

# “POUR UNE LITTÉRATURE-MONDE EN FRANÇAIS”: NOTES FOR A REREADING OF THE MANIFESTO

## **Soledad Pereyra**

*CONICET – Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas  
Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales (UNLP – CONICET).  
Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación.  
Universidad Nacional de La Plata – Argentina*

## **María Julia Zaparart**

*Instituto de Investigaciones en Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales (UNLP – CONICET).  
Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación.  
Universidad Nacional de La Plata – Argentina*



**Abstract** || The manifesto “Pour une littérature-monde en français” (2007) questioned for the first time in a newspaper of record the classification of the corpus of contemporary French literature in terms of categories of colonial conventions: French literature and Francophone literature. A re-reading of the manifesto allows us to interrogate the supplementary logic (in Derrida’s term) between Francophone literatures and French literature through analyzing the controversies around the manifesto and some French literary awards of the last decade. This reconstruction allows us to examine the possibilities and limits of the notions of Francophonie and world-literature in French. Finally, this overall critical approach is demonstrated in the analysis of Atiq Rahimi’s novel *Syngé sabour. Pierre de patience*.

**Keywords** || French Literature | Francophonie | Transnational Literatures | Atiq Rahimi

The manifesto "Pour une littérature-monde en français" appeared in the respected French newspaper *Le monde des livres* in March 2007. It is the work of forty-four authors<sup>1</sup> who jointly question the classification of the corpus of contemporary French literature in terms of categories of colonial conventions: French literature and Francophone literature.<sup>2</sup> The first canon seems to be founded on the ideas of public, nation and state—that is, on the legal and symbolic identification of given subjects who share a hypothetical cultural legacy and are citizens of a politically, territorially and historically marked state, France. However, the second, that of Francophone literature, which should etymologically be applied to all written production in French, is supplementary to the first. This supplementary bond is not merely an appendage, a prosthesis or mere addition to replace a deficiency. From the perspective of Derrida, the concept of Francophone literature, as with any supplement, generates a transgressive and surprising logic because it constitutes presence and absence at the same time:

[...] Mais le supplément supplée. Il ne s'ajoute que pour remplacer. Il intervient ou s'insinue à-la-place-de; s'il comble, c'est comme on comble un vide. S'il représente et fait image, c'est par le défaut antérieur d'une présence. Suppléant et vicaire, le supplément est un adjoint, une instance subalterne qui tient-lieu. En tant que substitut, il ne s'ajoute pas simplement à la positivité d'une présence, il ne produit aucun relief, sa place est assignée dans la structure par la marque d'un vide. (Derrida, 1967: 208)

Embedded as a *transnational*<sup>3</sup> corpus of *literatures in French* in contrast to *French (national) literature*, *Francophone literatures* do not attempt to invalidate the existence of that national literature; rather, they develop at its crossroads, intersections and crisis points. For this reason, from a Derridean perspective, the 2007 manifesto is not solely a claim for a *world-literature* in French as a modification and replacement of the idea of a national French literature. It is precisely in the logic of the supplement that links *world-literature* with *French literature* that the former finds its unverifiable value, both in what it adds and in what it indicates as an absence.

Cette structure de complémentarité est très complexe. En tant que supplément, le signifiant ne re-présente pas d'abord et seulement le signifié absent, il se substitue à un autre signifiant, à un autre ordre de signifiant entretenant avec la présence manquante un autre rapport, plus valorisé par le jeu de la différence est le mouvement de l'idéalisation et plus le signifiant est idéal, plus il augmente la puissance de répétition de la présence, plus il garde, réserve et capitalise le sens. (Derrida, 2003: 97-98)

Using Derrida's concept of the supplement, we can see how Francophone literatures reveal (like a wound that does not heal in the center of the *corpus*-body of French literature) their value as a

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1 | Muriel Barbery, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Alain Borer, Roland Brival, Maryse Condé, Didier Daeninckx, Ananda Devi, Alain Dugrand, Edouard Glissant, Jacques Godbout, Nancy Huston, Koffi Kwahulé, Dany Laferrière, Gilles Lapouge, Jean-Marie Laclavetine, Michel Layaz, Michel Le Bris, JMG Le Clézio, Yvon Le Men, Amin Maalouf, Alain Mabanckou, Anna Moï, Wajdi Mouawad, Nimrod, Wilfried N'Sondé, Esther Orner, Erik Orsenna, Benoît Peeters, Patrick Rambaud, Gisèle Pineau, Jean-Claude Pirotte, Grégoire Polet, Patrick Reynal, Jean-Luc V. Raharimanana, Jean Rouaud, Boualem Sansal, Dai Sijie, Brina Svit, Lyonel Trouillot, Anne Vallaëys, Jean Vautrin, André Velter, Gary Victor, and Abdourahman A. Waberi.

2 | In May 2007, the manifesto was included in an edited volume published by Gallimard under the title *Pour une littérature-monde*. In addition to the contributions by Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud, the editors and promoters of the project, the book includes essays by Alain Mabanckou, Abdourahman A. Waberi, Dany Laferrière, Jacques Godbout, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Grégoire Polet, Patrick Raynal, Ananda Devi, Nancy Huston, Boualem Sansal, Wajdi Mouawad, Lyonel Trouillot, Maryse Condé, Nimrod, Fabienne Kanor, Ana Moï, Brina Svit, Eva Almasy, Michel Layaz, Esther Orner, Chahdortt Djavann, Raharimanana, Gary Victor, Dai Sijie, and an interview with Edouard Glissant. The interventionary nature of this volume remains intact: "Le volume est donc, lui aussi, un manifeste, comme le désigne son titre, et permet de rassembler la définition et les différents thèmes et débats qui s'articulent dans le concept de littérature-monde, qui s'inscrit dans une perspective de

supplement rather than a mere, organically integrated complement. In accordance with the mechanics of the supplement—initially used by Derrida to think about the relation between writing and orality—those transnational literatures in French designated as Francophone show their double potential: as an addition and compensation, as well as being a mark of absence, of subtraction. It is for this reason that Francophone literatures—designated as a corpus of writings which are not integrated into the idea of a national literature—take on their prosthetic character, indispensable to an organism which can no longer exist separately and independently: that of French literature.

This supplementary logic reestablishes, in its disruptive manner, the focus on the differences created to establish categories of literatures in French. One of these is the use of the label “Francophone literature” for works written in French by authors born outside France (those who come from The Antilles, Africa, Switzerland, Belgium, Lebanon, Quebec, etc.).<sup>4</sup> Like others, Alain Mabanckou has questioned this definition in his article “La Francophonie, oui, le ghetto: non!” (2006), published in *Le Monde*. According to the Congolese, when we talk about Francophone literature we think about:

[...] une littérature faite hors de France le plus souvent par des auteurs originaires d'anciennes colonies françaises. [...] Dans ces conditions la littérature francophone n'est perçue que comme une littérature des marges, celle qui virevolte autour de la littérature française, sa génitrice.

Mabanckou refers here to one of the problems posed by this conception of Francophone literature: its supposed dependency on French literature. But this is not the only problem. What about authors who write in French but who have another mother tongue? It may become evident that it is impossible to sustain a categorization and a national literary canon of “French literature” that homogenizes literary criteria and values through a concept of state that is tied to language and nation. In this case, the idea of Francophonie should be redefined in order to definitively cut its remaining ties with a framework of colonial production and diffusion or, in its contemporary guise, globalized ways of reading.

## 1.

In 2006, the French-American writer Jonathan Littell won the Goncourt prize and the ‘Gran prix du roman’ of the French Academy for *Les Bienveillantes*; that same year, the Congolese Alain Mabanckou won the Renaudot award for *Mémoires du porc-épic*, and Nancy Houston, a writer born in Canada, won the Fémina award for *Lignes de faille*. The award of these literary prizes in autumn 2006 to Francophone writers born outside France was an opportune moment for the writers

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contournement et de dépassement de ce qu'on appelle la littérature francophone, mais aussi de l'actualité littéraire en France” (Valat, 2007: 194).

3 | If the ideals of the Enlightenment and the transformations of modernity motivated Goethe to propose the concept, first outlined by Wieland, of *Weltliteratur*, we cannot nowadays ignore the historical link between globalization and transnational literatures (Prendergast, 2004: viii-ix). For, just as Goethe described *Weltliteratur* within the specific historical context of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, transnational literature cannot be conceived of today apart from the globalized world from which it emerges and in which we live. Transnational literature then emerges as the production of multilingual authors from multiple cultural contexts who have been forced into political and/ or economic exile, becoming a differentiated corpus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This corpus poses questions about the underlying concepts of national literatures and pushes for a redefinition of literature in general (Pizer, 2006: 3-5). Transnational literatures, even though they are not a direct and pre-fabricated product of the contemporary globalized world, are the thematic, cultural, territorial, and linguistic outcome of the multiplicity of cultures determined by these historical circumstances. Therefore, they cannot be reduced to a canon based on national criteria: “(...) a genre of writing that operates outside the national cannon, addresses issues of facing deterritorialized cultures, and speaks for those in [...] ‘paranational’ communities and allegiances” (Seyhan, 2001: 10).

4 | The notion of Francophone literature has always been

of "Pour une littérature-monde en français" to make their voices heard. At first, these authors sought to concretize a revolution that would imply a paradigm-shift in the understanding of the apparently geopolitical boundaries of literature written in French:

Nous pensons, au contraire: révolution copernicienne. Copernicienne, parce qu'elle révèle ce que le milieu littéraire savait déjà sans l'admettre : le centre, ce point depuis lequel était supposée rayonner une littérature franco-française, n'est plus le centre. Le centre jusqu'ici, même si de moins en moins, avait eu cette capacité d'absorption qui contraignait les auteurs venus d'ailleurs à se dépouiller de leurs bagages avant de se fondre dans le creuset de la langue et de son histoire nationale : le centre, nous disent les prix d'automne, est désormais partout, aux quatre coins du monde. Fin de la francophonie. Et naissance d'une littérature-monde en français. (VV. AA., 2007)

The end of Francophonie is also the end of a certain way of perceiving the specificity of literature; one that has been maintained since its origins by categorizations delimited by conceptual boundaries that replaced those of the nation-state. The change results in a "Copernican revolution"<sup>5</sup>, and the act, the mere gesture, is abandoned in favor of a kind of lost authenticity:

Le monde revient. Et c'est la meilleure des nouvelles. N'aura-t-il pas été longtemps le grand absent de la littérature française ? Le monde, le sujet, le sens, l'histoire, le "réfèrent": pendant des décennies, ils auront été mis "entre parenthèses" par les maîtres-penseurs, inventeurs d'une littérature sans autre objet qu'elle-même [...]. (VV. AA., 2007)

This quotation describes the return of life to literature after many years of exile. It is a movement from the implicitly relativist notion of French literature as different to Francophone literature towards a more relational idea of the literary text, reinforced in this case by a shared language.

According to the writers who signed the manuscript, the attack on a kind of literature that silenced the voices of the world has a specific historical origin, and coincides with the effervescence of movements opposing the colonial regimes. Perhaps the contrived basis for the separation between French and Francophone literature—steeped in the complex historical-political situation of France with its colonies and overseas territories on the one hand, and the way prestige is accorded to literature on the other—is not as clear in the manifesto as in the stacks of FNAC (or any other large French library) before 2007. Then, works by Samuel Beckett (born in Ireland), Albert Camus (in Africa) and Nancy Huston (in Canada) were placed in the section of "French literature," while those by Mabanckou, N'Diaye and Laferrière remained in the "Francophone literature" section.<sup>6</sup> Other factors also emphasized this differentiation. One is the creation of Francophone literature collections—like Gallimard's "Continents noirs" or Dider's

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problematic. No definition of the concept defines it clearly and satisfactorily. Definitions vary according to the place of enunciation and the position of each researcher: Francophone specialists (J.-L. Joubert, C. Bonn, M. Beniamino) do not provide the same definitions as the proponents of a new world geography for literature (L. Gauvin, M. Calle-Gruber, P. Casanova, E. Glissant). F. Provenzano (2005: 13) proposes a socio-literary definition of Francophone literature essentially constituted on the opposition center-periphery. France, or more precisely Paris, is the center where recognition is concentrated and where literary values are established; the periphery holds all other zones of Francophone literary production, forced to negotiate their specific difference to Parisian values. The socio-literary approach for a definition of Francophone literature will acquire particular importance after Bordieu's works (1998) on the literary field. The aim is to describe the institutional functioning of these peripheral literatures, to characterize their degree of autonomy with respect to France, but also in political terms. This kind of approach was adopted for the case of Belgium and Quebec. For the so-called Southern Francophonies, a different critical apparatus seems to be deployed: drawing upon the Anglo-Saxon critical legacy, specialists like Jean-Marc Moura use postcolonial theory as a tool to study the corpus of Francophone literatures.

5 | It should be noted that, in spite of the extraordinary nature and wide scope of the recognition awarded to "foreign" authors in 2006, which the signatories of the manifesto saw as a "Copernican revolution", this was not a new phenomenon.

“mondes en VF”—which sought to highlight a regional specificity. Another is the fact that the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) has a Francophone literature collection separate to the French literature collection.<sup>7</sup>

Le Bris, Rouaud, Le Clézio, Glissant and the other writers who signed the manifesto engage with another aspect of the dispute on the purposes or functions of literature, attacking the kind of French literature associated with the *nouveau roman* and poststructuralist theory. For them, the petrification of life in narrative, especially in the novel, largely resides in the diverse forms of experimentation that have taken place since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, on the frontier of the canon of “French literature” in the heart of the Caribbean Francophonie, something different was being conceived:

Et les regards se tournaient de nouveau vers les littératures “francophones”, particulièrement caribéennes, comme si, loin des modèles français sclérosés, s’affirmait là-bas, héritière de Saint- John Perse et de Césaire, une effervescence romanesque et poétique dont le secret, ailleurs, semblait avoir été perdu. (VV. AA., 2007)

According to the writers of the manifesto, literature must capture the essence and vital energies of the world. It is a way of understanding reading as a space for transportation, committed to communicating the experience of the real; a kind of heir to Sartre’s *littérature engagée*. It is a task which has been undertaken by literature in French written outside of France. This is despite a latent short-sightedness in literary interpretation which has limited it to searching the Caribbean corpus for paradigmatic forms of an exoticism predestined to renew European literature: “Piments nouveaux, mots anciens ou créoles, si pittoresques n’est-ce pas, propres à raviver un brouet devenu par trop fade” (VV. AA., 2007).

The authors contrast the state of literature in France in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with the English situation, where narratives by writers of migrant origin achieved increasing recognition in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This corpus of narratives in English is not limited to the nostalgia and melancholy generated by uprooting, but includes voices from “les cultures de tous les continents” and explores the fact of being “hommes traduits”. Over time it has achieved wide acceptance and significant recognition by the main voices of literary criticism. An evaluation of the situation of many transnational writers in French reveals that they do not have a place in the canon of their literary language comparable to that of Anglophone transnational writers. On the contrary, they were relegated by linguistic-ideological imperialism to the field of the Francophonie. There were incidences prior to the manifesto of institutional acknowledgement of a Francophone author by means of a literary award—for instance, the novel *Les Honneurs*

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The big literary awards in France had previously granted recognition to many other Francophone authors. To name just a few, Tahar Ben Jelloun (1987, *La Nuit sacrée*) and Patrick Chamoiseau (1992, *Texaco*) had already obtained the Goncourt, and Jean Malaquais (1939, *Les Javanais*) and Yambo Ouloguem (1968, *Devoir de violence*), the Renaudot. Between 1995 and 1998, there were also many other cases of “foreign” prize-winners: Andreï Makine obtained, in 1995, the Goncourt, the Goncourt des lycéens and the Médicis for his novel *Testament français*, and shared the last award with the writer of Greek origin Vassilis Alexakis (*La Langue maternelle*). In 1996, Boris Schreiber obtained the Renaudot for *Un silence d’environ une demi-heure*, while the Cuban author Eduardo Manet won the *Interallié (Rhapsodie cubaine)* and Nancy Houston the Goncourt des lycéens for *Instrument des ténèbres*. In 1998, François Cheng obtained the Fémina award for *Le Dit de Tiany*. Furthermore, during this same period, a writer of Argentinian origin, Hector Bianciotti, joined the French Academy, followed later by François Cheng (2002) and Assia Djebar (2005).

6 | Anna Moï (2005) refers to this issue in her article “Francophonie sans français”: “Je note cependant que mes romans, écrits en français et publiés par Gallimard dans la collection ‘Blanche’, sont répertoriés dans le département de littérature vietnamienne à la Fnac. Les libraires anglo-saxons préfèrent classer les écrivains du monde entier par ordre alphabétique”.

7 | The official website of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) states that:

*perdues* by French-Cameroonian Calixte Beyala, winner of the Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française in 1996. However, it was the (almost always) polemic selection for the Goncourt prize, in this case that of 2006, which enabled a rupture and the creation of a common discourse that led to the elaboration of the manifesto, with change indicating a kind of death.

Soyons clairs: l'émergence d'une littérature-monde en langue française consciemment affirmée, ouverte sur le monde, transnationale, signe l'acte de décès de la francophonie. Personne ne parle le francophone, ni n'écrit en francophone. La francophonie est de la lumière d'étoile morte. Comment le monde pourrait-il se sentir concerné par la langue d'un pays virtuel ? Or c'est le monde qui s'est invité aux banquets des prix d'automne. (VV. AA., 2007)

Thus, the last avatar of colonialism, the distinction between Francophone literature and French literature, dies in these two events of canonization and literary intervention: acknowledgement through a literary award and a manifesto signed by a group of authors who ratify the decease. The importance of the manifesto for a *world-literature* lies not only in its inauguration of a polemic but also in its immediate impact on forms of literary legitimation as a result of being published in a renowned cultural supplement and signed by a group of authors. In 2008, just a year after the appearance of the manifesto, Afghan writer Atiq Rahimi won the Goncourt novel award, while Guinean Tierno Monémbo received the Renaudot award. Investigations should focus on whether, and if so, how, this transnational or *world-literature* in French disrupts the system that permits its formulation and circulation as a unique, legitimate literary production, while at the same time attempting to subject it to standardizing institutionalization.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, we need to ask if *word-literature* in French can generate tension with that space conceded by the inevitable processes of institutionalization—such as through the manifesto or the awards referred to above—or whether it merely replaces the main function allocated to it by these processes; that of being a means to represent an experience which is received with fascinated amazement in the centers of literary legitimation such as the French capital.

## 2.

*Syngué sabour. Pierre de patience*, by Afghan Atiq Rahimi,<sup>9</sup> winner of the 2008 Goncourt award, addresses the celebratory discourse surrounding the introduction of world-literature in French in a paradoxical fashion. For it is a fictional work that describes how the silence generated by the experience of death and trauma can render speech empty.

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1. leer: "La BnF entretient avec les pays francophones des liens de solidarité et de partenariat qui permettent une vaste collecte de leur production littéraire diverse et dynamique. Les collections de littérature francophone, appelée aussi littérature d'expression française, peuvent être consultées sur le site François-Mitterrand. Elles sont classées en dix zones géographiques : Afrique subsaharienne, Amérique du Nord, Asie / Pacifique, Caraïbes, Maghreb, Océan Indien, Proche Orient, Suisse, Belgique / Luxembourg, autres pays d'Europe". <[http://www.bnf.fr/fr/collections\\_et\\_services/litt/s.litterature\\_francophone.html?first\\_Art=non](http://www.bnf.fr/fr/collections_et_services/litt/s.litterature_francophone.html?first_Art=non)>.

2. 8 | Véronique Porra (2008) has referred to the fact that some Francophone writers are not against standardised institutionalization. Many of the authors who sign the manifesto have accommodated themselves to the exigencies of the Francophone literary system by occupying supposedly marginal positions which consist of reproducing peripheral content. Paradoxically, however, this enables them to occupy central positions in the competition to achieve recognition. Porra cites Graham Huggan's study *The Postcolonial Exotic – Marketing the Margins* to refer to the benefits that the market offers to those positions marked by the thematization of culture. From this point of view, Porra notes, it cannot be said that writers like Tahar Ben Jelloun or Nancy Houston, who have been able to provide a very elaborate literary dimension to their potential for difference, are the "enfants pauvres" of the general Francophone literary system. According to Porra, these positions generate an evident paradox: "certains écrivains refusent l'étiquette

A simple, linear reading of the plot may lead us into a trap, as such a conventional reading would place it next to the many titles of so-called *world fiction* (Casanova, 2001),<sup>10</sup> maintained by commercial imperatives through the eternal repetition of clichés, the platitudes of exoticism, and the claims of inclusion through exclusion. The story is about a young woman who – sitting next to her comatose husband – immerses herself in the murmurings of her prayers and goes through her rosary beads while outside a war is being fought in a territory that could be “*Quelque part en Afghanistan ou ailleurs*” (Rahimi, 2008: 11; our emphasis). Cherished before as a local hero, *the* husband is now completely paralyzed, unconscious and in a state of perpetual silence after a soldier from his own troop shot him in the neck over a petty dispute. It can be seen that up to now the text prohibits and silences any referential markers that might reduce it to a testimonial or documentary fiction. The fiction is constructed around a vagueness that enables a reading of an intimate situation beyond the boundaries and concrete times of the story; it talks about a woman, a man “[qui] a *peut-être* trente ans” (Rahimi, 2008: 13; our emphases), and a place at war that might or might not be Afghanistan. This vagueness in the narrative frame is closer to the classical opening of fantastical tales, the “once upon a time, in a land far, far away”, than to the detailed testimony about a war that the reader might expect.

As with all silences, time seems static in the novel, and if there is a rhythm that marks or delimitates time, it is not determined by the actions of public history, but by the hushed sounds that gather in the intimacy of the patient’s room, and which become the metronome of the fiction. On the one hand, we have the husband’s faltering breathing as he lies in bed:

Un silence épais s’abat alors sur la rue enfumée, sur la cour qui n’est plus qu’un jardin mort, sur la chambre où l’homme, couvert de suie, est allongé comme toujours. Immobile. Insensible. Avec ses souffles lents. Le grincement hésitant d’une porte qui s’ouvre, le bruit des pas prudents qui s’avancent dans le couloir, ne brisent pas ce silence de mort ; ils le soulignent. (Rahimi, 2008: 44)

On the other hand, there is the sound that accompanies the drip and the administration of eye drops to the patient.

Puis, elle verse le contenu du verre dans la poche de perfusion. Règle les gouttes, vérifie leur intervalle. À chaque souffle, une goutte. Une dizaine de gouttes après, elle revient [...]. On l’entend partir avec ses deux enfants. Leur absence dure trois mille neuf cent soixante soufflés de l’homme. Trois mille neuf cent soixante souffles au cours desquels rien d’autre n’arrive que les faits prédits par la femme [...]. Quelques respirations plus tard, un garçon traverse la rue [...] (Rahimi, 2008: 25)

The stoppage of time in silence is intensified when the woman, worn

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“francophone”, qu’ils considèrent comme dévalorisante, et parallèlement, “font les francophones” quand ceci est susceptible de promouvoir leur œuvre”.

9 | Rahimi was born in Kabul in 1962. He was 17 years old when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. He fled to Pakistan during the war and eventually, in 1984, obtained political asylum in France. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2002, Rahimi returned to Afghanistan, where he shot an adaptation of his *nouvelle Earth and Ashes*. In the past few years, he has become renowned as a writer and as a director of documentaries and films, especially after obtaining the Goncourt award in 2008 for *Syngué Sabour. Pierre de patience*. The film *Earth and Ashes* was included in the official selection of the Cannes Festival in 2004 and won various awards. Since 2002, Rahimi has returned frequently to Afghanistan to collaborate in the organization of a writer’s house in Kabul.

10 | In his prestigious 1999 book, *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova devotes only a few pages to the most recent transformations in the dynamics of relationship and legitimation. As well as acknowledging that we might be entering a polycentric phase in the literary sphere—with new capitals of letters in Frankfurt, Barcelona and New York—he also notes the emergence of an increasingly powerful commercial pole which seeks to impose itself as a source of recognition, with world fiction being one of the favoured products in its catalogue. Casanova negatively characterizes those narratives which are supposedly marked by heterogeneity and themes of exile and migration, but which become another commodity through marketing strategies that attempt to create a world

out from caring for her husband, sends her daughters to live with their aunt. Her desperation to detect any sign of life in her husband grows every day, and the silence overpowers her, driving her to cry out.

La femme vient jeter un regard inquiet vers l'homme. Elle craint, peut-être, que l'appel aux armes l'ait remis sur pied !  
Elle reste non loin de la porte. Ses doigts caressent ses lèvres, puis, nerveusement, s'enfourment entre ses dents, comme pour extraire des mots qui n'osent pas sortir. Elle quitte la chambre. On l'entend préparer quelque chose pour le déjeuner, parler et jouer avec les enfants.  
Et puis la sieste.  
Les ombres.  
Le silence. (Rahimi, 2008: 38-39)

The madness produced by silence is her chance to speak, to express and tell everything without being judged or interrupted. Here there is no dialogue or personal testimony, as there are no true communicative dynamics in her speech. The totally free expression that allows her to rid herself of self-censorship is barely a monologue because her only audience does not actually hear her: “Son homme. Ce corps dans le vide. Ce corps vide” (Rahimi, 2008: 24). This expressive rapture, which treats subjects usually prohibited to Muslim women, reconstructs the logic of silence, where nothing is heard. However, the speaker, the Muslim woman, remains behind a veil of silence, where her words are not truly understood.

Thus, what the manifesto “Pour une littérature-monde en français” posits as the main value of world-literature—writing and communication, being testimony to the vindication of literature from the margins, but in the language of European colonialism—leads us to establish a reading of her speech which does not produce a mere opposition. The plot provides those details and stereotypes about women and the Muslim world expected by the commercial market, but it simultaneously produces a disruptive reading of her fiction, which invades the text with a poetics of silence and the muted voice. The woman who talks (and Rahimi with her) seems to confirm this hypothesis in the novel when she says: “Ce n'est pas moi. Non, ce n'est pas moi qui parle... C'est quelqu'un d'autre qui parle à ma place... avec ma langue” (Rahimi, 2008: 130). Without any apparent tension, the plot of the work reveals the story of the controversial testimony that standardization seems to demand, while the discourse of the work speaks constantly to its readers in the silences.

The expression, confession and secret narrative recounted first hand by the very figure of exoticism—the woman from Afghanistan in front of her comatose husband, wounded in war—overflows with the clichés the main character seemed to want to avoid. Throughout the novel, the narrative discourse of Rahimi's work “tells” this to the

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fiction that easily reaches the bookshops of the world's main publishing markets. He labels them neocolonial works because in his view they recover the well-known formulas of exoticism which have characterised colonial literature: “Entiendo por novela neocolonial la obra de los escritores procedentes de países ex colonizados que, bajo la apariencia de ruptura, reproducen el modelo narrativo de la novela colonial más conservadora: el prototipo del género me parece la novela de Vikram Seth *Un buen partido*” (Casanova, 2001: 255).

European reader, the main addressee of the novel:

Abattue, elle balbutie: “Je... je deviens... je suis... folle”, renverse la tête en arrière, “pourquoi lui dire tout cela ? je deviens folle. Coupe ma langue, Allah ! que la terre engorge ma bouche !”, couvre son visage, “Allah, protège-moi, je m’égare, montre-moi le chemin !”.

Aucune voix.

Aucune voie. (Rahimi, 2008: 29)

This desperation will finally lead the woman to break down and try “to communicate through speech” with her husband, to tell him all the secret and most forbidden details of her life. The prostrated man will not really be her husband, but the “stone of patience” which, according to the Persian legend, allows the faithful to expiate their sins and anxieties.<sup>11</sup> The legend also notes that this stone will guard inside it everything that it has been told until one day it finally explodes. At the beginning of the woman’s quest, the simplest secrets emerge, but by the end, we hear those which are most tragic, horrifying and irredeemable. She reveals them one by one before finally telling him that he is not the biological father of his children. Here we could say that the plot fulfils commercial expectations in so far as the required exoticism is reflected in the delivery of the great secret, the gem brought from the East. Once more, the ending destabilizes the simplicity of this reading and produces new interpretative ambiguities. In the moment that the woman, in a religious ecstasy, projects herself towards a possible space outside the room, “comme si elle s’adressait à un public” (Rahimi, 2008: 136), and enunciates herself as the voice, gaze and hands of her husband, he takes her firmly by the hand to submit her to a last act of silence. As her words escape confinement, the man tries to hold the woman, to grab her, and her words are struck down by the imposition the man’s silence, who is “une roche, raide et sèche” (Rahimi, 2008: 136).

In other words, while it is true that the novel gives room to the confession and representation of the suppressed Muslim woman, at the same time the author does not allow the work to fall into simplicity. He does not resolve the silence in a simple monologue, reminding us of the tragic domination of subjects from the margins. By reading in accordance with the logic of the supplement rather than the binary we can emphasise the tense disintegration that seems to constitute this writing. We can see also how an apparently standardized plot for authors like Rahimi is configured in a discourse which, if it speaks, communicates or testifies something in some way, does so in its silences.

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## NOTES

11 | The “patience stone” appears early in the Old Testament’s *Genesis*. Even though the legend has different formulations in numerous cultures, where the stone can even symbolize impatience and uneasiness, the intertext of the Persian legend is clear in Rahimi’s novel. In Persian, *syngué* means “stone of patience”. According to this version, the stone is in Mecca, and millions of pilgrims go and circle around it to tell it their misfortunes. This version also says that the day will come when the stone is not longer able hold more misfortunes and will explode, provoking the Apocalypse.

### 3.

The work of the Afghan Atiq Rahimi, *Pierre de patience*, written in French—as well as the one written in Persian, *Khâkestar-o-khâk* (*Earth and Ashes*, 1999)—can be read as a way of recovering a tension, and not merely as a report or testimony about the veiled, the secret, and the exoticism of a reality that is foreign and distant to France, the receptive centre for which it was written (the centre also of literary recognition, as Casanova would emphasize). As we have analyzed in the previous section, this tension manifests itself not only in the plot but also in the form of the text through the repetitive use of images linked to silence and the impossibility of being heard, even when speaking. Thus, even though the woman talks to her husband, and Rahimi talks to the literature of France, both the character and the author unveil a nexus with a center that can only be supplementary: they come to replace an absence, a lack, while at the same time they point it out and remember it.

Rahimi's oeuvre pertains to the vast group of authors peripheral to French literature who nonetheless must be included in it according to linguistic criteria. The always supplementary relationship in the apparently oppositional binomial between the formerly called *Francophone literatures* (now *world-literature* in French) and *French literature* is confirmed by the swift and positive reception of Rahimi's first novel in French, *Pierre de Patience* (*The Patience Stone*, which won the Goncourt award only a year after the appearance of the manifesto "Pour une littérature-monde en français." The author and his work fall within the modes of institutionalization of *world-literature* in French which provide inclusion and critical recognition, especially since the cited manifesto. Nevertheless, through the discourse of fiction, Rahimi's texts reconstruct the discomfort surrounding the function that they have been assigned, from a pragmatic conceptualization of literature as a medium for communication or a testimony of the dreadful reality of the East.

Thus, the manifesto "Pour une littérature-monde en français" should not be considered as a mere concession that authorizes minority voices to speak from the center of Europe. At the least, it is fair to note that within current *world-literature* or transnational literature in French, Rahimi's writing appears to ask whether there is any real chance for these characters to speak, or, if they manage to do so, for their speech to be heard, not merely brandished under the violent pain that obliges them to break the silence. Because, in truth, the literature of Atiq Rahimi does not communicate anything, and if it shows something, it is constantly characters who resist communicating because they are in a relationship of domination, they lose their voice and submerge themselves in an always unspeakable remnant of silence.

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