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Writing Disaster: Literature, Trauma, Memory

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### On Omar and George

In the wake of heinous violence, disguised among all its rubble, are fragments of immutable loss. These fragments are victims of witness to tragedy, left to fester in the aftermath of what and who does not remain. In the margins of Sachdeva and Djébar's accounts, there are two boys in particular that contour trauma's haunting periphery. Omar, a precocious pupil in Atyka's class; and George, the aloof older-looking, younger brother of Promise. Their portrayals in "Women in Pieces" and "All the Names They Used For God" suggest that men, never boys, possess the monopoly on violence. Resigned to this understanding, both Omar and George unravel in their alienation and become consumed by a loss-induced melancholy and delusion.

Djébar obscures most intimate and non-intimate details about her students from readers' view. Most of them occupy a liminal space where their indispensability to the plot is dubious. Their personas are made to feel important on the surface, yet their characters remain nameless, making them feel expendable. Confusingly, she endows their personalities with a depth that, one would think, warrants recognition beyond the generic label of "jeune homme" (Djébar 206). The only character who escapes this anonymity in the terrain of Djébar's language and character-building is Omar, and he only does so only at the end of the story, in the dire face of the unimaginable—Les Gendarmes, les soldats. His name, it would seem, is invoked by the arrival of violence, a call to arms he cannot respond to. Omar is contoured by his own helplessness in the moment of Atyka's execution with a piercing bullet to the heart.

Atyka is a woman who by all descriptions has a monopoly not on violence, but on Omar's intellectual curiosity.

*Omar regarde.*

*Omar entend. Figé, il regarde, il écoute (Djebar 211).*

The murder of Atyka is no doubt traumatizing in some capacity for all of her students but Omar was the only one to witness the fatal blow; the only one to see exactly how her life was butchered with injustice by men. The pain is even more acute because her murder transpired after the students pored over and sympathized with a story of another woman left in pieces. He is forced to believe that the most powerful weapon is that which can draw blood, not inspire intellectual curiosity. Omar's trauma condemns him to an obsessiveness that he'll likely never return from, "...Hanté par cette seule interrogation, parcourt des jours et des jours la ville blanche, depuis chaque aube griffée de rose jusqu'à l'heure du couvre-feu (Djebar 214)." He is haunted by her voice and chases it further and further into obscurity, fastening himself inescapably to his alienation. The alienation that he becomes undone by drives him near the precipice of complete delusion. But before he's at its edge, he's confronted by an immediate trauma given rise to by the powerlessness inhabiting him in the face of extreme monopolistic violence. And with no way to combat it, he lets himself wither there in "the white city" (Djebar 214).

In contrast, George is confronted by trauma engendered by absence; the disappearance of his sister. He's suspended in the unknowing of his sister's alive-or-dead status, yet cognizant of the fact that the circumstances surrounding her removal from his life aren't benevolent. That her abduction occurs in a sanctified place and for reasons outside her control. Persecuted for her faith and resented for her gender. Even if George were in the same

predicament, there at Sunday school, he would've been differently spared, and that guilt-ridden acknowledgment is the source of his alienation and melancholy, I assume. Let it be clear, though, that there is distinction between melancholy and its phonetic counterpart, melancholia, and this difference is what separates the mood from the pathology. George presents the symptoms of a cavalier and despondent character who has experienced trauma—melancholy—where Omar, though in its early stages, seems to exhibit a “keener eye for the truth” induced by loss (Radden 282). This “keener eye” manifests as his obsession with the location of Atyka’s voice, because he is right: “Le corps, la tête. Mais la voix? Où s’est réfugiée la voix d’Atyka? (Djebar 214)” Where does Atyka’s voice take refuge? His curiosity even in grief conjures up a profound observation about where the immaterial goes in death. Omar’s reaction to trauma is reminiscent of Radden’s definition of melancholia.

However, George recovers what is lost or, rather, Promise, by returning home, fills in that vacuum. She suddenly threatens his conception of loss and its permanence, which must disorient him. For eight years, he inhabited a strain of guilt that depressed his spirits. When that became too burdensome, he chose to indulge what could drift him away from his mind and numb his body. Alcohol facilitated his alienation from himself, his family, and memory. After reuniting with his sister in an encounter that is by most accounts underwhelming, he welcomes her inside their shared family home; Sachdeva describing of the interaction: “[George] walks me into the room and there’s a carelessness in the way he moves, a looseness in the joints. I realize he’s drunk. He sits on the sofa and looks up at me without a trace of nerves... (Sachdeva 122).” George’s character feels hollowed out in his interactions with Promise, as though there used to be a vitalizing substance coursing through his veins that has sought refuge elsewhere. His mourning is complicated by the arrival of Promise, because she, to him, has already been substituted/replaced by an alienation that revolves around his antisocial behavior (Freud 244).

Much of George's melancholy rests on the grand delusion of his sister's ostensible death. But it isn't dramatic, almost as though Sachdeva didn't want to ask for any more of the readers' empathy. On the level of technique, she avoids literary tropes like the one of the family member who becomes crazed after the death of a close relative. Sachdeva doesn't want to sensationalize trauma, nor the delusion that George's is embedded with. He's nonchalant where Promise is bemused, open where she is unpliant, and drunk in a way that she could never be, because Promise is replete with enough tragedy to sober anyone's lifetime. No amount of alcohol could change that. Moreover, the resignation that comes across in George's persona is directly linked to the violence that the story is predicated on. Men, we have suggested, possess an uncontested monopoly on violence. What has not been mentioned is that men, too, control the external credibility of the violence they perpetrate. That means that they can distort violent realities and obscure details so an external viewer is forced to conflate violence with death, as is the case of Promise's family. Her death for many years is implied. The perpetrators of violence in "All the Names They Used For God" double as assassins of hope. George is delusional about the impossibility of hope, which is reflected in the way he alienates himself from his own memory of Promise. No paragraph from the short story paints it more succinctly than this, "My hand flutters against my chest. 'Promise. It's Promise,' I say, though my throat is so tight I can barely speak. Still, he stares at me for a second before he says, 'Oh...'" (Sachdeva 121)." This alienation and hopelessness extends to and permeates every other facet of his life (except for his interest in women).

So far we've argued that there's a monopoly on violence and that this monopoly is controlled by men. The men in these stories wield their violence in horrific ways to terrorize mostly women, but in the margins of their violence are traumatized boys. George and Omar are victims of a different kind but victims nonetheless of a violence that has left them in states of melancholy and delusion. For the duration of this essay, violence has narrowly been

defined in implicit ways as actions that cause physical and/or psychological harm. However, this definition draws out a crucial contradiction, especially in connection to “All the Names They Used for God.” After years of torment, Promise and Abike justifiably channel manipulative, supernatural violence to punish men for the ill they put into the world. Not spared from this violence either, is George. Considering this, we can nuance our argument to include this exception, that men’s monopoly on violence is penetrable when confronted with extreme retribution; sometimes at the cost of the victims like George who have been relegated to subordinate status on the ‘trauma hierarchy.’

Sachdeva and Djebbar bring attention to the issue of gender-based violence committed against marginalized people. This discussion in no way tries to diminish the historical and contemporary sensitivity of this subject. George and Omar presented a curious case on how boys can react to dehumanizing violence, how so completely they can be transformed. Investigation into their stories offers readers an understanding of what happens in the ‘margin’s margin,’ beyond the shadows of violence, in the throes of unimaginable tragedy.