

**Metaphors of Science and Empire:
The Entomologist Narrator in Amin Maalouf's *Le Premier siècle après Béatrice*, and the Scientific Subject in Chris Marker's *La Jetée***

Sura Qadiri

Introduction

Amin Maalouf's novel, *Le Premier Siècle après Béatrice*, tells the tale of the global rise in popularity of 'fertility beans', sold inside containers shaped like scarab beetles. These ensure the birth of male heirs to those who take them, and the result is that women begin to face global extinction. This causes the spread of global unrest, and the threat of apocalypse hangs in the air. The story is narrated by a Parisian entomologist, who first comes across the beans at a humanities conference on the mythological importance of the scarab beetle, where he is asked to offer a token scientific account of the scarab. The novel is narrated in a linear fashion, with twenty-six chapters headed A-Z. Thus a strong sense of narrative control is juxtaposed with the chaos of the events recounted. At an aesthetic remove, Chris Marker's film, *La Jetée*, tells the story of a prisoner of war living in an underground world in post-apocalyptic Paris. Whilst the subject of a time-travel experiment, he is projected into the Parisian past, and pieces together disjointed memories, before being shot dead by those running the experiment.

Comparative consideration of these two works reveals a common preoccupation with postcolonial issues on, at the very least, an implicit level.¹ Both portray protagonists who struggle to maintain a sense of identity in the wake of traumatic events. Through the use of subtle imagery, these events become closely associated with the issues of decolonisation, specifically the decolonisation of Algeria in *Jetée*. In both works the protagonists' struggles with self-narratives are also presented through images and tropes relating to science.

¹ See Max Silverman, 'Interconnected Histories: Holocaust and Empire in the Cultural Imaginary', *French Studies*, 52: 4 (2008) 417-428. Silverman makes the case that Holocaust and Empire have made a huge impact on the public imagination, to the extent that one or both of these may be evoked even where it is not being discussed explicitly in literature and film.

Scientists are depicted as figures of control who seek to impose order on their subjects: most easily accomplished when they are dead. The protagonist in *Jetée* constitutes a living subject, striving to construct a narrative of his own and being killed for it. Both works feature a struggle between scientist and subject for control of an identity narrative. The protagonist in *Jetée* struggles for control of his own psyche, whilst in *Béatrice*, the main character works hard to maintain a distance between himself as a rational figure, and the chaotic events of the world around him. Both struggles parallel broader problems of representation in narrative, and ultimately reinforce the idea that science, like literature or film, is part of wider discourse, and inevitably linked to ideological positions.

Marker, Maalouf and Postcoloniality

Maalouf's oeuvre is largely made up of tales set in a pre-colonial, sometimes pre-Islamic, Middle East, seemingly with a view to increasing awareness of the region's historical, ethnic and religious diversity. *Samarcande* tells the semi-biographical story of Persian poet Omar Khayyam, whilst *Le Rocher de Tanios* is based on a centuries-old folkloric tale originating in a Christian Lebanese village. *Béatrice* is unique amongst his texts, in that it is set in the future. Yet the novel is saturated with images evocative of a preoccupation with a colonial past. Moreover, the fact that the narrator of the book is an entomologist, whose job it is to scrutinise museum collections of preserved insects and produce academic evaluations of them, calls strongly to mind the colonial fondness for ethnography: the cultural, and even anatomical, fascination with and scrutiny of non-Western ethnic groups.

The imagery in *Béatrice* is, at times, strongly evocative of the colonial. The encounters of the entomologist, even happy personal ones, are characterised by a colonial language of possession. He reminisces in the following terms about his first meeting with Clarence, the journalist who becomes his wife: 'Je me souviens d'avoir passé mon regard en premier sur ses lèvres, barques de couleur rose nuit, tendues vers le lointain comme sur certaines fresques égyptiennes' [I remember first letting my eyes rest on her lips, *boats*² of deep magenta, pointing into the distance, as in certain Egyptian frescoes'].³ The image of the 'barques [...] tendues vers le lointain' is suggestive of the dawn of the colonial era, when explorers set off

² My emphasis. The word 'barque' is rendered 'shells' in the published translation. I have chosen to retain the original image of boats in order to sustain the passage's evocation of colonial travel and quest.

³ Amin Maalouf, *Le Premier Siècle après Béatrice* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelles, 1992), p.21/*The First Century After Beatrice*, trans. by Dorothy S. Blair (London: Abacus, 1993), p.16.

for faraway lands: a poetic time of the ‘couleur rose de nuit’ and of ‘fresques égyptiennes’; a time that predates the ethical crises and pain of colonialism, and the forced loss of vast expanses of colonial land. Clarence evokes captivating memories of innocent colonial youth, memories that may well be imaginary.

Images of the entomologist as a welcome and loveable colonial traveller abound in the text. He calls Clarence his ‘igloo’, based on the sound of her surname Nesmiglou: ‘Qu’est-ce que c’est qu’un igloo?’ ‘Un bloc de glace à l’abri duquel on se sent au chaud’ [‘What is an igloo?’ ‘A block of ice in the shelter of which one feels warm’], thereby paralleling himself with the kindly European traveller who is welcomed into native homes.⁴ Moreover, the arms of Béatrice around his neck as he drops her off at school are like a ‘guirlande brune’ [‘brown garland’],⁵ just like the exotic garlands welcomingly placed around the necks of European visitors to faraway lands. Clarence is impressed by the entomologist’s academic setting, which she describes as an ‘oasis,’⁶ and is content to listen to him ‘toute antenne dehors’ [‘she listened, her antennae raised’], like one of his insects; his subjects.⁷

Such images convey a romanticised colonial nostalgia, emerging from the perspective of a declining colonialist. This serves to express a domineering element to the entomologist as single narrator. His account hegemonically lacks other voices, in the same way that a selective account of history might. Indeed, all events are ultimately subsumed in *Béatrice* by a language of self-aggrandizement and self-justification. Clarence’s journalistic accounts of events are only alluded to, and never featured. Other voices in the text are commonly paraphrased and summarised. As a scientist, the entomologist represents himself as a figure of unquestionable empirical truth. This effect is enhanced by the fact that the narrative does not reveal his name. His namelessness makes him a pure voice of reason, not a personality through which information is distorted, unlike all the other (mediated) characters in the novel. Yet this representation of him is constantly undermined by the sinister colonialist subtext, which exposes the workings of his narrative-building as manipulative, selective and romanticist.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.27/24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.73/81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.26/23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.26/my translation; the image of antennae was lost in Blair’s translation.

Marker's film was made in 1962, in the wake of Algerian Independence, and at a time when Marker was also completing *Le Joli Mai*, a documentary film about the French response to Algeria. Moreover, Marker's 1953 film with Resnais, *Les Statues Meurent Aussi*, looks at the commercialisation of colonial art, and is often understood to carry an anti-colonial message.⁸ It was even banned by the French government in the late 1950s at the time of the outbreak of the conflict in Algeria.⁹ Marker's commentary on the film has obvious anti-colonial overtones. He says: 'we are the Martians of Africa. We arrive from our planet with our ways of seeing, our white magic, our machines.'¹⁰ Traces of this preoccupation with colonialism may be identified in *Jetée*. Emily Tomlinson draws parallels between images of the scientists surrounding the protagonist in the film, and the images of Algerians being tortured in Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*.¹¹ At the beginning of the time-travel experiment in *Jetée*, the narrative voice tells us that 'les images commencent à sourdre comme des aveux' ['begin to ooze like confessions'],¹² suggesting the beginnings of colonial guilt in the wake of Algerian decolonisation. It is as though the French psyche is confronting memories, or perhaps hitherto little known facts, of the perpetration of colonial torture. The fact that the captors spy on the dreams of their prisoners and pry into their minds is evocative of the intellectually and spiritually invasive aspects of colonial domination, reminding us that colonial powers did not merely seek to conquer lands.

Both *Jetée* and *Béatrice* thematize the desire for stable identity and narrative order at moments of political upheaval. Their chaotic settings are implicitly connected to the end of colonial history, and chart the desire to construct a stable sense of identity in the wake of trauma. The idea of science in both the film and the novel becomes associated with struggles for control, hegemony and dominion, both because of its historic role in such struggles, as suggested in *Jetée*, and because of its claims to detached empirical fact. Like other discourses, it is shown in both cases to be ideologically motivated.

⁸ See Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p.35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.36.

¹¹ Emily Tomlinson, 'Torture, Fiction, and the Repetition of Horror: Ghost-Writing the Past in Algeria and Argentina' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2002).

¹² *La Jetée*, dir. by Chris Marker (Argos Films, 1962), 11:05.

Narrating Chaos

The subtextual preoccupation with colonialism common to both *Jetée* and *Béatrice* is representative of discourses that are politically, economically and ideologically motivated. The emergence of a postcolonial critique of colonialism has undermined the idea that such discourses carry any objective weight. In the two narratives, the subjective colonialist account is juxtaposed with the motif of science, which represents a mode of discourse that is preoccupied with empirical facts as opposed to ideological agendas. Moreover, whilst discussions surrounding colonialism are ethically fraught and messy, science, in contrast, can offer tidy, unambiguous conclusions. By creating an implicit interplay between these two modes of discourse, *Jetée* and *Béatrice* ultimately show how much they have in common, and destabilise scientific claims to objectivity. In turn, the scientific strand in both texts represents a struggle for authority and control over the narrative, which constantly fails. In particular, both *Jetée* and *Béatrice* posit a sustained sense of distinction between the identities of coloniser and colonised as an indication of narrative control, where the failure to maintain the distinction suggests a loss of such control.

In *Jetée*, there is a marked blurring of identities. Ambiguity is introduced at the start of the film, where images of Paris destroyed by a nuclear war (gesturing towards ideologically-motivated uses of science) historically coincide with a war that is raging on Algerian soil. Historical buildings have been reduced to ruins and rubble, whilst a huge chunk is missing from the Arc de Triomphe, suggesting a blow to Parisian pride and identity. Images of a collapsed building reflected in a pool of water suggest a Paris that is actively contemplating its new, post-Algerian image, yet seeing nothing but wounded pride and destruction.

The ambiguity increases considerably with the introduction of the time-travelling protagonist. Although the memories of this time-traveller are of Sunday afternoons in Paris, his status as victim in the film, as well as his curiously Algerian appearance (he is of a slightly darker complexion than his captors), suggest an Algerian identity. He has clearly engaged in combat, and still wears a necklace that is linked to his military action. Yet he does not wear a military uniform. Instead, his clothing is that of a civilian resistance fighter, and gives him the look of an Algerian *maquisard*. We are thus presented with a figure who looks like an Algerian freedom fighter and is tortured like one, but who has the childhood memories of a Frenchman. His hybrid identity suggests a collapse of the colonial binary distinction between

French and Algerian, between coloniser and colonised, who have now come to be embodied by the same figure.

Feelings of trauma, confusion and dislocation are foregrounded in *Jetée*, but in Maalouf's text, conflict is relegated to the background, and is not experienced personally by the protagonist. His distance from it gives him a stronger ability to order his account. Yet the subtext of his narrative reveals his own sense of decline in a world filled with ideological change. Beyond his quiet sphere, he notes the spread of riots in distant countries like Sri Lanka, Burundi and South Africa.¹³ These two works might be seen to trace the impact of decolonisation on the French psyche over time. In the immediate wake of the Algerian War, there is shock, defeat, confusion, and an inability to make sense of what has happened, all of which is successfully depicted in *La Jetée*. Over time, the events in Algeria are integrated into the French self-narrative, distanced, tamed and rationalised, as in *Béatrice*. The images of decolonisation that appear in the text are of gradual decline, not of abrupt and explosive ending. The following is a description given by the entomologist of his office:

Et pour ce qui est de ce bureau, je vous dirai qu'il m'inquiète plutôt. Vous le voyez ainsi, majestueux, massif, mais sous cette apparence fallacieuse, il est miné par des réseaux de galeries où cavalent des colonies de percebois hilares [...] Et un jour, ils auront si bien labouré qu'il me suffira de poser ma serviette à cet endroit pour que tout s'écroule.

[And as for this desk, I must tell you it rather worries me. You see its impressive, massive looks but underneath this deceptive appearance, it is undermined by a network of galleries where colonies of wood borers cavort gaily [...] And one day they will have worked so hard that I shall only have to put my briefcase down on this spot for everything to crumble].¹⁴

The imperialistic description of the office as 'majestueux' and 'massif' is accompanied by an image of slow decline, a gradual gnawing away from beneath as opposed to any sense of explosive conflict. The insects seem to represent colonial subjects, arranged in 'réseaux', as the maquisards were believed to be.¹⁵ These insects are living, unlike the dead objects of the entomologists's study, arranged in display cases around his office. The term 'réseau' recurs in the text when the entomologist establishes the 'Réseau de Sages' [Network of Sages], an alliance of Western professionals united against the spread of fertility beans. Whilst the word

¹³ Maalouf, *Béatrice*, p.81/83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.23/18.

¹⁵ As seen in Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966).

‘sages’ suggests an imperialistic and scientific sense of intellectual superiority, ‘réseau’ calls to mind once again the theme of anti-colonialist underground resistance, thus betraying a sense of confused identity.

Later on in the text, the entomologist describes his father/son relationship with his old friend André who, since his childhood, has lent him books to read. Amongst the earliest of these is the colonially and scientifically suggestive *Gulliver’s Travels*. The entomologist notes that once a book is removed from the shelves, the gaps are not closed up, such that over time, the library acquires a look of toothlessness, becomes ‘édentée’ [like ‘a toothless mouth’],¹⁶ thus evoking the image of an old man slowly losing his teeth and declining intellectually. Colonialism is gently retreating from the world with its dignity more-or-less intact, just as the entomologist retreats from civilisation to a safe place in the hills. However this toothless image also conjures up the faint ghost of the tortured resistance fighter, possibly subjected to the horrors of tooth extraction. The happy, nostalgic memory of friendship is troubled by uncomfortable images of terror and decline, suggesting moments of slippage in the entomologist’s control over his narrative. However, this remains subtle. There is no shock, no humiliation, no personal loss (whilst women are vanishing from the world, the entomologist acquires both a girlfriend and a daughter during the course of the narrative). The authoritative figure of the scientist, with his retrospective, diegetic account of events, papers over moral ambiguity, and offers a tidy narrative.

Conclusion

The figure of the scientist in *Béatrice* becomes synonymous with order, wisdom and inertia, producing a narrative that is linear and lucid. He is also subtextually equated with an old and jaded colonialist, keeping himself dignified and distant from traumatic events. Images in his account suggest that, although it is well ordered, there are suppressed forces lurking in its margins that may destabilise it. In *Jetée*, the protagonist confusedly embodies several identities, and is not in command of his memories. He is under the control of scientists. These scientists whisper to each other in German, and call to mind the notorious Holocaust experiments carried out on human subjects. Indeed, this implicit reference to historic

¹⁶ Maalouf, *Béatrice*, p.38/38.

scientific atrocities goes some way to explaining the cultural use of scientists as figures of suspicion (both latently and overtly) which is presented here.

The scientist is also metaphorically equated with the writer. The entomologist in *Béatrice* is writing down his account of events. He struggles with his images and metaphors, just as he struggles with the natural world: his office is still under threat from insects, despite the glass cases full of moths that have been captured and catalogued. Both as a scientist and a writer, his task is to generate a sense of order and to give meaning to his surroundings. Both tasks involve the building of narrative, and yet both are open to the same threats of messiness, inconclusiveness and failure.