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Research Article

Identifying Identity: Xavier Le Clerc's *A Man with No Title*

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Abstract: "We were no longer living in France or Algeria," writes Xavier Le Clerc in his 2024 memoir *A Man with No Title*, "[v]iolence was the only country we knew." Caught in the quagmire of history and memory, Le Clerc traces the remnants of his father's life, originally from Algeria and later working in France, while grappling with the complexities of identity politics. Drawing inspiration from Albert Camus' 1939 journalistic writings on Kabylia, Le Clerc parallels his father's experience with the conditions Camus once described, illuminating the silent suffering of men like his father. Throughout the memoir, Le Clerc sheds light on the struggles of Algerian workers who migrated to France and played a pivotal role in its post-World War II reconstruction. In doing so, he exposes the hypocrisy of 'enlightened' France and its systemic neglect, racism, and exploitation of voiceless Algerian labourers. Through the lens of his father's life, Le Clerc reflects on his own identity as a French-born man of Algerian descent, and as someone navigating the politics of sexual identity. This paper aims to examine French-Algerian relations through the perspective of a son seeking to uncover and reclaim his father's silenced legacy in a nation that historically denied them legal and cultural recognition. It will read Le Clerc's memoir as a vital text that reclaims erased Algerian histories and explores the intersections of colonial legacy, national belonging, and queer identity.

Keywords: Identity; Politics; Memory; Colonial legacy; Queer Politics

> *"The Frenchman does not like the Jew, who does not like the Arab, who does not like the black man. The Arab is told: "If you are poor, it's because the Jew has cheated you and robbed you of everything." The Jew is told: "You're not of the same calibre as the Arab because, in fact, you are white and you have Bergson and Einstein." The black man is told, "You are the finest soldiers in the French empire; the Arabs think they're superior to you, but they are wrong." Moreover, it's not true; they don't say anything to the black man; they have nothing to say to him; the Senegalese infantryman is an infantryman, the good soldier who only obeys his captain, the good soldier who obeys orders.*
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> *"You not pass."*
>
> *"Why not?"*
>
> *"Me no know. You not pass."*
>
> *Unable to confront all these demands, the white man shirks his responsibility. I have a phrase for this: the racial allocation of guilt."(83)*

The above quote by Frantz Fanon from his celebrated book *Black Skin, White Masks* captures the intricate, racialised hierarchy engineered by French colonialism. It is a quote deeply embedded in the social fabric of France - particularly in the context of French-Algerian relations. In this passage, Fanon dissects the divide-and-rule racial logic that sustains colonial power structures. He shows how racism is not merely a matter of prejudice, but a systematic tool used to assign blame, identity, and value to different colonised groups - keeping them isolated, suspicious of one another, and dependent on the colonial authority. One can easily relate this idea of supremist colonialism to the experiences of the writer Xavier Le Clerc and the ordeals of his earlier generations, which he recalls in the book A Man with No Title, published in 2024. At one point in the book *A Man with No Title*, Xavier Le Clerc makes a fleeting yet subtle remark that almost cuts through the central issue of the novel/memoir: a colonial body under imperialism. In the novel, the narrator says: "Sonia emailed me that the doctors had given you only a few months to live, that the colon cancer had spread. It sounds like a 'colonial' cancer in a native." (123) The act of relating the colon cancer of an Algerian laborer and linking it with the cancerous expansion of French colonialism draws up a larger image of the abject conditions and cheap labor Algerians were necessitated to perform. Historically speaking, the use of Algerian colonial subjects by France dates back to an earlier generation of the writer's ancestors.

At the very beginning of the memoir, the writer proclaims that his father could never meet his grandfather who "died fighting for France in the trenches of Verdun on 26 October 1917." (15) In fact, historically speaking, as Martin Thomas puts it, "Algiers was home to France's largest overseas administration. Algerians raised more regiments to fight the First World War than any other colony." (68) The obligatory usage of Algerians as part of the expansionist policies of imperialism in World War I is something that lasts for the writer of the memoir for the next generation as well. His father, named Mohand-Said, is forced to immigrate to France due to the abject conditions in Kabylia, where he works as a labourer. "Official figures", as a historian puts it, "recorded the

entry of 222,793 colonial labourers during the First World War, of which 78,556 Algerians, and 48,995 Indochinese made up the largest national groups." (Thomas 17). The memoir can also be read as more than just a memoir of one family of an immigrant labourer or one group, but as a larger part of the various Algerian generations born and brought up with a fractured self, caught between the French and Algerian borders. Clerc writes:

> A century of colonial exploitation had crushed its inhabitants' lives like ore or coal, leaving Kabylia as a fiery vat of hunger where the alloy of injustices melted men down at fifteen hundred degrees. Whole generations had been poured into imperial and industrial channels, to be cast into either cannons or workers. (15)

The memoir makes a succinct remark about the writer's father (read Algerians) being used as nothing but fodder for the large-scale industrialisation and modernisation of France after World War II. The book weaves Mohand-Saïd Aït-Taleb's life into a broader tapestry of colonial history, immigrant experience, and personal identity. Through it, the narrative serves as a poignant commentary on the enduring impacts of colonialism, the complexities of familial ties, and the quest for self-acceptance in the face of societal constraints. This colonial labour would put France into a new era of Modernity. This modernity, for the French Empire, meant urbanisation, improved hygiene, enhanced infrastructure, and better education for French subjects. For the Algerians, however, it would mean something entirely different: famine, droughts, food scarcity, and enforced labour, among other things. Or as Clerc puts it in the book:

> For Mohand-Saïd, modernity meant searches, shouts, fear, helicopters that raised clouds of dust and dropped off sprinting paratroopers, military jeeps that climbed the twisting roads to the gourbis, and then more searches, more shouts, more fear. (29)

It is in this context, specifically related to the orchestration of deliberate poverty in the colonies, that Clerc alludes at the very beginning to Albert Camus' journalistic writing when he visited Kabylia in 1939, the place and decade in which Clerc's father, as a child, was growing up. The young Mohand-Saïd's arduous journey to work in the grape harvest at the age of nine underscores the resilience forged in the crucible of colonial exploitation. Upon relocating to France, he became part of the post-war labour force, contributing to the nation's reconstruction, which had previously subjugated his homeland. The father's experiences in France are marked by systemic racism and economic hardship, yet he remains steadfast in his commitment to providing for his family. Mohand-Said's silent endurance and stoic demeanour reflect the generational trauma inflicted by colonialism and the challenges of assimilation in a foreign land. His act of always being silent and never complaining about the brutal tortures at home and exploitation at work could also be read as an essential feature of how the Subaltern Studies group explicates the concept of subaltern labour.

It refers to the work performed by individuals or groups who are systematically marginalised within the socio-political and economic structures of power. These labourers occupy a position so peripheral that their voices, agency, and subjectivity are

silenced mainly or erased by dominant narratives - both colonial and postcolonial, capitalist, and patriarchal. Contextualising this within the broader framework of Subaltern Studies provides a nuanced perspective for addressing it. In a typical Gramscian sense, the subaltern group "are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class" (198) or are always "defined by its difference from the élite." (Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin 200). The subaltern is not just the economically oppressed but those whose ability to represent themselves is obstructed by institutional structures, including colonialism, patriarchy, and intellectual elitism. Subaltern labour, then, is not merely exploited economically, but also rendered invisible and voiceless within dominant discourses. Furthermore, as Stephen Morton puts it, Spivak emphasizes that "the western Marxist model of social change that... historians employ does not do justice to the complex histories of subaltern insurgency and resistance which they seek to recover." (7) In explaining that she makes clear that the idea of using the western Marxist historiography isn't something that would suffice to give us the idea of a laborer from the third-world countries. This is something that can be applied, through which one can further comprehend the labour of Mohand-Said as an Algerian labourer working for the French Empire under circumstances that aren't feasible for him in the first place. Additionally, the fact that Mohand-Said, as the book reiterates, is not someone belonging to the capital of Algiers but somebody who pertains to Kabylia, which etymologically means 'land of the tribes'. This distinction is significant and warrants closer attention. Through it, the very idea of a subaltern labourer becomes clear, as someone belonging to a marginalised tribal community. In this context, then, Mohad-Said is a subaltern, first, in his own homeland and then twice marginalised as someone working as a labourer for the First World capitalist coloniser. His silence throughout the novel then needs to be read primarily as that of an individual crushed by the very institutions he tirelessly labours for. As Clerc succinctly puts it in the book:

> The most exhausting jobs were those that came at harvest time. They were also the worst paid, but nobody complained, my father said, for fear of being run off like a rabid dog. Besides, itinerant workers from Souss in southern Morocco accepted even worse pay without demur. (25)

In another place, he writes:

> These were men who never complained, kept their heads down, skirted the walls. Their bodies and their faces were expressionless. "But behind the stoic mask, they feared every kind of authority, sharing the same dread of being tortured in some barracks, the same presumption of guilt. Merely being stopped on the street and asked to show their papers made them feel like being accused of feeding fellagha rebels. Within these young workers, who had left an Algeria in flames, it was as if the war continued to rage. (38)

The book, through the figure of the father, elucidates the brutality on the part of the French military that becomes a normative behaviour of almost every imperialist at work, that is, brutal torture and the subsequent humiliation on the part of Algerians in this case. He writes:

> One day, nearly half a century later, when my father lay in the hospital, he told me that French soldiers had once tortured him. His bloody body had been covered with bruises. The soldiers dressed him in a uniform and led him out of the barracks, a knotted rope firmly tied around his ankle, like a goat tied to a stake. At the entrance of the outpost, a pair of troopers forced him to stand at attention, without moving. 'One of them burst out laughing,' he told me in Kabyle. He eventually collapsed, probably from pain and exhaustion, and slept on the ground until dawn, when a decent young soldier came to help him. (32)

In the case of the writer himself, however, who can be called a second-generation Algerian immigrant, this tussle with France would come not in the manner of forced labour, military torture, or poverty *per se*, but in the form of racism, religious tension, and his queer identity while living in 21st-century France. His personal journey showcases that the tensions and problems of colonisation aren't things that stop with a particular generation but, in fact, spill over to the next generation in the form of other terminologies.

In one of his interviews on Radio France Inter, Hamid Ait-Taleb confesses and attributes his name-change to Xavier Le Clerc as a result of the large-scale racism directed predominantly due to his North African-sounding name. "Although I had two master's degrees from the Sorbonne," he confesses in the same interview, "I did not receive even a single phone call for a job interview. When I changed my name from Hamid Ait Taleb to Xavier Leclerc, I received Hundreds of calls" (*Politics Today*). This event is recalled in the book *A Man with No Title* as well, where the idea of changing the name is ruminated not only in the context of racism that's prevalent in France in relation to Algerians, but also as an essential idea related to the very identity of the character of Algerian origin with a Muslim name. Clerc writes:

> Was changing my name an ultimate denial of my father? To the contrary, it was the endpoint of his education, crossing frontiers to work hard, adapting to survive, cultivating gratitude and not resentment, refusing to complain, and remaining proud even at the edge of the precipice. (110)

Clerc's question of betraying the very legacy of his Algerian father, who worked tirelessly in France, becomes an apt reference point for understanding the nuanced and complex terrain of a body. This body happens to be an Algerian-Muslim-queer body navigating France in this part of the century. That makes the narrator of the book comment that "some names were more proper than others" (110). The new name, like in real life, changes the very life of the individual. For "in less than a week, I became a headhunter in the luxury industry" (113). In a jesting manner, Clerc notes that a name like this can seem to transform a person into a new individual. He slyly writes:

> A Xavier Le Clerc doesn't suffer the loneliness of exile. With a name like that, he faces only typical bourgeois inconveniences. A Xavier Le Clerc has family members he sees on New Year's Eve or at a little niece's baptism. His older brothers can't reject him in the name of dishonour of some sort. (124)

The name-change and the transformation of spaces it entails remind Clerc "of my status as an interloper, having gone from the proletariat to the exploiters' side" (114). All these have roots, however, in the way people approach one as belonging to a vast population of Europeanized names. It is in this context that the narrator details that they "were no longer living in France or Algeria. Violence was the only country they knew." (68) This violence stems from various counter–psychological, economic, social, and cultural factors.

Parallel to the exploration of paternal relationships, Le Clerc's narrative delves into the son's journey toward self-acceptance as a queer individual. The narrator's coming out is met with familial resistance and societal prejudice, yet it also marks a pivotal moment of personal liberation. The act of embracing one's identity becomes an assertion of agency and defiance against the constraints of heteronormative expectations. The father's reaction to his son's queerness is not explicitly detailed, yet his silent presence suggests a complex internalisation of societal attitudes toward sexuality. The narrator's resilience in the face of rejection and discrimination underscores the transformative power of self-acceptance and the reclamation of one's identity. The narrator puts it exquisitely when he, in oblique terms, confesses to his father of his queerness:

> My father, who had long been sleeping alone, was getting ready for bed in the living room. It was late, but before I left, he asked me in Kabyle, almost whispering, if the rumour was true. Out of reserve, I told him that I didn't plan to get married, which was a way of saying yes. He asked if someone was forcing me. Or if it was for money. The two questions summed up his view of homosexuality: rape or prostitution. Still, I was surprised by his relative gentleness. He wasn't judging me. However, I felt he was at a loss, as if my days were numbered. His face held all the agony in the world. The venomous rumour was constricting us like serpents. Moreover, he, who had already been bitten in so many ways, was making no mistake. It would be the last time in my life that I would see him. (105-106)

His father's silence at being exploited under imperialism, humiliated, and tortured by the French army is at once paralleled by the silence that accompanies his son's coming out as gay. His silence here, could be interpreted as a silence from orthodox, marginalized, heterosexual, colonized Kabylia realizing that his arduous journey in the France has almost come to nothing; that his next generation would fall fallen prey to the same vicious circle of torture and humiliation, this time, however, in the guise of an identity with which the father himself cannot relate with. In the introduction to his book, titled *Postcolonial Queer*, John Hawley makes a succinct remark regarding the queering of the postcolonial, which further problematizes the idea of the postcolonial as something that straitjackets the concept of a subject across the globe as a colonial subject. He writes:

> "Queer" acknowledges ongoing debates over the question of essentialism versus constructionism in both gay and lesbian studies and in feminist theory, and recognises the inadequate current knowledge of differences between and

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> among various gay men and women. Of special import for this collection, the term admits this relative lack of an understanding of "practices of homosexualities and representations of same-sex desire" as they apply to "race and its attendant differences of class or ethnic culture, generational, and socio-political location" (5-6)

The problem, therefore, of our narrator, first as a Muslim Algerian, the change of name to its Europeanized form, and then his coming out as gay, cannot be read in a straightforward way as any queer coming to terms with his identity. It needs to read as an individual caught as a postcolonial subject marginalised and rendered subaltern due to his identity, religiosity, and sexuality in the First World. The book, therefore, presents identity as a fluid site of meaning that continually changes due to social, political, and cultural conditions, which seem to have altered its meaning for the postcolonial queer. Xavier Le Clerc's *A Man with No Title* thus serves as a poignant narrative that intertwines the legacies of colonialism, the complexities of familial relationships, and the journey toward queer self-identity. Through the lens of the father-son relationship, the novel illuminates the enduring impacts of historical injustices and the personal quests for meaning and belonging. Le Clerc's work invites readers to reflect on the intersections of personal and political histories, offering a compelling testament to the resilience of individuals navigating the complexities of identity and heritage.

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