

Soliloquies and other poems

One of the reasons it is so important to see these poems re-released in translation is that they are at the centre of a revolving poetic universe, in which the writer revisits, recycles and adapts his original poetry. Of course, the enduring figure of Nedjma – symbol of the Algerian nation – is omnipresent throughout these poems that flow into each other and into Kateb's other literary creations. Indeed, the fragmented and fluid verses of these poems are themselves reflective of the intersecting poetic world that persists throughout Kateb's work. In the absence of a complete collection of Kateb's works, these poems bring a new focus on the writer.

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EDITIONS FRANTZ FANON

Boukhalfa Laouari
&
Carmen Garratón Mateu (eds.)

Kateb Yacine Soliloquies and other poems

Foreword by
Joseph Ford

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KATEB YACINE: A REVOLUTIONARY INSIDE THE REVOLUTION

Carmen Garratón Mateu¹

KATEB YACINE: A REVOLUTIONARY INSIDE THE REVOLUTION²

Kateb Yacine is considered to be one of the pillars of Algerian literature. In 2018, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Kateb Yacine Garden in Paris, his son, Amazigh Kateb pronounced the following words in memory of his father³,

“This garden is very nice. It is small and humble as Yacine was [...]. I should have found it unnecessary to inaugurate an enormous park with plants [...] this one is nice. It’s a park among the houses, with people living here that will see the garden daily, and I find this good, I think that it embodies Yacine’s image and his modesty. He loved wandering. He took his straw hat and his cane to pick flowers, and voilà, he loved walking because he would say it was good for writing, it felt good⁴”.

These words reflect a modest man’s personality and his life philosophy. A wandering poet at the crossroad of two worlds, engaged with freedom and with the people, and always in search of the genuine Algerian identity. A man for whom “poetry and revolution” were the same thing (Aouadi, 2003, 9).

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² Page numbers in the printed version of the chapter: pp. 27-81.

³All the citations in this work have been translated by Carmen Garratón Mateu.

⁴Source : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWDw4KMtU> (6/10/2018).

1. A NOMAD'S CONTINUOUS JOURNEY

The life of the poet, novelist and dramaturge, Kateb Yacine was a continuous journey, he was the eternal exile. According to his birth certificate, he was born on 6 August 1929 in Zighoud Youcef (which was named Condé-Smendou during the colonial period). However, neither the date nor the place of birth is correct: "I was not born on 6 August. Actually, I was born several weeks before that date in Constantine, at number 7, Des Huiliers impasse, not far from Polygone square" (Benamar, 2009). His mother had been repudiated by his father, and although they got back together afterwards, his father was absent during the childbirth. His grandfather, a jurist of Muslim law in Condé-Smendou took them immediately to his city and registered him with the name of Yacine (Benamar, 2009). Paradoxically, as his surname was Kateb (which means writer in Arabic) he chose to reverse it and he adopted the pen name Kateb Yacine. This confusion around his birth and name turned out to be a sort of premonition about his nomadic lifestyle and about the role he would play in life as a writer.

Kateb had Chaoui origins. His family came from an enigmatic marabout lineage of uncertain origin whose ancestry was Keblout. The legends and the mythological tales of this tribe represent Kateb's first contact with the oral tradition of his people. The Keblouti tribe was native to Nadhor, in the province of Guelma (Benamar, 2009) but as a result of the Arabization campaign undertaken by colonial authorities through the *Bureaux Arabes*, the names of the tribes were changed and Keblout ended up as Kateb (Thiba and David, 1998).

Mohamed, his father, was a poet and an *oukil*, a lawyer of Muslim law, and due to this job, his family was forced to move constantly. Yasmine, his mother, spent most of her life confined in a psychiatric hospital. The continuous arguments and reconciliations with her husband, and the premature death of

several of her sons led her to protect her only son “against all curses from the dark world” with all sorts of sorceries, pilgrimages and visits to saints (Benamar, 2009). This peculiar family introduced Kateb to the world of poetry from a tender age. His maternal grandfather, Si Ahmed el Ghazali Kateb, was also a renowned Arabic-language poet (Dugas, 2018, 1). Kateb used to practice poetry with his mother daily as she came from a Chaoui tribe in which oral poetry, transmitted from generation to generation, was very well rooted (Thiba and David, 1998). She would play the characters of the stories she told, she would sing and disguise herself. The poetic jousts, the oral tales, and the fables form a universe that appears mystified and amplified in Kateb’s work. Indeed, popular poetry was the last bit of freedom for people during the colonial occupation. The majority of people could not write or read in Arabic so they resorted to oral poetry as a means of expression free from censorship and illiteracy (Bamia, 2001, 101). Popular songs were part of collective memory and of the resistance against colonisation. At the same time, they were the way to express people’s aspirations in an oral context. Such practices were quite common in other Berber regions like Kabylia where women used to compose chants known as *izlan* with which they could evade oppressive reality and say things that could not be said (Garratón Mateu, 2016, 31).

Kateb was nourished by this popular culture, but he had also been immersed, since he was very young, in a double culture: French and Muslim. He received initial training in the Koranic school of Sedrata, but at the age of five he joined the French school Bougaa (named Lafayette during the colonial period), which was situated in the province of Setif. Aware that the French language was dominant at this moment, his father pushed him to learn this language, which he assumed would help him in the future (Abadi, 1967).

In 1941, Kateb’s entry to the French lyceum Albertini of Setif (renamed the lycée Mohamed Kerouani after Algerian independence), was his first contact with colonialism. Paradoxically, it was here that Kateb experienced his first encounter with the French language that would be true revelation for him. Thanks to the influence of his teacher, he discovered French poetry and fell in

love with the language. His family, accustomed to poetry, totally supported him.

However, this period of study was brief and ended abruptly. Almost at the same time he was discovering the revolutionary ideas that inspired the French Revolution, Kateb was involved in a series of bloody events that shocked Algeria. When he was only fifteen years old, he took part in the anti-colonialist demonstrations that started in the East of Algeria on 8 May 1945⁵. The reasons that triggered these events were numerous, but the immediate cause was the disappointment of Algerians who had participated in defending France during World War II and their impatience for reforms promised by the colonial authorities. The repression of these demonstrations by the colonial authorities was huge and resulted in a massacre that extended to all the towns of Kateb's childhood affecting many members of his own family. At that time, Kateb was still not fully aware of the situation of his country, but he was nevertheless arrested and sent to prison in *Le bagne de Lambèse* (at Tazoult) for four months, until the end of September 1945. This difficult experience marked his life and work. At that moment, an engaged poet, a revolutionary was born. In prison, he discovered the greatness of an illiterate people (Thiba and David, 1998) as he later reflected in his works where one of his characters, Lakhdar, "discovers true solidarity among his compatriots and receives his first notions about the revolution" (Boudraa, 2002, 99).

In the space of just a few months, he was taken from his studies and from his mother. She, after having escaped from the bloody events, was not able to know if her son was dead or alive and she ended up confined in the psychiatric hospital: "She lived inside a parenthesis that will never open. My mother, veiled light, lost in the infiniteness of her silence" (Benamar 2009).

⁵The popular uprisings spread to Setif, Guelma and Kherrata. For further information see Rey-Goldzeiguer, Annie (2002). *Aux origines de la guerre d'Algerie 1940-1945. De Mers-el-Kebir aux massacres du Nord-Constantinois*. La Découverte.

After the repressed uprising, Kateb dropped out of the lyceum, wanting instead to devote himself to writing poetry. Writing helped him to externalize the trauma and to express his feelings. The “healing power” of folk literature “flourishes during periods of repression and profound hardship” (Bamia, 2001, 11). His father did not object, so from this moment on Kateb’s poetic journey began (Faure, 1974, 71).

He was an author of complex and fragmented writing, and he was able to masterfully intermingle theatre, poetry and the novel. However, he considered himself primarily a poet.

“I am a poet. Since I was very young, I experienced a natural and irreducible inclination towards poetry. I recognise that some people do not pay attention to poetry in literary matters, but for me it is incontrovertible: everything begins with poetry⁶”.

After touring eastern Algeria, he went to Bône (Annaba) where he encountered the woman that would be the impossible passion of his life, his cousin Odette-Zouleikha, his paternal uncle’s daughter whose mother was a French Jew who converted to Islam. Zouleikha was also the first Algerian elected as a municipal councillor (Dugas, 2018, 3). This married woman was ten years older than Kateb, and she would become his muse, Nedjma, a character omnipresent throughout his works. The first time he met her, it was love at first sight, but this feeling would later turn into a terrible frustration (Lecoq, 1995).

In 1946, while he was still in Bône, he met Carlavan, the bankrupt publisher of the *Imprimerie du Réveil bônois*, who would nevertheless selflessly publish Kateb’s first poems under the name of *Soliloques (Soliloquies)*, accompanied by a preface written by Zouleikha. This first work caught the attention of the General Governor, Chataigneau, and as a result Kateb gained a scholarship

⁶ Kateb Yacine (1958), “Pourquoi j’ai écrit *Le Cadavre encerclé*”, *France Observateur*, n. 452, Paris (interview on 31 Decembre).

to France in spring of 1947 (Dugas, 2018, 2). The poet arrived in Paris in March 1947, at only 17 years of age. At the headquarters of the magazine *Lettres Françaises*, he met the major literary figures of the moment such as Luis Aragon, Paul Eluard and Jean Amrouche, among others. Two months later, on 24 May 1947, Kateb gave a lecture entitled *Abdelkader et l'Indépendance Algérienne (Abdelkader and Algerian independence)* at the salon of the *Sociétés Savantes* of Paris. This lecture urged the public to collaborate in the liberation of his country, and the text was finally published in *En Nahda* (p. 47) in 1948.

On returning to Algeria, he joined the Communist Party, but in April 1948 he came back to France. On this occasion, he travelled without funding so he was forced to write to the French poet and writer Gabriel Audisio to ask for help (Dugas, 2018, 3). This same year, he published his first significant poem, *Nedjma ou le poème ou le couteau (Nedjma or the poem or the knife)*.

This fruitful period in France was decisive for the writer. His first contacts with French intellectual life, his first published works, his political awareness and his experience falling in love with his cousin Nedjma marked the development of his writing career. But Kateb was a restless person.

In subsequent years, he combined his activity as a writer with many different jobs such as docker in the port of Algiers. After his return to Algeria in 1949, he wrote a series of texts of a political or social nature in several local newspapers. In the journal of the Communist Party, *Liberté*, he published *Le déshérités des Aurès (The disinherited of the Aurès)*, a “powerful and cruel” text about poverty among the rural population (Dugas, 2018, 9). From 1949 to 1951, he also collaborated with *Alger Républicain*, which allowed him to travel to other countries like the USSR and Saudi Arabia. Upon his return from Saudi Arabia, he published a report on the Mecca fraud under the pseudonym of Saïd Lamri. During this period, he met Ahmed Akkache, a journalist who would become a long-time friend: “The friend for over 20 years, from the time of the great hopes, the man to whom I sent the first copy still unpublished of *Le cadaver encerclé (The surrounded corpse)*, the man I was thinking of when I was writing *Nedjma*, my battle mate, the witness to my first babble as an

aspiring writer...” (Kateb, 1973, pref.). Akkache was the one to read a final tribute to Kateb during his funeral in Algiers (Chaalal, 2003).

The life of the young writer during these years was one of continuous coming and going (the USSR, Uzbekistan, France, Tunis, Germany, Belgium, Italy are some of the many places he visited). But after the death of his father in 1950, Kateb had to take care over the women of his family, and he was forced to emigrate to France in search of a job. Due to these circumstances, he came to call himself “the errant Maghrebi” (Faure, 1974, 73-74). A fragment of his later novel *Le polygone étoilé* (*The starred polygon*) recalls these difficult moments of his life:

“I was twenty-years old when he died
Just before burying my father
I was forbidden
To visit my mother
Behind the fence of the asylum
Since I myself felt my reason darkening
Between two evasions or two chases
Forced to restore among the four walls
The broken silhouette
Of the one without whom I wouldn’t have been able to live” (Kateb, 1997 [1966], 171).

During his first years as an emigrant in France, he had a hard life and had to accept multiple jobs (farmworker in La Camargue, where he worked with the Algerian writer Malek Haddad, mason, electrician...). These experiences are reflected in some of his works which, at that time, were already in draft form.

1952 was a fundamental moment in the poet’s career, as he asked again for Audisio’s support – despite their political differences. Audisio agreed to engage him as a reader for texts that were the fragments of his future novel still in its early stages.

Meanwhile, his friends provided him with accommodation and support, and he could at last fully commit to writing. From 1954 onwards, the year of the outbreak of the Algerian War, Kateb's works, that had been in gestation for many years, started to appear in published form. Thanks to his positive relationship with Albert Beguin and Jean-Marie Domenach, respectively director and chief editor of the magazine *Esprit*, his theatrical works were made public. Despite being banned in France, his play *Le cadaver encerclé* was published in the December 1954 and February 1955 issues. When Jean-Marie Serreau suggested he adapt it for the stage, Kateb's career as a playwright began. Due to the content of this play, inspired by the massacre of 1945, it was forbidden in France. It was finally staged on 4 August 1958, in Tunis, at the Théâtre Antique de Carthago. *Le cadaver encerclé* is a tragedy, in which the prison is omnipresent. It is a revolutionary piece of theatre with a strong political significance and with profound symbolism. As a result of this first play, Kateb collaborated with the theatre director, Jean-Marie Serreau, for ten years. He proposed that Kateb make the leap from poetry to theatre to give voice to the topics covered in his poems. Thanks also to Serreau, Kateb would meet the German dramaturge, Bertolt Brecht (Faure, 1974, 75).

In 1956, Kateb's first novel, *Nedjma*, was published by Seuil, in Paris and Kateb became known at the international level. This work, which he had been working on for many years, became his most famous and acclaimed novel. It is considered a "cult book", a symbol of the historic consciousness of an entire people (Thiba and David, 1998). *Nedjma* is a mythic and dynamic story where different literary genres – poetry, novel, and theatre – are intermingled. Kateb did not follow a predetermined system (Bonn, 1989, 275). *Nedjma* is a mythic and dynamic story where different literary genres – poetry, novel, and theatre – are intermingled. Kateb did not follow a predetermined system (Bonn, 1989, 275).

Meanwhile, the Algerian War represented a new exile for Kateb due to his political involvement with the nationalist struggle for the liberation of his

country. Harassment at the hands of the *Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire* forced him to travel constantly from one place to another (Milan, Tunis, Brussels, Hamburg, Stockholm, Trieste, Zagreb, Berlin, Florence, Rome, Moscow...). Despite the drawbacks, he went on writing but many of his works were lost. However, his years as an exile were very fertile and his most famous works would appear during this period.

In 1958, while Kateb was in Italy, we wrote *Les ancêtres redoublent de férocité*, that was staged by Serreau in 1967, in Paris. At the same time, some fragments of another unpublished piece in the making, *La poudre de l'intelligence* (*Intelligence powder*), appeared on 4 August 1958 in *Action* (9-12).

In 1959, during the peak of the armed conflict with France, Editions du Seuil in Paris published *Le cercle des représailles* with a preface written by Edouard Glissant. This work compiles some previously written and released plays. Algeria is omnipresent in a very poetic way, torn apart by the war but, at the same time, united by love for the land. It reflects the clamour of an entire people. It is both a metaphoric and a realistic work. This compilation is composed of two tragedies, *Le cadavre encerclé* and *Les ancêtres redoublent de férocité*; a comedy *La poudre d'intelligence* and a final poem *Vautour*. In turn, *La poudre d'intelligence* is the extended and subtitled version of some previously published fragments. This work is considered Kateb's first comedy and with it he started the satirical dimension of his theatre that became more politized in future works such as *L'homme aux sandales de caoutchouc* (*The man in rubber sandals*) and *Mohamed, prends ta valise* (Faure, 1974, 75). *La Poudre d'intelligence* was released in Paris in 1967 and in Algiers in 1969 in dialectal Arabic.

In 1963, *La femme sauvage* was staged at the Recamier Theatre in Paris by Jean-Marie Serreau. In this work, Kateb combines different fragments of other plays returning to the theme of the ancestors that will appear again in 1966 in his novel *Le polygone étoilé*. *La femme sauvage* is the completed version of *Le cadavre encerclé* and *Les ancêtres redoublent de férocité*. Serreau was the

artificer of the “miracle” of having put together all the scattered pieces to bring the work on stage (Abadi, 1967).

After Algerian independence, Kateb returned to his country. He continued collaborating with *Alger Républicain*. And in 1963, on the occasion of an interview with the journalist Philippe Bernier, he expressed his desire to establish himself in Algeria:

“If it was up to me, I’d like to move to Algeria, because it is my country, because I love my country. But there are objective reasons that make me an errant writer; they have opened new horizons and I am not ready to leave them. When I go to Algeria, I have to admit that I suffer at each moment because I have been far from the country for too long. If it is enough to be absent from a city for six months that it changes, then it is even more so if I have been absent for fourteen years” (*Bernier, 1963, 33*).

Despite these words, Kateb could not stop moving, “when I walk, I have ideas, I discover the world when I am walking” (Lecoq, 1995).

In the 1960s, he spent a period in Vietnam, which would influence some of his later works. Between 1963 and 1967, he continued to travel often to Moscow, Paris and Hamburg and he also enjoyed a short six-month period in Algeria in 1965 that he shared with his mother, who was temporarily out of the hospital. During these years, his literary production slowed down, although he kept on writing. The end of the war and the subsequent political disappointments seem to have impacted on his work (Aougadi, 2003, 8).

Meanwhile, he continued writing in *Alger Républicain*, where he published a series of texts under the name of *Nos frères les indiens (Our brothers the Indian)*.

In 1966 his second novel, *Le Polygone étoilé*, was published in Paris, ten years after *Nedjma*. The title of this work and its reference to the figure of the polygon

was likely a result of a meeting between Kateb and Jacques Berque in Tunis in 1958. Berque maintained that “from one end to the other of the Mediterranean world, a decorative motif is repeated almost obsessively. It is a sort of rosette, or rather a polygon whose angles point towards the outside” (Thiba and David, 1998). This novel is an ambiguous work, disorganised and chaotic, that can be considered as the continuation of his previous novel. Some of the events that occur in *Nedjma* are explained in this work in more detail, including information about independence (Akyeampong, 2003, 361). However, the structure of this novel, with juxtaposed and unexpected fragments, make it difficult to make sense of this work. It looks as if after *Nedjma* everything became senseless; though critics like Bonn (1989) suggest that *Le polygone étoilé* “constitute[d] a system to read *Nedjma*” (278). After the publication of this second novel Kateb definitively abandoned the genre of the novel.

The play, *Les ancêtres redoublent de férocité*, with a new ending, was published in the collection of the *Théâtre National* of Paris in 1967. This same year, Kateb announced his next project, a theatrical piece entitled *Les frères monuments* (*The monument brothers*), “a tragic-comic and antireligious piece”. This work does not intend to attack believers, but to attack “people who hide behind religion to betray the revolution” (Kateb, 1967, 37). Under the name of “frères monuments”, the writer was referring to the Islamic-conservatives such as the Muslim Brothers, but also to the people that, after having been revolutionaries, became “fossilized”, forgetting the original revolutionary idea (Abadi, 1967).

In 1970, after Ho Chi Minh’s death, Kateb published one of his major works, *L’homme aux sandales de caoutchouc*, in the *Théâtre* series of Editions du Seuil (Pears, 2003, 100). This theatrical piece brings to light class confrontations and anti-imperialist combat (Martin du Theil, 1972, 136). The author features a realistic portrayal of Ho-Chi-Minh and the war in Vietnam. After being premiered in Lyon, it was translated into dialectal Arabic and staged in the National Theatre of Algiers by Mustapha Kateb, on 21 November

1971. Kateb Yacine defended socialist politics and chose Vietnam to discuss communism from an external point of view. He longed to see the oppressed people of the world acting together in light of this play (Pears, 2003, 101). The argument recounts the war of liberation of the Vietnamese people. The play is framed in a theatre focused on “political education”. Its goal was to be a paradigm to “project the future of Algeria”. Kateb considered that “the solution to overcome the historical lag of colonized people was in socialism. While Vietnam had undertaken to implement a real socialist republic, Algeria had only passed the stage of nationalism” (Martin du Theil, 1972, 37).

In his maturity, the writer questioned everything: the act of writing, audience, publicity, publication. During this period, two events had an impact on the writer’s life: first, his definitive return to Algeria with the purpose of making a permanent home there after a twenty-year exodus; second, the staging of his play *Mohamed prends ta valise (Mohamed grab your suitcase)* in 1971 in Algeria, as a result of a collaboration with the actors of Théâtre de la Mer, founded in Oran in 1968. The experience of staging this play, inside and outside Algeria was a turning point in his artistic career (Alessandra, 1982, 111). It was the first play written by an Algerian in his mother tongue (Faure, 1974, 81). With this work, Kateb began writing what became known as “emigration theatre”. Hereafter, Kateb wrote together with the members of his troupe, the theatre group ACT (*Action Culturelle des Travailleurs*)⁷, financed by the Ministry of Labour. For several years, he travelled around Algeria with this group bringing popular theatre to the country⁸. It is estimated that the ACT reached an audience of 500,000 spectators in as little as six years (Alessandra, 1982, 112); they also did some international tours.

⁷Workers’ Cultural Action, in English.

⁸Meanwhile in his private life, his marital problems led him to take on caring responsibility for his son Amazigh, who was born in September 1972 (Benamar, 2009). Previously, Kateb Yacine had become the father of a daughter, Nadia Akkache, (whose mother was a Berber Jew) and a son, Hans Jordan (whose mother was German). Hans met his father for the first time when he was 21 years old. Amazigh Kateb, the youngest son, was the only one that lived with his father <<https://bit.ly/2D07I77>>.

Kateb's main works of this fruitful period were: *Les pensées de Moh Zitoun* (*Moh Zitoun's thoughts*) (1971); *La Voix des femmes o Saout Ennissa* (*Women's voice*) (1972); *La Guerre de deux mille ans ou Le Roi de l'Ouest* (*The two-thousand-year war or The King of the West*) (1974-1975); *Boucherie de l'espérance ou Palestine trahie* (*Butchery of the hope or Palestine betrayed*) (1977); and *Le bourgeois sans culotte ou le spectre du parc Monceau* (*The bourgeois without culotte or The spectre of Parc Monceau*).

However, in 1978, Kateb was compelled, much to his regret, to take over the regional theatre of Sidi Bel Abbès where he continued working with the same troupe of actors. This period was a sort of exile for Kateb, as the theatre, which was under the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, would not allow him to continue staging his plays abroad (Casas, 1998, 105). In an interview given to Casas in 1986, he admitted the difficult circumstances in which his troupe were having to work. He also denounced the lack of funds given to the theatre by the state. Despite this, Kateb and his group were able to stage numerous plays over the years (Casas, 1998, 97-98).

His last years in Algeria were quite peculiar. His mother died in 1980, when she was 74 years old, after having spent the last 35 years of her life confined in the hospital. Kateb was 51 years old when she died and he did not attend the funeral. He could only write a poem on the painting of his friend, the painter Issiakhen, that said simply: "I have a heavy heart. When a mother dies even a heart of steel falls apart" (Benamar, 2009).

His combative theatre focused on denouncing injustices and on bringing political consciousness to the people. Kateb's fierce defence of his personal freedom led him not to accept any kind of personal commitment, choosing instead to remain alone. He declared himself to be openly atheist, and although he recognised the historical role of Islam and of Muslim culture, he considered Islam as currently conceived was "more of an obstacle than a factor for progress" (Faure, 1974, 72).

Finally, Kateb suffered official and “indirect” censorship because of his opinions, though he continued to be very popular in Algerian intellectual circles. He was banned from publicly-owned media, such as television and radio, although he was allowed to remain at the forefront of the theatre of Sidi Bel Abbès –principally to keep him out of the way (Amrani, 2007, 201).

With regard to his working habits, Kateb was an unconventional writer. Some days he found inspiration from drugs and alcohol (Aouadi, 2003, 12). He could go days without writing before starting a new work: “I have many things under construction that do not succeed in completing” (Casas, 1998, 103). Kateb did not seem to be worried about the final destination of his oeuvre. He used to modify his works and some of them were revisited constantly. Thanks to the initiative of people like Jacqueline Arnaud, some of Kateb’s works have been recovered. Arnaud was able to compile many of his poems in French that were scattered throughout different magazines and newspapers. Her book, *Kateb Yacine, l’oeuvre en fragments*, was published by Sindbad in 1986 (Casas, 1998, 102-103).

Kateb died of leukaemia on 28 October 1989 at a hospital in Grenoble (France). He left five books on his bedside table: *Poèmes*, by Hölderlin, *Cours Hölderlin*, by Jacques Touboul, *Aracoeli*, by Elsa Morante, *Villes*, by Faulkner and *Concile d’Amour*, by Oscar Panizza. In the final one, a deeply blasphemous text, Kateb seemed to recognize as “the man of complete sedition, the insurgent” (Benamar, 2009), the man that exercised with no fear his freedom to think, to create and to transgress at any price.

Kateb died just one day before his cousin, Mustapha Kateb, Zouleikha’s brother. Both corpses were taken to Marseille airport in the presence of Zouleikha – Nedjma – to be repatriated to Algeria. It was as if Kateb had predicted his own death in his work *Vautour (Vulture)* in which Nedjma was also present in his final moments (Benamar, 2009). He was not only a writer, but a symbol, due to his way of life, his positions and contradictions and his

“perpetual rejection of any kind of conformism at any level [...]. Inside the perturbation, the eternal disruptive” (Bonn, 1989, 273).

Despite the *fatwa* that the great mufti of Algiers issued a day after his death with the objective of banning his burial in the lands of Islam (Benamar, 2009), his final remains were buried in front of a crowd in the cemetery of El Alia, in Algiers. A fragment of the epitaph, that was read during the ceremony by his friend and workmate, Ahmed Akkache, illustrates this moment:

“They have not succeeded, and your departure today has become a true hymn to life. Listen Yacine to these thousands of known and unknown citizens that are with us, all these young people, these women, these former militants, listen to the mixed screams, chants and cries from all of these simple people who love you” (Chaalal, 2003).

This unique author, left behind an innovative work devoted to the restoration of a people’s dignity and identity. He mocked religion and vocalized the pleasures of life. He was a provocateur; a nomad author, maintaining that writing, life, love, freedom and revolution could only find meaning through passion.

“I have deciphered the ancestors’ heritage and I have turned it into the rejection of submission. This refusal has become passion, passion for politics and for freedoms. My inner demons are not a curse, they are verbs! These verbs are a peaceful striking power!” (Benamar, 2009).

Kateb Yacine was awarded the following prizes and acknowledgments for his work⁹:

1963: Prix Jean Amrouche, conferred by the city of Florence, Italy.

⁹Source<<https://www.afrik.com/kateb-yacine-sa-vie-son-oeuvre>>.

1975: Prix Lotus conferred to Afroasiatic writers whose works address the struggles of the people of the Third World.

1980: Premier Prix du Lion pour le théâtre, Académie Simba and Corriere Africano.

1987: Grand Prix National des Lettres, conferred by the Ministry of Culture of France. Kateb received this prize after seventeen years without publishing any significant work.

1991: Medal of honour, conferred posthumously by the Jury of the International Festival of Experimental Theatre of Cairo.

2. THE THEMATICS, SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY OF KATEB YACINE'S WORK

It is striking how Kateb remained faithful to the main thematic developed in his works, to such an extent that some of his works are interconnected and the same characters wander from one work to the other. His own personal experiences are also disseminated in his texts. Violence and repression during the final years of colonialism gave birth to his political awareness, and an unending quest for a lost Algerian identity permeates his works.

His experience in French school and his immersion into the culture of the colonizer resulted in a difficult acculturation process for the people of his generation: “almost all of us believed in the myth of French Algeria” (Déjeux, 1973, 268). However, the bloody massacres of 1945 led him to a collision with reality. During these early years, before focusing fully on the “combative theatre” during the 1970s, his work was more poetic and operated at a more unconscious level. He recreates a particular universe of symbols, myths, reveries, legends and oral traditions which are rooted in ancient Barbary¹⁰. The theatre of this period is extremely lyrical and inspired by classical tragedies (Déjeux, 1973, 269). In contrast, the popular theatre that he created

¹⁰Barbary is the former designation for the coastal region of North Africa. The name originates from that of the Berbers, the oldest known inhabitants of the region.

later was more focused on political and linguistic issues, developing a satirical and polemic facet with which the writer felt more comfortable.

Kateb's genius resides in his ability to transgress all the prohibitions of society by means of his writing without being censored. He lashes out against the oligarchy that has repressed the Algerian people since independence, with a particular focus on women and Berbers. As he used to say: "It is necessary to revolutionize the revolution" (Boudraa, 2002, 84).

Kateb Yacine is also among the first intellectuals to foster the indigenous voice. In his works, he acts as a "poetic spokesman for the fight and for the transmission of memory and history" (Mestaoui, 2017, 8).

Among the more common topics discernible across his works, we would highlight the following:

2.1.- Remembrance of the past and the continuous search for personal and collective Algerian identity

In Kateb's oeuvre, the past occupies a predominant and idealized place. He defined his theatre as an "autobiography in the plural" (Rolin, 1963), composed of his personal experiences and those of others. In *Nedjma* there are also accounts of Kateb's childhood, references to his parents and allusions to his ancestors. Childhood represents for him a harmonious period thanks to the presence of his mother. In this book, the stories overlap without maintaining any chronological order (Kateb, 1996 [1956]). From this point of departure, everything moves in perpetual rotation. The writer gives a real sense of vertigo trying to return to the origins, where it does not matter whether one is European or "Oriental"; the crucial thing for Kateb is that one is a human being (Déjeux, 1973, 271). Kateb considered himself the heir of the *halqa* (lit. the circle) that used to recite traditional chants of historical events and hagiographic stories in the markets and in the squares in the villages as wandering troubadours (Haddad, 2008, 33).

As a militant of the independence, a recurrent theme in his oeuvre, he left proof of his people's identity and aspirations. He is among the first writers that even under the colonial yoke dared to denounce what colonialism covered up; he also showed its cruelty (Mestaoui, 2017, 9). He wanted a free Algeria but at the same time he longed for reconciliation with France. Several years after independence, his life was torn between two cultures, between two countries (Faure, 1974, 76-9).

The plot of *Nedjma* consists of a complex allegory of the Nation in which the desire for Nedjma represents the desire for an independent Algeria. Nedjma—Arab, Jew and French – is the image of the heterogeneity and of the mestizaje of the Algerian culture and identity (Akyeampong, 2003, 361). She represents the “sedimentation of all the autochthonous and foreign contribution that constitute the singularity of Algeria” (Thiba and David, 1998). Nedjma is the main character although she is the only one who does not act as a narrator, maybe because in the moment Kateb wrote the story there did not yet exist “a story of the Algerian nation”. The author seems to want to evidence the difficulties that Nedjma, as a symbol of the nation, finds to create her own story. She reflects how laborious it is the “reconquer the memory” and “the necessity of freeing herself to invent the language of the nation” that does not yet exist (Bonn, 1989, 277).

His unending movement away from and towards her, “the Foreigner”, and towards his motherland was one of his fundamental concerns. The image of the undecided emigrants, faced with the dilemma of succumbing to foreign women or returning to their country, represents a trap in which they lose their culture and identity. This is why Kateb represents France as a “public woman”, “appealing and castrating” (Déjeux, 1973, 283).

The poet was aware that in Algeria there was a huge job to do. As an author committed to his people, he thought revolution did not only consist of agreeing with revolutionary principles. He was not a prototypical nationalist writer. He believed that it was necessary to go beyond, from the inner revolution to the

political revolution. He was the “eternal perturbator” because for him “a poet is the naked revolution” (Faure, 1974, 78-79).

Regaining an original Algerian identity is a core focus of his oeuvre. He spent his life searching for the origins of Algerian identity. His awareness of French colonization but also of Arabic colonization brought him to discover the roots of his people. The figure of the wild woman embodies the resurrected image of a fugitive Algeria.

His interest in history led him to dive into the past of his people before the arrival of the Arabs. For Kateb, collective identity depended on the ability of the people to compile and tell the stories that form their history. As Bonn observed: “A people without true or mythical history does not exist” (Bonn, 1989, 276).

Like the popular poets, Kateb acts as a sort of chronicler of historic events (Bamia, 2001, 21). French authors from the colonial period, such as Eugène Daumas, showed their interest in popular folklore and they were fascinated to observe that the events that took place during the French conquest of Algeria in 1830 had been the object of a poem, which makes these oral poems historical documents (Bamia, 2001, 21). In the same way, Kateb focuses on contemporary events but also the historical milestones because history for the writer is essential to build national identity (Boudraa, 2002, 82). His commitment to history and his interest in the development of events led to a live theatre with the additional problem of the difficulty to end his plays that are constantly updated and rewritten (Casas, 1998, 99).

Kateb also made allusions to some legendary episodes in the history of Berbers to “deconstruct the false discourse of the different colonizers, and in particular, of the marabouts who do not stop confiscating North African history to resemble the Middle-East” (Boudraa, 2002, 83).

Despite the omnipresence of Algeria, Kateb will try to make current conflicts visible. In his plays he will address the problems of other places such as Vietnam, Palestine or Occidental Sahara. The argument of *Palestine trahie (Betrayed Palestine)* is based on historical events and on the history of religions. *Le Roi de l'Ouest (The king of the West)* refers to the conflict of the Occidental Sahara (Casas, 1998, 99).

2.2.- The feminine universe

The woman and the feminine universe are omnipresent in Kateb's oeuvre. Childhood, tradition, and nostalgia for one's roots are closely related to the different roles that women play in his works, such as the mother, the lover, and the insurgent or wild woman. Many of his images take us back to the mother's womb, to the uterine life. They are a return to the original source. The "black rose", the "rose of Blida" that appears in his works embodies Yasmine, Kateb's mother, victim of violence and madness. She is also the symbol of the earth mother that has been subjugated. His mother was the light of Kateb's childhood, but unfortunately this light stopped flashing too soon.

"Before being bound inside her shirt of silence, my mother was my muse and my musician, my first source of poetry, after my partner of theatre. French school broke us up" (Benamar, 2009).

French school was indeed for the writer a rupture, a sort of internal exile. At a stroke, the young pupil lost his mother and his language, "the only inalienable treasures, however alienated" (Faure, 1974, 68). This traumatic experience, the rupture with his ancestors, with his roots tormented Kateb during his whole life. Afterwards, due to the internment of his mother in the psychiatric hospital he was definitively separated from her. They could only be together in several specific moments.

Nedjma, on the other hand, was his impossible love of adolescence. She was, in the words of the writer, the only woman that Kateb could love (Lecoq, 1995).

But Nedjma is also the central character of his works. She embodies the insurrection, the unreachable and subjugated nation that is ready to free herself. She is “the knife woman”, “the wild woman”. Nedjma is the allegory of Algeria. The other male characters of the novel, the four cousins, will fight for her love, but she is a rebel. “They have isolated me to defeat me, they have married me to isolate me...As I love them, I will keep them inside my prison...In the long run the prisoner is the one that decides” (Benamar, 2009).

Both women, his cousin and his mother, made an indelible mark in the life and in the work of Kateb: “My adolescence remained with Nedjma, my childhood remained with my mother” (Benamar, 2009).

Kateb’s works highlights the important role played by women in the history of North Africa. In his play *La voix des femmes (Women’s voice)* he brings to the scene the mythical Berber queen Kahina, symbol of the resistance against the Arabs. To write this play, he studied history through the oeuvre of Ibn Khaldoun about the Berbers (Casas, 1998, 100). This play was a very ambitious project that aimed to give a central role back to women (Casas, 1998, 101).

In the group of pieces that comprise *Le cercle des représaillés*, the sacrifice of Nedjma illustrates how women’s interests have been sacrificed for a “fundamentalist nationalism that undoubtedly tries to recover the precolonial past” (Akyeampong, 2003, 362). This situation was not new. Women, once considered as the guardians of tradition, turn into hostages of the same tradition. However, Kateb in those turbulent times in which women’s rights were ignored, will assume the role of a disruptive poet and he will dare to question the predominant values. Maybe this position was due to his awareness, since he was young, of the difficult situation of women in his country. His own mother and his aunt were repudiated several times and returned to the home of their families of origin. Moreover, his sister was not able to get divorced and had to support a polygamous husband. Many “women, such as Kateb’s mother, were prisoners of the custom of getting

married according to blood ties. Their only consolation was to give birth to male children who could ensure the preservation of the lineage” (Bourdieu, 1998, 104). This is the reason why Kateb, in spite of having sisters, was considered “an only child”, because in his culture only male children could transfer the ties of blood. Women were only “human navettes, circulating at the will of exchanges of flesh and blood among families, that do not prevent neither the marriage to the direct cousin, nor the humiliation of being repudiated, nor the babies’ cries” (Benamar, 2009). It is the male domination described by Bourdieu. In these societies that give priority to men, women are reduced to a status of “instrument of production or of reproduction of the symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1998, 49-50).

Kateb was also very critical of the role that Islam assigns to women. In his opinion, the Arab Islamism has resulted in “the subjugation and in the degradation of women among us” (Yacine, 1992). He was criticized for his liberal positions in gender equality issues, such as his stance against the use of the veil:

“Perpetually sacrificed, women are received from their birth without joy. When daughters follow each other, this birth turns into a malediction. Until her marriage she is like a time bomb which endangers patriarchal honour. She will be confined and she will live a secret life in women’s underworld. We do not listen to women’s voices. It is almost a whisper. And very often, the silence. A stormy silence. Because silence begets the gift of the word” (Kateb, 1984).

2.3.- Symbolism of the characters

Symbolism in Kateb’s oeuvre would need a more specific study. For this reason, this section will give a brief overview of the most notable characters.

Kateb slides into popular tradition and ancestral land to create his particular imagery (Boudraa, 2002, 79). However, after the events of 1945, his works reflect a crumbling world where the lost and yet proximate paradise from

before no longer exists. This rupture appears in his works through different allusions – explosions, thunders, storms– that pre-empt a fatal event (Déjeux, 1973, 275).

Kateb uses the same characters in many of his works. Sometimes these characters coexist with other ones from the past. In his works, a double figure, the woman and the ancestors, stands out (Thiba and David, 1998).

The ancestors are responsible for the tribal cohesion that was one of the main Kateb's concerns. The group is promiscuous. Endogamy and incest are the ways to “scape from the extermination that has been imposed from the outside” (Déjeux, 1973, 272). His own ancestors, the maraboutic lineage of Keblouti, represent two traditional virtues: the knowledge and the military power. Some members of Kateb's lineage had been unjustly killed by colonial authorities and on account of this his tribe was dissolved. The ancestors, that appear in Kateb's works, are responsible for recovering “the ancestral word” and for returning to the fight. The four main characters of *Nedjma* belong to the same lineage and Nedjma, although she is a mestiza, is also the tribe's daughter, a symbol of the nation (Thiba and David, 1998). The myth of the ancestor belongs also to Kateb's own biography. He uses this biographical material to transform in literature what will be the basis for a genealogical fiction (Harchi, 2012, 6). In the novel, political events end in the confrontation between the tribe and the nation. The poet experiences the fracture in his own body. His harmonious relation with nature, his mother culture and his people were broken. In the novel, the tribal cohesion was ruptured because of a “Foreign woman” who seduced the men of the story. The mythic ancestor had deserted years ago and now he is just a spectre (Déjeux, 1973, 277). This work reflects a sort of collective amnesia where nobody remembers their origins. Nedjma, now Algeria, is possessed by force by the successive conquerors “suitors without a title and without love”. She has been acculturated, cross-dressed over the centuries. The roots of Algeria, like those of Nedjma, are hybrid, they are mixed (Déjeux, 1973, 279).

In another work, *Les ancêtres redoublent de férocité* (*The ancestors' ferocity intensifies*), the ancestors are outraged by the injustice that has come to their descendants who have been colonized, deprived and subjected to a dictatorship after the independence (Boudraa, 2002, 94).

Another recurrent character charged with symbolism is the vulture. The role of the vulture is similar to the role played by the raven in the popular poems from the same period. In these poems the raven “grown old and grey” embodies “the despair and suffering faced by poor farmers before independence with ceaseless frustration and humiliation” (Bamia, 2001, 98). The vulture in *Les ancêtres* shows a vision of death that is seen as a dream, a return to the Mother Earth (Déjeux, 1973, 281). But in this work, the vulture is also the ancestor Keblout. This figure of the vulture is present in pagan traditions and in the folklore of Constantine but, in Kateb's oeuvre, it stands out as the “totem” of an errant tribe. It represents both, Lakhdar and his ancestors, and the “wild woman” transformed in a female vulture (Déjeux, 1973, 287).

The vulture is also the link with the past, sent by the ancestors, in the theatre piece *Le cercle des représailles* (*The circle of retribution*) (Boudraa, 2002, 97). In this play we find the same characters of *Nedjma* but, on this occasion, Lakhdar, who lived an impossible love in the novel, is now presented as a young “nationalist militant acknowledged to be Nedjma's lover and the father of her child” (Akyeampong, 2003, 361). Here, he becomes “the vulture, messenger of the ancestors, to whom Nedjma, the symbol of the motherland, is sacrificed for the revolution” (Akyeampong, 2003, 362). The vulture appears in the crucial moment of the Algerian War, but it also undergoes an evolution. From a bird of the war, a scavenger, it becomes a “tamed” animal, a “specimen of life”. The vulture finally means “to die to be reborn” (Abadi, 1967).

Besides the vulture, many other elements from north African tradition, such as genies or *jinnns*, populate Kateb's oeuvre. The landscape also plays a central role in his work. It helps to create a series of images and metaphors that go beyond reality. In this scenery, the human and the cosmic representations are

mixed, plants and animals confuse the reader who is not able to distinguish between the characters and the landscape (Boudraa, 2002, 127). In short, all these elements create the particular “Katebian universe”.

2.4.- The question of language in Kateb’s work

In spite of knowing the works of writers such as Faulkner, Rimbaud, Camus, Baudelaire or Nerval, Kateb Yacine developed his own literary style. He is considered the founder of modern Algerian literature in French language (Thiba and David, 1998), and the contemporary of other francophone Algerian writers such as Mohamed Dib, Mouloud Feraoun or Mouloud Mammeri that used the literary genre of the novel that they had learned in their French colonial education to describe their dominated and colonized society. But, unlike them, the originality of Kateb’s novel lies in the fact that it calls into question and undermines this literary genre bequeathed by the French (Bonn, 1989, 275). His cosmopolitan life did not make him lose the link with his origins. He thought it was necessary to “dose” new knowledge. “I have a quite barbarian side, in part I regret culture”. He neglected “cultivated creativity [...]”. It is necessary to unlearn what we have learned” (Abadi, 1967). If he had allowed himself to be influenced by the whole foreign world that surrounded him, he would have lost his personal essence and he aspired to be completely free because, in short, to create freedom is not necessary to acquire all knowledge. A poet is not about knowing everything. To be a poet is to be lonely and to try to find the inner life of a country: “In Algeria the most cultivated person is the illiterate one” (Thiba and David, 1998).

The language issue reflects Kateb’s process of evolution and his awareness of the linguistic reality of his country. Although he was nourished by popular poetry, mainly in dialectal Arabic, he used to write his poems in French. In his artistic production, it is possible to draw a subtle line between two styles. From 1956 to 1966 his works reflect his rupture with and search for the individual and collective past. During this period his language is more poetic in spite of using French in a “subversive way”. But, some years after the independence, his style and his themes change. Now he is a writer in a brand-

new socialist state and his choice to use the popular language in his theatre implies the choice of a particular culture and audience.

The most transcendent revelation of his life was probably when he realized that Berber was his original language. Since he was a child, he was in contact with Berber. When his father was posted to Bougaa, near Setif, Kateb had a “sort of crush” and at that moment he discovered “his real people” (Yacine, 1992). Sometime later he had a new encounter with the Kabyle language:

“Nowadays anyone would think in Algeria and in the world that Algerians speak Arabic. I, myself, I thought this until the day I was lost in Kabylia. To find the way I asked a peasant in the road. I spoke to him in Arabic. He answered me in Tamazight. Impossible to understand. This dialogue of the deaf made me think. I asked myself if the Kabyle peasant should have spoken in Arabic or if instead, I should have spoken Tamazight, the first language of the country since prehistoric times¹¹”.

Although Kateb defended the Berber language, he was bilingual, in Arabic and French. His mother tongue was dialectal Arabic. However, due to his education, he had to choose French as the language in which he would write. Later, after the independence of Algeria, Arabization was imposed by the state, promoting Arabic. For Kateb, this was a second rupture with his mother tongue. He had been educated in the colonizer’s language. The French language was for him a “weapon” as he explained in 1966 on the occasion of an interview: “I write in French to tell the French I am not French” (Thiba and David, 1998). It was his way of “giving their own civilizing mission back to the French” (Abadi, 1967). The appropriation of the French language, the exile and the long periods abroad are part of a “collective logic of reconnaissance”, of a compulsory requirement for all north Africans. Kateb considered French to be the “spoils of war”. This fact legitimizes Kateb’s struggle, his “revolution through poetry” (Harchi, 2012, 6).

¹¹ KATEB, Yacine, “Les ancêtres redoublent de férocité”, preface in YACINE, Tassadit (1989), *Aït Menguellet chante*, p. 8, quoted by Amrani (2007, 210).

But using French was a real challenge for him. “For me, the challenge was to use this language to voice the unknown, hidden or neglected world of Algeria and to voice my own world. To turn this language into the means to face colonial tyranny but also the tyranny of the language by inventing, by innovating, by violating it. Subverting the language to say what dominators do not say or to say the opposite of what they say” (Benamar, 2009).

A great spirit of his time, he succeeded to “reverse the orientalist issue”. Although one of his major literary influences during his adolescence had been *Voyage en Orient*, by Gérard de Nerval (1851), he managed to change that occidental vision of orientalism. He adopted the point of view of the Algerian, in such a way that the “colonist often became the exotic object in the stories of the Algerians narrators” (Bonn, 1989, 275). While Nerval’s work showed a sort of mythologized journey, very far from the author’s real journey, Kateb, on the contrary, showed a non-mythologized vision of the Orient. He described it as it is, with its light and shadows. He shows social conflicts and gives them life on stage (Thiba and David, 1998).

Like other Algerian intellectuals of this time, Kateb experiences “the mental alienation (that) left the Algerians floating between two identities, not belonging wholly to either” (Bamia, 2001, 85). Even after, when he was free from the colonial yoke, and settled in his country, his quest for an identity did not end or materialize into a precise definition. The new policy of national unity on the basis of Islam and Arabic did not meet his expectations. This conflict led some writers to end up living a “self-imposed exile”, mainly in France (Bamia, 2001, 86).

Kateb even claimed to see a “double fascism”, the one that affects every language and the one arising from the Arabization policy, imposed by some leaders who “only know some stereotypes and some Koranic verses with regard to Arabic” (Benamar, 2009). In addition, he maintained that “Arabization could not be other than the suppression of Tamazight. Arabization implies imposing

to the people a language that is not their language. It means fighting against their own language, killing it [...]. Arabo-Islamic Algeria means an Algeria against herself. It is an Algeria imposed by the weapons” (Yacine, 1992).

Since Classical Arabic is considered to be God’s holy tongue, the poet who dares to transgress this language will be punished, therefore a poet will be freer if he writes in French. Kateb argued the necessity to bring about a linguistic revolution to avoid standing still in a classical language linked to religion (Abadi, 1967).

From the end of the 1960s, Kateb’s philosophy did change. He was more and more focused on theatre in dialectal Arabic with some fragments in Berber. By this time, he became aware of adaptations in Berber of classical plays that had been carried out by troupes who had emigrated to France. He was hoping to do the same in Algeria where, de facto, 99% of the Algerian theatre repertoire was in dialectal Arabic “in spite of the efforts to promote classical Arabic” (Casas, 1998, 107).

He chose to abandon writing in French and started using dialectal Arabic in his popular theatre. He is one of the main promoters of Algerian theatre in dialectal Arabic. The use of the popular language provided people with a “deep psychological boost, a liberating feeling, freeing them from formal Arabic’s linguistic restrictions” (Bamia, 2001, 24). This deliberate choice, that was considered a real militant act, was an ideological project targeted at the popular masses to make them aware of their own language against the artificial Arabization campaign that followed independence. The recourse to the spoken languages became a sort of “source of revenge for those who could not otherwise have raised their voices” (Bamia, 2001, 24). In his poems and theatre, Kateb assumed the role of a sort of messenger. He wanted to come into contact with the common people, developing both the personal and communal aspects of poetry (Bamia, 2001, 12). His message is the poetry, by means of which he “takes the prophet’s word and becomes the means to express what politicians cannot say” (Abadi, 1967).

The advantages of staging a play in Algerian popular Arabic or in Berber were that it allowed Kateb to be closer to the public by means of using a language that was truly rooted in society. This popular theatre, in the vernacular language, is a “body in motion”. It is a theatre in simple shapes, with a collective *mise-en-scène* in which the audience and the actors interact and dance, there are music and songs with political content (Haddad, 2008, 36).

However, Kateb did not turn his back on his previous works in French. He returned to these initial texts to work in common with his troupe and to adapt them into Arabic. This demonstrates how his works were very dynamic and could be adapted to all audiences (Haddad, 2008, 34). Kateb’s first works in French respected the rules of French because “it was the language of the colonizer and it was necessary to bring the struggle for Algerian independence to the international stage”. Once independence was achieved, Kateb gave up French to start working in Arabic because “the battlefield had changed. The new goal was to reach the greatest number of people in Algeria” (Haddad, 2008, 34). His opting for the freedom of expression and for the use of popular Arabic and Berber became more and more direct and incisive which made him a target of criticism (Benamar, 2009). In Algeria, he can be considered as the creator of the oral theatre in Berber (Thiba and David, 1998). He maintained that the “Arab Maghrib” was an invention, an ideology whose aim is to turn us away from Africa” (Yacine, 1992). Due to his pronouncements in favour of autochthonous languages, he was forbidden to speak in public and some of his successful plays, like *Palestine trahie* or *Le roi de l’Oest*, were censored.

In spite of this, Kateb seized every opportunity to defend the Berber language, as we can read in the following fragment of one of his prefaces:

“The poet is at the heart of the world” said Hölderlin. To be at the heart of the world, he needs to beat the heart of the people, that is his people. People need to feel recognised in him. This umbilical link is very well illustrated by the uprising of Tizi Ouzou; when the *wali* decided in April

1980 to forbid Mouloud Mammeri's conference on ancient Kabyle poetry. To the calling of the students, people of the city, and then people of the neighbouring regions, and of Algiers, where Kabyles were very numerous, stood up to defend, through the ancient poets, the ancestors' language¹²".

In this sense, his controversial opinion was completely different to the official view around the idea of the unity of the nation. Through his works, we perceive the image of a plural country where many linguistic and cultural trends coexist (Amrani, 2007, 209).

During the years he worked with his theatre group in Sidi Bel Abbès they only presented plays in dialectal Arabic to reach the whole audience and not only a part (Casas, 1998, 99). They worked collectively: Kateb would propose an idea and write one or two sketches, sometimes in French and other times in dialectal Arabic with Latin characters. Then, with his group, he translated the whole play into popular Arabic and, here, there emerged the final version that would be put on stage (Casas, 1998, 103). Unfortunately, they did not have the technical means to record these theatrical performances. Kateb's special value lies in the fact that his theatre succeeded in elevating dialectal Arabic to the category of a literary language, in contrast to the "official theatre" broadcasted on television that endeavoured to promote a Classical Arabic that was "nobody's tongue" (Haddad, 2008, 35).

3. KATEB YACINE'S MAIN POEMS

Kateb Yacine was a prolific author. Among his various works there are some lectures, prefaces, journalistic articles, interviews, collaborations on studies about his works, and so on. He also made a brief foray into the world of cinema. He produced a film about the transfer of the Emir Abd el-Qader's ashes to Algeria and made another movie about the ancestors with a very low

¹²KATEB, Yacine, "Les ancêtres redoublent de férocité", preface in YACINE, Tassadit (1989), *Ait Menguellet chante*, p. 5, quoted by Amrani (2007, 209).

budget. This latter work won a prize at the festival of Belgrade, though the event was not reported in the Algerian press at the time (Casas, 1998, 108).

As is the case for his novels, his theatrical pieces are interconnected and linked to *Nedjma*, and it is for this reason Kateb used to call himself “a onebook writer” (Akyeampong, 2003, 362). However, unlike the novel *Nedjma*, in his plays *Nedjma* takes the floor and speaks.

Given this book introduces a poems collection, we will highlight here some of his best-known poems, without disregarding his other works that we will not include in this introductory chapter in order not to prolong it.

Kateb Yacine was primarily a poet. Even his theatrical work, which is characterised by plays that are critical of colonialism, is accompanied with a large dose of poetry. He maintained that both the theatre and the novel were the way to materialize the poetic word (Aouadi, 2003, 10).

Poetry was the real source of his work but it was not enough. He would need to “materialize” it to transmit his message and to provoke public awareness. From here emerged his poetry and his theatre (Aouadi, 2003, 7).

Many of Kateb’s poems are scattered, or included in other works. The main challenge is compiling all these dispersed works to have a complete overview of his oeuvre.

Like in his theatrical pieces, Kateb returned again and again to the same poems, changing them. For this reason, here we mention only fragments of his poetry– some of which was compiled after his death.

In 1946, Kateb published his first collection of edited poems in French under the title of *Soliloques*, which is presented and translated in the present volume. At that time, he had become “politized” and used to give lectures promoted by the *Parti du Peuple Algérien*, “the major nationalist party of the masses”, founded by Messali Hadj. The original version of *Soliloques* was lost and not

recovered until years later. It was reedited in full by *Éditions la Découverte* in 1991, accompanied by an introduction that Kateb had written before he died. However, even before this reedition, Jacqueline Arnaud had published some fragments of this work in her 1986 book *Kateb Yacine, l'œuvre en fragments* (Dugas, 2018, 2). The two main themes of *Soliloques* were love and revolution. The images of these poems are full of violence – corpses, suffering, blood – capturing the direct influence on Kateb of the events of 1945.

Kateb's next work appeared on the occasion of his first stay in Paris. It was the poem *Ouverte la voix*, that was published in number 16 of the magazine *Lettres françaises*, in May 1947.

But, the extended poem, *Nedjma ou le Poème ou le Couteau*, published in number 102 of *Mercure de France* in January 1948 was the real germ of his most famous work, *Nedjma*. From this moment on, a series of poetry compilations were regularly announced. *Poèmes de l'Algérie opprimée (Poems of the oppressed Algeria)*, sent to press in 1948 in *Nahdha* in Algiers; *Cent mille vierges (One hundred-thousand virgins)*, announced in 1958 in *Oswald* in Paris, but not published; *Sous les cris des coqs (Under the cries of roosters)*, mentioned by Kateb in a 1972 interview (Déjeux, 1973, 267).¹³

In 1959 he wrote the poem *La femme sauvage (The wild woman)*, that resulted in a play staged in 1963 under the same title. That same year, Denise Barrât presented a compilation of Algerian poems among which there were four works by Kateb: *Le feu, c'est le secret (The fire, it is the secret)* (poem n. 23), a hymn to the Algerians' fight that was presented five years after the massacre; *La bombe et le temps (The bomb and the time)* (poem n. 81); *Présents et absents (Present and absent)* (poem n. 112); and *Fleur de poussière (Flower of dust)*, a poem dedicated to his mother confined in the Blida psychiatric hospital (poem n. 195). *La bombe et le temps* is the central part of a longer poem published in *Jeune Afrique* under the title of *Le temps qui tue (Time kills)* and the dramatic

¹³*Al-Athtr*, n. 1, 15 April 1972.

poem *Présents et absents* reappears in the final act of the play *Mohamed, prends ta valise*. Lastly, *Fleur de poussière* was extended and retitled *La rose de Blida* (*The rose of Blida*) and was published in 1965 in *Lettres Françaises*, to appear afterwards in the novel *Le polygone étoilé* (Faure, 1974,76).

In general terms, Kateb's poetry is complex to analyse as it is intimate, deeply personal and clearly comes from his heart. He was not a rigid poet and he even ventured into the terrain of experimental poetry. From the initial topics, such as impossible love, exile or insanity, his poetry became more revolutionary and militant. It was Kateb's way to denounce the injustices and to speak on behalf of freedom. He considered himself a voice for the people, a "public writer" (Aouadi, 2003, 12). His texts were used like a "weapon" (Haddad, 2008, 37), its author committed to addressing social problems and current events.

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