

# Hearing Silent Voices: A Study on the Female Identity Writing in Assia Djébar's Novel *Femmes d'Alger dans leur Appartement*

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## ABSTRACT

Being a former French colony, the Maghrib region in Africa is deeply influenced by its colonial history. During its struggle against colonial oppression and its pursuit of national identity, literature writing has been regarded as a weapon of national liberation by many North African writers, particularly female writers, among whom Assia Djébar, known as Lady Maghrib, was an important representative. Based on her personal experience and from a female perspective, her works show the unremitting struggle of Arab women in North Africa in the post-colonial era to regain their voice, fight for their freedom and rebuild their identity. This paper is a case study on *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, a collection of short stories. Through an interpretation of the hybrid space of text forms and content, this paper explores how Djébar breaks through the false facades and deconstructs the identity of Muslim women misinterpreted by the West, thus restoring the image of Muslim women as representatives of the new world, and releasing women's voice from the double oppression of colonial and masculine discourses.

**Keywords:** Assia Djébar, Female voice, Identity, Postcolonial writing.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Regarded as one of the most influential French-language writers in North Africa, Assia Djébar (1936-2015) was the founder of French-language feminine literature in Algeria. When she was elected an Academician of the Academy de France in 2006, she became the first North African to enter France's highest hall of learning. Her works have been translated into more than 20 languages and recognized by a dozen international literary awards. They were widely recognized in Algeria and internationally, making her a promising candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature. As a Muslim woman born in the third world and writing in French, Djébar's works have unique political and cultural significance in the contemporary age. From her early-stage works *La Soif* (1957) and *Les enfants du nouveau monde* (1962), to medium-stage works *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980) and *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985), to her later-stage works *Vaste est la prison* (1995), *Les nuits de Strasbourg* (1997) and *Ces voix qui m'assigent: En marge de ma francophonie* (1999), like a warrior,

Djébar marched boldly in the world of literature writing, crying out for the Arab women in North Africa under the double oppression of colonialism and patriarchy.

Among her many works, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, a collection of short stories, is at the "turning point of Djébar's career" and the "most unforgettable" work for her. Named after the oil painting *The Alger Woman* by Eugène Delacroix, a French painter, this collection of short stories is about the stories of the forgotten Algerian women. Through a mixture of content and writing forms, Djébar successfully deconstructed the mainstream discourse's representation of the subordinate women and restored their real social and political history; by tempering her language, she imbued the words of the former suzerain with the rhythm of Arabic, gave a new voice to her fellow women who had been marginalized in the colonial removal project, reshaped the familiar image of the downtrodden, thus challenging the traditional model of how Western feminism had been defining women in the third world, especially Arab and Muslim women.

## 2. DECONSTRUCTING FEMALE IMAGES THROUGH THE MODEL OF INTERTEXTUALITY AND VARIATION

French feminism holds that "gender identity is strengthened through strong patriarchal institutions". This thinking reflects the situation of Muslim women to a large extent, and has fixed the image of these women in the Western mindset. This stereotype is a prejudice caused by Orientalism. In the post-colonial context, "the so-called 'Orientalism' has become a sort of 'Oriental myth' invented by Westerners out of their ignorance, prejudice and curiosity towards the East or the third world"<sup>1</sup>. This myth made its mark on French painter Delacroix's painting *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*. In 1832, shortly after Algeria was conquered by the French, the artist stumbled into the backyard of a Muslim house, and thus entered the unknown world of Algerian women. Two years later, the painting, which spoke of the misfortunes of colonial women through memories and dreams, was painted. Three women languidly appeared at the center of the painting, without words or movements, letting themselves wander in a dream, like flowers from the East, beautiful but lifeless. Surrounded by silk cushions and gold-encrusted bongs, they blended into the background and became the most luxurious objects in this scene. More than a hundred years later, at the beginning of the Algerian war of liberation, Picasso the Spanish painter gave a new interpretation of the three women in Delacroix's painting. In 1980, Djébar named her literary work after this painting, and explored the issue of female identity revealed by these two paintings with an attitude of an involved person and from an Eastern standpoint.

In the epilogue to *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Djébar had a conversation with the above-mentioned paintings. In her opinion, Delacroix's painting, which was regarded as the first painting observing Eastern women from a research perspective in European history of painting, was only hiding a sort of Western imagination of the mysteries, taboos and loneliness of the Eastern world, and that those women in the third world had no lives, "as if engulfed by their environment", "nothing was related to them,

themselves, their body, their lust, their happiness ..."<sup>2</sup>

But in Picasso's painting, the backyard disappeared, and it was replaced by an open door through which sunlight flows in like water. Picasso "allowed misfortunes glow and depicted a brand-new happiness with bold lines. This foresight is going to guide us in daily life." A new interpretation was generated through the naked bodies, dance with all strength and the infinitely expanding space. "Picasso seemed to have discovered the truth about everyday languages. In Arabic, 'lifting the veil' means 'taking off the clothes'. It seems that not only was he making such nakedness a mark of 'breaking through shackles', but more importantly, he was trying to make it the mark of these women gaining a new birth of their body." In Djébar's view, Picasso's vision overturned the curse of the unfortunate identity of Muslim women in traditional colonial mindset.

Like Picasso, Djébar told us through her works about the survival experience and plight of Algerian women, about resistance and obedience, about the harshness of the law on women and the precarious status of women, thus completing a post-colonial interpretation of North African women's cultural identity. Different from the changeless Muslim women wearing veils and indulging themselves in a life of pleasure and comfort in Delacroix's painting, the Arab women in Djébar's works became independent women who have walked out of the purdah, stepped onto the stage and got rid of their dependent status: Fatima, the "water delivery woman" living in misery; Leila, the "bombing carrying woman" who fought bravely for national liberation and independence; Ada, the old granny who guarded hope with dignity while surrounded by foreign rulers... These images of brave, strong, and powerful women are what Djébar wanted to show to her readers. These vivid images of women overturned the established imagination of third world women in traditional colonial mindset, thus successfully deconstructing the image of Muslim women in North Africa.

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1. Wang Ning. "Orientalism, Post-Colonialism, and Criticism of Cultural Hegemonism: An Anatomy of Edward Said's Theory of Post-Colonialism." *Journal of Peking University* 1995(2): 54-62.

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2. Hu Yuanyuan. Assia Djébar's Writing on North African Women's Cultural Identity. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, 2016(3): 109-116.

### 3. RESTORING FEMALE IDENTITY THROUGH HISTORICAL RE-WRITING

In *Maghrib Female Literature in French*, Jean D  jeux once pointed out: "Having never been absent from the history of the Maghrib, women often don't get the recognition they deserve because chronicles and history books are written by men<sup>3</sup>. Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject construction and object formation, women's image has disappeared. Rather than disappearing into a simple nothingness, she has disappeared into a violent alternation. It is a replaced image of women in the third world, caught between tradition and modernity, preservation of culture and pursuit of development." However, postcolonial feminine literature is good at capturing such dynamic changes. It often looks for the lost sisters through historical re-writing, bringing women behind the purdah to the stage, integrating the cry for liberating women and pursuing freedom into the concern about the destiny of the country and the nation, as well as the observation of social life and human emotions.

*Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* "is a collection of the stories I have heard along the way from 1958 to today, September 2001", and it is about the lives of ordinary women in Algeria before, during and after the war of national liberation. While she was writing it, Djebbar, from the perspective of a well-trained historian, read the colonial archives of centuries, including official documents of the French occupation army, memorandums, newspapers, records and personal letters of French soldiers, writings by writers and artists, etc., focusing on capturing the perspective of female witnesses of events, so that the re-written history about the French occupation could be with a female perspective and voice as much as possible.

If Algerian women were still passive onlookers in political events in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Djebbar's records of her interviews in middle 1980s with women in the area where she was born have proven their participation in the war for national independence.

In the first part of the book published 18 years after Algeria's independence, Djebbar described the impact of the war on the situation of women. Women are equal with men in the struggle and have

played an important role; She told us briefly about their courage and passion for freedom:

Where are the bombers? They formed a parade, with grenades in their palms blooming in the fire and their faces shining...Where are you, firefighters, you sisters who must liberate the city... [...] We shot your naked body in the street, your revenge arm is in front of the tank...We suffered because your legs were separated by soldiers rapist. Therefore, the sacred poet awakened you in the lyrical Di Wan.<sup>4</sup>

Or:

In fact, they took out these bombs as if they were taking out their chests. These grenades were pointing at them and at them. Some of them found themselves electrocuted and bruised by torture.<sup>5</sup>

Through historical methodology and literary writing, Djebbar put great effort into her search for the forgotten traces of women in documents believed to have recorded "the truths", attempting to capture female witnesses of events in this history about love and hatred, so that the re-written history of the French occupation could be with a female perspective and voice. In this way, she brought the Algerian women behind the war onto the stage of history, restoring the real role of women.

One and a half centuries later, twenty years after the independence of Algeria, how are the daily lives of Algerian women, who had played an important role in the war of independence? In what way can they still try to pursue a broadened space of survival?

As can be read in the first story, *The Night of Fatima's Recount*, "Parents at that time, especially fathers, who were the authority of the family, believed that girls ought to marry and perform their duties as wives and mothers as soon as they turned fourteen. Whether they were educated or not, and no matter how much space of freedom they once had, when the time came, marriage would tightly cover girls' lives like a far-flung net." From Arabia to Fatima and then to Anissa, they walked from the countryside to the cities of Algeria. After three generations, they were still forced to bear the parting when the mother was forced to let someone else raise her kids. The space enclosed by the high

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3. Jean D  jeux. *La litt  rature f  minine de langue fran  aise au Maghreb*. Paris : Editions Karthala, 1994: 5.

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4. Assia Djebbar. *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*. Paris : Editions Albin Michel, 2002: 54.

5. Assia Djebbar. *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*. Paris : Editions Albin Michel, 2002: 163.

walls trapping them was gradually widened, but the walls still existed.

Thus, it can be seen that after experiencing national traumas, the protagonists in Djébar's stories were sidelined by their families and by society due to their identity as women, carrying heavy shackles of the traditional culture. Their fate became even more difficult in the turbulent years when the new regime was replacing the old.

#### **4. RESHAPING THE FEMALE IDENTITY THROUGH EXPRESSION "ENTRE DEUX" (IN BETWEEN)**

As Michel once said, "Writing is the way for us to analyze ourselves"<sup>6</sup>. Judging from Djébar's writing, her purpose was not to record her own stories. She defined her behavior of writing as "a process of seeking both individual and collective." She showed the multi-cultural identities of herself and her collective. In these identities, "she admitted that she had been influenced by two cultures and was between those two cultures, being placed in an intermediate zone." This intermediate zone was what Djébar herself termed "entre deux" (in between). The themes of "entre deux" involved two different opposite shores of identity brought by languages and cultures, and were to a certain extent reflected in the forms and content of her writing.

Firstly, in terms of character setting, most characters in her works lived in two languages and cultures, in the exchanges between France and Algeria that could not be cut. Djébar captured the appeals of those living in the intermediate zone, expressed their contradictions, thus giving a tension and vitality to the characters living in the gap.

Secondly, in terms of content arrangement, Djébar intentionally created an intersection of personal experience and historical events, linking reality and fiction, and seeking the space for a female voice between individuals and collectives and between virtuality and reality. "Fragmented conversations recalled and restored from memories... stories either fabricated or close to the reality - which happened to other women or women I knew - made-up relatives, faces and whispers in the intertwining of yesterday and today, struggling in an uncertain and informal future." From the very beginning of the book, the author had put "me" at

the center of the work, enhancing the universal significance of "me" as a representative of Islamic women, whether she's Sara, Leila or Tura.

Thirdly, in term of language choosing, Djébar blended others' language and her mother tongue, thus crying out for women. Like other writers from former colonies, Djébar was also caught in a dilemma of language use. She believed that "trying to write an autobiography in French is like subjecting myself to a vivisection operation with a slowly cutting blade to reveal the flesh beneath my skin,"<sup>7</sup> for writing in French would equal unconsciously accepting the cultural consciousness and values of the colonists; she held that "the transition from everyday Arabic to French will weaken the vitality and colors", which would hinder real expression. In the face of this mixture of a gift and a burden, Djébar adopted a method of cutting "for my purpose". By adding colloquial Arabic and morphologic female body languages to French writing, she mitigated the side effects of colonial language and increased the expressiveness of her native language. In scenes involving the expression of women's bodies, she freely used the language of "the others" to present women's body features and emotional expression so as to avoid the taboos in Arabic, which was as if gazing at women. She believed that "freely expressing Arab thoughts in French is an effective way to resist others with others' language."

And finally, in terms of her mode of narration, Djébar valued the combination of the first person and the third person, and used dialogues with direct speech and indirect speech as the main stage of the rich inner world of Islamic women, thus emphasizing the important value of language expression in the fight for an equal status for women. This can be seen in conversations between women (Hearing this, Fatima was shocked, "Did your mother have the courage to marry a non-Muslim and continue living in her city?" "My mother's father was a primary school teacher who firmly believed in Socialism and insisting on cultivating his daughter according to his own will ...Dossy led a normal school training female teachers and she dedicated herself to her job! ) In this conversation, "I" was not only narrating objectively. Instead, "I" was an individual with an emotional inclination. The first person reinforced the autonomy of speech, the gender stance of tone is very clear, and personal emotions are incisively

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6. Michaux H. *Passages* (1973-1963). Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1963:142.

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7. Assia Djébar. *L'Amour, la Fantasia*. Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1995: 224.

expressed through direct speech. It can also be seen in conversations between women and men, (“I didn’t resist and I just allowed him to easily abandon me! ... I didn’t want to say a word at that time (she was complaining), yet he, he thought that I would wait like a patient and tame wife for him to come back! He ordered me to go to this city... Yet lachrymose as I had always been, I shed no tears when parting with him! ...”) In this conversation, the husband’s words were quoted through indirect speech. At this moment, men became “him” existing in Leila’s subject consciousness of “me”, and this conversation reflects a women’s challenge to men’s central status.

Therefore, through her delicate arrangements of the structure, content and expression of the stories, and through the writing of collective identities, Djebbar managed to break the antagonism of genders, regions, cultures and languages, and thus found a way of liberating the women of her own nation in a long gap.

## 5. CONCLUSION

After experiencing colonial rule, national liberation and social changes, the Maghrib region in Africa has gradually embarked on its journey of spiritual and cultural reconstruction in the post-colonial era. Represented by Assia Djebbar, North African female writers writing in French bravely broke through the category of female writing, and boldly involved themselves in themes traditionally written about by men, thus criticizing the reality and rectify the name of women through the re-writing of history. Different from the observation perspective of postcolonial male writers, female writers in North Africa such as Djebbar are better at breaking false facades to restore the image of Muslim women and release the female voice from gender and colonial oppression. As the spokesperson of Arab women in North Africa, Djebbar completed her autobiographical collective body writing through the female perspective and female language, seeking the true sense of women's liberation in the independent North African world.

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