



From the Maquis to the Mauve Planet: Trajectories of Liberation in the Short Stories of Safia Ketou

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Abstract:

*This article analyzes Safia Ketou's 1983 collection *La Planète Mauve et autres nouvelles* as a speculative fiction book of Algerian and North African literature. The collection, which spans from 1962 to 1978, during a time of major national upheaval, remarkably joins together the historical reality of Algeria's anti-colonial struggle with imaginary speculative futures. In keeping with the classification, Ketou uses different generic modes in the stories such as historical realism, allegory, and science fiction – and this article argues that she employs all of them to curate an intricate and unbroken continuum of liberation. Analyzing key stories “*Les larmes d’Aïn Sefra*,” “*Cri d’encre*,” and “*La Planète mauve*” demonstrates how Ketou moves the concept of freedom from political national liberation of the maquis, then to the social and psychological emancipation of the individual, particularly women, imaginative, then collective emancipation. This article seeks to argue that by situating her writings at the crossroads of postcolonial history and speculative imagination, we should not only perceive Safia Ketou as a pioneer of Algerian science fiction but more as a provocative writer who has captured the essence of the ongoing battles for the claim of freedom fought on the battlefields of the past and the present.*

Keywords: __Safia Ketou, Algerian Literature, Science Fiction, Liberation, Postcolonialism.

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Résumé :

*Cet article analyse le recueil de nouvelles de Safia Ketou, *La Planète mauve et autres nouvelles* (1983), comme un ouvrage de fiction spéculative s'inscrivant dans la littérature algérienne et nord-africaine. Ce recueil, qui couvre la période 1962-1978, marquée par d'importants bouleversements nationaux, mêle avec brio la réalité historique de la lutte anticoloniale algérienne à des futurs imaginaires. Conformément à cette classification, Ketou utilise différents modes d'expression dans ses récits, tels que le réalisme historique, l'allégorie et la science-fiction ; cet article soutient qu'elle les emploie tous pour construire un continuum complexe et ininterrompu de libération. L'analyse de nouvelles clés, « Les larmes d'Aïn Sefra », « Cri d'encre » et « La Planète mauve », montre comment Ketou fait évoluer le concept de liberté : de la libération politique nationale du maquis à l'émancipation sociale et psychologique de l'individu, en particulier des femmes, puis à l'émancipation imaginaire, et enfin à l'émancipation collective. Cet article vise à démontrer qu'en situant l'œuvre de Safia Ketou au croisement de l'histoire postcoloniale et de l'imaginaire spéculatif, il convient de la considérer non seulement comme une pionnière de la science-fiction algérienne, mais surtout comme une écrivaine engagée qui a su saisir l'essence des luttes pour la liberté, menées sur les champs de bataille d'hier et d'aujourd'hui.*

Mots-clés : *Safia Ketou, littérature algérienne, science-fiction, libération, postcolonialisme.*



Introduction

In the years that followed Algeria's independence in 1962, a surge of creativity unfolded as artistic and intellectual communities endeavored to think through the challenge of constructing a new society. In this environment of post-colonial thought and action, literature was essential in recognizing the costs of the past while envisaging the promise of the future. In this milieu, Safia Ketou's collection *La Planète Mauve et autres nouvelles*, published in 1983 (containing stories written between 1962 and 1978), stands out as a striking and emotionally impactful text. The back cover of the book makes an audacious and innovative claim that Ketou is "the first Algerian writer to have written science fiction" (Ketou, back cover). This alone invites critical consideration. Her work marks a coming into being as a pioneering figure in an Arabic and Francophone speculative fiction tradition that is increasingly drawing scholarly attention (Campbell).

However, this article argues that the innovative aspect of Ketou's collection is not simply the presence of science fiction, but in the intentional and fluid merging of genres. Ketou does not consider historical fiction, social allegory, and speculative fiction as distinct projects; instead, she employs them as interconnected tools to think through a complex, evolving notion of liberation. This study argues that Ketou's work articulates a continuum of freedom from earthly to cosmic realms. This trajectory, starting with the politically concrete progress of the maquis; then the more intimate social and psychological struggles of the individual; and, ultimately, to the imaginative freedom needed to

continue building a fair and lasting vision of the future. Ketou draws on a lineage of Maghrebi women authors, such as Assia Djébar, who committed to a creative act of writing the female experience into the contours of the national history (Djébar).

Through placing narratives of difference in conversation, Safia Ketou develops a powerful argument, namely, that liberation entails a whole process of negotiating possibility through memory and imagination. Ketou demonstrates an imaginative vision that freedom, once achieved on the battlefield, must be re-fought and informed by each individual (at home, in themselves, and so on, and ultimately, in the stars).

1. The Terrestrial Struggle: Liberation from Colonialism

In launching her readership into the imagined universe of speculative fiction, Safia Ketou asserts that she is rooted in her vision of liberation in Algeria, nourished by blood and tears, tinted by suffering and ultimately hope in its million magnetic miles of persistence in breaking out of the grip of colonialism. The war story aspects of *La Planète Mauve* – specifically, "Les larmes d'Aïn Sefra" and "Interview du passé" – are more than war stories, they are the original extrapolative narrative, and they remain the place in text where the gratuitous, sacrificial, and ultimately collective process of freedom is born. In this way, the collective sacrifice for liberty suggests a psychological process mapped by Frantz Fanon, in which the colonised person must surrender their individual identity into a new collective consciousness of national identity based in struggle (Fanon 45-50). In these stories, rather than an ideal of liberation being imagined, instead the corporeality of liberation



demands the subjugation of the individual for the viability of the nation.

“Les larmes d’Aïn Sefra” powerfully depicts the transformation of personal tragedy and sorrow into national myth. The story revolves around a widow named Meriem, who dedicates her entire life to her only son, Aziz: “En fait, elle ne vivait que pour lui. Elle tombait en extase devant la moindre de ses paroles, les buvant avec avidité” (Ketou 17). The main conflict of the story develops around the rupture of this personal world in the wake of the collective call of duty: Aziz’s decision to join the maquis.

Meriem’s initial backlash is one of intense personal devastation: “Son cœur cessa de battre. Son âme se figea” (Ketou 19). However, her expansion beyond this grief is remarkable. Ketou describes her not as a grieving mother but as a transcendent figure: “Galvanisée, elle se mit à l’aider. Elle planait d’une pièce à l’autre, efficiente et légère. Un élan fantastique la soulevait... faisant d’elle une ballerine” (Ketou 20). This transformation culminates in a moment of profound endorsement, where personal love is alchemized into patriotic duty: “Elle souriait parce qu’elle venait enfin d’accepter le sacrifice. Elle remettait son fils entre les mains de Dieu. Elle donnait son enfant à sa patrie” (Ketou 20-21). The story’s tragic yet hopeful conclusion, where the site of her son’s death becomes a source of water, transforms her innermost sorrow into a collective blessing: “Ô mères déchirées, que vos larmes deviennent sources par la grâce de Dieu!” (Ketou 23).

While “Les larmes d’Aïn Sefra” deals with the gift of sacrifice, “Interview du passé” engages with the trauma of what one has lost. In recounting the loss of freedom by

sharing the total cost of her freedom, Saadia, a former maquisarde, ritualistically cancels out her marriage, loses her son to execution, and is maimed to the point of being incapable of having more children (Ketou 27, 29). No matter what the personal loss, Saadia scrupulously does not accept the victim's identity. When the journalist attempted to frame her values by placing emphasis on her loss, saying, "tu as tout perdu; ton fils, ton mari, ta santé," Saadia's response, which forever altered the entire equation, was given in, "grande sérénité," saying, "Ma joie est de voir l'Algérie libre" (Ketou 31).

This bold proclamation enacts a foundational principle of Ketou's vision: the collective success of the nation mitigates and gives significance to each individual's suffering. Ketou further establishes the credibility of this assertion by offering narration of unbelievable trauma not as forms of pity, but forms of human dignity. For example, she references the extreme torture of another female militant, who would not be broken: "Avec un art consommé, ils la meurtrissaient, crescendo jusqu'à la démence" (Ketou 30). Her silence afterwards is an act of defiance, signifying that liberation - in this earthly sense - happens through the durability of trauma and maintaining dignity in human beings as a subject of dehumanization.

2. The Inner World: The Liberation of the Self

Though the national revolution offers the necessary context for *La Planète Mauve*, Ketou quickly also emphasizes that political independence is not where the journey ends. She then quickly turns her critical focus inwards, critically examining the continuing struggles of her newly liberated nation. This resonates with Marnia Lazreg's



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discussion of the paradox of post-independence, where the political independence of Algeria did not necessarily lead to social independence for her women (Lazreg). Ketou asserts that, in addition to this political independence, there must also be a second, more personal liberation: that of the self, and particularly the female self, from the shackles of the patriarchal tradition, social constructs, and fear that has internalised itself.

In "La femme abstraite," Nora, the central character, embarks on a spiritual journey toward "l'Absolu," which Ketou describes as characterized by her contestation of the material and morally corrupt "Vallée Factice." When she meets a man, Nor, who is in a married state, her deepest fear is not emotional but structural. She cries out one word that explains her struggle: "Des chaînes" (Ketou 14). They are not the chains of colonial oppression, but internal, structural social constraints that Fatima Mernissi writes about as being central to the construction of female autonomy in contemporary Muslim societies (Mernissi). The tragic conclusion of the story, wherein Nora reaches the Absolu only to find herself a disembodied "poudre d'or", suggests the difficulty of achieving full personal autonomy in the material, social world (Ketou 16).

Zina's struggle in "Cri d'encre" is very overwhelmingly concrete. As a pioneer in her rural village, she faces the crushing burden of an entire community that is not used to seeing women exercise autonomy, such that she feels herself under a "projecteur aveuglant, impitoyable" (Ketou 59). Her biggest struggle is with her family, who fulfill their role as guardians of tradition. The turning point in "Cri d'encre" appears when Zina comes to terms with her own role in her

oppression: "J'ai écouté les «qu'en dira-t-on.» Sourde à l'appel de mon moi. J'ai vécu à contre-époque, à contre-cœur, à contre-vie. J'ai écrasé mon âme." (Ketou 69).

The resolution of the story presents a different avenue of freedom. Her reflection in a river tells her, "Écris ton propre livre, Zina... Tu seras délivrée" (Ketou 70). Liberation exists, here, in articulation. The "cri d'encre" becomes her tool of resistance, a form of self-recovery. Her use of writing as a method of self-creation corresponds with Valérie Orlando's concept of the new "nomadic voice," an avatar created through literary act (Orlando).

3. The Cosmic Leap: Liberation through Imagination

After laying bare the elemental struggles for both national and individual freedom, Ketou makes her most daring leap into the cosmos. Her sci-fi is not escapist but envisioned consequences of post-colonial anxiety projected onto a speculative platform.

'C'est l'ère lunaire, pourtant' is a direct condemnation of a society that is fascinated by technology yet does not recognize the suffering it perpetuates. The refrain(s) from the text, "C'est l'ère lunaire. C'est le siècle du progrès. Et pourtant... Pourtant, il y a des gens qui ont faim" (Ketou 32), are critical in framing her thesis. Ketou contends that although the old slavery has been replaced, it has been exchanged for a new slavery... a new reliance. She makes the claim, "L'esclavage existe encore. C'est la dépendance économique, politique, culturelle" (Ketou 35). Her critique and assertions of a continued neocolonial structure echo the structural power that Edward Said ascribed to Orientalism in a post-colonial era (Said).



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In the title story, entitled "La Planète mauve," Ketou fully deploys science fiction as a political laboratory in a manner that la Fredric Jameson allows a reading of the story as a utopian text, where its very perfection proves to be the dystopia (Jameson). The planet of the XYRYX is a perfect socialist utopia with no poverty, disease, or want. Our guide explains, "Nous avons choisi le socialisme scientifique... La justice sociale est une réalité concrète" (Ketou 94). However, the human astronauts are horrified to find they have been invited to readiness to become immortal, eternal rulers of this society, which is against their will. The promise of supreme power becomes the ultimate slavery. Alym's protest, "C'est inconcevable!" expresses the horror of their plight: they are to be "liberated" from their humanhood in order to fulfil a perfect system (Ketou 98). The Mauve Planet is a cautionary metaphor on a revolutionary state that risks drowning the very humans they are trying to liberate in its search for stability.

Conclusion

From the bloody frontline of the maquis, to the clean utopian future of a new planet, Safia Ketou makes a meaningful and coherent journey of liberation. Her oeuvre is more than a collection of disjointed pieces but rather a unified literary undertaking. The journey to the Mauve Planet which begins with the earthly sacrifices of the Algerian revolution and makes room for the liberation of the individual self, which then unfolds into an imaginative project of creating a world anew. In this "third space" of

literature (Bhabha), Ketou produces a distinctive Algerian perspective.

Ketou combines realism, allegory and science fiction, creating a universe that responsibly acknowledges the past's sacrifices while daring to think about the potential (and responsibility) of the future. As a significant text (and importantly neglected text) in contemporary North African literature, Ketou's work is a work of Algerian science fiction, and a substantial exploration of female subjectivity, it should incite a reevaluation of postcolonial writing's thematic scope. Furthermore, Ketou's stories illustrate, as contemporary people of color protest, that the primary act of liberation is and always will be the act of imagination.

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