

Special Features

ASSIA DJEBAR

An Algerian Woman's Voice of Maturity and Vision

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I see for Arab women only one way to unleash everything: to speak out, to speak out unceasingly of yesterday and of today, to speak out among ourselves [...] and to look outside, to look beyond the walls and the prisons.

Assia Djebbar, Femmes d'Alger

Assia Djebbar, a writer of middle-class Muslim and Algerian origin, was able to synthesize her traditional Islamic background and her European education. By the age of twenty-six she had published three novels (*La soif, Les impatients, Les enfants du nouveau monde*) and had obtained a B.A. in History from the Sorbonne. During the revolution she taught in Tunis and Rabat where she completed a fourth novel (*Les alouettes naïves*). She returned to Algeria after its independence in 1962, and taught at the University of Algiers. In 1969, she co-produced a play, *Rouge l'aube*, for the Third Panafrican Cultural Festival in Algiers, and her *Poèmes pour l'Algérie heureuse* was published by la SNED (the National Algerian Publishing House), all of which signaled that she had been accepted and was willing to make peace with the authorities of her country.

In 1969 she suddenly stopped publishing and producing, and remained silent for about ten years, leading many critics to speculate about the causes of her silence. Clarisse Zimra probably gives the best analysis of this silence, which she regards as "a cycle that opens on an enlarged version of the female self. The resulting figure is one of disclosure rather than closure."¹

It was with a film (*La nouba des femmes du Mont Chénoua*) that Djebbar finally broke her silence. The film received the first prize at the Venice film festival in 1979. It was followed by a collection of short stories (*Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, 1980), named after the 1832 Delacroix painting. She has since published three volumes of a quartet (*L'Amour, la Fantasia*, 1985; *Ombre sultane*, 1987, and *Vaste est la prison*, 1995) in an increasingly refined style which blends historical events and autobiographical elements in a complex weave of time and space. *Loin de Médina*, which appeared in 1991, marked an interruption of her quartet with its reflection on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, which we will analyze later. Another

interruption, stirred by Djebbar's desperate concern for the events in her country, saw one more publication in 1995: *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, which she wrote after being shaken by the violent death of a loved one:

"The worst moment for me...was in March of last year (1994), when a friend and relative, Abdel Kader Alloula, died. He was an extraordinary man...the only one in my opinion who, for the last thirty years, had forged an Arabic language between the popular language of the street and the literary one... He died at the age of 53. He was forging this language for us. It was a song at the cross-roads between several traditions. The fact that this man was killed was for me—how shall I say—as if danger was being installed...in the heart of Algerian culture. My reaction was to close myself into my apartment for three months and to do my own amnesia, going back into my mother's, my grandmother's, memories, and into my own, of thirty years in which I lived pushed back and forth between Europe and Algeria." (*Langue et Littérature en Suisse Romande*, pp. 73-74.)

Le blanc de l'Algérie is an amazingly courageous and honest narrative which raises vital questions about Algeria's current, past and future political and cultural situation. In it, Djebbar expresses a strong vision beginning with the personal and the national and concluding with the political and the universal. It is because of this progression that I suggest that her fiction has achieved a true maturity, a realization that the self and its freedom cannot be separated from the entire social context. Obviously, this evolving vision has important political implications.

Djebbar now spends most of her time in France as a writer, film producer, and literary critic. This year she received the International Neustad Literary Award given by the journal, *World Literature Today* a very prestigious Prize which, in the last twenty years, has seen eighteen of its laureates subsequently receive the Nobel Prize. Djebbar's first novels reflect an evolution of her ideas from an insistence upon the necessity of self-preoccupation in a world hostile to women, to a recognition of the importance of awareness of others, to the resolution of personal problems through immersion in a national cause. Her first novel reveals a selfishly unhappy woman preoccupied with herself; her second shows a woman more aware of society but still bored and selfish; and finally, her third novel depicts women who lose themselves to gain their country's independence. This reflects the approximate path of women's liberation in Algeria, a movement which lost nearly all its impetus after



"Women of Algiers", 1834, Oil on canvas. Eugène Delacroix

national independence was gained. According to Fadéla M'Rabet, women were simply used during the revolution, only to be pushed down to a lower level after independence.²

Reflecting occurrences in Algeria, Assia Djebar's first novels indicate a simultaneous—and perhaps related—progression in the cause of nationalism and regression in the cause of women's rights. The nationalism which was so necessary for the revolutionaries to oust the French colonialists became counter-revolutionary after the oppressor was evicted. As part of this counter-revolution, traditional laws were reinstated which deprived women of the rights they had enjoyed under colonial rule. Although Djebar's first novels give us the impression that she is revolutionary in her ideas of women's role and their liberation, her theoretical ideas presented at that time in an introduction to a book of photographs called *Femmes d'Islam* showed her to be a moderate.³

Djebar believed then that it was dangerous to speak of the Muslim woman because she could be seen in such varied contexts throughout the Islamic world. Even within the

confines of Algeria, attitudes toward the liberation of Algerian women varied widely, often reflecting what the individual stood to gain or lose by such liberation. For example, there was the French-educated Muslim man who deplored the seclusion of women, but married a European, or the Muslim father who was in favor of having his daughter receive a bicultural education, but then became alarmed when his daughter gained a wide knowledge of the world and began to behave like a European. Finally, there was the feminist who decided that the dominating male, to whom she happened to be married, really possessed only illusory power! Nor did Djebar find true liberation to be an unmixed blessing. She observed, for instance, that the Eastern mindset tended to emphasize and value private rather than public life, in distinction to the Western approach, which tended to value the public display and outward control of others. Essentially, this was the difference between being and doing. Thus, liberating a woman in an Eastern cultural context often entailed thrusting her into a cruel and competitive public world for which she was unprepared and in which she

might have no wish to participate.

Djebar denied that women were inferior to men in Islamic thinking. Instead, she insisted that the genders were complementary. Furthermore, she emphasized that women were in fact becoming emancipated as the traditional extended family structure disintegrated, as more and more women were holding jobs outside the home. Djebar also noted, however, that this emancipation as a result of the disintegration of the family structure was creating problems, rather than solving them.

In his study, *Women of Algeria*, Gordon saw a similarity between Debèche's and Djebar's directions: if women were to be emancipated, it had to be accompanied by harmony with society as a whole, for the liberation of women demands the liberation of men as well from the framework of traditional Muslim thought.⁴ In short, while Djebar was acutely aware of—and poignantly depicted—the plight of the Algerian woman, she was far from convinced that the total liberation of women by legislative fiat would be a wise course of action for her country. Indeed, since she saw liberation primarily as a process of individual adjustment of mindset, she would probably have viewed “legal” liberation as irrelevant.

In contrast to a few novels written by women in the Mashreq and the Maghreb which lashed out against brutalizing social conditions, the majority presented, in the first decades of women's literary production, a more moderated view. Often pampered and bored, the women writers of North Africa and the Middle East frequently began their careers by imitating the West. Djebar and Ba'albaki, for example, imitated Françoise Sagan in drawing melancholic characters and plots filled with sudden violence and frequent violations of normal fictional causality. Later they tried to grasp more of themselves through increased sensitivity to their Eastern heritage, producing self-searching, introspective literature which revealed the inward turn of their rebellion. The critic Abdelkabar Khatibi tried to explain the reasons for this inwardness which characterized so many of the women writers of that period:

“Considered, and perceiving herself, as an object, the woman is more sensitive, more centered on her own psychological problems. Bullied, obliged to be always on the defensive, she interiorizes her complexes and neuroses. This is why one finds in feminine literature this constant taste for introspection, this obstinate search for the other, this feverish Puritanism.”⁵

This preoccupation with the self may account for the writers' inability to engage themselves in political and social problems outside their own immediate environment. Thus it was that the writers of that period, while dwelling on their own oppression in some detail, generally lacked sympathy for and awareness of the sufferings of women from the lower strata of their own societies. A number of cultural problems which directly affected women found no expression in the fiction of women writers of that period. Little attention was paid to crimes of honor, for example. Djebar mentioned

them in *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*, but passed no judgment on the act itself. It was merely mentioned in passing as evidence of traditional thinking among political revolutionaries.

The inability to express women's problems and to be heard by the public she wanted to reach, combined with personal problems and the dilemma over which language to use, rendered more acute through a search for cultural and national identity, can probably account for the cessation of Assia Djebar's writing for a long time after that novel. In a recent interview with Lise Gauvin, she tells us:

“It seemed to me I could have been a poet in the Arabic language. *Vaste est la prison* starts with an introduction called “the silence of writing”. I talk about why I remained almost ten years without publishing. I show what I had not yet perceived in *L'Amour, la fantasia*. In that book, I was in a relationship between French and Arabic. French had given me liberation of my body at the age of eleven. But it was also a Nessus tunic, meaning that I had been able to escape from the veil thanks to the French language, thanks to the father in the French language. It was evident that at the age of sixteen or seventeen I conceived of myself as much as a boy as of a girl.”⁶

Language is a dilemma Djebar reflects upon in many instances. Like many North African novelists who have been outspoken on the topic,⁷ Djebar also experiences bilingualism as a problem which “enriches only the one who truly possesses two cultures. And this is rarely the case in Algeria.”⁸ But unlike many of her male counterparts who express this dilemma in violent terms, Djebar has a more tender relationship with language:

“I started by writing one day, on the first page of a notebook, a rule of behavior to myself: ‘To recover the Arab tradition of love in the language of Giraudoux.’ ...Each time, I find different justifications, the least of evils being to recreate in French a life lived or felt in Arabic. This movement from one language to the next has probably helped North African writers of French expression with lyricism for some, with a tone of aggressivity or on the contrary one of nostalgic poetry for others. As for me, my desire is to find, in spite of this movement, a profound fluidity and intimacy—which seems difficult.”⁹

Ten years of silence were broken with a film, *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chénoua*, 1979. Like the Senegalese Sembene Ousmane, Assia Djebar felt she could reach her people at last, and especially the women, in a language understandable through spoken Arabic and through sounds and images. It is a very beautiful film which reflects on memory and portraying the gaze. A young woman plunges into her past and allows women to speak out, giving them a voice and telling their stories mixed with the stories of their ancestors and flashes on war. In it, one already finds many elements of her future novels.

With her short stories, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, a take-off from her film made into narratives, women's voices come out even more strongly. It is as if millennial oppression was finally unleashed, veils dropped, bodies restored to their beauty and full integrity:

"New Algerian women, for the last few years circulating, crossing the threshold blinding themselves with the sun for a second. Are they liberating—are we liberating ourselves—completely from the relationship with the shadow entertained for centuries with their own bodies?" (167-193).¹⁰

L'Amour, la fantasia, is a carefully worked-out narrative that functions on two levels, reflecting two journeys: one into her inner-self, partly autobiographical, the other historical, tracing the Algeria's history from the conquest of 1830 to its liberation in 1962. It is also a reflection on language. These two themes, the autobiographical elements mixed with history and the reflection on language, are crafted beautifully within the narratives. They can be found again in the other two volumes of her quartet. In addition to these two levels, Djébar gives us interwoven narratives through various voices set into different time frameworks. For example, her reflections on language is one voice, lyrical passages in praise of Algerian women are another. She successfully constructs a polyphonic narrative resembling a symphony, thus the allusion to Beethoven's *Fantasia* and her division of the novel into five parts, like a symphony. The condition of women is also very present and continues in the line of her preceding works with more strength and determination to give them more voice and visibility. Djébar studied the archives and looked for women's achievements and participation in political and historical events. She demonstrates that women were active participants in the resistance against the French. As Mortimer well analyzed:

"By alternating historical accounts of the French conquest, oral history of the Algerian revolution, and autobiographical fragments, Djébar sets her individual journey against two distinct and yet complementary backdrops: the conquest of 1830 and the Algerian Revolution of 1954. The former introduced the colonial era; the latter brought it to a close. In this way, the narrator establishes links with Algeria's past, more specifically with women of the past whose heroism has been forgotten. Giving written form to Algerian women's heroic deeds, Djébar as translator and scribe succeeds in forging new links with traditional women of the world she left behind."¹¹

In *Ombre Sultane*, Djébar continues on the musical theme she started with *L'Amour, la fantasia*, alternating the voices of two women, one traditional, the other liberated, married to the same man. The inner and outer journeys are still present but are reflected by the two women. Hajila, the traditional woman, decides to leave the confinement of her home and explore the city while Isma, the emancipated one, embarks on a reflection of her past, her childhood as well as her married life. She resembles the heroines of Djébar's ear-

lier works. It is almost as if *La soif* was being repeated in this novel with Isma, like Nadia, choosing Hajila who is submissive, as a second wife to her husband and then pushing her into a revolt bound to end in tragedy. But in this novel, the complexity of the narrative gives way to various interpretations, one of which being that Hajila could be the double of Isma, or her subconscious. The intermingling of Schéhérazade's story adds to this complexity and gives yet another understanding of the story. It recalls the tales of the *Arabian Nights* in which Schéhérazade, a princess, tries to escape the fate a cruel Sultan inflicts on all the virgins of the town: He has sex with them and at the end of the night he kills them. Schéhérazade succeeds in saving her life by inventing tales that never end, thereby keeping the Sultan interested in hearing the next one every night. In order to do so Schéhérazade calls upon her sister, Dinarzade, for help. Dinarzade sleeps under the nuptial bed and helps her sister remember stories: "To throw light on the role of Dinarzade, as the night progresses! Her voice under the bed coaxes the story-teller above, to find unfailing inspiration for her tales, and to keep at bay the nightmares that daybreak would bring."¹²

In an anticipation to her narrative *Loin de Médina* (Far from Madina, 1991), Djébar tells us why she terms "novel" this collection of tales, narratives, visions, scenes, and recollections inspired by her readings of some of the Muslim historians who lived during the first centuries of Islam. Fiction allows freedom in re-establishing and unveiling a hidden space. Through it, Djébar gives a voice and a presence to the many women forgotten by the recorders and transmitters of Islamic tradition.

This is quite an ambition, and Djébar does it well in her usual careful, sensual, and articulate language. In a beautiful style, she recreates the lives of the women who surrounded the Prophet Muhammed, the influence they had on his thinking and the debates of the times. The unofficial, occulted history of the beginning of Islam becomes very real and tangible through its women, as created by Djébar's powerful pen. There is Aisha, the prophet's favorite wife; Fatima, his proud daughter. They both died soon after him. There is Sadjah the woman prophet; Selma, the healer, and so many others. They all seem to act freely and are not afraid to stand up for what they believe, especially when it pertains to their belief in the Prophet. The Prophet himself is described as someone soft-spoken and very kind to women, whom he treats with respect and care and whose advice he takes seriously.

This is certainly a revolutionary outlook and program for women's role in contemporary Arab society, if only it would take its religious tradition seriously as an example to follow. And I have no doubt Djébar intended it this way. Nonetheless, such a tactic raises many problems, not least to be found in the text itself. The final message is that one ought to leave Madina: "If Aisha, one day, decided to leave Madina? Ah, far away from Madina, to find the wind, the breathtaking, the incorruptible youth of revolt!" (p. 300). But actually, the whole novel is a song to Madina, a

glorification of the Prophet and of the women in his life. This is the most problematic contradiction one finds throughout the book: if, in order to free oneself, one ought to leave tradition and its enslavement, then how can one look upon tradition as a beautiful past filled with noble role models?

Other questions raised by this narrative as it inscribes itself in today's contemporary Arabic and North African literature are: What message can today's writers give? Ought they give one? Is there no middle way between these two ventures: glorification and reinterpretation of tradition?

Djebar must have been aware of, or unconsciously gripped by, all these questions because her latest work *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (1995) inscribes itself into the most daring, courageous, and outspoken reflections of today's world problems and pressing conflicts, most specifically, those daily enacted in the current Algerian civil war. It dares to look at the roots of the conflict and raises vital questions including the works of well-known writers and intellectuals (Fanon, Camus), as well as political leaders.

Djebar associates the destiny of Algiers in 1957 to the present, noticing that violence and carnage are taking the same form: "on both sides, death launchers — one in the name of legality, but with mercenaries; the other in the name of historical justice — or ahistorical, transcendental, therefore illuminated with demons. Between these two sides, ...a field is open where a multitude of innocents are falling, too many humble people and a number of intellectuals" (p. 134). She is not afraid to attack the power in place: "those who continue to officiate in the confusion of the hollow political theater...the well-kept, getting better established year after year; with a belly, self-righteousness, space, bigger bank accounts....This is how the caricature of a past is amplified where indistinctly sublimated heroes and brotherly killings are getting mixed up" (p.150). She wonders who is going to talk about all of this now, and in what language, noticing that the two who could have done so with irony, humor and strength — Kateb Yacine and Abdelkader Alloula — are dead and "we miss them." Indirectly, Djebar is setting herself in their place by giving us this strong, beautiful text.

Le blanc de l'Algérie is also a reflection on death, and on the yearning for, and the contemplation of, the possibility or the probability of her own death. The grief and sadness she feels over the deaths of loved ones and the destruction of her country leads her to express a death wish: "Desire takes hold of me, in the middle of this funeral gallery, to drop my pen or my brush and to join them,...to dip my face in the blood [of the assassinated]..." (p. 162). She barely resists the temptation, finally noticing that the earth calls her, other countries invite her. She will heal, but not forget. I agree with Clarissa Zimra, who notes that:

"The White of Algeria" marks a turning point in Djebar's career, because it is the first time she has come publicly, in voice as well as in print, to an openly political position regarding current events in her country....She indicts the official governmental policy that would render the complex

and multi-layered ethnicity of past and present-day Algeria into a single entity. But she also indicts a whole generation of writers and thinkers, herself among them, who have not spoken soon enough and loudly enough."

The blunter and more open treatment of the oppressive aspects of North African societies that we find in the more recent literary inscriptions by Assia Djebar is not simply a more daring exercise of literary freedom, although we must never lose sight of the courage she has shown. Rather, the increasing clarity and frankness with which the social context is presented suggests that it is no longer merely a backdrop for the action of the story. In these works, North African society itself comes forth as a character in the play, a character complete with principles of choice and action, and with both trivial and tragic flaws.

It is not necessarily the role of fiction to provide blueprints for concrete social action—and much bad fiction had resulted from attempts to do so—but the recent fiction of Assia Djebar, with its greater openness and its integration of individual struggle into the larger social context, may well become a force for positive and creative change in the Arab world and in her native Algeria, which needs so much at this point in history.

Endnotes

- 1) Zimra, Clarisse. "Writing Woman: The Novels of Assia Djebar," *Substance* vol. 69, 1992, pp. 68-83.
- 2) M'Rabet, Fadéla. *La femme algérienne, suivi de Les Algériennes* (Paris: Maspéro, 1969), pp. 97-142
- 3) Djebar, Assia. *Women of Islam* (Netherlands: Deutsch, 1961) p. 1-25.
- 4) Gordon, David. *North Africa's French Legacy* (Harvard University Press, 1962) p. 49.
- 5) Khatibi, Abdelkadir. *Le roman maghrébin* (Paris: Maspéro, 1968) pp. 61-62.
- 6) Djebar, Assia. "Territoires des langues: entretien," (avec Lise Gauvin) *Littérature*, No. 101, fév. 96, pp. 73-87.
- 7) See my articles on the topic: "Writing to Explore (W)Human Experience," *Research in African Literatures*. (No. 23.1, Spring 1992) pp. 179-185; "L'écriture (comme) éclatement des frontières," *Postcolonial Women's Writing in French, L'Esprit Créateur* (ed. Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi), (Summer 1993. Vol. xxxiii, No. 2) pp. 119-128.
- 8) Interview. *L'Afrique littéraire et artistique*, No. 3, February 1969.
- 9) *Europe*, No. 474, October 1968, pp. 114-120.
- 10) Djebar, Assia. *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*. Paris: Des Femmes, 1980.
- 11) Mortimer, Mildred. "Fleeing the Harem: Assia Djebar." *Journeys Through the French African Novel Women's Voice*, 1990, pp. 156-57.
- 12) Djebar, Assia. *A Sister to Scheherazade*. Trans. Dorothy S. Blair. London: Quartet, 1987. P. 95.