

Unveiling the Self: Family Secrets and Personal Identity in the Contemporary Francophone Novel

A Dissertation Defense by Jessica Tindira

Thursday,
November 8th,
2018



10:00am



GA1060

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My dissertation addresses the patriarchal family structure that continues to produce tension in work by contemporary authors writing in French, such as Assia Djebar, Linda Lê, Maryse Condé and Véronique Tadjo, through their awareness of hierarchies based on which the family assumes that male family members in positions of authority have the right to hide information from other family members and the right to know everything about their wives and daughters. Previously, authors such as Michel Foucault have identified a link between knowledge about people and power over them which, once established in a society, infect microcosms of society such as the family. Keeping secrets becomes an act of rebellion against the father and the hierarchy that he represents, and yet, rather than constituting a liberating gesture, the sudden realization that her father's authority is incomplete traumatizes the female character. In keeping with Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma, the female character who experiences such an abrupt, upsetting event subsequently attempts, and fails, to give the event meaning by narrating it through writing. In each of these authors' works, discovering or keeping a secret traumatizes in a female character: the realization that she does not know something about her family or that the head of her family does not have the right to know everything upsets her worldview. My dissertation concludes that, although the character becomes aware that her community mirrors the family's hierarchy and asserts her right to keep secrets in an attempt to break free of that system, she fails to excise herself from the structure that she recognizes as harmful. Even her coming-to-writing is not ultimately a triumphant moment since she writes the same plot obsessively and thus remains haunted by the family she has reoriented and by the home that her plot recalls.



If you'd like to attend, please contact the chair: opanaite@indiana.edu