

*The Language War in Colonized Algeria: A Postcolonial Perspective*

حرب اللغة في الجزائر المستعمرة: منظور ما بعد الاستعمار

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**Abstract :**

When France occupied Algeria, the latter was a mirror through which France saw a reflection of its many ambitions to reach power. To achieve this purpose, France adopted a policy of psychological warfare, surrounded itself with an aura of grandeur and claimed to shoulder the burden of backward countries towards development. Under the guise of la mission civilisatrice, France convinced Algeria of its backwardness and the necessity to keep up with civilization, thus waging a cultural war against it with the aim to eliminate its language and erase the features of its identity. This study aims to shed light on the French educational policy in Algeria and how it worked to create an individual who would be loyal to France.

**Keywords:** Algeria, La mission civilisatrice, France, Language, educational policy

ملخص:

عندما احتلت فرنسا الجزائر، كانت هذه الأخيرة مرآة صافية رأت من خلالها فرنسا انعكاسا لتحقيق مطامعها الكثيرة للوصول إلى السلطة. وللحصول على مبتغاها انتهجت فرنسا سياسية الحرب النفسية، أحاطت حول نفسها هالة من العظمة وادعت حمل عبء الدول المتخلفة نحو التطور. تحت مسمى المهمة الحضارية، اقنعت فرنسا الجزائر بتخلفها وحاجتها إلى مواكبة الحضارة لتشن بذلك عليها حربا ثقافية كان مسعاها الأول والأخير هو القضاء على لغتها وطمس معالم هويتها. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على السياسة التعليمية الفرنسية في الجزائر وكيف عملت على خلق فرد يجرى بالولاء لفرنسا

كلمات مفتاحية: الجزائر، المهمة الحضارية، فرنسا، اللغة، السياسة التعليمية

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**1- Introduction:**

Colonialism is an act of political domination of one nation over another. Though with terrible repercussions, there exists another sort of control that is more widespread and malicious in its effects, more deeply ingrained in a society and more difficult to eradicate: Cultural Colonialism. This type of dominion was practiced by a colonial power that sought to leave a forever imprint; more like a disease that can never be healed; a dagger in the body of the nation that can only be removed by removing its soul i.e. its language. Algeria is, indeed, an interesting ground for the study of French acculturation policies. Being colonized for 132 years makes it the only African country exposed to the longest assimilationist French rule and the most harmed by it. The harsh French acculturation

programs were not an endeavor to spread the French language and make the people more civilized, as allegedly stated, but rather to destroy their identities and create a clone of France that is completely paralyzed. Algeria had, therefore, to enter a war of language to restore its sovereignty and regain the bedrock of its identity which is the Arabic language.

## **2- Language War:**

The term language war can be traced back to the early 20th century when the linguistic conflict intensified between the Jews over the use of Hebrew and Yiddish languages. As far as language is concerned, there has been a general consensus among historians that language difference is a sturdy source of division. Even though the use of more than one language cannot in all cases cause strife, discords occur when “people try to carve out a space for their own tongue which expands to other linguistic territories” (Benrabah, 2013, p. 2). This language spread produce disparity and animosity in any social structure.

The most ferocious language feuds are those in which empires exterminated a people's language as an indication of dominance. Historically, colonizers sought to eliminate the diversity of languages and cultures in a given area to help impose their own. The process, despite its apparent lack of ugliness, conceals a heinous offence against subjugated peoples. In an effort to disseminate his language and culture, the colonizer substitutes the language of the colonized, thereby, rendering it obsolete and can no longer be transmitted from one generation to another. This was the scenario in Algeria following the establishment of French educational programs. Linguists refer to this form of language destruction as ‘linguisticide’ or ‘language genocide.’ (Benrabah, 2013, p. 4)

## **3- How It Started?**

It is a universally known reality that everything begins with a thought. However, France's strategy in Algeria began with a dream, and the first step towards achieving it was to invade the country. Algeria is the largest country in Africa, and its position in the Mediterranean was so alluring to France. Algeria was the gateway to third world nations and the “appeal of the Mediterranean as un ‘bassin francais’ was as potent as that of la plus Grande France.” (Harrison, 1983, p. 76) After extensive thought and preparation, France chose to undertake a military attempt to invade Algeria. It picked Sidi Fredj beach, located west of Algeria's city. The beach's position rendered loss so foreseeable that elite members hired luxury boats to monitor the shoreline assault. (Evans & Phillips, 2007, p. 1) The occupation began with control of the coastal districts, and then the French soldiers advanced into the interior, encountering only minimal opposition from certain Ottoman groups which led, according to foreign estimates, to a death toll of 500,000 peoples.

Right at the beginning of colonization, France faced a major obstacle: the difficult terrain, in addition to a diverse population of 3 million people. The initial solution to this problem was for a large number of French people to displace to Algeria and settle in the coastal areas, forming a French community called les Pieds-Noirs. In an unusual way, the displacement was huge and surprising to an extent that historians anticipated France's long stay. On this occasion, historian Marc Ferro commented: "Elsewhere, there had been invasions, occupations of countries that have lasted ten, twenty maybe thirty years yet; this level of occupation, with massive land dispossession and settlements is quite singular. Algeria was not only part of France, Algeria was France." (Calvet, 2017, p. 4)

The creation of L'Algerie francaise initiated in 1848 when Algeria was annexed to mainland France and divided into 3 administrative departments. As bizarre as it may appear, France created a fictitious homeland, French Algeria, and issued several pronouncements about it. France attempted to persuade the public that Algeria had united with France to form one body, a Greater France, while acknowledging that their connection is that of a single family. France is viewed as the 'patrie' or 'matrerie', caring for her daughter Algeria which is a little French version formed in North Africa, a dynamic new country modelled after France. (Gosnell, 2002, p. 14) These series of illusions were followed by the establishment of les communes de plein exercices in the 3 departments; the coastal areas that are known for their massive settlement by European populations and according to the 1936 urban density surveys, nearly quarter of the Algerian cities were populated by Europeans (Humphrey, 1976, p.432). These places resembled a second version of France in terms of urban planning, street names and lifestyle. The French considered them a source of pride in their plan to create France in Algeria. As for Algerians, they were a bloody and permanent reminder of the French presence in their homeland.

Perhaps the general impetus behind this settlement was to create a sort of integration and coexistence between Europeans and Algerians which will eventually lead to a sort of interpenetration and dissemination of the French culture and language. In other words, France decided to Frenchify the Algerian context and to celebrate this Frenchness, France organized the grandiose festivals of 1930 in Algiers to commemorate 100 years of coexistence and also held the colonial exposition of 1931 in Vincennes to display its powerful influence in North Africa. According to the official program of the centennial:

Algeria intends not only to celebrate its individual effort or success, but also to organize an international celebration in honor of France. It expects that this Centennial mark the glorification of the colonizing methods of the Mother-Country, of her just and protective action.... To create more love and especially more

knowledge of this great country. . . . This is one of the primary goals of the Centennial.  
(As cited in Gosnell, 2002, p. 20)

Through the centennial, France expressed on behalf of Algeria, its gratitude for its colonial efforts to promote love, peace, and unity. However, not all opinions agreed on another round of applause for France's alleged achievements. Many critics sought the centennial as a celebration of past oppression and colonization of a territory. Thus, many historians and statesmen saw the plan, which solicited public acceptance and rejoiced about what France deemed a tremendous success, as evidence of guilt. On the flip side, the reality of Algerian society has proven that the idea of coexistence was not actually successful in creating a French individual according to the desired French standards. French Algeria constituted barely 10% of the nation while the other 90% percent were conflicted with anything French. (kada, 2024, p. 63).

Meanwhile, France had to devise an alternate strategy to achieve its aim; it would be shameful for a great country like France not to bear the burden of this impoverished nation in desperate need of civilization and advancement. As a matter of fact, Civilization is a French concept that refers to 'law that makes a criminal process civil'. It originated in the 18th century in France during the enlightenment when there was a fresh interest to progress the society from barbarism. France adopted the notion of 'la mission civilisatrice,' which was also adopted by many other European countries. Yet, France has gone beyond the limits of logic and made it an imperial doctrine. This action was based on its deep conviction in the superiority and distinction of the French race, and gaining recognition from many scholars, increased its already high confidence. According to philologist Ernest Renan (1882) "nature produced a race of laborers: the Chinese...; a race of workers of the earth, the Blacks...; a race of masters and soldiers: the Europeans," (Brooks, 2016, p.10) and these nations are engaged in a race struggle that necessitates a superior race colonizes an inferior one in order to achieve dominance. Therefore, the idea of colonization is accepted by order of nature. France, from another stance, viewed its culture as a medium of expanding its empire that carries a cultural mission of civilizing the uncivilized. It was this belief that destroyed many colonized countries' schooling system, legal system, religion and language.

#### **4-Frenchification in Algeria:**

By emphasizing the country's backwardness, France sought to legitimize its civilizing mission in Algeria, and advocates of colonialism agreed that the project needed the execution of an assimilationist strategy. Assimilation is a term used to describe the French policy in Algeria that aimed to transform Algerians into Frenchmen through the process of education. Although the excuse was to develop a sophisticated people, the real aim was to create an individual devoid of culture and

distinct identity, a hollow person who could be easily influenced and compelled to accept French culture and language. Historian Leroy Beaulieu claimed:

The way to dominate a people is to assimilate it, to seize the youth in its infancy...The knowledge of the Koran is disappearing in Algeria: it must not be revived; it is a book full of bellicose exhortations against infidels and includes thousands of texts that can be used against us. North Africa (...) will only belong to us definitively if we conciliate Arabs and, to a certain extent, Frenchify them. (As cited in Assous, 1985, p.91)

France promoted the notion of "Frenchification" as a moral uniting force, aiming to convert colonial people into 'like-minded Frenchmen.' and eliminate distinctions between the country and its colonies through education. The French republican philosophy in education aimed to create an individual with a patriotic attitude to guarantee his loyalty and devotion to France, as well as a person without religion so that he could be easily controlled and managed. These ideas resulted in educational reforms known as the Jules Ferry laws which were declared in March 1882 and stipulated the establishment of a primary school education that is 'free, obligatory and secular' in France and Algeria.

The initial focus of the educational mission was on the young generation only. A colonial education theorist stated that the goal of the French school was:

To transform the primitive peoples in our colonies, to render them as devoted as possible to our cause and useful to our commerce . . . the safest method is to take the native in childhood, bring him into assiduous contact with us and subject him to our intellectual and moral habits for many years in succession, in a word to open schools for him where his mind can be shaped at our will (As cited in Benrabah, 2013, p. 31-32)

The implementation of this plan began with the illusory notion that French identity was within the reach of the indigenous Algerian population in the same way that it was for the French, because French identity was not subject to the rules of race, religion, or place of birth, but rather that the individual only needed to be culturally transformed to be considered a French individual. Thus, Education was the effective tool that facilitated the spread of French thought. France designed a parallel educational system and identical textbooks were allocated to teach children in both Algeria and France. Schoolchildren in Algeria and France were chanting "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois" to celebrate their shared gaulic heritage. (Gosnell, 2002, p. 41) This is what the colonial educational policy aimed at, namely to instill a sense of adaptation. Although the 'shared ancestry' is a misleading theory and a simple play on words, it was successful in establishing a sense of ease and acceptance towards the European culture.

## **5- Education in Colonial Algeria:**

As previously stated, primary school education was deemed ' free, obligatory and secular' following the Jules Ferry laws 1882 which was the product of careful consideration and preparation that led to the decision of implementing an educational program with the goal of establishing a cohesive civic society. (Déloye, 1994, p.25) Although the promises were to implement an educational system identical to France, the year 1892 witnessed the establishment of 'les écoles Franco indigènes' for Arabs and Berbers which were characterized by a great educational racialization. These institutes prioritized vocational or agricultural education for Algerian youngsters, because as future laborers and peasants; it is not necessary to undertake a professional education.

The textbooks used in these schools promoted the idea of producing a working and agricultural generation by depicting workers in markets selling vegetables and fruits, carrying water, and on farms. These trades were associated with Arab names such as 'Sliman the basket maker,' 'Ali the jeweler,' 'Ahmed the barber,' and 'Mohammed and Ali the cobblers,' to spot the professions that an Algerian should seek. According to Gosnell (2002, p.46), instructors often encourage students to pursue these trades by stating that 'Il n y a pas de sot métier' and emphasizing the importance of pride in their work.

Numerous investigations conducted by professionals in education have demonstrated that the French government established this educational policy out of concern that it would jeopardize its own interests if it offered the public an authentic educational experience. As usual, France developed psychological arguments that Algerians should only receive physical education rather than intellectual because that would spoil their nature as peasants. As a result, instead of learning what they should know, they should learn what they should do. All of these claims can be characterized as psychological deception, and France was very good at it to conceal the reality that the whole thing was a front for its fear of producing intelligent Algerians who would either challenge it for power or force it to demand independence in the future. (Magrath, 2006) These schools were criticized of providing little to no education at all, the reason why they were called "les écoles gourbis" and "instruction au rabais" (Kateb, 2004, p. 24)

### **5.1. French Language and Moral Education:**

The attempt to establish the French language was the next phase in these decisions. In reality, the French language served as a major foundation for the French educational system. For the Republicans of the Third Republic, maintaining dominance over the colonial states and fostering national unity required more than just passing legislation and reforming the educational system. Instead, national and united teaching methods were needed for education, and the French language

was selected as the key to achieving this unification. (Brooks, 2016, p. 40) Some French people believe in the transformative nature of the French language, that it has the power to create a different person. They claim that teaching the language to the native inhabitants of colonial Algeria can inspire them to acquire a half-French identity. This language can make them think and feel like a French person, and the more fluent they are, the more 'assimilable' they will be.

One aspect of French educational policy that merits recognition, if not praise, is its thoughtfulness in reaching judgments following a careful analysis of the Algerian context. These two factors played a major role in the language's success. Initially, the creators of the educational programs believed that Algerian students might have trouble adjusting to the French language. Therefore, they decided to teach it gradually using body language, sign language, and simple terminology to help with information transfer. Language instructors also examined the Algerian environment and came to the conclusion that French school textbooks would not aid in acquiring the language. They, thus, rushed to design textbooks that presented familiar scenes to the Algerian schoolchild to make the newly learned language more relevant to his reality. For instance, learners studied Algeria's topography, climate, and flora and fauna in their science textbooks, while In social textbooks, they described locations and public spaces using slang terms like: 'un souk', 'un couple de fellahs', 'un matin dans le bled'. History books, on the other hand, spoke of France's heroism in the war, and of the Algerian people's fighting alongside France in World War I, pointing to the unity of the two peoples. (Gosnell, 2002, p. 50-52)

The literature books were arguably the most impactful school texts for Algerian children at the time. These books served as the child's primary source of instruction on moral behavior, including proper eating habits, conduct, organization, cleanliness, politeness, accuracy, and loyalty in the workplace. To put it briefly, these books taught him every trait that France required of an Algerian in order for him to be recognized as a true French person. (Aziz, 2015; brooks, 2017, p. 32) Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1957) coined the term "civic instruction" to describe this kind of education. France sought to create a homogeneous society and to achieve this aim; it resorted to unifying moral behavior among members of the same society so as to establish a unified social order.

In 1917, claimed an educational theorist: "the safest method is to take the native in childhood, bring him into assiduous contact with us and subject him to our intellectual and moral habits for many years in succession, in a word to open schools for him where his mind can be shaped at our will." (As cited in Benrabah, 2013, p. 31-32) And since children are mainly imitative in nature, France's language teaching practices have mainly proven successful. Particularly after the First World War and the return of Algerian combatants in the French army to their homeland, their attitudes toward French education shifted. After having strong concerns about it, the war altered their minds,

and they became more convinced that contemporary education is the path to societal progress. Thus, cultural resistance evolved into complete acceptance of colonial schools, which quickly led to the desire for more intense French education. (Benrabah, 2013, p. 33)

The years from 1882 -1962 witnessed an escalation in the use of the French language among the Algerian populace and by the mid-20th century, almost all Algerian could speak French. This leads to the conclusion that the French language was no longer seen as foreign by the people. France was able to lift any reservations about it, allowing it to become acceptable and take root in the state, eventually becoming the common language in French Algeria in the 1950s.

## **6- Postcolonial Perspective:**

Language is widely recognized as a tool of communication between nations, as well as a feature that provides countries unity and distinguishes them from others. However, in terms of relations between colonizer and colonized, as well as the discipline of postcolonial studies, it is entirely different. In the zone of contact between colonizer and colonized, Language is not a factor of unification but a factor of division. There is always one superior language: that of the colonizer that is supposed to be adopted by the colonized. Frantz fanon claims that: 'to speak a language is to take on the world, a culture' and in this sense, to speak the language of the colonizer is to take on his culture. The harshness of this philosophy stems from the reality that the colonized here is a victim of identity theft, as adopting another culture requires him to abandon his own. (Jinadu, 1976, p. 607)

The attempts made by the colonizer, whether by boasting about his superior culture or by isolating the colonized from his language and culture, generates in the latter as sense of self depreciation and worthlessness of his own culture, and what heightens the intensity of this feeling is the colonizer's attachment to his culture and his constant pride in being the messenger of knowledge, logic, and civilization which drives the colonized to mimic him. Lacan refers to this as 'desire'. This desire to imitate the colonizer is not necessarily an attempt to evade his culture, but rather an attempt to gain recognition from the colonizer, so that the colonized can first prove to himself, and then to his colonizer, that he is not the inferior 'other' and that he can be valued equally with him. In truth, the colonizer will never be willing to forsake his negative perception of the colonized, nor will the latter be able to meet the colonizer's expectations. Thus, adopting the language and culture of the colonizer only exacerbate the problem, because the language "one speaks comes with baggage, that even our mother tongue is the Other" (Dascomb, 2018, p.17)

## **7- Conclusion:**

During the neo-imperialist era, France sought to expand its hegemony by acquiring colonies in the African continent. Algeria was the dominating Mediterranean country at the time, serving as a significant gateway to the Third World. France found its way to Algeria and held it tightly for 132 years. Following the establishment of the Third Republic, France, under the umbrella of the civilising mission, implemented various educational changes in metropolitan France. Given that Algeria was the second France in Africa, France chose to honour it by granting it a French educational licence. Algeria, according to many historians and politicians, was the jewel in the Republican crown, yet the acculturation process was the move that killed the shine of that jewel. France attempted to construct an Algerian person according to French ideals, employing the French assimilation program in the hopes of producing citizens loyal to France. As a matter of fact, it did succeed in creating such an elite, but in the process, it left behind a generation that had lost its identity and was unable to find its place in post colonial Algeria.

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