

The Tragedy of Exile and Elusive Identity in Zahia Rahmani's « *Musulman* » roman¹

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War often produces exile, whether forced or voluntary, reluctant or desperate. The Algerian War of decolonization, which lasted seven years and ended 132 years of French occupation in Algeria, exiled numerous populations, ranging from approximately one million *pieds noirs*, numerous supporters of the Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS), some 800,000 Algerians who immigrated to France, and thousands of *harkis*, or Algerian auxiliary soldiers in the French army (McCormack 117-118). As Jo McCormack argues, these *harkis* and their families had to navigate a double exile: already expelled from Algeria, they then had to contend with being “internal exiles,” as well as their new marginalized status in France (123). While these exiled *harkis* were not killed like many of their counterparts who remained in Algeria, they nonetheless faced the impossibility of belonging and the haunting question, “If exile is intended to deny identity to a people, how might exiles attempt to reforge an identity?” (McCormack 124).

¹ The title of Rahmani's novel is most commonly written as « *Musulman* » roman and is printed as such in the 2005 and 2007 Sabine Wespieser editions. Although there is a 2015 Sabine Wespieser edition with the title *Musulman* « roman », Rahmani explains that she deliberately placed the quotation marks around « Musulman » to distinguish the word both as a concept and as a common noun (“Zahia”).

Drawing on the idea that the social construction of identity can sometimes be closely linked to exile and the exclusions generated by colonialism and war, I analyze the link between exile and identity in Zahia Rahmani's autofiction « *Musulman* » roman (2007). As an Algerian writer with a *harki* father, Rahmani examines colonialism and its heritage of trauma and exile. In her text, which is divided into five acts like a Shakespearean tragedy, she explores the effects of war on exile and identity through the experiences of a nameless female narrator who is exiled from her homeland of Algeria because of identities that she never chose, those of *harki* and *musulman*. However, these identities follow the narrator to France, hounding and even imprisoning her when she leaves the country, and becomes a nomad, only to find herself caught in another war in Iraq, where American soldiers give her the additional identities of "traitor" and "terrorist." I draw on Edward Said's discussion of exile and Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of classification and identity to argue that while the narrator's geographic, linguistic, and gendered alienation offers her the chance to shape her own identity and resist imposed labels, it ultimately leads to the representation of identity as a tragic, inescapable system of oppression.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator recounts her story of persecution from the Iraqi desert prison in which she is trapped. Through the use of flashback, Rahmani reveals how the narrator is equally confined to an identity that she never chose, the universal and masculine *Musulman*. The French language grammatically defaults to the use of masculine nouns and adjectives to describe groups of people, thus subsuming women under a label with which they may not fully identify; if the label *Musulman* were to agree with the narrator's gender, it would appear as *Musulmane*. The narrator thus has never been able to escape the *folie* and *contrainte* of the label *Musulman* (Rahmani 13), a name that she never chose to use but that demonstrates how, as Rahmani states in an interview with Literary Hub, "She is seized by expectations that were constructed outside of her" ("Zahia"), or how the narrator is subject to other people's perceptions of her.

In this manner, the narrator suffers from the pertinence principle of identity, which as Pierre Bourdieu explains, "can be clearly seen in all the classifications built around a stigmatized feature [. . .] It is even clearer in all 'labelling judgements', which are in fact accusations, [. . .] and which, like insults, only wish to know one of the properties constituting the social identity of an individual or group" ("Classes and

Classifications”). Indeed, the judgments that accompany the inescapable name of *Musulman* led to the narrator’s imprisonment. Although she never consented to the label, the soldiers who imprisoned her have taken up its echo, declaring “Musulman tu as été, musulman tu es!” and also trying to impose upon her the idea that *Musulman* is the only label to which she should respond (Rahmani 15). The narrator, unable to escape *la meute* and the animality of its decree, wonders, “Pourquoi donc me vouloir telle qu’on me veut, soumise à un Dieu?” (Rahmani 15). Here, *soumise* is the first word in the novel that reveals the narrator’s gender, and its link to one God, or Allah, highlights that she is oppressed both as a woman and as a Muslim. Given that Islam also etymologically means *submission*, the narrator’s use of the word *soumise* further captures society’s determination to identify her by her religion alone vis-à-vis the label *Musulman*.

To be *Musulman* is to carry the burden of a name that has marked and haunted the narrator for her entire life, condemning her to other people’s prejudices. She had no choice in the matter, for “Nous sommes, ont-ils dit, le mal. Ainsi en ont-ils décidé” (Rahmani 17). Everyone except for her has decided that she will bear this label from birth, silencing her voice and her opinion. But as she recounts her persecution, intertwining past with present, she reveals that she resists this violence of assigned identity via silence. Because she refuses to confirm that she is *Musulman*, she affirms that she takes control of the silence to which she has been condemned: “Si à l’injonction, à l’assignation qui m’est faite, je répons, ‘Musulman’, je suis ! J’étouffe. C’est au silence qu’on me condamne” (Rahmani 16). If she says nothing, then she cannot accept her assigned label. In fact, silence serves as foreshadowing for the rejection of identity that will arrive later in the novel.

As a child, the narrator and her family are geographically exiled to France because of her father’s *harki* heritage. They suffer from the double persecution of being Muslim and *harki*, relegated to the margins of society in France after having been banished from Algeria for treason. Consequently, the narrator loses all connection to her mother country except for her language, explaining that “Tout ce en quoi j’ai cru est mort. Seule ma langue ne veut pas mourir” (Rahmani 18). She begins to experience exile as defined by Said, which is “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (“Reflections”). As demonstrated by the narrator’s loss, exile is a permanent separation,

which prompts the sadness of being cut off from Algeria. She tries to fill the rift by clinging to her mother tongue, Tamazight, which is now the only link that connects her to her past in Algeria, to her heritage of orality, Islam, and the Quran.

However, the narrator enters linguistic exile by losing this vital connection at the age of five, almost immediately after her family's exile to France. She has a nightmare in which elephants, which allude to the birth of the Prophet Mohammed and to Muslims, steal her Tamazight (Rahmani 21-25); that is to say, the elephants, which embody her family heritage, linguistically exile her by taking her ability to speak Tamazight, or her sole remaining connection to her family. Because of this physical, cultural, and emotional distance between herself and Algeria, the narrator finds herself condemned to French, which is a language that she cannot pass down because it is not part of her inheritance. In other words, her inability to speak her mother tongue cuts her off from her linguistic and cultural heritage, rendering her unable to carry out her "fonction de porte-parole," which Assia Djebar writes in her book *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* is "le rôle culturel traditionnel des femmes au Maghreb" (74). To survive this exile, the narrator distances herself from everything that Tamazight represents: her family and especially the elephants, Prophet Mohammed, and Muslims, declaring, "De ceux de l'Éléphant, je n'ai pas voulu être" (Rahmani 31). She thus rejects the label of *Musulman* by taking charge of her new identity of *exclue*, of an exiled girl who no longer belongs to a mother country and community that rejected her for being *harki* (Rahmani 55).

Despite her attempts to distance herself from the label *Musulman*, however, the narrator cannot escape this imposition. Society denies her the agency to embrace her chosen identity, thwarting her attempts to build a new life on a new continent by insisting on assigning her "une religion et une vocation; un Nom" (Rahmani 38). Attached to this identity against her will, the narrator tries to grant herself a reprieve, to flee the inevitability of a "Name," but she learns that she is not the only victim of violence and denomination. At the age of ten, she accidentally discovers the existence of another "Name" that has endured hate in Alain Renais's 1956 documentary *Nuit et brouillard* (Rahmani 39), which investigates concentration camps and Nazi ideology. By gaining knowledge of the Holocaust, she realizes the evil of subsuming an entire people under one "Name" and loses her innocence. Though she never names them, we can deduce that the narrator is speaking of the Jews.

Like them, the narrator is a scapegoat subject to hate, scorn, brutality, violence, and lies, a hostage to the social construction of a “Name”; as she states, “Je suis un ‘Musulman.’ Je n’ai pu m’y soustraire” (Rahmani 47).

After watching Renais’s documentary and discovering that she is no longer alone in her suffering, the narrator recovers Tamazight ten years after her nightmare and her exile to France, and her mother tongue starts to serve as a refuge from her exile (Rahmani 55). Her reconnection with Tamazight suggests the necessity of solidarity for surviving the trauma that results from war and remains a “traumatic legacy for many exiled groups” (McCormack 121), especially because the narrator reacquires Tamazight while reflecting on the Algerian War. She explains that, for the guilty, “‘les survivants,’ cet entre-deux des guerres, cette lumière trop humaine, il fallait l’éteindre” (Rahmani 57); that is to say, survivors are dangerous precisely because they incarnate resistance, hope, and the promise of a future untarnished by war. However, the narrator is removed from this community because of her *harki* heritage and exiled to France. Upon realizing that she is part of a new collective memory of suffering, of a different sort of shared unhappiness, the narrator reclaims Tamazight from the elephants and speaks the language to her mother for the first time in ten years. Having found a community, she no longer feels alone and abandoned, for she now has a home where she is welcomed by her “langue maternelle [. . .] La langue de l’enfance, la langue d’ailleurs, celle de la mère, la langue mineure” (Rahmani 60). Tamazight nourishes her and gives her a sense of belonging, but she cannot stay connected to this language if she wishes to liberate herself from the name *Musulman* and all its other accompanying labels.

Despite the rediscovery of her mother tongue, the narrator realizes the damage that the accumulation of multiple identities to which she has not consented has wrought upon her. As a result, she begins to “hair toutes ces marques d’identités qui s’accrochaient à [elle] comme le chiendent à la terre. Arabes, immigrés, exilés, musulmans” (Rahmani 85). In other words, these identities grow like weeds, obstinately multiplying everywhere, and above all, where they are not wanted. When the French language becomes “une source d’angoisses et de questionnements” while she is registering for high school, for the teacher’s claim that her nationality is “française” confuses and worries her, she sets off in search of an identity to which she can relate (Rahmani 86). In other words, the narrator hopes that she no longer has to be

categorized as *harki*, *Musulman*, or *française*, for she has no desire to be “part of [a] history only by association and not by practice” (“Zahia”); she wants to find an identity that she herself has chosen, not one that others have assigned to her.

The narrator’s mother tongue again serves as sanctuary, and she immerses herself in Berber recordings and Kabyle stories. However, when she looks for more information about Kabyle singers such as Aït Menguellet and Slimane Azem, she sinks into desolation when she realizes that the history of these Arabs can only be found in her own literature, that “Aucun livre ne m’instruisait en France de faits et grands gestes de ses peuples” (Rahmani 87). Disillusioned by this Western hegemony of knowledge and confronted by “the crippling sorrow of estrangement” (Said), the narrator attempts suicide in order to escape the weight of these identities (Rahmani 91). After the paramedics pump her stomach of the pills she swallowed, she insists on leaving the hospital, and at her house, she finds peace in books.

This brush with death not only gives the narrator a yearning for life, but also the determination to resist her assigned identities:

La colère et toute la haine qu’avait nourries mon indignation je les écarterais. Je ne serais plus le jouet de quiconque. Et encore moins des miens. Je ne serais pas qu’une exilée, une immigrée, une Arabe, une Berbère, une musulmane ou une étrangère, mais plus. Quoi qu’ils fassent pour m’y retenir, je n’irais plus sur ces territoires où sont assignées ceux qu’ils ont d’universel, de beau, d’humain et de grandeur. (Rahmani 92-93)

It is important to note here that, in acknowledging and then rejecting these labels, the narrator renders them feminine for the first time; that is to say, it is the first moment when she adds the *e muet* to these labels, indicating that they are describing a woman, or herself. Previously, the narrator had distanced herself by repeating the universal and masculine *Musulman* that had been assigned to her, so this brief recognition functions as both a reclaiming and a reckoning. She is a person who is more than her assigned identities, a woman who cannot be contained by such categories. Determined to resist these labels, she sets off to forge her own identity, forsaking “ces territoires” even if doing so means leaving behind her own family (Rahmani 93). For once, instead of others

exiling her, she exiles herself, as she seeks to live without the weight and the constriction of imposed identities.

For several seasons, the narrator succeeds in leading a life where her identity is not a crime. Although she lives alone, far from anyone in France, she hopes to build a community of “un peuple vagabond” like her, “Un peuple qui aurait dit, À ces mots d’ordre que l’on m’inflige, je refuse de répondre” (Rahmani 98). She waits hopefully for other people who also reject societally-imposed identities and national borders to come to her so that she can finally find belonging among fellow self-exiled people, but she never gets the opportunity to learn if rootless people like her exist. Instead, a civil servant interrupts her voluntary exile, interrogating her and demanding that she retrieve the identity she has thrown away, for she is not supposed to exist outside of society’s classification system where people are organized by nationality, name, and gender.

However, the narrator defies the civil servant’s demands, upholding that she does not have a country and belongs to neither Algeria nor France and that she is thus “apatride” (Rahmani 99), or stateless, without nationality or state-enforced identity. Her silence, or her refusal to speak the label *Musulman*, denies “the evocative power of an utterance which puts things in a different light” (Bourdieu) and asserts her choice to establish herself as *apatride*, as someone whose identifying feature is the lack of a nationality. Without papers or a passport to establish labels that she never chose and with which she never identified, the narrator hopes to escape the pertinence principle that renders identity “a decisive object of struggle” (Bourdieu), or an isolating mechanism that denies an individual’s right to exist outside of systems of classification.

Dissatisfied, the civil servant persists in trying to categorize her for his government report, eventually asking whether the narrator has children. When she replies that she has none, he remarks, “C’est embêtant ça. Très embêtant,” and bids her farewell (Rahmani 107). Here, *embêtant* carries two significations and possibilities, both of which are negative: *boring* or *annoying*. If the civil servant intends to call the narrator boring, then he dismisses her out of disinterest after noting that she has not contributed to a population of scapegoats. However, if he finds her choice annoying, then he has placed her into another box and is expressing concern that she has not fulfilled the accompanying gender role of her reproductive duty, an expectation that the narrator returns to later in her story. Although the civil servant finally leaves the narrator alone, the location and safety of her refuge have been compromised, so she must abandon her chosen home,

the refuge where, as she tells the civil servant, she was able to “cultive[r] [s]on jardin” and do as she wished (Rahmani 102).²

The narrator geographically exiles herself from France in the hopes of finding another place where she can live without identity. In her quest for identity, or non-identity, she decides to try to understand her past by returning to her homeland of Algeria, for she has nowhere else to go. “Que pouvais-je faire ?” she demands. “Fuir, partir encore ? Mais pour rejoindre qui ? Il me fallait comprendre. Retourner là où le ‘Musulman’ est né. Vers le désert je me suis avancée” (Rahmani 107). In uninhabited areas of the desert, there are no countries, no borders, and no identities, and perhaps this lack of categories will help the narrator to unearth and understand her roots. However, she fails to cross this “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place” (Said), for she is captured by soldiers, and although she declares that she is nothing, that she has no identity, she is searched, held at gunpoint, and imprisoned in a camp. She then receives a new identity in a new language: that of “Prisonner” from American soldiers in Iraq during Operation Desert Storm (Rahmani 117).

Rahmani asserts that identity imposed by others is both individually and collectively traumatizing. She enlarges this trauma by evoking the Holocaust a second time, for soldiers imprison the narrator in a camp, give her an orange star, and lead her to showers. Although the soldiers endlessly demand where she is from, the narrator insists on her stateless status, highlighting during the interrogations that she has neither a nationality nor a country. For example, she affirms that she was born “Sur les rives d’une mer fermée. Cet endroit a disparu” (Rahmani 122) to demonstrate the incompatibility of a country with her identity.

Although the narrator gives a name for the first time, “Élohim,” it is a false name, a Hebrew word that means one or more gods (Rahmani 122). Her choice suggests that she is again distancing herself from the label *Muslim*, resisting it by identifying with the Jews, another scapegoated people. Choosing the name Élohim also implies that the narrator is trying to subvert her sacrificial status as victim by asserting divine power and control. Indeed, while the American soldiers interrogate her, she responds to their questions by supplying answers that satisfy herself rather than the

² Here, Rahmani alludes to the final words of Voltaire’s *roman philosophique*, *Candide*, in which the protagonist declares that “Il faut cultiver notre jardin” (86). Candide’s experiences of the world also render him disillusioned, and much like him, the narrator in « *Musulman* » *roman* decides to assert her agency and take control of her own life to escape the world’s miseries.

soldiers. For example, when a military woman demands to know what the narrator is doing in Iraq if she is not Iraqi, the narrator simply replies, “Vous m’avez fait prisonnière” (Rahmani 123) and continues to frustrate the soldiers with her humorously honest responses, thus subtly taking control of the interrogation.

In addition to religion, Rahmani broaches the topic of gender through the narrator’s imprisonment. Julia Kristeva asserts in her essay “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident” that exile is also gendered, explaining, “A woman is trapped within the frontiers of her body and even of her species and consequently always feels *exiled* both by the general clichés that make up a common consensus and by the very powers of generalization intrinsic to language” (296). Women are thus exiled from their own bodies as a result of language and gender roles and the expectations that result from these social constructions. Indeed, in Rahmani’s novel, the problems of war and of an assigned identity also affect women, thus producing a collective experience that goes beyond the Holocaust. For example, even though the narrator is imprisoned with women who are strangers, she becomes one of them in their shared gendered exile, explaining that “Je ne suis pas des leurs mais avec elles je suis” (Rahmani 118). She is at once dissimilar from and similar to her fellow prisoners, for although the narrator is not Iraqi, she is nonetheless a woman. Because of their gender, she and the other women were all targeted by soldiers, detained and punished in this camp as part of a war strategy, for the soldiers believe that the enemy men “ne peuvent se nourrir sans elles” (Rahmani 125) and will therefore be helpless. The soldiers’ reasoning, however, paradoxically highlights the women’s power and powerlessness; that is to say, the soldiers acknowledge the importance of the women’s domestic duties while simultaneously perpetuating patriarchal oppression by punishing them for being women.

When the narrator learns that these innocent women are victims of yet another war, she accuses the soldiers of being murderers and hypocrites. Or, as she clarifies, “c’est qu’à vos yeux je suis une terroriste. Je ne peux être d’accord avec cette idée” (Rahmani 134). In other words, she asserts that she suffers because of other people’s perceptions of her, and she refuses to submit to the soldiers’ judgment, to these names that are “overtly designated to function as signs of distinction or marks of infamy, stigmata” (Bourdieu). Instead, she chooses to reject their labels, for if she cannot be classified, then she cannot be stigmatized. She highlights the violence of systems of categorization, declaring, “Je ne souhaite pas de papiers. Pas

d'identité. Pas de ce principe qui régit vos conquêtes [...] C'est ce qu'on vous apprend dans vos académies militaires. Ficher, inscrire, noter, identifier l'autre" (Rahmani 134). Identity, when imposed upon a person, thus serves as a weapon of war, of conquest, of oppression, especially because identities that are nonnormative, especially non-white and non-male ones, are often ascribed to bodies in order to weaponize those bodies and individuals as anti-white and anti-patriarchal. As the narrator points out, the soldiers learn to "identifier l'autre," to develop an "us versus them" mentality in which *l'autre* is classified as the enemy. The soldiers' categorization of Muslims as terrorists therefore functions as unfounded "labeling judgements" and "accusations" (Bourdieu) that condone the capture and imprisonment of innocent women of color.

The narrator has managed to take some degree of control over her identity and her gendered exile, acting "within the frontiers of her body and even of her species" by refusing heteronormative expectations (Kristeva 296). In other words, "she refuses that which makes her a woman, that is the say the possibility to perpetuate herself" ("Zahia"). She reflects upon the fact that she has never had children, repeating thrice, "Je n'ai pas fait d'enfant" (Rahmani 139-140). Her small act of resisting her reproductive duty, which the civil servant had declared "embêtant" (Rahmani 107), however, is also marked by an immeasurable sadness, for the reason the narrator has never had a child is because she would be unable to condemn them to her fate. If she had had a child, she explains, "À l'enfant, j'aurais aussi donné un autre nom. Pas le mien. Mais pour autant, aurait-il été sauvé? [. . .] Mais son visage, je n'aurais pu à l'avance le façonner" (Rahmani 139-140). In this manner, she acknowledges the hopelessness of escaping an assigned identity, for even if she had given her imaginary child a surname that was not Muslim, society still would have condemned the child to the label based on their appearance alone.

As a marginalized individual, the narrator is at the mercy of a society that imposes an identity system on everyone. While she can resist by denouncing the categorization of humans, she realizes that she is "là pour trahison" (Rahmani 145), or that she has been imprisoned in the camp for the treason of having rejected her legally assigned identity. Her realization echoes an earlier thought: "Aujourd'hui, cette nationalité je l'ai égarée. Et c'est pour cette raison, cette trahison que je suis maintenue dans cette tôle" (Rahmani 86). The soldiers claim that they know her name is not Élohim and demand to know what she has done with her papers, or the documents which prove that she is of French nationality. She finds herself unable to

respond, understanding that the soldiers have given her the new labels of traitor and terrorist, and that she will therefore always be a part of this broken wheel in the social mechanism of identity.

Even though the narrator exiled herself from France and her family in an attempt to find freedom from normative identities, the American soldiers assume that she has disposed of her papers so that she can use her anonymity to perform acts of terrorism. The soldiers then claim that they know her real name, taking away any agency the narrator tried to assert as Élohim, for the final sentences suggest that the narrator will always suffer from the violence of assigned labels. She states, “J’ avais donc un nom. Un nom. Depuis ce temps, j’attends qu’ on me réclame” (Rahmani 145). The fact that she is still waiting to be named suggests the inescapability of assigned identity and that the narrator will never get to name herself, never get the opportunity to be more than just *Musulman*. Because “the world males [sic] her into the figure of a Muslim” instead of letting her define her own identity, the narrator “herself never felt what would be, or what one would call, a Muslim identity” (“Zahia”), and the repeated rejections of the narrator’s attempts to assume a non-identity are what render the novel a tragedy.

Although she wishes to remain unnamed and stateless, society condemns the narrator to the label *Musulman*, an epithet that she neither chose nor consented to. History repeats itself and the book comes full circle, causing the narrator to become a scapegoat again, already judged as guilty for a crime that she never committed. In this manner, denomination represents an insidious form of erasure, for the assignation of a new name demonstrates the violent refusal of agency, of an individual’s chosen identity and their desire to reinvent themselves and reclaim their exile. Ultimately, in Rahmani’s novel, identity is a problematic assignation that society must stop imposing upon people, and it is others, not the monolithic *Other*, who must recognize and use someone’s chosen identity. Because “The language of the exile muffles a cry, it doesn’t ever shout” (Kristeva 298), we must learn to listen to this cry and to help it shout.

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