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Benjamin J. Sparks

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, benjaminjspark@gmail.com

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The Economics of Colonialism: Hunger, Expropriation and Mendicancy in Mohammed Dib's Algerian Trilogy

Abstract

The colonial endeavor as argued by Aimé Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism* is neither an evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor an aid system to combat systems of ignorance, sickness, and tyranny (32). It is a system of power relations based on exploitation and violence without concern for the Other. To borrow Césaire's term, colonialism is nothing other than *chosification*; it makes objects of people, tearing them from their land, home, and families, depriving them of essential, life-providing commodities. Colonization's social and economic policies disrupted traditional society and the Algerian way of life more so than the physical military conquests had done. Albert Camus, as a Pied-Noir author, provides an outsider's perspective on the suffering of the Algerian population, declaring, "Pour aujourd'hui, j'arrête ici cette promenade à travers la souffrance et la faim d'un peuple. On aura senti du moins que la misère ici n'est pas une formule ni un thème de méditation. Elle est. Elle crie et elle désespère. Encore une fois, qu'avons-nous fait pour elle et avons-nous le droit de nous détourner d'elle ?" (Camus 40) 'For now, I must end this survey of the suffering and hunger of an entire population. The reader will have seen, at least, that misery here is not just a word or a theme for meditation. It exists. It cries out in desperation. What have we done about it, and do we have the right to avert our eyes.' Mohammed Dib's Algerian trilogy gives flesh to Camus's statement; misery in these novels shouts and despairs, it shows itself through the characters and narration. This literature shows, as only literature can, the Algerians' misery, and their desperation; it creates a collective trauma to be shared and understood by many through the act of storytelling. This collective trauma brings out the emotions of the characters and allows the reader to feel empathy toward the plight of the Algerians.

Keywords

economics, colonialism, Mohammed Dib, hunger, expropriation, mendicancy

The Economics of Colonialism:
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Benjamin J. Sparks
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

The colonial endeavor as argued by Aimé Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism* is neither an evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor an aid system to combat systems of ignorance, sickness and tyranny (32). It is a system of power relations based on exploitation and violence without concern for the Other. To borrow Césaire's term, colonialism is nothing other than *chosification*; it creates objects of people, tearing them from their land, home, and families, depriving them of essential, life-providing commodities. Colonization's social and economic policies disrupted traditional society and the Algerian way of life more so than military conquests had done. Albert Camus, as a Pied-Noir author, provides an outsider's perspective on the suffering of the Algerian population in the Kabyle region in his *Misère de la Kabylie (The Misery of Kabylia)*. As a young journalist for the *Alger Républicain* he travels this area documenting his findings. At the conclusion of his first exposure, he declares, "Pour aujourd'hui, j'arrête ici cette promenade à travers la souffrance et la faim d'un peuple. On aura senti du moins que la misère ici n'est pas une formule ni un thème de méditation. Elle est. Elle crie et elle désespère. Encore une fois, qu'avons-nous fait pour elle et avons-nous le droit de nous détourner d'elle ?" (40) 'For now, I must end this survey of the suffering and hunger of an entire population. The reader will have seen, at least, that misery here is not just a word or a theme for meditation. It exists. It cries out in desperation. What have we done about it, and do we have the right to avert our eyes?' (46). Mohammed Dib's Algerian trilogy, which consists of *La grande maison* ('The Big House'), *L'incendie* ('The Fire') and *Le métier à tisser* ('The Loom'), gives flesh to Camus's statement; misery in these novels shouts and despairs, it shows itself through the characters and narration. This literature shows, as only literature can, the Algerians' misery and their desperation; it creates a fictional world that enables the readers to become conscious of a collective trauma to be shared and understood by many through the act of storytelling. This collective trauma brings out the emotions of the characters and allows the reader to feel empathy toward the plight of the Algerians. This essay, therefore, looks at the use of the thematic elements of hunger, expropriation, and mendicancy in the Algerian trilogy to show the misery and suffering of the Algerians as outlined by Camus.

Camus published his findings in article form for the *Alger Républicain* from June 5 to June 15, 1939; these articles have been collected and published as *Misère de la Kabylie* in *Chroniques algériennes (Algerian Chronicles)*. Camus's

introduction to these articles provides insights into the economic explanations for the suffering of the Kabyle population. Camus initially criticizes the Kabyle as he argues that they consume more than they produce; they have similarly overpopulated the habitable land available. They are a grain-consuming people, but only produce enough grain for an eighth of their needs; thus, they rely on the sale of olives and figs in order to purchase grain from outside sources. The colonial government at the time of Camus's observations had, however, inflated the price of grain without adjusting that of olives and figs. This problem was further compounded as the workforce diminished as a result of France's involvement, and therefore subsequently Algeria's, in World War II, and families could no longer rely on their sons to work and acquire the resources needed to purchase grain at an inflated price. These unilateral adjustments forced the Kabyle either to starve or to rely on charitable distributions of grain by the colonial government, which were minimal at best, to meet the rest of their needs. Camus's initial explanation for the poverty of the population denounced the practices of the Kabyle, but at the end of his introduction he sympathizes with them, asking what more could be done for these people.

After discussing the inability of the population to produce enough food for survival, Camus looks at the compounding factors of unemployment and wages. People who are dying of starvation typically have one way out of this suffering: employment and the income that follows. Camus argues that this, however, is not the case due to the insufficient wages paid to the colonized; he is, in fact, appalled by the wages colonized workers receive. He writes, "On m'avait prévenu que les salaires étaient insuffisants. Je ne savais pas qu'ils étaient insultants" (50) 'I had been alerted to the fact that wages in Kabylia were insufficient; I did not know that they were insulting' (53). Colonialism, through its practically nonexistent wages and long working days, resembles a form of modern slave labor according to Camus, who declares, "je suis forcé de dire ici que le régime du travail en Kabylie est un régime d'esclavage. Car je ne vois pas de quel autre nom appeler un régime où l'ouvrier travaille de 10 à 12 heures pour un salaire moyen de 6 à 10 francs" (50-51) 'I do not wish to be shrill, but I am obliged to say that the labor regime in Kabylia is one of slave labor, for I see no other word to describe a system in which workers toil 10 to 12 hours per day for an average wage of 6 to 10 francs' (53). These working hours exceeded the legal limit by almost double. In order to justify the insufficient wages of the colonized, the colonist accuses the colonized of providing inferior manual labor, a belief stemming from the superiority complex of the colonizer. Camus notes that in some cases the manual labor of the colonized was, in fact, inferior to that of the colonizer due to the colonized not having sufficient strength because they had not eaten in days. Camus points out the irony as he writes, "Et l'on nous met en présence d'une logique abjecte qui veut qu'un homme soit sans force parce qu'il n'a pas de quoi

manger et qu'on le paye moins parce qu'il est sans forces" (55) 'It is perverse logic that says that a man is weak because he hasn't enough to eat and that therefore one should pay him less because he is weak' (57). Camus's findings provide a point of departure for an analysis of suffering through poverty and its consequences in the Algerian trilogy.¹ Camus published his observations in 1939, the same year in which Mohammed Dib's novels take place.

The backdrop for Mohammed Dib's trilogy roughly covers the years between 1938 and 1942. It is important to note that these dates precede the massacre at Sétif and Guelma in 1945 and the beginning of the Algerian war of independence in 1954. Although the novels historically cover this period, the anticolonial sentiment and discontentment towards injustice resonate more strongly with the publication dates in the early 1950s. According to Jean Déjeux, in 1949 Mohammed Dib devised the idea to write "un roman aux proportions assez vastes qui devait présenter une sorte de portrait divers de l'Algérie" (145) 'a vast novel which presents a sort of diverse portrait of Algeria,' which would later become what is now considered the Algerian trilogy, a collection of semi-autobiographical novels based around the life of a young boy named Omar.² Through the observant eyes of Omar, these novels recount the struggles of Algerian life, whether in the countryside or the urban center under French colonial rule. Dib uses a social realist lens to portray the suffering of not only Omar and his family, but those around him in Dar-Sbitar, the big house, which summarily describes the whole of Algeria; the trilogy is, thus, a microcosm of colonial Algeria. Although criticizing colonialism through anticolonial sentiments, Dib escapes censure by placing the characters in the period prior to the Algerian revolution. Likewise, this time frame would place Omar as a man in his mid-twenties at the outbreak of the revolution and capable of participating in the Algerian war; his observations, therefore, help to provide a perspective on how the revolution arose from the masses to its eruption in 1954.

The trilogy tells the story of Omar's upbringing in these tumultuous times surrounded by inevitable suffering and war as the veil shielding him from the reality of life falls from before his eyes. The trilogy begins with Omar as a ten-year old boy living in Dar-Sbitar, the residence for the poor of Tlemcen, with his mother and two sisters. His mother desperately and tirelessly works to provide food for her children, but often comes up empty-handed. Dib's opening novel displays the harsh conditions of not only the adults in this Manichaean world, but of the children as well. The following novel, *L'incendie*, continues Omar's narration as he travels to Bni Boublen, a village in the Algerian countryside, with Zhor, a neighbor from Dar-Sbitar. In Bni Boublen, Omar, as an observer and witness, describes the horrible conditions of the *fellahs*, the indigenous agricultural laborers and landowners, who have become dispossessed of their lands and have become a source of cheap labor for the Europeans. He also

becomes a witness to the *prise de conscience*, an awakening of the national consciousness, of the *fellahs*, whose emotions run high and result in not only a strike, but an *incendie* which symbolizes the *fellahs*' inextinguishable fervor.³ The final novel of the trilogy, *Le métier à tisser*, continues to follow the story of Omar, who is now fourteen years old and has left school to become an apprentice weaver. This novel demonstrates that the *prise de conscience* that had occurred in the countryside likewise has taken place back in the urban center of Tlemcen.

The economic situation in Algeria for the colonized subjects in the countryside or the urban center relied heavily on governmental policies created across the Mediterranean. This often resulted in miscommunication between the ministries in Paris and the colonial authorities on the ground, where gaps were filled with "guesswork, thereby exposing how easily ingrained prejudice could take the place of more rational, dispassionate analysis" (Thomas 147). Poverty and its associated effects, including suffering, therefore derived directly from the government's lack of good economic intelligence and its inaction in relation to the colonized's economic well-being. In addition to miscommunication, the colonizers' mindset, which essentially dictated their actions, placed the colonized in an inferior position in relation to privileges, both economically and socially. With this superiority complex, the colonizer then never questioned the unfounded concept that the Algerian population's basic needs were subordinate to those of the European settlers. The governing body, in fact, took precise calculations into account as it determined the lengths to which it could go before inciting rebellion among the colonized. However, the French failed to calculate correctly by inadequately appeasing the colonized economically, which affected the stability of the colonial system.

Realizing that the effectiveness of the colonial system relied on the colonized's ability to acquire life-sustaining commodities, namely food, the colonial government "formulated plans to alleviate the disastrous effects of unemployment and famine on Algerian communities, [but] they took action only in 1934, and even then corruption and fraud reduced the available credits to a miniscule amount" (Kalman 125). Ironically, it was the Pieds-Noirs who proposed theoretical improvements in the form of shelter and food for the Algerians. These proposals were, however, two-fold: one side demonstrated to an international community that the French were truly concerned about the economic and mental well-being of the colonized, whereas the other aimed at keeping the colonized in a state of docility; for how could one expect the colonized to be loyal to France while suffering from starvation and deprivation at their hands? However, those who could not eat or ate mere rations of roots were refused their happiness at the hand of the colonizer, which did in fact then lead to civil unrest. Alfred Henry Lewis argued that "there are only nine meals between mankind and anarchy" (605). Likewise, in *La grande maison*, Omar's cousin Mansouria argues that the

colonizers “ont peur de ceux qui ont faim. Parce que d’avoir faim donne des idées pas comme celles de tout le monde” (Dib 160) ‘are afraid of those who hunger. Because hunger produces thoughts unlike those of the rest of the world.’ The actions taken by the colonizer failed to curb the starvation of the colonized, eventually leading to the massacres at Sétif and Guelma which opened up the path towards revolution.

Some, however, accept their inferior status and refuse to resist the powers that subjugate and deprive them. Aïni, Omar’s mother in *La grande maison*, does so as she simply declares “Nous sommes des pauvres” (112) ‘We are poor,’ without any desire to change or question their lot. Omar, on the other hand, asks the basic question: “Mais pourquoi sommes-nous pauvres?” (112) ‘But why are we poor?’ No response is given to this seemingly straightforward question other than “C’est notre destin” or “Dieu sait” (113) ‘It is our destiny’ ‘Only God knows;’ these responses provide no logical reason or culprit for the suffering of the poor. Omar is bewildered by the abundance of poor people like his family and those who live in similar places like Dar-Sbitar, who do nothing to change their situation. He declares: “Et personne ne se révolte. Pourquoi ? C’est incompréhensible. Quoi de plus simple pourtant ! Les grandes personnes ne comprennent-elles donc rien ? Pourtant c’est simple ! simple !” (113) ‘And yet no one rebels. Why? It is incomprehensible. There is nothing simpler! Do the elders not understand anything? Yet it is straightforward! Simple!’ Omar, as a child, understands the world better than the adults; he questions the world and the colonized’s subjugation when the adults fall into docility. The docility of the indigenous population as a result of colonialism prevents them from recognizing the causative agent of their inferior economic situation. This, however, is not the case for the colonized body as a whole, for the *fellahs* in the following chapter discuss their discontent with the insufficient wages, which begins to bubble to the surface and changes the tone of the trilogy, eventually leading to the strike and *incendie* in the second novel.

The discussions of the *fellah* leading up to the *incendie* openly attack the unjust colonial system that has placed the colonized in inferior economic standing. Slimane Meskine expresses his discontent as he argues:

Bon messire Kara, bon messire, dans les vieux temps... cela n’est pas vrai... tout n’était pas mauvais. Peut-être y avait-il du mauvais, mais tout ne l’était pas. Aujourd’hui, que voyons-nous ? La fin du monde pourrait venir. Les temps sont bons pour les riches et les étrangers. Peut-être cinq ou six familles... Certainement pas plus d’une dizaine. Et les pauvres ?... Que leur nombre est grand ! (*L’incendie* 69)

Well, well, Mr. Kara, in the old days...that is not necessarily true...Everything wasn't bad. Maybe there were bad things, but not everything was bad. Today, what do we see? The end of the world could come. Times are good for the rich and the foreigners. Maybe five or six families...Certainly not more than a dozen. And the poor?...Oh, there are many!

Just like Omar, Slimane Meskine recognizes the abundance of the poor in relation to the rich. He does not come out directly and declare that colonialism is the source of this disparity, but he argues that not all was bad in the past. "The old days" of which he speaks predate this rampant suffering of the poor due to colonialism, a time when suffering did exist, but to a limited extent.

The suffering from poverty in these novels directly derives from the characters' exchange entitlements and ownership patterns. Amartya Sen, an Indian economist and philosopher who won the Nobel Prize for economics in 1998, argues that in order to understand poverty and famine it is necessary to understand these forces. Exchange entitlements pertain to the bundles of commodities one can acquire through exchanging what one owns. Sen provides five influences that affect one's exchange entitlement and therefore one's ability to avoid starvation and mendicancy:

- (1) whether he can find an employment, and if so for how long and at what wage rate;
- (2) what he can earn by selling his non-labour assets, and how much it costs him to buy whatever he may wish to buy;
- (3) what he can produce with his own labour power and resources (or resource services) he can buy and manage;
- (4) the cost of purchasing resources (or resource services) and the value of the products he can sell;
- (5) the social security benefits he is entitled to and the taxes, etc., he must pay. (4)

Sen addresses the issue in terms of a general economy, but each of these five influences contributes to or diminishes the risk of starvation and mendicancy. If an individual is able to find work and earn sufficient wages, that individual and his or her family will avoid starvation; however, the opposite is true as well. Likewise, if an individual is able to sell non-labor assets or labor power at a premium while purchasing needed goods at low prices, he or she then will be able to avoid starvation. Finally, if the benefits paid to the individual are greater than the amount required for taxes, the individual will avoid starvation. These favorable circumstances, however, do not generally exist in the colonial system.

Typically, the colonized are either unemployed or paid insufficient wages and taxed while receiving minimal to no “social security” benefits in the form of a grain distribution. Albert Camus in his *Algerian Chronicles* argues that this grain distribution is not delivered equally as a result of the *caïds*, Algerians acting as representatives of the French government. Whether delivered by the *caïds* or the French, the rations distributed to the native Algerians were inferior to those of the Europeans (98).

The themes of hunger, starvation, and famine persist through the Algerian trilogy as a result of the economics of colonialism. Dib's trilogy opens with *La grande maison*, whose primary theme relies strictly on the hunger of Omar and his family. The novel begins with Omar begging, “Un peu de ce que tu manges” (7) ‘May I have some of what you are eating’ and, likewise, ends with the narrator explaining, “Omar s'accroupit lui aussi avec les autres, devant la meïda, et surveilla sa mère qui rompait le pain contre son genou” (179) ‘Omar squatted down with the others, in front of the meïda, and observed his mother who broke the bread against her knee.’ Not only do the first and last lines convey the theme of suffering due to hunger, but what lies in between these lines demonstrates the complexity of the issue. Characters are defined by whether or not they eat and by what they eat; the poor have limited means of acquiring food sufficient for their needs and are often left eating roots, while the rich eat couscous with meat and other delicacies. As is the case here, the hunger of the colonized is not necessarily a direct result of insufficient food at the national level, for some have food and others lack it; it is, rather, a result of colonial policies which limit consumption of food goods by the economically inferior colonized.

The narrator in *La grande maison* goes on to explain the two means by which Omar procures food: either through begging other students for food or helping his widowed neighbor, Yamina, who rewards him with food. The fact that Omar, as young boy, has to use outside sources to acquire food for himself indicates the inability of the family to provide sufficient nutritional assistance in the home. Omar's concern for filling his belly constantly preoccupies him. Likewise, this preoccupation affects the narration of the novel. Following the introductory chapter, Omar's dialogue with his mother opens the second chapter with a concern for the next meal: “C'est le déjeuner ?” (11) ‘Is this lunch?’ Aïni is in the process of preparing cardoons, also known as artichoke thistle. Considered an invasive weed in other parts of the world, this agricultural product further illuminates the family's economic status; a meal consisting only of cardoons does not provide sufficient nutrition. Omar expresses his discontent with this meager meal by declaring: “Maudits soient les père et mère de ces cardons” (11) ‘Cursed be the mother and father of these cardoons.’⁴

With Omar back at school, the narration moves forward with a brief description of the students. Among them are the poor like Omar, but also students

from wealthier families, such as the sons of merchants, land owners, and civil servants.⁵ These wealthier students have protectors who generally shelter them from the violence of the schoolyard. As a result, they boast of their meals and treats. One of these students, Driss Bel Khodja, not only eats bread, a delicacy in and of itself for Omar, but also cakes and candies. The poor students follow him around hoping to get a taste of fallen crumbs. In observing this, Omar wonders why such a person would gain the respect of his peers: “Était-ce l’obscur respect que leur inspirait un être qui mangeait chaque jour à sa faim?” (14) ‘Was this the obscure respect that inspired a person to fill their belly daily?’ Driss further torments the poorer students every morning by recounting his meal from the previous evening, claiming to have eaten “[des] quartiers de mouton rôtis au four, [des] poulets, [du] couscous au beurre et au sucre, [des] gâteaux aux amandes et au miel” (14) ‘quarters of roasted mutton, chickens, buttered and sugared couscous, almond and honey cakes.’ Omar’s insufficient meal consisting of cardoons pales in comparison.

Through the opening events of the trilogy, the reader becomes aware of Omar’s struggle to acquire his daily bread, as well as the inequality among the population. The novel begins many chapters with the descriptions of meals prepared by Aïni which Omar continually views as insufficient due to the lack of an essential element: bread. The narrator describes such a scene by stating, “Aïni versa le contenu bouillant de la marmite, une soupe de pâtes hachées et de légumes, dans un large plat en émail. Rien de plus, pas de pain ; le pain manquait” (51) ‘Aïni poured out the boiling contents of the pot, minced pasta and vegetables, onto a large enamel plate. Nothing more, no bread; the bread was missing.’ Omar shows his unhappiness by angrily arguing with his mother, asking how he is supposed to eat the soup without bread while in the background, his sisters contentedly use spoons to eat the soup. Along with the lack of bread in this meal, there is not a sufficient amount of soup to fill their bellies, and for this purpose, Aïni uses large amounts of cayenne pepper to make the meal spicy, requiring the children to drink a copious amount of water which, in effect, fills their stomachs. Dib describes not only the menus of the family, but also the way in which they consume the food. In doing so, he allows the readers to immerse themselves in this atmosphere and to comprehend the misery endured by Omar and his family. In this scene Dib helps the reader to hear the Algerian’s misery, not through screams, for they lack the strength to do so, but through the clinking of spoons against dishes, stressing the lack of bread.

The issue of hunger consumes Omar’s thoughts as he notices that “Il y a aussi les riches ; ceux-là peuvent manger. Entre eux et nous passe une frontière, haute et large comme un rempart” (113) ‘There are also the rich: those who eat. Between us and them is a large boundary, like a rampart.’ He does not understand the difference between those who eat and those who do not, and he attempts to

find an answer: “il voulait savoir le comment et le pourquoi de cette faim. C’était simple, en effet. Il voulait savoir le pourquoi et le comment de ceux qui mangent et de ceux qui ne mangent pas” (163) ‘he wanted to know the how and why behind this hunger. It was rather simple. He wanted to know why some eat and others do not.’ What Omar fails to understand in his youth is that the issue surrounding those who eat and those who do not is a complex relationship of power and exchange entitlements. The colonizer intentionally creates a gap between the rich and the poor, which allows the colonizer to prosper while forcing the colonized into abject misery and starvation.

Ownership patterns similar to exchange entitlements shed light on the economic situation of the colonized. These patterns show connections through legitimate means, demonstrating the methods by which the owner has possession of the commodity to be sold, traded, or transferred. The Senatus Consulte of 1863 along with the Warnier Law of 1873 allowed for the constant transfer of lands from Algerians to settlers under a legalistic façade. These laws transformed communal, tribal property into private property, a commodity available for sale or purchase, which, in effect, disrupted the pre-existing tribal identity and society. Meanwhile, the distribution of private property created the inequalities existent in a capitalist society, creating a class distinction between the rich and poor. This transformation also allotted settlers land which was often the most arable, in effect further complicating class distinctions and disparities.

The Algerian population’s holdings of agricultural land paled in comparison to the Europeans’. It is estimated that the average indigenous Algerian’s farm holding in 1954 was around 11.6 hectares, while the European average holding was roughly 123.7 hectares (Horne 62). This large disparity contributed to the financial well-being of the colonizer and the economic burden of the colonized. Expropriation removed not only valuable land from the colonized, but the resources stemming from the possession of that land as well. Expropriation solidified the subaltern status of the colonized, for without the resources that the colonizer has seized, the standard of living for the colonized incessantly spirals downward. Albert Memmi describes the colonizer as a *usurpateur*, someone who has illegitimately taken the place of another, an

Etranger, venu dans un pays par les hasards de l’histoire, il a réussi non seulement à se faire une place, mais à prendre celle de l’habitant, à s’octroyer des privilèges étonnants au détriment des ayants droit. Et cela, non en vertu des lois locales, qui légitiment d’une certaine manière l’inégalité par la tradition, mais en bouleversant les règles admises, en y substituant les siennes. (*Portrait* 34)

A foreigner, having come to a land by the accidents of history, he has succeeded not merely in creating a place for himself but also in taking away that of the inhabitant, granting himself astounding privileges to the detriment of those rightfully entitled to them. And this is not by virtue of local laws, which in a certain way legitimize this inequality by tradition, but by upsetting the established rules and substituting his own. (9)

Because of the vampirism of expropriation, the colonized become subject to poverty and famine, lacking any means of survival. Meanwhile, these foreigners thrive because they inherit what had previously belonged legitimately to the Algerians.⁶

Jean-Robert Henry argues that land is an integral element in colonial Algerian literature as it is “à la fois comme base de la colonisation [*sic*] et comme lieu du conflit colonial” (157) ‘at the same time the foundation of colonization and the colonial battlefield.’ The theme of dispossession and expropriation is central to the last two novels of the Algerian Trilogy, *L’incendie* and *Le métier à tisser*. The *fellahs* make simple remarks throughout *L’incendie* referring to the expropriation of lands by declaring: “Des étrangers possèdent le pays” (67) ‘Foreigners possess the country.’ Comandar, a *fellah* who “tirait son nom d’une longue carrière militaire” (Dib, *L’incendie* 12) ‘took his name from a long military career,’ in speaking of Bni Boublen, argues that only a hundred years before, no one inhabited this region, but one by one *les anciens* settled the area because its settlers had been forced off of their old lands by the colonizer.⁷ Before the initial establishment of Bni Boublen, the *fellahs* had “des terres à orge, à figuiers, à maïs, à légumes et à oliviers” ‘fields of barley, fig trees, corn, vegetables and olive trees’ but through expropriation “elles leur furent enlevées” (64) ‘they were taken from them.’ Bni Boublen is anchored in colonial history; it is demonstrative of the power of the colonizer over the colonized. In this location, the role of colonialism and suffering at its hand reaches a climax; it is, therefore, a choice place for the eruption of an *incendie*.

The narrator aptly describes the expropriation of land in *L’incendie* as he declares: “Des hectares par milliers devenaient la propriété d’un seul colon. Celui-ci ou cet autre, c’était pareil: ils étaient arrivés dans le pays avec des chausses trouées aux pieds. On s’en souvenait encore par là. Ils possédaient à présent des étendues incalculables de terre” ‘Hectares by the thousands became the property of a single colonizer. This one or that one, it is the same: they had arrived in the country wearing pantaloons with holes in the feet. One still remembers. Now, they possess incalculable amounts of land.’ This contrasts greatly with the *fellahs* who “de génération en génération, suaient pendant ce temps-là sang et eau pour cultiver un minuscule lopin” (Dib, *L’incendie* 31) ‘from generation to generation, sweat blood and water during this time to cultivate a miniscule plot.’ The

colonizers, as *usurpateurs*, came to Algeria in rags and through expropriation possess a large portion of land, leaving the colonized with plots which are either too small, infertile, or worst of all, a combination of both. Ben Youb, a *fellah*, slowly begins to recognize the injustices and suffering as a result of the expropriation of land. He comes to the conclusion that “la véritable richesse était rassemblée entre les mains des colons” (31) ‘the actual wealth was assembled in the colonizers’ hands.’ Ben Youb’s unfortunate plot of land does produce, but its location on the foothills leaves much to be desired: “Lui, sa terre ne commençait, comme celle des autres cultivateurs de Bni Boublen, que sur les flancs anguleux de la montagne. Cette terre produisait, mais, comme les femmes de ces hauteurs, toutes en gros os, elle donnait un lait rare” (31) ‘His land only began on the angular slopes of the mountain, like the other farms of Bni Boublen. This land produced, but, like the women of this elevation, all large boned, she produced a rare milk.’ Ben Youb, however, is not the only one who has been forced to cultivate “au seuil de la steppe” (31) ‘on the threshold of the steppe,’ on the land considered unsuitable by the colonizer and, thus, left to the colonized.

Through expropriation, the colonized feel a sense of *dépaysement*, the feeling that comes from not being in one’s home country. The colonizers have not only replaced the colonized language and culture with their own, but have taken away the colonized’s land. Ben Youb expresses his disgust with this sense of *dépaysement* by declaring:

Ne sommes-nous pas comme des étrangers dans notre pays ! Par Dieu, mes voisins, je vous dis les choses comme je les pense. On croirait que c’est nous les étrangers, et les étrangers les vrais gens d’ici. Devenus les maîtres de tout, ils veulent devenir du coup nos maîtres aussi. Et, gorgés des richesses de notre sol, ils se font un devoir de nous haïr. Naturellement ils savent cultiver ; pour ça, ils le savent bien ! N’empêche que ces terres sont toutes à nous. Travaillées avec l’araire ou même pas travaillées du tout, elles nous ont été enlevées. Maintenant, avec elles, avec notre propre terre, ils nous étouffent. Ne croyez-vous pas qu’on est tous encagés comme dans une prison, pris à la gorge ? On ne peut plus respirer, frères, on ne peut plus ! (Dib, *L’incendie* 46)

Are we not foreigners in our own country! My God, my neighbors, I will say what I think. They would believe that we are the foreigners, and the real ones are the natives. Having become masters of everything, they wanted to become all of a sudden our masters as well. And, covered in the wealth of our land, they make it their work to hate us. Naturally, they know how to cultivate the land; for that, they know how to do it well! Nevertheless these lands are ours. Whether they have been plowed or not,

they have been taken from us. Now, with our own lands, they suffocate us. Do you not believe that we are caged like in a prison, held by our throats? We can no longer breathe, brothers, we cannot do it any longer!

Ben Youb argues that he and other *fellahs* have now become strangers in their own land and the colonizers, the real foreigners, perceive Algeria as theirs. This expropriation figuratively strips the colonized of their flesh and smothers them; it shows the misery and desperation of the dispossessed. Ben Youb cannot bear this suffering and attempts to incite rebellion through his words. His rebellion acts as a form of resistance against the desires of the colonizer. His declaration here attempts to discourage the *fellahs*' migration to the urban centers, arguing against ceding more land to the colonizers than they have already taken. Ben Youb equates the loss of land with the loss of honor, an integral element in Kabyle society: "Si vous abandonnez votre terre..., . . . vos enfants, vos petits-enfants et arrière-petits-enfants... jusqu'à la dernière génération, vous demanderont des comptes. Vous n'aurez point mérité d'eux, de votre pays, de l'avenir..." (45) 'If you abandon your land..., . . . your children, your grandchildren and your great grandchildren...until the last generation will demand of you an account of your actions. You will no longer deserve praise from them, from your country, from your future.'

Comandar likewise observes a sense of *dépaysement* among the Algerian population through the laws enacted by the colonial government. In accordance with colonial law, little to no recourse is provided to combat the expropriation of land and resources. Comandar argues that "La Loi leur conteste la propriété de leurs terres" (64) 'The Law contests the ownership of their land' and negates the traditional agrarian society, yielding a vagrant population. Vagrancy as a result of expropriation alters individuals' choices, opportunities, and actions; they become discouraged and disheartened, eventually resigning themselves to work on the colonizer's land or become beggars. Comandar declares of this vagrant population: "Maintenant, s'ils découvrent seulement comme ça de terrain où poser leurs corps, non loin des plaines fécondes et arrosées, ils ne vont plus loin" (65) 'Now, if they find enough land sufficient to rest their bodies, not far from the fertile plains, they do not go further.' His discourse climaxes as he argues that "c'est comme ça qu'un pays a changé de main, que le peuple de cette terre, pourchassé, est devenu étranger sur son propre sol" (65) 'it is this way that the country has changed hands, that the people of this land have become foreigners on their own soil.' Comandar's declaration exemplifies the misery observed in *Misère de Kabylie* by Camus who argues that rather than providing statistics he is providing stark and revealing facts; Dib, likewise, demonstrates these harsh realities through storytelling in order to create a collective consciousness from individual, personal events.

The centrality of land in an agrarian society affects the *fellahs*' livelihood and therefore, expropriation economically inhibits the survival of those who dedicate their life to the land. The *fellahs* link prosperity and land, for the possession of land provides "aisance et liberté. C'est là qu'il trouve la vraie indépendance" (Dib, *L'incendie* 32) 'wealth and freedom. It is there that one finds true independence.' The role of land in this literature must not be overlooked as it represents not only a "lieu du conflit colonial" 'colonial battleground' but "la mère nourricière" 'the nourishing mother' as well (Henry 159). Without land or the resources derived from the earth, the *fellahs* are reduced to a life of poverty, begging for food and often migrating to the urban centers. Throughout the narration of *Le métier à tisser*, the displaced mendicants express the trauma of colonial oppression through their silence; the urban center has become overrun with the vagrant unemployed population from the countryside. Azzedine Haddour describes the historical context: "Eighty-five per cent of a sedentary population was reduced to a nomadic life and many peasants were forced to immigrate to Tunisia, Morocco, or the Middle East" (113) as a result of expropriation. Bourdieu, discussing the disruption and disintegration of Algerian society during colonialism, similarly argues,

The disintegration of the agrarian order has led to an abnormal development of the cities. Life appears to have nothing stable or durable to offer the urban populace, which has been completely and irrevocably cut off from its former environment, lives crammed together in incredible densities in the unsanitary dwellings of the old city districts or of the new shantytowns, and is generally filled with uncertainty as to the future. The misery and insecurity have been made even worse by the distress resulting from the loss of the group ties on which the individuals' psychological and social stability was based in the old communities. (141)

The actual urban effects of the colonizer's actions in the countryside become evident through the large mendicant population, further complicating the effects of expropriation on the economic situation of the Algerians.

In Dib's works, these vagrant individuals are like phantoms and zombies who haunt the living: "Lentement, leur foule, hommes, femmes, vieillards, enfants, prenait possession de tous les quartiers. La plupart d'entre eux étaient valides" (*Le métier* 14) 'Slowly, their hordes, men, women, old men, children, took possession of every neighborhood. Most of them were fit, well and able.' Dib's imagery of these hordes further elaborates on the misery and desperation of those individuals; it is as if they have no purpose or meaning in life. These vagabonds as described by Dib are neither invalids nor social outcasts; they have merely been displaced, comparable to refugees with no place to go. They become

beggars, forced to rely on the charity of others or starve as a result of the unemployment rate for unskilled laborers. Day by day the number of beggars who enter the concrete jungle increases with little waiting there for them. The mendicants set up wherever is convenient: “On en découvrait de plus en plus au fond des impasses, sous les auvents, aux abords des remparts, devant les bains publics, sur les escaliers du marché couvert, au pied des murailles turques de Méchouar, contre le porche des fondouks. Dans toutes les rues déambulaient leurs silhouettes mal ficelées, grises et sales” (15) ‘One found them more and more at the end of a dead end road, under the awnings, surrounding the walls, in front of the public bath houses, on the stairs of the covered market, at the feet of the Turkish murals of Méchouar, against the porches of the caravansaries. On every road their silhouettes meandered, poorly dressed, gray and dirty.’

Dib intertwines the narration of the life of Omar, in this third novel, with the introduction of these mendicants as a form of social realism, an illustration of the Algerian identity under colonialism; this mode is used to construct collective trauma through colonial economic policies. The traumas of colonialism have altered, battered, and buried the Algerian identity in irrevocable ways. Similarly, the narration of Omar’s story, intermingled with the story of the mendicants, reinforces the collective sharing of suffering as cultural and collective trauma. Initially, Omar and the other city dwellers fail to understand the mendicants, viewing their suffering as individual. For this reason, the narration’s preoccupation with the vagrant population transforms the mendicants’ suffering from individual to collective; “Ce ne sont que les nôtres. Hé! Regardez-les ; comme un miroir, ils vous renverront notre propre reflet. L’image la plus fidèle de ce que nous sommes, ils vous la montrent !” (19) ‘These are our people. Hey! Look at them; like in a mirror, they reflect our own image. They are showing us the most faithful image of who we truly are.’ They are a reflection of the misery of the general population who suffer economically under the hands of the colonizer.

The narrator fittingly describes these individuals as “des meurt-de-faim” (18) ‘those dying of starvation’ who are no different than Omar and his family. During the year between working at the *épicerie*, a local grocery store, and being hired on as a *dévideur*, a person who winds up loose string into a ball that can then be used to make clothing or rugs, Omar acts no differently than the mendicants who “vagabondaient un peu de-ci, de-là ; jamais ils n’allaient bien loin. Inattentifs les uns aux autres, ils ne se réunissaient pas entre eux. Mais quand, quelque part, une distribution de nourriture ou de gros sous avait lieu, ils formaient un cercle qui s’enflait à vue d’œil” (18) ‘roamed a little here, and a little there; they never went really far. Unaware of each other, they did not gather together. But when, somewhere, a food or monetary distribution took place, they gathered in a circle around the distribution that swelled visibly.’ After being hired

by Mahi Bouanane as a *dévideur*, Omar distances himself from the mendicants, as he can now provide at least minimal amounts of food for himself; however, he still acts as an observer who objectively portrays the growing suffering. As an observer, Omar ventures among the masses of vagrants as the narrator notes, “Les rues étaient encombrées de mendiants, si bien qu’en maintes endroits, il devait enjamber des corps pour passer” (44) ‘the roads were cluttered with beggars, so much that in certain places it was necessary to step over bodies to pass by.’ Due to high unemployment and expropriation, these places which were once littered with goats are now replaced by vagrant humans. The replacement of goats with mendicants demonstrates the colonial regime’s lack of concern for the displaced, equating them with animals.

Aïni notes the increasing numbers of beggars as she declares, “Des mendiants arrivent de partout, ces jours-ci” (Dib, *Le métier* 41) ‘Beggars come from every direction these days.’ They are described as having “des visages brûlés, secs. C’étaient des femmes, à la féminité sacrifiée, assises sur les trottoirs ou les marches des magasins ; des hommes, debout, couchés, pliés en deux, cachant les mains sous leurs guenilles” (44) ‘blackened, dry faces. There were women, without feminine beauty, sitting on the sidewalks or store steps; there were also some men, standing, laying down, bent in half, hiding their hands behind their rags.’ Dib’s imagery here aptly portrays the mendicants as lifeless corpses inundated with misery and desperation. After having observed these mendicants, Omar decides to interact with them. These zombie-like beggars haunt Omar’s conscience, and he decides to share some bread and fish with a little girl among the horde. Once the girl has eaten her share, the father is left standing with the crumbs that remain. All the other beggars stare blankly at the father, unsure what to do with the remnants. Omar realizes that he has just stirred the pot; he has momentarily awakened the walking dead, and flees in fear. Omar comes to a realization that with the growing population of these mendicants, it becomes more and more difficult to appease them with such limited means.

With each new description of the city of Tlemcen by the narrator in *Le métier à tisser* comes an update on the status of the mendicants. As the novel progresses, the number of mendicants increases, while at the same time, the general population becomes numb to their presence; the narrator argues that “A bout de patience, les habitants firent comme si ces êtres n’existaient pas, et ne s’occupèrent plus d’eux. . . Au surplus, des agents de police étaient postés à tous les coins de rue” (Dib 117) ‘Having run out of patience, the inhabitants acted as if these individuals did not exist, and did not bother themselves with them. . . Furthermore, the police officers were stationed at every street corner.’ Once the horde of mendicants has grown too large, neither the colonizer nor the colonized make any attempt to help. The colonizer instead attempts to suppress the mendicants through a visible policing force, while the colonized continue on with

their daily routine. The mendicants have affected the colonized, causing them to become numb not only to the beggar's suffering, but to their own as well, until an eventual *prise de conscience* occurs. Dib's portrayal of the mendicants in the final novel of the Algerian trilogy emphasizes the negative impact of the economics of colonialism among the indigenous population as outlined by Albert Camus.

Through the act of storytelling, Mohammed Dib in his Algerian trilogy creates a fictional world in which real world circumstances including hunger, expropriation, and mendicancy, affect the characters' actions. He gives a voice to the misery of the population, emphasizing the economic exploitations and violence of the colonial system. The use of these thematic elements by Dib creates a collective trauma and demonstrates the *prise de conscience* that occurred among the Algerian population as a result of colonial economic policies. This *prise de conscience* eventually leads to the colonized putting off the oppressive yoke of colonialism which has deprived the colonized of life-providing commodities.

Notes

1. Although Camus focuses centrally on the Kabyle region of Algeria, the effects of colonialism discussed in *Misères de la Kabylie* are not confined to this area. Unemployment and insufficient wages abound in colonial Algeria, and the general disdain towards the colonized was widespread.
2. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Dib's Algerian trilogy is not available in English. It is, however, available in Arabic, which is the only translation available.
3. The purpose of leaving the French term here is to understand the dual meaning attached to the word: the first being a literal fire, secondarily a figurative frenzy or turmoil. Both of these translations help describe the rupture in the trilogy. For this purpose the use of the French term, rather than the English term "fire," will be used to demonstrate the larger role that the *incendie* plays in the narration of the novel.
4. Albert Camus states, "Je crois pouvoir affirmer que 50% au moins de la population se nourrissent d'herbes et de racines et attendent pour le reste la charité administrative sous forme de distribution de grains" (*Chroniques* 36) 'I believe I can state that at least 50 percent of the population lives on herbs and roots in between government handouts of grain' (43). Mohammed Dib, through the voice of some wandering *fellahs* in *L'incendie* declares: "Pour boire, nous puissions l'eau de sources; pour manger, ça n'était pas aussi facile. Qu'est-ce que

nous avons mangé ! Madre mia ! De tout ! Des racines de *telghouda* et des mûres sauvages ; de la galette que nous donnaient de bonnes gens qui avaient pitié de nous ; des feuilles de guimauve, des amandes vertes et des fruits de grenadiers” (70) ‘In order to drink, we collect water from the spring; in order to eat, it is not as easy. What have we eaten ! Oh my goodness ! Everything ! Roots of the telghouda plant and wild berries; some galettes that were given to us by those who had pity on us; Althaea leaves, green almonds and some pomegranates.’ Dib italicizes and defines the word *telghouda* as a wild plant whose roots are often the only food among the poor in the countryside.

5. In Algeria at this time, it was only the boys who had access to education.

6. This naturally brings up the complicated concept of legitimacy in colonialism; what had legitimately belonged to the Algerians is usurped through the laws of colonialism. The question of whose law is higher and more legitimate could be addressed in great detail. However, that is not the scope of this project.

7. Comandar plays a very influential role in the life of Omar while in the countryside. He is, in fact, admired for his military prowess by all because “Il était resté trois jours et trois nuits sous un amoncellement de corps. Il avait lutté ; il avait hurlé trois jours et trois nuits. Et il s’était traîné hors du charnier ; seul il avait vaincu la mort” (Dib, *L’incendie* 13) ‘He stayed three days and three nights under a heap of bodies. He had fought; he had yelled three days and three nights. And he had been dragged out of the grave; only he had conquered death.’ The people link Comandar to his military role, they, in fact, no longer remember his real name and salute him as a greeting.

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