

**Maïssa Bey's *Au commencement était la mer...* and *Hizya*:
toward a 'writing of erosion'**

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Abstract

Maïssa Bey's novels often hold confusing and sad closures that leave the reader with a sense of puzzlement and bitterness. As the stories in *Au commencement était la mer...* and *Hizya* unfold, the reader becomes the witness of the life of young women who go through a variety of experiences and hardships that leave little room for personal fulfillment. The falling apart environment, which is also reflected in the setting's description, becomes to a large extent a reflection of the protagonists' inner self. The author's aesthetic choices further reinforce this dominating atmosphere. The present paper contends that the sense of bitterness and collapse, the heroines' turmoil, the setting's description, and the elaborated scripture where typography, division, and structure interplay, contribute in creating what I would like to call a 'writing of erosion'; a writing that voices the daily tragedies of marginalized young generations with stifled voices and crushed dreams.

Keywords: youth; disillusionment; collapse; trauma; Algerian literature.

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Guelma (Algeria)**Résumé**

Les romans de Maïssa Bey ont souvent des fins marquées par la confusion et le malheur provoquant chez le lecteur confusion et amertume. Avec le développement des trames narratives dans *Au commencement était la mer...* et *Hizya*, le lecteur devient témoin de la vie de jeunes femmes qui traversent nombre d'expériences et de difficultés entravant leur épanouissement personnel. L'environnement qui s'effondre, qui se reflète aussi dans la description du cadre général, devient le reflet de l'état intérieur des héroïnes. Les choix esthétiques de l'auteure renforcent cette atmosphère. Le présent article soutient que le sens d'amertume et d'effondrement, la tourmente que vivent les héroïnes, la description de l'environnement, et l'écriture élaborée où typographie, division, et structure se conjuguent, contribuent à créer ce que j'appelle « l'écriture de l'effritement » ; une écriture qui donne voix aux tragédies quotidiennes de générations de femmes marginalisées avec des voix étouffées et des rêves élaboussés.

Mots clés: jeunesse; désenchantement; effondrement; trauma; littérature algérienne.

ملخص

كثيرا ما تنتهي روايات مايسة باي نهاية محزنة و محيرة مخلفة في نفس القارئ شعورا بالارتباك و المرارة. فمع تقدمه في قراءة روايتي "في البدء كان البحر..." و "حيزية" و اكتشافه لأحداثهما، يصبح القارئ شاهدا على ما تخوضه شابات من محن و تجارب لا تدع لهن أي مجال لتحقيق نواتهن. و يصبح المحيط المنهار من حولهن، الذي يعبر عنه أيضا وصف الأمكنة، إلى حد بعيد انعكاسا لدواخل البطلات أنفسهن. كما تساهم اختيارات الكاتبة الجمالية في تأكيد هذا المناخ المهيمن في الروايتين.

نحاول في هذا المقال أن نبين أن شعور المرارة و الانهيار و تفكك نفسيات البطلات و ازدواجيتها و وصف الأمكنة و الاشتغال على الكتابة التي تتفاعل فيها عناصر مختلفة من أشكال الطباعة إلى تقسيم النص إلى البنية، كل ذلك يخلق ما أسميه « كتابة التفتت »، و هي كتابة تعبر عن المآسي اليومية التي يشهدها شباب مهمشون حُنت أصواتهم و تحطمت أحلامهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مايسة باي، شباب، خيبة، صدمة، أدب جزائري

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*Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.*

Langston Hughes

I- Introduction :

The increasing recognition¹ of Algerian francophone female writer Maïssa Bey both at national and international levels is solidly grounded in a literary production that is, as Lila-Ibrahim Ouali suggests, “faite d’exigences et de richesses esthétiques” (2002, p 6). If Bey voices her narratives through a wide spectrum of characters – including a child in *Pierre sang papier ou cendre* (2008), female and male protagonists in *Bleu blanc vert* (2006), mature women in *Puisque mon coeur est mort* (2010) and *Nulle autre voix* (2018)– young female voices do hold the lion’s share. This interest already appears in her first published novel *Au commencement était la mer...* (1996), a text that introduces some of the major themes that will mark her subsequent œuvres such as the impact of social and political factors on individual lives, and the gender and intergenerational tensions that characterize family and social interactions in independent Algeria. In an interview conducted by Nassira Belloula, Maïssa Bey defines her writing as a commitment against all silences (2006, p 44), a unifying thread that will actually define an abundant production which encodes and breaks a variety of taboos² including rape, abortion, murder, abuse, sexuality, and conjugal violence. It is precisely in this enterprise that Bey’s works hold their fullest sense: beyond the binary judgement that can be exercised about her female protagonists’ ‘success’ or ‘failure’ lies a willingness to shed light on a variety of daily, ordinary, marginalized, and/or silenced female experiences in an Algeria marked by successive traumatic experiences and exclusive dogmas and policies. As Catherine Brun put it, Bey’s work is partly about “lifting the veil” (2017, p 282).

Such is the case with *Au commencement était la mer...* and *Hizya* (2015), two novels that share many aspects. Remarkably, as the stories in the two novels unfold, one comes progressively to realize that the author is offering texts that even though hold some traits of the coming of age narratives³ depict a process that, as we will argue, leads to the protagonists’ own crumbling. The present paper argues that while Bey’s (thematic) concern with young women’s daily struggles⁴ remains at the very heart of her works, her writing developed to what we would like to call ‘a writing of erosion’.

II– From falling dreams to eroded heroines:

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines erode as “to gradually destroy something or make it weaker”. In a similar line, the *Cambridge Dictionary* writes: to erode is

¹ Commenting on Algerian female writers who emerged since the 1990s, Charles Bonn highlights “Maïssa Bey est sans conteste celle dont l’œuvre s’est le plus affirmée, tant par le nombre et la qualité de ses romans et nouvelles, que par leur diversité [...]” (2019, p 10)

² When Suzanne Ruta asks Bey about the taboos she breaks in her works, the novelist answers: “I didn’t deliberately set out to break taboos, but I felt I was becoming more and more deeply mired in silences and compromises, and I wanted to break free.” (2006, p 16)

³ For instance, Lila-Ibrahim Ouali argues “Aussi bien la trame que la structure narrative apparente ce texte au Bildungsroman: l’éducation de l’héroïne, pour laquelle la guerre joue le rôle de révélateur, passe ici par une liquidation de ses illusions et de son idéalisme.” (2002, p 16)

⁴ In an interview conducted by Zineb Ali Benali, Bey sustains: “Mes personnages féminins sont souvent en révolte contre un milieu qui voudrait faire taire ces ‘intempêtes voix recluses’. Au sein d’une société agitée de courants contraires, les femmes tentent, par la parole, par la contestation d’un ordre qui puise sa légitimité dans le rejet de la modernité assimilée à une acculturation, d’aller à contre-courant. C’est ce combat qui est aussi le mien, que je voudrais donner à voir.” (2009, p 52)

“to weaken or damage something by taking away parts of it gradually, or to become weaker in this way”. At one level, this *erosion* is to be linked to the heroines who due to personal, social, economic, and political factors are progressively falling apart. Like an eroded soil, Bey's protagonists end up symbolically impotent since unable neither to carry out their dreams nor to give meaning to their world. In this frame, the temporal dimension, this gradual process, becomes of paramount importance since the development occurs at a lifetime scale and does not come as the result of one single event. Year after year and experience after experience, Bey's characters go through a slow destructive process and progressively cultivate their sense of loss and emptiness. The *writing of erosion* underlines then how some realities prevent young individuals from acquiring a sense of fulfilment, a sense of being fully into the world. It also highlights how certain conditions make it almost impossible for the protagonists to persevere in the trajectories they initially chose for themselves. At another level *erosion* is to be linked to the writing elaborated by the author in *Hizya*, a writing that translates into the heroine's inner fragmentation and doubling, and the elaborated scripture where typography, division, and structure interplay.

The two selected works, like most of Bey's other texts⁵, have confusing and sad endings that leave the reader with a sense of puzzlement and bitterness. This bitterness can be associated to the description of Algiers, the urban setting that largely contributes in establishing the general atmosphere of both narratives as appears in the respective following descriptions: “Septembre sur Alger. Un Soleil inutile traîne ses rayons encore vifs sur les façades indifférentes des immeubles de la cité. Sur les broussailles desséchées des terrains vagues tout autour et les rues poussiéreuses” (*Au commencement*, p 69) echoed by “Où est le poème ? Dans les fêlures des vasques, dans le silence des fontaines, dans les volutes noircies des colonnes, dans les traces d'une splendeur aujourd'hui morte ? Les poubelles, lasses de vomir quotidiennement leur trop-plein d'ordures, se sont peu à peu disloquées, émietées” (*Hizya*, p 39). In both novels, images of urban decay and waste are recurrent and testify to the oppressive surrounding in which the heroines are trapped and have to evolve. The dislocated and crumbling trash stands for a city literally and symbolically falling apart and foreshadows the heroines' own fate.

III- At the beginning was *Au commencement était la mer...*:

Bey's first novel *Au commencement* was first published during the 1990s, a controversial and dark period characterized by extreme physical and psychological violence. In *La guerre invisible: Algérie, années 1990*, historian Benjamin Stora (2001) highlights the complexities, tragedies, and challenges that faced 1990s Algeria; a bloodthirsty and traumatized Algeria that constitutes the background of the narrative. From beginning to end, the novel reflects high and constant tension through a composition that opposes, for instance, light with darkness, future with past, and life with death. Nadia, the protagonist, is an eighteen-year-old educated woman who first appears as full of projects, hopes, and dreams. Nadia's secret meetings with the sea at the beginning of the story highlight her thirst for light and freedom:

Elle salue le jour naissant comme au commencement du monde. Elle est seule. Plus seule et plus libre qu'elle ne l'a jamais été. Et elle court maintenant, les bras étendus, rêve d'oiseau qui fendrait l'espace, sans que rien ni personne ne puisse le retenir. Ses cheveux dénoués volent autour d'elle, viennent gifler son visage offert. Le bas de sa jupe, mouillé par le frôlement blanc des vagues, se fait lourd, entrave sa course folle. (12)

The openness of the natural setting in this dreamlike scene goes with the protagonist's willingness to explore more possibilities, to let herself enjoy that momentary freedom.

⁵ It is the case, for instance, with *Surtout ne te retourne pas* (2005) that ends with an apocalyptic vision of an impending tsunami, *Bleu blanc vert* (2006) whose end can be read as the protagonist's forced uprooting, and *Puisque mon cœur est mort* (2010) that closes tragically with murder and madness.

Symbolizing “la dynamique de la vie” (Chevalier, 1990, p 623), the sea reinforces the image of a young woman longing for life and movement. Even though her brother appears a moment later to remind her of the gravity of this “délit de liberté” (13), Nadia maintains her daily early morning secret practice, a salutary ritual for both her body and soul.

Nadia’s dynamism and rebellious spirit go with a willingness to question things, a trait that will cost her a lot. The heroine comes to realize that at an early age:

[...] le seul fait de poser des questions pouvait déranger le monde !
Même en classe, parce qu’elle voulait tout savoir, tout saisir, elle dérangeait.
D’abord à l’école primaire, puis au collège. Elle a dû apprendre à se taire.
Rentrer dans le rang. [...] Les vraies réponses, elle doit les chercher ailleurs.
Seule. (36)

The heroine’s loneliness will become part of a tragic journey that starts home. The first deep ‘wound’ is linked to her own mother. The importance of the mother figure is undeniable; mothers are indeed “believed to be the most important model for their daughters” (Kaced, 2019, p 136). When Nadia’s mother first appears, she is described in the following terms “elle attend. Patience inaltérable de ces femmes qui savent, qui ne peuvent qu’attendre” (25). The mother’s action, or rather non-action, through her endless ‘waiting’ non-activity suggests her unwillingness or inability to act on her environment, in other terms, her lack of agency. The shift operated in the subject sentence from ‘the mother’ to ‘these women’, from the single to the plural, inscribes this lack of agency in a tradition that has long defined women’s status in Algerian patriarchal society. While the daughter enjoys every single moment she spends in the beach where she can sense openness and liberty, an activity that helps her discover and construct her own subjectivity far from traditional roles, the mother condemns “l’indécence de ces corps à demi nus s’offrant au soleil et au regard des autres en ces temps de ferveur religieuse retrouvée, affichée” (32). The old woman deeply believes in the gendered spatial division that has long confined women to interior, closed spaces. The intergenerational gap that separates women who seem to belong to two different worlds is widened as the conservative mother progressively becomes submissive to the predicaments of a fundamentalist religious discourse that overwhelms the society. As Nadia discovers love and breaks one of the most important rules, “[...] le Commandement Absolu: tu ne disposeras pas de ton corps” (86) the mother is “depuis longtemps enfermée dans un monde d’où les rêves et les emportements sont exclus” (85). The women’s two opposing visions set them apart, and except for routine exchanges, ominous and deafening silence becomes the defining trait of their tormented relationship.

Unwilling to follow a path similar to her mother’s, and determined to find her own answers, Nadia decides to fully engage in a love relationship with a young man of her age. Also a student, Karim first appears as a passionate loving partner who shares Nadia’s dreams and aspirations. Completely dedicated to this relationship, Nadia breaks all rules and accepts to have an intimate relationship. Yet even in the heart of this intimacy, Nadia fails to enjoy. As a woman that loves sun, air and liberty, Nadia is unable to appreciate a relationship which is doomed to be lived in the darkness of closed spaces:

Un après-midi puis d’autres, ils se retrouveront dans cette chambre sombre et minuscule, à peine une fenêtre, jamais ouverte parce qu’elle donne sur une cour intérieure, parce qu’on pourrait les voir. Ils n’allumeront même pas la lumière et c’est dans la pénombre qu’ils vivront ces instants-là de leur amour, de leur histoire. (92)

This confinement and darkness foreshadow the end of a romance that is poisoned by the weight of a tradition with which Karim finally complies. Nadia is actually failed by her lover who decides to conform and submit to his mother’s traditional rules by marrying another woman from his own ‘milieu’ at a crucial moment of their relationship. Nadia learns that she is pregnant and before she was able to inform him,

he announces the end of their relationship. Obligated to go through an abortion alone, Nadia is completely devastated:

elle n'est plus qu'une loque inerte, disloquée, exsangue. Quelque chose, une force irrépessible l'attire vers des profondeurs à la fois brûlantes et glacées. Elle s'enfonce sans esquisser le moindre geste, loin, très loin, vers le centre de la terre. Elle s'enfonce dans un gouffre aux parois lisses et sombres, se laisse emporter dans un trou noir où tournoient de minuscules papillons blancs, légers, aériens, des grains de lumières serrées. (125)

This nightmarish, almost apocalyptic, scene opposes the dreamlike opening of the narrative. When compared, the two scenes allow assessing the extent of Nadia's falling (apart) since the new gloomy atmosphere comes in sharp contrast to the openness of the sky and the sea depicted at the beginning. The clear opposition between warmth/cold, sky/hole, light/darkness, activity/passivity, movement/inertia, and wellbeing/suffering, highlights the heroine's collapse. Furthermore, the abyss, which at the psychological level symbolizes "[la] décomposition de la personne" (Chevalier, 1990, p 2), makes it clear that Nadia has already gone far in her process of 'erosion'. Simultaneously, the abyss symbolizing "[les] ténèbres infernales des derniers jours" (ibid.), the scene can be read as another foreshadowing to Nadia's tragic end.

The situation gets even worse as the silence and submissiveness of Nadia's mother obliges the heroine to confront another complicated relationship alone: the one tying her with her own brother. As the story progresses, the tension between Nadia and Djamel goes crescendo. Nadia indeed has to deal with the religious fundamentalism incarnated by her sibling who due to the void left by their deceased father takes the lead as the patriarchal figure in the house. When Djamel decides to impose his religious dogmas, where being a woman is considered as "délit" (91) and where there is no room for art, beauty, and books, the heroine has to face that alone. Positioning himself as a simple observer at the beginning, Djamel becomes more and more invasive and ends up penetrating his sister's most intimate space, her room. He then takes the liberty to destroy all what he considered as illicit such as books and art works. He further imposes his dictate on his sister's body as he obliges her to wear the veil. By this act, Djamel succeeds in bringing home the atmosphere of gloom that was already dominating the whole society: "dans la ville, plus personne ne rêve. Il n'est que de voir les visages défaits, les regards éteints de la foule pressée, assaillie de rumeurs funestes" (118). Failed by the closest people around her, i.e. her mother, her lover, and her brother, and affected by the gloom and chaos that were dominating society, Nadia is broken.

Hopeless and desperate, and no longer able to foresee her future, she decides to make a last move by taking refuge in her past. The protagonist goes back to the house where she grew up as a child looking for her grandfather's warmth and protection. Unfortunately, her last attempt will also be met with failure. This last disappointment takes with it the last bit of life remaining. The narrator reports: "Nadia écoute seulement le bruit qui s'éteint à l'intérieur d'elle. Une vague se retire dans un lent et douloureux râlement" (144). Completely torn apart, the heroine is no longer able to bear the weight of the lies that have been surrounding her all along her life:

Un mensonge. Un de plus. Jusqu'au bout, sa vie n'aura été qu'un vaste, qu'un immense mensonge.
Mensonges, les souvenirs d'enfance au goût de tendresse et de douceur.
Mensonge, l'amour d'une mère qui ne voit ni n'entend les cris, les déchirements de ses enfants. La chair de sa chair dit-elle.
Mensonge, l'amour plus fort que la mort. Mensonges, tous ces mots creux et vides. Rien que des mots. (146)

The passage introduces the final scene of the novel and clearly contrasts with the life, hope, and gaiety that characterized the opening. Already dead inside, Nadia decides to confront her extremist brother condemning herself to death. The novel then ends tragically leaving the reader with a strong feeling of bitterness.

IV- *Hizya* or the writing of erosion:

Published in 2015, *Hizya* parallels *Au commencement* in many regards. Hizya is a twenty-three-year old, educated woman full of dreams. The narrative opens with the following lines: “C’est peut-être en moi que le poème danse. / Et que dansent les mots de ce poème au nom de femme. / Hizya” (11). As Nadia was inhabited by the sea, Hizya is inhabited by a traditional song-poem celebrating a forbidden love that challenges social norms and family-clan rules. Inspired by the song, Hizya’s story is meant to be a quest for love, liberty, and a life out of the confines of social constraints and traditions that defined her existence starting from her own traditional naming. The discovery of this song changes her life and marks the beginning of a strong willingness to “braver les interdits. Surmonter tous les obstacles pour aller jusqu’au bout d’une passion partagée. Si ces amants là l’ont fait il y a plus d’un siècle, pourquoi cela ne serait-il plus possible aujourd’hui ?” (13). The novel opens then with an explicit challenging tone, with Hizya refusing to see herself living the traditional life experienced by her mother. Indeed, just like Hizya resembles Nadia, their mothers are also quite the same since both play the role of tradition keepers, both incarnate what Camille Lacoste Dujardin’s refers to as “des mères contre les femmes” (1985). Like Nadia’s, Hizya’s mother seems to be part of women whose life is defined by submissiveness and conformity, aspects that they try hard to transmit to their daughters,

Elles perpétuent ainsi, dans un choral bien connu, le chant appris depuis des temps immémoriaux.

‘Nous / femmes / sommes venues au monde / pour consacrer notre vie toute entière aux autres / Obéir / Servir / Subir / Accepter d’être / et de faire / ce que les autres / en premier lieu / les parents / décident / pour nous / Et puis / une fois mariées / donner la vie / C’est notre fonction / C’est notre seule raison d’être / C’est notre mission sur terre.’

Malheur à celles qui veulent briser le cercle, à celles qui veulent forcer le destin. (50)

The fragmented aspect, with the non-conventional use of slashes to separate the different components, stresses the passage, gives it rhythm, and provokes a certain monotony that highlights the repetitiveness of a long tradition. The verbs used -‘obey’, ‘serve’, ‘endure’ etc.- highlight the lack of agency of women who are told how to be and what to do, who are denied subjectivity, and whose purpose in life is associated with procreation. Even though the new generation has gained accesses to the outer spaces, mainly through education and work, the mother, repeatedly reminds the heroine “avec une obstination exaspérante, que je ne suis qu’en liberté surveillée” (24). In this regard, Hizya’s challenging spirit, just like Nadia’s, proves to be risky. Yet while Nadia’s ardour is openly manifested, that of Hizya is rather refrained.

Indeed, Hizya’s story seems to be more ‘ordinary’ and ‘banal’ than Nadia’s. This can be observed, for instance, in the heroines’ first activities. The liberating dreamlike scene lived by Nadia is substituted by a kind of daydreaming scene where Hizya connects with the eponymous traditional poem, a scene followed by a return to a reality deeply rooted in a strikingly daily routine: “En attendant, il faut que je monte sur la terrasse pour étendre le linge entassé dans la bassine de plastique vert qui trône au milieu du patio” (13). In addition, while Nadia’s end is openly tragic, Hizya’s story ends with a marriage project. Living in the post-civil war era, Hizya’s story is then apparently less agitated than Nadia’s. Progressively however, the reader realizes that just like Nadia, Hizya will also be subject to a number of events that will lead to the erosion of her dreams and vision.

Furthermore, while thematically close, *Au commencement* and *Hizya* adopt different writing styles. In many regards, the narrative mode and the novel’s architecture in Bey’s later novel is more elaborated and complex translating the complexity of the character. To highlight the inner conflict that inhabits Hizya who seems to be often hesitating and confused, the author, contrary to the simple third person narrative voice used in *Au commencement*, adopts a double narrative mode. Alternating two narrative voices, a first person narrative through the “je/I” and a

second voice that addresses the protagonist through the personal pronoun "tu/you", the text, which is composed of about eighty-five short chapters of few pages each, is constructed on a duality of voices and perspectives. While the first voice is clearly Hizya's and allows to share her ideas, feelings, hopes, dreams, and daily life 'adventures', the second voice comments Hizya's narrative and addresses her, pushing the protagonist to think about the limits, the disappointments, and the challenges that she still needs to go through.

Inscribed using a different typography –italics–, the passages addressed to Hizya operate as visual-textual disruptors. This constant typographic alternation also creates a fragmented dimension that sustains the idea of crumbling. The textual dimension becomes the mirror of not only Hizya's own complex personality, but also of the *making of* and *dismantling* of her own self. In addition, the use of different typographies keeps the reader in constant to and fro between different moods and standpoints. Each time Hizya 'dares' transgressing social and family rules, each time she raises her ambition above what is expected from her, the voice is here, sceptical, ironic, and questioning.

The interrogative form is actually very recurrent in the passages inscribed in italics increasing and highlighting the feeling of puzzlement in which the protagonist is constantly finding herself. The repetitive short interrogative sentences used, combined with an extensive use of ellipses and exclamation marks, create a rapid rhythm and further stress the fragmented aspect of the text which is already created by its different typographies. The contrast between the different parts is thus not only visual/typographic and narrative, but also stylistic: while Hizya's narrative is rather plain, well structured, and 'tells' the actual story, the italicized parts are dismantled, creating a language that seems to be inconsistent. These parts push the young woman to scrutinize both her environment and herself, and allow the reader to have a better insight on Hizya's internal conflicting universe. They also testify to the heroine's development, a development based principally on disillusionments.

One of Hizya's great disillusionments is linked to her inability to find a job. Graduated in translation, she ends up working in a hair salon, a situation that even though provides her with a certain (economic) liberty is very disappointing. The voice is then there to remind her of that: "*alors Hizya-Liza, ça fait mal, hein? ça fait quand-même un peu mal. Tout ça, toutes ces années d'études et d'illusions pour... pour échouer dans un salon de coiffure. Apprentie coiffeuse!*" (26). This concession comes with another one linked to her identity. The protagonist is asked to change her name which according to the salon owner "est un prénom de vieille" (20). This other renunciation marks the beginning of a new life far from the protagonist's ambitions of working as interpreter in embassies and international congresses. Confronted with a harsh economic and social reality, Hizya has to definitely lower her expectations. Her case is no exception. It rather reflects a shared concern of a whole generation. The graffiti she used to see all around the university voice the anxiety of youngsters who seem to have "no future!" (131). The high professional hopes that Hizya raised are then crashed by a reality where social disparity has become the norm and that she subsequently comes to fully realize. While visiting the house of a rich client, she notices "le contraste est si grand entre le monde que je venais d'entrevoir et notre vie, la précarité de notre vie, que la comparaison n'est même plus possible. Il ne s'agit plus de richesse ou de pauvreté. C'est une façon d'être au monde" (164).

Already marked by her experiences and disappointments, Hizya is further affected by the stories of the female characters working with her, "at the 'Belle, Belle, Belle' salon, where she joins the unmarried Sonia, the unhappily married Nej, the disgracefully divorced Leïla, and the owner Salima" (Howell, 2017, p 696). Through their stories, the young woman is confronted to a wide variety of experiences such as poverty, abuse, divorce, family pressure, and violence. She simultaneously comes to realize the sacrifices and concessions these women were constantly urged to make in order to 'survive'. When finally she had to make a choice between her two suitors, Hizya rejects Djamel, the 'poet', the one who is inhabited by poetry and romance and who accordingly corresponds to her own aspirations, and chooses Riyad instead, the man who better conforms to social norms and to her family's expectations. Once more, it is Hizya's inner voice that questions this decision and that evokes the naked truth:

mais avant, il faudrait que tu t'interroges sur les vraies raisons de ton indifférence pour ce pauvre type. Tout en lui n'était qu'exagération, c'est ça ? Et puis, tout ce que tu sais des poètes à force de les fréquenter dans tes lectures, ça ne t'incite pas trop à envisager d'affronter l'épreuve du quotidien. [...] et puis [Riyad] a les pieds sur terre. Tu as pu t'en rendre compte dès votre première discussion [...] et même si la poésie et lui... Tu as même pas osé aborder ce sujet. (209-210)

By choosing Riyad with whom she is not even able to evoke what used to be an important part of her life, poetry, Hizya makes another step in abandoning her dreams and aspirations, and thus loses another part of herself. Later in the narrative, she ends by rejecting the poem itself. She then wonders:

À quel moment s'est produite la faille ?
 À quel moment est survenu l'ébranlement, puis l'écroulement de toutes mes constructions illusoires ?
 Je ne me souviens d'aucun événement notable. Cela s'est fait sans doute à mon insu, en profondeur. Je n'en ai pas saisi les prémices. [...] étaient-ce les histoires, parfois sordides, que j'entends quotidiennement au salon et qui peu à peu frayent leur chemin dans ma conscience ?
 Étaient-ce les regards concupiscent des hommes que je croise dans la rue, des regards chargés d'un désir si brutal, si direct, si malsain qu'ils me renvoient une image souillée de moi-même, une image dégradante, avilissante ? (257-258)

Long torn between two ways of being –conformity and rebellion-, and deeply affected by the harsh reality surrounding her, Hizya finally surrenders to social norms. Though not dead physically, Hizya's spirit is no longer. The last but one part is composed of the following two sentences “le fantôme de Hizya erre dans les ruelles désertes du vieux *ksar* désaffecté. [/] Ce n'est qu'un fantôme” (294). The statement seems to refer to both the old and new heroine. The *ksar* parallels the *Casbah*, the old quarter where Hizya lives. Hizya is then no more than the ghost, the shadow, of what she used to be. The weight of day-to-day life ended up by shattering the dreams that normally “nul ne peut lui enlever” (Maafa, 2019, p 218). Progressively emptied from her dreams, ambitions, and expectations, the protagonist is metaphorically dead. The novel ends with Hizya projecting herself in the future:

Nous nous marierons et nous aurons trois enfants. [...]
 Nous aurons une maison pleine d'appareils électroménagers dernier cri. [...]
 Nous dormirons ensemble. Nous nous aimerons dans un grand lit. Porte fermée. [...]
 Nous aurons une vie ordinaire. Nous formerons une famille identique en tous points à des milliers d'autres familles. (295-296)

Hizya's new vision perfectly conforms to her surrounding's expectations. Her path is now traced, just as the one of millions of other women before her. The shift in point of view from the individual 'I' to the collective 'we' highlights the melting of her subjectivity and individuality in a traditional couple. In the last lines of the text, the 'I' reappears just to reconfirm the protagonist's willingness to depart from the poem: “Nous. Je. Je finirai bien par oublier le poème” (297). With the death of the poem, Hizya loses her poetic and dancing soul. The disappearance of the second narrative voice “tu” in the last parts of the novel confirms the change that occurred in the heroine's personality: Hizya is no longer the complex and questioning character that she used to be. In other words, the development of the narrative mode also contributes in translating the heroine's erosion.

IV- Conclusion:

Through *Au commencement* and *Hizya*, Bey portrays vivid female characters strongly animated by youth ardour; heroines who dream of freedom and liberty along with a different life and future. Yet, despite their challenging spirit, the context in which Bey places her protagonists leaves little room for self-fulfilment. Indeed, the urban and hostile environments that frame the stories are defined by economic, social, and political constraints, and are highly shaped by gender and class considerations. As the stories unfold, the narrative unveils the personal and social predicaments that the female characters have to face inside and outside their homes all along their journeys. These journeys turn to be associated with a gradual destructive process, a process that will lead to the heroine's tragic end: a physical death for Nadia, a metaphorical one for Hizya. This *erosion* shapes *Hizya*. The double narrative structure, the questioning style, and fragmented structure conveyed through typography and division all serve the creation of a work that sustains the protagonist's own development. By developing what I would like to call a writing of erosion, Bey voices the often trivialized, silenced, and forgotten fights and tragedies of young women with stifled voices, crushed ambitions, and stolen dreams in a society that prioritizes the group over the individual, the male over the female, and the past over the future. Her novels then break silence around and pay tribute to all women whose "life turned into a broken-winged bird that cannot fly".

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