Journal of Informatics Education and Research
ISSN: 1526-4726
Vol 6 Issue 2 (2026)

Ambiguous Belonging and the Representation of the Feminine Self in a Colonial Context in Slim Betka's Isabelle

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Received : 07-12-2025 ; Accepted : 15-02-2026 ; Published : 24-04-2026

Abstract:
This study sheds light on the problematic nature of ambiguous belonging and the representation of the feminine self in Isabelle by Salim Bouteqa. The protagonist is placed in a complex existential situation within a colonial space that reshapes both individual and collective identity. The novel reveals the character's fragmentation between two conflicting affiliations, rendering the feminine self a wavering entity caught between assimilation and rejection. Within this context, the female body becomes a symbolic battlefield where cultural and political dimensions intersect. Belonging is thus portrayed not as a free choice but as a coercive burden imposed upon the self. Through a charged discourse, the novel grants the woman a position that transcends subordination, establishing a feminist voice that resists the erasure of the self in the colonial era. Accordingly, this research seeks to analyze the processes through which the feminine self is constructed within the colonial context and to trace the representations of identity-related belonging.

Keywords: Belonging – Identity – Feminine Self – Colonialism – Postcolonialism – Representation

Introduction:

The historical novel constitutes a fertile ground for re-reading the past from alternative perspectives, where memory intersects with imagination and narrative with identity. In a colonial context, the act of writing becomes a space of symbolic resistance in which forgotten and marginal figures are revived in order to interrogate the dominant discourse and unveil its mechanisms of exclusion and representation. This study therefore seeks to examine the representation of the female self within a colonial framework through Slim Betka's novel Isabelle, with a particular focus on the duality of ambiguous belonging and female identity in a narrative space that reimagines a controversial historical figure.

This study falls within the frameworks of postcolonial approaches, as the novel is read as a literary discourse that interrogates the boundaries between self and other, as well as between the feminist and the colonial. It does so through the life story of a European woman who chose to assimilate into a colonized society by renouncing her conventional femininity, embracing Islam, and living in Algeria. In this way, the novel transcends the documentary nature of a peculiar woman's biography to delve into the complexities of cultural and gendered belonging. The reader is thus confronted with a female self in search of a new identity beyond the binary of East and West and outside the conventional classifications of gender and belonging. However, this sense of belonging is neither absolute nor stable; rather, it remains ambiguous, conditioned by a historical context fraught with colonial and political tensions.

The novel raises central questions regarding the representation of the female self within a multifaceted colonial space—colonization of the land, the language, and the body alike. It also engages with issues concerning the extent to which a woman can reconstruct her selfhood outside of cultural and gendered impositions, particularly when this self is caught between two conflicting fires: the fire of Western belonging, which she rejects, and immersion in an Eastern identity that does not fully recognize her. Consequently, the novel invites us to consider several key issues, including:

_How is the female self shaped within a discourse dominated by colonialism and patriarchy?

_What is the nature of the cultural and social belonging experienced by the protagonist?

_Is this belonging genuine or ambiguous?

_How does the author employ literary imagination to deconstruct the relationship between identity, the body, and belonging under a dual (political and cultural) colonial context?

Research Objectives:

- To examine how the female self is represented in Isabel within a colonial context.
- To analyze the identity tensions experienced by the protagonist under ambiguous belonging.
- To highlight the impact of colonialism[1] on the reconstruction of women's consciousness and position within the narrative structure.

I. The Issue of Identity, Belonging, and Representations of the Female Self in Light of Postcolonial Studies:

In recent decades, there has been a qualitative shift in approaches to identity and belonging, particularly in the context of the expansion of postcolonial studies, which have revisited and problematized concepts related to the self, the other, and cultural hegemony. The question of identity remains one of the most complex and intricate concepts, owing to its multifaceted nature, encompassing both individual and collective dimensions, as well as the inherent tensions between stability and change, particularity and universality. Belonging, in turn, manifests as an extension of identity within spatial and cultural domains, and is invoked as a condition for the formation of the self within a specific social and historical context.

1. Identity and Belonging in Cultural Criticism:

The issue of identity has produced a historically complex and multifaceted dimension, which has become particularly evident in the contemporary era. It is now apparent that the notion of possessing a unified or coherent identity has become highly questionable amid escalating divisions, divergent perceptions, and the emergence of multiple identities—especially within the Arab context. Today, we face a fragmented landscape contested by various forces, each human group seeking to impose its own purported vision of identity in an attempt to assert its distinctiveness and separation from the Other, thereby disregarding the shared human commonality that ought to unite and enrich them. However, these attempts do not reflect a mature collective consciousness; rather, they represent an extension of a closed mentality aimed at marginalizing and negating the Other.

The issue of identity, therefore, constitutes one of the profound topics that has sparked extensive debate in political literature, particularly in its intellectual, social, and cultural dimensions, due to the complexity and interwoven nature of its meanings and contexts. This debate reached its

peak and expanded to an unprecedented scope following the collapse of the global socialist system and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc—an event that marked a decisive turning point, leading to the emergence of diverse movements and groups that strongly sought to reclaim their identities, whether religious, national, or linguistic. This was manifested in the outbreak of intense conflicts, which in many instances took the form of violent confrontations in the name of religion, and in other cases in the name of ethnic affiliation or linguistic distinction. In all such cases, cultural and social particularities constituted a central point of departure for any discussion of identity, understood as an essence to which groups long submerged under the surface of imposed uniform models aspired, models that had enforced their representations and conferred a totalizing character upon the societies in which they lived, rendering difference suppressed and divergence marginalized. (Sh. Abdel-Hussein, 2017, p. 13)

The concept of identity and belonging is among the most controversial notions in contemporary cultural discourse, due to its multiple dimensions and its entanglement with issues of the self and the other, particularity and universality, as well as center and margin. Identity, as a cultural and historical construct, has thus become subject to continuous questioning and analysis, especially in light of the transformations imposed by globalization and the fragmentation of grand narratives. This has led to the reshaping of patterns of belonging and the reconsideration of modes of expressing both collective and individual selves. Culture, therefore, constitutes the framework that embraces and embodies identity, articulating the sense of belonging. It is a synthesis of layered values that interact with the other, as well as with behaviors, practices, customs, and traditions that reflect human conduct and life. (Sh. Abdul Hussein, 2017, p. 16)

Within the framework of cultural criticism, identity is no longer studied as a fixed given or a pure essence; rather, it is understood as the product of intersecting discourses shaped by power, representation, and history. In this respect, cultural criticism converges with postcolonial studies, feminist critique, and theories of multiculturalism in deconstructing patterns of domination and exposing the mechanisms of exclusion employed by dominant culture in representing the "other," whether that other is ethnic, religious, or gendered. Freeman and Brockmeier, in their study, argue that identity, while deeply tied to the evaluation and interpretation of an individual's personal past, cannot be disentangled from normative ideas about life, or what it is assumed life ought to be if it is to be deemed well-lived. They refer to such ideas as concepts of the "good life," drawing attention to the fact that the narrative construction of identity is not only psychological, social, and aesthetic, but also moral in nature. (J. Brockmeier, 2024, p. 24)

Identity is defined as a set of historical, linguistic, and psychological characteristics that distinguish one group from another. This definition distances identity from the notion of fixity, as it emerges as the product of successive dynamics shaped by a range of conditions that impose, at each stage, qualitative transformations within human societies. Such transformations often generate a state of imbalance and tension between inherited traditions and the new elements striving to assert their presence (Chalghin, 2015, p. 7). Thus, identity can be understood as the individual's awareness and perception of the self and of belonging to a human collective—whether national, religious, communal, or societal—within the broader framework of human affiliation. In this sense, Halim Barakat defines identity as "our knowledge of what and where we are, of our origins and our destinations, of what we desire for ourselves and for others, and of our position within the map of existing relations, contradictions, and conflicts" (Barakat, 2000, p. 62).

Identity, for the individual, is what distinguishes him in his essence and grants him the sense of differentiation from the other and of uniqueness. It enables him to define the image he carries of himself about himself, and it is also the consciousness of distinction—"I am not the other" (A. Chelghin, 2015, p. 20). This has been affirmed by many thinkers who regard identity as "a comprehensive system of material, psychological, spiritual, and social givens that entails a structure of cognitive integration processes, and is characterized by its unity embodied in the inner spirit, encompassing the very property of awareness of identity and the feeling of it" (A. Michelli, 1993, p. 15).

In this conceptual framework, identity is understood as a cultural construct composed of a set of common characteristics and elements that represent the minimum shared cultural traits among members of a given community, allowing them to experience mutual belonging and to develop a shared awareness of their collective self. These traits, in their diversity and complexity, are precisely what distinguish members of one nation or community from others, and thus enable them to recognize themselves within a collective horizon marked by differentiation and continuity. However, although identity rests upon these common denominators, it is not defined in a closed or final form. Rather, it embodies an internal dynamism open to formation and transformation in accordance with the contexts of historical experience and lived reality. This is what Adonis pointed out when he argued that identity is not a ready-made or final given, but rather an ongoing task that must always be completed, and that change, rather than fixity, is the very mark of identity (A. Ahmad Sa'id, 2002, p. 8).

In this sense, identity can be understood as a set of cultural traits that represent the minimal common ground shared by all those who belong to it, and through which they are recognized and distinguished from members of other nations. This renders identity a central dimension in shaping the consciousness of individuals and communities, insofar as it transcends being a fixed form of belonging to become a dynamic process that interacts with cultural, social, and historical contexts.

As for the concept of belonging, many thinkers and sociologists have addressed it as an integral part of the depth of human personality in a general sense. Belonging constitutes an inseparable element of any social system whatsoever; it is the tendency that drives the individual to enter into a particular social or intellectual framework, with all that this implies in terms of commitment to its norms and rules, supporting it, and defending it against other social and intellectual frameworks (N. ʿAbd al-Hamid, 1999, p. 57).

Belonging, therefore, is a complex collective experience that reflects a holistic social condition, manifested through the intersection of multiple identities. This becomes evident in the formation of the roots of social identity, which constitute the nucleus of collective being. In this sense, belonging represents a profound response to the question of identity: "Who are we?" It takes the form of a construct that embodies the manner in which the individual situates himself within the community, whether that community is a creed, an idea, a philosophical system, or even a network of emotions and sentiments (ʿA. Wutfa, 2007, p. 192).

On the other hand, belonging is viewed as a connecting bond among the members of a community, through which a collective tie is established that enables them to coexist. In this sense, belonging in its simplest meaning refers to attachment, harmony, and belief in what one belongs to. Identity, in turn, constitutes a heritage expressed through behaviors that distinguish

one group from another, thereby making such patterns a manifestation of the feelings of belonging that safeguard—or threaten—our identity. Identity thus encompasses all material and immaterial behavioral patterns prevailing in a society, which set it apart from others, and include thought, history, civilization, and even the future. These intellectual patterns, transmitted across time, form the cultural heritage that binds individuals to it, constantly renewed though not without setbacks. (A. Shalghin, 2015, p. 36)

From the foregoing, and through our consideration of the concept of belonging, it becomes evident that belonging is an objective condition imposed by the reality of existence—such as an individual's belonging to a certain nationality. Yet, the question that remains concerns the individual's sense of this belonging**: can one truly express one's identity, given that the feeling of belonging is itself the expression of identity**? **And how can we, then, define our emotions of belonging?**

It is well known that human beings undergo a multiplicity of identity experiences that are reflected in the diversity of their affiliations and in the fragmentation of their personality across conflicting frames of reference. Although these affiliations express profound emotional sentiments, they remain unstable and fluctuating, due to the influence of individual culture, the limited scope of personal aspirations, and the weakness of the intellectual foundations that could otherwise provide a unified conception of the self and the world. Hence, feelings of belonging in the individual are often marked by contradiction and volatility, which are primarily linked to the multiplicity of intellectual and psychological sources that nurture the subject. The diversity and conflict of these affiliations ultimately lead to contradictions in the ordering of emotions and affective attachments related to identity. Thus, identity becomes an ambiguous construct, open to possibilities of interpretation and transformation, expressing not a condition of stability, but rather a set of inner fragmentations. This, in turn, renders the individual's sense of belonging more contingent upon contextual circumstances than upon any fixed internal structure, suggesting that such sentiments are not the product of free will or of a coherent existential stance, but rather an expression of acute identity-related anxiety (A. Wutfa, 2007, p.196)

It thus appears that the sense of belonging to a particular cultural identity constitutes an essential psychological and social need indispensable to any human being. Such belonging serves as the affective and symbolic space through which the self may grow, assert itself, and unfold. The awareness of cultural identity, however, is neither artificial nor manufactured; rather, it exists in latent form, like a repressed element, which awakens and intensifies in moments of major transformations and transitions experienced by nations, often accompanied by crises. In such contexts, the attachment to cultural identity functions as a refuge and a safe haven (M. Mualifin, 2013, p.227).

2.On the Feminine Self

The feminine self constitutes a central subject in contemporary intellectual, literary, and social studies. The discussion of the feminine self is not confined to the biological or social dimension of womanhood; rather, it extends to the ways in which women construct their self-awareness within a discursive system shaped by culture, power, and history. Thus, the feminine self emerges as a problematic representation of gendered identity in its relations with authority, history, and language—particularly within colonized or postcolonial societies. For this reason, reading the representations of the feminine self in light of postcolonial studies becomes essential for understanding the processes through which the female body is rewritten, belonging

is reformulated, and identity is redefined in opposition to official narratives and cultural hegemony.

What perhaps remains most enduring regarding the self as a concept fixed across time—as recently emphasized by Charles Taylor—is the sense of commitment to a set of beliefs and values that we cannot subject to radical scrutiny. This commitment, of course, provides the driving force, so to speak. In this sense, the novel does not merely encompass the construction of the self but also the construction of one's culture (J. Brockmeier, 2024, pp. 46–47). Here, the feminine self may be foregrounded once more as a problematic representation of gendered identity in its relations with authority, history, and language, particularly within colonized or postcolonial contexts.

Perhaps what remains most firmly entrenched with regard to the self as a stable concept across time, as Charles Taylor has recently reminded us, is the sense of commitment to a set of beliefs and values that we cannot subject to radical scrutiny. This commitment, of course, constitutes the driving force, so to speak. In this sense, the novel encompasses not only the construction of the self but also the construction of one's culture (J. Brockmeier, 2024, pp. 46–47). In this context, the feminine self emerges as a problematic representation of gender identity in its relations to power, history, and language, particularly in colonized and postcolonial societies.

The feminine self, embodied in the character of Isabelle in Isabelle by Slim Betka, is depicted as a mutable entity subjected to successive phases of suffering that generate both her crisis and her captivity, eventually leading to her emancipation and the discovery of her own being. This process unfolds in opposition to the presence of the masculine self, or masculine authority, which carries with it inherited social laws that confine womanhood within the boundaries of the body and familial role, thereby denying its broader human horizon. Such a perspective varies according to the conditions and customs of society, yet it consistently exerts efforts to prevent the feminine self from accessing the emancipatory elements that nurture awareness, out of fear that exposing the vulnerabilities of authority might pave the way for the self's rebellion against its laws. Consequently, in its quest for liberation, the feminine self comes to embody freedom in its most subversive sense—namely, the individual's desire to be the master of one's own self.

II.Ambivalent Belonging and the Crisis of Identity between Self-Fragmentation, Assimilation, and Rejection in Isabelle.

The question of identity is among the most complex and problematic issues in contemporary discourse, particularly in light of the profound transformations the world has undergone in the twenty-first century. This question is not confined to being a theoretical inquiry into the self; rather, it extends to become a central and pressing matter directly related to the self's relationship with the Other and to the ways in which it positions itself within a shifting social and cultural context.

The process of defining identity in this framework is often fraught with tensions arising from representations of the Other and from difference, which frequently lead to forms of symbolic and material violence nourished by the exclusion and negation of the Other. The situation grows even more complex when such a process becomes entangled with subjective desires, ideological determinants, and preconceived stereotypical visions that collectively contribute to the

construction of closed and self-enclosed identity formations. These, in turn, establish exclusionary positions and fuel extremist discourses that drive further tension and conflict.
Thus, Arab narrative has raised the notion of ambiguous and mutable identity, shaped by major shifts in values that compel individuals and groups to acquire new identities. Individuals adopt masks through which they disguise themselves in order to overcome the challenges they encounter. On both the collective and individual levels, identities undergo transformation—whether among ethnic or sectarian minorities, which seek to reposition themselves within new identity frameworks, or among individuals who conceal themselves behind masks to shield against dangers. It is difficult to overlook the impact of religious and political references in this process, for narrative transformations never occur in isolation from their cultural backgrounds. Yet, literary representation does not necessarily entail direct description. (A. Ibrahim, 2011, p. 149)

Isabelle Eberhardt was a dislocated figure from birth. She was born in Vienna in 1877 as the result of an illegitimate relationship. Her aristocratic mother, Natalie de Moerder, had been exiled from Russia, while her lover and the tutor of her children, Alexander Trophimovsky, raised his illegitimate daughter Isabelle as though she were a boy, in an environment that shaped her profoundly. This form of education ignited in Isabelle an irrepressible desire to flee elsewhere. During her early years, she acquired knowledge of Islam and learned Arabic from her tutor, which prompted the novelist to make her declare in his narrative:
(S. Betqa, 2024, p. 62)

"In order to live, one needs a reason to live for, something higher than life itself—faith, faith in Islam. Although I was raised by an atheist, I refused to become one."

Isabelle's exposure to the works of the orientalist Lyautey, with his dark contemplations, his profound sense of escape toward the Other, and his exoticized depictions of the East as a desirable alternative to a declining Europe, intensified her yearning to travel and settle in the Orient. In 1887, she, her mother, and her half-brother Augustein moved to Algiers, where they eventually settled in Algeria. There, Isabelle embraced Islam—an experience that marked a moment of maturity for her and inspired her to write about life in Algeria.

The migrant, therefore, when confronted with a radically different environment from that of his or her native society, faces challenges that necessitate a reconstruction of his or her relationship with the surrounding world, under conditions previously unknown. In the space of exile, new modes of life are often imposed, requiring daily adaptation to a system of customs, traditions, and behaviors that may, at certain levels, contradict one's upbringing. This forces the migrant to adopt new forms of interaction, which entail a reformulation of expressive and behavioral identity—whether in speech, food, clothing, attitudes, values, or perceptions. This is clearly evident in the case of Isabelle, who was able to fashion for herself a new Orient. The novelist conveys this in a dialogical exchange between her and her brother Augestein, when he asks her about the certainty of her decision to leave:
"Are you sure, Isa?"
"I have no choice. Only in Africa can I finally embody the persona I long for—the true self."
(S. Betqa, 2024, p. 49)

It was precisely in this region—the East—that space of in-betweenness situated between two worlds and two different cultures, where the intensification of estrangement, the sense of detachment from homeland, kin, and cultural origins produced a deep dissonance and fragmentation of the self. All of this profoundly shaped Isabelle's identity. Positioned between two worlds, she found herself suspended in a place of non-belonging, embodying within her two conflicting selves that could not be reconciled: she was neither fully Arab nor distinctly European. Instead, she hovered between two contradictory identities, which engendered in her a sense of dual estrangement and an unsettled identity—all in pursuit of happiness. As she herself reflects:

"All of them are in search of something they share: the quest for happiness, the quest for the secret of beauty. Happiness for me is self-satisfaction, and it requires no witness. Happy families resemble one another, whereas unhappy families each live their unhappiness in their own particular way, as Anna Karenina says."
(S. Betqa, 2024, p. 48)

Despite her wandering in the East—conceived as a negation of what was dominant and a rejection of the European order—Isabelle, as many readers have observed, despised mechanization and strove to avoid Europe's disciplinary institutions by embracing a life of travel and adventure in the Orient. She believed that vagrancy constituted a state of liberation, a form of freedom. The novelist captures this outlook through her own words:

"When Baricand spoke to me about Africa, I knew its people were black; I imagined it as a vast forest, with animals everywhere… I resolved to know more, to read more about Africa, and why not embark on the adventure myself, to discover this unknown continent…" (S. Betqa, 2024, p. 53).

Isabelle thus emerges as a problematic historical figure, one that is summoned today in contemporary Algerian discourse through selective approaches that often diverge from an objective assessment of her role within the trajectory of colonial history. Her presence is not invoked as a mere passing symbolic gesture, but rather within a tense temporal framework in which colonial history is re-examined through individual representations and ambiguous stances. She belongs to the colonial era marked by a sharp entanglement between projects of domination on the one hand and strategies of dissimulation on the other. Functioning as a disguised colonial instrument, Isabelle helped reinforce the contours of direct domination by cloaking the colonial enterprise in the guise of a wandering traveler in search of spiritual and cultural belonging. This underscores her profound entanglement in the very fabric of colonial discourse and her indirect complicity with the mechanisms of symbolic domination.

Immersed in the dream of her Orient, Isabelle produced works such as Hours in Tunisia and Free in the Tunisian Sahel. These texts, as inaugural Orientalist gestures, establish a parasitic relationship with the writings of early Orientalists like Pierre Loti and Gérard de Nerval, who indulged in the fascination of flight and escape that later travelers inherited—accompanied by a vision of the East as a site of personal liberation or as a geographical alternative to the crude decline that France experienced in the late nineteenth century. Thus began Isabelle's "other Orient," a desired world rather than a strange one (A. Behdad, 2013, pp. 240–241). The novelist emphasizes this perspective:

"Isabelle created her own Orient before she even departed. But this Orient was an idealized vision, entirely devoid of any sense of superiority. For this reason, she left

Europe—which she never loved—and set out in search of a world that resembled her." (S. Betqa, 2024, p. 53).

This acute existential void that Isabelle experienced after the death of her mother, her brother Vladimir, and Vava—resulting in a lack of psychological response and an intensification of her condition of non-belonging—contributed significantly to shaping a fragmented personality torn from within, one that sought to find meaning in existence through identification with imaginary or mythical forces. Her identity was dispersed across multiple narratives from which she derived compensatory symbolism against a rejected reality. This became evident in her adoption of a dual mode of life that reflected a stark contrast within her sense of self. She states:
"My mother and my brother Vladimir are dead, and now Vava. All this chaotic life, this entire world of shattered hopes and lifeless illusions, all these calamities have made me what I am, and what I shall always remain.
Everything has collapsed; the final days in the countryside brought only silence and indifference... absent from a world where nothing truly moves me anymore... even my two friends, Vera and Shushenka, no longer communicate with me... My dreams and my anger have been broken." (S. Betqa, 2024, p. 30)

It seems that the tendency to attribute herself to another name, different from her real one—such as "Si Mahmoud"—originated in a profound psychological impact. This inclination exerted a strong influence, manifesting in her continued use of pseudonyms and imagined masculine identities. She recounts in a dialogue that took place upon her arrival in Algeria, when her guide, Si Ahmed, introduced her to Lieutenant Eugène:
"At the moment I leaned closer to Eugène to light another cigarette, suddenly a Muslim man approached us, sat beside us, and asked for a cup of tea. I watched Adam's apple contract with every sip…
'Hello, Si Ahmed.'
'Si Ahmed… this is Mahmoud.'
'Welcome, Si Mahmoud.'
Ahmed kept staring at me the whole time; I shook my head, as if to suppress his bewilderment, as though saying: pay no attention… I had completely rejected my condition as a woman. Moreover, I shall always carry those feelings with me. I love men only, and I want to be a man as well." (S. Betqa, 2024, pp. 64–65)

Whatever the nature of her wandering may have been, it assumed a dual dimension that revealed a profound ideological split. Travel here was not merely a geographical or cultural movement, but rather a symbolic act of resistance aimed at undermining the discursive structure of colonialism, even while remaining tied to its very references and shaped by them to varying degrees. Her explicit rejection of Western culture did not merely reflect a direct refusal or a superficial gesture of rebellion; rather, it carried within it a complex critical practice that deconstructed the centrality of bourgeois Western discourse and re-interrogated the notion of "Western superiority," a notion founded upon the binary opposition of European advancement versus Eastern backwardness—an opposition long mobilized by colonial discourse as a means of legitimizing civilizational and cultural domination over the colonized Other (A. Behdad, 2013, p. 242).

Thus, male attire for her (Isabelle) constituted a form of disguise that granted her access to what was otherwise forbidden to a European woman in the East. Her adoption of men's clothing

should not be viewed as an act of identification with the Other, but rather as an appropriation of the East. In this sense, her donning of the Oriental robe becomes a form of colonial mimicry, aligning her with the logic of colonial discourse. The Eastern dress thus appears as a masquerade, a kind of Orientalist mask concealing her European identity, despite the many questions and suspicions it provoked. This is vividly illustrated in a dialogic scene with Lieutenant Eugène, who, astonished by her attire, is portrayed by the novelist as follows:

— "Good day, Eugène."
— "Good day, Isabelle… I hope I haven't kept you waiting too long?"
— "Not at all. You soldiers are always punctual… Call me Si Mahmoud!"
— "What???"
— "Call me Si Mahmoud the Muscovite."
— "What is this splendid attire? You look more Bedouin than the Bedouins themselves! An embroidered burnous, a turban, and high boots!"
— "Do you not like it?"
— "On the contrary… it is a beautiful outfit, but you will face harassment every time you wear it." (S. Betka, 2024, p. 61)

Isabelle managed to occupy an intermediate position as a parasitic orientalist, a position that stemmed from the split nature that characterized her identity. By adopting the guise of a man, she sought to undermine the feminization of the Orient carried out by the West. As one scholar has noted in his study of the period between 1897 and 1904—years during which Isabelle spent most of her time in North Africa—she lived disguised as an Eastern man, leading a life of wandering, mysticism, and, eventually, involvement in the colonial project (A. Behdad, 2013, pp. 234–247). This is also emphasized by the novelist Battaqa in several instances. In a dialogic passage between her and Lieutenant Colt, he writes:

_From now on you will work for me, travel as before, continue recording your observations, and deliver them to me.
_And if I refuse?
_I very much doubt that you will, Miss…
[She remains silent.]
_Do not underestimate the profound joy you will bestow upon me and _my men by aligning yourself with our perspective.
_I despise you… (S. Battaqa, 2024, p. 191)

The novelist goes on to recount further episodes between Isabelle and a French commanding officer, Colonel Lyautey, hinting directly at her pleasure in working with (and for) the colonial enterprise. He writes:

_You are always welcome, Colonel.
_I am delighted to be here, Colonel, to rediscover the profound pleasure of my wandering life—the pleasure of being the only one, the stranger, beneath the burnous and the Arab turban.
_You can rely on our support, which no one else has offered, to seize the very soul of this country…
_Thank you, Colonel. I know your friendship is sincere—it is a precious gift that touches me more deeply than you might imagine…
No one can understand Africa like Si Mahmoud. (S. Battaqa, 2024, pp. 236–237)

He also adds:

_ She felt a profound sense of pride in fulfilling the task assigned to her, ready to risk her life whenever necessary in defense of the values she believed in. (S. Battaqa, 2024, p. 239)

If we scrutinize Isabelle's duality, embodied in her adoption of men's clothing, we find that she appears fully aware of the displacement between her European feminine self and the Eastern masculine role she performs. This becomes evident in her acknowledgment of her "assumed identity," as she repeatedly asserts in her writings: "**No one knows my true identity**." Such a statement reveals a rupture between her authentic self and the identity she chose to adopt. Furthermore, in her book Towards the Blue Horizons, Isabelle goes even further by rationalizing her Orientalist disguise as an Orientalist necessity. She explains: **"I would never be able to see anything if I wore women's clothes, for the entire world would remain closed to me, since it appears to have been made for men and not for women. I wanted to be immersed in the tide of popular life, to feel the waves of the crowds wash over me, to be impregnated by the human flood, and in this way to possess and to know the city in ways that no tourist, regardless of the countless explanations in their guidebooks, could ever hope to achieve."** (A. Behdad, 2013, pp. 248–249).

A close reading of this passage reveals a fracture in her gendered identity: through her voyeuristic desire—if the term may be used—Isabelle intensifies her impulse to observe popular life and to possess the city, while simultaneously identifying with the discursive position that sustains the colonial desire for domination and mastery. This ambivalence is made explicit in her dialogue with Suleiman, where the novelist portrays Isabelle as a figure of ambiguity:

— Tomorrow is a day of rest. What do you think of a hunting trip?
— I have an appointment tomorrow with the Bedouins. Go alone… Besides, I despise hunting… I have always believed that there is something inherently evil in a man who hunts.
— Do you not fear being caught?
— I will set out, and no one will stop me. I will go my own way, I will run until I collapse… They may watch me, they may bind me, but I did not come here to be imprisoned, to cry, and to lament.
— Take care of yourself. One day the Bedouins will discover who you really are, and everything will change.
— I have eaten bread and salt with them, ridden their horses… They do not forbid me from entering men's spaces—the mosque, the Arab café. (S. Bouteqa, 2024, pp. 185–186).

Although Isabelle fiercely opposed the repressive practices of colonialism, her efforts in producing alternative representations were nevertheless appropriated by the colonial system as valuable information, and this material was subsequently exploited to suppress indigenous resistance.

Conclusion:

At the end of this study, the main findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Slim Betka's Isabelle presents a complex representation of the feminine self within a colonial context, where individual experience intersects with political and historical structures.
2. The protagonist lives in a state of ambiguous belonging, oscillating between an imposed colonial identity and a suppressed local one, reflecting the fragmentation of the self under a dual colonial reality.
3. The narrative reveals the crisis of feminine identity through a language shaped by tension and division, displaying an internal struggle between conformity and resistance.
4. The female body in the novel functions as a symbolic space for internalizing the effects of colonialism, granting the representation of the self both political and existential dimensions.

5. Isabelle stands as a model of an alternative feminist narrative that transcends the binary classification of (victim/colonized), offering instead a complex portrait of a woman in search of her self within a fractured reality.

Recommendations:

1. Deepening research into representations of the feminine self within colonial contexts, as they entail complexities that go beyond the binary opposition between colonizer and colonized.
2. Encouraging analytical approaches that combine feminist criticism with postcolonial theory, particularly in the study of Algerian literature written in French, in order to grasp the interwoven dimensions of gender, history, and language.
3. Inviting researchers to examine Isabelle in light of narratives of cultural hybridity, as the novel rewrites colonial history from a feminine perspective, questioning dominant narratives of hegemony and subjugation.
4. Expanding the corpus of studied texts dealing with representations of the feminine self in colonial and postcolonial contexts, instead of limiting research to the male-centered works that continue to dominate the Algerian literary field.

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