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Faculté des Lettres et des Langues

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**Université Blida 2-Lounici Ali- El-Affroun .Blida. Algérie**

**Téléphone: 020-58-01-35 .Fax: 025-25-01-05.**

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# Re-Evaluating the Negative Critical Reception of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Two Thousand Seasons*

Dr. Mohamed CHAABANE ALI

University of Blida2

## الملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال إلى إعادة النظر في النقاط السلبية التي أثارها مجموعة من النقاد وعلى رأسهم " تشينوا أتشيببي" (Chinua Achebe) و"درك رايت" (Derek Wright) و"برنث ليندفورس" (Bernth Lindfors) من خلال مناقشتهم لروايتي المؤلف الغاني " أيي كواي آرما" (Ayi Kwei Armah) الموسومتان بـ "الجميلون لم يولدوا بعد" و"ألفا موسم". إن اعتماد الكاتب على النبرة التشاؤمية في الرواية الأولى و الخطاب العنصري ضد المستعمر أثار حفيظة هؤلاء النقاد حيث رءوا في ذلك ابتعادا عن محاكاة الواقع غير أنه لكل أديب أسلوبه الخاص دون أن ننسى أن هدف آرما الأساسي من خلال مبالغته في سرد الحقائق هو جعل القارئ ينبذ المادية و يتوق إلى مجتمع راق أخلاقيا. وقد تميز مشوار آرما الأدبي باستفادته من آراء النقاد لمؤلفاته وهذا من خلال تفاعله للنقائص التي أشاروا عليها حين تأليف رواية جديدة فمثلا اعتمد بشدة على التقاليد الشفوية الإفريقية في كتاباته الأخيرة على عكس روايته الأولى التي انتقد فيها بتبنيه أسلوب دخيل طغت فيه صور الدرن و الألفاظ السوقية. إن آراء النقاد حول روايات آرما لا تنقص من قيمتها الفنية بقدر ما تنسب إلى جرأة الروائي على معالجته للواقع و الأحداث التاريخية بطريقة تهكمية، وتجدر الإشارة وفي الأخير إلى أنه ليس من الضروري على الكاتب إرضاء كل نقاده فلكل كاتب أسلوبه الخاص به وقناعته الإيديولوجية.

## الكلمات المفتاحية:

النقد الأدبي الإفريقي، الرواية، التعابير الشفوية، المنهج التشاؤمي، أسلوب التهكم، الأسطورة الإفريقية، اللاعنصرية العنصرية، النقد النسوي.

## Abstract:

This paper is chiefly intended to re-assess the seemingly negative reception of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Two Thousand Seasons* (1972). Very often, the former is taken to task for its pessimistic tone and scatological imagery, whereas the latter is perceived to evince a xenophobic discourse against the colonialists. That viewed, it is apposite to examine the reasons for these unflattering comments and the consequences of these critical remarks on Armah's career development. Our central argument is that Armah's

tendency to innovate in both style and themes lies mainly behind the negative reception of some of his works. Yet his literary innovations are rewarding in a number of ways.

Basically, the deployment of the grotesque tropes in Armah's debut novels allowed him to found the satirical tradition as a mode of social criticism in African literature. Moreover, his clarion call for the return to the pre-colonial egalitarian values in his so-called historical we-narrative establishes a strong connection between his people's mythical past and the concretion of a future utopia characterised chiefly by the elimination of all neo-colonial forms of racial and social hierarchies. Indeed, Armah is not as much concerned with the mimetic representation of reality as with the effects his novels may exert on the African readers whom he believes to be the true agents of social change.

Finally, any reevaluation of the negative critical reception of Armah's novels in question cannot be complete unless due provision is made for its beneficial impact on the writer's *imaginaire*. Incontestably, the more intense the criticism of his novels are, the more refined his subsequent works will be. This is clearly illustrated by Armah's frequent recourse to African myth and orality in his later novels given the fact that his first one has been reproached of being foreign in style. All in all, what matters most is not why Armah's novels have not been positively received by some critics, but how their comments have served the writer in using richer imagery, on the one hand, and widening his thematic concerns, on the other.

**Key Words:**

African literary criticism, the novel genre, orature, grotesque imagery, despair, mythopoeisis, xenophobia, the essentialist discourse, Feminist criticism, commitment.

A general study of the creative production of the leading Anglophone African writers reveals that the earlier novels of Ayi Kwei Armah, if compared to those of Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Wole Soyinka, have not been positively received by such critics as Chinua Achebe, Charles Nnolim, and Bernth Lindfors. This prompts us to identify the major reasons that led these critics to lay emphasis on the "flaws" of Armah's mode of writing in some of his works. However, it

must be stated that Armah's very novels that have received the most intense criticism are also praiseworthy because of their subversive rhetoric against the ills of today's Africa. If anything, this indicates that what is embarrassing for one critic may be viewed in a positive light by another. Still, the questions pertaining to the way Armah has been approached by his critics have not been adequately discussed so far in the scholarly research on African fiction.

This being so, the aim of this article, as its title clearly suggests, is to re-evaluate the seemingly negative critical reception of Ayi Kwei Armah's novels in general and his *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Born* and *Two Thousand Seasons* more specifically. But it is important here to stress that, though unflattering some critics' comment have been on Armah's novel, this does not constitute a good reason to undermine his creative genius as one of the leading novelists from West Africa. Basically, the African writer can display a great talent in his works without being able to meet all the criteria established by different critics. Given the apparently less positive reception of Armah's aforementioned novels, a number of questions need to be raised. Chief among these are the following: what are the major deficiencies that critics have noted in their study of Armah's novels in question? Why is it necessary to revisit this seemingly negative reception of Armah's works? Did Armah himself benefit from his critics' remarks? If so, how?

More importantly, this paper rests upon the assumption that it is very common for the African writer to have some detractors. In the case of Armah, critics have found faults with his ideological stand as well as his style. For instance, his recent view of the relevance of the ancient Egyptian paradigms for the contemporary situation of African has caused much disagreement among postcolonial scholars who tend to be divided between those who laud him for his mythopoetic thrust and those who express doubt about the applicability of his ideas in the real world. Too, as will be analysed later, Armah's mode of writing, especially in his first novel, is not without problems, as observed by his fellow writers like Chinua Achebe and Ama Ata Aidoo. But given space restrictions, our choice here falls on his two novels that have received the most intense criticism, namely, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Two Thousand Seasons*. It must be further noted that each of these two works has been criticised in its own way because each is marked by its own style and each articulates a different

authorial vision of society. Whereas the former has been shown to be predominated by a pessimistic tone on the one hand and by olfactory images on the other, the latter is usually indicted for its xenophobic discourse. Despite his recourse to different literary forms such as satire and orality, Armah's goal remains almost the same. That is, his commitment to social change has not been affected by the variation in his approach to novelistic composition.

While Armah's deployment of African myths has won him many admirers because it represents a laudable move towards epistemic decolonisation, the use of the grotesque forms, especially in his first novel has aroused a negative reaction. Suffice it to say that this novel was described by Chinua Achebe as a "sick book" whose writer "is in grave danger of squandering his enormous talents and energy in pursuit of *human condition*."<sup>1</sup> Armah is further seen to have exposed degraded secrets of the continent to outsiders. Perhaps Achebe's major accusation against Armah is that, because of the centrality of the excremental metaphor in this novel, he is not "sufficiently local or African." Similarly, Charles Larson, a Western critic in his *The Emergence of African Fiction* contends that this novel was foreign-inspired or foreign-influenced.<sup>2</sup> Charles Larson's comment on *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* provides a good example for our belief that many Western critics are eager to show that African literature bears testimony to the influence of Western works, whereas the African critics take great pains to reveal that the black-authored narratives are epistemologically rooted in the autochthonous tradition of their continent.

The controversy over the tools that are useful for the study of the African texts calls to our mind the *bolekaja* critics' main argument that just as African literature must be regarded as autonomous, so should its criticism.<sup>3</sup> In effect, there are two main approaches to African literary criticism. The first one considers the inevitability of the influence of Western or universal literature on African fiction. Conversely, the second one stresses the uniqueness of African literature. The difference between the implementation of the European tools in African criticism and the adoption of an Afrocentric stand is better explained in the quote below:

*While some [critics]-Izevbaye (1969), Palmer (1981), and Oyegoke (2003) for instance- advance the argument that any conscious attempt to break African literature away from the theoretical postulates of*

*Western criticisms will amount to a suicidal dismemberment from the unified body of literary activities, others like Ngara, Iyasere, Nnolim, Achebe et cetera strongly defend the need to discourage the pseudo universalist's critical approximations of African literature by damaging encrustations of the imperialists.*<sup>4</sup>

Even though the enormous efforts made by both writers and critics in order to decolonise African literature by indigenising it have not been highly successful, the displacement of the (neo-)colonial discourse will be more cogent once the European aesthetic techniques, literary tools and languages are abandoned. Simply put, Eurocentrism is best dismantled by the development of an aesthetics alternative to the Western literary canon. Lest we forget, since the impact of literature European on the African writers is undeniable, their novels are most often, if not always, hybrid as they tend to be a combination between two literary traditions. Regarding Armah's novels, it can be presumed that his preoccupation is chiefly thematic. But this is not to say that the formal study of his works offer no clear insights into his ideological pronouncements. His pet themes, namely, alienation and social regeneration are expressed in scatological language and mythical tropes respectively.

*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Born* is often reproached when applying the African critical standards in its discussion. This novel, in other words, does not seem to be "indigenous enough." Nevertheless, this begs the question of whether the African-authored novel has to be replete with oral features. No less significantly, as will be discussed later, it is very hard to concur with the view that Armah's first novel is devoid of any indigenous elements. Also, the setting in this novel is a post-independence Ghanaian city, unlike Achebe's archetypal work *Things Fall Apart* which is set in a pre-colonial Ibo village. Arguably, too, the absence of the so-called Achebeist approach to novel writing (i.e. integrating oral cultural forms in written literature) in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* ought not to be regarded as an aesthetic deficiency. Noticeably, Simon Simonsen attributes Armah's minimal recourse to the indigenous culture in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* to the fact that "it is the African tradition that has become external to the world he describes."<sup>5</sup> Even more so, one has to firmly contend that

the inclusion of the autochthonous elements is just one criterion according to which the African work of art is to be critically assessed.

On the other hand, *Two Thousand Seasons* is usually criticised from the Western ideological perspectives and discursive paradigms. Undoubtedly, the harshest critical remarks on this novel are summarised in the following quoted passage:

*The narrative has been criticized for embracing mythologies of ‘race’ consciousness, for depicting implausible historical characters, for dabbling into heavy-handed ideological enthusiasm, and for abandoning proper and mimetic realities.*<sup>6</sup>

Apart from being rooted in African mythology, this novel essentialises the white race as the embodiment of greed and lust, hence moving away from the realistic portrayal of history. Nonetheless, this text discredits the view, held mistakenly by some critics, that Armah is mainly inspired by foreign sources. But Armah’s aim behind the publication of this text is certainly far more important than proving to his critics that he is capable of oralising the novel genre. Indeed, Armah seems to accord greater priority to ideological over aesthetic questions, even if both are central to the formulation of the postcolonial discourse of liberation and endogenous development. What is indeed surprising is that, due to the “excessive” appropriation of the Western literary aspects such as existentialist imagery, Armah was described as “an alienated writer” in his *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and yet his *Two Thousand Seasons* has been called the first true African novel because it marks a clear departure from the individual sensibility of the Western canonical novel form by its celebration of communalism which is inherent in the African cultural tradition. In this vein, Derek Wright’s book, entitled *Ayi Kwei Armah’s Africa: The Sources of his Fiction* offers a new perspective of reading Armah’s fictional production since it “endeavours, by tying Armah’s writing back to very specific African roots, to dispel some Western critical myths about its dependence on Western literary models, and to relieve Ayi Kwei Armah of an ill-fitting ‘expatriate’ tag bestowed upon him by criticism of his early novels.”<sup>7</sup> The use of the foreign literary forms can at once be viewed negative or in a positive light. Just as it is indicative of the writer’s preference of the foreign tools of expression over indigenous forms, it also means that those

foreign tools are universal because of their applicability to express African ideologies.

Additionally, Derek Wright points out that many critics miss the point when they state that the oral tradition had no influence on the Armah's first novelistic experiment. He puts forward that "*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is rescued from the cartoonlike banality of its political themes, the bareness of its plot, and the suspicious simplicity of its cyclical view of history by the performance of language and its dazzlingly inventive, fantastic hyperbole, clearly influenced by the African oral tradition."<sup>8</sup> Derek Wright is implying that, were it for its sophisticated imagery, the novel would be faulted on the ground of its excremental imagery in its presentation of the banality of power in the postcolony. Yet one cannot dismiss that the impact of the Akan culture on this novel is not as strong as it is on his mid-career novels of historical reconstruction, notably, *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*. The use of black aesthetics in the postcolonial African novels is very often, if not always, lauded for it reinforces the quest for decolonisation.

In addition, the one of main thematic differences between *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Two Thousand Seasons* is that the former is a kind of cul-de-sac for the hopeless neocolonial subjects and in the latter the author articulates a very optimistic view of his continent's future through retreating into the deep recesses of history. This thematic variation is clearly reflected in the novel's style. That is to say, the more the work is about Africa's millennial past, the greater the importance the oral tradition takes on in it. Besides, the existential ennui of the modern African subjects can hardly be expressed by the pre-colonial cultural forms. By contrast, the celebration of the African people's age-old civilizational achievements is best made in an incantatory style drawn from the cultural treasures of their past. After all, different literary tools are required in addressing the individual's psychological state of alienation on the one hand, or in treating collectivist philosophy on the other. Remarkably, the narrator of *Two Thousand Seasons* is a griot or an oral bard who possesses "vocation of those who used to be the soulguide of our people, the rememberers of the way" (*Two Thousand Seasons*, p. 88). The writer's mission of serving as a custodian of his people's cultural values and social mores is therefore accomplished by the so-called

ideological oralisation of his works. To put it more clearly, the use of the griot enables *Two Thousand Seasons* to be more than the product of an individual consciousness as this narrator mediates the communal consciousness and impulses arising from group sensibility.

Moreover, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is accused by the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo of not being an accurate portrayal of her country as the latter is presented as an existentialist canvas. However, what matters most is the symbolic nature of this work rather than what it actually represents, as remarked by Emmanuel Samba Zumakpeh when wrote that “Armah seeks, through symbolic, to reveal the deep significance of Ghana’s corruption and social disintegration.”<sup>9</sup> Depicting Ghana as a giant stinking lavatory constitutes in itself a satirical technique of social criticism and political disillusionment. Secondly, this work has also been hailed as a moral fable in which the faithful representation of reality is overshadowed by the didactic messages the author is eager to convey. As will be discussed subsequently, Armah is much concerned with the effect this novel may have on the reader than with giving a pleasant picture of his country.

As mentioned previously, the fundamental problem of Ayi Kwei Armah is that some of his fiction has been misread by both African and Western critics. For instance, given his publication of the bleakest novel about the post-independence condition of anomy, he was described by James Booth as the “figure of negativity in African literature.”<sup>10</sup> His pejorist style is not solely an expression of hopelessness. Notice that in his first novel there are images of rot associated with rebirth. The clearest example without doubt is the following: “Yet out of the decay and dung there is always a new flowering” (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, p. 85). True, his first three novels have been labelled his trilogy of despair, but this does not suggest that these works convey no hope of a possible social salvation. Furthermore, a close reading of his recent fiction unequivocally reveals that he does not solely produce dystopian works about his continent.

Ironically, then, Armah has been accused of being very pessimistic in his earlier works, whereas he seems to be too idealistic in his later novels. In other words, he appears not to have taken a middle-of-the-road position vis-à-vis the portrayal of the actual condition or the visualisation of a renescent society. Perhaps

he is so hurt by the appalling living conditions of the underprivileged people and this leads to seek any solution, however mythical, to the current problems.

More generally, many postcolonial critics distinguish between different types of realism within the African literary landscape. While Chinua Achebe is believed to be “the exponent of the realist novel”, Ayi Kwei Armah, Wole Soyinka, among others, are duly considered “mythopoeic writers.”<sup>11</sup> Armah does not only deviate from Achebe’s school of realism by resorting to myth but also through the use of grotesque. In other words, in Armah’s view, fiction should not truthfully represent facts, and this point is made very clear by Derek Wright when he asserts that Armah’s debut novel “does not behave like a piece of objective realism.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, firstly, postcolonial literature is too rich to be reduced to a single aesthetic trend. Secondly, Armah need not follow in the footsteps of “the father of the African novel in English.” Whether we like it or not, each writer has his or her own style. Thirdly, it could be safely contended that Armah’s realism is indeed more complex than Achebe’s. Basically, Armah’s novels are not easy to read, and hence he should have been lauded rather than merely criticised for his appropriation of modernism in the composition of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* for it is reminiscent of the Western modernist tradition that used to lament the loss of the spiritual values in the modern Western society. Armah, then, was partly inspired by a number of Western writers (for example, Scott Fitzgerald in his well-known *The Great Gatsby*) who articulated their disenchantment with a world predominated by crass materialism in particular and false values in general. Also, Armah managed to borrow an excerpt from Gibran Khalil Gibran and utilises it as a bitter comment on the erosion of the primal values in Nkrumah’s Ghana. Indeed, the following intertextual quotation is a symbolic indication of how the new leaders’ basic concern is satisfying their biological needs such as eating and drinking to the detriment of the aspiration of the “wretched of the earth.”

*Would that you could live on the fragrance of the earth,  
And like an air plant be sustained by the light.  
But since you must kill to eat,  
And rob the newly born of its mother’s milk to quench  
Your thirst,*

*Let it then be an act of worship... (The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, p. 47)*

Armah's novel is without doubt an efficient means of fathoming the psycho-existential crisis arising from the African individuals' pursuit of fake modernity. As a matter of fact, one has to deplore the dearth of research where a comparison is made between Armah's mode of writing in his first novel and the modernist movement in the Western literary canon.

It might well be argued that since Armah's first novel was not greatly appreciated by African and Western critics, this has affected, however minimally, the way his subsequent works are received. Yet it is obvious that these later works are different in theme and style from his debut novel. Thus, we are tempted to say that Armah has responded to the negative reception of his first novelistic experiment by producing "better" works. Stated differently, Armah might have benefited a great deal from the seemingly negative reception of his creative production as the sordid images do not abound in his subsequent novels. In general, Eustace Palmer underlines the role of criticism in the development of African literature. He indeed points out that "literature can only flourish in an atmosphere where writers are exposed to intelligent objective criticism of their work."<sup>13</sup> Besides, our further argument is that Armah's diverse responses of his works, if anything, are clearly revelatory of their enormous complexity and ideological profundity.

Usually perceived as the most powerful work composed on moral decay in post-independence Ghana, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is peculiar in style and language. Whereas this peculiarity has won the plaudits of some critics, it has been frowned up by such writers as Chinua Achebe and Ama Ata Aidoo. Undoubtedly, the main reason for the seemingly negative reception of his works is his iconoclasm. That is, Armah is often noted to write in a manner that is different from other Anglophone African authors, and this accounts partly for a number of unflattering critical commentaries on some of his novels. Interestingly, Tesse Akaeke Onwueme observes that "Armah pays the necessary price for daring to be different, and not conforming to norms of literary establishment among the African literati."<sup>14</sup>

But we need to stress that the writer has to be commended for his stylistic innovations, though it is undeniable that he is inevitably influenced by others. Interestingly, Armah's novels bear no clear resemblance to other works as, say, Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* which reveals striking parallels at the level of themes, characterisation and plot to Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*. But this does not deny the attempt made by Robert Fraser to find affinities between Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* and the Francophone literary tradition, including such texts as André Schwartz-Bart's *Le Dernier des justes* and Yambo Ouologuem's tour de force *Le Devoir de violence*.<sup>15</sup> The originality of Armah's works, thus, has never been called into question. For this reason, the theory of intertextuality has been applied much in the study of Armah's works. Indeed, Armah is often rebuked in his first novel for the use of "the alien" forms of grotesque imagery and decadence aesthetics. Notwithstanding, the postcolonial writer does nothing wrong in his appropriation of the Western literary techniques and discursive devices. The raging debate between appropriation (which involves both adopting the European literary forms and adapting them to the African cultural context) and abrogation (which means the total repudiation of these forms) in the burgeoning postcolonial literature has not yet fully resolved. This point was famously emphasised by Bill Ashcroft et.al in their seminal book *The Empire Writes Back*,<sup>16</sup> and given space restrictions we cannot dwell on the issue any further.

True, no work of art is free from some deficiencies. However, it is not the main duty of the critic to spot the weaknesses of those fictional works. Sometimes, the comments made by the critics are not based on solid grounds. For instance, the criticism of Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* has gone as far as to the point of even contesting the view of being a novel, as the following quote reveals:

*Two Thousand Seasons does not purport to be a novel in any sense of the word, and the novel's psychological complexities and traditional fair-minded openness to the variety of human experience are not to be found here. Its polarized racial polemic, preferring partisan invective to critical investigation, simply showering abuse on Arab "predators", European "destroyers", and their African collaborators and agents.*<sup>17</sup>

This indicates that apart from its ideological messages, the form of *Two Thousand Seasons* has been embarrassing for some critics. This work indeed offers an offensive depiction of the Arabs and the Europeans, and hence the stark contrast between black essence and white putrescence, in turn, seems to be more eye-catching for the readers than anything else. Perhaps the most racist assault in this work is found in the following statement: “there is nothing the white man will do to satisfy their greed [...] monstrous is the greed of the white destroyers, infinite is there avarice” (*Two Thousand Seasons*, p. 34). But it is very hard to subscribe to the view that *Two Thousand Seasons* is not a novel simply because it is overwhelmed by satirical techniques that are used against the mental enslavers of the blacks. Moreover, the novel in contemporary literary criticism is considering as a “mongrel” or flexible genre as its boundaries with other forms has become so blurred. Thus, some of the negative remarks upon Armah’s novels have to be completely rejected.

What is interesting about Armah is each of his novels has its own distinctive character. Whereas *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born* is an exposé of Africa’s currently pathological status quo, *Two Thousand Seasons* probes mainly the root cause of the present disintegration of its communities. The search for authentic values and true selfhood as undertaken by a single individual only known as the man in Armah’s first novel soon turns out to be a communal concern in *Two Thousand Seasons* where a group of initiates led by Isanusi set out to reconstruct their people’s identity. This group has the potential of throwing off the yoke of foreign oppression and restore the community to its health and prosperity. Despite being regarded as a cynical novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* can be said to offer a little hope of regeneration. This may represent a move away from the mainstream Western modernist tradition which is often characterised by a dim view of life. Importantly, the very fact that the man is able to uphold his honesty and moral integrity in a corrupt world should not be left unnoticed. He indeed refuses to be fetishist and materialist as his loved ones (his wife and mother-in-law) have sadly become. This indicates that the perverted, depersonalised and existential living is not all that post-independence Ghana is about. After all, the end of the story suggests that the chase after the gleam, which is a metaphor for

opulence, is in reality a futile existential quest for an illusory goal. Earlier, the questers for money are compared to moths that are attracted to light which is not only phoney but destructive as well. Furthermore, the image of Plato's cave can be used to satirically comment on the corrupt individuals who favour the things of flesh over spiritual values. As far as this point is concerned, Wright asserts that "those who pursue 'the gleam' of materialism are, like Plato's cave dwellers, people who for ages had seen nothing outside the darkness of their own shadowy forms and had no way of believing that there could be anything else [i.e. light]." <sup>18</sup> Indeed, Armah would say that the African people have internalised the principle of the white people in their egocentrism.

In general, the corrupt bourgeoisie typified by the character of Koomson is made by the novelist the object of ridicule and derision. Thus, besides employing the grotesque language for the sake of describing the degraded environment, it is a means of caricaturing the ruling class. Indeed, the cartoonist depiction of Koomson reaches its peak when he is made to escape from the man's latrine following the military coup. However, the major problem of the grotesque aesthetics is that, as Achebe famously noted, is not inherent in the African people's indigenous culture. But this does not deny the valuable attempts made by such critics as Patrick Williams and Simon Gikandi in order to prove that the African satirical tradition was partly rooted in the oral tradition since the ritual practice of lampooning the kings had already existed in some of the pre-colonial African communities. <sup>19</sup> Ngugi is indeed reputed for the use of the indigenous elements in a bid to satirise the neo-colonial tyrants as his *Devil on the Cross* and *Wizard of the Crow* clearly show. If nothing else, the tyrants in these two novels are likened to the ogres of the folk tales. Thus, it would be unfair to say that Armah borrowed the grotesque aesthetics in his *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Two Thousand Seasons* from just the white literary tradition.

This "excremental" novel has also been studied with respect to the role of the intellectual class represented by a character known only as the teacher in the process of building the post-colonial nation-state. This character, who functions as the philosophical voice in the novel, and regardless of his reclusion, is expected to articulate the potential for revolutionary change. But his permanent self-exile can hardly be conducive to terminating the state of social degeneration which is

highlighted by the decrepitude of the bus and the sadistic behaviour of its conductor at the opening chapter of the novel. Instead of providing solace to the story's hero who is always reproached by his loved ones for resembling the chichidodo bird in its inability to do away with dirt as it lives on maggots, the teacher, because of being overwhelmed by cynicism and despair, seems to worsen the man's predicament. Indeed, the basic problem of the Teacher is his impotent withdrawal into cynical passivity which leads to no positive resolution to his dilemmas. Since his "nationalism of mourning" is hardly energising for the subaltern populace, Armah creates intellectuals in his subsequent works who strive—though in a non-violent way— to undo the harmful effects of both colonisation and neocolonisation, and Armah's Damfo in *The Healers* is a case in point.

However, the intellectual characters' lack of involvement in social change is not only a defining feature of Armah's debut novel but it can be traced in Ngugi's early prose fiction as well. In this respect, Richard Peck argues that

*The early works of both Ngugi and Armah suggest considerable self-conflict, taking the form of a combination of self-doubt and self-glorification. This is expressed through exceptional but conflicted protagonists. Usually recognizable representatives of African intellectuals and artists; they are torn about their proper role in society, about the validity of their visions, and about their inability to convey those visions to the community. In Ngugi's works these characters are most often a combination of Hermit and failed Saviour.<sup>20</sup>*

Thus, it has to be stressed that utopianism was not a predominant characteristic of the early phase of modern African literature in general as the euphoria of independence in many, if not all, black countries had given way to popular frustration and mass disillusionment. Also, it must be contended that since that period marked the true beginning of African literature, the writers' visions of their nations were yet to be mature. This being so, Armah should not be taken to task because his first novel is not "utopian enough".

Basically, the blasted landscape that marks this novel is not solely suggestive of a dystopian rhetoric. Quite recently, much has so far been said about the

author's quest for an ideal society in this grotesque narrative. The scatological imagery does not only symbolise moral degeneracy for it may signal a possibility of social regeneration. Apart from the general view that grotesque satire is intended to be corrective to the social ills, Nadia Naar avers that the shocking images with which the Ghanaian context is portrayed have nothing to do with pessimism and existentialism and adds that

*as any dissident author committed to a change for the better for his society, he [Armah] wants his readers to be shocked, intellectually stimulated, and motivated to take action against an unjust and corrupt society, to awaken them to social responsibility. In other terms, the author's purpose is mainly to sharpen his readers' critical ability and shake them out of their complacency.<sup>21</sup>*

If anything, the sordid images of filth are useful in de-naturalising the status quo that is seen in bright colours by the proponents of the official discourse of the state. The more emphasis is laid upon abnormality, the more urgent is the need for social reform. That viewed, the grotesque tropes constitute a perfect postcolonial strategy of subverting the interpellative narratives of the government.

Fundamentally, the failure of Nkrumah's movement to interpellate all the Ghanaian citizens is clearly shown in the reaction of some characters, including chiefly the man and the teacher. In spite of the absence of any redemptive praxis in the whole narrative, at least their vision are guided by the traditional African worldview that is better explained in Armah's subsequent novels, most notably, *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*. More importantly, their consciousness has not been reified by the capitalist economic and social relations. Whereas the teacher opts for leading a hermetic life, the man resists the corrupt social system from within. For instance, Unlike his ex-classmate, the man totally rejects of the fraudulent practices which have become indispensable for climbing the social ladder. Yet his decision to take part in Koomson's escape at the end of the novel signals a major revision of his earlier stand of detachment. Rather than remaining a passive voyeur of the changing political events, he enables Koomson to flee by bribing the watchman of the port. However, this act appears to be inconsistent with his moral stance of condemning corruption as an irrational practice. In fact,

the man does so in order to prevent the ex-minister to be tried by the new leaders who are likely to be as corrupt as (or perhaps more corrupt than) their predecessors. Nevertheless, one should not completely rule out the possibility of interpreting the man's act of giving money to the watchman in order to save his friend as promoting corruption and evil. Irrespective of the controversy over meaning of the man's bribery, we need to conclude that the man does not practise corruption here for a purely selfish reason.

Whilst arguably deploying grotesque imagery in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Born* as a technique of denouncing the social maladies in today's African world, Armah in his post-trilogy of despair novels obviously resorts to the ancient mythical paradigms which he postulates as curative to the pathological status quo. Yet the use of myth can be indicted as another deviation from realism. More remarkably, Armah's thesis in this narrative that the pre-colonial society was kingless is rather suspicious. It has been contended by Kwame Ayivor that Armah's fictional representation of the communal life in Africa before the colonial enterprise as democratic and egalitarian is fiercely repudiated by such critics as Bernth Lindfors and Derek Wright who see it as "the most distorted aspect of [sic] Armah's deconstructed history of pre-colonial Africa."<sup>22</sup> In other words, the falsified image of African history as projected in the colonial discourse should not necessarily be displaced by the idealisation of the African people's past. Indeed, any reader of Chinua Achebe's archetypal novel *Things Fall Apart* will certainly conclude that this past is not denuded of imperfections. Armah, on the other hand, opts for myth rather than mere history in order to destabilise the discourse of power of both the coloniser and the neocoloniser. As interestingly argued by Bernth Lindfors, Armah's historical novels, namely *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers* are more "visionary myths rather than historical chronicles."<sup>23</sup> After all, the distinction between what is mythical and what is historical in postcolonial writings is not easy to make.

More significantly, one of the primordial functions of myth in historical re-telling is to anchor identity and provide hermeneutic clues to liberation. Yet it has to be asserted that myth and history are not to be understood in antagonistic terms. We mean by myth here the local epistemology of the Akan people before the conquest of their land by the white race. In this sense, it is synonymous with

ideology. Myth, in other words, is important in the modern society for the moral values it communicates, to say nothing about its centrality in the formation of African selfhood. Our further contention is that Armah is not interested in history per se; rather, he is more motivated by the use of the past to heal the pathetic situation of the present. That is to say, what matters most for him is having a positive view of the pre-holocaust times. After all, a distinction is to be drawn between recording historical facts and transforming the historical material into a work of fiction. In this regard, Kofi Anyidoho puts forward that “in transforming historical experience into fictional discourse, Armah both subverts and recreates history.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the glorification of African history is made more explicit by comparing the blacks to the elect people in the religious pamphlets of the early Puritans in America.

More particularly, *Two Thousand Seasons*, apart from being somehow unconventional in style, posits the existence of “the way”, which can be loosely defined as the mythical essence of the Akan community. The text, then, injects aspects of Akan mythic and cosmogonic materials into its historical reconstruction. Consequently, this text can be taken to task for showing how reality should have been rather than how it actually was. Too, whilst lauding Armah’s attempt at epistemic decolonisation through the postulation of a communal ethos antagonistic to the predatory practices of the white folk during their invasion of the African lands, Wole Soyinka is embarrassed by its vagueness as he states that the way “remains a hazy and undefined ideology.”<sup>25</sup> Despite this, the use of myth and legend remains a viable tactic of nullifying the Western views that had for so long equated pre-colonial African with barbarism and savagery. What was regarded as superstition from the Western point of view is underlined by Armah as either a belief or social practice that was behind the epic grandeur of Africa’s past.

Armah’s mythopoetic thrust in his so-called novels of historical reconstruction does by no means suggest that being truthful to historical facts is not greatly effective in evincing his idealistic vision of a better future. However, Isidore kpewho argues strongly that the use of mythology is more conducive to the development of the utopian hermeneutics than being merely satisfied with the historical content. He states that “[t]he visionary quality of Armah’s [*Two Thousand Seasons*] is also reinforced by the fact that his concept of “the way” is

unlocated in any specific time or place.”<sup>26</sup> Armah, as observed by many critics, tends to create a mythology which is in accordance of the needs of his society. He, in other words, reshapes the past to reverse the continent’s drift towards self-destruction. This argument is reminiscent of Logankaga Losembe’s apt observation that in Armah’s novels “the effects and lessons are more important than truth and realism.”<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, Armah does not only use myth in *Two Thousand Seasons* to offer solutions to the current problems in his continent but also for the sake of promoting an apparently racist outlook in which the whites are regarded to epitomise moral depravity, cupidity and, even worse putrescence, as opposed to the social ideals that, for him, had promoted the black essence. And this smacks of xenophobic discourse on the ground of which this novel has been mostly criticised. Apparently, the author uses the symbols of the springwater and desert, as the novel’s prologue clearly indicates, to differentiate between the healthy ideology of the black people and the destructive deeds of the whites. It is for the first time that an African writer falls back on the grotesque imagology in order to reify the tormentors of the natives as bestial beings. Yet, the novel’s racial essentialism has been its least salutary aspect. Surely, one of the negative implications of the xenophobic ideas in *Two Thousand Seasons* is that the outsiders are blamed for the contemporary problems of the African continent. The negative reception of Armah’s works in question vacillates between mimicking Western literature and mocking the white people.

Here again, the writer’s politics of satire aims to underscore the fake values rationalising social hierarchy and oppression, and in so doing presenting the foreigners as a malicious race wreaking havoc to the pristine African society. More specifically, the aesthetics of decadence is used to highlight the debased acquisitive spirit of the invaders and the selfishness of their acolytes. Because of their unquenchable thirst for plunder and unnatural proclivity for contaminating the life around them, the white intruders and their black collaborators are starkly contrasted with the enlightened group of Africans who set out to liberate their community from oppression and exploitation. We shall see later that this Manichean attitude has come under fire by a number of critics.

To begin with, Armah divides his characters into two main categories: those who stand for the traditional tenets of selflessness and reciprocity and those who embody the evil forces of corruption and destruction. Isanusi is a clear illustration of the first category, whereas King Koranche exemplifies the villainous ruling elite. This indicates that the black people are vilified insofar as they serve the interests of the white marauders. The following passage gives ample evidence that the black collaborators are as caricatured as their white masters: “Have you not seen the fat ones, the hollow ones, now placed above us? These the destroyers have already voided of their spirits [...] Barren, unproductive pillars have been driven into their brains. Then, left to walk the land, they do their zombie work, holding up the edifice of death from falling in vengeance on their killers’ head” (*Two Thousand Seasons*, p. 7). After all, Armah, unlike Chinua Achebe, is famous for his fictional credo of dividing the people into angelic and demonic individuals. The characters in this novel are contendedly are types representing principles. As far as this point is concerned, Eustace Palmer argues that *Two Thousand Seasons* “seems to be sadly deficient in characterization.”<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Armah deploys the grotesque to present the archetypes of evil and makes use of myth and legend to describe the archetypes of goodness. Basically most of heroes in Armah’s later prose fiction, such as Isanusi, Densu and Damfo, appear to be endowed with some exceptional qualities that make them hardly representatives of the ordinary people. Generally, the grotesque functions as an aesthetic means of disfiguring the Arabs and the Europeans, whereas Akan cosmology serves as a way of glorifying the civilizational achievements of the black population.

In some sense, the more Western epistemology is vilified, the stronger the feeling of the African people will be for mental independence. Whilst drawing upon African history, the writer uses myth as the foundation of the formal structure of the novel as well as its main communicative strategy. However, this should not be viewed as an aesthetic flaw for a distinction is to be made between reality and its fictional representation. Pierre Machery argues in his *A Theory of Literary Production* that literature is a self-contradictory product in that it simultaneously reflects and fails to reflect the historical condition it purport to depict.<sup>29</sup> Thus, it is curious to see why the author has tended recently to transcend

the historical time through an escape to the realm of myth. For instance, the principal reason for which the Anoons are presented to have lived in a transcendental place in *Two Thousand Seasons* is to prompt the oppressed subjects to work towards the creation of a transcendent condition in the future.

But, as argued above, critics of Armah are once again divided on whether the xenophobic ideas in *Two Thousand Seasons* is justified or not. Whereas Bernth Lindfors is at loss to find a rational explanation to the anti-white sentiments of the writer in this work, Wole Soyinka does not appear to be annoyed by the violent language against the colonial marauders. Viewing this book as being predominated by a monotonous racial chauvinism, Lindfors says that “here xenophobia is carried to its ultimate extreme [since] Armah goes beyond ‘anti-racist racism’ to a racially selective misanthropy,” and further claims that it is “the white abomination: violence in its pure state, hatred mixed.”<sup>30</sup> Ironically, emphasising the evil deeds of the coloniser while valorising the culture of the coloniser is in many ways reminiscent of the principal tenets of the Negritude movement which Armah himself had famously castigated as “sloganeering gimmick.” Indeed, much has been said about the Negritudist tendency of Armah especially in his later fiction. But it is not the idealisation of the past that was the bugging aspect of *Two Thousand Seasons* for some of the white critics; rather, it is obvious that the images of the uncanny that are associated with the portrayal of the colonial enterprise which incurred their wrath. Bernth Lindfors, it must stressed, recommends the young Africans to read *The Healers* because, to him, does not nurture racial hostility as its predecessor supposedly does.

On the other hand, Wole Soyinka argued in favour of the vehemence of Armah’s portrayal of the colonialists in that it provided a counterbalance to the centuries of vehement racist discourse on Africa. He would ask the following question: how can the author heighten the masses’ political consciousness against their long period of physical and mental enslavement without using fierce vocabulary? In addition, the use of the grotesque allows the author to provide an antidote to enervating selfishness, greed and perversion. It is therefore a discursive strategy designed to awaken the postcolonial subjects from their jaded consciousness. However, our argument in this paper is that the politics of

demonising the other cannot be excused for any reason. Indeed, it is no wonder that *Two Thousand Seasons* has been ill-received by some Muslim and Western critics. Evidently, the so-called aesthetics of revenge is not the only means of mobilising the African masses. Not only is Armah charged with exaggeration in the deployment of excremental metaphor to provide a harsh critique of Nkrumah's regime but also the same charge of exaggeration is made given his "disfigurement" of the whites in his historical we-narrative.

Last but not least, a feminist reading of Armah's novel has also given rise to some apparently "unflattering" remarks. Needless to say, his project of a "new Africa" that he envisages in his works is not primarily female-centred or female-oriented. For example, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* can be taken to task from the feminist perspective as it does not project the image of strong female characters that usually characterise the female-authored narratives. Whilst being a scathing denunciation of the failed project of Nkrumah's government, the novel does not seek to upset the dialectics of patriarchy in the post-colonial society. Florence Stratton contends that if a writer does not dramatize the women's struggle for emancipation this means that he condones the ethos that supports the male dominated social order.<sup>31</sup> So she faults Armah for what she views as the unconvincing portrayal of the female characters in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Why Are We So Blest?* Even for her, casting the female character as Naana as the idealised custodian of tradition in his *Fragments* is yet to prove that his thought has yet to be powerfully sympathetic with the women's predicament. Nevertheless, such criticism also applies to the earlier works of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o in which they avoid questioning the hierarchal nature of gender relations in their respective societies. However, whereas subverting the patriarchal order was not the top priority in Armah's first three novels, the feminine presence has become stronger and stronger in the novels that he wrote recently.

The best example is without doubt *Two Thousand Seasons* which, besides, discrediting the imperialist ideology, seems to subvert the patriarchal paradigms which for him were imported to Black Africa by both the 'predators' and later the 'destroyers.' Formulated differently, the writer is of the view that these paradigms are part of the foreign cultural system and hence they are at loggerheads with the

pre-colonial African values of “generosity” and “reciprocity.” Basically, most of the visionaries in this novel are female characters. Chief among these are Abena, Ndola, Naita, to name but a few. But does this make Armah a feminist writer? The fundamental problem in his representation of these visionary women, as pointed out by a number of feminist critics, is their affiliation within the group is prioritised over their personal lives. Instead of delving into their private matters, these women are first and foremost presented as combatants. The strong woman in the anti-patriarchal works should not simply be regarded as a symbol for communal consciousness otherwise the issue of female emancipation will be “blatantly subsumed under the nationalist question.”<sup>32</sup> That is to say, it is often the case in the male-authored narratives that lip-service is paid to the gendered identity of the revolutionary female figures.

Nonetheless, one of Armah’s greatest merits in *Two Thousand Seasons* is that, as remarkably observed by Kwame Ayivor, “ [his] stereotyped image of women (...) is devoid of pejorative features and projects a vision which attempts to rehabilitate the secondary status imposed upon women by male-dominated Africa.”<sup>33</sup> It could further be contended that this novel veers away from individualised characterisation as much focus is being laid on the community as a whole. Most fundamental of all, the racial problem of colonialism and slavery has occupied a more novelistic space than that of gender oppression. In other words, even though the role of women in the meaningful revolutionary programme of regenerating the global African community has been largely recognised by the author in the novel, the dismantlement of the patriarchal system is sought mainly because of its complicity with the foreigners’ “road of destruction and death.” The heroic women in the story revolted primarily against their people’s tormentors and hence, for them, the African woman’s sexual objectification by the alien patriarchs is no more than a sign of her society’s completely degenerate condition. By quickening the process of recovering the lost way of reciprocity, the subversion of the patriarchal ethos is seemingly a means rather than an end in itself. But Armah should not be blamed for not bringing to the fore the gender issue because, until the beginning of the seventies, it was not the *zeitgeist* of the time in the African literary landscape.

Interestingly, too, the question of gender in Armah's novelistic production has also been raised by Abena Busia as she divides Armah's women characters into two main categories: parasites and prophetesses. She indeed argues that Armah cannot be regarded as a feminist writer even in his depiction of the African female subjects as fighters, let alone in rendering them as complicit with the hierarchal social order. In her comment upon female rebellion in *Two Thousand Seasons*, she views that despite the fact that "all liberating actions are initiated by women," they are portrayed as "unsexed."<sup>34</sup> What is perhaps surprising is that these female figures use their sexuality as a political weapon of resistance by luring the oppressors of their community such as King Faisal and later slaughtering them. But Armah's top priority in this novel is the concretion of *afrotopia* rather than *feminotopia*. Yet the criticism that the gender question is subsumed by other issues such as nation or race applies also to other male writers. Our contention in this regard is that the male writer cannot be as an ardent partisan of the women's cause as the female writer usually is. Sadly, the feminist critics tend to be harsh in their discussion of the male writers' treatment of the female question. Armah writes for all his people and not only for one section of his society.

In general terms, in spite of some negative reception of Armah's novels, critics have responded favourably to their subtle textual nuances. As mentioned earlier, of the seven novels that he has written to date, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Two Thousand Seasons* have received the most intense criticism. The former is usually described as an existentialist saga on post-independence Ghana whereas the latter is often indicted on the ground of its anti-racist racism. Also, these two works have been approached from the feminist perspective as the first does not claim to subvert the patriarchal system of the neocolonies and the second identifies today's challenge in Africa as racial rather than gendered. But this is not to undermine the value of Armah's novels because no writer can produce a work that satisfies everybody by either answering the aesthetic standards of various critics or propagating the ideological convictions of different intellectuals. Armah's major merit in these two novels is that he transforms both the grotesque language and African myths into a moralising discourse in which the African subjects are exhorted to take the necessary steps so as to rid their continent of its neo-colonial ills. In other words, Armah's main

motive behind his recourse to exaggeration in these works is to exert a maximum impact on the reader so that he will think differently and act more appropriately. In a nutshell, investigating the critical reception of Armah allows us to see whether his novels have really affected the readers in the way the author originally intended.

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- <sup>11</sup> Mark Mathuray. *On the Sacred in African Literature* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-2.
- <sup>12</sup> Derek Wright. *Ayi Kwei Armah: The Sources of his Fiction* (London: Zell Publishers, 1989), p. 24.
- <sup>13</sup> Eustace Palmer. "The Criticism of African Literature: Its Nature and Function" (*The International Fiction Review*, 1974) p. 112.
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- <sup>15</sup> Robert Fraser. "Two Thousand Seasons: Literary Ancestry and Text" Ed. Derek Wright. *Critical Perspectives on Ayi Kwei Armah* (Three Continents Press, 1992), pp. 298-314.
- <sup>16</sup> For further information cf. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).
- <sup>17</sup> Derek Wright, 1990, op. cit., p. 37.
- <sup>18</sup> Derek Wright. *Ayi Kwei Armah: The Sources of his Fiction* (London: Zell Publishers, 1989), p. 211.
- <sup>19</sup> For example, "The use of the fabulous, the grotesque, and the supernatural is part of Ngugi's deployment of popular and traditional elements of African culture." Patrick Williams. *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 113.
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- <sup>21</sup> Nadia Naar. *Modern African Literature Revisited: A Study of Literary Affinities in Selected Early Novels by Achebe, Feraoun, Kateb, Ngugi, Armah and Mimouni* (Tizi Ouzou: Mouloud Mammeri University, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, 2014), p. 275.

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# T.S. Eliot's Impersonal Theory in Charles Tomlinson's Poetry: Reading and Misreading the Master

Farid Benamzal

M'Hamed Bougara University, Boumerdes

## ملخص البحث

يتناول هذا المقال تأثير الشاعر شارلز توملينسون ب.ت.س إليوت. وانطلاقاً من نظرية التأثير الشعري لهارولد بلوم، سنسعى إلى إثبات أن شعر توملينسون هو قراءة ضالة لجمالية إيليوت. فقد أظهر توملينسون، من جهة، ميوله للنظرية الموضوعية لإيليوت على حساب الجمالية الذاتية الرومانتيكية. إلا أن مسيرته الشعرية، من جهة أخرى، تعكس سعيه الحثيث إلى تصوير الواقع وتقديمه بدلاً من أن تعبر عن التقاليد الأدبية التي دعا إليها إيليوت باعتبارها سبيلاً لتحقيق الموضوعية في الشعر.

## Abstract

This article discusses the influence of T.S. Eliot on Charles Tomlinson. Taking our bearings from Harold Bloom's theory of influence, we wish to demonstrate that Tomlinson's poetry is an act of misprision of the Eliotan aesthetics. Tomlinson is attracted to Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry against the romantic subjective aesthetics. However, Tomlinson's poetic career is a strive to offer reality rather than literary tradition urged by Eliot as a way to achieve objectivity for poetry.

## Introduction

Since the publication of "The Wasteland," T.S. Eliot has been a model for younger poets, and his poetry has become an inescapable influence on them. The poem is so popular because it embodies Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry. In fact, it brings the reader face to face with the modern artist's dilemma of how to find adequate poetic means to protect art from the romantic solipsism. This objectivity is achieved

through allusions to old literary texts, such as Greek mythology, the Bible, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Metaphysical poetry and French Symbolism. Many critics have very often discussed Eliot's impersonal theory in the works of younger poets, who use the same allusive method to discard romantic subjective aesthetics upholding excessive effusion of emotions. However, to our knowledge, no comparative study has been made so far between Eliot and Tomlinson even though each of them has received a considerable amount of critical attention. In fact, Tomlinson has been compared to Wallace Stevens and William Carols Williams, Eliot's contemporary detractors. The reason behind grouping Tomlinson with Stevens and Williams instead of Eliot is Tomlinson's preference of American dynamism over the European tradition which makes him Eliot's opposite. Throughout this article, we shall show how Tomlinson's poetry performs a clinamen in relation to Eliot's. He misreads his master Eliot to find his new poetic voice, but the echoes of Eliot are still heard in it. In fact, Tomlinson shares Eliot's view for an objective poetry, but he swerves away when he offers a new way other than Eliot's allusive method to literary tradition as a means to achieve objectivity for poetry. For Tomlinson, objective poetry entails a focus on elements of reality without resorting to literary tradition to replace the purely imagined world of romantic poetry.

### **Review of the literature**

In his article, "Modernist Dialectic: Stevens and Williams in the Poetry of Charles Tomlinson," Gareth Reeves considers Charles Tomlinson as "one of the most "Americanized" of the British poets to come to prominence in the twenty or so years following the Second World War."<sup>1</sup> One reason is certainly his assimilation of the many poetic qualities of American literary modernism that makes his poetry more American than British. As British and American poetic tastes are

so different that the two nations cannot hear each other's verses, Tomlinson's achievement has been underestimated in England.<sup>2</sup>

Tomlinson was born in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire in 1927. As a boy, he received little education in American poetry because little attention was paid to it. In this context, he explains, "a boy from the provinces, going up to read English at Cambridge in 1945, as I did, will have learned little of American poetry from his university teachers. None of them seemed to mention it."<sup>3</sup> Tomlinson discovered Stevens's and Oscar Williams's poetry by accident in a pub. Yet, it was Stevens's poetry that attracted him more: "One evening, late in 1947, my new tutor . . . read to me, in a pub in Trumpington, Williams's 'tract' from Oscar Williams's *Little Treasury of Modern Poetry, English and American*. I thought it delightful. He handed me the book to reread it and, as he did so, the pages fell open at Stevens's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.' I gazed through this rapidly then moved back to 'Track.' It was 'Thirteen Ways' that stayed in mind . . . The Williams sank from recollection."<sup>4</sup>

If we turn now to Eliot's biography, it shows that his life and poetic career are very different from those of Tomlinson. Eliot was born in St. Louis Missouri in 1888 to a family with prominent New England roots. He left America for Europe in search for a sustaining literary tradition which is was absent in America. In 1927, he became a British subject and converted to Anglicanism declaring that he was "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion."<sup>5</sup> Despite his American birth and upbringing, many critics consider him as an English citizen. Helene Vendler, for example, included no poem by Eliot in her *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*.<sup>6</sup> Among the reasons that may explain the denial of Eliot's Americanness by these critics is his attempt to find ancestors in Dante, Baudelaire, Donne rather than Whitman and Emerson in addition to the British citizenship he took in 1927.

With the publication of "The Wasteland," Eliot became a model for younger poets who praised both his poetry and criticism. David Perkins explains this influence: "For twenty-five years T. S. Eliot exercised an authority in the literary world not possessed by any writer before him for more than a century. Similarly, Stanley Kunitz argues that Eliot was an inescapable influence on younger poets: "for more than three decades, you could scarcely pick up a poem a younger writer without overhearing [Eliot] somewhere in the background. . . . In the twenties and thirties one had to follow Eliot in order to win a reputation or an audience."<sup>7</sup>

A look at these biographical facts suggests that Eliot and Tomlinson are diametrical opposites. Eliot's defence of the European tradition makes him very different from Tomlinson who came to America to take something from its aesthetic dynamism and put it into his own poetry. These differences may explain the oddity of the grouping choice of these two poets though their poetry has received much attention. For example, Lee Oser, in his *T.S. Eliot and American Poetry*, discusses Eliot's influence on John Ashbery, Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Lowell. Pauline McAlonan wrote a thesis comparing the effects of Eliot's and Auden's conversion upon their reputation and the difficulties they faced as modern Christian poets. Saddik M. Gohar wrote many articles discussing Eliot's influence on Arab poets, such as Badr Shakiral Sayyab, Salah Abdel-Sabour, and Muzaffar Abdul-Majid Al-Nawab.

In a like manner, Tomlinson's poetry has been read, discussed and compared to many other poets. For example, Gareth Reeves wrote an article "A Ghost Never Exorcized: Stevens in the Poetry of Charles Tomlinson" explaining how his poetry is haunted by both the Symbolist tendencies of Stevens on the one hand and the Imagism of Williams. Darrell Martini Laird's second chapter of his thesis "*An Unpredicted Terrain: The Poetry of Charles Tomlinson*" discusses how Tomlinson

is most indebted to Stevens in his early volume, *The Necklace*. For his part, Richard Swigg devoted the first three chapters of his book *Charles Tomlinson and the Objective Tradition* discussing how Tomlinson learned the objective tradition from Stevens.

This short review of comparative analyses involving Eliot and Tomlinson has shown that Eliot and Tomlinson have attracted considerable critical attention. Many critics whose interest extends to comparative literature compare both poets to other writers, but as for Tomlinson's connectedness to Eliot, no thorough study of the relationship between these two poets exists. Tomlinson has been often compared with authors in particular Stevens that Kermode calls Neomodernists, those modernists who believed that the dependence on the past threatens the mind seeking a link with the world of the present.<sup>8</sup> However, no comparative study, to my knowledge, has been done between Tomlinson and Eliot or any other poets that Kermode calls the paleomodernists, the modernists who claimed that a way to cultural health implied a strenuous process of return to tradition, in particular, classical cultures.<sup>9</sup>

### **Issue and methodology**

This study attempts to fill this gap in this field of comparative literature by emphasizing the connectedness of Tomlinson's poetry to Eliot's. It rests on the assumption that Tomlinson is attracted to Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry against the romantic solipsist and escapist approach of reality. Though Eliot and Tomlinson share the same anti-Romantic stance, they rebel differently against the tenets of this movement. Against the romantic account of poetry as originating in the poet's individual genius, Eliot uses allusions to the European literary tradition as a more objective and coherent response to his contemporary experiences. In contrast, Tomlinson, for the same purpose, focuses on the immediate experience of the real world rather than literary history.

To examine the nature of Eliot's influence on Tomlinson, I shall operate from Harold Bloom's theory of influence. According to Bloom, a strong poet learns to appreciate poetry through the irresistible work of precursors. To make his new voice, a strong poet misreads precursors. Yet, he cannot escape the awareness that his imaginative vision is born out of the very achievements of the past poets. The defensive mechanism the belated poet uses against his precursor is "poetic misreading or misprision"<sup>10</sup> which is a process through which he sublimates his precursor's influence: "poetic influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets, – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, as an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation."<sup>11</sup>

Bloom identifies six distortive processes through which a belated poet operates in reading his precursor. He calls them reversionary ratios and means them to represent the developmental stage of the ephebe. This article takes its methodological bearings from Bloom's first ratio that he calls clinamen. According to him, clinamen is "poetic misreading or misprision proper"<sup>12</sup> in which there is an implication that "the precursor poet went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved precisely in the direction the new poem moves."<sup>13</sup>

## **Results and discussion**

One achievement of romanticism was its awareness of the disunity between man and his world. However, rather than striving for reconciliation, the romantics attempted to create an ideal world through art that focused on the self and offered a purely imagined nature as a refuge against reality. Thus, the romantic search for an ideal world reflected their failure to achieve a union between reality and the imagination. This failure can be noticed in the following passage from Wordsworth's "At the crossing of the Alps" which describes the power

of the imagination which usurps his consciousness, creating the "invisible world":

This is the very spirit in which they [the higher minds] deal  
With all the objects of the universe:

.....

But quickened, roused, and made thereby more fit  
hold communion with the invisible world. <sup>14</sup>

The poet attempts to fulfil his desire for a balance between the imagination and reality. Yet this desire is only attained with the usurpation of reality by the imagination. The imagination takes over reality and the poet finds himself cherishing the fancy world of his imagination in which reality implicitly disappears. The supremacy of the imagination over reality ends up with a world of dreams and fantasies that denies reality.

The usurpation of reality by the imagination forced the romantics to create a solipsistic world which many of their poems celebrate. One of them is Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as A Cloud" which places value on the solipsistic world over reality. When the speaker was in nature, gazing at the real daffodils which "stretched in never-ending line," he hardly thought "what wealth the show to [him] brought" though he recognizes that he was happy "in such a jocund company" of the daffodil. It was later when he was at home lying on his couch away from nature that the imaginative daffodils "flash upon that inward eye" and fulfil the psychological vacancy of his self. Now his heart "dances with the[imaginative] daffodils."<sup>15</sup>

This romantic refuge in a solipsistic world instead of facing their alienation from their environment becomes subject to attack by both Eliot and Tomlinson. Eliot's "The Wasteland" highlights modern man's alienation from his environment. Being socially isolated, each member avoids the glance of others and "fixed his eyes before his feet."<sup>16</sup> The theme of alienation is also presented in "What the Thunder Said" in

which Eliot regrets that "We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison."<sup>17</sup>

Like Eliot, Tomlinson views that this world is an uncompromising alien to man. In "The Snow Fences," nature and man are not just enemies, but enemies at war. It shows the heroism of being human resisting to the wind and cold, and time and death:

The bitter darkness drives you  
back valleywards, and again you bend  
joint and tendon to encounter  
the wind's force and leave behind  
the nameless stones, the snow-shrouds  
of a waste season: they are fencing  
the upland against those years, those clouds.<sup>18</sup>

Though both Eliot and Tomlinson recognize man's alienation from his environment, their methods to face alienation are very different. Eliot rejects the romantic subjective method that consists of a retreat into the solipsistic world created by the poet's imagination. Instead, Eliot suggests an impersonal objective mode of expression that denies the centrality of the personality of the artist. In this context, Eliot argues that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."<sup>19</sup> Instead of expressing emotions of strictly personal significance, the poet has to transform what is personal into something of universal significance: "the poet has not a personality to express but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experience combine in a peculiar and unexpected ways."<sup>20</sup>

Too much emphasis, indeed, upon the personality and the individuality of the poet can prevent the artist from recognizing the order and unity provided by tradition. Thus, the artist must continue to acquire the sense of tradition throughout his career by allowing his

poetic sensibility to be shaped and modified by the past. For Eliot, the best and the most individual part of a poet's work is that which shows the continual influence of the writers of the past: "Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice, we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual part of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."<sup>21</sup>

To better understand Eliot's theory, it is profitable to examine "A Game of Chess," the second section of his "The Wasteland." The fragments of literature of the past are put together with the real to illuminate the predicament of modern man. The section describes two women who have no actual connection with each other. The first woman is upper class whereas the second, who is lower class, is named Lil. Their stories, as they stand, are incomplete fragments, but in the context of the poem and in relation to other fragments from other stories from other literary texts, such as Antony and Cleopatra, Aeneas and Dido, and Tereus and Philomela, they do dramatize the themes of loss and love in the poem as a whole. However, only the rape of Philomela by Tereus is depicted in detail:

Above the antique mantel was displayed  
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene  
The change of Philomela, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
'Jug Jug' to dirty ears.<sup>22</sup>

All the three women alluded to in this section fall victim to their love: Cleopatra commits suicide after the death of Antony, Dido the Queen of Carthage sets herself on fire after the departure of Aeneas in order to establish the new city of Rome, while Philomela is raped and then has her tongue cut out. Indeed they represent all modern women in the

poem who are in the clutches of the selfish men's preoccupation with sex as a mere physical performance in which the female counterpart is often victimized, bored, or indifferent. This comparison suggests something essentially disappointing about the rich woman who is unable to communicate her interior self to the world. The woman and her surroundings, though aesthetically pleasing, are ultimately sterile and meaningless, as suggested by the nonsense song that she sings. In the case of *Lil*, sex is basely extorted. The outcome is abortion and the fear of death.

However, Eliot's reliance on tradition ends up with the same sense of escapism from the real world. Tomlinson assumes the task of revising Eliot's text with the aim of bringing that text close to the here and now. For Tomlinson, in the world of the imagination, the alienation of man from reality is a source of inner nourishment. Reality is primary, and man's senses are subservient to it. It is the things of reality that catch the senses before the senses seek to possess them. Reality is rather a state where an imperfect thing that "we see" is transformed by the poet's imagination into a "perfect thing":

Did Eden

Greet us un gated? Or was that marrying

Purely imaginary and, if it were,

What do we see in the perfect thing?<sup>23</sup>

Yet reality, impinging on the senses is physical and inhuman, becomes human once known to the mind:

Facts. And what are they?

He admired accidents, because governed by laws,

Representing them (since the illusion was not his end)

As governed by feeling. The end is our approval

Freely accorded, the illusion persuading us

That it exists as a human image.<sup>24</sup>

The mind sees fact and its analogues, and art translates fact and explores possibility, extensions beyond the fact. Art not only imitates but also imbues observation with the quality of the artist's response.

Tomlinson's account of the imagination giving life to static objects can be found in "A Given Grace." Two static cups are placed "on the mahogany pool of table"<sup>25</sup> which any observer can say only that they are there. Then, they become objects contained in the mind: "They unclench / the mind, filling it / with themselves."<sup>26</sup> The mind is not merely the passive recipient but an active agent of transformation:

Though common ware,  
these rare reflections,  
coolness of brown  
so strengthens and refines  
the burning of their white,  
you would not wish  
them other than they are.<sup>27</sup>

The "reflections" are also mental performed by the mind so that the cups which were "common ware" become rare because they are strengthened and refined. In addition, the two cups need the coolness of the mind to intensify their burning essence.

After having discussed the different ways Eliot and Tomlinson employ in their early careers in order to objectify poetry, we shall focus on the new methods and arguments of the two poets in their late careers for the same purpose of protecting poetry from solipsism. In what follows, we shall argue that Tomlinson's late poetry still enacts a clinamen in relation to poetry Eliot wrote after his conversion to Catholicism.

In fact, none of Eliot and Tomlinson maintains his method of correcting romanticism. After his conversion, much of Eliot's poetry and prose reviles the romantic attempt to conflate religion and art and the idea that poetry may be a substitute for religion. With Percy Bysshe

Shelley, poetry reached its highest point of exaggeration when he claimed that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind."<sup>28</sup> In many of his essays, Eliot condemns this attempt to make art into a religion. For Eliot, a poet is not a priest that performs religious rites. Eliot further claims that "[t]he poet makes poetry, the metaphysician makes metaphysics, the bee makes honey."<sup>29</sup> Against Shelley's tenet that poetry has the status of religion, Eliot belittles the power of poetry as a religious force. Eliot argues that "Poetry 'is capable of saving us' ... it is like saying that the wall-paper will save us when the walls have crumbled."<sup>30</sup> Eliot thus denies the priestly functions of the poet upheld by the romantics. Thus, poetry and religion are two different spheres and should not be treated as identical. In "The Function of Criticism," for example, he remarked, "I have assumed as axiomatic that a creation, a work of art, is autotelic."<sup>31</sup>

In "Ash Wednesday," Eliot betrays a fear of allowing his artistic ambitions to hinder his spirituality and to lead him to less spiritually fulfilling life. The temptation that he encounters is that posed by poetry:

Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.  
Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,  
Lilac and brown hair;  
Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over  
the third stair,  
Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair.<sup>32</sup>

Repentance is a spiritual exercise that requires the renouncement of aesthetic enjoyments. Thus, the charms of "distraction" caused by the music of the flute can hold back spiritual progress. In order to reach a complete purification, the flute should be rendered breathless and "the silencing of the flute (poetry) may be a necessary step in reaching the world."<sup>33</sup>

In his late poetry, Tomlinson, like Eliot, presents new arguments against romanticism. Yet, Tomlinson refutes Eliot's return to religion and adopts more revolutionary attitudes against the romantic idealism. In fact, Tomlinson hardly laments the disappearance of religion which will free reality from the burden of its vanished divinities:

Now the gods are dead  
their houses greet a sky  
freed of their weight.<sup>34</sup>

In the modern secular age, the air is empty of the supernatural additions. Now that the gods have departed, what remains in the air is only its "inviolable sign." Thus, there is no other miracle than the place that the eye sees:

Twilight was the going of the gods: the air  
Hung weightlessly now its own  
Inviolable sign. From habit we  
Were looking still for what we could not see.<sup>35</sup>

Tomlinson's rejection of Eliot's metaphysical world of religion enables him to focus on revolutionary issues in his strive to rid poetry from romantic idealism. From 1969 to 1978, political subjects entered his poetry. Revolutionary idealism started to replace the ethic of perception as his major preoccupation. The Russian Revolution provides the context and the characters for his poetry of that time.

Tomlinson's concern with the utopian dream of the romantic art of "transforming the world by music and rite"<sup>36</sup> is the subject of his poem "Prometheus." The outcome of such dream is the real and tragic events of the October Revolution: "the events / Were less merciful than your mob of instruments."<sup>37</sup>

The second stanza of the poem begins "We have lived through apocalypse too long: / Scriabin's dinosaurs."<sup>38</sup> Lenin transforms Scriabin's egalitarian utopia to the fields of politics when he arrived from exile by train at the Finland Station. Ironically, Lenin adopted

"merciless patience"<sup>39</sup> for dictatorship and the policy of terror in post-revolutionary Russia. In the real world, extremism must be avoided, and man must recognize his limitations. Lenin's indifference to historical facts led to tragic historical consequences:

I set Lenin's face by yours\_  
Yours, the fanatic ego of eccentricity against  
The systematic son of a schools inspector.<sup>40</sup>

Scriabin and Lenin share the same partiality of view which ignores the human and physical dimensions that surround them. For the artist Scriabin, the centre is his ego while Lenin's centre is his ideological system that guides his actions. The shift of utopianism from the field of art to the field of politics will have a different consequence:

History treads out the music of your dreams  
Through blood, and cannot close like this  
In the perfection of anabasis. It stops.<sup>41</sup>

The illusions of utopianism degenerates into disillusion by an appeal to the facts, and the consequences are disastrous:

Hard edges of the houses press  
On the after-music senses, and refuse to burn,  
Where an ice-cream van circulates the estate  
Playing Green sleeves, and at the city's  
Stale new frontier even ugliness  
Rules with the cruel mercy of solidities.<sup>42</sup>

The myth of fire in Scriabin's poem contradicts the cooled world of reality. The ideal world of music "refuse[s] to burn" in the world of facts with its "solidity" and the "hard edges of the houses." In the field of politics, the rule of the city based on Leninist model proves in the world of facts to be the "ugly" and "cruel."

The contrast in Eliot's and Tomlinson's poetic methods has its effects on the way the two poets employ images. In fact, Eliot and Tomlinson employ many similar images in order to maintain objectivity. However,

these images in Eliot's poetry do not carry the same meanings and values as in Tomlinson's. Water, the eye, and the stairs illustrate well the idea.

According to Northrop Frye, water is the commonest symbol of rebirth: "a landscape of water . . . appears at the beginning of Dante's journey up the mount of Purgatory, where there are many suggestions that the soul is in that stage a newborn infant."<sup>43</sup> "The Wasteland" is a poem about drought and sterility, but it is filled with references to water as a symbol of the fertility that the wasteland no longer has: "Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road."<sup>44</sup> Thus, the lack of water epitomizes the spiritual emptiness of the inhabitants of the wasteland who "do not find / The Hanged Man"<sup>45</sup> that represents Christ or any other symbol of resurrection. Even when water is present, its restorative principle is denied. In the first section "The Burial of the Dead," Madame Sosostris, reputed "to be the wisest woman in Europe,"<sup>46</sup> prophetically warns "fear death by water."<sup>47</sup> In the fourth section, her prophecy comes true:

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss.  
A current under sea  
Picked his bones in whispers.<sup>48</sup>

The death of Phlebas, the Phoenician Merchant, further illustrates Eliot's ironic use of water. Phlebas appears as the drowned sailor who is an emblem of failed spiritual redemption. In fact, Phlebas is not resurrected or transfigured since the bones of his dead body still sway under water.

The same images of water are recurrent in Tomlinson's poetry but to convey secular ideas. In "In San Clemente," he uses the image of water to refute traditional religion owing to its obsolescence. For him, reality changes so faith changes. The poem describes the Church of Rome

with three layers constituting its foundations: Beneath the Christian site is the older shrine of Mithras, and below that, is the eternal water:

the roar  
Of subterranean waters pouring by  
All of the centuries it takes to climb  
From Mithras to the myth-resisting play  
Of one clear jet chiming against the bowl  
In the fountained courtyard and the open day.<sup>49</sup>

Water represents reality that has survived despite the passing of all the centuries of time while Christianity and Mithraism, Christianity's major competitor in the Roman Empire, vanished. The "subterranean waters" climbs out from under the earth through the cave of Mithras and through the foundations of the church, resisting time and the darkness of myth whether Christian or Mithras. Now, water continues to burst out to the light of the "daylong play"<sup>50</sup> of the present.

The stair provides a further example of Eliot and Tomlinson's use of the same image but with different meanings. According to Frye, the stair is the archetype of the movement from one world to the other. He explains that "Purgatory in Dante is an enormous mountain with a path ascending spirally around it on top of which stands the Garden of Eden."<sup>51</sup> The same images of the stair, reminiscent of Dante's mountainous stairs are used in the third part of "Ash Wednesday," to evoke the poet's journey towards paradise. The speaker has to ascend the stairs to reach his spiritual renewal. "At the first turning of the second stair,"<sup>52</sup> the speaker is torn between his present hope to turn to God and his memory of his past worldly attachments which are full of temptations of self-deceit, despair, and lust. This hesitancy is characterized as the "devil of the stairs"<sup>53</sup> with his "deceitful face of hope and of despair."<sup>54</sup> "The second stair,"<sup>55</sup> he has to mount is dark ugly and fearful. It is "like an old man's mouth drivelling, beyond repair, / Or the toothed gullet of an aged shark."<sup>56</sup> According to Nasreen Ayaz, "these

images symbolize the evil and malaise within the soul of the poet of which he becomes sensuous through a process of self introspection.<sup>57</sup> "At the first turning of the third stair,"<sup>58</sup> he looks upon the temptations "of a pasture scene"<sup>59</sup> and "music of the flute."<sup>60</sup> Symbolically, these three steps mean that the poet is doing his hardest to work out his spiritual salvation, as Dante does, to reach full salvation.

While Eliot uses the stairs to suggest a movement from the relinquishing of worldly things to spiritual renewal, Tomlinson's stairs ironically imply a struggle to inhabit the world physically and to abandon the supernatural illusions of Christianity or Romanticism. In "Revolution," he uses the image of the stairs and the flight to distinguish between his approach to reality and the romantic one. The romantic flight without stairs, which ignores reality and does not involve the senses, remains solipsistic because its "flights are inward."<sup>61</sup> In contrast, the poet's "flight of stairs"<sup>62</sup> are perceived by "the sauntering eye" which feeds the mind with elements of the physical world, such as the "stone" and the "hill":

what was once a hill,  
each step a lip of stone  
and what they say  
to the sauntering eye  
as clear as the day.<sup>63</sup>

Here, Tomlinson declares his refutation of the ideal world and his adherence to the physical world. His "flights of stairs" from the external world are symbols of his art's attachment to it.

The eye is another image that recurs in the poetry of both Eliot and Tomlinson though bearing different meanings. Frye emphasizes that the eye tends to idealize "the human representatives of the divine and the spiritual world." Many of Eliot's poems evoke the eye as an attempt to fulfill much the same role, for they offer a chance of escape from modernity's chaos and entry to the peace, light, and timeless moment of

the divine. In "The Hollow Men," Eliot uses the eye to suggest the possibility of redemption and movement out of the "wasteland." Locked in a "cactus land"<sup>64</sup> the hollow men exist as a "Paralyzed force, gesture without motion."<sup>65</sup> Despite the emphasis on the hollow men's paralysis, the poem leaves open the possibility for change through the image of the eye that represents hope for redemption:

Sightless, unless  
The eyes reappear  
As the perpetual star  
Multifoliate rose  
Of death's twilight kingdom  
The hope only  
Of empty men.<sup>66</sup>

Unlike Eliot's eye, the eye found in Tomlinson's poetry is devoid of any spiritual meaning. The eye as the origin of perception that dictates the content of the mind is found in, "Crude Foyer." To be meaningful, the imagination should intermingle with reality. Thus, there is no pure reality of the mind that is not also a physical landscape rooted in the act of the eye's perception:

Eye  
drinks the dry orange ground,  
the cowskull  
bound to it by shade:  
sun-warped, the layers  
of faked and broken bone  
unclench into petals.<sup>67</sup>

The eye is as an instrument of perception that stands between the real world and the imagination. What the eye perceives becomes the driving force of the imaginative mind. The phenomenal world is inevitably a human world, for eye and mind involuntarily organize what they perceive into shapes and categories.

## Conclusion

A poet cannot be a poet at all if he is not connected with another poet or all the literary tradition. Eliot's relation to Tomlinson holds true to this dictum. Eliot, who was influenced by European and American precursors or contemporaries, has become a literary model exercising influence on world literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He has become the precursor and influences whom the young poets look for as a master. His achievements, his objective theory of poetry in particular, are incorporated and transformed in the works of the younger poet Tomlinson. Tomlinson, for his part, has executed Bloom's revisionary ratio, clinamen in his attempt to rid his poetry from the romantic solipsism. Tomlinson misreads his master Eliot to find his new poetic forms, other than Eliot's, to objectify his poetry.

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# Culture and Learner Autonomy

**Maamar MISSOUM**  
**University of Blida2**

## **Abstract:**

Recent reforms in Algerian higher education couple with challenges related to difficult working conditions especially a very high student-teacher ratio to require that learners assume higher responsibility for their own learning. Learning is a complex phenomenon that does not occur in a vacuum. It takes place in a specific cultural and educational context. Culture determines the roles learners and teachers can take in educational settings; i.e. their duties and rights, who should do what, when and how. In this paper, the researcher explores the relationships between culture, both general and educational, and autonomous learning. This research discusses data collected via a review of literature and a field study. The study consisted of the administration of a survey questionnaire to 35 teachers and 135 students from the English department at the University of Blida 2, Algeria. The results seem to indicate that the surveyed teachers and students hold positive attitudes towards learner autonomy. Nonetheless, some uncertainty emerged from the data about the role of the educational culture and the wider Algerian culture in developing Algerian learners' autonomy. The researcher attempts to argue that the general culture as well as the educational culture must be taken into consideration in the preparation and implementation of reforms in education. This paper closes with some implications related efforts towards fostering EFL learners' autonomy.

**Keywords:** General culture, educational culture, learner autonomy, teachers' perceptions, teachers' attitudes, learners' perceptions, learners' attitudes

## **ملخص البحث بالعربية:**

الإصلاحات الأخيرة في التعليم العالي بالجزائر تضافرت مع التحديات المتعلقة بظروف العمل الصعبة وخاصة اكتظاظ الأقسام لتتطلب أن يتحمل المتعلمون مسؤولية أكبر في تعلمهم. التعلم هو ظاهرة معقدة لا تحدث في فراغ بل في سياق ثقافي وتعليمي معين. الثقافة تحدد أدوار المتعلمين والمعلمين في الأوساط التعليمية أي واجبات وحقوق كل طرف، من الذي ينبغي أن

يفعل ماذا، متى وكيف. في هذه الورقة البحثية يسعى الكاتب لاستكشاف العلاقة بين الثقافة سواء العامة و التعليمية و التعلم المستقل. يناقش هذا البحث معطيات تم جمعها من خلال مراجعة البحوث السابقة في الموضوع بالإضافة إلى دراسة ميدانية. تمثلت الدراسة الميدانية في مسح استبباني على 35 أستاذ و 135 طالب و طالبة من قسم اللغة الانجليزية (جامعة البليدة 2 – الجزائر). وتشير النتائج إلى أن الأساتذة و الطلاب الذين شملتهم الدراسة يحملون نظرة ايجابية نحو التعلم المستقل. إلا أنه ظهرت بعض الشكوك من المعطيات بخصوص دور الثقافة الجزائرية العامة و التعليمية في تطوير التعلم المستقل عند الطلبة الجزائريين. يحاول الباحث تبيان أن الثقافة العامة و التعليمية يجب أن تؤخذ بعين الاعتبار في إعداد و تنفيذ الإصلاحات في مجال التعليم. يختم الباحث هذه الورقة ببعض المقترحات التي يرجى منها المساهمة في الجهود ذات الصلة بتعزيز استقلالية متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية الغير ناطقين بها.

الكلمات المفاتيح: الثقافة العامة والثقافة التعليمية، الاستقلال الذاتي للمتعلم، تصورات المعلمين / المتعلمين.

### **Résumé:**

Les récentes réformes de l'enseignement supérieur en Algérie ajoutées a quelques défis liés aux conditions de travail difficiles en particulier des classes surchargées pour exiger que les apprenants assument plus de responsabilité de leur propre apprentissage. L'apprentissage est un phénomène complexe qui ne se produit pas dans le vide. Il prend place dans un contexte culturel et éducatif spécifique. La culture détermine les rôles que les apprenants et les enseignants peuvent assumer dans les établissements scolaires; c'est à dire leurs droits et devoirs, qui doit faire quoi, quand et comment. Dans cet article, le chercheur explore la relation entre la culture, à la fois générale et éducative, et l'apprentissage en autonomie. Cette étude examine des données recueillies grâce à une revue des écrits sur le sujet ainsi qu'une étude sur terrain. L'étude a consisté en la passation d'un questionnaire avec 35 enseignants et 135 étudiants du département d'anglais à l'Université de Blida 2, Algérie. Les résultats de l'enquête semblent indiquer que les enseignants et les apprenants interrogés ont une attitude positive à l'égard de l'apprentissage en autonomie. Néanmoins, une certaine incertitude est apparue à partir des données sur le rôle de la culture éducative et de la culture algérienne dans le développement de l'autonomie des apprenants algériens. Le chercheur tente d'argumenter que la culture générale

ainsi que la culture éducative doivent être prises en considération dans la préparation et la mise en œuvre de réformes dans l'enseignement. Cet article se termine par quelques recommandations liées aux efforts pour la promotion de l'autonomie des apprenants en anglais langue étrangère.

**Mots Clés:** Culture, culture éducative, autonomie de l'apprenant, perceptions des enseignants, attitudes des enseignants, perceptions des apprenants, attitudes des apprenants.

## **Introduction**

The field of language teaching and learning has in the last three decades seen an increased interest and discussion of the concept of **learner autonomy**. This new or renewed interest in the ability of learners to assume more responsibility in planning, executing and assessing their own learning recognizes changes that affected how knowledge is conceived and consequently teaching and learning. For some decades, there has been a paradigm shift in Algerian higher education, i.e. attempts have been made to depart from teacher-led classes working in a uniform fashion towards common goals to more individualized and more learner-centred learning. The present study examines the role of general and educational culture in promoting or stifling learner autonomy in Algerian university departments of English.

## **1. Theoretical Background**

### **1.1 Definition of Learner Autonomy**

Learner autonomy may be a relatively new academic research interest but probably and old human issue of survival; Thousands of years ago, human groups who independently learnt to harness available resources like fire, animals and earth for agriculture, etc. survived and thrived. In this age of rapid growth and change of knowledge and skills, autonomy of learners may be critical for success in academia and life at large. The first challenge in a discussion of 'learner autonomy' relates to defining the term. Researchers may use different terms to mean the same construct or slightly different aspects of it (see for example Little 2002). A detailed and in-depth historical discussion of the various definitions given to the concept by researchers is presented

by Bensemmane (2008). As there is no scope here for a discussion of the variety of definitions proposed in the literature, in this work, the term ‘learner autonomy’ is used in the following sense: **the capacity for and actual practice by learners of the primary responsibility for planning, executing, monitoring and evaluation of their own learning**. This definition can be rephrased using another term used in the literature; i.e. ‘self-regulated learning’ or the degree to which the learners are able to manage their learning themselves (with help from environment when deemed effective) in defining learning objectives, work procedures and assessment of learning outcomes, etc.

## **1.2 Developing Learner Autonomy as An Educational Goal**

Developing learner autonomy may be an essential mission for education as recognised by many educationalists (Piaget 1965, Kenny 1993, Cotterall 2000, Jiménez 2009, etc.). Piaget (1965), for instance, argued that the ultimate goal of education is “for the individual to develop the autonomy of thought to create new, original ideas rather than just recycle old ones” (Cited in Jiménez 2009). According to Kenny, “Education is about empowerment and what it empowers is people's autonomy. This allows them opportunities to generate knowledge, as opposed to being passive consumers of it.” (1993, p. 431). Besides, autonomy in learning is considered as very important to the development of lifelong learners (Jiménez 2009). Education, as a dynamic sub-culture, can achieve such mission through clearly stated educational objectives that provide for the development of learner autonomy. These objectives need to be reflected in the practice of teaching and learning via appropriate syllabi.

## **1.3 Factors Underpinning Learning Autonomy**

Understanding (how to develop) learner autonomy requires substantive knowledge about this concept. Following is a brief analysis of the concept to explore the factors underlying autonomous learning. We need first to acknowledge, as Benson noted, that there seems to be disagreement between researchers about what abilities and attitudes compose learner autonomy (2006). Nevertheless, one reasonable way for considering this issue consists of looking at three types of factors:

1. Learner intrinsic factors – the skill / strategy sphere;

2. Learner intrinsic factors – the psychological / personality sphere;
3. Learner extrinsic factors: General and educational culture, syllabi, instruction, and teachers.

### **1.3.1 Factors for Learning Autonomy – The Skill / Strategy Sphere**

The more visible sphere of autonomous learning consists of observable tasks and strategies done by learners. According to our review of the literature, autonomous learning may require learners to be *willing* and *able* to undertake such tasks as:

**1.3.1.1 Taking an active part in setting their own learning objectives** (Little, 2002; Cotterall 2008, Azevedo and Witherspoon 2009): Cotterall says that learner autonomy is essentially a *capacity* for decision-making (2008:111). Autonomous learners make proposals to modify course contents and work method as they see fit (See for example Cotterall's students 2008:111). To set goals, learners need to possess some ability to identify their learning needs and, as Little insists, understanding the purpose of their learning (2002). But primarily, autonomy necessitates the ability to **make decisions** (see for instance Cox et al. 2010)

**1.3.1.2 Making decisions about learning goals** belongs in a broader ability; i.e. (Taking an active part in) **planning one's learning and mobilising resources**. A major aspect of autonomous learning consists of taking an active part in planning one's learning. Planning for learning, according to Azevedo and Witherspoon also involves analysing the learning context in order to determine which learning strategies to use and find out the resources in the context which could be used to enhance learning (2009:319).

**1.3.1.3 Monitoring and self-assessing** their learning achievement: Autonomous learners monitor and evaluate their learning. They are aware and better able to assign success and failure to specific factors, which is pre-requisite for remedial work and to adjust learning plans. They “regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness” (Little, 2002).

**1.3.1.4 Self-Motivating:** Autonomous learners must **primarily** rely on themselves for creating and sustaining their own motivation to learn and overcome difficulties and failures in the learning process. They would not wait for external motivators although they may make use of them.

**1.3.1.5 Self-Management Skills** (managing time, emotions and staying on task) have been researched as significant factors in learning performance (Candy 1991; Hoff and Sawka- Miller 2010; Dabbagh & Kitsantas 2012). With the advent of entertainment technologies like digital game devices, audio and video players, TV, etc. learners, especially younger ones, are faced with a new challenge: How to stay focused on their learning tasks. Skills to manage one's time and balance learning and recreation have never been more important.

**1.3.1.6 Collaboratively learning with and from peers** and other people: Autonomous learners are expected to “determine how much social support (if any) may be needed to perform the task” (Azevedo and Witherspoon 2009:319). Learning benefits from the ability for effective help seeking from one's environment. Help-seeking has been found by Lynch and Dembo 2004 to be a predictor of academic achievement. Other people represent another form of resources that could be mobilised for learning.

**1.3.1.7 Effective communication skills:** Collaboration with people that might contribute to one's learning calls for good communication skills. The ability to communicate with other people is a key support skill that intervenes in most learning tasks (Gulbahar & Madran 2009; Merrouche 2011; Wach 2012). Effective learning requires learners to be able to express their needs clearly and ask for precise assistance. Collaboration can succeed only if communication is efficient between team members.

**1.3.1.8 Conflict resolution skills** are necessary to tackle tensions that may arise while working with others. Bushman and Peacock maintain that learners can be trained in skills to resolve conflict (2010). Autonomy in one of its manifestations comes in the form of recognising problems and acting to resolve them. Learners who possess this skill will not wait for external intervention (that may or may not come) and will use strategies to resolve conflicts.

**1.3.1.9 Critical thinking:** Some researchers (Little 1991 and Cotterall 2008) recognise the role of critical thinking in learning autonomy. For instance, in planning learning or revising plans, autonomous learners rely on critical reflection to assess their and others' decisions about learning goals, materials, tasks, assessment, etc. Critical attitude towards the flow of input knowledge, one's knowledge, decisions and actions is pre-requisite to evaluation and adjustment towards higher efficiency.

**1.3.2 Factors for Learning Autonomy – The Affective/Personality Sphere:** The skill requirements for autonomous learning that have been discussed in the previous section are probably underpinned by a number of factors that pertain more to the learner's personality / affective sphere. These include:

**1.3.2.1 Learner's Beliefs / Attitudes:** There has recently been much discussion of the role of learner's beliefs in strategy use and autonomy (Cotterall 1995, White 1999, Carter 2000, Tillema 2000, T. Lamb 2008, Bown and White 2010, Yilmaz 2010, Reinders and Lazaro 2011). T. Lamb, for instance, found that the development of learner autonomy significantly depends on both learners and teachers' beliefs about the roles and responsibilities in teaching and learning (2008). More specifically, according to Wenden (1998), "two kinds of attitudes are crucial: attitudes learners hold about their role in the learning process, and their capability as learners ...if learners labour under the misconception that learning is successful only within the context of the "traditional classroom," where the teacher directs, instructs, and manages the learning activity, and students must follow in the teacher's footsteps, they are likely to be impervious or resistant to learner-centred strategies aiming at autonomy" (52, cited in Thanasoulas 2000). Beliefs and attitudes can determine what learners can and will do to learn. A positive learner attitude towards autonomy is necessary to maximise their readiness for undertaking the complex tasks involved in autonomous learning.

**1.3.2.2 Self-Efficacy:** Beliefs underlie motivation and self-efficacy; i.e. if learners believe they cannot do a task, they will not have a go. According to Bandura (1997), learners will not engage in learning and adopt learning goals unless they feel ready for a successful

performance (cited in Ponton et al. 2005). Then, it may be expected that self-efficacy should precede autonomous learning (Ponton et al. 2005). This was supported by Weisi and Karimi whose research has shown that personality characteristics such as motivation and self-confidence are good predictors of attitude towards self-assessment (2013:736).

**1.3.2.3 Motivation:** According to Dornyei, most scholars (See Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Muchnick and Wolfe, 1982; et al. cited in Thanasoulas 2000) seem to agree that motivation [an outcome of attitude] is “one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second or foreign language (L2) learning. Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process” (1998:117, cited in Thanasoulas 2000). Learning autonomy requires higher motivation from learners (Zimmerman and Moylan 2009:313). On the other hand, gains in motivation are actually put forward as a common justification for autonomy in education. Autonomous learners are motivated and do more effective work (Dickinson 1995).

**1.3.2.4 Resilience:** According to Wang, resilient individuals are characterised in the literature for having high self-esteem, a clear sense of purpose, the ability to successfully plan, modify their environment, and strong problem-solving skills (1997:263, cited in T. Lamb 2008). Because autonomy often means a high level of responsibility for success and failure, autonomous learners need to be resilient and adaptable to survive setbacks and obstacles that they are certain to encounter in their learning journey.

**1.3.2.5 Agency (Taking responsibility for one’s learning):** Learners and people in general vary in terms of readiness to assume responsibility of their own lives. Requirements for learner autonomy start with a **sense of responsibility** for their own learning (Holec 1979, Little 1991). Researchers agree that autonomous learners accept responsibility for their learning (Little, 2002). Only when learners act as agent in their learning that they will take initiative in planning, managing and executing their activities learning.

**1.3.2.6 Self-awareness and Reflectivity:** Autonomous learning requires learners to be aware of their own experience of learning (Chik

and Breidbach 2011). In Bensemmane, most surveyed teachers underscored the need for learners to possess ‘**metacognitive awareness**’ (2008:256). This awareness is prerequisite for the reflection autonomous learners need to do on all aspects of their learning.

### **1.3.3 Learning Autonomy and Culture**

The third sphere of factors that can impact the development and exercise of learning autonomy consists of factors which generally surround learners/learning. The general culture and the educational culture determine, to a significant extent, what can and does happen in the learning process.

The term culture has been widely discussed in the literature. Various definitions were proposed. In this paper, the term ‘culture’ is used to mean, among other things (this is not meant to be an all-encompassing definition), **all the social codes shared by a community of people that define roles for its members and appropriate social conduct.** Culture also dictates the roles learners and teachers can take in educational settings; i.e. their duties and rights in the learning activities, who should do what, when and how.

In practice, as stated above, autonomous learners are more or less able and willing to undertake such learning-related tasks as:

- 1) Setting their own learning objectives
- 2) Self-assessing their learning achievement
- 3) Motivating themselves for learning
- 4) Learning from peers and people other than teachers

These dispositions and abilities may need to be developed and fostered in (young) members of the community / learners through education.

#### **1.3.3.1 Learner Autonomy and *General Culture***

Learning takes place in cultural contexts. It is difficult even for the most liberated minds to escape the straps of cultural contexts. There has been a debate over the issue of the impact of culture on learner autonomy. An interesting direction of research explores the role of culture in autonomous learning; in other words, whether different cultures impact the development and practice of learner autonomy in

different ways. Mason for instance wondered about a possible impact of culture especially in Asian countries on knowledge and learning. “Might the liberal ideal of the independent and autonomous individual clash with communitarian values of identity in relationship? ... How might one reconcile the phenomenon, well documented among many Asian students, of learning by induction from rote memorization ... with western ideals of learning and of the growth of knowledge by critical questioning? ...” (2008:1). Such position seems over simplistic as it opposes a supposedly ‘free-thinking’ western world to an authoritarian eastern world. Little (2002) holds a more moderate position as he states that research on learner autonomy has been grappling with the question whether learner autonomy is an exclusively western cultural construct, which makes it foreign to learners in other **cultures**. The author concludes that although evidence seems to support the position that learner autonomy can be a universal construct, culture always impacts on learning (Little, 2002:12). As Pierson (1996) argues, social structure in education is thought to influence learners’ propensity for autonomy (Cited in Aoki 2000).

In a specific Asian context, Ahmad and Abdul Majid looked at the relationship between learners’ readiness for autonomy and the Malay cultural values. Their study indicated that culture influenced the development of the respondents’ readiness for learner autonomy. It has the capacity to either inhibit or encourage learning autonomy (2010:262-3). “In a collectivist society such as Malaysia..., members of groups do not speak up, or even express a contradictory point of view, instead social harmony is maintained and it is the hidden goal of every communication (Beamer and Varner, 2008)...” (Ahmad and Abdul Majid 2010:255). Dang studied EFL learner autonomy in Vietnam from a sociocultural perspective and found out that “...learner autonomy can be either fostered or hindered deliberately within various community constraints” (2010)

Probably in all contexts, culture can stifle, allow or promote learner autonomy to the extent that it stifles, allows or promotes the attitudes and skills underpinning learner autonomy (discussed above under 1.3.1 and 1.3.2). In other words, a culture could be considered learner autonomy friendly if it allows, or better, encourages its members to: 1. assume primary responsibility for their lives; 2. Take decisions for

themselves; 3. collaborate with others for better performance in tasks, etc.

### **1.3.3.2 Learner Autonomy and *Educational Culture***

Educational culture can be defined as a set of beliefs held by and practices of the stakeholders and participants in education especially learners, teachers and managers. It also includes regulations that determine the teaching/learning goals and methods.

Learner autonomy may not be desired or welcome by all people and in every context. “Despite the ever-expanding literature, learner autonomy remains a minority pursuit, perhaps because all forms of 'autonomisation' threaten the power structures of educational culture” (Little 2002). Following a study on teachers’ perspectives on innovations in Dutch schools, Könings et al. found out that teachers were reserved about student autonomy (2007:985). In some cultures, autonomous generally younger learners might be perceived by teachers as rebellious and not respectful of their authority of elders. Therefore, we should acknowledge that teachers’ readiness for autonomy is affected by their beliefs. Their attitudes toward learner autonomy can be expected to influence whether and how they might seek to develop their learners’ learning autonomy. Borg insists that we need to listen to the voices of teachers and tap their beliefs and attitudes (2013) if we wish education to target learner autonomy.

Educational philosophy, as reflected in the stated or implicit mission of educational institutions and policy, influence what happens in schools. More specifically than general culture, educational culture impacts learning experiences. Jiang and Smith claim that “teachers or parents can be significant mediators who pass on learning strategies to the younger generation through education or child-rearing...” (2009:297). Previous educational experiences (earlier learning) can have an impact on the learners’ readiness and willingness to assume more responsibility of their own learning. Carter states that learners’ educational background constrains their potential for autonomy (2000). “Learners’ attitude towards, or affect associated with, autonomy may also have its root in the institutional environment that surrounds the place where learning actually takes place...” (Aoki 2000)

One of the main components of educational culture is the curriculum. Traditional curricula usually require that teachers work at a certain pace and use certain materials (See for instance Snodin 2013:15). A curriculum can make clear provision for the development of learner autonomy, pay lip-service to or overlook it. In many countries in the world especially those ranking high in international classifications (Finland, Canada, United Kingdom, South Korea, etc.), autonomy of learning is explicitly incorporated in curricular objectives. A curriculum that aims to promote students as independent learners should be learner-centred. Since nowadays knowledge and skills quickly become obsolete (They used to stay useful for 40-50 years), Brown recommends that we better teach learners dispositions to network, update their knowledge, and seek information, etc. (2012).

With or without educational objectives and syllabi that are favourable for autonomous learning, teachers can generally contribute or impede the development and practice of learning autonomy especially through the type of control they exercise on what goes on in their courses. Teaching may be the strongest element in the learning culture. In most educational environments, teachers still play significant roles. What they do or not do affects learners in different tangible ways. The role of teachers' in promoting students' learner autonomy has become an important venue of research in this field (Little 1995, T. Lamb 2008, Reinders and Lazarro 2011, Fumin and Li 2012). According to Candy, control over the learning process is better seen as a continuum from teacher-control to learner-control (1991:205, cited in Thanasoulas 2000).

Teaching that fosters learner autonomy does make some requirements. In Jiménez (2011) words, pedagogy for autonomy requires “a re-conceptualisation of the teaching-learning process. When teachers are encouraged to foster learner autonomy in their everyday teaching ... they are asked to have different understandings of their role as modern language teachers, to create a different relationship with their students...”(p. 159). Jiménez underlines here a necessity for reforming educational culture to tolerate and eventually foster learner autonomy. Teachers can encourage autonomous learning by showing willingness to give away some control to learners. Teachers who are usually held accountable for the success or failure of the learners may be expected

to show some reluctance to loosen their control over what happens in their classes. Kumaravadivelu writes “teachers have to determine the degree of control they are willing and able to yield to their students in terms of curricular aims and objectives, selection of tasks and materials, and assessment of learning outcomes” (2003: 155).

Teachers affect their learners’ autonomy in another way. A recent direction in research on learner autonomy consists of exploring teacher autonomy and its links to learner autonomy (Little 1995; Tort-Moloney 1997; T. Lamb 2008; Lamb and Reinders 2008; M. Lamb 2011; Fumin and Li 2012). What is teacher autonomy? According to M. Lamb, teacher autonomy has been defined as:

- a. “The extent to which teachers have the capacity to improve their own teaching through their own efforts (through reflective or research-oriented approaches)” (Smith 2000 and McGrath 2000):
- b. “the freedom to be able to teach in the way that one wants to teach is also a manifestation of teacher autonomy (see, for example, Webb 2002).”
- c. Ability for self-direction and self-development,
- d. “capability of making decisions regarding one’s own professional learning needs” (M. Lamb 2008)

Teachers as autonomous learners and autonomous persons are probably needed as role models for students. Autonomous teachers always seek ways to improve themselves and impact their learners in a positive way and do not wait for opportunity to be granted to them (self-empowerment). For Lamb, a teacher autonomy-learner autonomy relationship requires that:

1. “The teacher learns how to (and has, or claims, the freedom to) develop autonomously as a professional, through critical reflection
2. The teacher has a commitment to empowering his/her learners by creating appropriate learning spaces and developing their capacity for autonomy
3. The teacher introduces interventions which support the principles and values which underpin their own and their learners’ autonomy” (2008)

Little maintains that learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy (1995). He explains that only teachers that are themselves autonomous (Practice in their teaching reflective and self-managing processes) and

who know what it is to be an autonomous learner can be expected to foster learner autonomy (2000:45, cited in M. Lamb 2008). Autonomous teachers display autonomy by organising learning in new ways, in learning how to teach, or the self-management of their own classroom practice to be in a position to foster learner autonomy (M. Lamb 2008).

Like the general culture, an educational culture (regulations, curriculum and teaching) can stifle, allow or promote learner autonomy to the extent that it stifles, allows or promotes the perceptions, attitudes and skills underpinning learner autonomy (discussed above under 1.3.1 and 1.3.2). In other words, a culture of learning could be considered learner autonomy friendly if it allows, or better, encourages learners to 1. Assume primary responsibility for their learning; 2. Take decisions concerning their own learning as much as their expertise allows; 3. Collaborate with peers and teachers for better performance in learning tasks, etc.

## **2. The Study**

### **2.1 Purpose of the Study**

Changes and reforms to education may not bear expected fruits when the culture (general and educational) especially as reflected in the perceptions and attitudes of all the stakeholders is not adequately taken into consideration. Teachers and learners' attitudes in particular can have a positive or negative effect on the implementation of reforms as they are the main agents and beneficiaries of most organizational or curricular changes in education. Therefore, Cotterall (1995), for instance, recommends assessing learners' readiness for autonomous learning before shifting from teacher-centered to learner-centered paradigm in formal education.

Algerian higher education has witnessed since year 2004 significant restructuring known as the LMD (licence/bachelor, master, and doctorate) system. In parallel and for decades, a huge increase in the numbers of student enrolled in higher education has not been matched by increase in infra-structure and teaching, management and support staff. Increasing numbers of students in classes meant a significant reduction of the time learners have to get counsel face-to-face with

their teachers. In the same time, distant or online teacher-learner interaction has yet to become a standard practice in Algerian education. Learners will therefore have to learn with less guidance from their teachers. In other words, they must become more autonomous.

The present study aims to collect data to answer the following research questions:

**Research Question One:** Does the Algerian culture promote learner autonomy?

**Research Question Two:** Does the Algerian educational culture (educational policies and organisation, curriculum and teaching) encourage the development of learner autonomy?

## **2.2 Method of the Study**

### **2.2.1 Data Collection Procedures**

This research is a tentative attempt to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of EFL teachers and students regarding the roles of general and educational culture in developing 'learner autonomy'. A survey questionnaire was designed and used to collect data from teachers and learners. The teacher questionnaire (See Appendix 1) consists of eleven questions, three of which are open-ended, one is of the closed type and seven items mix the two types; i.e. invite respondents to explain their answer. The learner questionnaire (See Appendix 2) contains eleven mixed-type questions. In both questionnaires, the answers are selected from four to six set possible answers.

The questionnaire items are meant to collect data about university EFL teachers and learners' beliefs and attitudes towards learner autonomy. More specifically, the questions elicit insights about (LQ = Learner Questionnaire; TQ = Teacher Questionnaire)

- a. The respondents' views about the effect of developing learner autonomy on the students' academic success (LQ item 1; TQ items 3, and indirectly items 4, 8, 9);
- b. The respondents' views about the effect on the learners' academic success of the use of some learning strategies (student self-assessment of their own learning, students setting their own learning objectives, etc.) (LQ items 2 through 7);

- c. The respondents' perception of the role of culture, environment and family in developing their learner autonomy (LQ items 10 + 11; TQ item 5)
- d. The respondents' perception of the role of education in general, the department of English and teachers in developing learner autonomy (LQ items 8, 9; TQ items 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 & 11)

The items of both questionnaires are not sequenced in any logical order. Such order is reversed on purpose to prevent monotonous and mechanistic responses. Paraphrased questions are meant to cross-check each other.

### **2.2.2 The Participants**

A random sample of one hundred and sixty five (165) informants participated in our study: one hundred and thirty (130) students and thirty five (35) teachers. The teachers' category falls into three sub-categories: senior teachers have more than five years in teaching English as a Foreign Language, junior teachers have less than five-year experience in EFL teaching and pre-service teachers. The latter group consists of students in their final year of the Master degree in didactics. Most of the teachers and all of the students who were surveyed come from the Department of English at the University of Blida 2, Algeria.

The teachers who participated in the survey were randomly approached according to their availability in the premises of the English department at Blida University, Algeria or by email for teachers from other Algerian English departments. As for the learner questionnaire, the randomisation of participants was stratified. The questionnaire was administered to students who attended regular classes at the English department of Blida University, Algeria. A sample was randomly selected from each level of study in the department; i.e. L1: 1st year of the 3-year English degree; L2: 2<sup>nd</sup> year; L3: 3<sup>rd</sup> year; and M2: 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the Master degree.

### **2.2.3 Procedure**

The administration of the questionnaires took place in December 2012. Students completed the Learner Questionnaire during regular

classes. The researcher offered participants help when needed. As for Teacher Questionnaires, they were sent out by emails or handed over face-to-face. The questionnaire was emailed to over one hundred (100) teachers in Algerian English departments in December 2012. Thirty three (35) teacher questionnaires were completed and returned within due time.

#### **2.2.4 Data Analysis Procedures**

For every questionnaire item, responses were aggregated so as to allow trends, if any, to emerge from the responses. Responses to teacher questionnaires were collated for pre-service, junior and senior teacher sub-categories (See Appendix 3 for the collation of data collected). Responses to learner questionnaires, however, were aggregated according to level of study (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the English Bachelor Degree or 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the Master's degree).

#### **2.2.5 Presentation of the Data Collected**

Appendix 3 (Data Collected) presents the responses obtained from the administration of TQ (Teachers' Questionnaire) to eleven STs (senior teachers), seven JTs (junior teachers), and seventeen PSTs (pre-service teachers) and the LQ (Learners' Questionnaire) to fifteen L1 (1st year of the 3-year English degree, fifty L2 (2<sup>nd</sup> year), forty-nine L3 (3<sup>rd</sup> year), and sixteen M2 (2<sup>nd</sup> year of the Master degree) students. The responses to each questionnaire items have been laid out in tables. The highest line of each table contains the scales or possible responses from which respondents selected one answer. The second line contains the sub-categories within each major category of respondents (teachers or learners). As for the third line, it shows the number of answers for each scale selected by sub-category out of the total number of respondents in that sub-category. Those numbers are turned into percentages. The numbers of responses for every scale (possible answer to a given question) are put side-by-side to allow comparison of the response tendency between sub-categories of respondents; i.e. compare teachers with different professional experience and learners at different levels of study.

### **3. Key Findings of the Study: Discussion and Interpretation of the Data**

In the following discussion, we shall use the data collected in this study to attempt to find answers to each research question.

### **3.1. The respondents' views about the effect of developing learner autonomy on the students' academic success**

All surveyed teachers agree that autonomous learners succeed better in their studies. 87 % of the responses by the students share the same attitude. Benefits of learner autonomy may extend beyond academia to society at large. Indeed, in a similar study with teachers in Algiers University, Algeria, Bensemmane reports that "Teachers believe that university prepares for life in society and agree that an autonomous learner has more chances to adapt to a changing society; 14/15 teachers think that an autonomous learner will become an effective citizen in a democratic society" (2008, p. 257). There is apparently a general agreement about the positive contribution of learner autonomy to academic achievement in Algerian higher education.

### **3.2. The learners' views about the effect of the use of some autonomous learning strategies on the learners' academic success**

On average, 87 % of the student respondents stated that autonomous learning strategies have a positive effect on the students' academic success. The statistics came as follows:

1. Making decisions about what they should learn: 99%
2. Self-assessment: 81%
3. Making decisions about what they need to learn especially outside class: 90%
4. Reflecting on what they are doing in class to learn: 87%
5. Reflecting on their own learning strengths and weaknesses: 91.5 %
6. Motivating themselves: 83 %
7. Learning from other people (like friends, etc.) besides teachers: 79 %.

### **3.3. The respondents' perception of the role of culture and family in developing learner autonomy**

The issue of the role of culture in fostering or inhibiting the autonomy of individuals is a moot point according to the responses obtained. 60 % of the students surveyed agree that in general, the Algerian culture, society and family do **prepare** students to make decisions for themselves and be responsible of their lives. But up to 40 % of the respondents said culture does not prepare them to be autonomous. On a related question, when asked whether Algerian culture, society and family **encourage** students to be autonomous learners, 76% of the teachers surveyed disagreed. On the contrary, 70 % of the students agree that the Algerian culture, society and family do **encourage** students to make their own decisions. The discrepancy between students' responses to both questions and the responses of the teachers may stem from differences in life experience and analytical capacity between students and teachers. This variance in responses possibly suggests that more weight in terms of validity should be allotted to teachers' responses without amounting to an invalidation of data from the students.

Although globally the vast majority of students are convinced of the benefits of learning autonomously, a few students especially from the third year category hold a negative attitude towards tasks pertaining to learner autonomy particularly **motivating oneself and learning from other students**. This issue may be ascribed to culture or previous learning experience predominantly controlled by teachers.

One of the questions that could be asked about the relationship between culture and learning autonomy is: How much freedom does culture allow to its members to take initiatives, make decisions, question authority, act differently from the groups, etc.? Cultures can encourage autonomous learning to occur in it to the degree it permits freedom for learners to make their choices. Cultures with a strong authoritarian tendency may be expected to inhibit autonomy as reflected in individuals making their own decisions without counsel from the people in authority or elders and choosing pathways other than those preferred by the community.

### **3.4 The respondents' perception of the role of education in developing learner autonomy**

If most of the participants in the present study (students and teachers from an Algerian English department) seem to be convinced of the usefulness of learner autonomy, do they perceive a need for promoting learner autonomy as an educational goal in their EFL departments? When asked about the level of autonomy in their students, 61% of teachers said only some or a few of their students seem to be autonomous learners. 36% of Master students reported that none or few of their classmates seem autonomous. The statistics indicate that the majority of the students may not be autonomous enough; which calls for intervention in the form of training to increase learner autonomy among EFL students. Insufficient learning autonomy can be ascribed to educational culture. Bensemmane's data point to this explanation; "With respect to the students' earlier educational experience (from primary school to university) ... all teachers agree that this school learning background is likely to impact negatively on the students' attitudes towards learning. They blame the parents and family for supporting and encouraging this form of learning, thereby preventing them or reducing their capacity to become autonomous." (2008:257)

The need for intervention to foster learner autonomy is reflected in the response obtained for the question whether education should aim at developing learner autonomy. Indeed, 94% of the teachers (strongly) support the idea that education should aim at developing learner autonomy. Besides, all the teachers said they agree that developing learner autonomy **should** be one of the educational objectives of the English department reflecting a strong attitude in favour of an autonomous-learning English department. However, 51% of the teachers said that developing learner autonomy is **not** one of the objectives of their English department's curriculum or that they did not know whether it is an objective. Not knowing is similar, though definitely not the same, to believing that their department does not aim at learner autonomy.

The educational context in Algerian EFL learning seems to inhibit autonomy in managing learning for both learners and teachers. Most decisions relating to the management of learning like learning objectives, syllabus, examinations are taken by top managers. This was confirmed by Bensemmane who notes that context allows for limited autonomy to all participants (2008:257). Educational context

may not give teachers enough freedom to allow autonomous learning especially under the pressure of tight requirements for completion of the national syllabus and high-stake standardised examinations like the secondary school certificate.

Especially when institutional policy does not provide learner autonomy, the role of teachers becomes crucial. Pedagogy for autonomy requires teachers to have a different concept of their role as teachers in order to be ready to teach towards higher autonomy of the learners. In the English department at Blida 2 University, 84% of the teachers said that they usually seek to develop their students' learning autonomy. The students go along teachers' responses as 94.5 % of the said that teachers seek to develop learner autonomy.

Nonetheless, care should be exercised with self-report data. Although the responses obtained from the teachers who participated in this study are very positive about learner autonomy, these data need to be double checked via other research tools like classroom observation. Bensemmane's research in an Algerian context yielded suspicion expressed by a few teachers regarding autonomy turning into a non-productive goal in the Algerian context (2008:257)

In conclusion of this discussion of the findings of the present study, it is notable that most of the surveyed teachers and students seem to agree to the importance of learner autonomy for academic success. However some of the open-ended responses from both students and teachers underscore that we probably cannot simply assume that because students in EFL classes are sensitized to take responsibility of their own learning, they possess the tools to do so, or that because teachers adhere to learner autonomy, this will fully be reflected in the practice of their teaching. Nakata (2011) investigated teachers' readiness for promoting learner autonomy among EFL students in Japanese high schools and found that many Japanese EFL high school teachers, although they understood the importance of autonomy, were not ready to promote their learners' autonomy. Although most of them seem to adhere to the importance of learning strategies, they used them much less than would be expected in practice. Nakata (2011) ascribes the mismatch between attitude towards autonomy and actual practice of it to the social/cultural context which sets limits to both learners and teachers' autonomy (p. 900). The larger social culture can

socialise both teacher and learners to become indifferent or even opposed to taking initiative and self-regulation. Therefore, there is need for further research to investigate the readiness of both teachers and learners to engage in learner autonomy. Research needs to explore further the role of culture, general and educational, in preparing participants in education for autonomous learning.

#### **4. Some Implications**

On the basis of insights gained through the review of the literature and the study within the present research, it may be appropriate to consider the following implications. Culture (General and educational) especially parents / teachers may foster autonomy in the (younger) citizens / learners by allowing / helping them

1. Take an active part in setting life/learning goals and develop a capacity for decision-making; identify their learning needs and understand the purpose of their learning;
2. Take an active part in planning one's life / learning and mobilise resources;
3. Monitor and self-assess their life / learning performance, assign success and failure to specific factors, and adjust their plans;
4. Motivate themselves to overcome life / learning challenges and setbacks;
5. Manage their (learning) time, emotions and stay on task despite a myriad of distractions especially in modern life; And as Conley suggests, develop self-management skills (2010:72);
6. Collaborate with (to learn with and from) other people and determine how much social support (if any) may be needed to perform the task;
7. Communicate efficiently especially to collaborate, avoid and / or resolve conflicts;
8. Resolve conflicts that may arise while working with others; recognise problems and act to resolve them;
9. Think critically to assess their and others' decisions about one's learning goals, materials, tasks, assessment, etc.
10. Hold positive beliefs / attitudes towards being an autonomous person / learner;
11. Hold good and reasonable self-confidence;

12. Be resilient and adaptable to survive setbacks and obstacles they are certain to encounter in their Life / learning journey;
13. Take responsibility for their life / learning in order to take initiative in planning, managing and executing life / learning plans; Curricula should be adjusted to create a culture of self-regulation (Egan 2011);

Finally, changes and reforms to education may not bear expected fruits when the attitudes and perceptions of all the stakeholders are not adequately taken into consideration. Teachers and learners' attitudes in particular can have a positive or negative effect on the implementation of reforms as they are the main actors and beneficiaries of most organizational or curricular changes in education.

## **Conclusion**

Recent reforms in Algerian Higher Education seem to underscore the importance of developing students' learner autonomy. For instance, the new national English department curriculum has integrated study skills and research methodology courses. Yet one might ask a question about the readiness of teachers and learners to shift to a more autonomous learning paradigm. Since human actions tend to be affected by their perceptions and attitudes, do teachers and learners adhere to this paradigm change at least at the attitudinal level?

Sometimes educational changes, despite a good design, fail to prepare the field they target to reform before implementation. Algerian higher education has witnessed fundamental organisational changes which seem to call for higher autonomy from managers, teachers and learners. The purpose of the present study was to explore Algerian EFL students and teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the importance of culture, EFL department and society at large in fostering learner autonomy. This endeavour underscores the need to understand learners and teachers' cultural readiness, educational contexts and working conditions before educational reforms are implemented in order to increase chances of success.

The present research represents an initial step in an attempt to explore the relationship between culture, both general and educational, and

autonomous learning from the standpoint of teachers and learners. Any general conclusions from this study remain tentative. Further research is needed to investigate whether teachers and learners in Algerian departments of English are in practice adhering to learning autonomy. The data collected via a survey questionnaire administered to thirty five teachers and one hundred and thirty students from the English department at the University of Blida 2, Algeria seem to indicate that the surveyed teachers and students hold positive attitudes towards learner autonomy and its effects on EFL students' academic achievement. Nonetheless, some uncertainty among teachers and learners emerged from the questionnaire data about the role of the educational culture and the wider Algerian culture in developing learner autonomy. The researcher attempted to argue that general culture as well as educational culture must be taken into consideration in the preparation and implementation of reforms in education. This paper suggested some strategies especially for parents (general culture) and teacher (educational culture) that may help foster learning autonomy for EFL learners.

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## **Appendix 1 - Teacher Questionnaire**

Study on EFL Learner Autonomy - Teacher Questionnaire

Sir/Madam, please complete the following questionnaire. Space is available if you wish to explain your answers or add comments. Thank you

I have been teaching EFL for \_\_\_\_\_ year (s)

1. According to you, what is a brief definition of '**learner autonomy**'?

2. Please circle the choice closest to you opinion in the following *All – most – some – a few – few - none* of my students seem to be autonomous learners?

3. Autonomous learners succeed better in their studies. I *strongly disagree – disagree – agree - strongly agree*. (Why?)

4. Developing learner autonomy should be one of the objectives of education. I *strongly disagree – disagree – agree - strongly agree*. (Why?)

5. Algerian culture, society and family encourage students to be autonomous learners. I *strongly disagree – disagree – agree - strongly agree*. (Why?)

6. Is developing learner autonomy one of the objectives of your department's curriculum? (*Yes / No / Don't Know*)

7. In my teaching, I *do not - rarely - sometimes - usually - always* seek to develop my students' learning autonomy. (Why?)

8. Developing learner autonomy should be one of the educational objectives of the English department. I *strongly disagree – disagree – agree - strongly agree*. (Why?)

9. Teachers should seek to develop learner autonomy in their students. I *strongly disagree – disagree – agree - strongly agree*. (Why?)

10. How can your students develop their learning autonomy?

11. How can teachers develop their learners' autonomy?

Thank you for  
your valuable contribution

## **Appendix 2 - Learner Questionnaire**

Study on EFL Learner Autonomy - Learner Questionnaire

Dear student, please circle the choice closest to your opinion in the following statements. Thank you

Please circle the right information about yourself: I am a (1 <sup>st</sup> / 2 <sup>nd</sup> / 3 <sup>rd</sup> year / Master1 / Master2) student.
--

1. If I learn how to make decisions about what I should learn, how to learn, where, when, etc., it will have a *very negative - negative – neutral - positive - very positive effect* on the success of my studies because
2. Besides teachers' exams, if I evaluate my learning and progress, it will have a *very negative - negative – neutral - positive - very positive effect* on the success of my studies because
3. If I make decisions about what *I* need to learn especially outside class, it will have a *very negative - negative – neutral - positive - very positive effect* on the success of my studies because
4. If I think about and discuss what we are doing in class to learn, it will have a *very negative - negative – neutral - positive - very positive effect* on the success of my studies because
5. If I try to find my own learning strengths and weaknesses, it will have a *very negative - negative – neutral - positive - very positive effect* on the success of my studies because
6. If I motivate myself to keep studying for success, it will have a *very negative - negative – neutral - positive - very positive effect* on the success of my studies because
7. If I try to learn from other people (like friends, etc.) besides my teachers, it will have a *very negative - negative – neutral - positive - very positive effect* on the success of my studies because
8. My teachers **develop** my ability to do the tasks above (1-7). I **strongly disagree – disagree – agree - strongly agree** because
9. My teachers **encourage** me to do the tasks above (1-7). I **strongly disagree – disagree – agree – strongly agree** because
10. In general, the Algerian culture, society and family **prepare** me to make decisions for myself and be responsible of my life. I **strongly disagree – disagree – agree – strongly agree** because
11. The Algerian culture, society and family **encourage** me to make decisions for myself and be responsible of my life. I **strongly disagree – disagree – agree – strongly agree** because

Thank you for  
your valuable contribution

### Appendix 3 - Data Collected

**Abbreviations:** TQ = Teachers' Questionnaire, LQ = Learners' Questionnaire, ST = senior teachers (> 5 years teaching EFL), JT = junior teachers (> 5 years teaching EFL), PST = pre-service teachers (2<sup>nd</sup> year of the Master degree in teaching EFL), L1 = 1st year of the 3-year English degree, L2 = 2<sup>nd</sup> year, L3 = 3<sup>rd</sup> year, and M2 = 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the Master degree

**Autonomous learners succeed better in their studies. (TQ Item 3)**

strongly disagree			disagree			agree			strongly agree		
ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST
1 / 11	0 / 7	0 / 0	0 / 11	0 / 7	0 / 0	3 / 11	6 / 7	0 / 0	7 / 11	1 / 7	0 / 0
1 / 18 (5 %)			0 / 18 (0 %)			9 / 18 (50%)			8 / 18 (45%)		

In general, the Algerian culture, society and family prepare students to make decisions for themselves and be responsible of their lives. (LQ Item 10)

strongly disagree				disagree				agree				strongly agree			
L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2
3 / 15	12 / 50	6 / 47	0 / 0	1 / 15	11 / 50	11 / 47	0 / 0	7 / 15	8 / 50	23 / 47	0 / 0	4 / 15	19 / 50	7 / 47	0 / 0
21 / 112 (19 %)				23 / 112 (20.5 %)				38 / 112 (34 %)				30 / 112 (26.5 %)			

In general, the Algerian culture, society and family encourage students to be autonomous learners. (TQ Item 5; LQ Item 11)

strongly disagree			disagree			agree			strongly agree						
ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST				
3 / 11	2 / 7	0 / 15	6 / 11	5 / 7	9 / 15	2 / 11	0 / 7	4 / 15	0 / 11	0 / 7	2 / 15				
5 / 33 (15 %)			3 / 33 (61 %)			6 / 33 (18 %)			2 / 33 (6%)						
strongly disagree				disagree				agree				strongly agree			
L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2
4 / 15	6 / 48	3 / 47	0 / 12	3 / 15	9 / 48	8 / 47	3 / 12	6 / 15	25 / 48	28 / 47	7 / 12	2 / 15	8 / 48	8 / 47	2 / 12
13 / 122 (11 %)				23 / 122 (19 %)				66 / 122 (54 %)				20 / 122 (16 %)			

Developing learner autonomy should be one of the objectives of education (TQ Item 4)

strongly disagree			disagree			agree			strongly agree		
ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST
0 / 11	0 / 7	0 / 33	1 / 11	0 / 7	2 / 33	2 / 11	3 / 7	17 / 33	8 / 11	4 / 7	14 / 33
0 / 51 (0 %)			3 / 51 (6 %)			22 / 51 (43 %)			8 / 51 (51 %)		

Developing learner autonomy should be one of the educational objectives of the English department. (TQ Item 8)

strongly disagree			disagree			agree			strongly agree		
ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST
0 / 11	0 / 7	0 / 31	0 / 11	0 / 7	1 / 31	3 / 11	3 / 7	29 / 31	8 / 11	4 / 7	1 / 31
0 / 49 (0%)			1 / 49 (2%)			35 / 49 (78%)			10 / 49 (20 %)		

Teachers should seek to develop learner autonomy in their students. (TQ Item 9)

strongly disagree			disagree			agree			strongly agree		
ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST
0	0	0	0	0	2	3 / 11	4 / 7	19 / 33	8 / 11	3 / 7	12 / 33
0 / 51 (0%)			2 / 51 (4 %)			26 / 51 (51 %)			23 / 51 (45 %)		

Is developing learner autonomy one of the objectives of your department's curriculum? (TQ Item 6)

Yes			No			Don't Know		
ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST
4 / 11	3 / 7	18 / 33	3 / 11	1 / 7	4 / 33	4 / 11	3 / 7	11 / 33
25 / 51 (49 %)			8 / 51 (16 %)			18 / 51 (35 %)		

Teachers seek to develop their students' learning autonomy (TQ Item 7 + LQ Item 8)

do not			rarely			sometimes			usually			always		
ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST	ST	JT	PST
0 / 11	0 / 7	0 / 0	0 / 11	0 / 7	0 / 0	1 / 11	2 / 7	0 / 0	5 / 11	5 / 7	0 / 0	5 / 11	0 / 7	0 / 0
0 / 18 (0 %)			0 / 18 (0 %)			3 / 18 (17 %)			10 / 18 (56 %)			5 / 18 (28 %)		

strongly disagree				disagree				agree				strongly agree			
L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2
0 / 15	2 / 50	0 / 47	0 / 0	0 / 15	0 / 50	4 / 47	0 / 0	10 / 15	36 / 50	42 / 47	0 / 0	5 / 15	12 / 50	1 / 47	0 / 0
2 / 112 (2 %)				4 / 112 (3.5 %)				88 / 112 (78.5 %)				18 / 112 (16 %)			

Teachers encourage students to use strategies for autonomous learning (LQ Item 9)

strongly disagree				disagree				agree				strongly agree			
L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2
0 / 15	0 / 50	2 / 47	0 / 0	1 / 15	3 / 50	0 / 47	0 / 0	9 / 15	36 / 50	33 / 47	0 / 0	5 / 15	11 / 50	12 / 47	0 / 0
2 / 112 (2 %)				4 / 112 (3.5 %)				78 / 112 (69.5 %)				28 / 112 (25 %)			

The effect of learners making decisions about what they should learn, how to learn, where, when, etc., on their academic success (LQ Item 1)

very negative				negative				neutral				positive				very positive			
L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2
0 / 15	0 / 50	0 / 49	0 / 0	1 / 15	0 / 50	0 / 49	0 / 0	0 / 15	0 / 50	0 / 49	0 / 0	8 / 15	26 / 50	37 / 49	0 / 0	6 / 15	24 / 50	12 / 49	0 / 0
0 / 114 (0%)				1 / 114 (1%)				0 / 114 (0%)				71 / 114 (62%)				42 / 114 (37%)			

**The effect of self-assessment on the learners' success in their studies (LQ Item 2)**

very negative				negative				neutral				positive				very positive			
L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2
1/ 15	0/ 50	0/ 49	0/ 0	1/ 15	2/ 50	5/ 49	0/ 0	3/ 15	4/ 50	5/ 49	0/ 0	9/ 15	15/ 50	21/ 49	0/ 0	2/ 15	28/ 50	18/ 49	0/ 0
1 / 114 (1 %)				8 / 114 (7 %)				12 / 114 (11 %)				45 / 114 (39%)				48 / 114 (42%)			

**The effect of learners making decisions about what they need to learn especially outside class on their academic success (LQ Item 3)**

very negative				negative				neutral				positive				very positive			
L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2
0/ 15	0/ 50	0/ 49	0/ 0	1/ 15	2/ 50	2/ 49	0/ 0	0/ 15	4/ 50	2/ 49	0/ 0	5/ 15	19/ 50	31/ 49	0/ 0	9/ 15	25/ 50	14/ 49	0/ 0
0 / 114 (0 %)				5 / 114 (4 %)				6 / 114 (4 %)				55 / 114 (48%)				48 / 114 (42%)			

**The effect of learners thinking about what they are doing in class to learn on the success of their studies (LQ Item 4)**

very negative				negative				neutral				positive				very positive			
L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2
0/ 14	0/ 50	0/ 47	0/ 0	1/ 14	0/ 50	4/ 47	0/ 0	1/ 14	6/ 50	3/ 47	0/ 0	3/ 14	26/ 50	22/ 47	0/ 0	9/ 14	18/ 50	18/ 47	0/ 0
0 / 111 (0 %)				5 / 111 (4 %)				10 / 111 (9 %)				51 / 111 (46%)				45 / 111 (41%)			

**The effect of learners finding out their own learning strengths and weaknesses on their academic success (LQ Item 5)**

very negative				negative				neutral				positive				very positive			
L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2
0/ 15	0/ 50	0/ 49	0/ 0	0/ 15	3/ 50	1/ 49	0/ 0	2/ 15	4/ 50	0/ 49	0/ 0	5/ 15	13/ 50	17/ 49	0/ 0	8/ 15	30/ 50	31/ 49	0/ 0
0 / 114 (0 %)				4 / 114 (3.5 %)				6 / 114 (5 %)				35 / 114 (31%)				69 / 114 (60.5%)			

**The effect of learners motivating themselves to keep studying for success on the success of their studies (LQ Item 6)**

very negative				negative				neutral				positive				very positive			
L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2	L1	L2	L3	M 2
0/ 15	0/ 50	0/ 47	0/ 0	0/ 15	3/ 50	6/ 47	0/ 0	2/ 15	4/ 50	4/ 47	0/ 0	2/ 15	13/ 50	21/ 47	0/ 0	12/ 15	30/ 50	16/ 47	0/ 0
0 / 112 (0 %)				9 / 112 (8 %)				10 / 112 (9 %)				35 / 112 (31 %)				58 / 112 (52 %)			

**NB: 3 non-responses**

**The effect of learners learning from other people (like friends, etc.) besides teachers on their academic success (LQ Item 7)**

very negative				negative				neutral				positive				very positive			
L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2	L1	L2	L3	M2
0 / 15	0 / 50	0 / 47	0 / 0	1 / 15	1 / 50	5 / 47	0 / 0	3 / 15	8 / 50	6 / 47	0 / 0	10 / 15	19 / 50	30 / 47	0 / 0	1 / 15	22 / 50	6 / 47	0 / 0
0 / 112 (0 %)				7 / 112 (6 %)				17 / 112 (15 %)				59 / 112 (53 %)				29 / 112 (26 %)			

# *The Origin of the Algerian LMD Reform*

**Hind SAIL**  
**University of Blida2**

ملخص البحث بالعربية:

منذ سنة 2004 - 2005، قام عدد من الجامعات الجزائرية بالتحول إلى نظام دراسي جديد متمركز حول المتعلم أو ما يعرف بنظام الليسانس- ماستر- دكتوراه (ل- م- د). من خلال هذا النظام و الإصلاحات المترتبة عنه، عمدت الوزارة إلى إعادة التفكير في محتوى المناهج و البرامج الدراسية إلى جانب طرق و وسائل التدريس. الهدف من ذلك هو تمكين الجامعة الجزائرية من مجارات نظيراتها من الجامعات و تبنيها للمقاييس و المعايير الدولية

أصل نظام ل- م- د لم يكن وربما لا يزال غير معروف عند البعض من الباحثين، الأساتذة و الطلبة و في هذا الصدد ارتأينا صياغة هذا المقال كمحاولة لإثراء هذا الموضوع من خلال ومضة تاريخية نعرف بها مرجعية نظام ل- م- د. يهدف المقال أيضا إلى رسم نقاط الاختلاف الموجودة بين النظام الجزائري و بين النظام الأوروبي للتعليم العالي

## **Introduction**

Since 2004-2005, a number of universities in Algeria have implemented a learner-centered teaching approach, introduced, along a wave of reform in higher education, called the LMD system (Azzi 2012 - Bensemmane 2012- Idri 2012). Through this reform, the ministry's objective was to rethink curricula and syllabuses, teaching methods, techniques and materials and to align with international standards.

The origin of this reform has often been ambiguous for some, if not most Algerian university researchers, teachers and students. In an attempt to shed more light on this issue, the present historical review attempts to define the source of the LMD reform known as the Bologna Process and then to identify the differences between the two Algerian and European higher educational reform systems.

## **1. Bologna Process (BP) as a Top-down Model of Reform in Europe**

The BP (1999) is a top-down<sup>1</sup> model of reform since it is the outcome of a policy decision or a series of debates among initially four European ministers. Some issues caused the implementation of this reform and other factors caused its widespread all over Europe. The following section goes back in time to trace the source of the reform. Then, it displays the reform's most significant objectives and developments.

The origin of the BP idea started in France through some university reform attempts, often referred to as the Attali's Report (1998). The report has two basic aims: first, to enable transfer from universities to Grandes Ecoles through the harmonisation and segmentation of studies. Second, to reform university research institutes and make them contribute to the country's economy by comparing them with their American and British counterparts (Stanilav 2011).

In fact, the BP started as French and it ended-up, in a very short period of time, as a European issue. Actually, in 1998, four European ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the UK had met in Sorbonne in order to sign, a year later in Italy with 25 other European countries, the Bologna Declaration.

The Bologna Declaration 'is not a legal treaty' but 'a working program with precisely defined goals, steps and deadlines.' (Pechar 2007:112) Basically, the declaration aimed at creating a European unification process or the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. It also aimed at adopting the Anglo-Saxon (American and British) structure studies known as the three-plus-two or Licence plus Master degree (Stanilav 2011).

As envisaged in the BP, a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was indeed formed in 2010. The creation of the EHEA had direct implications in terms of developing a comparable level of higher education across countries in Europe. In fact, the meeting of European higher education ministers held in 2012 in Bucharest further underlined the importance of promoting mobility, employment and quality across European universities (Crosier et al. 2013)

The evidence presented so far demonstrates that the BP is a top-down model of reform since the agreement of four European ministers caused its implementation. The BP constitutes a working programme that aims at promoting mobility, employment and quality

across European universities. This was indeed achieved through the spread of the programme all over Europe and the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The impact of the BP was not confined to European countries. In fact, its effect went much beyond the European borders.

## **2. Worldwide Impact of the BP and Birth of the LMD Reform**

Since 2005, the BP has witnessed a worldwide impact. There seems to be a mutual interest for Europe to want to export the BP outside its territory and for non-European countries to embrace the BP higher educational reform. The adoption of the BP happened also in the Maghrebean countries, including Algeria.

While the first few years of the BP were concerned with establishing an intra-European coordination among European universities, the coming years witnessed an establishment of an extra-European coordination between Europe and other continents. Indeed, in May 2005, the Council of Ministers issued the following statement on the ‘external dimension’ of the EHEA in the Bergen Communiqué:

“We see the Higher Education Area as a partner of higher education system in other regions of the world, simulating balanced student and staff exchange and cooperation between higher education institutions. We underline the importance of intercultural understanding and respect. We look forward to enhancing the understanding of the Bologna Process in other continents by sharing our experiences of reform processes with neighbouring regions. We stress the need for dialogue on issues of mutual interest.” (West 2010)

Two years later at a ministerial conference in London, the Council of Ministers adopted a strategy called ‘the European Higher Education Area in the Global Setting’. This strategy outlined the following five priority areas: improving information on the European Higher Education Area, promoting European higher education to enhance its world-wide attractiveness and competitiveness, intensifying policy dialogue, strengthening cooperation based on

partnership and furthering the recognition of qualifications (West 2010). All these priorities further assert the willingness of European ministers to consolidate cooperation among higher education systems inside as well as outside Europe.

According to Crosier et al. (2013), numerous initiatives in different regions of the world indicate the impact of the BP worldwide. For example, in Latin America, the Inter-American Organisation for Higher Education initiated a programme to create a Latin American and Caribbean Higher Education Area. Similarly, in West Africa, 15 countries signed an agreement to promote student mobility. Initiatives were also made to create a South-East Asian higher education space. As a matter of fact, by the year 2012, 47 countries were implementing the BP.

It is significant to note that the aim behind exporting the BP to other countries of the world serves Europe in the first place. According to Aristotelis (2006), the previously described influence of the BP on other non-European countries will make European education attractive to foreigner ‘consumers’ and at the same time respond quickly to the impact of Globalisation<sup>2</sup> and prevent academic migration to the USA. In fact, the exportation of the BP benefits not only European but also non-European countries.

The interest in the BP by non-European signatory countries can be attributed, according to Crosier et al. (2013:70), to many reasons. The first is the ‘general appeal of the idea of integration and harmonisation of diverse higher education systems’ so that diplomas would be mutually recognised. All over the world, there exists an established belief that ‘regional cooperation is vital to facilitate the international mobility of students and workers’.

Also, certain ‘qualifications and mechanisms for Quality Assurance (QA) have proven to be of particular relevance for other regions’. In addition to the factors mentioned above, ‘for many developing countries, limited resources and prevention of brain drain were important reasons for increasing regional collaboration’ (Crosier et al. 2013:70). These are some of the reasons that led non-European countries to import the BP.

In fact, the European higher education model has had its influence on the Maghrebean countries before issuing the 2005 Bergen Communiqué statement reported above. The earlier and non-

official impact of a European system of education is due to the colonial legacy factor in the sense that the educational system in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco is historically based on the French system (West, 2010).

In Algeria and during this last decade, some of the French system BP principles and tools have been introduced in some piloting universities right in the 2004-2005 academic year. Briefly, those principles were the three-plus-two (Licence+Master/Bachelor+Master) degree and the credit transfer systems (Daghbouche, 2011- Bennouar, 2013).

To sum-up, the impact of the BP all over the world served the interests of both European and non-European countries. In reality, there were official decisions stated through the Bergen Communiqué (2005) and the conference of London (2007) to coordinate work among European and non-European countries in their commitment to the BP. The Maghreb seems to constitute an exception since the effect of the BP appeared earlier in those countries.

With higher-education traditions modeled after the French System, all three former French colonies: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco have structured their higher education systems along similar lines to the new Bologna-inspired French qualifications framework. Thus, the LMD system that is now part of the French/European higher-education landscape is being used as a model to promote higher-education reform in the Maghreb in general and in Algeria in particular. Even though the LMD reform derives from the BP, it has differences with its European counterpart.

### **3.Differences between the Algerian and the European Systems**

A comparison between the current higher educational systems both in Europe and Algeria reveals some differences despite the fact that they both derive from the Bologna Process. They differ in the reasons for undertaking the reform, in the funding system and in the reform's implications.

In Europe, the Bologna Process is considered by policy makers as a suitable choice which takes an economic power aspect. In Algeria, the situation is different in the sense that the adoption of the BP or the LMD system is a self-evident political task or rather be called a colonial heritage (West 2010).

Also, in Europe, the Bologna Process is a projection of Neo-liberal<sup>3</sup> changes in higher education. These changes reflect extreme capitalism<sup>4</sup> and reject social democratic policies. They have roots in Marketisation or what has been recently referred to as the New Public Management. This latter is an economic policy which supports less reliance on state and public funding; in other words, a fusion of public and private management (Stanilav 2011).

Some scholars (Aristotelis 2006) hold a skeptic view about the rapid growth of the knowledge society all over the world and the focus on efficiency in European universities; they have made a call to face or reduce the impact of Globalisation and the penetration of market forces into Higher Education.

Unlike European universities, Algerian universities still rely on Public Management. This latter has roots in what is known in economy as the Centralised policy or the Associative sector. In fact, all Algerian universities are financed by the central government or the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) which is responsible for providing free schooling for students. Some scholars (Daghbouche 2011), in reaction to this situation, have urged experts to establish a link between the Algerian university and the market place at national and international levels.

In Europe, the implications of the BP are very apparent in relation to the creation of quality assurance mechanisms and the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register (Crosier et al. 2013). However, in Algeria, the LMD system is superficially evaluated and insufficiently analysed.

Algerian decision makers' talks are setting up objectives around the structure of the system (Licence, Master and Doctorate degree levels), its grading mechanisms (Mobility and Credits) only rather than focusing also on the system's efficacy such as providing a teaching/learning of quality that permits students to become responsible future citizens (Djamaa 2013). Consequently, higher education in Algeria is often characterised by a lack of systematisation, flexibility and industrial linkage (Daghbouche 2011).

The above comparison gives a clear idea about the differences that exist between the European and the Algerian higher educational systems. Although they both advocate the BP, the university in the former has become an enterprise-like place and in the latter, it has

moved from a mass to ‘a masser’ higher educational system. And between the two, efficacy or quality will always remain an issue.

What really seems not to count against the Algerian University is that it preserved what Stanilav (2011) calls the positive characteristic of Social Capitalism<sup>5</sup>. According to him, this characteristic keeps university as a right to personal development rather than as an instrument of economisation and investment.

Algeria, like many European and non-European countries, has committed its higher educational policy to the implementation of the BP/ LMD Scheme. The decisions to adopt this new scheme are purely top-down and may result in an Educational Change as Fullan (2007:30) states: ‘mandated reforms by governments are among the direct causes and processes of any Educational Change initiation’. In other words, the LMD reform, as legislated and initiated by higher education policy makers may offer a possibility for implementing a real Educational Change process in Algeria.

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<sup>1</sup>There exist two approaches to achieve reforms in Higher Education. One that derives from the government decision makers, known as the **Top-down Model** and another one that considers the goals and objectives of the local authority actors (or community members), often called the **Bottom-up Model**(Sabatier P., 2005).

<sup>2</sup>**Globalisation:** Some scholars argue that Globalisation is an unprecedented 21<sup>st</sup> century reorganisation of time, space, people and things or the New World Order. It is the object of resistance and support in a global system of interconnected communication and transportation networks, economic markets and persons, covering almost the entire planet (Turner, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>**Neo-liberalism:** refers to a broad range of economic policies adopted since the 1970s by Western capitalist nations. This doctrine advocates measures to promote economic development and is used to guide the transition from planned to market economies in former communist countries. (Turner, 2006)

<sup>4</sup>**Capitalism:** in order for human and societies to survive, the economy has to be organised in a special manner, of which Capitalism is only one. There has to be production; what is produced has to be distributed and what has been distributed has to be consumed. (Turner, 2006)

<sup>5</sup>**Social Capital:** refers to intangible resources embedded within interpersonal relationships or social institutions. (Encyclopedia of Education, 2003).This form of capital arises from relationships between individuals, families, groups, communities that provide access to valuable benefits and/or resources. (Turner, 2006)



# **Pour une approche didactique des représentations des étudiants du département de français sur la compréhension de l'écrit/ compétence de lecture**

**IMANE OUAHIB**  
**Université Blida 2.**

## **Résumé**

A travers cet article nous nous proposons de rendre compte d'une partie des résultats que nous avons obtenus lors d'une recherche doctorale que nous avons menée et qui s'intéresse au développement de la compétence de lecture et son impact sur les représentations social des étudiants du département de français de l'université de Médéa. Notre objectif consiste à faire émergé les représentations des étudiants sur la lecture/ compréhension de l'écrit en français langue étrangère afin de mieux les comprendre .

Mots clés : représentations social – lecture/ compréhension de l'écrit – Français langue étrangère.

## **ملخص:**

من خلال هذا المقال نسلط الضوء على بعض النتائج التي تحصلنا عليها في بحثنا لرسالة الدكتوراه والتي تدور حول تطور كفاءة القراءة والفهم وأثرها على التمثيلات الاجتماعية لطلبة قسم اللغة الفرنسية، جامعة المدية. هدفنا يتمثل في إظهار تمثيلات الطلبة عند القراءة و الفهم بالفرنسية كلفة أجنبية حتى يتسنى فهمها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تمثيلات اجتماعية، قراءة/فهم، الفرنسية لغة أجنبية.

## **Abstract .**

**Through this article we propose to give an account of some of the results obtained during the doctoral research, that we have conducted, on the development of the Reading Skill and its impact on social representations of French Language Department students at the University of Médéa. We aim at bringing out the students' representations on Reading/Reading Comprehension of French as a foreign language, with the view of better understand them.**

**Key Words: social representations – reading/reading comprehension – French as a foreign language.**

## **Présentation et justification de notre thème de recherche**

Lors de notre expérience professionnel au département de français de l'université de Médéa de 2008 à 2012 nous nous sommes rendus

compte que le module de compréhension écrite n'apparaissait pas dans l'ensemble des modules enseignés tout au long de la préparation de la licence de français langue étrangère dans le cadre du système L.M.D alors que les étudiants du système classique bénéficiaient pendant les deux premières années de la licence de trois heures de compréhension écrite par semaine ; en faisant un peu de calcul, nous avons constaté que les étudiants du département de français inscrits en licence classique avaient en moyenne 180 heures d'enseignement-apprentissage de la compréhension de l'écrit.

Au regard de ces quelques constats observés sur le terrain pédagogique, en tant que chercheur, il ne fallait pas être influencé à priori par l'état des lieux. L'observation du terrain pédagogique nous a orientée vers la conception et l'élaboration au départ du cadre problématique général de notre recherche.

### **Problématique et hypothèse**

Toute recherche naît d'une situation quelconque. Le sujet que nous avons abordé a été motivé par une série d'interrogations que nous nous posons au cours de notre expérience socioprofessionnelle. Dans quelles conditions pédagogiques les étudiants du département de français de l'université de Médéa apprennent-ils la compréhension en lecture en français langue étrangère ? Est-ce que le fait d'apprendre ou non la compréhension de l'écrit pendant le cursus universitaire influence la compétence de lecture en F.L.E des étudiants du département de français de l'université de Médéa et quels types de résultats et d'effets pédagogiques peut-on observer chez-eux ?

Notre hypothèse a été posée comme suit :

Les étudiants arrivent en première année licence de français avec des représentations et des stratégies d'approche spécifique du projet de lecture (savoir/ savoir-faire). Et que la lecture en langue étrangère remettrait en question ces savoir-faire acquis de façon plus ou moins consciente. Par conséquent, si l'apprenant est guidé de manière adéquate dans cette activité, cela devrait l'amener à une prise de conscience plus forte et à une nette progression de sa compétence de lecture.

### **Introduction**

Définir la notion de représentation sociale est une tâche assez complexe, cela est dû selon Jodelet (1994) au fait que cette notion se situe comme une interface entre deux processus, l'un social et l'autre

psychique qui forment « un ensemble organisé d'opinions, d'attitudes, de croyances et d'informations se référant à un objet ou à une situation et qu'elles déterminent ensuite les actions des individus » (Abric, 2003, p.59). Transmettre des connaissances, des savoirs et savoir-faire, oblige à s'interroger sur les connaissances dans un contexte donné. Nos perceptions sont structurées et constituent une vision du monde spécifique à chaque individu en fonction de sa culture, de son appartenance sociale, de sa place dans la société en fonction aussi de ses expériences antérieures. La représentation reflète, par conséquent, un modèle personnel d'organisation de connaissances sur un sujet lié à la pratique.

En effet, en formation universitaire, les connaissances interfèrent nécessairement avec les représentations des étudiants, il est alors impératif d'en tenir compte. La démarche formative et pédagogique doit pouvoir accepter que l'apprenant puisse construire une connaissance différente de celle de l'enseignant. De ce fait, nous devons admettre que l'adulte en formation a toujours une expérience et des connaissances plus au moins en rapport avec le sujet sur lequel il va travailler. La représentation est en définitive le sens que la personne attribue à un thème. Toutefois, le sujet n'a généralement pas conscience de ses représentations. Elles ne sont d'ailleurs posées comme telles que lorsqu'elles représentent un objet d'étude. Du reste, les représentations ne sont pas directement observables, elles existent sous forme de systèmes liés entre eux.

Comme plusieurs auteurs (Abric, 1994 ; Garnier et Rouquette, 2000) l'expliquent, les représentations sociales conduisent à l'action, qui influence à son tour les comportements des individus appartenant à un groupe, en fonction de leur prise de position. Ainsi, les modalités d'enseignement/ apprentissage de la compréhension écrite, la poursuite d'une formation en FLE qui prend en charge l'enseignement apprentissage de la compréhension de l'écrit de manière explicite dans le cadre d'un module (système classique)<sup>1</sup> ou la poursuite d'une formation où le module de compréhension écrite n'existe pas (système LMD) contribuent à créer des représentations propre à chaque groupe d'étudiants du département de français de l'université de Médéa. Donc, l'analyse de ces représentations pourra nous aider à mieux comprendre la vision que se font les étudiants inscrits au département de français, de la compréhension en lecture et du lien qui peut exister entre celle-ci et leurs aspirations professionnelles (Abric, 1994).

### **Ancrage théorique**

le sociologue Emile Durkheim (1858- 1917) a été le premier à s'intéresser à la notion de représentation sociale. Ses travaux ont été repris et développés ensuite par Moscovici (1961) et ont connu une large diffusion pour devenir par la suite une notion clé de nombreuses sciences notamment celles relatives à l'éducation.

Pour Jodelet (1997), lorsqu'on analyse les représentations sociales, il faut étudier les différents éléments affectifs, mentaux et sociaux qui les composent tout en tenant compte de la cognition, du langage et de la communication qui déterminent les rapports sociaux qui affectent ces représentations sur lesquelles il est possible d'intervenir. Cette définition des représentations sociales est systématique et globale et va dans le sens de celle de Moscovici (1961).

Abric (1994) confirme cette vision par la définition qu'il donne à ce concept :

*La représentation est donc constituée d'un ensemble d'informations, de croyances, d'opinions et d'attitudes à propos d'un objet donné. De plus, cet ensemble d'éléments est organisé et structuré. (1994, p. 19).*

Garnier et Rouquette (2000), démontrent que la recherche en éducation, basée principalement sur les théories de la psychologie, utilise fréquemment des instruments d'évaluation psychométriques, séparant chacune des dimensions étudiées (attitudes, croyances, valeurs, perception, etc.). Pourtant, c'est l'ensemble de toutes ces dimensions, étant dynamiques et s'influencent entre elles, qui dicte les conduites et les comportements des individus en fonction du groupe auquel il appartient. Ainsi, les représentations sociales, comme le définit Moscovici, font interagir les croyances, les connaissances et les actions ensemble, formant un tout qu'il faut analyser comme tel.

### **La théorie du noyau central**

Nous nous proposons d'étudier les représentations sur la lecture/compréhension écrite en FLE en nous référant à la théorie du noyau central établie par Abric (1989). Selon Rouquette et Râteau « toute représentation est organisée autour d'un noyau central. » (1998,p.21). En effet, Abric (1994) montre que lorsqu'on s'intéresse aux éléments d'une représentation sociale, certains sont plus importants que d'autres, car ils sont générateurs de significations, de sens et assurent une fonction organisatrice dans la représentation. Ainsi il rend compte

de la structure et de l'organisation des représentations sociales par la théorie du noyau central selon laquelle une représentation sociale s'organise en un double système, central et périphérique. Cette théorie qui postule qu'une représentation sociale est organisée autour et par un noyau central s'appuie sur le fait qu'une représentation sociale est « une manifestation de la pensée sociale et que, dans toute pensée sociale, un certain nombre de croyances collectivement engendrées et historiquement déterminées, ne peuvent être remises en question car elles sont les fondements des modes de vie et qu'elles organisent l'identité et la pérennité d'un groupe sociale » (Abric, 2001, p. 83).

Le noyau central est donc l'élément fondamental de la représentation qui assure deux fonctions essentielles : la première fonction est organisatrice, elle détermine le lien entre les éléments de la représentation sociale ; et la deuxième fonction est génératrice, elle donne signification aux éléments de la représentation. De ce fait, les éléments du noyau sont dissociés du contexte qui les a produits, acquérant ainsi une plus grande autonomie qui augmente leur possibilité d'utilisation pour l'individu.

Les éléments du noyau doivent avoir une forte valence. C'est ce que Moliner (1994, 1996) définit en disant qu'une cognition centrale doit être plus « connexe » qu'une cognition périphérique. « D'un point de vue quantitatif, les éléments centraux se distingueraient donc des autres par une plus grande connexité et donc par une plus grande saillance. » (1996, p.63). Cependant pour appartenir au noyau, la connexité ou la saillance ne suffit pas, il faut rajouter comme le précisent Abric (1994) et Moliner (1996) la dimension qualitative rattachée au caractère « non négociable » des éléments centraux, qui sont autrement dit des « prescriptions absolues ».

### **Le système périphérique de la représentation sociale**

Le système périphérique de la représentation sociale se caractérise par l'hétérogénéité des éléments qu'il contient, les contradictions et l'acceptation d'un certain niveau de conflit entre les éléments qu'il autorise. Les éléments périphériques ne sont pas le contraire des éléments centraux : « les éléments centraux expriment la normalité (mais pas la certitude) alors que les éléments périphériques expriment le fréquent, parfois l'exceptionnel, mais jamais l'anormal » (Moliner, cité par Abric, 1994, p.28).

Ils assurent trois fonctions essentielles :

- Une fonction de concrétisation : ils présentent la représentation sociale en des termes concrets, compréhensibles et transmissibles ;
- Une fonction de régulation : ils adaptent la représentation sociale aux évolutions du contexte ;
- Une fonction de défense du noyau central : le noyau central résiste au changement, car sa transformation entraînerait un bouleversement complet.

Les éléments périphériques sont décrits, dans le cadre de la théorie d'Abric comme des schèmes, organisés autour du noyau central, assurant de façon immédiate le fonctionnement de la représentation comme grille de décryptage d'une situation.

### **Présentation de l'outil méthodologique**

Pour pouvoir mettre en œuvre notre recherche, nous sommes parti du postulat qu'une représentation sociale se définit par son contenu et son organisation. Le simple repérage du contenu d'une représentation ne suffit donc pas à la reconnaître et à la spécifier : c'est l'organisation de ce contenu qui est essentielle. Deux représentations définies par un même contenu peuvent être radicalement différentes si l'organisation de ce contenu, et donc la centralité de certains éléments, est différente. L'étude des représentations nécessite donc :

- Le repérage du contenu de la représentation ;
- L'étude des relations entre les éléments, de leur importance relative et de leur hiérarchie ;
- La détermination du noyau central.

Notre but est donc de mieux comprendre quelles sont les représentations sociales que se font les étudiants du département de français de l'université de Médéa de la lecture/ compréhension écrite. Pour ce faire, nous avons tenté de :

- 1- Dégager les représentations sociales de la lecture/ compréhension écrite des étudiants de la première et troisième année (licence classique et LMD) du département de français de l'université de Médéa.
- 2- Analyser les représentations qu'ils se font de la lecture /compréhension en FLE.

Nous avons donc tenté de mettre au point des outils de mesure complémentaires qui répondent au principe de triangulation<sup>2</sup> en utilisant plusieurs méthodes de collecte de données à fin de saisir les données dans toutes leurs richesses mais aussi pour améliorer la

validité interne de notre recherche en confrontant les données issues de plusieurs sources que nous portons à contribution :

- Deux questionnaires : le premier, est un questionnaire de données sociodémographique générales mais qui nous permet aussi de savoir quel est le cursus scolaire du sujet, ses attitudes vis-à-vis du français langue étrangère, la lecture en FLE et l'apprentissage de la compréhension de l'écrit. Quant au deuxième, il regroupe une série de questions sur la finalité des lectures des étudiants, l'objet de la lecture, les modalités de cette pratique et les déroulements de cette pratique en classe.
- Activité « d'association libre »;
- Des entretiens individuels.
- 

### **Interprétation des résultats**

Pour la majorité des étudiants interrogés, tous groupes confondus, préparer une licence de français langue étrangère a été un choix personnel motivé par l'amour de la langue française. Cependant, l'objectif visé n'est pas le même chez tous les étudiants. Si pour certains c'est pour améliorer leur niveau de langue qu'ils ont choisi de suivre ce cursus, pour d'autres, c'est pour atteindre un objectif professionnel (devenir enseignant de français langue étrangère).

La majorité des enquêtés témoignent utiliser le français quotidiennement et en dehors du cadre universitaire. Les résultats présentés ci-dessus, montrent clairement, certaines différences entre les trois groupes interrogés quant à la pratique de la lecture et sa finalité.

Si l'amour de la langue française semble unanime chez l'ensemble de notre échantillon, celui de la lecture en français langue étrangère l'est moins. Une grande majorité des 3<sup>ème</sup> LMD et des 1<sup>ère</sup> année LMD déclare lire par obligation, afin d'apprendre la langue. Ils voient dans la lecture un outil d'apprentissage afin d'acquérir des compétences linguistiques. Alors que l'objectif des étudiants de 3<sup>ème</sup> année classique dépasse le seul apprentissage de la langue et vise aussi la découverte de la culture française pour connaître et comprendre les différents styles d'auteurs et élargir leurs connaissances culturelles.

Les données d'enquête collectées par questionnaire permettent de dresser un certain portrait des pratiques de lecture en français langue étrangère en 1<sup>ère</sup> et 3<sup>ème</sup> année LMD et 3<sup>ème</sup> année classique telles

qu'elles ont été déclarées par les étudiants. Nous remarquons que ces pratiques diffèrent assez peu entre les trois groupes. Il apparaît un fort consensus entre les différents groupes de notre échantillon qui confirmerait que l'apprentissage et la lecture vont nécessairement de pair.

Les habitudes de lectures des étudiants des trois groupes en disent long sur leurs représentations sur l'acte de lire. En effet, nous avons remarqué que le choix de leurs lectures est fait par rapport aux contenus des différents modules du cursus. Ce sont soit des livres imposés ou conseillés par les enseignants. Malgré la différence de niveau théoriquement avérée entre les étudiants de notre échantillon (1<sup>ère</sup> et 3<sup>ème</sup> année), l'association de l'acte de lecture à l'apprentissage de contenu théorique est clairement perçue à travers les déclarations des étudiants des trois groupes.

Si les habitudes de lecture semblent se rejoindre dans les trois groupes, la fréquence de lecture demeure différente. En effet, nous remarquons que celle des 1<sup>ère</sup> et 3<sup>ème</sup> année LMD est beaucoup moins importante (un livre par bimestre) de celle des 3<sup>ème</sup> année classique (un livre par mois).

Toutes les expériences et les connaissances accumulées tout au long du parcours scolaire contribuent à la construction des représentations sociales que se font ces étudiants de leurs compétences de lecture. Ainsi, nous avons remarqué que presque la totalité des étudiants de 3<sup>ème</sup> année LMD à des doutes sur son niveau et se considère comme ni bon ni mauvais en lecture. Ce doute est en relation directe avec leurs difficultés de compréhension notamment des livres littéraires. Les étudiants de 3<sup>ème</sup> et 1<sup>ère</sup> année LMD contrairement à ceux de la 3<sup>ème</sup> année classique semblent avoir peu conscience de la complexité cognitive de la lecture et de l'importance des connaissances antérieures, ils disent ne pas réfléchir sur leurs manières de lire et d'accéder au sens. Les connaissances pragmatiques de nos trois groupes sur l'acquisition/ apprentissage de la lecture, les mécanismes de compréhensions et l'enseignement de cette compétence sont assez différentes d'un groupe à l'autre. Si le groupe de 3<sup>ème</sup> année classique semble avoir de bonnes connaissances contrairement à celui de la 1<sup>ère</sup> année LMD, c'est le groupe des 3<sup>ème</sup> année LMD qui a retenu notre attention. En effet, nous remarquons une contradiction dans les résultats de ce groupe, d'un côté, ils déclarent qu'il n'est pas utile de connaître le sens de chaque mot du texte pour pouvoir accéder au sens. Et de l'autre côté, ils préconisent l'utilisation systématique du

dictionnaire pour construire le sens pendant la lecture. Différentes explications peuvent contribuer à comprendre ces contradictions. Il est possible qu'il y ait chez ces étudiants un écart entre les savoirs qu'ils ont des mécanismes de compréhension, acquis de manière plus ou moins inconsciente, et de leur savoirs faire en compréhension écrite. Selon la théorie des représentations sociales, ces résultats contradictoires peuvent s'expliquer en termes de schèmes étranges ( Garnier et Rouquette, 2000). Ces schèmes étranges peuvent être vus comme des indicateurs de changement car ils arrivent lorsque les personnes doivent s'adapter à de nouvelles pratiques ou à des situations changeantes ou complexes ( Garnier et Rouquette, 2000). Ainsi, il se peut que les étudiants de 3<sup>ème</sup> année LMD connaissent une période de transformation de leur représentation de la lecture depuis leur entrée à l'université.

Selon la théorie du noyau central (Abric, 1988), tous les éléments au sein d'une représentation n'ont pas le même statut. Certains sont dit centraux alors que d'autres sont dit périphériques.

L'analyse de l'activité d'association menée avec les trois groupes de notre échantillon a révélé que les représentations des étudiants de 1<sup>ère</sup> et 3<sup>ème</sup> année LMD sur la lecture avaient le même noyau central. Ils associent la lecture à « culture » et « apprentissage », ces éléments font partie de leur définition de l'objet de la représentation, lecture, en question. Cependant, le noyau central des représentations des étudiants de 3<sup>ème</sup> année classique est composé de « apprentissage », « acquisition » et « culture ». en se basant sur le modèle associatif des schèmes cognitifs de base (Guimelli et Rouquette, 1992), il apparaît clairement que l'association fournie par les trois groupes au mot inducteur renvoie à une relation d'action (apprentissage, acquisition) donc relatif, selon le modèle des schèmes cognitifs, au schème praxie. Cependant, nous considérons le terme « culture » comme attribut de la lecture.

En comparant les éléments périphériques des représentations des étudiants des trois groupes sur la lecture, nous nous sommes rendu compte de la différence des éléments périphériques les plus éloigné du noyau central des groupes de 1<sup>ère</sup> et 3<sup>ème</sup> LMD et classique.

Pour le groupe de la 3<sup>ème</sup> LMD, « difficultés » est l'élément périphérique le plus éloigné du noyau central et donc considéré comme stéréotypes ou croyance. Pour les étudiants de 1<sup>ère</sup> année c'est « activité individuelle » alors que dans le groupe de 3<sup>ème</sup> année classique c'est le terme « analyse » qui est considéré comme élément

périphérique le plus éloigné du noyau central. Le jugement de ces trois groupes sur la lecture en dit long sur comment ils décryptent la réalité. En interrogeant les étudiants sur leurs difficultés lors de la lecture, nous avons remarqué que celles déclarées par les étudiants de la 1<sup>ère</sup> année LMD et la 3<sup>ème</sup> année LMD se rejoignent. Les deux groupes s'expriment sur leurs difficultés au niveau de la microstructure : la reconnaissance des mots (Giasson, 1990). En effet, ces étudiants identifient leurs méconnaissances du vocabulaire nouveau, utilisé dans un texte comme un écueil à leur compréhension. Cependant, ces mots nouveaux ne semblent pas bloquer la compréhension de leurs camarades de la 3<sup>ème</sup> année classique qui déclarent arriver aisément à dépasser et à construire le sens du texte.

Les difficultés soulevées par le groupe des 3<sup>ème</sup> année classique sont de l'ordre de la macrostructure, relatives au processus d'intégration : retrouver le sens caché d'un texte (Giasson, 1990).

Ces différences de difficultés nous permettent de situer le niveau des étudiants en compréhension de l'écrit, s'arrêter à chaque fois au niveau de la microstructure peut amener une surcharge cognitive chez le lecteur et freiner la construction du sens. Sachant que la connaissance du lexique utilisé influence directement la compréhension du texte (Fayol et Morais, 2004). Il est primordial pour un lecteur de développer des stratégies pour palier à la méconnaissance de certains mots, d'autant plus que cette situation est courante dans la vie d'un lecteur.

D'après les étudiants de 3<sup>ème</sup> et 1<sup>ère</sup> année LMD outre la relecture, la seule chose à faire pour dépasser l'obstacle et comprendre le texte c'est l'utilisation du dictionnaire. Résoudre ses problèmes en cherchant les mots dans le dictionnaire pour trouver le sens est une stratégie intéressante mais, ils ne font pas appel à leurs connaissances et à leurs représentations sur la langue : ils ne mentionnent pas observer la morphologie du mot ni s'interroger sur sa classe. Les lecteurs experts démontrent un grand nombre de stratégies avant, pendant et après la lecture (Falardeau et Gagné, 2012).

Un autre point, déclaré par l'ensemble des étudiants a attiré notre attention : « lire beaucoup...ou beaucoup lire », l'imprégnation intensive par la lecture aide à améliorer sa compétence de lecture. Tous les étudiants partagent cette même croyance, pour eux c'est à force de lire tout le temps qu'on arrive à dépasser ses difficultés et qu'on devient bon lecteur.

## **En conclusion**

Nous pouvons dire que les résultats de l'activité d'association et de l'entretien confortent ceux obtenus à l'issue de l'enquête par questionnaire et décrivent avec précision les représentations des étudiants dans les trois groupes de notre échantillon. Nous sommes face à trois profils tout à fait différents. Le premier est celui des étudiants de la 1<sup>ère</sup> année LMD qui de par leur cursus secondaire se représentent la lecture en français langue étrangère comme attribut de la culture qui préconise un apprentissage d'une activité qui reste individuelle. Le deuxième profil est celui des étudiants de la 3<sup>ème</sup> année classique, justifiant d'un apprentissage explicite de la compréhension de l'écrit pendant leur cursus universitaire se représente la lecture non seulement dans une optique d'apprentissage mais aussi d'acquisition tout en considérant l'aspect culturel et du travail à faire pour accéder à la compréhension. Le troisième profil est celui des étudiants de la 3<sup>ème</sup> année LMD qui malgré leur cursus universitaire, ont les mêmes représentations que leurs camarades de 1<sup>ère</sup> année à savoir, comme attribut de la culture et qui préconise un apprentissage ceci dit ils l'associent à difficultés.

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<sup>1</sup> 2012/2013 est l'année de la dernière promotions d'étudiants aux département de français de l'université de Médéa.

<sup>2</sup> Vu les particularités des représentations sociales, différents auteurs proposent d'utiliser une pluri-méthodologie dans l'étude des représentations pour tenter de cerner la complexité des produits sociaux (Abric, 1994).