

Portrait of the Postcolonial Algerian Woman in Assia Djebbar's 'Femmes d'Algers dans leur appartement'

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Abstract- *Francophone Algerian Writer Assia Djebbar's collection of short stories 'Femmes d'Algers dans leur Appartement', published in 1980 marks her return to literary scene after a hiatus of almost ten years. This collection is considered to be representative of the maturation of her literary themes and style that explore issues related to the postcolonial Algerian/Arab women and of Djebbar's comes to terms with her own hybrid identity. With stories set in various moments in Algeria's history, ranging from the pre-independence period to over a decade after independence, they offer a panorama of Algerian women dealing with patriarchy, society, nation and history. This article attempts to show how 'Femmes d'Algers dans leur appartement' paints a multi-dimensional portrait of the postcolonial Algerian woman, at a particular moment in history, on the verge of breaking out of her silence.*

Indexed Terms – *Francophone literature, Algeria, Assia Djebbar, postcolonial woman, language, feminism*

I. INTRODUCTION

Francophone Literature has emerged an important area of study within the ambit of French Literature and World Literature over the past fifty years. Literature from French speaking regions of the world other than metropolitan France is known under the umbrella term 'Francophone Literature'. Literature of French expression, from European nations where French is spoken as well as nations which were part of the erstwhile French Colonial Empire, form the body of Francophone Literature. As French became the language of administration and education in the French colonies due to the assimilationist policy of France (Corcoran, 2007, p. 5), writings in French also became part of the cultural landscape of these regions, coexisting with

native languages and even dominating literary production. At first, imitative of metropolitan French styles and themes, soon, these writings took on their own specific characteristics, as they engaged with local and universal issues such as racism, colonization, modernity and identity. For example, Martinican writer Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) was "a groundbreaking poem (that) laid the foundations for a new literary style in which Caribbean writers came to reject the alienating gaze of the Other in favour of their own Caribbean interpretation of reality" (Thomas, 2008).

After decolonization, French still remained part of the literary landscape of the ex-colonies although its stature varied from region to region. For example, in Canada, 'official bilingualism' placed French on par with English. From the pen of the French Caribbean writers emerged concepts such as Créolité and Antillanité in the post-colonial period that acknowledge historical roots while affirming a hybrid linguistic and cultural identity based in everyday reality of the Antilles (Corcoran, 2007, pp. 189-192). As writings in languages such as Arabic took the place of French on the national stage, French retained its presence as a language of prestige, as a way to engage with international audiences and with metropolitan France and as a way to express dissent. In the Maghreb (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco), Francophone literature first emerged as literature of decolonization but in the post-colonial period, in the face of increasing state-supported Arabization, it "transmuted into an iconoclastic literature, obsessed with transgression, interdictions and taboos" (Corcoran, 2007, p. 36). The condition of women, naturally found a voice in this literature of revolt. Francophone women writers from the Maghreb challenged repressive familial and social structures, patriarchy and the erasure of

women from public life. Writers such as Fatima Mernissi, Leila Abouzeid, Malika Mokkedem and Assia Djébar have addressed various issues concerning Maghrebien women, focusing on family, society, nation, history and patriarchy. The work of such writers has received much critical attention both in the field of literary studies and feminist studies. In this paper, we focus on Assia Djébar, considered to be one of the foremost Maghrebien women writers of French expression, known for her novels, short stories and semi-autobiographical writings that are representative of the Maghrebien woman. Assia Djébar's literary career spans over 50 years and she has been honored by the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature for her contribution to world literature in 1996. She has authored the famous Algerian Quartet comprising of the novels 'L'amour, la fantasia' (Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade), 'Ombre sultane' (A Sister to Scheherazade), 'Vaste est la prison' (Vast is the Prison), and 'Le blanc de l'Algérie' (The White of Algeria). However, this paper focuses her collection of short stories 'Femmes d'Algers dans leur appartement' - which mark her return to writing after a long hiatus - and the portrait of the Algerian woman sketched by Djébar in these stories.

II. ASSIA DJÉBAR'S 'FEMMES D'ALGERS DANS LEUR APPARTEMENT'

Born in Cherchell in 1936, Assia Djébar (née Fatima-Zohra Imalhayène) is considered to be Algerian's foremost woman writer (Ringrose, 2006, pp. 9-10). From her first novel 'La soif' in the pre-Independence period in 1957, she appeared on the Francophone literary scene as a flagbearer of modernity (Zimra, 1992, p. 68). Her works until the end of the 1960s, novels and a collection poetry from the revolutionary period and after Algeria gained independence in 1962, reflect this engagement with the newly formed nation-state of Algeria and its women. However, this was followed by almost a decade of silence, only to be broken by in 1979 with the production of her first film 'La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua' which received the first prize at the Venice Film Festival. She returned to the literary world with the publication of 'Femmes

d'Algers dans leur appartement' in 1980. This is why the collection is worth studying, as it "heralded a change in the thematic and stylistic nature of her writing" (Geesey in Harrow, 1996, pp. 40-50). The 'silent decade' was marked by a return to her Berber roots, collecting oral histories of Algerian women that culminated in the creation of 'La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua'. As Assia Djébar herself says in her interview with Clarisse Zimra, the 'silent decade' was not just due to the issue of language - the gap between Arabic and French - but also by an inability to "inscribe my innermost self in my work" due to the ingrained code of silence, especially for women, in Algerian culture (Djébar, trans. de Jager, 1992, pp. 159-211). The collection consists of an opening Overture, followed by six stories and an ending Postface penned by the author. The six stories are divided into two groups 'Today', consisting of two stories written in 1978 (the eponymous 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment' and 'The Woman Who Weeps') and 'Yesterday', having four stories written between 1959 and 1970 ('There is No Exile', 'The Dead Speak', 'The Day of Ramadan' and 'Nostalgia of the Horde'). The story 'The Dead Speak' written in 1970 and 1978 straddles these two time periods as Assia Djébar attempts to "bring the past into a dialogue with the present" (Djébar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 188). Djébar states that the role of the Postface 'Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound' is to "provide a reflective background to the stories" and "unify the stories" (Djébar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 175).

III. THEORETICAL APPROACH

In the Afterword to the English translation of 'Femmes d'Algers dans leur appartement', Clarisse Zimra remarks that this collection marks a maturation of Assia Djébar's writing, showcasing issues related to the passage from a colonial to a postcolonial literature – the definition of a national literature, the issues of cultural authenticity, language, female subjectivity and patriarchy (Djébar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 163). In his book on Francophone Literature, Patrick Corcoran posits that "francophone literature, in so far as it exists as a single body of work at all, is first and foremost a postcolonial literature" (Corcoran, 2007, p. 22). He conceives of "postcolonial" francophonie as a space from which

‘other voices’, other histories and other claims to legitimacy can emerge, (and which) is part and parcel of a decentring (sic) process (having) its roots in decolonization” (Corcoran, 2007, p. 23). If we are to understand the term ‘postcolonial’ not as simply being the writing which comes after decolonization, but as literature which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship and its consequences as explained by Elleke Boehmer, then, as she explains, “As well as a change in power, decolonization demanded symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings. Postcolonial literature formed part of that process of overhaul” (Boehmer, 1995, p. 3). As decolonization reorganized power structures in the erstwhile colonies, new patterns of oppression emerged, especially for women. As feminist scholars have argued, the intersection of colonization with patriarchal structures led to the “double colonization” (Holst and Rutherford, 1986) of women, an ongoing process even after decolonization. Thus, the life of women in the ex-colonies, was and is subject to the double oppression of (neo) imperialism and male dominance. Postcolonial women’s writing in various languages brings out this reality and women’s resistance to it. Speaking about African literature, Uka, Nkemdirim Carol and Okachukwu Onuah Wosu say that “the subordination of women remains a big challenge for women in most African countries, where culture and patriarchy dominate women’s freedom, reasoning, and desire to grow” (Uka and Wosu, 2024). It is from this perspective, that we approach Assia Djébar’s ‘Femmes d’Algers dans leur appartement’ in order to examine how the portrait of postcolonial Algerian woman is painted in her stories, as she negotiates patriarchy, society, nation and history.

IV. PORTRAIT OF THE POSTCOLONIAL ALGERIAN WOMAN

In the Postface, Assia Djébar remarks,

“For a few decades – as each nationalism triumphs here and there – we have been able to realize that within this Orient that has been delivered onto itself, the image of the woman is still perceived no differently, be it by the father, by the husband, and, more

troublesome still, by the brother and the son”
(Djébar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p.138).

In the year Algeria gained independence, the Tripoli Charter of 1962 expressed the hope that “the participation of Algerian women in the liberation struggle has created favourable conditions that will break the age-old yoke which hangs over her” (Roche and Kwaku, 1992). However, independent Algeria adopted policies that promoted Arabization and legislations such as the Family Code which severely impacted the autonomy and space accorded to Algerian women, in private, in public life and in society. Their suffering and contribution during the freedom struggle passed under a veil of silence as Algeria began to construct a homogenous (and macho) national identity. Assia Djébar undertakes the mission of conveying the silenced voices and experiences of Algerian women and rendering visible the erased female figures from public and historical spaces in ‘Femmes d’Algers dans leur appartement’ with the hope for solidarity with Algerian women who are taking the first steps to resist their subjugation in the post-colonial period. The stories in ‘Femmes d’Algers dans leur appartement’ portray a multi-dimensional picture of the condition of postcolonial Algerian through “fragmented” accounts of “a past-present that rebels” in an “excoriated language” that has “never (...) appeared in the sunlight”, “sometimes been intoned, declaimed, howled, dramatized, but always mouth and eyes in the dark” (Djébar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 1).

HISTORY AND NATION

The first story ‘Women of Algiers in their Apartment’ written in 1978, begins with a dreamed scene of torture. This is a reference to the Algerian war and the incarceration and torture of the freedom fighters by the French. The torture and rape undergone by countless Algerian women revolutionaries, is portrayed through the characters of Sarah ‘the silent one’ and Leila, who ends up addicted, fragile and sterile. The trauma of the period of freedom struggle is evoked also through the refusal of Ali to talk to his son Nazim, about his experiences in the Algerian war and his repeated nightmares about his wife’s Sarah’s torture. This reveals the unease of the Algerian society in

remembering a period humiliation as does Leila's lament "They are ashamed of me" and "Were there really any brothers, Sarah..." (Djebar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 45). Only the outlier, the homosexual painter, resists this veiling of history as he rescues Leila from the madhouse, saying "Condemned to death at age twenty, after that years of imprisonment, and again they lock her up?" (Djebar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 21). As Sarah roams through the city of Algiers collecting material for her documentary, a past-present of Algeria appears before the reader, through the old songs singing of times past, of even before colonization, and through a city marked by the colonial encounter, now transforming in to the modern Algeria.

In the story 'There is No Exile' (1959), Assia Djebar touches upon the life in exile of Algerian refugees during the Algerian war. Through the microcosm of a single family living in exile, Djebar depicts the situation of women. The first-person narrator of the story, who has lost her two children and been divorced by her husband, relives that pain of losing her child as she listens to the sobbing of the hired mourners at the funeral of a dead child next door. Through this incident Djebar brings to life the customs that Algerians keep alive even in exile revealing their longing for their native land. The remembrance of missing family members alludes to the freedom struggle and the hope for change. However, as her family wishes to arrange another marriage for her, the narrator expresses her frustration and anger at the continued powerlessness of women saying,

"Yes, I was thinking how everything had changed and that, still, in some way everything remained the same. They were still concerned with marrying me off. And why exactly? (...) Just so I could have worries that never change whether it's peace or wartime, so I could wake up in the middle of the night and question myself on what it is that sleeps in the depths of the heart of the man sharing my bed... Just so I could give birth and weep" (Djebar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 70)

Djebar uses the narrator's voice and the title 'There is no Exile' to depict the disillusionment of women with the fact that decolonization has not brought significant change and empowerment to Algerian women.

In the story 'The Dead Speak' (1970 and 1978), Djebar uses the character of Hassan, the newly deceased Yemma Hadda's grandson, a hero of the Algerian war alienated from his ancestral world, juxtaposed with the life of Yemma Hadda, her sharecropper Saïd and his cousin Aïcha to show the incompatibility between the past and the future of Algeria. Hassan accepts the devotion of Aïcha and his grandmother's wartime sacrifices as his due while having no space for them in his future. This can be considered an analogy for the situation of Algerian women after independence in the face of increasing Arabization of society. Yemma Hadda's and Aïcha's rejection of their husbands across generations and their silent contributions to the nationalist cause reveal them as the real heroines in a male dominated world. In the final story of the collection 'Nostalgia of the Horde' (1979), Djebar delves further back into history through the oral narratives of women. The great-grandmother's stories of her own past and the stories told to her in the past bring reader back to the very moment of French conquest in 1830 through the memory of a "chain of grandmothers" (Djebar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 154). Through these "collective murmurings" Algerian women "resist simultaneously the brothers' amnesia and the conqueror's brutality", through what Djebar calls "their own 'underground' voice" (Djebar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 208).

SOCIETY AND MODERNITY

The themes of exclusion from public spaces and the lack of autonomy within the family are recurring themes addressed by the author in this collection of short stories. In the 'The Woman Who Weeps' (1978) the first-person narrator, a separated woman, finds no space in her paternal home, always at mercy of the female relatives. In 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment' (1978), only those in desperate situations let women circulate in public spaces such as poor families whose women work as office cleaners, migrant communities who are not properly housed and women such as the water carrier, Fatma, who

after running away from her marital home, ends up as a prostitute, then as masseuse in a public bath. In part III of this story, through the long scene of Sarah and Anne at the public bath, Djebbar introduces us to ‘silenced’ Algerian women incarcerated at home, for whom only the visit to the public bath provides relief. The story also provides anecdotes of new patterns of restriction of women’s mobility in independent Algeria. One anecdote narrates that the peasant women of a rural community broke the faucets as they were no longer allowed to go to the fountain to fill water. Modern housing restricted their freedom, caging them behind doors. As Baya comments, “Closed in, every one of them, locked in upon herself...” (Djebbar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 32). This mirrors Sarah’s observation about women in the city, “the cloistered women, not even in a courtyard, just in a kitchen where they sit on the floor (...) No more terraces, no more openings of sky above a feeble fountain” (Djebbar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 23). Through such examples, Djebbar shows that modernity has not necessarily always benefitted Algerian women. In ‘There is No Exile’ ‘Nostalgia of the Horde’ and ‘Day of Ramadan’ it is the mother, the mother-in-law and other female relatives who serve as the instrument of patriarchy, pushing women in to marriage, advocating submission and denying personal freedom. In several of the stories we find reference to interrupted education and the backlash and hostility faced by ‘modern’ educated Algerian women.

BODY, GAZE AND VOICE

Among the most important preoccupations of Djebbar concerning the postcolonial Algerian woman are that of the body, the gaze and the voice.

The female body as the site of violence is a recurring theme in these stories. The tortured and mutilated bodies of Sarah and Leila in ‘Women of Algiers in their Apartment’, the shattered face of the woman in ‘The Woman Who Weeps’, the great-grandmother with her broken forehead in ‘Nostalgia of the Horde’, attest to the fact that violence, especially sexual violence, is a means of subjugating women. Djebbar reveals the inherently violent nature of the man-woman relation in the patriarchal Algerian context, showing that this violence permeates all levels of life

– both private and public, individual and collective. Through the references to rape and torture by the colonizers in these stories Djebbar evokes the collective trauma of Algerian people during the freedom struggle, with women being made the symbol of this trauma during decolonization but being expected to disappear from the collective memory after Independence. Djebbar uses these examples to critique the practice of rape and sexual torture as a “tradition” of war. (Djebbar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 150) and the double injustice undergone by Algerian women.

For Djebbar, the female gaze and voice are emblematic of female subjectivity. As Sarah the ‘silent one’ finally speaks out in ‘Women of Algiers in their Apartment’ (1978),

“For Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, (...) Talk among ourselves and look. Look outside, look outside the walls and the prisons!... The Woman as look and the Woman as voice, (...) But the voice they’ve never heard, because many unknown and new things will occur before she’s able to sing: the voice of sighs, malice, of the sorrows of all the women they’ve kept walled in.... (Djebbar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 50)

Polyphony or a “collective murmuring” that gives voice to ‘silenced’ Algerian women is also a characteristic of Djebbar’s writing in this collection and a herald of her mature style that showcases orality and linguistic hybridity. Each story of this collection gives voice to multiple female characters, speaking in various tongues, from colloquial Arabic, standard Arabic and French. The songs and dirges bring to life the Berber roots of Algerian culture preserved by Algerian women through their oral traditions. Djebbar states in the Overture of ‘Femmes d’Algers dans leur appartement’ that in the post-independence period, affected by “my own Arabic woman’s silence”, “speaking on this ground has become, (...) a transgression” (Djebbar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 2). She stresses that, contrary to the stance of Western Feminist scholars, she is not “speaking for” or “speaking on” Algerian women but

“barely speaking ‘next to’ and, if possible ‘very close to’” Algerian women (Djebar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 2). Therefore, the very act of writing becomes transgressive of the patriarchal Algerian society. In the Overture of her most important novel *l’Amour, la fantasia*, Assia Djebar speaks of “giving a feminist voice to a “language that in turn has taken the veil for so long a time”” (Djebar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p.197). Writing in a deracinated French voicing Arab and Berber rhythms becomes an act of resistance against the postcolonial Algerian patriarchy for Djebar. Through her agency, she gives voice to those Algerian women who have been silenced in the past-present.

Speaking of the veiling of women, in the Postface, Djebar refers to it as “the female body that one keeps incarcerated (...) within walls, or better within veils” (Djebar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p.139). In the ‘Woman Who Weeps’ Djebar gives a long description of the narrator putting on her veil as she which erases all markers of her being a woman, transforming her in to a “billowing parallelogram” (Djebar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p. 53-54). However, she concludes this passage positively with the line “Above the mask of lace, her light-brown eyes, still smiling, seemed more almond shaped”. Djebar speaks of the paradox of the veil, which while imprisoning women, offers them the possibility of circulating in public places “thanks to the veil, both her eyes are now wide open to the exterior” (Djebar, trans. de Jager, 1992, p.138) She alludes to the threat that men feel of becoming the object of this hidden female gaze as veiled women begin to enter public spaces. In this way, Assia Djebar, does not subscribe to the Western perspective on the controversial issue of the ‘veil’ but offers an indigenous inward-looking and empowering Algerian/Arab perspective.

CONCLUSION

The stories in this collection make it evident that at the end of the 1970s, the Algerian woman has not yet managed to “overthrow the age-old yoke that hangs over her” and fulfil the hope expressed in the Tripoli Charter. Through these stories, Djebar attempts to articulate their reality and provide them with a way to break out. Djebar’s resistance to Algerian patriarchy functions at multiple levels. The very act of writing,

writing in French, decolonizing French to express Algerian culture, giving voice to silenced Algerian women, breaking the taboo of silence on women’s experiences of war and peacetime, an individual collective remembering of history from a woman’s perspective are various transgressive technics employed by Assia Djebar. Women characters of ‘*Femmes d’Algers dans leur Appartement*’ while subjugated and silenced, have begun to find ways of resisting, through education, reappropriation of their history, solidarity with other women, questioning of societal norms and expectations and by navigating public spaces. Finally, ‘*Femmes d’Algers dans leur appartement*’ paints a multi-dimensional portrait of the postcolonial Algerian woman, like Assia Djebar herself, at a particular moment in history, on the verge of breaking out of her silence.

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