

Received Date: October 20, 2025

Accepted Date: November 11, 2025

Published Date: December 01, 2025

## **Writing about misogyny in the Maghreb: Boudjedra and Monénembo confront gender-based violence**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines representations of misogyny and gender-based violence in the Maghreb through a comparative analysis of two novels: *La Répudiation* (1969) by Rachid Boudjedra and *Bled* (2016) by Tierno Monénembo. Using Claude Duchet's sociocritical approach, this research aims to identify the forms of expression of such violence, their underlying factors, and their inscription within a specific spatio-temporal framework. The analysis reveals that these forms of violence primarily stem from the patriarchal nature of Maghreb society and manifest through four main modalities: verbal, physical and sexual, psychological, and economic violence. The study also demonstrates how the narrative techniques employed by both authors contribute to the denunciation of these social phenomena.

**Keywords:** misogyny, gender-based violence, Maghreb literature, sociocriticism, patriarchy

### **Introduction**

The issue of gender-based violence is now a major concern in contemporary societies and is the subject of particular attention from international human rights organizations. This

issue, long considered to be exclusively a private matter, has gradually taken on a public and political dimension, thanks in particular to international feminist movements and literary works that offer critical representations of it. The United Nations, through its Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993), has contributed to the international recognition of this phenomenon as a violation of fundamental rights.

In the Maghreb context, this topic is particularly important due to the cultural, religious and social specificities of the region. Maghreb societies, marked by their colonial heritage, independence processes and contemporary socio-economic transformations, present particular configurations of gender relations that warrant in-depth analysis. While many women writers such as Assia Djebar, Fatima Mernissi and Leïla Sebbar have taken up this issue to denounce their condition, male authors have also contributed to this denunciation, offering a complementary perspective on these social phenomena.

This research focuses on two novels that are representative of this critical approach: *La Répudiation* (1969) by the Algerian Rachid Boudjedra and *Bled* (2016) by the Guinean Tierno Monénembo. The choice of these two novels is justified by several methodological and theoretical considerations. Firstly,

the time gap of nearly fifty years between the two publications allows us to analyse the permanence or evolution of representations of gender-based violence in the Maghreb region. *La Répudiation*, published in 1969, is set in the post-independence context of Algeria and is part of the movement to denounce traditional social structures. *Bled*, published in 2016, offers a contemporary perspective on these same issues, allowing us to assess the transformations and continuities.

Secondly, although the two authors have different geographical origins (Boudjedra from Algeria, Monénembo from Guinea), they share a common experience of the Maghreb region and a particular sensitivity to gender issues. Monénembo, who lived in Algeria during his years in exile, has an intimate knowledge of Maghreb societies, which is reflected in *Bled*.

Despite the importance of this theme in the work of these renowned authors, there is still a lack of academic research analyzing their treatment of misogyny and gender-based violence. Existing studies on Rachid Boudjedra, notably those by Kangni Alemjrodo (2001), focus mainly on the formal and intertextual aspects of his work, without sufficiently exploring the sociological dimension of the violence depicted. With regard to Tierno Monénembo, academic research, with the notable exception of Faya Pascal Iffono's work (2018) on the writing techniques of exile, has not yet fully explored the socio-critical richness of *Bled*.

This research therefore aims to analyse representations of misogyny and gender-based violence in the Maghreb region as they appear in *La Répudiation* by Rachid Boudjedra and *Bled* by Tierno Monénembo. The central question can be formulated as follows: how do these two authors represent misogyny and violence against women in the Maghreb, and what critical reading do they offer through their narrative and aesthetic choices? The main objective of this study is to examine how these two authors represent these social phenomena and what critical readings they offer through their narrative techniques.

## 2. Theoretical and methodological framework

This study falls within the framework of sociocriticism as developed by Claude Duchet (1979) and enriched by the subsequent work of Pierre Popovic (2011). This theoretical approach makes it possible to analyse the relationship between literature and society by seeking to grasp "the meaning of what is written in relation to society", in other words, to "bring literariness closer to sociality" (Duchet, 1979). Sociocriticism differs from purely sociological approaches to literature in that it does not seek to identify mechanical correspondences

between text and society, but rather to analyse how the social is inscribed in the text and transformed by it. It posits that the literary text is not a simple reflection of the social, but a workspace where social contradictions are staged, problematized and sometimes symbolically resolved.

This theoretical approach is particularly appropriate for this study in that it allows us to examine how the social facts of misogyny and gender-based violence are represented, transformed and criticized in literary discourse. Several concepts from sociocriticism guide this analysis. The concept of the "sociogram", developed by Duchet, refers to the set of social discourses circulating at a given time on a particular subject. In the case of this study, the aim is to analyse the sociograms of femininity, masculinity and gender relations as they appear in the two novels.

*The sociocritical approach is complemented by contributions from gender studies and postcolonial criticism. Gender studies provide the conceptual tools necessary to analyse the mechanisms of social construction of male and female identities and the power relations that structure them. Postcolonial criticism is particularly relevant for analyzing the specificities of gender relations in Maghreb societies, which have been marked by colonial experience and decolonization processes.*

The methodology adopted is based on a qualitative content analysis of the two works, supplemented by a comparative approach. This approach is carried out in several stages: firstly, an exhaustive analytical reading of the two novels allows us to identify and list all occurrences of gender-based violence, whether explicit or implicit; secondly, a thematic analysis identifies the main representations of the female condition and gender relations; thirdly, a formal analysis examines the narrative techniques used by the two authors; fourthly, a comparative analysis identifies the convergences and specificities in each author's treatment of this theme.

## 3. Historical and literary context

*La Répudiation*, published in 1969, was written in a particularly significant historical context. Algeria, independent since 1962, was undergoing a period of identity and social redefinition. Boudjedra's novel was part of an intellectual movement that sought to question traditional social structures and their contradictions with the aspirations for modernity of the nascent Algerian society. The work is in line with other Maghreb novels of social denunciation, alongside the works of Mohammed Dib, Mouloud Feraoun and Kateb Yacine. However, *La Répudiation* stands out for its

radical criticism of patriarchal structures and the boldness of its narrative form.

The very title of the novel, *La Répudiation*, refers to a legal and social practice specific to Muslim societies, which allows a man to unilaterally divorce his wife under specific conditions. This practice, which is legal under traditional Muslim law, crystallizes gender inequalities and constitutes an institutionalized form of symbolic violence. By choosing this title, Boudjedra immediately places her novel under the banner of denouncing these inequalities.

*Bled*, published in 2016, is set in a very different context. Since the 1970s, Maghreb societies have undergone significant transformations: urbanization, women's education, feminist movements, and the influence of globalization. However, these developments coexist with the persistence of traditional structures and the emergence of new religious fundamentalisms that sometimes challenge the gains made in women's rights. Monénembo's novel reflects this contemporary complexity. Published in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, it questions the hopes and disappointments of the democratic processes in the region.

Rachid Boudjedra and Tierno Monénembo occupy specific positions in the French-speaking literary field. Boudjedra, a major figure in Algerian literature, has always championed socially engaged writing that is critical of political and religious powers. His work is characterized by a constant questioning of relationships of domination, whether political, social or gender-based. Monénembo, a Guinean writer based in France, has developed a style of writing marked by his experience of exile and his intimate knowledge of several African cultures.

#### **4. Typology of gender-based violence in the works studied**

Verbal violence is the primary form of misogyny identified in both novels. This violence, often considered "minor" compared to physical violence, actually reveals deep-rooted mechanisms of symbolic disqualification that contribute to the construction and maintenance of male domination. In *La Répudiation*, this violence is mainly manifested through Zahir's words to his mother: "No female has ever touched a man's hand!" (Boudjedra, 1969, 25). The use of the term "female" reveals a process of animalization that aims to deny women their status as fully-fledged human beings.

This functional reduction of women is accompanied by their exclusion from public space and citizenship. The novel presents a society in which women are systematically

excluded from decision-making and public discourse. Cafés, male spaces par excellence, become places where misogynistic discourse is reproduced: "The cafés are packed, and every cup of coffee is a negation of women" (Boudjedra, 1969, 39).

In *Bled*, verbal violence takes on more directly aggressive forms, as illustrated by the remarks made by the sub-prefect of Aïn Guesma to Zoubida Mesbahi: "Ah, I understand! So that's it! Slut!" (Monénembo, 2016, 17). This institutional verbal violence reveals how representatives of public authority participate in the stigmatization of women in vulnerable situations.

Physical violence plays a central role in both novels and is specifically misogynistic in nature. In *La Répudiation*, physical violence is mainly exercised within the marital context, illustrating the issue of domestic violence. The novel depicts a family environment where male brutality is normalized and women have no institutional recourse. Si Zoubir's deflowering of Zoubida is a scene that particularly reveals this institutionalized violence. The description of this wedding night emphasizes Zoubida's youth (fifteen years old) and her husband's brutality.

*Bled* offers an even more explicit representation of physical violence in the scene where Mounir hits Zoubida: "I tasted blood in my mouth. A hand had just struck my face, my eyes were burning and I couldn't tell who had hit me. I lost consciousness" (Monénembo, 2016, 25). This description, adopting the victim's point of view, allows us to grasp the traumatic impact of this violence and its unpredictable nature.

Sexual violence is one of the most tragic aspects of this issue. Both novels feature scenes of rape that illustrate the absolute exploitation of the female body. In *La Répudiation*, Rachid abuses his cousins, taking advantage of their vulnerability. In *Bled*, Mounir regularly rapes Zoubida despite her status as a wet nurse: "Talk about a badly healed womb! Mounir took me that very night" (Monénembo, 2016, 44). The gang rapes described in the novel reveal a ritualized dimension to sexual violence: "They took turns with me until the greyish light of dawn swept across the bottom of the door" (Monénembo, 2016, 45).

Psychological violence is a particularly pernicious form of abuse because it attacks the psychological integrity of victims in ways that are often invisible and socially. In *La Répudiation*, Si-Zoubir's attitude towards Ma perfectly illustrates this modality: since his plan to remarry, he tortures her "with indifference", subjecting her to repeated public and private humiliations. The psychological consequences of this

violence are described in detail: 'Ma fainted twice a day' (Boudjedra, 1969, 71).

In *Bled*, psychological violence takes many forms and begins with Zoubida's forced exile. Society's systematic hostility towards Zoubida is another dimension of this psychological violence. The sub-prefect's refusal to grant her protection perfectly illustrates this social ostracism: "M'hamed, take her wherever you can: to the police station, the brothel, the hospital or a rubbish bin. The main thing is that she never sets foot here again!" (Monénembo, 2016, 19).

Economic violence manifests itself mainly through the imposition of economic dependence on women and various forms of exploitation. In *La Répudiation*, this economic violence appears from the moment of Zoubida's marriage, "bought at the age of 15 by my father" (Boudjedra, 1969, 123). This formulation starkly reveals the commercial dimension of marriage in certain social contexts. *Bled* presents a particularly dark dimension of this economic violence through the systematic exploitation of Zoubida in Mounir's brothel. This situation illustrates the mechanisms of trafficking in women as it can occur in contexts of extreme social vulnerability.

### 5. Factors explaining gender-based violence

The analysis reveals that the patriarchal structure of Maghreb society is the main explanatory factor for this violence. This structure is not imposed by force alone, but is based on a set of legitimizing discourses that naturalize male domination and present it as necessary for social order. Religion, or rather a particular interpretation of religious prescriptions, is one of the main mechanisms for legitimizing this patriarchal structure.

This hierarchy of gender relations is reflected spatially in the social organization described in the two novels. The exclusion of women from certain social spaces is part of this logic of control. The reproduction of these patriarchal patterns begins in childhood, as shown by the description of children accompanying their fathers to the café: "always dressed in their Sunday best and with the determined air of those who know that the next generation is certain: to keep the females" (Boudjedra, 1969, 39).

Analysis of the two novels reveals that male violence is not natural but socially constructed through specific educational and socializing mechanisms. Violent masculinity appears to be the product of social learning that values aggression and domination as markers of male identity. In *La Répudiation*,

the character of Zahir perfectly illustrates this social construction of violent masculinity.

The male obsession with controlling female sexuality is a second major factor explaining the violence analyzed. This obsession, presented as protection of family honor, actually reveals the mechanisms of patriarchal domination and male anxieties about female autonomy. In *Bled*, this obsession appears particularly dramatically in the community's reaction to Zoubida's pregnancy outside marriage.

Beyond cultural and psychological factors, both novels reveal the importance of socio-economic factors in the persistence of gender-based violence. Situations of precariousness, social transition and economic crisis are aggravating factors that increase women's vulnerability. In *La Répudiation*, the context of post-independence Algeria reveals how periods of transition can be accompanied by a hardening of gender relations.

### 6. Narrative and poetic techniques of violence

An analysis of the narrative strategies employed by the two authors reveals significant aesthetic choices that contribute to the construction of meaning and the effectiveness of the denunciation. In *La Répudiation*, Boudjedra opts for a first-person narrative that gives access to the inner world of the narrator, Rachid. This technique allows the psychological mechanisms of violence and its repercussions on witnesses to be grasped.

The limited use of direct speech in *La Répudiation* (only 7% of the text) reveals a particular narrative strategy: Boudjedra favors analysis and reflection over direct representation. This technique avoids the sensationalisation of violence while maintaining its denunciation. In *Bled*, Monénembo adopts a different strategy by giving Zoubida a direct voice through first-person narration.

An analysis of the temporal construction in both novels reveals sophisticated techniques for representing trauma and its effects on the victims' psyche. In *La Répudiation*, Boudjedra uses a complex anachronism that disrupts the traditional narrative order. The novel opens with a scene that should logically take place at the end (Rachid as an adult with his mistress Céline), creating a circular effect that reflects the narrator's inability to escape his traumatic past.

In *Bled*, Monénembo also uses anachronism techniques, but in a different way. The novel begins in the middle of the plot (the police search for Zoubida) before returning to previous events.

The constant alternation between present and past in *Bled* reveals the impossibility of forgetting trauma and its permanent presence in the victim's consciousness.

An analysis of the language registers used in the two novels reveals particularly refined strategies for representing symbolic violence. In *La Répudiation*, the use of informal language by the male characters towards women contrasts with the formal register of the narrative passages. Zahir's expression towards his sister ("You smell of blood and Lent!") perfectly illustrates this everyday verbal violence.

In *Bled*, Mounir's use of foul language ("So? Tell us your name, you fucking bitch!") reveals a masculinity that can only be expressed through vulgarity and verbal aggression. The insertion of Arabic terms in *Bled* is a particularly significant narrative technique. The use of terms such as "Bent Kahba" (prostitute), "Bara Nayek" (sex lover), and "Chmeta" (person without principles) in their Arabic form rather than their English translation lends a particular brutality to these expressions.

An analysis of the rhetorical devices used in both novels reveals strategies of amplification that aim to make violence visible and unacceptable to the reader. Hyperbole is one of the most frequently used figures of speech, particularly in the words of the male characters. Animalistic metaphors are another recurring figure of speech that reveals the processes of dehumanization at work in misogyny. The systematic use of the term "female" in *La Répudiation* or "goat" in *Bled* reflects a degraded view of women.

## 7. Spatio-temporal inscription and construction of the fictional universe

Analysis of the spatial inscription of violence in the two novels reveals a particular geography that systematically contrasts open spaces with closed spaces, male territories with female refuges. In *La Répudiation*, the action is concentrated in a geographically restricted space (Bab El Djedid, a working-class neighborhood in an Algerian city), but this spatial concentration allows for an in-depth micro sociological analysis of the mechanisms of violence.

The organization of domestic space reveals a strict gender-based hierarchy of places. Places of male socialization (cafés, streets) are opposed to spaces of female seclusion (home, courtyard). In *Bled*, the geographical space expands considerably (Aïn Guesma, Sidi Ben-Omar, prison, desert), but this apparent openness does not translate into greater freedom for women. The brothel in Sidi Ben-Omar is the

archetype of a space of gendered violence: a closed space where women are held captive.

Analysis of the temporal inscription of violence reveals particular rhythms and cycles that reflect its systemic nature and social reproduction. In *La Répudiation*, age is a crucial temporal marker: early marriages (fifteen years old for Ma and Zoubida) reveal how violence is exercised from adolescence onwards and structures the whole of women's lives. Night-time is another significant temporal marker: it is in the darkness that the most serious violence occurs.

In *Bled*, the dates mentioned (1980, 1982) anchor the narrative in a specific historical time frame corresponding to a period of social and political tension in the Maghreb. Night remains the preferred time for violence, particularly in the scenes of gang rape that stretch "until the greyish rays of dawn sweep across the bottom of the door" (Monénembo, 2016, 45).

Spatial analysis reveals a constant opposition between confinement and freedom that structures both narratives. In *La Répudiation*, the confinement of women takes many forms: domestic confinement, social confinement, psychological confinement. In *Bled*, Zoubida's quest for freedom structures the entire narrative. Zoubida's final liberation (marriage to Arsane and exile in the desert) suggests that female freedom is only possible at the cost of breaking away from traditional society.

## 8. Comparative analysis and critical synthesis

A comparative analysis of the two novels reveals remarkable similarities that testify to the persistence of structures of gender-based violence in the Maghreb region over nearly half a century. Thematically, both novels share a critical view of Maghreb patriarchal society and its mechanisms of reproduction. They unanimously denounce the reduction of women to their reproductive and sexual functions, their exclusion from public life and citizenship, and their economic exploitation.

The issue of early marriage is a recurring theme in both works, revealing the persistence of this practice and its traumatic consequences. The age of fifteen, which appears in both novels, seems to symbolize the age at which women's freedom is captured by the institution of marriage. The condemnation of domestic violence is another major point of convergence.

On an aesthetic level, both authors use similar narrative techniques: temporal fragmentation, alternating points of view, and the use of metaphor and irony to reveal the absurdity

of violence. Despite these similarities, the analysis also reveals significant differences and developments. *La Répudiation*, published in 1969, focuses mainly on domestic violence and its psychological repercussions. *Bled*, published in 2016, considerably broadens the spectrum of violence analyzed by including trafficking in women, commercial sexual exploitation and institutional violence.

An analysis of the critical scope of the two novels reveals their significant contribution to raising awareness of gender-based violence in the Maghreb region. On a cognitive level, both novels help to make the invisible visible by revealing mechanisms of violence that are often denied or trivialized. On an emotional level, both novels provoke indignation through the power of their descriptions and the accuracy of their analyses. On a political level, both novels implicitly call for social change by revealing the urgency of the situation.

## Conclusion

This comparative analysis of *La Répudiation* by Rachid Boudjedra and *Bled* by Tierno Monénembo reveals the richness and complexity of literary representations of gender-based violence in the Maghreb. Despite being written nearly fifty years apart, the two works converge in their denunciation of the mechanisms of male domination and their tragic consequences for women.

The study identified four main forms of expression of this violence: verbal, physical and sexual, psychological, and economic. These different forms are linked in a coherent system of domination that aims to control women completely and reduce them to the status of objects. Analysis of the explanatory factors reveals that this violence is rooted in the patriarchal structure of Maghreb society, legitimized by a particular interpretation of religious prescriptions and perpetuated by specific educational and socializing mechanisms.

An examination of narrative techniques shows that both authors use sophisticated aesthetic strategies to represent these phenomena: temporal fragmentation reflecting traumatic experience, alternating points of view, the use of revealing rhetorical devices, and meaningful spatial and temporal inscriptions. These aesthetic choices contribute greatly to the effectiveness of the denunciation.

This research makes several significant contributions to the understanding of gender-based violence and its literary representations. It proposes an original methodological approach that combines sociocriticism and gender studies to analyse these phenomena in both their social and aesthetic

dimensions. The comparative analysis reveals the structural permanence of this violence over the decades, contradicting optimistic discourses about its gradual disappearance.

Beyond its scientific contribution, this study is part of a broader approach to combating gender-based violence by contributing to its visibility and understanding of its mechanisms. It highlights the essential role of literature in the processes of collective awareness and social transformation. The works analyzed testify to their authors' commitment to this struggle and their contribution to the emergence of critical awareness.

This research opens up several avenues for further study that could enrich our understanding of these phenomena. Extending the analysis to other authors and works would make it possible to identify more general trends and potential developments. An international comparative approach would reveal the specificities of Maghreb representations in relation to other cultural areas. The study of the reception of these works and their impact on the evolution of mentalities would be a valuable complement to this textual analysis.

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