



PROJECT MUSE®

Letter to Zohra Drif

Hélène Cixous, Eric Prenowitz

College Literature, 30.1, Winter 2003, pp. 82-90 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2003.0007>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/39022>

Letter to Zohra Drif

Hélène Cixous

*Hélène Cixous teaches English
literature at Paris VII. She is the
author of **The Laugh of the
Medusa.***

I have not written this letter. It is still there. Speechless, present, shy, it is my letter to Zohra Drif. It stays with me, unwritten, patient. I have a blank letter that does not leave. It is addressed To Zohra Drif. But it is held back. This letter has its reasons. For not writing itself. For not vanishing. It has been addressing Zohra Drif in Algeria on my behalf for decades. What halts it just before the paper and suspends it between my shores, my countries, is a long story. The loss of words I never had.

It all began in January 1957. When I wanted to write my letter to Zohra Drif. Such an impulse broke out in me. I was reading in the Paris newspapers what was happening in Algeria. The birth war raged. The war I had despaired of, and which had bloomed at last on the day of my despair, in November 1954, the great quake of time, the shackled country had finally broken its fetters, and it shook the pillars of the metropolitan temple at last! The day before, I had left, I had fled this earth in pain that I could nei-

ther caress nor help nor call my mother without offending it. I arrive in France, a foreign distinguished elegant country. I arrive in France, I thought. There I am not. I can't get my footing. This country is not my country. I am savage, a bit furious, alarmed, overwhelmed to the point of being crushed by its constructions and its customs, I can't manage to arrive. I go nuts, I goat and ram. I stumble on the carpets of the bourgeois buildings I who went barefoot yesterday. But no nostalgia, I had not been at home behind the fences of my native cradle.

From Algeria my love my terror I am liberated by the Algeria that is being born. She frees herself. It is this combat—which I had despaired of—that liberates me at last: I can go my way without the dread, the shame of powerless anger following me, and without remorse. My childhood grief at having been fated to a thankless birth in spite of myself stops persecuting me. Africa gives me my first departure. Algeria freeing itself frees me of the sins I did not commit and which had been deposited as a poisoned gift in my cradle.

I who had been born under the guise of French citizenship, a frail semblance dating nonetheless, on the side of my father, an Algerian Jew with Spanish ancestors, to 1867, and which was broken overnight by the anti-Jewish laws of Vichy. In *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, Jacques Derrida has described this maneuver, unique in history, of the French State subjugated to Hitler, which made us, we who were "French" but Jewish, in October 1940 and for two years, we who were born "French," into passport-less, law-less, shelter-less, identity-less, school-less, profession-less people.

The sea alone, our good sea mother, protected us from the deportation that took those like us captured in France. We fell outside inside. The outside became my inside. I have never left it since. My German Jewish grandmother with all our German-speaking family had just lived through the same annulment. How could I have been able to believe that we were "French," or want to be when we were recitizenized after 1943, puppets of the whims of a State that established its authority on a colonial Empire the jewel of which was North Africa. I was three years old when I was driven out of the true garden into which I had just been admitted as the daughter of an officer doctor of the French army, and which had never been open to the "natives." In October 1939 my father Doctor Cixous was lieutenant doctor in the French army, on the Tunisian front. In October 1940 the little girl that I was saw him unscrew his doctor's plaque from the door of our house: he was no longer French or doctor. Jew.

Gates as high as the sky, invisible and mobile ones, used to encircle my childhoods. I was always separated from my true kin as from myself.

Undecidable but decided and condemned by an iniquitous State to be one or another of the things I wasn't. I survived between the bars.

Algeria had given me the departure. But France could not give me the arrival. In 1955-56 I lived in the French language, in books, in paper. That war, in my native cities, was a harsh springtime.

That is when I learned from the newspapers that in the Algiers Casbah a leader of the *FLN* and his young woman companion were holding out against the assaults of the French army. I read the instantaneous legend. In the Casbah, the oldest of Algiers's cities, the most folded up, the convoluted one, the cascade of alleyways with the odors of urine and spices, the secret of Algiers, and, if I had been able to name it then by its hidden name, I would have called it the savage genitals, the antique femininity. Yes the Casbah with its folds and its powerful and poor people, its hunger, its desires, its vaginality, for me it was always the clandestine and venerated genitals of the City of Algiers.

And it resisted rape.

From the bottom of my voluntary internment in France, as a spectator without earth, without roof, without nationality of the soul, I watched the play that was showing in the sacred places of my antiquity. Shakespeare in Algeria. The Act of the Casbah. Enter: Zohra Drif. This is fate and it halts. I might have been born Zohra and I was Hélène but a bit of Zohra in me had never stopped chafing at the bit.

Enter Zohra. I know the footpaths and the roof terraces well. It is in the Casbah that my mother the Kabla delivers babies. The Casbah, place of nativities.

I cried out with joy. So there was a woman who was freeing the Casbah. She has blond frizzy hair, a calm body—I must stop—I shall return

This whole story had begun in the preceding act in 1947. The set: Lycée Fromentin, the antithesis of the Casbah. It is the most beautiful school in the world. A mythical place. Imagine an old Moorish palace in terraced gardens, where amongst the enormous trees stood the flower birds with orange beaks of the *Strelitzia*. The path that led to the classroom buildings is flanked with bushy slopes. The fine house on a small hill, nested on the heights of Algiers. But on these primitive beauties a warlike masquerade is spread: during the World War which is moving further and further from its walls this school was the headquarters of high French political and military authorities. So the house was adorned with a camouflage that remains and monumentalizes it. The walls are painted with frescos of fake khaki and brown trees. *Trompe l'oeil*. Everything is *trompe l'oeil*. My father, coming from ebullient Oran to live in a poor neighborhood of Algiers, enrolls me there, at Lycée Fromentin in the fall of 1947. What he does not know: this school is governed right to

the depths of its soul by the spirit of the *numerus clausus*. The spirit of Vichy. What is the “Numerus Clausus?” The *closed number*. These Latin words ennoble a mental leper: Closed number means exclusion: Even yesterday the beautiful school had closed its doors to Jews, as had all public places, but not totally: the law made it an obligation to exclude the Jews while including one or two percent of alibi and hostage Jews. Once the war was over all these legal racist measures had been consigned to oblivion. But at Fromentin, the pleasure of exclusion had not been forgotten. A tradition had simply been perpetuated secretly. This is how I was a student in a school where the Jews could be counted on the fingers of one hand. I was almost always the only Jew in my class. My father died at the dawn of 1948 without having had the time to take the measure of the sickness. Yet even in 1947 he had been obliged to intervene twice against an illegal insidious Catholicization of the teaching.

Lycée Fromentin could not be detested. It was a femininity, modern, sumptuous, luminous gymnastic fields, there were eucalyptuses, secret corridors, underground passages, one day there was snow, during playtime in the edenic courtyard we fought around the old Maria Carabosse a little shrunken fairy in the form of a broken stick of barley sugar who sold barley sugar sticks. But I could not love it freely. It smelled of Vichy in the fine corridors and offices.

I lived on the edge, irritated, and each year more strongly nourished with vigilance, with revolt. I detected the lingering odors of racism and colonialism in the teachers. A cult to France reigned and was not questioned. We learned France. It was only the French teachers come from France who brought the fresh air of a foreigner. Most of the others, “Algerian French,” lived comfortably seated on the divans of a volcano, as blind ladies used to live before the Revolution.

Note that there was no explicit discourse. It would have facilitated my life and my private mission. But everything was sign and symptom. So I did my political reading alone, and with no one in whom to confide my suspicions, young, not yet trained, but having always been on alert. The students, my companions all French and Christian were less insidious and perilous than the teachers. Occupied with childhood in the enchanted gardens of Fromentin. Inside there was only Algeria without Algerians. It was natural that one of them should say to another who would not give up her eraser: “don’t be a Jew.” The day I heard that sentence I was 11 years old, I asked for an explanation. The other, older, gave it to me: it means: don’t be stingy. I undertook a protest that was not understood. For the other girl that expression was a normal part of French culture. My father had just died.

There were only invisible signs: absence of Jews, absence of Muslims. Brilliant absences that dazzled me and took my breath away. How can one

make people see the invisible? Colonial Algeria, champion of making-invisible: they did not even need apartheid: they could walk through the Algerian crowds without seeing them. They said, “the Arabs” (and not Algerians: Algerian is a revolutionary word) and it was a magic word: they no longer saw the crowds or the feverish looks of offended men, or the timid women, or a destitution that I never saw anywhere else before finding it again in India, or the anger of the humiliated, or the hate of the oppressed, or the ulcers, or the rags. The “Whites” called “Europeans” climaxed with all their force. I have never seen such an appetite. Even today I feel suspicion and repulsion with regard to the enormous jubilation of the French from Algeria. I saw it as a symptom: the dance before the storm.

At Lycée Fromentin the camouflage was unfurled on all of reality.

I saw the invisible. I heard the furtive shifts of meaning in the words of the French and History-Geography teachers. I perceived the cover-ups. And no one to complain to.

My brother, a student at Lycée Bugeaud, in town, had the good fortune of being in a theater where everything was said. Insults flew. There were Jews and Muslims amongst the colonialist majority. So they could fight it out, a great relief in the thirst for justice.

But at Lycée Fromentin, a veil muffled all the senses. Reduced to powerlessness, I thrashed about like an animal: the words were missing. The poison circulated on the sly. I dreamed of battles. I took my end-of-term tests like the champion of a cause that did not exist—and was not recognized.

At 13 I went to spend the summer in England my first country abroad, and I swore I would leave my prison at the first possible moment.

That was when three Muslim girls appeared at the school, in my class. They immediately entered, with an absolute privilege, into my memory forever. In one season they became unforgettable for me. And I knew nothing. Except that for me they were the incarnations of the truth. But which truth?

Samia Lakhdari, Leila Khaled, Zohra Drif. One brunette, one redhead, one blond. One smiling, one laughing, one serious. It is very difficult to tell a story that had no events. This story happened to me. What was happening to me, this I knew, was Algeria. This arrival of three young girls had a prophetic dimension for me, that is how I experienced it. Alone. There were no names for it. It was Biblical. I had the message. Not that they themselves gave it to me. But I had received it. I was attached to their presence.

All of this was not said. My life had changed horizons, directions. I did not say it. I had a feeling of community. With them. But to say so was hopeless and senseless. It would have been in anticipation, a declaration of love for the future still well hidden behind the foliation of Fromentin. It was *my* life that was transported onto another planet. I was the one who needed them,

their future freedom, so that mine would be able to blossom. I also needed in an indefinable way a discovery, a reunion, an alliance, because with them I made sense to myself. I called to them in silence and without hope. I was behind the bars of a mad destiny, cooped up with the French my non-fellow creatures, my adversaries, my hands held out toward my kind, on the other side, invisible hands held out to my own tribe who could not see me. For them, surely I was what I was not: a French girl. My ancient desire for them, my desire for innocence, for purification, inaudible. There was no *us*.

My solitude doubled. But I was more cheerful. I laughed a lot with my three friends, whom I loved for the remote years and who did not know to what point of necessity I loved them. In the narrow neighborhood of the school they were always my distant ones, my young girls in bloom, they lived in me, I did not inhabit them. I could tell a thousand details about this chaste and audacious relationship. But the letter to Zohra awaits me.

I left Algeria in 1955. Without grief. With no idea of returning. I removed my bandages. Enough silenced. Enough swallowed. I removed my gag. I began. At last I stopped being the one I wasn't. And I was the foreigner that I was. Unknown. Alleviated of my double, the anger that had accompanied me until then. I no longer had to carry the sins of France. I, who as a child, had been chased out and execrated by France. At last there was war, the just war.

According to the tradition of my father, my brother a medical student in Algiers was committed in favor of the Algerians' struggle for independence, as I was naturally in France. We were no longer those tied up scorned and misunderstood hostages of the tragic comedy of nationalities. There was at last future, cause, promise: Algeria for the Algerians. Not for me of course. At last I could enjoy being delivered from the usurpation, the theft, the expropriation, the slavery, the French crimes.

Then I read the newspaper: Zohra Drif armed in the Casbah. Alongside Yacef Saadi. It was the message. The summary of the books written above us. We are characters in a great narrative. We go line by line on the page without ever seeing the volume in which we figure. But it happens that the Author lifts us one day out of the chapter and, holding us above the plot of our existences, briefly reveals to us the architecture of the whole, the coordination of details, the concordance of metaphors and, for an instant, we see exterior to ourselves the face of our story.

I had my vision. I was taken with exultation. The incandescence murmured: write a letter to Zohra. Yes, yes, a letter to Zohra Drif. Something, a hello, a joy.

I did not write it. Not with words. It lay in my desire in patience. It searched for its words, its forms, its tone, its address. I searched. Where should

I address it? False question. Once written it would have found a way to Zohra in the Casbah. That was not it. I did not write it. It fluttered near my shoulder. I smiled sideways to it. I would write it soon. I would write: Zohra, it's Hélène. No that's not it.

It would say: Zohra, Algeria, at last, you, I had sensed it coming, I had not hoped for it, there was something behind your eyes that did not show itself, a guard, at last you. It would say: "we have suffered so much separately, ground our teeth, chewed bitter mistrust." No. I was nineteen, I was experiencing the impossible letter. It was the first time. In the impossible letter we want to explain everything to God, we commune, we are neither humble nor proud, we recognize and we are recognized, between us incomprehension reigns respectfully, we speak, superhuman without shame and without modesty, we spend nights seeing ourselves write it, from hour to hour we rise, we approach, at dawn we renounce we are still too far from the good height. We are so little and so confused, we will write it tomorrow.

What I did not want to write was a letter from Lycée Fromentin. I wanted the impossible one, the only one that would be worthy of the immensity of the event.

How could I write with justice to Zohra, Algeria? The letter to Zohra did not leave me. There are letters we do not write, that does not mean they don't exist. Changed into prayer and thought, they stay near us, for decades, ready to be, unforgotten, sublime. Waiting for us to have attained the region where they will be able at last to land in sentences. In this letter I said: Zohra, then the words went off and all the history of Algeria unfolded from the Atlas up to the Tell, the paper did not contain the contours I loved without having ever seen them.

It was a letter in the image of my fatality of Algeria: mute, ardent, faithful, enthusiastic. Forbidden. I can talk about it because it is still there. It did not go by. I did not throw it into forgetfulness. It knows this. I did not deny it. It is the portrait of my own in existence, phantom that I was as a child and young girl, surreptitious and unknown at school. I keep it, unfinished. It is the only photograph of my soul that I accept as a witness of my extreme Algerian impotence.

Are there other reasons for this non-happening? The fear of love the fear of hate. Many others, no doubt, but I do not know them.

When I met Hamida in 1993, my first Algerian to come close to me, in reality, sitting beside me sitting beside here at a table as if absolutely nothing separated us, no mountains, no colonial infamy, neither religion nor wall nor secular silence, when I found myself and she, Hamida, speaking trembling to me about the severed heads, the slit throats, the Assassination that has taken over this country, and nothing shut me in I was not driven out, within the

first hour that united us, I asked Hamida for news from Zohra Drif. As if my silent letter had waited forty years for Zohra to answer.

N.B. A few names and dates:

1997: Forty years later:

—Zohra Drif, my mother says, was a great resistance fighter.

—She's a very important woman, says my friend Nourredine, a young Algerian born in 1964, all of Algeria knows her. She's not someone who has been forgotten. The terrorist group of Yacef Saadi. Djamal Hamani, a poet, who was in his group, talks about her all the time. You see Zohra Drif a lot on TV. She talks of Democracy. When you say: Yacef Saadi and Zohra Drif, you say: "the Battle of Algiers."

"The Battle of Algiers," January 1957, fateful month in the history of the war. Point of no-return.

November 1954: The Algerian War breaks out. It is commanded by seven "historical leaders" of the FLN (National Liberation Front).

(1955 I arrive in France I am the first person in my family to imagine staying there.)

September 1956: Bombs explode in the cafes popular amongst the "French" of Algiers, in the center of the city. These are the famous attacks of the *Milk Bar*, of the *Cafétéria*. The persistence of fear spreads in the arteries of the City. The French army is everywhere. There will be 450,000 men enlisted in the war.

End of 1956: Several of the principal leaders of the FLN hide in the Casbah. The Casbah: the oldest neighborhood of Algiers, entirely Muslim.

January 1957: Larbi Ben M'hidi, one of the great leaders of the FLN suggests the idea of an insurrectional strike. It will take place on 28 January. It will catch the imagination of the world and attract the attention of the UN. The strike is preceded on 26 January by a spectacular series of bomb attacks.

Yacef Saadi is charged with executing the most sensational of the episodes in this tragic play. Time bombs fabricated in the Casbah are placed in the most familiar, famous cafes in the center of Algiers, by the hands of the young girls of the group. (Zohra Drif, Samia Lakhdari, Djamila Bouhired, Djamila Bouazza.)

La Cafétéria, the *Coq Hardi*, the *Otomatic*, are blown up with many victims. Algiers no longer sleeps. The old Casbah makes the gilded young French Algiers tremble.

In vain, two thousand paratroopers comb the Casbah. Yacef Saadi and his companions, in the Casbah, stay no longer than two days in the same hide-out. He is hidden at 14 rue du Nil. With Zohra Drif and Larbi Ben M'hidi.

He is hidden at 5 rue Caton.

He is at 7 Impasse de la Grenade. The French Army searches without stopping.

It is time to leave the Casbah, they think.

Larbi Ben M'hidi goes to hide with friends in the European neighborhood. On 23 February he is arrested. On 4 March he is "interrogated" to death by a Special Section of Paratroopers. Continually supported by Zohra Drif, Yacef Saadi avoids all the traps. He goes disguised as a woman, covered with a Haik, his face veiled. They escape all the dangers.

1962: Algeria is Independent.

Rue d'Isly, one of the two main streets of Algiers is henceforth called rue Ben M'hidi Larbi. In 1947 my father had opened his Radiology clinic there. That is where my midwife mother remained until 1971. A hundred meters from the *Milk Bar*.

—Today Yacef Saadi has retired from politics.

—Zohra Drif married one of the seven historical leaders, Rabah Bitat, who was the president of the National Assembly and several times minister. He is the only one still living. In Algeria he is called "the Authentic."

1981: Large women's marches were organized in Algiers to protest against the "Code of the Family," which the Algerian feminists call the "code of infamy." At the head of the procession, I am told, the elders marched, the famous resistance fighters Djamila Bouhired and Zohra Drif.

1984: The code of infamy, close to the *Charia*, is voted. It annuls the Constitution of 1976 that guaranteed civil rights for women.

Translated by Eric Prenowitz