
The Guest/Host Dichotomy of “L’Hôte” in Leïla Sebbar’s *Marguerite* and Nina Bourauoi’s *Garçon manqué*

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“Certains peuples sont plus hospitaliers que d’autres.”
—Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Hospitalité française*.

In the French language, for approximately ten centuries, hosts and guests have cohabitated in the same word, “hôte.”¹ It is only through context that we can discern whether the person about whom we are speaking is receiving guests or being invited. It is an important statement about reciprocity, too, that the French language uses the same word for both agents in the ritual of hospitality. One cannot be a host without having a guest, nor can one be a guest if no one agrees to host. In this latter case, one becomes an unwanted or unwelcome guest.

Therefore, just as the French language allows for ambiguity when it comes to hosts and guests, so too does literature that takes into account postcolonial encounters in both North Africa and France. The best-known French literary example of the ambiguous host and guest appears in Albert Camus’ short story, “L’Hôte,” in his collection of short stories, *L’Exil et le royaume*, published in 1957. Camus’ hôte is Daru, a teacher who works in a small mountaintop school in colonial Algeria. When a police officer asks him to deliver an unnamed Arab prisoner to the authorities in a neighboring village, Daru hesitates and ultimately has no choice but to house the prisoner overnight before sending him on his way the next morning. In the final pages of the short story, Daru famously refuses to make the choice for the prisoner. He leads him to an open path, where he tells him to choose for himself which direction he will go: one way leads to the authorities and prison, while the other leads to freedom (pointedly through the laws of their hospitality) with the nomads. As Daru turns back he notices the prisoner has chosen the direction leading to incarceration; he also discovers that someone has written a menacing threat on the blackboard of his classroom. The story ends with the following: “Dans ce vaste pays qu’il avait tant aimé, il était seul” [“In this vast country that he had so loved, he was alone”] (Camus 124). This serves as a profound reminder of Daru’s isolation, which is both literal, in the sense that he lives in Algeria’s inhospitable mountainous terrain, and figurative, in the sense that

he is not welcome as either a guest (a French citizen in French-occupied Algeria) or a host (born in Algeria).

Daru's role as both host and guest can be seen in his position as an Algerian-born Frenchman, as the unwilling host to the unnamed prisoner, and at the end of the story, as an unwanted guest in the country of his birth. Alternatively, one can interpret the title of the novella as describing the prisoner who spends the night under Daru's care. The prisoner is both Daru's guest, in this circumstance, and his host, since this (Algeria) is his country. And, finally, as Roland Champagne convincingly argues, the title's approximate homonym, "l'autre" ["the other"] can refer to both Daru and the prisoner as well (Champagne 569).

Given its time of publication, Camus' novella expresses the ambiguity inherent in the French colonial situation and in the Algerian War of Independence. It also underlines the allegorical interpretation of hosts and guests as they relate to national identities. Thus, the crux of the ambiguity offered in Camus' story is that Daru and the Arab prisoner are both hosts and guests because of national identity and because of France's position in Algeria. The concept of the guest/host dichotomy echoes the political climate and Camus' own conflicted stance on it.² In David Carroll's analysis of "L'hôte" he states:

For Algeria is presented in [Camus'] stories as a land in which no one can legitimately claim to be master and no one is destined to be slave, where no one thus is colonizer and no one colonized, where no one is authorized by any doctrine or contract to occupy the place of the host in a place that is exclusively his or hers, and no one is placed definitively in the position of being either an invited or intrusive guest in a foreign land. (535)

This ambiguity actually makes it difficult to talk about a dichotomy, because as Carroll points out, what Camus is doing in "L'hôte" and other stories in *L'Exil et le Royaume*³ is making the case for *no one* to be the clear host or the clear guest. Obviously this model will become problematic in the political aftermath of the War of Independence, when one million Algerian-born French citizens were forced to flee Algeria.⁴ They were quite clearly considered unwelcome guests.

Fifty years later and in a postcolonial context, the intellectual debate surrounding hosts and guests in Franco-Maghrebi relations has shifted its focus away from questioning the French colonial presence in Algeria, and who "occupies the position of host": the indigenous Algerian or the "French-Algerian" (i.e., Camus) to questioning who is the "invited or intrusive guest" in France. History has altered the patterns of immigration. During the colonial era the French practiced a politics of *peuplement* ["population"],⁵ and in the late 1960s and early 1970s aggressively recruited Maghrebi workers to come to France to supplement the

declining numbers in their workforce. In 1974 the French government enacted a policy called the “regroupement familial,” which enabled even more Maghrebi workers’ families to join them in France.⁶ Thus, more North African families, many of whom were Algerian, made their way to France. In the 1980s as French unemployment started to rise and new socio-cultural phenomena appeared on the horizon, France became less hospitable to these immigrant families.⁷

In 1984, as incidents of intolerance against immigrants began to increase, Tahar Ben Jelloun penned *Hospitalité française*. He then reprinted it in 1998 with a new, topical preface. In his 1998 introduction Ben Jelloun writes: “L’hospitalité a ses lois. Elles ne sont pas écrites, mais font partie des valeurs et des principes d’une civilisation. Elles impliquent tantôt des droits, tantôt des devoirs” [“Hospitality has its laws. They are not written but are part of a civilization’s values and principles. They imply both rights and duties”] (13). Ben Jelloun’s book focuses on what he deems the inhospitable French state when concerned with both invited and uninvited immigrant guests. In his introduction, as seen in the quotation above, hospitality is understood as a cultural given, one that does not have written rules, but one that is universally understood. Therefore, in Ben Jelloun’s reading of the allegory, France is the host, whether graceful or not, and the North African immigrants are the guests. Mireille Rosello points out in her 2001 book, *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*, that Ben Jelloun’s treatment of hospitality is general and obviously intended for a wide audience (26-28). Given the historical context of his essay (the early 1980s), which he points out in a four-page chronology of acts of aggression undertaken against North Africans in French locales over a one-year period, it is clear that Ben Jelloun’s intention was to call into question the actions of the French state (Ben Jelloun 27-32).

In contemporary fiction that focuses on both invited and uninvited guests, along with the willing and resistant hosts, when questions of nationality arise, the allegory of hospitality places the country of destination in the position of host and the immigrant as guest. In an examination of the host/guest paradigm, let us consider how it presents a model for understanding relationships between North Africa and France, one that extends beyond national borders and ends up questioning the very positions of guest and host, especially in the case of women. Two novels alter our perceptions of what it means to be a host or a guest, and in which the protagonists, both of whom are women, move back and forth across what constitutes a continuum of the guest/host relationship (and here I use Rosello’s term: “continuum”). This continual movement allows us to reconsider questions of immigrant identity and removes the static notion of one host and one guest. In her book, Rosello links this fluctuation to the same sort of fluidity that needs to be considered when

discussing the post-colonial condition: “it may be that the opposition between the guest and the host is worth revisiting as a continuous and problematic line between power and powerlessness, ownership and dispossession, stability and nomadism.... [H]ospitality is often in flux: power comes and goes, and so do protection and respect, servitude and care” (Rosello 18). It also allows us to question the implicit gender roles assigned to the various host(esses) within these novels.⁸ As we will see, it is through their questioning of these roles that the female protagonists undermine an accepted dichotomy of host/guest relationships.

Two authors, whose works often tackle issues of immigrant identity are Leïla Sebbar and Nina Bouraoui. Both women were born in Algeria to Algerian fathers and French mothers; both write in French; and both attempt to express in their fiction the experience of marginalization that is tied to the issue of immigrant identity.⁹ These authors frequently choose immigrant characters as narrative voices but avoid the simple allegorical reading of immigrants as guests and of “native” women as hostesses. Rather, these authors highlight the idea that the line between the host and guest wavers, and that this is ever more the case when the protagonists must also confront assigned gender roles.

In Leïla Sebbar’s 2000 novel, *Marguerite*, the eponymous character plays the role of host to a group of workers at her father-in-law’s farm. As a young woman Marguerite marries Simon just before he leaves to fight in the Algerian war. When Simon returns from Algeria he is increasingly taciturn and close-minded; although both his father and his wife try to communicate with him about his experience, he shows no interest in discussing it. He merely states that he dislikes his father’s practice of hiring North African workers to help on his farm. In spite of Simon’s protests, in the summer months the family spends their vacation at the farm, where Marguerite cooks meals, serves the workers, and does the housework (20). When she is present at the farm, although she is a guest to her father-in-law’s host, she is also the host to the migrant workers.

When one of the workers thanks her for a meal (21-22), Marguerite is troubled, because she has considered the work she does at her father-in-law’s farm as a duty. She does not see herself as a host. The worker’s gratitude indicates the expected or accepted response of someone who is acting as a guest in a French home. He wants to thank his host(ess) for her hospitality. Yet, for Marguerite, preparing the meals is not an act of benevolence. To Marguerite, this is not a personal relationship between a host and an invited guest. The line is blurred here: Marguerite is the host(ess) at the farm, because of her husband’s family; nevertheless, she is also a guest vacationing with her children for the summer. She must simultaneously fulfill the roles of host and guest.

In Rosello's aforementioned work she is looking expressly at these roles as they pertain to the immigrant as guest; however, in the case of *Marguerite*, Sebbar leads us to think of the host/guest continuum first in terms of a French woman in France. Here, Marguerite appears as a guest on her father-in-law's farm, yet she is tasked with the responsibility of hosting the immigrant workers. In this example, Sebbar shows us that one can be both a host and a guest simultaneously and that national identity is not the sole defining factor in determining one's role as either host or guest. Anne Donadey's article, titled "Leïla Sebbar's *Marguerite*: A Literary Model For Positive Cross-Cultural Relations," tells us, "In *Marguerite*, the most important condition for positive cross-cultural relations appears to be a certain level of openness to the other, which allows characters to go beyond colonial and decolonial overdeterminations" (360). As we will see, Sebbar's use of the allegorical host/guest relationship does not immediately refute the notion of France as the host and the former North African colonies as guests; rather, she focuses instead on this openness to which Donadey refers. Marguerite's troubled social position, which places her on the line between both host and guest, draws our attention.

Thus, the first part of the book highlights the French family farm as the locale playing host to the migrant workers and of Marguerite's role as both the guest and the host(ess). In the second half of the book, however, both Marguerite's role and the locale change. The catalyst for these changes is the death of Simon, which signals the end of the first part of the novel, in addition to the end of Marguerite's role as hostess at the farm. There are no further trips to the farm, and the setting for the remainder of the novel becomes Marguerite's home. Now, as a 45-year-old widow with children, she is trying to determine what her path should be. Having spent much of her life reading romance novels set in exotic locales, she recognizes the monotony of her daily life; yet, she remains uncertain of ways to change that. She readily acknowledges her own escapism: "Elle aime savoir comment vivent les autres dans des pays lointains où elle n'ira jamais, à des époques différentes, sa vie à elle, ne l'intéresse pas vraiment.... L'histoire d'une femme qui lui ressemble, ça lui ferait peur, elle ne la lirait pas" ["She likes to know how others live in faraway countries where she will never go, in different eras, her own life doesn't really interest her.... The story of a woman like her, that would frighten her, she wouldn't read it"] (85). Nothing in her own life has ever been even remotely exotic, except the one summer at her father-in-law's farm, when she met the Moroccan migrant worker, who thanked her for preparing that meal.

When she meets Sélim, a traveling salesman of Algerian origin, he reminds her of that Moroccan man she met at her father-in-law's farm. He represents both the exotic North African and the antithesis of Simon, her deceased husband. As

Marguerite's relationship with Sélim gradually develops, the reader notices that he, the immigrant, gradually becomes Marguerite's host. Although Marguerite and Sélim meet in France, the fact that she is the native French citizen and that it is at or near her home that they first connect, does not indicate that she will act as the host. On the contrary, Marguerite begins to act as a guest: she embarks on a small series of discoveries. First, she ventures out to a café where she tries a new drink; then, she attends a community dance with her neighbors; and, finally, she begins a romantic relationship with Sélim. Their relationship is less about Marguerite inviting him into her literal home than it is about him enabling her to see and do things *outside* of her home, away from the place in which she is the host. This relationship extends beyond the borders of her household and also works on an allegorical level, because Marguerite does not play hostess to Sélim in France, her home country, either. He acts as the catalyst and agent of discovery for her. It is Sélim who invites her to dance, who travels with her to other parts of France and Europe, and who ultimately plans to take her to *his* country. At the end of the novel, Sélim's death renders this final trip impossible, but in some ways Marguerite has already made her journey.

Thus, we first see Sebbar's portrayal of Marguerite, a French woman who acts first as host to North African migrant workers at the same time that she is the guest of her own father-in-law in her own country. Then, we see the reversal of the host/guest idea, when Sélim, the Algerian immigrant, becomes Marguerite's host in France and elsewhere in Western Europe. The writer's depiction of Marguerite is one that is not clearly defined as either a host or a guest; rather, if we look at the allegory of hosts and guests as being on a continuum, we understand that there is no absolute. There is, in fact, not simply one host and one guest. The possessor of national identity is not necessarily the host and the immigrant is not necessarily the guest. The best reading of this novel goes beyond the dichotomous relationship and reminds us of the true meaning of the word "hôte" in French. It is at once both the host and the guest.

In contrast, Nina Bouraoui's 2000 novel *Garçon manqué* also examines the guest/host continuum, but in a slightly different way. As Ching Selaoui points out in "Porter l'Algérie: *Garçon manqué* de Nina Bouraoui," the novel is as much about bearing witness to the wars in Algeria (both the War of Independence and the Civil War of the 1990s), as it is about identity (Selaoui 75). Bouraoui writes her autobiographical novel through the first-person narration of Nina. It is separated into four parts: "Alger," "Rennes," "Tivoli," and "Amine." The first three represent geographical spaces, while the third represents Nina's alter ego, Amine. In each section Nina, whose father is Algerian and mother is French, questions the limiting

characteristics associated with identity politics. With the backdrop of Algeria's War for Independence and eventually, the Civil War of the 1990s, she demonstrates how the political relationship between France and Algeria continues to influence the ways in which she is perceived. She refuses accepted notions of gender and ethnic identities, and in so doing points out that her particular upbringing in Algeria to a French mother and Algerian father—with summers spent in France with her maternal grandparents—further obscures any clear understanding of her role as either host or guest. Explicit in the designations of host and guest is the idea of being at home. Rosello explains that “Being at home is being where you can not only eat and drink but also invite someone to eat, to drink, to chat. Being at home is being where you can be the host, where you can offer hospitality” (Rosello 17-18). Nina lacks that feeling of being at home, whether in Algeria or in France. Bouraoui writes in the chapter titled “Alger”: “De mère française. De père algérien.... Ne pas choisir c'est être dans l'errance. Mon visage algérien. Ma voix française.... Je suis l'une contre l'autre” [“From a French mother. From an Algerian father.... Not choosing means being in a state of wandering. My Algerian face. My French voice.... I am one against the other”] (35). The concept of “errance” stands diametrically opposite that of hospitality. One who wanders is not bound to a home and cannot therefore embody the role of host.

In the chapter called, “Rennes,” she becomes the guest of her maternal grandparents and is forced to conform to the roles of both granddaughter and immigrant. She repeatedly expresses her discomfort at being both of these and never feels completely at home. Rosello explains that if an immigrant remains a guest then s/he is never permitted to become a host. Never achieving the status of host means never having the same rights and privileges society affords the person in that role. Nina never becomes the host in France. “Je reste entre les deux pays. Je reste entre deux identités. Mon équilibre est dans la solitude, une unité. J'invente un autre monde” [“I stay between the two countries. I stay between two identities. My equilibrium is in solitude, a unity. I invent another world”] (Bouraoui 28). A close reading of Nina's words here shows us that she does not adopt the role of guest any more than she adopts that of host. She explains that she stays “between two identities,” which means she is neither French nor Algerian. This also forces her to invent “another world.” In her own world she can be the host *and* the guest, because this other world she creates is one that allows her to live “in solitude, a unity,” and one that permits her to transgress gender boundaries. Nina's invention of her male alter ego, Amine (or sometimes Brio), is the result of this desire to go beyond the alternatives she is being offered. Up to this point, her identity has been prescribed by geographical markers. Nationality has been the single most

determining factor in her identification. She discovers, however, that her true identity, the place in which she may achieve personal fulfillment is beyond those geographical borders, and is perhaps not a place at all.

While Nina's creation of Amine is in response to her position between two identities, as she says above, it is also in response to a traumatic childhood experience. When a man in Algiers attempts to kidnap her as a child, Nina narrowly escapes, thanks to her sister; this, however, becomes a further catalyst in her quest for a new identity. "Ma vie est un secret. Moi seule sais mon désir, ici, en Algérie. Je veux être un homme. Et je sais pourquoi. C'est ma seule certitude. C'est ma vérité. Être un homme en Algérie c'est devenir invisible" ["My life is a secret. Only I know my desire, here, in Algeria. I want to be a man. And I know why. It is my only certainty. It is my truth. To be a man in Algeria is to become invisible"] (39). She realizes, even as a young child, that being a male in Algeria renders her life easier, makes her less noticeable, and allows her to explore a new way of being within this world. She recognizes what appears to her to be the simpler life of Algerian boys and men. When she goes to France, however, to spend the summer with her grandparents, her grandmother buys her dresses, takes her for a physical, and prioritizes her femininity in every way. Not only does Nina struggle with her national identity (Is she French? Is she Algerian? How can one be both after the divisive War of Independence?), but she is further confused by her grandmother's attempts to make her more feminine (160-161). Her grandmother's efforts also reinforce Nina's identification of France with femininity and Algeria with masculinity. Thus, her struggle to be an appropriate guest while in France is continually complicated. She cannot be the French little girl her grandmother wants. At the same time, when she is in Algeria, she cannot be the Algerian host, the young boy, she so desperately tries to be. Nina is at an impasse.

Tellingly, the third chapter of the book is titled "Tivoli," in neither Algeria nor France. During her summer in Rome she says: "Je n'étais plus française. Je n'étais plus algérienne. Je n'étais même plus la fille de ma mère. J'étais moi. Avec mon corps" ["I was no longer French. I was no longer Algerian. I was not even my mother's daughter. I was me. With my body"] (190), and she notes: "Rome. Ma ville. Ma nouvelle ville" ["Rome. My city. My new city"] (191). What we see happening here is Nina's complete separation, first from France, then from Algeria, then from her mother. As Martine Fernandes indicates: "C'est finalement en Italie que Nina Bouraoui connaît le désir, qu'elle passe d'objet du désir à sujet désirant, dans ce tiers espace qui n'est ni la France ni l'Algérie" ["It is finally in Italy that Nina Bouraoui knows desire, that she passes from desired object to desiring subject, in this third space that is neither France nor Algeria"] (71).¹⁰ The

autobiographical protagonist must transgress the national and gender boundaries in order to achieve the desiring agency she finds impossible in both Algeria and France. Note that she specifically invokes her mother and says she is no longer her daughter. It is the corporal connection with her mother, the French woman who married the Algerian man and gave birth to this female child, that she rejects here. At the same time, her transgression recalls that of her mother, as Fernandes points out, because her mother rejected accepted norms by marrying an Algerian man in the immediate aftermath of the War of Independence (Fernandes 71).

Nina's simple declaration of "I was me. With my body" (190) underlines her understanding that a body with its markers of gender or its ethnic features or its implied national origin does not create one's identity.¹¹ It is in a place where she has no familial ties, is a full-fledged visitor, and not in a confused position of both host and guest that she says she is herself. Along the continuum of host/guest relationships, she is at the extreme end, as a tourist, so the ultimate short-term visitor or guest. In the case of Nina, it is at this outlying position that she erases all markers of identity, reconnects with her body, her *self* and ultimately says goodbye to Amine, her alter ego (the title of the last chapter, and actually more of an epilogue). Amine, her male alter ego, is no longer necessary, because she will now be able to embrace her own body, which is female, and her desire, which remains somewhat undecipherable at the end of *Garçon manqué*, but what we suppose to be homosexual.

In our brief examination here of both Sebbar's *Marguerite* and Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué*, we can see that understanding hosts and guests on a continuum allows us to transgress the borders between identities that are Algerian and French, immigrant and national, male and female. Sebbar and Bouraoui both posit situations in which the assumed host becomes the guest and vice versa. In doing this, they create protagonists who work toward a self-awareness that goes beyond mere binary classification. Sebbar's protagonist, Marguerite, literally plays the role of host and guest at the same time while she is at her father-in-law's farm, and it is during that period of time that she is the most perplexed about her position. She becomes confused when the Moroccan migrant worker thanks her for the meal, because she understands in a rather murky way that she has been labeled as the hostess, because she is the woman serving the meals to the men in this home. Later, in the second part of the book, when Sélim offers to take her away from her home, to make her become, a *tourist*, she is relieved of her responsibility as a mother, as the figure of womanly virtue, in her own home. As is the case with Nina in Bouraoui's book, it is as a tourist that she feels unencumbered enough to reach fulfillment.

Nina's journey takes her well beyond prescribed gender roles, and in her case, it is tightly associated with each country: France is the feminine country, while Algeria is the masculine one. Her refusal to be the guest in France and to be the host in Algeria translates also into her rejection of the gender roles assigned to her in both countries. Again, it is as a *tourist* (for Nina, beyond the borders of both France and Algeria) that she feels she can truly breathe and capture some element of who she wants to be. Both women, Marguerite and Nina, achieve their own understanding of themselves when they take both the national and generic positions associated with hosts and guests out of the equation. The relationship between France, the former colonizer, and Algeria, the formerly colonized, dictates an understanding of hosts and guests that both of these writers are rejecting. For Marguerite it is in her own country, but eventually in the position of guest, where the host is an Algerian immigrant; and for Nina it is completely out of the sphere of France and Algeria, in Italy, that she reaches fulfillment and where she says, "J'étais moi."

These two protagonists' revalorization of the role of guest calls to mind Rosello's concluding chapter and her statement that "if the guest is always the guest, if the host is always the host, something has probably gone very wrong" (167). Sebbar and Bouraoui echo that sentiment through Marguerite's and Nina's experiences as guests, both metaphorical and literal.

Notes

¹ According to the *Trésor de la langue française*, "hôte," derived from *oste*, dates back to the 12th century, and includes both the current definitions of the word: one who gives hospitality and one who receives it.

² For more on Camus' stance regarding the war in Algeria, see Robert Zaretsky, Conor Cruise O'Brien, and David Carroll.

³ In particular, Carroll discusses "La femme adultère," another of Camus' stories to address quite specifically questions of territorial possession. Edward Saïd also analyzes this same short story as an example of French-Algerian appropriation of colonial territory in *Culture and Imperialism* (183).

⁴ For more on the French-Algerian (or *pied-noir*) community in Algeria, see Benjamin Stora (16-23).

⁵ See Stora.

⁶ Filmmaker Yamina Benguigui portrays the impact of the politics of *regroupement familial* in her 2001 film, *Inch'Allah Dimanche*.

⁷ In his article on pedagogical models for teaching a French civilization course to undergraduates, Mark Ingram provides a concise summary of issues related to *patrimoine*, national identity, and reactions to immigrants in both the 1980s and 1990s (1158-1159).

⁸ In her book, Rosello includes a chapter titled “Gender and Hospitality” in which she addresses the perspective of gender (119-148).

⁹ For more on Sebbar and marginalization, see Mildred Mortimer, and for a reading of both Bouraoui and Sebbar together, see Helen Vassallo.

¹⁰ This mention of the “tiers espace” in Fernandes’ article explicitly invokes Homi Bhabha’s work on the third space, which can be found in *The Location of Culture*.

¹¹ For a thorough critical inquiry on the question of gender, see Judith Butler’s foundational work.

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