

The Exile of the Body and Existential Wandering in Nina Bouraoui's Work

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of exile in *La Voyeuse interdite*, *Garçon manqué* and *Mes mauvaises pensées* on the basis of an existential conception of unmooring. The analysis shows that exile in Nina Bouraoui simultaneously engages belonging, the body, perception and language. Through these three novels, Nina Bouraoui questions the multiple forms of identity instability and the experiences that make the quest for the self complex. Exile, confinement, the relation to the body, the gaze of others, memory and speech constitute so many places from which the subject attempts to understand his or her own existence. The Franco-Algerian in-between, the blurring of gender categories and the difficulty of inscribing the body within a stable identity bring forth a consciousness marked by doubling, uncertainty and the feeling of never coinciding with a definition of the self. Memory, wounds and love experiences then become a matter from which writing seeks a form of coherence, giving the subject the possibility of taking possession of his or her history again and of redrawing the contours of his or her identity. By crossing Gilbert Durand's anthropology of the imaginary with the contributions of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Pierre Richard, we show that Bouraouian wandering is defined here by an experience of distance and discrepancy, which affects the subject's relation to space, to the other and to himself or herself.

Keywords: exile, identity, corporeality, perception, existential wandering.

INTRODUCTION

In Nina Bouraoui's novels, the question of exile unfolds from a broader experience of discrepancy. The displacement between Algeria and France, cultural gaps, tensions linked to gender, the uncertainty of the relation to the body and the difficulty of inscribing an intimate experience in stable words all participate in a single dynamic of separation. The Bouraouian subject moves between several belongings and several images of the self; he or she seeks to construct forms of continuity capable of linking scattered fragments of experience. The three works selected for this study, *La Voyeuse interdite*, *Garçon manqué* and *Mes mauvaises pensées*, give this dynamic distinct configurations that make it possible to follow the progressive transformation of exile into existential wandering.

In *Garçon manqué*, the narrator explicitly formulates this situation of in-betweenness: 'I remain between the two countries. I remain between two identities. My balance is in solitude, a unity'¹. Identity is constructed here in the coexistence of several belongings. In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the statement 'I am, a subject in a blurred zone' further radicalises this experience of an open identity, difficult to confine within a single definition². *La Voyeuse interdite* for its part places the female subject in a social space where the body, speech and desire are subject to forms of control that transform

the inhabiting of the world into an experience of distance and confinement.

This study thus seeks to understand how exile, in Nina Bouraoui, progressively engages identity, the body, perception and language, to the point of giving the experience of unmooring an existential significance. The analysis would seek to show that these four dimensions could form a single chain of representation. Identity unmooring would find a concrete inscription in the body; the latter would in turn become the place where the relation to the gaze of others and to the world is negotiated; finally, the crisis of speech would translate the difficulty of giving a stable form to an experience traversed by several belongings. Wandering could then be understood as a search for the self and an attempt at identity recomposition.

This conception can also be brought closer to Sartre, whose reflection on freedom insists on the processual character of existence: 'Man is free because he is not himself but presence to himself. The being which is what it is cannot be free. Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is made-to-be at the heart of man and which forces human-reality to make itself instead of to be'³. In Bouraoui, the subject is constituted precisely from an identity in becoming, constantly taken up again in contact with space, the body, memory and otherness. Exile then takes on an existential significance and manifests itself in the distance that separates what has been transmitted,

what is lived and what remains to be constructed. Identity is thus formed in a process of search for and re-elaboration of the self.

The existential dimension of this experience appears more clearly when it is related to a conception of the subject founded on movement, separation and the necessity of constructing oneself. The thesis relates this orientation to Cioran, for whom existence bears the mark of an originary rupture: ‘We are not running toward death, we are fleeing the catastrophe of birth, flailing about, survivors who are trying to forget it’⁴. This formula makes it possible to understand birth as a first experience of unmooring, a separation that inscribes the subject in a history of successive displacements. In Bouraoui, this originary fracture finds a particular echo in the scenes of departure, of change of territory and of identity recomposition.

To conduct this reflection, we draw on Gilbert Durand’s anthropology of the imaginary, attentive to the symbols, schemes and structures of intimacy and of the fall. Durand defines the imaginary in the following terms: ‘the balancing dynamism that the imaginary presents itself as the tension [...] of two regimes, each of which lists images in two antagonistic universes’⁵. We cross this perspective with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which makes it possible to question the subject’s embodied relation to the world. Jean-Pierre Richard’s works illuminate networks of images and sensory motifs; Gérard Genette provides tools for the study of narrative fragmentation; Judith Butler makes it possible to think the social construction of gender categories; Julia Kristeva extends the analysis toward the relation to language. This theoretical articulation makes it possible to follow one and the same dynamic across the three novels: an identity in imbalance, a body exposed to assignments, a perception marked by distance and a language engaged in a quest for meaning.

Axis One: Exile as an Experience of Identity Unmooring

1.1. The Cultural In-Between and the Fragmentation of the Subject

Bouraouian exile first takes the form of an inner displacement. The subject is constructed from multiple lines of belonging that intersect and produce a mobile identity. In *Garçon manqué*, the formula ‘I remain between the two countries. I remain between two identities’⁶ sums up this liminal position. The verb ‘remain’ associates movement with a form of suspension: the subject inhabits the in-between and makes this unstable position a mode of existence. The passage between Algeria and France acts less as a succession of territories than as the constitution of an intermediate space in which belongings are continually reinterpreted.

The question of gender deepens this tension. Nina formulates four identity-related questions: ‘Every morning I check my identity. I have four problems. French? Algerian? Girl? Boy?’⁷. The juxtaposition of categories produces a scene of daily verification. Identity is constructed in the confrontation between cultural, national and gendered norms. Judith Butler’s reflection clarifies this logic on the basis of a conception of gender as a construction without a stable origin: ‘[...] gender is

a parody, does not presuppose the existence of an original that would be imitated by such parodic identities. Fundamentally, parody concerns the very idea of the original; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification refers to the fantasy of a fantasy – the transfiguration of an Other who is always already a “figure” in the double sense of the term – gender parody reveals that the original identity from which gender is constructed is an imitation without an original. More precisely, we are dealing with a production, one of whose effects consists in passing itself off as an imitation’⁸.

In Bouraoui, this conception illuminates the mobility of the categories that traverse the character, for whom the body becomes the first place of this negotiation.

This logic of decentring also traverses naming. ‘Nobody calls me Yasmina in Saint-Malo. It is a voluntary erasure’⁹. The first name concentrates a family and cultural history; putting it at a distance expresses a way of reorganising belonging. This mobility joins the Foucauldian conception of the subject, formulated in the thesis through the following definition: ‘What we are is not an essence, it is a crossing, an intersection; it is not a substance, it is a resonance’¹⁰. Bouraoui’s writing gives a sensible form to this conception by placing the construction of identity within a permanent work of resumption.

In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, this fragmentation is inscribed in the very form of the narrative. The monologue progresses through returns, ellipses, associations and temporal displacements. The thesis draws on Genette’s notion of ‘indeterminate ellipses’¹¹, which designates the zones of temporal lacuna in the narrative. In Bouraoui, this narrative organisation accompanies the movement of memory. Fragments of the past surface according to an associative logic; the temporality of the narrative follows the detours of consciousness. Writing stages an identity that composes itself as it passes through heterogeneous elements.

The sentence ‘With the bad thoughts, I am so afraid of no longer knowing who I am’¹² inscribes this instability at the heart of speech. The subject discovers himself or herself in a fragile relation to his or her own continuity. Narrative fragmentation becomes a mode of searching for the self: the discontinuities make visible the efforts by which consciousness gathers what comes back to it in the form of memories, images and sensations.

Unmooring thus takes on a temporal dimension. The subject finds himself or herself situated between several moments of his or her history, and this intermediate position feeds existential wandering. Geographical changes are accompanied by a mobility of inner time: the Algerian childhood returns in the French present, familial voices resurface in the monologue, while certain scenes remain suspended like isolated images. Exile can be read in the gap between lived time and narrated time.

This logic appears in the sentence: ‘With the bad thoughts, I am so afraid of no longer knowing who I am’¹³. The narrative directly associates identity continuity with the possibility of remembering and linking the episodes of existence. When the narration returns to an image, a sensation or a word from the past, it reactivates a portion of the subject. Memory intervenes

as an operation of recomposition: it selects and reinscribes the fragments in the present of writing.

Narrative fragmentation pursues this identity in becoming through a discontinuous temporality. Genette's notion of 'indeterminate ellipses'¹⁴ designates the moments when the narrative leaves in shadow the exact duration separating two sequences. In Bouraoui, these gaps participate in the representation of a consciousness traversed by returns, associations and displacements. The narrative of *Mes mauvaises pensées* advances by fragments, as if memory were progressively reconstructing what it preserves.

This mobility joins the Foucauldian formulation: 'What we are is not an essence, it is a crossing, an intersection; it is not a substance, it is a resonance'¹⁵. The vocabulary of crossing and intersection suits Bouraoui's writing particularly well. The subject appears at the meeting point of several histories, several languages, several spaces and several gazes. Identity takes the form of a relational fabric whose elements respond to each other and transform themselves as experiences unfold.

1.2. From Unmooring to the Ordeal of the Body

The Durandian reading makes it possible to specify its symbolic dimension. The imaginary unfolds, according to Durand, in a tension between different regimes of the image. The diurnal regime is defined by the 'regime of antithesis', while the nocturnal regime is presented as 'the plenary regime of euphemism'¹⁶. Bouraoui's novels bring these polarities into play through images of light and shadow, of protection and threat, of opening and confinement. The body is situated at the heart of these tensions: it can become a surface exposed to the gaze or an intimate space where forms of appeasement are reconstructed.

The sentence 'Each body is the contamination of another body. Each forms the stratum of the other. In the end it is a single body. It is a single movement'¹⁷ radicalises this conception. The individual body appears traversed by other bodies, by norms, affects and representations. It becomes a place of circulation rather than an isolated envelope. This porosity explains the central place granted to skin, flesh, blood, eyes and gestures in the three novels: these motifs give a material form to what identity experiences internally.

Identity instability acquires a concrete dimension when it is inscribed in the body. In Bouraoui, the body constitutes a meeting place between the subject's belongings and the norms that seek to define it. In *Garçon manqué*, the narrator directly associates identity and bodily materiality; in *La Voyeuse interdite*, the female body is inscribed under the gaze of familial and social authority; in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, it becomes the space of fears, sensations and disturbances of consciousness. The passage from identity to the body constitutes a continuity of exile because what affects the feeling of belonging takes a sensible and bodily form.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological conception provides an operative framework here. In *Phénoménologie de la perception*, the body is engaged in the world as the place of lived experience¹⁸. In Bouraoui, the body functions precisely as an interface between the subject and his or her environment. The statement 'My body shuts itself in twice'¹⁹ associates spatial

constraint with identity assignment. The body thus materialises a feeling of closure that touches both lived space and the representation of the self.

Axis Two: The Body as a Place of Exile

2.1. Corporeality, Confinement and Vulnerability

The body constitutes in Bouraoui's work a privileged place for the inscription of separation. In *La Voyeuse interdite*, Fikria moves in a universe where the visibility of the feminine immediately calls for control. The social gaze penetrates intimate space, imposes limits on movement and transforms corporeality into an object of surveillance. The body becomes a surface on which the norms the character faces can be read. The formula 'Woe to him who will stare too long at the female corpus'²⁰ condenses this logic of mistrust toward women's bodies.

Bodily experience also manifests itself in *Mes mauvaises pensées*, where the narrator describes fear as a diffuse sensation: 'With the bad thoughts, I am in the circle of fear, it takes hold in the entire body'²¹. The body receives the affect here even before it is put into words. Fear unfolds in a corporeality that transforms emotion into spatial experience. It envelops, circulates and spreads across the whole subject. This representation joins Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, for which the body constitutes the anchoring point of perception and existence. Exile acquires an embodied dimension since the subject experiences the distance from the world through his or her own materiality.

The conflict between the body and social representations is reinforced in *La Voyeuse interdite* by the presence of the paternal gaze. The female body becomes a place of judgement and reprobation. The scene in which Fikria lights a cigarette condenses this tension: 'My father was watching me consume my last moments of solitary pleasure'²². The verb 'watching' transforms the act into a scene of observation and judgement. The reference to the Durandian analysis of the gaze can be specified through the notion of 'light-vision isomorphism'²³, which associates visual perception with a power of revelation. The body is placed under an authority that claims to define what can be seen, desired or accomplished.

The social gaze thus participates in the formation of a bodily consciousness marked by vulnerability. The narrator of *Garçon manqué* evokes 'the fire of other people's gaze. On my skin. On my face'²⁴. The fragmented syntax gives the gaze an almost tactile dimension. It reaches the skin and the face, two surfaces immediately exposed to otherness. The body becomes the first scene of encounter with others, but also the place where the representations and judgements that shape the self-image are deposited.

2.2. Sexuality, Shame and the Control of the Flesh

Corporeality takes on an even more conflictual dimension when it is associated with desire and sexuality. In *La Voyeuse interdite*, vegetal metaphors transform female desire into a figure threatened with suffocation. The formula 'Cursed flower planted between the two horns of Satan'²⁵ associates sexuality with a symbolism of fault. The flowers torn up by the mother extend this representation: desire appears as a force that must

be contained, cut or kept at a distance. Gilbert Durand inscribes the flesh in the symbolic regimes of the fall, where food, sexuality and blood are gathered in a single imaginary constellation²⁶. This reading illuminates the way Bouraoui gives an imagistic form to the conflict between desire and prohibition.

The scene of the forced marriage intensifies this symbolism. The description of the méchoui ('Lying on a bed of potatoes, garlic, parsley [...] stuffed sexes, gaping belly'²⁷) associates food, the body and sexuality in an image of objectification. The female body is absorbed by a culinary imaginary that transforms the intimate into spectacle. Sexuality presents itself through an invasive materiality, where the body becomes the support of a social domination.

Mes mauvaises pensées offers an intimate formulation of this experience. 'I am not ashamed of sexuality, I am perhaps ashamed of jouissance; would dying be of this circle? Would shame come from there?'²⁸. The distinction between sexuality and jouissance shifts the analysis from the social register to that of intimate experience. Jouissance involves the momentary loss of the boundaries of the self and joins, in Georges Bataille, the idea of a 'little death' associated with the temporary dissolution of the self in pleasure²⁹. In Bouraoui, this dissolution remains traversed by shame, revealing the internalisation of norms that continue to act on the subject.

The body appears as the place where desire, identity and power meet. The question of exile gains depth: it designates a distance between the subject and the social forms that seek to inscribe him or her in a stable definition. The body preserves the traces of this tension, while remaining one of the principal means by which the character experiences his or her existence. This bodily dimension leads naturally toward perception, since the subject enters the world from a body that sees, feels and knows itself to be looked at.

2.3. The Body as Memory and Inscription of the World

This bodily inscription also manifests itself in the relation to Algeria and to the maternal figure. Nina states: 'I am angry because I cannot hold my mother's body, I am angry because I cannot hold the body of the night, I am angry because I cannot hold the body of Algeria'³⁰. The repetition of 'body' brings together three figures that writing associates with origin: the mother, the night and the territory. The country of origin becomes a fleshly reality, grasped through the desire to touch, to hold and to find again. Geographical distance is converted into physical tension; exile is felt in the impossibility of materially reaching what nevertheless remains constitutive of the subject. The body then appears as the place where belonging, memory and the desire for return intersect.

The Bouraouian body also acts as a surface of memory. It gathers the affects, the words and the traces of a history that exceeds the individual. In Mes mauvaises pensées, the formula 'I am also the blotting-paper skin of this world'³¹ gives corporeality a function of absorption. The skin becomes a sensitive matter that receives the marks of the world, those of the family, of displacements and of events. This image extends the figure of the body exposed to the gaze: the subject is no longer content with being seen, he or she carries within what he

or she has seen and what he or she has lived. The skin acquires a mnemonic, almost palimpsestic thickness, in which successive experiences are inscribed without erasing the preceding ones. Exile takes on a historical and affective dimension here: displacement transforms the relation to territory, but the territory remains inscribed in the body in the form of sensations, images and memories.

Axis Three: Perceiving the World, Inhabiting Distance

3.1. The Gaze as an Experience of Otherness

Perception accentuates bodily experience by giving a relational form to exile. In Bouraoui, to see means at once to enter into contact with the world and to experience the distance that separates the subject from what he or she observes. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology leads us to consider perception as an embodied experience of the visible. In the thesis, this construction of visibility is formulated as a 'concretion of visibility'³², a notion that makes it possible to think what is seen as the result of a progressive elaboration in experience. In the three novels studied, the gaze precisely becomes one of the privileged instruments for the representation of strangeness.

3.2. Spaces, Memory and Anchoring

This mnemonic power is found in Onimus's expression: 'the house that remembers'³³. Space preserves traces, welcomes objects and restores a presence. In Mes mauvaises pensées, the apartment that keeps 'our things from Algiers' functions as a place where family history remains inscribed in matter. The space of residence ceases to be a mere setting: it becomes an external memory of the subject. This dimension joins the logic of exile: when the territory is distant, places, objects and images take charge of part of belonging.

The house also possesses a mnemonic value. Bachelard writes: 'beyond memories, the native house is physically inscribed in us'³⁴. This proposition illuminates Nina's relation to the Algerian house: the place belongs to memory as much as to geography. Objects, smells and images make a distant world present. In the same perspective, Bachelard asserts that 'the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind'³⁵. In Bouraoui, the house precisely becomes a gathering point of identity fragments, even when the subject remains geographically distant from this place.

Bachelard's reference to 'oneirically incomplete dwellings'³⁶ makes it possible to deepen this image of unstable space. In Bouraoui's novels, domestic places can protect and confine, welcome and constrain. The family house of Garçon manqué concentrates childhood memories and belongings, while the house of La Voyeuse interdite materialises the social norms that frame the female body. Domestic space thus becomes an extension of the identity conflict: the character inhabits a place charged with a history that participates in his or her definition.

This relation between perception and memory becomes particularly visible in urban spaces. The city of Algiers appears at times in an oppressive form: it is described as a 'black forest pressed tight against the light of the sky'³⁷, then as 'a vast prison' in La Voyeuse interdite. The city ceases to be a mere setting; it acquires a bodily and mental dimension. In Mes

mauvaises pensées, a character recounts that ‘the city closed in on him, like one body on another body, so that he could no longer tell his right from his left’³⁸. Urban space becomes an experience of disorientation: losing one’s way amounts to momentarily losing the coordinates from which the subject situates himself or herself.

Perceptual experience, however, engages more than a simple act of vision. Merleau-Ponty proposes a ‘concretion of visibility’³⁹, which makes it possible to think visibility as a progressive construction. What is seen is formed in the relation between the body, the place and the gaze. In Bouraoui, perception precisely produces a sensible reality traversed by memories. The exterior world acts as a trigger in which a colour, a light, a street, a face or a smell reactivates a buried dimension of experience.

In *La Voyeuse interdite*, Fikria occupies the position of an observer separated from the world she contemplates. She ‘scrutinises’ her targets ‘with a probe and a magnifying glass’ and transforms their lives into a ‘life-map’⁴⁰. The medical and cartographic metaphor gives the gaze a power of investigation. The window materialises this relation and introduces a ‘frozen interval’⁴¹, a formula that expresses the suspension of space between the observing consciousness and the outside world. Fikria becomes a ‘clandestine spectator suspended above the city’⁴², a formula that sums up the character’s liminal position.

The paternal gaze introduces another form of distance, founded this time on surveillance. In the cigarette scene, the father becomes an authority that observes and evaluates. The gaze is transformed into judgement; it directly affects the way Fikria experiences her act and her own body. Perceptual experience acquires here an ethical and social dimension: the subject is constituted under the eyes of others and encounters, through this gaze, the norms to which his or her existence is referred.

In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the relation to the other also passes through a perceptual distance. The narrator observes her grandmother: ‘I could gaze at her for hours so closed to me is her world; I know nothing about her, her gaze slides without ever enveloping me’⁴³. The repetition of ‘gaze’ accentuates the duration of observation, while the formula ‘her world is closed to me’ transforms the observed person into inaccessible territory. The gaze seeks to reach the other while discovering the irreducible singularity of his or her experience.

3.3. The Mirror and the Representation of the Self

The mirror extends this questioning. ‘There will always be this distorting mirror, there will always be this uncertainty too’⁴⁴. The mirror introduces a gap between the perceived image and inner experience. Identity appears in the tension between what the subject sees and what he or she experiences. In *Garçon manqué*, this relation also passes through colour and the metaphor of the eyes: ‘golden eyes. Snake eyes’⁴⁵. The gaze becomes a sign of otherness that condenses social projections and intimate questionings. Exile here joins an experience of the representation of the self, always mediated by an image.

In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the mirror takes on another intensity: ‘I look at myself in a mirror and I know what I see at the bottom of my eyes: there is shame, shame of myself and

worse still, there is anger, I could break the mirror with a blow of my head’⁴⁶. The gaze becomes reflexive. It returns to the subject and transforms the mirror into a surface of revelation. The perception of the face brings up an affective history that goes beyond mere appearance. Exile manifests itself here in the form of an inner discrepancy: to look at oneself is to meet an image of the self charged with memories, norms and emotions.

The mirror extends this relational construction of perception. In *Garçon manqué*, Nina asserts: ‘I break my identity. I change my life. Feel my stomach hard. My muscled chest. My strong shoulders. Deny oneself. See another face in the mirror. Talk to oneself. Think oneself virile’⁴⁷. The mirror introduces a doubling: the observed body and the subject observing it find themselves face to face. Perception becomes an experience of comparison, of recognition and of displacement. The image returned by the mirror participates in a re-elaboration of the self and in a confrontation with the categories that seek to define the character.

3.4. Language as a Quest for Meaning

Bourauian speech is thus situated at the frontier between expression and withdrawal. It bears the wounds of the body, the memory of places, the multiplicity of belongings and the experience of the gaze. It also constitutes a means of transforming these elements into narrative. Exile finds in language an additional form of displacement: the subject passes from territory to text, from body to sentence, from memory to a narrative organisation that renders a singular experience shareable.

Language can also reach its own limits and turn into silence. The expression ‘Learning to be silent’ is associated with a reconquest of inner space, while ‘coinciding in silence’⁴⁸ designates a form of relation in which presence precedes utterance. This dimension appears in *Mes mauvaises pensées* when the narrator’s silence is brought into relation with that of the mother. Silence becomes a form of indirect speech, bearer of memory and affect. It accompanies the search for an inner coherence that words alone sometimes struggle to fix.

This quest for meaning leads to the question of truth. The thesis cites Merleau-Ponty: ‘speech is the vehicle of our movement toward truth’⁴⁹. Speech here represents a movement rather than a definitive result. In Bouraoui, to write amounts to traversing an experience, taking up its fragments again and bringing forth a singular truth. In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, she asserts: ‘My work as a writer is also a forger’s work. There is only my truth, you know, there is only my interpretation of things’⁵⁰. Literary truth is constructed in this articulation between experience, memory and interpretation.

For Kristeva, this situation falls under a ‘crisis of signification’⁵¹. The formula corresponds to the functioning of Bourauian writing, marked by resumptions, associations, silences and corrections. Meaning appears progressively through the work of the sentence. Speech advances in a zone where experience sometimes overflows words, then returns upon itself in search of a more accurate formulation. We can associate this difficulty of formulation with a ‘second rupture with the mother’⁵², which makes it possible to think linguistic separation as an extension of the originary separation.

Language becomes a sensitive frontier. It links the subject to the inheritance and at the same time recalls the distance that separates him or her from this inheritance. In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, this tension takes the form of a 'rupture of language' when the narrator recalls words that have become devoid of meaning⁵³. Language then bears the traces of a fragmented inner experience.

To the experience of the gaze responds the question of language. In Bouraoui, speech seeks to establish a continuity between the subject, his or her history and the world, while encountering the limits of formulation. This tension appears particularly clearly in *Garçon manqué*, where the relation to Arabic concentrates the stakes of belonging. 'I do not speak Arabic. My voice says the letters of the alphabet, ây bâ, ta, tbâ then fades away. It is a famished voice, a voice foreign to the language it utters'⁵⁴. The voice produces the signs of the language and at the same time experiences a distance from their cultural inheritance. Language becomes an experience of the in-between.

This linguistic distance constitutes one of the extensions of identity exile. The narrator specifies: 'I do fifteen years of Arabic. I dig into my silence... I speak Arabic in my own way. I interpret. I remain in the lie, a habit'⁵⁵. The verbs 'to speak', 'to interpret' and 'to dig' make language an activity of transformation. The received language is taken up again by the subject and becomes a personal matter. Speech bears the trace of separation while participating in a recomposition of identity.

In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the rupture of language takes a form more directly linked to memory and inner experience: 'I remember the words of the ex-wife of a tennis player [...] her words made no sense, there was something like a rupture of language, and I was afraid of that when my bad thoughts appeared'⁵⁶. The memory brings the scene back in the form of speech associated with the loss of meaning. Writing transforms this disquiet into narrative material: what threatens the coherence of the subject becomes precisely what feeds the narrative.

The relation to words also remains marked by their power to wound: 'There are words too, that I am afraid to hear: slash, wound'⁵⁷. Speech is here invested with a bodily power. Words cut and strike the subject in the manner of a sharp object. The 'language that bleeds' evoked by Bouraoui⁵⁸ extends this materialisation. The border between body and language becomes porous: the bodily wound is transposed into speech, while speech preserves the traces of an experience lived by the body.

Julia Kristeva makes it possible to specify this relation by associating modern writing with a 'crisis of signification'⁵⁹ and with a confrontation with the zones of the unsayable. In Bouraoui, fragmented speech retains a value of search. It advances through resumptions, silences, associations and corrections. This conception joins Merleau-Ponty's reflection on a speech that engages the subject in his or her relation to meaning: 'speech is the vehicle of our movement toward truth'⁶⁰. Language becomes a matter through which the subject experiences, formulates and reorganises his or her experience. This perspective also joins Blanchot's reflection on a speech

'deprived of centre'⁶¹: the dispersion of language refers to a subject who seeks his or her own unity in the very work of writing.

The path followed through the three novels makes it possible to understand the coherence of this dynamic. Exile begins with an experience of identity unmooring; it is then inscribed in the body in the form of confinement, control and shame; it finally extends into a perception marked by distance and a language engaged in a quest for meaning. Existential wandering designates a mode of relation to the world in which each attempt at anchoring entails a new operation of reinterpretation. Bouraoui represents this mobility through recurrent motifs (the threshold, the window, the mirror, the body, the voice, silence) that give inner experience a literary and symbolic form.

CONCLUSION

The study of the three novels shows that exile constitutes in Nina Bouraoui an experience that far exceeds geographical displacement. It organises a singular relation to identity, the body, the gaze and language. Through these three narratives, we have shown that identity is constructed in an experience marked by displacement, discrepancy and the search for balance. The subject confronts multiple belongings, social norms and the gaze of others, while the body becomes a privileged place of this experience. Memory and speech then occupy an essential place in the resumption of the lived path, as attested by a fragmented writing that accompanies the subject's return to himself or herself. Exile emerges as an existential experience engaging at once the body, identity, memory and language.

Corporeality constitutes the point of passage between these different dimensions. The body receives the effects of unmooring, preserves the memory of tensions and renders perceptible the power relations that surround the subject. The gaze then transforms this corporeality into a relational experience: being seen, looking and looking at oneself become so many ways of experiencing the distance that separates self and other. The mirror, the window and the paternal or social gaze show that identity is always constructed in relation to the images that surround it.

Language then gathers the traces of separation and inscribes them in a speech that restores lived experience. The relation to Arabic in *Garçon manqué*, the ruptures of speech in *Mes mauvaises pensées* and the wounding value of words reveal a language worked by the gap between experience and its formulation. Speech nevertheless remains a place of elaboration: it gathers fragments, reinterprets belongings and seeks a point of balance between several versions of the self. Wandering takes on a poetic significance. It designates a way of occupying instability through narrative, through images and through speech in motion.

Through this articulation between identity, the body, perception and language, Bouraoui's writing sets up a poetics of distance and recomposition. Exile appears as an experience that ceaselessly displaces the subject, while literature provides him or her with forms for thinking this displacement.

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