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The Individual vs. the Collective:
How Henry Miller writes about Paris from an individualistic perspective
while Mehdi Charef write about Paris from a collective perspective.

For authors Henry Miller and Mehdi Charef, the act of writing from an individualist perspective or a collective perspective greatly influences each of their respective semi-autobiographical novels centered around the city of Paris. Miller's novel, *Quiet Days in Clichy*, is an American expatriate's voyage through a vice-ridden, loveless yet exciting Paris. Charef's novel, *Tea in the Harem*, is an Algerian immigrant's account of a suffocating and mediocre Paris. Neither writer depicts Paris as the stereotypical shining beacon of arts, humanities, science, and culture. Rather, the city of Paris is demystified into something almost shockingly obscene, repellent, and opposite of what was expected. The difference between the two writers, however, are their perspectives. Miller is writing from the individual perspective. He is interested in writing for himself. His novel, *Quiet Days in Clichy*, does not concern itself with the struggles of a people nor even the shared experience of a group (such as the experience of other American expatriates). Inversely, Charef is writing from the collective perspective. Despite writing a novel about an individual's experience (the character of Majid), his novel speaks of an experience that is shared by many others. Whether it is the topic of immigration, life in the banlieue / housing projects, racism / discrimination, etc. Charef's text speaks from a collective perspective – whether intentional or not. This essay intends on analyzing the similarities and differences between the two writers and their individualist / collectivist approach. First, we will analyze the concepts of nationality, race / ethnicity and societal status. Then, we will analyze the demystification of Paris. And finally, we will look at how these writers write on nature,

memories, and nostalgia. For it is this individual and collective perspective that is the greatest influence on Miller and Charef's respective novels.

I. Nationality, Race / Ethnicity, and Societal Status

One of the greater influences as to whether a writer will end up writing from an individualist or collective perspective is the writer's nationality, race / ethnicity, and societal status. In other words, where one comes from, how one is treated, and other factors such as money, occupation, and age. In *Quiet Days in Clichy*, Miller's narrator, Joey, is an American expatriate working as an impoverished yet inspired writer. In *Tea in the Harem*, Charef's protagonist, Majid, is an 18-year-old Algerian immigrant who grows up in the impoverished suburbs of Paris. Already we can begin to see some noteworthy differences. The most important factor is the luxury of choice. Miller's narrator, Joey, chooses to be in Paris. He chooses to remain in impoverished conditions - as opposed to returning to America. And he chooses to engage in the vice-ridden underside of Paris. In contrast, Charef's protagonist, Majid, does not have that same luxury of choice. He was brought to France as a child. His family cannot afford better living conditions. And much of what happens around him is out of his control. Miller's narrator, Joey, is a grown man who comes to Paris as an adult for, presumably, an extended sojourn. He comes to Paris for all its sin and excitement. On the other hand, Charef's protagonist, Majid, is a teenager who has had to experience most of his life in less-than-desirable conditions without any say in the matter. Simply to say, Miller's narrator, Joey, chooses. Charef's protagonist, Majid, lacks the opportunity of choice and freedom.

This concept of choice / lack of choice becomes all the more important when viewed under the context of race / ethnicity and culture. Charef's novel is written from the collective perspective of immigrants in France, particularly middle eastern immigrants. This is often referred to as *Beur* literature. *Beur* literature being a collective experience as Alec G. Hargreave explains, "...characterized by an unusually uncertain sense of identity, and the exploration of that uncertainty is the central dynamic which informs most *Beur* writing. As the children of migrants, the Beurs are heirs to a dual cultural heritage. At home, their Muslim parents do their best to transmit to their children the language and religion transported with them from North Africa. But outside the home, these youngsters are immersed in the culture of France, notably through the secular education dispensed by state schools" (661). Charef's *Beur* protagonist, Majid, is a young, impoverished immigrant who has very little control over his life. Bored, frustrated, and often emotionally numb, Majid spends his days seemingly without purpose. He, and his other impoverished friends, often turn to crime and troublemaking in an attempt to alleviate the boredom. "The lads go off looking for the car that they're planning to burn. They go from one car park to the next, just like when they take a short-cut via the cemetery, kicking over flowers and gravestones as they go, only this time it's wing mirrors, car bumpers and widescreen wipers that get the treatment" (Charef 31). The *Beur* / immigrant status is something that follows Majid throughout the novel. He is constantly being reminded of who he is. "She starts ranting at him in Arabic... Majid pretends he doesn't understand" (Charef 12). "Majid fancied her, and she fancied him, but old man Pelletier keeps a watchful eye on her boyfriends. An Arab boyfriend? No chance!" (Charef 19). "He looks him up and down without a hint of embarrassment: an Arab! He grabs the Arab by the collar and hauls him over: 'My wallet, you little shit!'" (Charef 88). "Some of the passengers shrink back at the sight of an Arab walking their way" (Charef 89). "I'm

French. This is my country. What do you take me for, an Arab?" (Charef 117). Majid's treatment seems to come to a climax with an encounter with the local neighborhood militia. "The 'militia' was a group of tenants – many of them parents themselves – who were exasperated by the continual thefts, the vandalism, the stolen or burned-out cars... They had decided to play at cops themselves. In a group they felt strong – driven on by their hatred of the youth and by the fear that they whip up among themselves, and which is regularly fed by the media" (Charef 121). This 'militia' carries a vendetta against the youth in the housing projects. In this scene, a brutal brawl occurs between the young generation and the older generation. And so, impoverished people begin to police the other impoverished people, creating a perverse, twisted world. Such an experience must certainly influence the way one sees the world. It seems that whether outside in the city or inside in the housing projects, Majid cannot escape persecution. Majid's fate is one that is all too familiar to those like him: young, ethnic, poor.

It is also worth mentioning the novel's ending that involves the police. Whether due to more racism, ageism, or general suspicion, Majid and his friends are targeted by the police. Of all the hostile encounters in the novel, this may be the tamest of them all. Majid, seemingly tired of fighting against the monotony and hopelessness of his life, gives in to being taken by the police. And though it is a non-violent encounter, the conclusion of the novel is still Majid being arrested by the police. The final image is Majid in custody of the police (Charef 157). It is essentially the familiar story of a young immigrant arrested by the police. It is a common narrative that is seen across other Beur / minority writers such as Faïza Guène. In her novel, *Just Like Tomorrow*, Guène writes of a character named Youssef, who is also arrested by the police. "...the police turned up at hers at six in the morning to arrest Youssef. They broke the door down, kicked him out of bed, thrashed the whole flat and took him to the station... he's supposed

to be mixed up in some story about drug dealing and stolen cars” (Guène 61). The similarities are present, not just in the arrest but also in the nature of the crime. By ending *Tea in the Harem* with Majid being arrested, it feels as though Majid’s individual story is erased as he becomes just another impoverished hoodlum immigrant taken away and arrested. The journey that we have followed him on becomes less a story of Majid but more the story representing a group of people: those who are either impoverished, young, immigrants / children of immigrants or all.

Now would be a fitting point to return to Henry Miller and *Quiet Days in Clichy* as he also shares an encounter with the police. Despite taking advantage of a runaway fifteen-year-old girl, Miller’s narrator, Joey, and his friend Carl are able to avoid prosecution from the police. In contrast with Charef’s Majid, Miller’s Joey escapes custody by using his status as a writer. “That sour-faced bastard was certainly impressed. Literature! So French, that. Even the police are literary-minded here. And your being an American – a famous writer, I said – that raised our stock enormously... The French have a great respect for writers, you know that. A writer is never an ordinary criminal... I could almost hear him saying to himself, ‘These fellows can’t be so very bad. The child might have fallen into worse hands’” (Miller. *Quiet Days...* 48-49). And so, this episode has its “happy ending” as a crisis is averted. Most importantly, it showcases how a grown man with some societal status can leverage such things to avoid consequences. It showcases how even the most minimal amount of status can make a difference. This scene also briefly touches on the idea of race / ethnicity as Carl mentions that the detective had “expected to find a couple of Apaches, I guess. Or blackmailers. When he saw you he weakened” (Miller. *Quiet Days...*49). Such a statement is important as it implies that a criminal must look a certain way, and not like either Joey or Carl. That is to say that such refined men of literary standing could never be criminals in the eyes of the police.

Because Miller is so detached from any identity, whether it is race or nationality, he is able to proceed with a touch of individualism. Unlike Majid, no title is constantly being thrown upon Joey. Even the titles of “American” or “writer” are aloof and only used to his benefit. The closest Miller gets to writing about home in *Quiet Days in Clichy* is the following, “Home. Home is if home lasts. Where you hang your hat, in other words” (Miller. *Quiet Days*... 65). In another one of Miller’s writings, *Sunday after the War*, he reaffirms such sentiments, “I believe that it is now possible for me to have my being anywhere on earth. I regard the entire world as my home. I inhabit the earth, not a particular portion of it labeled America, France, Germany or Russia. I own allegiance to mankind, not to a particular country, race or people. I answer to God and not to the Chief Executive, whoever he may happen to be. I am here on earth to work out my private destiny... I refuse to jeopardize my destiny by regarding life within the narrow rules which are now laid down to circumscribe it.” And so, without other titles, worries, allegiances, or other stipulations, Miller’s writing can be both inspired, pretentious, and somewhere in between. He has that luxury. Not writing from a down-beaten perspective, Miller has the luxury of being careless, aloof, certain, if he wishes to be. Whatever he wishes to be. His point-of-view has not been narrowed by life circumstances. Not needing to worry about what is in front of him nor worry about the shared struggles of a group of people, Miller can write about an ugly Paris, candid sex, or philosophical reflection. Miller elevates himself in a hierarchy of needs, no longer needing to write about basic, everyday life, he has the luxury to move onto more elevated emotional, mental, and spiritual concerns. The end of *Quiet Days in Clichy* is a fine example of such detached writing. Here, he is removed from time and place and any corporeal senses. In this moment Miller - through Joey - is in no specific time and place as his reflections allow himself to be omnipresent. There is little sense of time as it shifts from the dead of night to suddenly early

morning. And there is hardly a sense of place as his words jump around and take the reader rapidly from one place to another. “Now and then I succeeded in opening my eyes: I saw the room, as through a mist, but my body was down below in the shimmering marine depths. To swoon back was voluptuous. I fell clear through to the bottomless bottom, where I waited like a shark. Then slowly, very slowly, I rose. It was tantalizing. All cork and no fins. Nearing the surface I was sucked under again, pulled down, down, in delicious helplessness, sucked into the empty vortex, there to wait through endless passages of time for the will to gather and raise me like a sunken buoy. I awoke with the sound of birds chirping in my ear.”(Miller. *Quiet Days...* 66-67). Such inspired writing seems to be the result of when an author is removed from the collective experience and writes from the individual experience.

II. The Demystification of Paris



Place de la République en Hiver By Eugene Galien-Laloue¹

Despite one writer writing from an individual perspective and the other writing from a collective perspective, both writers write about a demystified version of Paris. The difference is that the individual / collective perspective greatly influences the writer's outlook on the city. As discussed in the earlier section, Miller's narrator, Joey (and by greater extent, Miller), has the choice of being in Paris, and thus his perception tends to be more favorable. Meanwhile, Charef's protagonist, Majid (and by greater extent, Charef), does not have a say in where he is, and thus his perception tends to hold a bit more disdain. We are able to see a clear example of this as both writers mention the "greyness" of the city of Paris. Miller's passage states, "...the word grey, which brought about the association, has little in common with that gris which, to the

¹ This painting is included as it represents the "ideal" image of Paris; lights, festivity, movement, warmth, and something nostalgic.

ears of a Frenchman, is capable of evoking a world of thought and feeling. Long ago, walking the streets of Paris, studying the watercolours on exhibit in the shop windows, I was aware of the singular absence of what is known as Payne's grey. I mention it because Paris, as everyone knows, is pre-eminently a grey city. I mention it because, in the realm of watercolour, American painters use this made-to-order grey excessively and obsessively. In France the range of greys is seemingly infinite; here the very effect of grey is lost" (Miller. *Quiet Days...* 3). Here we can almost hear a romanticized, impressionistic description of Paris and its greyness. It is almost a celebration of it. Within this colourless world there exist an infinite number of other worlds. The final line is particularly interesting, "the very effect of grey is lost." Miller seems to say that the colour grey – which primarily has the effect of naturalness, dullness, bland, and dreariness – is lost. In other words, grey becomes a colour that is full of life, just as the other shades and colour. And so we can see how Miller's outlook is playful, insightful, and leans towards the positive. In contrast to this, Charef writes quite a bit about the bleakness of the grey walls in the housing projects. "The boredom, the routine and the longing for a bit of excitement. You have to do something to break the monotony, the drabness that gets hold of you and begins to squeeze the life out of you, like a giant octopus. The greyness enters your soul and finally chokes you. In a sea of mediocrity, the least mediocre is king... The children grow up as part of the cement and concrete. They grow up and they begin to take on the characteristics of concrete: they're dry and cold and hard, to all appearances indestructible – but they've got hidden cracks... The concrete doesn't sing, it screams- howls despair, like wolves in the forest, in the snow, without the strength to dig a hold to die in. They wait there like idiots, waiting to see if someone will get them out. They wait like the children of the concrete" (Charef 52). Here we can see how Charef characterizes the greyness of the city. Here, grey is not a lovely impressionistic colour but a

suffocating almost disease-like thing. Charef describes the greyness almost as a monster that consumes the people who live within the housing projects of Paris. And it is not an ultimate evil that consumes an individual in a flash of brilliance but something that through years of dullness seeps under the skin of the children and other residents. The greyness takes over with a suffocating process that takes its time. Before one can realize, it has strangled one's life. This is clearly a harsh distinction from the pretty picture that Miller was referring to.



Still from the film, *La Haine* directed by Mathieu Kassovitz²

Another element that both writers seem to share and talk about often is the vice-ridden underside of Paris, a place where drugs, alcohol, and prostitution exist quite presently. Miller describes Paris as a place littered by filth, vice, and, ultimately, sex. “Montmartre is worn, faded, derelict, nakedly vicious, mercenary, vulgar. It is, if anything, repellent rather than attractive, but insidiously repellent, like vice itself. There are little bars filled almost exclusively with whores,

² A still from the film, *La Haine*. This is included to contrast the earlier painting and to bring visual to Charef's descriptions of the monotony and grey lifelessness.

pimps, thugs and gamblers, which, no matter if you pass them up a thousand times, finally suck you in and claim you as a victim. There are hotels in the side streets leading off the boulevard whose ugliness is so sinister that you shudder at the thought of entering them, and yet it is inevitable that you will one day pass a night, perhaps a week or a month, in one of them” (Miller. *Quiet Days...* 4-5). It goes without saying that this is the inverse of the mythical version of Paris. What is hyper important about his characterization of Paris is the lack of disdain, as previously mentioned. And what is critical of his descriptions is how he acknowledges the vulgar nature of Paris but is ultimately drawn to it. In the end, he cannot and does not complain about the ugliness of it all because he, through Joey, wishes to be a part of this world. “On the grey days, when it was chilly everywhere except in the big cafés, I looked forward with pleasure to spending an hour or two at the Café Wepler before going to dinner. The rosy glow which suffused the place emanated from the cluster of whores who usually congregated near the entrance. As they gradually distributed themselves among the clientele, the place became not only warm and rosy but fragrant... There are only two things you can do on a rainy day, as the saying goes, and the whores never wasted time playing cards” (Miller. *Quiet Days...* 6). Charef describes an equally sin-filled Paris. “The obvious place to blow the money was to go into town, so they headed off to their favorite stamping-grounds. They stopped for a merguez and chips, and beer, and more beer. Once they’d eaten their fill, they went to rue Saint-Denis to get an eyeful of the prostitutes. In the doorway of a hotel stood two big, heavily made-up girls, wearing nothing but a pair of knickers under their open-fronted fur coats. They lingered there, their mouths watering. A third girl was sitting on the hotel steps, her legs apart” (Charef 146). What is interesting to note is the idea of Majid going to his “favorite stamping-grounds.” It could be said that perhaps for Majid, this Paris is not a demystified Paris as it is what he simply grew up with – or at the very least has

grown numb to it. For Majid and his mother both experienced the idea of a shining Paris being nothing more than an illusion and facing the harsh reality of life in the suburbs of Paris. “When she first saw the place, Malika burst into tears, and Majid wondered if it was some kind of practical joke... Malika used to clutch her little boy in her arms and wish she’d never made the voyage” (Charef 96).

As Paris loses its golden allure with the less-than-favorable descriptions by Miller and Charef, we should once again remember that Miller is writing from the individual perspective and Charef from the collective perspective. And it all return to this idea of choice, Joey’s perception of Paris is both ugly and exciting because that is what he sought. Meanwhile, Majid’s perception of Paris is ugly and suffocating because that is what was forced onto him.



Guinguette à Nogent-sur-Marne by Willy Ronis³

³ A final image in balance to the first and second image. Here we see a Paris that is neither an illusion nor completely downtrodden. This image also brings to life Miller’s version of Paris: a grounded yet lively place.

III. Nature, Memories, and Nostalgia

The final section of this essay vaguely titled nature, memories, and nostalgia refers to the writer's relationship with these three elements. Starting with descriptions of nature, Miller writes about this passage of Luxembourg in *Quiet Days in Clichy*. "A thousand years' peace seemed to reign over this somnolent vale. It was like a corridor which God had traced with his little finger, a reminder to men that when their insatiable thirst for blood had been appeased, when they had become weary of strife, here they would find peace and rest. To be truthful, it was beautiful, orderly, prosperous, easygoing sort of world, everyone full of good humour, charitable, kindly, tolerant. Yet, for some reason, there was a rotten odour about the place. The odour of stagnation. The goodness of the inhabitants, which was negative, had deteriorated their moral fibre. All they were concerned about was to know on which side their bread was buttered. They couldn't make bread, but they could butter it. I felt thoroughly disgusted. Better to die like a louse in Paris than live here on the fat of the land, I thought to myself. 'Let's go back and get a good dose of the clasp,' I said, rousing Carl from a state of near torpor" (Miller. *Quiet Days*... 54). Here we can see both instances of the luxury of choice as well as individualism. When presented with the choice of something beautiful yet boring or ugly yet exciting, Miller's Joey chooses that which is ugly and exciting – a choice that is probably the unconventional choice. And as referred to earlier, Miller has moved beyond the initial levels on a hierarchy of needs, now he is looking for self-fulfillment. One might dare say that Miller's attitude is a bit sinister, yet that is also the markings of an individual. Certainly, he is unafraid to state his own mind. As Chales I. Glicksberg explains, "The characters that people his novels are wretched, ignorant, stricken creatures, convulsed with list and grief and rage, frustrated, decadent, ripe for suicide. Yet all this fills Miller with unaccountable elation. Let the deluge come. The world for the past century has

been dying; let it die. He would like to see it blown to smithereens” (293). We can understand that Miller carries a sense of conviction. And as alluded to in the quote, Miller has little regard for the past and what it signifies. In the Luxembourg scene in *Quiet Days in Clichy*, Miller’s Joey is forward facing towards the future. He does not feel the need to reflect on the past nor feel a sense of nostalgia towards anything. All that is on his mind is the present and future in Paris.

In contrast to this, Charef’s relationship with nature in *Tea in the Harem* is a bit more welcoming. It is also a bit more tied to memories, nostalgia, and all things sentimental. “Majid remembers it well. He was a kid then, and he remembers his mother leading the dancing at family weddings in Algeria. The men would be on one side, and the women on the other, behind a mud wall...Malika played with elegant pride. With her long black hair hidden behind the latest fashion in head-scarves, she would lead the singing... Majid would come up and tug at her dress, crying for her to pick him up. He’d have to wait until the dancing was over. Still, there was plenty of space to play, out in the north-west Algerian countryside, among the country folk who, in those days, knew nothing of city life and who were happy that way. The sun’s rays were never absent – in fact its brilliance seemed to reflect its enjoyment of the dancing” (Charef 135). The difference is stark as we see in this passage the connection between nature and more positive sentiments. The level of elation is so grand that one might dare to say that it all sounds a bit cliché. Yet it is effective. A wedding might just be the most joyous celebration any culture could have. To tie such a celebration to a memory and furthermore to a memory out in the country makes the spite for Paris and the city all the more evident. If the city is corruption, then nature surely must be a form of purity. Or at the very least, it is so in Majid’s memories. As Majid feels more and more suffocated by the city and by the housing projects, he dwells on his parents’ home country of Algeria. By doing so, he almost then creates a sort of inversion as he does not

romanticize Paris but his parent's home country. Such a struggle is difficult for Majid – and those he represents – as he is someone caught between two cultures. "...reflecting that for a long time he's neither French nor Arab. He's the son of immigrants – caught between two cultures, two histories, two languages, and two colours of skin. He's neither black nor white. He has to invent his own roots, create his own reference points. For the moment, he's waiting... waiting... He doesn't want to have to think about it..." (Charef 13). Charef, through Majid, is not alone in feeling this way. Faïza Guène once again shares similar sentiments in her novel *Just Like Tomorrow*. In one particular scene, the protagonist, Dora, speaks on the civil duty of voting. This goes to show how the young immigrants and children of immigrants are already blending into the culture of France. At the same time, there is still some trepidation towards the process as she acknowledges that the system does not really take people like her into account. "If things worked out better for him maybe he'd shift his arse and vote. Except I don't really see who'd represent him... When I'm eighteen, I'll vote. You never get a chance to speak round here. So when you've got it, grab it" (Guène 87-88). Returning to *Tea in the Harem*, the question of where Majid truly belongs and how does he fit in lingers within him and it is a large part of what Charef is writing about. And so, what Majid is left with is feeling uncertain about his place in the world. Neither truly Arabic nor French, he is caught somewhere in-between. His family carries a culture from another place, yet society seems to want to reject that culture. And so, Majid – and those who find a voice in Majid – are effectively lost in where they belong.

Herein lies the effectiveness and power of collective writing. Through Majid, Charef's novel speaks on behalf of a group of people. It is a partial contrast to Miller and his individualistic writing as in order to find likeness to Miller one must look past the important yet surface level elements such as race / ethnicity, age, nationality, etc. Both Miller and Charef have

a voice, it just so happens that Charef's speaks more to a common struggle while Miller's speaks to a journey of self-discovery that is possible only once the surface level issues have been settled. In other words, once one is no longer struggling with a sense of identity, then one can begin to examine further within. Once we are no longer tied to memories and nostalgia, then one can look forward to where we truly wish to be.

Conclusion

By analyzing the individual vs. the collective perspective, we are able to see how both Henry Miller and Mehdi Charef write about the city of Paris. Miller with his text, *Quiet Days in Clichy* describes an almost gluttonous, extended vacation in Paris as he overindulges in vice and pleasures. He detaches himself from any ideas of nationality, race, or creed. Though he lives in poverty, there is still a place for liveliness. "He used to say I was an incurable optimist, but it wasn't optimism, it was the deep realization that even though the world was busy digging its grave, there was still time to enjoy life, to be merry, carefree, to work or not to work" (Miller. *Quiet Days...* 28). Sometimes off-putting, but always true to himself, Miller truly writes as an individual. Mehdi Charef is then writing from the collective perspective. Although he is similar to Miller in that he writes a narrative centered around the individual of Majid, it is ultimately a narrative that seems to represent a great many people. If Miller's text is indulgence, then Charef's text is starvation. Starving for opportunity, affection, attention, sympathy, the characters in *Tea in the Harem* rot away under the plain sun. "Majid looked like he didn't want to leave his seat. He just stared straight in front of him, his eyes half-closed, fed up and tired" (Charef 156). The conclusion then is that writing from as an individualist allows for freedom of choice and more open perception while writing from the collective guides perception to be a bit more

narrow and singular. In other words, the individual is free to see the world as they see fit.

Meanwhile, the collective comes together in a unified voice to share their experiences of the world. In this particular case, Miller sees Paris as a flawed yet riveting place. Meanwhile, Charef explains Paris to be a less-than-the-ideal place with little chance for a future. By analyzing Miller from the individual perspective and Charef from the collective perspective, we can see how their perceptions came to be.

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