

*Paper prepared for*

*The 6th Euroacademia International Conference*

*Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities*

*Florence, Italy*

*22 – 23 June 2017*

***This paper is a draft***

***Please do not cite or circulate***

# Re-/Righting Her/Story: Renegotiating Gender and Identity in Maghrebian Women Writing.

Najla ACHEK

University of Manouba, Tunisia

## Abstract

Due to the French colonialism and the amount of acculturation the Maghreb was subjected to, Maghrebians in general and women in particular looked back in anger and embarked on an exasperating and painful journey that led to the flourishing of a hybrid corpus of literature written by women writers who constructed and celebrated an identity trotting the margin of the society.

Maghrebian women writers celebrated their “liminality”<sup>i</sup> for being excluded from the public sphere for many years due to various reasons namely patriarchy and colonialism, these women writers have been trying to forge a space for themselves as they needed their voices to be heard and their identities to be asserted. Through the use of the former colonizer’s language, i.e. French, women writers of the Maghreb (Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco) aimed to re-right the course of a “his-tory” that excluded them and a society that chained them down.

The act of writing is, to use Franz Fanon’s words, an act of “bursting the bounds of the narrow world in which she had lived without responsibility, and was at the same time participating in the deconstruction of colonialism and in the birth of a new woman” (*A Dying Colonialism* 107).

Literature, therefore, became “her-story”, the one which was once erased and silenced whether consciously or unconsciously, became a story to be heard and a power to be reckoned with. Words then became tools of negotiation, survival, and assertion of gender and identity. Thus the Maghrebian women writers’ literary corpus resembled a battlefield of multilayered concepts of self/other, individual/collective, public/ private, center/periphery.

Literature has endowed women writers with tools of resistance and empowerment engendering a “rhizome”<sup>ii</sup> following Deleuze and Guattari’s model where “culture spreads like the surface of a body of water, spreading towards available spaces or trickling downwards towards new spaces through fissures and gaps, eroding what is in its way. The surface can be interrupted and moved, but these disturbances leave no trace, as the water is charged with pressure and potential to always seek its equilibrium, and thereby establish smooth space.”

**Keywords:** Maghrebian, gender, identity, space, subjecthood, hybridity.

“Till we have spoken the unspoken we have not come to the heart of the story”.  
(Coetzee, *Foe* 141).

The renegotiating of gender and identity in the postcolonial Maghrebian context has always been a challenging task for women writers for they needed to create a space whereby the claim of identity and the celebration of a long silenced womanhood should be asserted. The desire to dismantle the preexisting male order (both patriarchal and colonial) has taken center stage in the feminist Maghrebian corpus of literature. Various writers indeed stood bravely in front of a double folded threat namely a patriarchal society and a colonizer's gaze rendering women's presence to the mere object of desire and exoticism.

The current paper will apply Feminist and postcolonial approaches mainly on works by the Algerian writer Assia Djebar to shed light on the female writers and pioneers of the Maghrebian literary tradition who fought back in words for a representation of an undermined woman “her-story”. In this study, I will take up the concepts of gender and identity in Djebar's poetics to demonstrate how Djebar embarked on an aesthetic experience for politicized aims so that the act of writing does not only come as an act of resistance and self-assertion but also as an act of celebration of hybridity and liminality.

By standing on the margin, women rewrite and re-right a presupposed image of femininity confined behind veils and closed walls. Through the use of feminist and postcolonial theories, this article investigates instances of resistance and politicized identities within the aesthetics of female Maghrebian writers. The use of the colonizer's language presented a tool to subvert a colonial aesthetics presentation of women and has, consequently, led to the creation of hyphenated selves and identities.

Women, therefore, become the subject of the literary and historical production which once rendered them into mere objects. The space established through the aesthetics is a space of negotiation, tension and subversion of the preexisting norms of hegemonic powers. Identity, as a matter of fact, is no longer fixed and defined through the patriarchal and colonial venues but rather fluid and shifting to accommodate itself within a new acclaimed space. This newly acclaimed space can be referred to as “the third space” to use Homi Bhabha's words, a dynamic ever-changing space for the hybrids and the nomads.

## I. Transcribing Maghrebian Identity through the Colonizer's tongue.

### 1. Female characters in Assia Djebar's literature:

"For me, feminism has always been tied up with the question of language" (Djebar 1992:176)

Using the French language to write the story of Algerian women was a problematic issue that characterized Djebar's poetics for writing in a former colonizer's tongue appeared to be as challenging as the act of retelling the hidden and unheard stories of the female behind the veils and closeted “harem<sup>iii</sup>”. However, choosing to write in the master's language empowered writers like Djebar and others to subvert and dismantle the master's house from within and endowed them with tools of resisting the already existing male paradigms. Female characters in Djebar's literature are as diverse as the stories they come to tell. Regardless of age or generation gap between them, they all meet at the middle ground to make their voices heard.

These women defy silence and embark on a journey of testimonies that must be revealed. Female characters in Djebar's works are independent, autonomous and dignified as

opposed to women's presentation in the Orientalist androcentric discourse of male in which women are rendered to mere objects of desire and exoticism. For Djébar, the question was how to tell the stories of these women in French which was neither her language nor that of her protagonists. Critic Clarisse Zimra refers to French as "the alien language". "In Her Own Write, The Circular Structure of Linguistic Alienation in Assia Djébar's Early Novels", Zimra writes,

North African writers of French expression have long had an ambivalent relation to language, for the medium that history forced upon them also happened to carry the ideology of the ideology of the colonizer (206).

Maghrebian female writers like Djébar were doubly alienated. On the one hand, it was a linguistic alienation (i.e. the use of the colonizer's language) and on the other hand, it was a social alienation based on their gender for how was it possible for women to write or even tell a story? Were their stories even worth the telling? All of these questions deepened the ambiguity and ambivalence that characterized Djébar's novels for the battle was double folded. It was a metaphorical and symbolic war waged against heavy colonizing history and a discriminatory biased patriarchy.

Women's quest for identity is a recurrent theme for Djébar. Female characters in Djébar's novels, for instance, *La Soif* (Trans. *The Mischief* 1958) and *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (Trans. *Children of the New World* 2005) and in almost all her works champion a new image of women and celebrate a new female identity in the "becoming". Women, as a matter of fact, are heroines, revolutionary leaders, rebellious, writers, students etc. ; they are no longer restrained behind closed doors as they break free from the social and patriarchal manacles.

The dynamics of identity structure in Djébar novels is subverting and uprooting pre-determined conditions of existence for being in the margin is a deliberate choice that would enable the writer with further tools to re-inscribe new images of representation for women. In an interview with Pratibha Parmar, Vietnamese writer Trinh T. Minh-ha states that,

The claim of identity is often a strategic claim. It is a process which enables me to question my condition anew, and one by which I intimately come to understand how the personal is cultural, historical or political. The reflexive question asked, as I mentioned earlier, is no longer: who am I? but when, where, how am I (so and so)? This is why I remain skeptical of strategies of they are not intricately woven with strategies of displacement. Here the notion of displacement is also a place of identity: there is no real me to return to, no whole self that synthesizes the woman, the woman of colour and the writer; there are instead, diverse recognitions of self through difference, and unfinished, contingent, arbitrary closures that make possible both politics and identity. (*Feminist Review*, No. 36 (Autumn, 1990) "Woman, Native, Other" 72, 73)

In Djébar Poetics there is an urgency to re-define and re-shape a concept of identity that would fit a newly born Maghrebian woman. This urgency is indeed ideological and political as women's presence was archived for so long due to the heavy manacles of patriarchy and colonialism. Djébar's words are the vehicle through which one can hear voices remained silenced for so long; rewriting these voices and telling their stories definitely re-right the course of a whole nation. It also helps claiming back a presence rather than an absence.

North African women writers felt this urgency because of the need to trace back a "her/story", a genealogy of silence of their sisters and "mothers/ancestors". As the Maghrebian tradition started mainly as an oral tradition translating it and inscribing it through language was a preliminary task for these writers. There was this need to reconcile with a history that relegated women to the mere silence and turned them into victims of a paralyzing gaze that "othered" them. In *Amour, la fantasia* (Trans. *Fantasia* 1993), Djébar states,

Writing in a foreign language, not in either of the tongues of my native country- the Berber of the Dahra mountains or the Arabic of the town where I was born- writing has brought me to the cries of the women silently rebelling in my youth, to my own true origins. Writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters (204).

Assia Djébar challenges the readers by making them embrace her celebration of difference and the birth of a new Algerian woman. Difference is no longer seen through pejorative lenses but rather appreciated and championed as it offers a new sense of identity for Maghrebian women in general and Algerian women in particular. Djébar sheds light on the long, painful and exasperating journey of women in order to forge a space which was solely and exclusively male dominated. Djébar's characters trot the margin of society and *history*, they occupy what the Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls "a third space of negotiation". In "Signs Taken for Wonders", Bhabha writes,

The place of difference and otherness, or the space of the adversarial, within such a system of 'disposal' as I've proposed, is never entirely on the outside or implacably oppositional. It is a pressure, and a presence, that acts constantly, if unevenly, along the entire boundary of authorization, that is, on the surface between what I've called disposal-as-bestowal and disposition-as-inclination (32).

## 2. The process of Veiling and Unveiling in Djébar's Poetics: A female identity in "the becoming":

For so many years, Maghrebian women were entrapped and cloistered inside the "harem" and behind their veils. Being dark and having little contact with the outside world, "the harem" within the novels of Assia Djébar becomes a counter-discourse device from which the gaze of the "Other" is challenged and subverted. The autonomous characters Djébar created in her poetics re-owned their bodies and consequently felt liberated. As Foucault contends the body is the locus of power in modern society hence the crucial task of writers such as Djébar to redefine a new inscription of the female body breaking the patriarchal and colonial shackles.

In *Fantasia* and *Women of Algiers in Their Apartments*, Djébar recounts the story of orientalist painter Delacroix who came to Algeria in 1832 to have access to women in the "harem", that exotic yet still unknown 'paradise'. As he proceeded in painting these women and writing down their name on his sketches, Djébar referred to the women's "penciled bodies" as "coming out of the anonymity of the exoticism". ("Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound" 135). The importance of returning back this intruding gaze was a crucial act of resistance as well as a subversion device of the androcentric hegemonies.

Djébar's novels provided women with a platform to tell their stories and reconstruct a collective identity through the various voices of female narrators. The novels mechanism is characterized by this multiplicity of voices or what Bakhtin referred to as "heteroglossic dialogism"<sup>iv</sup>, that is the plurality of "tongues" instead of the solitary male voice. This sense of collectivity that women shared through the act of telling their stories paved the way toward a new sense of identity and helped forge a space for an altered and renewed Maghrebian female subjectivity. Through the act of writing in the language of the oppressor, i.e. French, Djébar creates what can be referred to a politicized collective and communal identity for the women of Algeria. In *Fantasia*, she writes,

The silence of my solitary confinement feeds this monologue which is disguised as a forbidden conversation. I write to get a grip on these beleaguered days (...) 'You see, I'm writing, and there's no harm in it, no impropriety! It's simply a way of saying I exist, pulsating with life! Is not writing a way of telling what "I" am?' (58)

Djébar then re-appropriates the language of the colonizer and subverts it in order to create a new Algerian memory based on the unheard voice and the untold stories shared by the women characters that inhabit her works. The writer, therefore, succeeded in re-writing and

re-righting and unveiling of a “history” that relegated women to the margin and made their presence disregarded and distorted. Djébar’s corpus of writing was a testimony for a new representation of women. In “Rewriting Writing: Identity, Exile and Renewal in Assia Djébar’s *L’Amour la Fantasia*”, H. Adlai Murdoch states that

[Djébar’s] task will be to take on the ‘official’ record of the French colonial conquest of Algeria, itself a re-writing of historical fact, and to re-write this rewriting from the perspective of the colonized subject. (75)

The writing of Assia Djébar introduces the reader to the traumatic war experiences, the memories of loss, and stories of struggles. Djébar was aware as an intellect of the burden she was carrying by digging into the scars of the past. Writing becomes a cathartic process through which Djébar herself reconciles with her past/memory and “history”. As she embarks into pinning down in words oral testimonies which she calls “torch words” (*Fantasia* 142) she initiates a new representation of Algerian women, a representation that defies oblivion and breaks down silence. Djébar says, “the voice recounts? Scarcely that. It digs out the old revolt.” (*Fantasia* 141)

The words passed on from one generation to the other give birth to that “old revolt”, that of creating a collective memory and a shared her/story never told before. As she starts the task of collecting these stories, Djébar recognizes the heavy burden she carries as she starts writing these testimonies in the oppressor’s language. She contends,

Writing the enemy’s language is more than just a matter of scribbling down a muttered monologue under your very nose; to use the alphabet involves placing your elbow some distance in front of you to form a bulwark – however, in this twisted position, the writing is washed back to you. (...) This language was formerly used to entomb my people; when I write it today I feel like the messenger of old, who bore a sealed missive which might sentence him to death or the dungeon. By laying myself bare in this language I start a fire which may consume me. (*Fantasia* 215)

In the Djébarian poetics, the subaltern<sup>v</sup> to use Spivak’s words does speak as she tells stories omitted both by the patriarchal and colonial systems that objectified Algerian women. Djébar engages in a metaphorical journey to the past to recollect the fragmented memories tainted in haunting closed spaces. The writer goes back to the “harem”, to closed houses, and the shattered windows in an act of defiance. Djébar wants to claim a long silenced identity, she says “writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters” (*Fantasia* 204)

Djébar is aware of the importance of the process of healing and reconciling with one’s past. Neither a present nor a future can be consumable if the relationship with the past is broken or fragmented. In recollecting testimonies and restoring long lost stories, Djébar takes women from the harem and restrained spaces to the light of a new Algerian *herstory* in the making. The protagonists of novels breaks the manacles of patriarchy and colonialism, their voices are a —“refusal to allow memories to disperse” (Stora 81)

In the final scenes of Djébar’s movie “*La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*”, the grandmothers of Chenoua tribe whisper the untold stories and pass them on to their granddaughters who listen attentively. Djébar carries on with this pattern of writing down the oral tradition of her ancestors in almost all her novels. She writes,

I imagine you, the unknown woman, whose tale is handed down from storyteller to storyteller; now I too take my place in the unchangeable circle of listening. I recreate you, the invisible woman, ancestress of ancestress, the first expatriate. I resurrect you during that crossing that no letter from any French warrior was to allude to. (*Fantasia* 189)

When Djébar wrote *So Vast the Prison*, she felt the urgency of writing down a collective and communal memory for Algerian women fearing that this memory would be erased definitely. This urge presented the main locus of Djébar’s poetics. In “Translating Assia

Djebar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement: Listening for the Silence*", Marjolin De Jager states that in Djebar's literature,

Every woman has a voice, for even her silences speak volumes, speak for herself, speak for and of all the generations before her, of those women whose sounds were indeed severed, truly and traditionally imposed by the patriarchy. (857)

Sarah, one of the protagonists of *Women of Algiers in their Apartments*, realizing how much she and her mother suffered from silence gets an epiphany about the significant act of telling the untold stories. It was important to write down these testimonies and pass them on to the new generation of Algerian women. The process of retelling the hidden stories serves as a platform to re-right a past history and creates a *herstory* in the making as Sarah, the protagonist, says,

For Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves, in all the women's quarters, the traditional ones as well... Talk among ourselves and look. Look outside, look outside the walls and the prisons! (...) The Woman as look. The Woman as voice... Not the voice of female vocalists whom they imprison in their sugar-sweet melodies... 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, of malice, of the sorrows of all the women they've kept walled in... The voice that's searching in the opened tombs. (50)

Djebar restores these voices and translates the cries of her protagonists and despite the ambiguity in writing in the Other's language, Djebar carried on her project of healing through the process of writing a collective and shared memory. As a Maghrebian woman who writes in French, Djebar embraces her liminal status as an intellectual who writes orality from the margin. Valerie Budig-Markin, a scholar specialized in Assia Djebar's literature, affirms that

Oral transmission has preserved history to a certain point; writing carries further its promise to make the individual and collective voices of the past speak, even though they may have been silent in the past as well (903).

Djebar manages to write silence in a unique aesthetic style that puts the accent on the scars of the past and demonstrates the importance of testimonies to pave the way towards a healing process. Through her attempts at verbalizing the past traumatic experiences, Djebar unveils and subverts the controlling powers of patriarchy and colonialism that have heavily weighed on the free will of women. For her protagonists, the act of speaking is healing while for Djebar as a writer the act of writing is liberating yet painful and challenging. Djebar notes in "Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound",

What words had uncovered in time of war is not being concealed again underneath a thin covering of taboo subjects, and in that way, the meaning of a revelation is reversed. Then the heavy silence returns that puts an end to the momentary restoration of sound. Sound is severed once again. (150, 151)

In her essay "The Eyes of Language", Djebar addresses the dilemma of going back and forth to the broken Algerian history in an attempt to resurrect women's stories. She writes,

You always negotiate with your country, but you do it badly. You want to leave it, and yet you do not want to leave it; you want to forget it and not forget it, to curse it and to sing its praises... Yes, you accept to live as far away as possible... until you rediscover your own land at the end of your wanderings... look[ing] once again at this country, at its drama, at its blood, to contemplate its treachery, its martyrdom, and ... its malediction. (785)

Thanks to Assia Djebar's tremendous efforts to restore Algerian women *herstory* we today could hear the voices of the Maghrebian subaltern. Women of Algeria particularly and Maghrebian women generally enjoyed a sense of liberation as Djebar succeeded in forging a space where their voices are heard and are resonating. Djebar took these women from the abyss of history to a new dawn of *herstory* told through stories of pride and resilience.

Djebar's protagonists stand for every Maghrebian woman who was once silenced, oppressed or relegated to the annals of silence and darkness.

## II. The Gendering of the Maghreb: Writing/Righting through the lenses of a woman.

“Sometimes fear grips me that these fragile moments of life will fade away. It seems that I write against erasure”.  
Assia Djebar (2010)

Writing and righting Algeria through the eyes of her women is a central thematic in the literature of Assia Djebar. Voicing the women's stories and struggle during the French colonial rule and in the post-colonial period is indeed a daunting responsibility that Djebar assumed throughout her poetics. Djebar's aesthetic and politicized mission of writing about a gendered Maghreb bothered many who saw in Djebar a threat to the rhetoric of the androcentric status quo. She is not only a Maghrebian woman but also a writer who shakes the grounds of male discourse both in the patriarchal and colonial sense. Djebar was aware that the Algerian liberation struggle was not over once colonialism ended but rather there was a new struggle that has just started for women in independent Algeria.

Despite their perseverance and sacrifice during the National liberation struggle, women's place in society and politics was neither recognized nor acknowledged. Djebar aimed at inscribing women within the historical context and tried to fill in the gender gap by adding women's voices to the discourse patterns that silenced them for she used the concept of gender as a tool to subvert and dismantle the patriarchal and colonial discourse. In *Gender and the Politics of History*, critic Joan Scott writes that gender “seem[s] the best way to (...) bring women from the margins to the center of historical focus, and, in the process, transform the way all history was written.” (xi)

Realizing that deliberated obliteration of women's presence in the making of the Algerian history, Djebar establish a new tradition of female writers which helped draw a gendered image of new Maghreb in which women's rights and liberation take center stage. In an interview, Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist Fatima Mersini has said, “the real mistake of women was to let the memoir, the collective, the history, space of producing history - to let it in the hands of men.” (1993)

Djebar's writing initiated a new wave of feminist Maghrebian women writers and activists who do not solely engage in the liberation process of a nation but also believe that a nation's liberation is incomplete if not followed by women's liberation. As one of the pioneers of this feminist wave in North Africa, Djebar took the power of the pen to inscribe a new representation of Maghrebian women in literature. Figuratively, Djebar's “pen” became the empowering tool for women in and out of Algeria and also a means of resistance for the women's quest for emancipation. In her book *Nomadic Voices of Exile*, Valérie Orlando states that,

Whether Djebar is listening to the oral stories of the mountain women she studies, reinscribing the historic archives she uncovers, or directing her films about the lives of women, the author empowers a new venue for feminism and intellectual voice in her homeland (132).

As she proceeds into collecting women's stories, Djebar's novels become testimonies for the colonial and post-colonial Algeria. Djebar wants to bring these women out of darkness and into the light. As Spivak contests, “in the colonial production (...) the subaltern as female is deeply in the shadow (287). Djebar, therefore, gives the reader a panoramic view of women's lives being cloistered in the houses and rendered silent behind their veils. Her



novels also portray and testify for women's struggle against a double folded discrimination, firstly by the French colonizers and their voyeuristic gazes and secondly by Algerian men and their patriarchal endeavor to "protect" women from the intruding gazes of the "Other". By subverting the gaze of the other and breaking free of the cloistered spaces of the "harem" and "the hammam", Algerian women were given agency to re-appropriate their own space and to affirm both their bodies and their voices.

Djebar's literature postulates a new model of subjectivity for women and by so doing; she confirms her belief in the centrality of women's experience in the social, cultural and political making of modern Algeria. Not only does Djebar challenge the patriarchal status quo, she also defies the stereotypes of the submissive Algerian women by recreating and retelling the stories of the rebellious, defiant and strong female figures. In *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1987), Isma the main narrator tells the story of Hajila, the second wife of her ex-husband, as the novel folds, the reader is exposed to a complex image of the Algerian educated elite and is also introduced to a story of defiance when Hajila revolts against her husband who abused and raped her.

Djebar's narrative portrays images of women from all walks of life and from different historical backgrounds. As a writer, Djebar creates a bond and a sense of sisterhood that links women of the past with women of the present. Djebar makes their stories traverse the silence and travel through time. By connecting these past and present protagonists Djebar's novels become in a way a metaphorical and figurative third space that contributes to the characters hybridization. A space that Homi Bhabha referred to as a space "in-between the designations" (*The Location of Culture* 4) in other words the Djebarian literary corpus stands as a platform for a celebrated and acclaimed hybrid women's identity who are constantly growing and becoming.

Every woman reader can relate to one of the characters for they are not solely strangers whose stories are being told, they are also representative of women herstory that was always neglected and silenced. The transgenerational Djebarian novels evoke the paramount dynamic between a national liberation and women's liberation for a free independent Algeria cannot exist if her women are being silenced and unrecognized.

Writing a feminine version of the Maghreb and righting the annals of history that relegated women to the realms of silence presented the main mission of Assia Djebar. It is from that desire to give women a dignified and defiant presence in history that stems the Djebarian poetics. Djebar subverts the patriarchal and colonial discourses that "othered" women and rendered them to object of desire and exoticism. She embarks on a mission of bringing women from darkness to the light. Djebar reconstructs the forgotten history of Algerian women and thus reconstructs a feminine genealogy of the Maghreb.

The idea of constructing a record of feminine stories is linked to Luce Irigaray's theory of genealogy. According to Irigaray, Western patriarchal discourse recognizes only one type of subject: the masculine subject. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray writes, "all theories of the subject have been appropriated to the masculine"(133). The feminine subject is always associated to absence while the masculine subject is always associated with presence. Like Irigaray Djebar felt the urgency to write the female subjecthood. She, therefore, engages in the project of questioning and challenging the one-male-subject discourse by presenting a feminine subject counter-discourse. Djebar's novels are archives of the feminine voices and a call beyond the patriarchal and androcentric culture. The Djebarian revolutionary feminist writing portrays "the feminine to be Other than the limits imposed on her" (Cornell 102).

In "Anamnesis in the Language of Writing", Assia Djebar articulates her desire to write and right the Maghreb and its women. A gendered Maghreb allows for women's participation and recognition in the construction of modern Algeria. She writes,

[The movement animating my characters- the people of my genealogy as well as their shadows who, in a sense, are looking at me, challenging me, expecting me to pull them, to

make them enter. in spite of myself in spite of themselves. into the house of this foreign language- this movement becomes my principal thrust, the central core of my novelistic form. (188)

Various works by Assia Djebar evoke the theme of sisterhood and bond between women or as Spivak says the subalterns. Djebar's narrative language gives a new birth for these long forgotten sisters, that poetic and challenging language that aims at returning the gaze of the patriarchal cultural patterns. As Laurence Huughe notices, the narrative style Djebar uses is "nothing less than the specific language of the Algerian woman. The language of modesty, it protects Djebar and her characters from the gaze of voyeurs, be they Algerians, Orientalists, or colonialists" (872)

Djebar empowers the Maghrebian subaltern to write back and by liberating women's voices to tell their forgotten stories, Djebar also proceeds into a collective therapy through the act of remembering in order to be freed from the burden of a colonial history and patriarchal domination. Using her liminal status as an intellect, the writer moves in-between location and travels through the temporal scope to recollect the hidden stories that must be told. The spatial and temporal freedom collected memories presents Djebar with the opportunity of looking/gazing at her culture with both of an insider and an outsider perspective. She is looking from a distant as a foreigner and engages in the writing/righting of her nation as a native. Dwelling in such a hybrid space, Djebar becomes the mouthpiece of her "sisters".

As Djebar engages in the revolutionary act of constructing the feminine self in the emerging post-colonial Algerian nation she was faced with harsh criticism from the Algerian elite who believed that women's liberation was not as important as the national liberation process. However, for Djebar these two liberation quests, that of the "self" and that of a nation, go hand in hand and are complementary in modern Algeria. In her two novels, in her next two novels, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (trans. Children of the New World 1962), and *Les Allouettes naïves* (trans. *The Naive Larks* 1967), Assia Djebar treats this theme of the parallel construction of the feminine self and the birth of a nation.

Djebar refers to these revolutionary women as "children of the new world", children of the new Algerian nation in the making. If in *Les Enfants du nouveau Monde*, Djebar goes on into immortalizing these women warriors and heroines of the Algerian revolution by giving them the space and the voice they have been denied by the patriarchal monolithic discourse both in the colonial and post-colonial Algeria. In *Les Allouettes naïves*, Djebar questions the deliberate and intentional silence structured around women's participation in the war of liberation. She, therefore, criticizes the embedded patriarchal discourse that belittled the heroic deeds of the Algerian women and silenced their voices despite being active actors in the liberation battles.

The deliberate act of silencing women and relegating them to the realms of silence is explained by Robin Lakoff in her book *Language and Woman's Place* as she states,

It will be found that the overall effect of 'women's language' — meaning both language restricted in use to women and language descriptive of women alone — is this: it submerges a woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly, on the one hand, and encouraging expressions that suggest triviality in subject matter and uncertainty about it; and, when a woman is being discussed, by treating her as an object-sexual or otherwise- but never a serious person with individual views ... The ultimate effect of these discrepancies is that women are systematically denied access to power, on the grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic behaviour along with other aspects of their behaviour. (42)

The silencing of the voice means the silencing of the body, for a woman without a voice is someone who does not own her own body or her own subjectivity, and is thus confined to the prison of oblivion. This heavy silence restricts their movements and denies them action. Djebar's mission was not only to give voice to these voiceless women but most importantly to resurrect them from the dead by forging a space of their own in the emerging Algerian nation. Clarissa Zimra states that Djebar's work "gives voice to 'the inappropriate/d other'"

of Western patriarchies, the native's mute mate who stands simultaneously as the other of the West and the other of man'' (Djebar 1992: 161).

This androcentric discourse was countered by a Djebarian gendered discourse of Algeria and its women, a discourse which celebrated women's contribution in the past and the present of modern Algeria. The voices that echo in Djebar's novels and films resist silence and fill in the social, historical and cultural gaps that characterized the history of Algerian women. Throughout her various works, Djebar juxtaposes the personal and the collective memory and history in order to shed light on the alienation and marginalization aspects of women history.

By telling different female stories, Djebar constructs a new female subjectivity inscribed within the making of the Algerian nation. In "Resisting Silence in Arab Women's Autobiographies", Al-Nowaihi writes that Djebar constructs "her text in such a way that these different angles of consciousness can stand apparently but also merge with and shed light on one another—the different parts of the text are in a self-corrective dialogue" (488). For instance, in *Fantasia* the female narrator and protagonist recounts her story and the story of her long forgotten sisters as well as the story of a nation struggling under the heavy burdens of colonialism.

Inscribing the individual and collective consciousness in the writing form makes it tangible and accessible to readers and helps to restore the various gaps of history. The gendered re-writing and re-righting of the Maghreb presents a major priority for a writer/artist and intellectual like Assia Djebar who used her "pen" to ponder on issues of gender and subjectivity as a reaction to the records of the colonial hegemonic power and the repressive patriarchal traditions which determined the dynamics between men and women. The act of writing becomes, to use Franz Fanon's words, an act of "bursting the bounds of the narrow world in which she had lived without responsibility, and was at the same time participating in the deconstruction of colonialism and in the birth of a new woman" (107).

Djebar indeed engages in a dialogue with the past and the present; with the colonial history and modern Algerian society, her polyphonic texts are vehicles for the different voices of women. Djebar's liminal status, her in-betweenness position as a mediator between the East and the West, makes her novels occupy what Homi Bhabha referred to as the third space, a space of national, social and cultural negotiation. In "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences", Bhabha asserts

To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between*, the space of the entre that Derrida has opened up writing itself – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. (...) It is this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others. And by exploring this hybridity, this 'Third Space', we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (209)

As one of the most prolific and poignant North African novelist, Assia Djebar's literary and artistic corpus presents a negotiation platform for different issues mainly that of gender and identity. These two thematics have been haunting her works since the first novel and they have framed her literary engagement through years of artistic production. Djebar becomes the mouthpiece of the Algerian women, the long forgotten sisters or what she calls "fire carriers". She fills up the gender gap and pays tribute to women not only Algerian women but Maghrebian women in general. In *Translating Assia Djebar's Femmes d'Alger dans leur Appartement: Listening for the Silence*, De Jager attests that Djebar engages in a revolutionary writing/righting process not only in her homeland "but for all Arab women, all silenced women, and in the end for all women. Her voice sounds across cultures and time, across histories and continents; hers is truly a universal voice" (856).

---

<sup>i</sup> Edward Said's concept of "liminality" as referred to in Said's lecture entitled "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals". Check, <<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/said/said3.html>>

<sup>ii</sup> G. Deleuze and Félix Guattari introducing the concept of “rhizome” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. The “rhizome” is a “botanical term for a root system that spreads across the ground [...] rather than downwards, and grows from several points rather than a single tap root” (Ashcroft et al. Post-Colonial Studies: The Key 207) The concept of rhizome is based on the idea of multiplicity and on the process of becoming as opposed to the linear and traditional logic of identity construction.

<sup>iii</sup> “the harem” is mainly the space that women occupied in their houses in North Africa and the Middle East. It was a cloistered space exclusively reserved for women as they had no excess to the outside world. The concept of “the harem” tainted the imagination of Orientalist artists and researchers who wanted to “gaze” at that closed and “mysterious” world of women.

<sup>iv</sup> In *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin’s concept stresses the importance of language and how language is dialogic because it implies multiplicity of voices and perspectives. Language is, therefore, heteroglossic.

### Works Cited

- Al-Nowaihi, Magda. 2001. “Resisting Silence in Arab Women’s Autobiographies”. *International Journal of Middle Studies* 33, no.4, 488.
- Bhabha Homi K., 2006. “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, Routledge, New York, 209.
- , 1985. “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817”. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 1, "Race," Writing, and Difference. Chicago UP, 32.
- , 2004. *The Location of History*. Routledge Classics 2nd ed., London & New York, 4.
- Budig-Markin, Valerie. 1996. Writing and Filming the Cries of Silence. *World Literature Today* 70.4, 903.
- Cornell, Drucilla. 1991. *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law*. New York: Routledge, 102.
- De Jager, Marjolijn. 1996. “Translating Assia Djebar’s Femmes d’Alger dans leur Appartement: Listening for the Silence”. *World Literature Today* 70.4, 856- 857.
- Djebar, Assia. 1993. *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*. Trans. Dorothy Blair. Portsmouth, N.H: Heinemann.
- , 1992. *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*. Trans. Marjolijn de de Jager Charlottesville: University of Virginia.
- , 1993. *A Sister to Scheherazade*. Trans. Dorothy S. Blair. Portsmouth, N.H: Heinemann.
- , 1992. “Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound”. *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 135.
- , 1977. “La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua”. Directed by Assia Djebar. Algeria.
- , 1999. “Anamnesis in the Language of Writing”. *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 12, 188. <<https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1461>>
- Djebar, Assia, and Pamela A. Genova. 1996. “The Eyes of Language.” *World Literature Today* 70.4. New York: Columbia UP, 785.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1994. *A Dying Colonialism*. Trans. Haakon Chevalier. Grove Press, 107.
- Huughe, Laurence. 1996. “'Ecrire Comme Un Voile': The Problematics of the Gaze in the Work of Assia Djebar.” *World Literature Today* 70.4, 872.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian G. Gill. Ithica: NY. Cornell UP, 133.
- Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. 2004. *Language and Woman’s Place: Text and Commentaries*. Ed. Mary Bucholtz Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 42.

---

Murdoch Adlai H., 1993. "Rewriting Writing: Identity, Exile and Renewal in Assia Djebar's L'Amour la Fantasia", *Yale French Studies*, 2.83, 75.

Orlando, Valérie. 1999. *Nomadic Voices of Exile: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb*. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 132.

Parmar, Pratibha and Trinh T. Minh-ha. 1990. "Woman, Native, Other". *Feminist Review*, No. 36. Palgrave Macmillan Journals, 72-73 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395110>>

Scott, Joan W. 1999. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia UP.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 287.

Stora, Benjamin. 1999 "Women's Writing Between Two Algerian Wars." *Research in African Literatures* 30.3, 81.

Zimra, Clarisse. 1980 "In Her Own Write: The Circular Structures of Linguistic Alienation in Assia Djebar's Early Novels". *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 11, No. 2. Indiana UP, 206.

#### **Author's Bio-note**

Najla Achek is assistant professor of English at the Higher Institute of Documentation of Tunis, University of Manouba. She has a B.A. in English language and literature and an M.A. in Cross-cultural Poetics from the Higher Institute of Languages of Tunis, University of Carthage. She holds the National Diploma of Aggregation in English Language and Literature from the University of Manouba. Her research fields include Women and Gender studies, Feminist studies and postcolonial studies. She is currently enrolled in the PhD. Program at the University of Manouba, Tunis.