

**Questioning the Nation: Ambivalent Narratives in *Le Retour au désert* by
Bernard-Marie Koltès**

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Bernard-Marie Koltès has remained nearly as enigmatic almost 20 years after his death as in the early 1980s, when his plays routinely challenged and confused contemporary audiences and critics. Koltès' writing, which combines lyric elegance with biting social commentary, has gained in popularity over the past two decades, but analysis of his work has concentrated primarily on his critique of the French bourgeois lifestyle.¹ Recent studies, however, have made significant gains in our understanding of postcolonial minority identities and questions regarding national belonging in the Koltesian theatrical project. Donia Mounsef, in her analysis of Koltès' last play, *Le Retour au désert*, analyzed the role of the body as a site of mediation for concerns about the interplay between France and Algeria. Catherine Brun, also studying *Le Retour au désert*, has developed the link between the Algerian War and the breakdown of a provincial bourgeois family. Building on these groundbreaking observations, I wish to take the question of postcoloniality in Koltès' work one step further by exploring the ways in which his characters interact with the concept of the nation. Beyond simply challenging racial and social constructions, I argue, Koltès reveals a fundamental ambivalence regarding the value of nationality as a tool for identification. As we will see, he breaks down traditional understandings of French national identity by questioning its foundational philosophies yet also calls for a new, reinvigorated solidarity through interracial mixing and dialogue.

While any number of Koltès' plays contribute to this discussion, I have chosen to focus on *Le Retour au désert*, the last play Koltès published before he died in 1989. This play embodies the key strategies he employs to undermine strict definitions of national belonging, in particular by questioning the primacy of the French language and by problematizing the active

participation in national collective memory. We will therefore proceed on three levels: first we must develop the traditional philosophy of French national understanding as defined by Jules Michelet, Maurice Barrès, and Ernst Renan, three thinkers credited with developing the specifically French conception of national identity. We will then analyze Koltès' portrayal of these constructions, which reveals that his characters subvert the tools of the French republican model in order to undermine illusions of national cohesion. These characters speak French but also Arabic, and they either mock or refuse to recognize French history. As a result, the French nation no longer brings them together. Finally, we will situate Koltès' approach in a broader field of study by analyzing convergences between his plays and work by Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha. Anderson's and Bhabha's contributions to the theory of national unity will elucidate Koltès' approach in communicating an ambivalence toward the French national project.

Before we proceed, however, it will be helpful to sketch a brief summary of the play. *Le Retour au désert* takes place in the early 1960s in a provincial town in eastern France, most likely inspired by Koltès' native Metz. The story begins with Mathilde, who returns from Algeria in a spirit of revenge after having fled France during the post-World War II *épuration*. Her brother Adrien now inhabits their childhood home along with his family and his servant Aziz, a Frenchman of Algerian descent. The play chronicles the challenges these characters face as they reestablish connections. We learn that Mathilde has two children, Édouard and Fatima, and that Adrien is a member of the *Organisation de l'Armée Secrète* (OAS), a French paramilitary organization committed to preventing Algerian independence. Koltès saw this play as his only comedy, and many scenes contain unexpectedly amusing elements. *Le Retour au désert* ends with Fatima giving birth to black twins (with no concrete indication of who could be the father and no notice beforehand that she is pregnant), and Mathilde and Adrien flee, perhaps so as not

to deal with the town's reaction to the scandalous babies, perhaps because they cannot stay in a place that no longer means anything to them.

This story is, in fact, wide open for interpretation. In order to appreciate the various ways in which Koltès engages with the idea of the nation, it will be useful first to expand on the French understanding of national belonging. The historian Jules Michelet is a key figure for this philosophy, and he argues that French history begins with the formalization of the French language. As he notes in his *History of France*, “The history of France begins with the French language. Language is the principal sign of nationality. The first monument of ours is the sermon dictated by Charles the Bald to his brother in the treaty of 843 AD” (79). For Michelet, the nation does not exist without a unifying language. As Eugen Weber has demonstrated in his classic study of French peasantry, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*, regional languages routinely competed with French in schools, churches, and government offices throughout the 19th century.² Republican leaders understood the importance of language as a site for national unification and devoted much energy to unifying the population through standard French. The Third Republic, inaugurated in 1875, implemented this policy through its national school system and mandatory military service, among other institutions.

In the opening scene of *Le Retour au désert*, however, we see that French is not the unifying language of the characters. The play begins with a scene half in Arabic and half in French. Mathilde, even though she is French, introduces herself to Aziz and to the audience in Arabic. In this first scene, Aziz and Mathilde have the following exchange, entirely in Arabic:

Aziz (muttering to himself): Today is going to be a terrible day.

Mathilde (entering): And why is it going to be a terrible day?

Aziz: Because, if the sister is as idiotic as the brother, it's a given.

Mathilde: The sister is not as idiotic as the brother (87).

Since this first exchange occurs exclusively in Arabic, our first impression of Mathilde is as a character who communicates comfortably in both French and Arabic and who is possibly more attached to Arabic than to her native French. Her Arabic is convincing enough that Aziz does not realize who she is right away. Mathilde, despite her “pure” French heritage, functions between France and Algeria, and her choice of Arabic undermines Michelet’s demand that France cannot exist outside of the French language. By intentionally rejecting her native language, Mathilde creates a new understanding of Frenchness outside of linguistic requirements.

Her brother Adrien, on the other hand, sees no value in learning any other languages. When Adrien’s son Mathieu announces that he is tired of his father’s protectionism and wants to join the army in order to see the world, Adrien replies, “A good Frenchman does not learn foreign languages. He is happy with his own, which is entirely sufficient, complete, balanced, pleasing to the ear; the whole world envies our language” (24). For Adrien, even the desire to learn another language represents a betrayal of one’s country. Since France represents the pinnacle of civilization, he sees no reason to learn another language. It is of course not surprising to learn later that he is an active member of the OAS, since this organization denied the existence of Algerian nationalism. In the play he serves as an antithesis of his sister, since his intransigence serves to highlight Mathilde’s willingness to cross all borders (national, racial, and social). The fact that they come from the same family underscores the depth of the wounds inflicted on French society during the Second World War and suggests the long-lasting and wide-spread impact of the break-up of the colonial empire.

Aziz, the family’s Arab servant, mediates these extremes. Aziz was raised in France but also realizes that he will never truly be considered French. He speaks French with most of the

other characters and only slips into Arabic on two occasions: once with Mathilde in the opening scene and once in an Arab café owned by Saïfi, whose background is never explained. Saïfi tells him, “You are an Algerian, Aziz, that’s all there is to it.” Aziz responds, also in Arabic, “I don’t know Saïfi, I just don’t know” (87). The conversation continues, half in Arabic and half in French, but Aziz chooses to express his doubts in Arabic, the language repressed and denied by his country of residence. In other words, he uses Arabic to express his reservations about the assertion that he is Arab, thus illustrating the paradox at the heart of his social identification: he does not belong anywhere because he is not only too French to consider himself Arab but also too Arab to consider himself French. He does not have one particular native language, and by extension he does not have one particular national identity either. As we will see later in the play, he is also the one character sacrificed to the terrorist insanity of the OAS.

These three linguistic choices reveal deeper insecurities about the characters’ identification with the French nation. Mathilde was accused of sleeping with the German occupier during World War II and fled to Algeria after suffering the indignity of having her head shaved, whereas Adrien is afraid of outside dangers and has effectively built a fortress around his house to protect the family from the outside world. Aziz, on the other hand, tries to mediate the divide between his French upbringing and his Algerian homeland. Their choices of language, instead of tying them more closely to France, expose a much more complicated situation in which all three characters suffer from the current state of affairs. Rather than following Michelet’s rigid correspondence between the French language and the French nation, Koltès uses language to subvert the national framework and to reveal underlying fissures in the national project.

Beyond language, another key element of national identification according to the French

republican tradition involves active acceptance of dominant interpretations of the nation's history. Nationalist thinker Maurice Barrès developed these ideas with his notion of "la terre et les morts," the fatherland and the cult of the dead. In his *Scènes et doctrines du nationalisme*, he explains,

I have my fixed points, my hooks in the past and in posterity. If I link them together, I derive the glory of French classicism. How could I not be prepared for any sacrifice to protect this classicism that has built my spine? I speak of a spine not as a metaphor but as the most powerful of analogies. A chain of exercises throughout the centuries has trained our reflexes (189).

Barrès argued that one becomes French as a result of a shared history and respect for past achievements. Ernest Renan nuanced this philosophy in his speech entitled *What is a Nation?*, in which he notes that in some cases one must glorify past victories and in other situations conveniently forget or ignore past injustices: "Forgetting, and I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation... every French citizen must have forgotten the Saint Bartholomew massacre and the massacres in the Midi in the 13th century" (34). According to Renan and to Barrès, it is impossible to be French without an active understanding and acceptance of French history, but of course this history involves hiding certain moments. In theory this construction allows anyone who genuinely desires to become French to do so, since it defines national belonging culturally rather than ethnically. As we have seen with Aziz's discomfort, however, organic nationalism continues to privilege those born with French genes.

Mathilde best exemplifies the complexity of collective memory in Koltes' work. When her brother Adrien tells her that it is good that she has escaped the Algerian War and come to "the house where she has roots," she replies, "My roots? What roots? I am not a salad; I have feet and they're not made to get stuck in the ground. As for that war, my dear Adrien, I don't care. I'm not fleeing any war; instead I'm bringing it here, in this town, where I have some old

scores to settle” (13). She settles her old score flamboyantly: she and her son capture the police chief who shaved her head after World War II and they perform the exact same punishment on him. In this action, Mathilde shows that she will do what she pleases with her nation’s history. Rather than glorifying past triumphs and forgetting harsh injustices, she tackles the matter directly and reopens the wound. She actively refuses to accept the national myth surrounding the Second World War and even manages to make the aftermath of the event look ridiculous when embodied by a bald police chief.

Adrien’s view of France, on the other hand, is so narrow that he fails to see the bigger picture. While Mathilde cannot tie herself to any particular national framework, Adrien is so preoccupied with protecting his family from the outside world and planning attacks on Arab cafés that he fails to recognize that the country has changed. He learns the hard way that it is no longer possible to live a cloistered life when his colleagues accidentally injure his son in a bombing and when Fatima’s surprise babies reveal that she has slept with someone Adrien would not consider “French.” In perhaps the strangest scene of the play, a black parachutist drops out of the sky, converses with Adrien in a parody of Charles De Gaulle’s post-World War II speeches, and runs off as mysteriously as he arrived. There is no indication that he is the father of Fatima’s twins, but it is entirely possible. Perhaps this parachutist is the father of a new, openly hybrid nation? Either way, in all of these examples, we see that Adrien’s intransigent view of French history no longer explains the situation at hand, and his determined blindness eventually undermines his main goal of protecting his family. Just as Mathilde cannot accept her nation’s past, Adrien’s distorted fears prevent him from participating fully in the national project.

Unlike Mathilde and Adrien, Aziz *has* no history. He is no longer connected to a family lineage in Algeria, yet he also has no roots in France. French history does not apply to him, since

he has no “terre et morts” with which to identify. In Saïfi’s café when Aziz expresses his doubts on his Arabness, Mathieu asks him, “If you are not an Arab, then what are you? A Frenchman? A servant? What should I call you?” Aziz responds, “A fool [*couillon*], I am a fool...I spend my time being a fool in a house that’s not mine, to keep up a garden and wash floors that are not mine...The Front says that I am an Arab, my boss says I’m a servant, the military service says I am French, and me, I say I am a fool...I don’t give a damn about Algeria just like I don’t give a damn about France” (73). Aziz’s lack of history is of course indicative of the same problems faced by almost all colonial populations in France, and researchers have recently devoted much energy to studying this situation. Even though the large influx of immigrants during the 1950s and 1960s was actually nothing new for France, these new arrivals suddenly reflect a disintegrating empire and remain visibly separate from a French population created by many generations of European immigration. As a result, it becomes all that much easier for Adrien and like-minded compatriots to target specific immigrant groups, thus underscoring the challenges they face as they try to find a place for themselves in a new society.

For Koltès’ characters, the French nation is an entity that exists on paper but not in reality. Mathilde has actively rejected any glorification of “la terre et les morts,” and Adrien only sees what he wants to see. Aziz does not have any past at all. Using Benedict Anderson’s elegant notion of the nation as an imagined community, we can say that these characters exist in a refused community. Anderson, influenced by Renan in particular, argues that nations exist as the result of a collective choice.³ When members of the community actively prevent this choice or undermine its values, the nation can no longer exist in the same form. In the case of Koltès’ characters, they are unwilling or unable to imagine their community in a constructive fashion based on the current political and social situation. The French language does not predominate

and French history is mocked and rejected. The France they live in does not extend beyond the administrative state; their hearts and minds are not captured. Based on Anderson's theories, the traditional model of the French nation has failed for them because it is not equipped to deal with the complexity of their situation.

Moving one step further to Homi Bhabha's understanding of the nation in his essay "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," however, the theoretical framework presented in this study allows for dissenting discourses regarding national belonging. In fact, Bhabha argues, the nation is located precisely in the intersection of many differing narratives:

The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*. (297)

For Bhabha, the true nation can be found in the split between what he calls the pedagogical and the performative, or the historical theories of national evolution and how we act in daily life.

Writing, particularly minority discourse, reveals this tension and underscores the plurality of the nation that is often subsumed under broad historical myths. While Koltès does not come from a minority background, his plays often attack the dominant bourgeois social structure. He positioned himself as an unseizable outsider, and it is not surprising that many interpretations of his work focus on his critiques of bourgeois values.

In the case of *Le Retour au Désert*, Koltès effectively puts his finger on all of what Bhabha would call the “liminal” points of the nation, or the exposed cracks in the national discourse. His characters confront each other from many perspectives, and their interactions demonstrate a wide range of interpretations of the French national project. Mathilde’s past reveals that French society during WWII was not nearly as united as the Gaullist resistance myth would like us to believe, and the black parachutist’s appropriation of de Gaulle’s nostalgic speeches on the French provincial lifestyle comedically extends French historical memory to include African populations. Mathieu’s injury during the OAS bombing predicts that the French bourgeoisie will not be able to hide from the disintegrating colonial empire forever, and Aziz’s existential crisis foreshadows identity questions challenging North African immigrants and their children that were largely ignored until the decade following Koltès’ death. By insightfully covering themes that will not become a primary focus of research and policy-making for another decade, the play supports Bhabha’s argument privileging narrative as a fundamental expression of concerns related to national belonging.

Finally, however, it is important to note that neither Bhabha nor Koltès is entirely nihilistic about conceptions of national belonging. Bhabha explains that he has developed his theories of cultural difference in order to allow for a new, more cohesive organization of society: “For it is by living on the borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender, that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity” (320). Bhabha sees that cultural difference can be a source of strength rather than division, and Koltès ends his play on an optimistic note: Fatima, Mathilde’s daughter, gives birth to black twins whom she names Romulus and Remus, a clear indication of her ambitions for her sons. In an often-cited interview, Koltès bluntly explains that as a teenager during the Algerian War, “I

quickly understood that it was them [foreigners] who were the new blood for France, that if France were to live just on the blood of the French, it would become a nightmare...The only blood that nourishes us at all is the blood of immigrants” (*Une part de ma vie* 116, 126-127). Rather than pessimistically predicting the end of France, Koltès sees cultural mixing as a way to save the French from themselves and as the source of renewed purpose for the future.

Perhaps the strongest compliment we can give to Koltès is that two decades after publication and despite the rapidly changing political understanding of minorities in France, his ideas still remain relevant. In his plays we see the seeds of many of the political identity debates that still challenge historians, social scientists and politicians alike, and a recent Comédie Française production of *Le Retour au désert* uncovered tensions in the theater world about whether the role of Aziz must be played by an Arab actor.⁴ With an uncharacteristically comedic touch, Koltès’ characters eventually manage to transcend divisive prejudices, and they leave us with the hope that they will use their differences to formulate a new social order. Of course, both Bhabha and Koltès leave the details of the solution up to their readers. In refusing to dictate a specific roadmap for the future, they leave the door open for creative and constructive proposals for new symbols of solidarity. How will Fatima’s Romulus and Remus create a new classical tradition based on a mixing of ethnic, religious, and historical symbols, and how will this project impact current political and social structures? It remains up to us to determine what form our new national myth should take and how we will use it to address the many divisions plaguing modern society.

¹Notes

¹ For examples of these classic arguments, see Grewe and Heed.

²² For further development of these ideas in Weber's work, consult Chapters 6, *A Wealth of Tongues* and 7, *France, One and Indivisible*.

³³ Anderson's classic definition of the nation can be found in the Introduction, pg. 6 of the 2006 edition.

⁴⁴ For a thorough analysis in English of the Comédie Française controversy, see Shine.

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