

Algerian Women in their Apartment

(Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement)⁽¹⁾

This is the title of six short stories recently published by Assia Djébar⁽²⁾, in which she develops a single theme: the marginal status of Algerian women. Discovering the present through the past, she tries to detect the traditional "structure of the seraglio" or harem in the present way of life. Beyond the deceptive appearance of emancipation, women of today are still invisible, cut off from social communication and condemned to live under supervision. How will they be able to create an exit for themselves to the outside? "There is only one issue for them, one means of escape: speak, speak continuously of yesterday and to-day, speak among themselves of all the harems, the traditional and the up-to-date. Look outside walls and prisons, be the eyes and voice of women!" (p.2) "Create the new word, the authentic word which does not mistake a false, superficial freedom for a true one" (p.3). How does one gain access to the authentic word? Perhaps by a return to one's own language, a critical listening which gradually leads to the lucid and sad knowledge of the real conditions which produced that word.

From an introduction which has been briefly given here, Claude Tahite proceeds to analyze one of the six stories contained in Assia Djébar's book. The method

applied is an analytical reading of the text, scrutinizing its structural form or the organization of narrative syntax, making use of semiotic terms and symbols. The text chosen for analysis is "La Nostalgie de la Horde", (Nostalgia of the Horde), a story which takes the form of an autobiographical narrative, told by an Algerian grandmother to her three young granddaughters. Briefly related, it tells how the grandmother was married at the age of 12; a unique child spoiled by her parents, she knew nothing about domestic chores. Failing one day to rise early, she was rebuked by her mother-in-law. The latter then complained to the bride's father who took the trouble to come and threaten his daughter. When, after a while, he met her father-in-law, he changed his tone, showed his anger at being disturbed, asserted that his daughter was a child and ought to be excused. The father-in-law was quick to apologize. After that, the daughter-in-law learned to rise early and to perform all her domestic duties faithfully.

In the story, the mother-in-law is a spying eye who dominates and manipulates the other members of the family. The daughter-in-law is manipulated in such a way that she is transformed from an ignorant, careless young bride into a dutiful, enslaved wife. Terrorized, she does more work than is required of her and is mentioned as an example.

Authority in the family is hierarchical, starting with the father and particularly the father of the male. The old dominate the young; the woman, though she may be old, is considered a minor. The final decision

- 1 — Document de Travail, n° 2, par Claude Tahite, Groupe de recherche sur les femmes Algériennes, C.D.S.H. (Centre de Documentation des Sciences Humaines, Université de Wahran, 1981).
- 2 — «Femmes d'Alger dans leur Appartement» by Assia Djébar, Editions des Femmes, Paris, 1980.

(Continued from page 4)

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| Restriction concerning freedom to declare a political or a religious opinion | 49.70% |
| 4. Restriction regarding choice of reading matter | 44% |
| 5. Restriction regarding economic freedom: free use of money | 64.74% |
| 6. Restriction regarding choice of a profession | 56.10% |

Conclusions

1. Results of the study show a relatively high degree of agreement between parents and youth regarding values transmitted from the older generation to the younger one.
2. Such a proportion of agreement, or of absence of conflict, reflects a persistent dynamism of parental authority which stands as an impediment to change and evolution.
3. Parental authority, however, is being shaken by

- new outside influences, namely political allegiances and party affiliations which emerge as a new authority rivaling that of parents and offering new guide-lines to youth.
 4. On the other hand, involvement of young people in politics, while it tends to shake parental authority, may become an obstacle to sound character building if it impresses them with principles of aggressiveness, hatred and rivalry. In this case, they would be exchanging one form of enslavement for another.
 5. Moreover, we should not forget that war conditions have limited the present study to include almost exclusively one Lebanese community, reducing the other community to one sixth of the sample. Furthermore, the rural sector, compared with the urban one, represents only 1 to 3.
- For more accurate and comprehensive results, the study should be repeated under more favorable circumstances.

belongs to the males of the group. The task of the mother-in-law is to guarantee conformity.

The story also reveals the following facts:

- 1 — The daughter-in-law is treated as an object. Her fear and her masochism are forms of auto-observation and auto-censorship.
- 2 — The women's dwelling is completely separated from that of men, where authority is concentrated.
- 3 — No communication exists between the characters; silence is imposed on their secret dealings. The father announces his presence by coughing instead of speaking. The grandmother says: "I naturally knew nothing about it", showing her conformity to the code of secrecy.
- 4 — Imposed values are a part of the self. The subject is spied on by all others; he sees himself through their eyes. In accepting the values imposed by others, one rejects free will and creativity. Self-consciousness is impossible, and the result is complete alienation.

Results of this system:

- 1 — The concepts of true versus false are suppressed. Communication organized according to power means that sincerity is nullified and subordinated to efficiency.
- 2 — The concept of responsibility is suppressed. The mother-in-law, through her conduct, involves her husband without informing him; his response involves her without her knowing. The father-in-law, considered to be the character with the most responsibility, is precisely the one who knew nothing of the problem. This condition excludes mutual trust.
- 3 — Hence everyone is obliged to spy on everyone else. Silence is the rule; everyone is spied on, everyone is manipulated.

Besides her involvement in a complex methodology, the researcher is careful to read between the lines of the text. She thinks that the autobiographical story of the grandmother corresponds to a liberating discourse. She detects in certain stereotyped sentences a shade of irony. The text seems to her an ambiguous, incomplete narrative, in which every sentence suggests a hidden idea and may carry a double meaning. Here is an example: "By her (the grandmother's) incomplete communication, she transmits the code of authority... She might have liked to make fun of the dominant mother-in-law. She knows this and expresses it in an ironical manner. That is how she proposes to her grand-daughters the way, the voice of liberation" (p.24).

Whatever the conclusions are, they confirm Assia Djébar's recommendation to Algerian women: Speak, speak continuously of yesterday and to-day... Look outside prison walls, use your eyes and your voice. Speaking means crossing a space where no road exists. It means building a new vocabulary and syntax, free from the investments of the patriarchal system.