

**Nostalgia and Alienation in Assia Djébar's Works and her Soft /Crying
Anti-Colonial Militantism. A Particular Emphasis on:
*L'amour, la fantasia***

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Abstract:

This paper aims at shedding light on Assia Djébar's nostalgic/ nationalist thoughts as portrayed in her novel *L'amour, La fantasia*. The research focuses on finding answers to some dichotomies as Colonizer/Colonized), (Man/Woman), (Nostalgia/Homeland), (Alienation/ Domiciliation or Settlement). We used, accordingly, research synthesis and content analysis as methods and approaches to find by the end appropriate panaceas to Djébar's big questions. Research findings show that Djébar's militantism was soft with literature; crying with mind and questions, and effective with creativity and concerns.

Keywords: Nostalgia; Alienation; Militantism; Assia Djébar; *L'amour, la fantasia*

Résumé :

Cette Recherche vise à faire la lumière sur les pensées nostalgiques et nationalistes d'Assia Djébar telles qu'elles sont décrites dans son roman *L'amour, La fantasia*. L'investigation se base sur la recherche de réponses à certaines dichotomies comme Colonisateur/Colonisé), (Homme/Femme), (Nostalgie/Patrie), (Aliénation/ Domiciliation ou Implantation). Nous avons utilisé, en conséquence, la synthèse de recherche et l'analyse de contenu comme méthodes et approches pour trouver d'ici la fin des panacées appropriées aux grandes questions de Djébar. Les résultats de la recherche montrent que le militantisme de Djébar était doux avec la littérature et révoltant dans/avec l'esprit.

Mots-clés : Nostalgie ; aliénation ; Assia Djébar; *L'amour, la fantasia*

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Ever since I was a child, the foreign language was a casement opening on the spectacle of the world and all its riches. In certain circumstances, it became a dagger threatening me¹

(Djebar, *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*, 1993, p. 126)

1. INTRODUCTION

This research paper aims at investigating AssiaDjebar's philosophic/nationalistic vision as enormously showed in her novel *L'amour, la fantasia*. The work at hand departs with a starting point that AssiaDjebar carried in her writings, though in French, seeds of crying nationalism and soft /non-violent militantism that gave her pen a literary-genuine and intellectually engaged role during the Algeria's 'Times of Revolution'. Many other concerns and questions about the language she used, the beliefs she carried, the concerns she portrayed are raised within the core of this paper. .

2. Literature Review

Many research works, academic dissertations, and essays tackled and talked about AssiaDjebar and her nostalgic sensibility, lingual/gender alienation, and nationalistic crying soul and voice. This article refers to many, namely to 1) books: AoudjitAbdelkader in his book *The Algerian Novel and Colonial Discourse. Witnessing to a Différend*, Déjeux Jean's book *La LittératureAlgérienneContemporaine*, Hiddleston Jane *AssiaDjebar, Out of Algeria*, and TASSADIT Yacine-Titouh book *Chacalou la ruse des dominés. Aux origins du malaise culturel des intellectuelsalgériens* and 2) articles: Katz Liza. "Writing the Cry: French and Francophone Literature", Saadallah Abu El Kacem *Le Monté du Nationalism algérien*, Ringrose Priscilla. *AssiaDjebar: In Dialogue with Feminisms*, and MaamriRebai. M *The Syndrome of the French Language in Algeria*. Another book entitled *Lire AssiaDjebar!* was so important to me while working on this research. It covers series of well-built and selected articles by AmelChouati, Sonia Amazit, Anne-Marie Carthé, Anne Donadey, Jennie Dumont, Kiyoko Ishikawa, HiboMouminAssoweh, Patrick Potot, HervéSanson, WassylaTamzali, and Max Véga-Ritter. With reference to these books and articles, this research paper would explore more two challenging issues that

urge a crying need to be explored and analyzed attentively.

3. AssiaDjebar. Facts in brief

AssiaDjebar is the pseudonym or pen name of Fatima-ZohraImalayène. She is an author, novelist, filmmaker and historian who had been frequently honored to be called the “grande dame of Algerian/Maghreb Francophone literature”. She was born in 1936 in Cherchell on the Algerian coast (on the neighborhood of Algiers).She wrote many novels, essays and scripts of films. Among her best known works: *La Soif* (The Mischief/Nadia 1957); *Les Impatients* (The Impatients 1958); *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (Children of the New World 1962); *les Alouettenaives* (The Naives Larks 1967); *Femmes d'Algerdansleurappartement* (Women of Algiers in their Apartment 2002) *L'amour, La Fantasia* (Fantasia. An Algerian Cavalcade 1985). She had been awarded many literary prizes in 1985, 1986, 1998 and 2000 for her literary masterpieces. She died in 2015².

4. AssiaDjebar's *L'amour, la fantasia* (Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade)

In her *L'amour, La Fantasia* (1985), AssiaDjebar's first autobiographical novel, she tried to demystify with precise and meticulous voice the Algerian writers 'conflict' with history, language and identity. She demystified this conflict-ridden situation by offering a profound analysis to her own relationship to language as an example.

Djebar described as well the atrocities of the French colonizer and unearthed its past horrors. One scene in the novel *L'amour, La Fantasia* (1985) revealed a letter written by one of the colonial officers who had participated in France's invasion of Algiers in July 1830³. The officer described heartlessly the body of a woman whose foot had amputated in order to steal her jewels on her anklet". [a woman's foot that had been hacked off to appropriate the anklet of gold or silver...suddenly he inserts

these words, they prevent the ink of the whole letter from drying, because of the obscenity of torn flesh that he could not suppress in his description] (Djebar A., *L'amour, la fantasia*, 1985, p. 161). For Djebar, the ink that can never dry represents the cruel and haunted violence of French colonialism, written in the archives, but not fully revealed publicly (Goellner, 2018, p. 115). Nationalist seeds are quite clear accordingly.

AssiaDjebar could show, in her *L'amour, la fantasia*: 1) a historical profit with autobiographic features (pp14-17, 24-28, pp39-45, pp50-56...). This autobiographic novel (pp 11-13...), by its historical significance and its creative-poetic ability, could easily get into the Algerian literature camp which itself keep going in a continuous search for an Algerian 'name', 'land' and 'difference' different from the French. In fact, reading and analyzing this novel could provide a work of liaison and set bridges between the various textual fragments of form and structure across fiction and narration.

Djebar's novel(s) embodied three main experiences illustrated into three main core discourses: 'Discourse of a Period Testimony'⁴; 'Discourse of a Woman Testimony', and another of an 'Autobiographic Pursuit'⁵. Indeed, three main works illustrate genuinely these discourses, namely: *L'amour, la fantasia*, *Loin de Médina* and *Vasteest le Prison* (Mebirouk, 2018, pp. 4-14-16).

5. AssiaDjebar's Nostalgic Pen, Alienation, and Nationalism

Departing from what AssiaDjebar said in one of her interviews that "The homeland is not only a soil, but souls of this soil", we can safely say that AssiaDjebar does not emphasize surface understandings to things, but rather she goes deep in her discourse that carries a profound philosophy need to be explored, analyzed, and demystified.

5.1 AssiaDjebar's Nostalgic Pen

Hiddleston Jane declares strongly that Algeria is Djebar's native land and surly different from France. This quest of "inciting the writer to invent an identity and genealogy"(Jane, 2006, p. 3). By means of that linking and search for individual identity, Djebar finds another search collective and national identity for Algerians. Her search for restoring identity got a nexus to Reda Bensamaia, Professor Emeritus at Brown University (American Private University), researches that revolved all around the paramount role of the writer in narrating the identity of a decolonized country. AssiaDjebar was inevitably part of those committed pens and minds to national liberation and nationalist discourse.

AssiaDjebar tried to benefit from the French documents and reimagined, rewrote, repositions, and recombined them with her own fiction in order to set a new Algerian cultural memory via challenging the hegemonic French archives. In his article, *Rewriting Writing: Identity, Exile and Renewal in AssiaDjebar's L'amour, la fantasia*, the writer, Adlai Murdoch explains this point:

Djebar'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 subject⁶. (Murdoch, 1993, p. 75)

Algerian writers attempted to record the history of their nation themselves from their own perception and experiences, AssiaDjebar believed. For instance, the novel of Rabah Belamri *Un regard blessé* "was written as a diary that refers both to the evolution of the war and the blindness of the main character." Some critics consider this novel a way "of re-collecting pieces of history (objective discourse on political events) and memory (subjective feelings).....the text of Belamri dates back to the last months of the Algerian war (1962)"(C.P, 2018, pp. 65-79). To my mind, through these narratives Belamri and AssiaDjebar combined the experience of the Algerian individual as a colonized during the French direct rule with

their own political points of view to the Algerian war⁷.

5.2 AssiaDjebar Lingual/gender⁸ Alienation

Djebar tried to defend what she called ‘Algeria’s soul’, the Algerian woman. The latter was described as marginalized, against both the French and the Algerian men through narrating the history of Algeria. Further, she wanted to find a ‘therapy’ to her ‘two-ness’ and a bridge to rupture ([oppressed] Algerian/ ([oppressed] women) by writing. AssiaDjebar set her *Memoria* in a very special and particular way via translating the memory of women from an oral source into the medium of writing. For her “writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters”⁹.

The French language, which is yours, ladies and gentlemen, has become mine, at least in writing. French has become the place of the deepening of my work, the space of my meditation or of my daydreams, the target of my utopia. Perhaps, I will even say it is the tempo of my breathing, from day to day: (it is) what I would like to sketch right now, where I dwell as a silhouette standing at your doorstep¹⁰ (Djebar A. , *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* , 1993).

As an Algerian native who received a French education, an education that was reserved to boys, AssiaDjebar developed an ‘ambivalent’ perspective within the Algerian society. This vision shaped her philosophical and cultural engagement. This is why Jane Hiddleston, one of AssiaDjebar’s scholars, claims that in her work, she “troubles the identification of her ‘writerly’ voice” (Jane, 2006, p. 3). Therefore, Djebar’s ‘ambivalent’ vision and starting point as a postcolonial writer preludes to an ongoing search for identity and subjectivity that can be met throughout her works¹¹.

Many critics consider *L’amour, la fantasia* to be one of Djebar’s

greatest works of one of the Algerian greatest literature titans. The work is the first volume of the Algerian quartet published for the first time in 1985 in French. The novel is a combination of Djebar's autobiography and Algeria's history during the Algerian Revolution. 'Throughout the novel, there is an emphasis on the experience of Algerian women who must decide to hold or reject their identity'(Ringrose, 2006, p. 24).¹² 'Feminism' is another important concern of the novel.

The novel is related to Djebar's own life. The *Fantasia* opens with an important scene of the young girl who is caught and surrounded by two worlds, two languages: French and Arabic, and two historical periods: past and present. The novel's first scene opens with a father taking his young girl to school (Djebar. A,*L'amour; la fantasia*, 1985, pp. 11-16). Such scene has a relation with Djebar's own childhood when:

...her father decided to send her to a French school in order to receive a formal education: A little Algerian girl going to school for the first time, one autumn morning, walking hand in hand with her father. A tall erect figure in a European suit carrying a bag of schoolbooks. He is a teacher at the French primary school; a little Algerian girl in a village in the Algerian Sahel.(Winkler, 2003, p. 434)

Joining the French school was a decision taken by AssiaDjebar's father. Throughout the novel, Djebar claims that thanks to her father's choice, she was different from other Algerian women who did not receive education. AssiaDjebar made it explicit, in her *L'amour; la fantasia*, that: "it was her father who gave her the opportunity to get schooled and open wider horizons and multiple perspectives" (11-13).

Feminism is not the only theme discussed in Djebar's novel. The novelist devoted other works to discuss the legacy of the French colonization of Algeria. She depended on the French archives; she re-wrote

it, and therefore, challenged the colonizer in her writings. Djébar, accordingly, was able to approach Algeria's past from the colonizer's points of views as she relied on a collection of eyewitness accounts written by French journalists and officers. These documents, including diaries and personal letters of French soldiers, helped Djébar to make a comparison between the French written historical documentations and the Algerian oral tradition of narrating (Peters, 2012, p. 1). By doing so, Assia Djébar made an appropriate use of these documents as historical evidence and reinvested it into a new Algerian cultural memory. The latter was combined with her narrative fiction to 'construct' her novel¹³.

Furthermore, Djébar use the French record in order to retell it from an Algerian perspective. Another aim behind re-writing Algerian history is to oppose and counter the French 'Center' vision to Algeria the 'Periphery'. Djébar rejected the idea that the French archive as the only witness of Algeria and its colonial history (though she depended on it partially in her writings). Therefore, she used it to create her own opposed narrative, an Algerian one. In her in-depth study, *Recasting Post-colonialism: Women Writing between Worlds*, Anne Donadey illustrates this point: "The Frenchmen's writings served to erase and/or distort the Algerian people by (mis) representing and colonizing them"¹⁴ (Donadey, 2011, p. 70).

As a writer, Djébar felt that she must re-appropriate this discourse, rewrite it, and subvert it by decentering its perspective. She "over reads" the colonial archives, reading Algerian men and women back into history, and then overwrites their presence by writing over colonial documents¹⁵.

In her fiction, Djébar mainly deals with her 'overflowing' relationship with the French language and the place and voice of women in Algerian history and Islam. Djébar, for the first time, comes to grasp the Berber dimension of her identity (as Mouloud Feraoun did)(Tessaadit.Y.T, 2004, pp. 251-275)

Djébar in her fictional novels *Vasteest la prison* (The Prison is so

Vast), *L'amour, la fantasia* (The Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade) and her film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (The Nouba of Ladies of Mount Chenoua) shows a clear appreciation to her Algerian roots and Berber ancestry (Djebar L. C., 2012, pp. 154-176). History as identity are present in her writings.

Because of personal reasons, Djebar believes that writing in the French language is problematic. It results in the disconnection between herself and her Algerian heritage. Moreover, writing in the French language causes her an identity crisis. She writes in her novel *Fantasia: an Algerian Cavalcade*,

‘Ever since I was a child the foreign language was a casement opening on the spectacle of the world and all its riches. In certain circumstances it became a dagger threatening me’ (126).

Many passages in this novel *L'amour, la fantasia* show Djebar's lingual and cultural alienation. In one of the passages ‘*L'aphaseamoureuse*’, she writes:

Dans les cérémonies familiales les plus ordinaires, j'éprouvais du mal à m'asseoir en tailleur: la posture ne signifiait plus se mêler à l'autre femme pour partager leur chaleur, tout au plus s'accroupir, d'ailleurs mal commandment¹⁶. (181)

This passage shows clearly a social malaise and a setting of a discomfort of the writer.

Another setting showed by the writer to reveal another malaise.

Cette impossibilité en amour, la mémoire de la conquête renforça. L'orsequé, enfant, je fréquentai l'école, les

mots français commençaient à peine à attaquer cerempart. J'héritai de cette étanchéité; dès mon adolescence, j'expérimentais une sorte d'aphasie amoureuse: les mots écrits, les mots appris, faisaient retrait devant moi, dès qu'il tenait de s'exprimer le moindre élan de mon cœur. (183)

This time, the uneasiness of the writer is at school when she was child. Her first entrance to the school and her first exposure to French caused her an internal tension and psychological faintness.

Assia Djébar again shows her lingual alienation in other contexts. One of them is revealed below.

Lorsqu'un homme de ma langue d'origine pouvait, me parlant en français, se permettre une approche, les mots se transforment en un masque que, dans les préliminaires du jeu esquissé, l'interlocuteur se résignait à prendre. C'était lui, en somme qui se voilait, pour oser avancer à ma personne. (183)

Assia Djébar, to a given extent, struggles within an internal 'ambivalence' and 'contradiction'. She feels a paradoxical state between being grateful for the opportunities that her education in the French language has afforded her and hatred toward the same education that has essentially attempted to make her an outsider from her Algerian identity, heritage and culture.

5.3 Assia Djébar's Soft and Crying Nationalistic Militantism

In 1958, Assia Djébar married a member of the Algerian fighters against the French colonizer, Ahmed Ould Rouis. Moreover, they moved to

Tunisia where she worked as an investigative journalist. She wrote for the FLN newspapers 'El Moudjahid ', with Frantz Fanon as editor. However, on the eve of Algeria's independence in 1962, Djebar came back to Algeria where she started working at the University of Algiers. During this period, she published two novels which were considered as more politicized literary, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (1962) (Children of the New World) and *Les Alouettes naïves* (The Naives Larks) (1967) (Ringrose, 2006, p. 10). However, she, similar to other Algerian writers, was criticized for her ongoing writings in French instead of switching to the Algerian national language. AssiaDjebar was 'unable to disconnect herself from the French language that she acquired!'

Indeed, AssiaDjebar, throughout all her books, acts as a writer who tries the best to narrate the experience of Algeria as a nation with a spectral language in a progressive quest and search for non-existing limits of the nation has destructed identity. Her explicit reflections on the position of the writer and its role as an intellectual reveal an evolution towards the understanding of the modest but necessary role of intellectuals. AssiaDjebar preserves the 'intellectual task as a voice for the people' and a 'witness to the suffering of Algerians.

AssiaDjebar claims that her role as a writer should be tightly linked to her intellectual actions. In this respect, she said: "A book, one among thousands, millions that time will reduce eventually to dust or to a web-like architecture made of multiple silences, the symphony of a fading, yet haunting dream" (Jane, 2006, p. 51). Each role complements the other, according to her.

Many critics consider Algerian authors in French were 'fortunate' receivers (including AssiaDjebar) of French education. The latter 'opened' for them 'new horizons' (at that time) added to the fact that it exposed them to the masterpieces of Western literature. These Francophone writers decided to portray this 'unexpected happy fate'. In turn, stressing the

doomed destiny of their own people that horizon was 'blemished'. Jean Jaures, the French socialist thinker, described the Algerian young elites "we have set the young Algerians...astride two civilizations: they rapidly lost footing in theirs and they have hardly been able to introduce themselves into ours" (70). These elites did not admit that colonization had brought equality and happiness to Algeria. (72) (Saadallah., 1978, pp. 70-72). Would critics consider Djebbar part of these elites? As a pertinent recommendation, researches should keep digging in these fields to give 'true' merit to Algerian writers in French expression.

6. CONCLUSION

AssiaDjebbar proved to be history-knowing novelist and knowable filmmaker who used all her talents to revive colors, uproars and fantasia of some episodes in the Algerian history mixed up with autobiographical highlights. Her pen was an effective camera that flashed the atrocities of the French conquest and its aftermath.

AssiaDjebbar moved from the far history to recent one, from third person to first one with an extraordinary evocation to her father, mother, and cousin. She is simply one of the icons of the Algerian literature in French expression.

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8. Appendices

Plot Summary of *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* by Assia Djébar.

Fantasia (cultural definition) : An equestrian event, a traditional closing of a Berber wedding celebration, it is a martial performance ; it symbolizes a

strong attachment to tradition. Fantasia (musical definition): a musical composition featuring free improvisation by the composer.

Cavalcade: A procession or parade, that focuses on a re-enactment of important historical events. It is a participation event, as opposed to a spectacle.

In this stunning novel, AssiaDjebar intertwines the history of her native Algeria with the episodes from the life of a young girl in a story stretching from the French conquest in 1830 to the 1954-1962 War of Liberation. The girl, growing up in the old Roman coastal town of Cherchel, sees her life in contrast to that of a neighboring French family, and yearns for more than law and tradition allow her to experience. Headstrong and passionate, she escapes from the cloistered life of her family to join her brother in the maquis' fight against French domination. Djebar's exceptional descriptive powers bring to life the experiences of girls and women caught up in the dual struggle for independence - both their own and Algeria's. (Adopted from Heinemann Edition)

9. Notes

منذ ان كنت طفلة كانت اللغة الاجنبية بمثابة نافذة على العالم وكل ثرواته...في ظروف معينة أصبحت هذه اللغة خنجر (في)¹
!.....ظهوري) بهدّني

(أسيا جبار...الحب الفنتازيا ص 126)

Depuis mon enfance, la langue étrangère a été une fenêtre ouvrant sur le spectacle du monde et de toutes ses richesses. Dans certaines circonstances, c'est devenu un poignard qui me menaçait
(Djebar, *L'amour, la fantasia*, 1985, p. 123)

²Synthesisfrommanyencyclopedias(World Book Encyclopedia, Britannica, Universalis...)

³(Djebar, *L'amour, la fantasia*, 1985, pp. 14-17)

⁴L'écriture est dévoilement, en public, devant des voyeurs qui ricanent...Une reine s'avance dans la rue, blanche, anonyme, drapée, mais quand le suaire de laine rêche s'arrache et tombe d'un coup à ses pieds auparavant devinés, elle se retrouve mendiante accroupie dans la poussière, sous les crachats et les quolibets

(Djebar, *L'amour, la fantasia*, 1985, p. 104)

(As cited by Hervé Sanson in *Lire AssiaDjebar!*)

⁵ « Ma fiction est cette autobiographie qui s'esquisse, alourdie par l'héritage qui m'encombre. Vais-je succomber ? » (Djebar A.,*L'amour, la fantasia*, 1985, p. 304)

C'est une autobiographie qui est tissée de fiction, l'autobiographie a pour nom fiction, la fiction se fond dans l'autobiographie. L'autobiographie pratiquée dans la langue adverse se tisse comme fiction, du moins tant que l'oubli des morts charriés par l'écriture n'opère pas son anesthésie. Croyant « me parcourir », je ne fais que choisir un autre voile. Voulant, à chaque pas, parvenir à la transparence, je m'engloutis d'avantage dans l'anonymat des aïeules... !

(As cited by Hervé Sanson in *Lire AssiaDjebar !* p. 24)

⁶As referred to by the researcher in another article entitled:Exploring the Algerian Novel-the Colonial Legacy-the Post-colonial DiscourseNexus. Themes and Languagespublished by Revue des Sciences Humaine, Constantine 1 University on June 2020 pp 583-595 Vol 31, n 2.

(BOUDERSA, 2020, pp. 583-595)

⁷Ibid

⁸« Les femmes algériennes, sous la plume d'AssiaDjebar, habitent le corp textuel français : expèrince première, unique,dans la liitérature de langue française », (Assia Djebar, 2012, p. 21)
(As Cited by Hervé Sanson in *Lire AssiaDjebar !*)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰As referred to by the researcher in another article entitled: Intellectual and LiteraryLanguageControversies in the Algerian Post-colonial NovelWritten in French published in Ichkalat Revue on 2020 Vol 9 N5 pp 628-645
(IBOUDERSA.H, 2020)

¹¹Interview with Abdelkader Aoudjit, Algerian Professor at the University of West Virginia, USA. April 2015.

¹²« In the most ordinary family ceremonies, I found it difficult to sit cross-legged : the posture no longer meant mingling with the other woman to share their warmth, at most squatting, moreover inconveniently » (Translated from French by the researcher)

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This impossibility in love, the memory of the conquest reinforced. When I was a child, I went to school, French words were just beginning to attack this rampart. I inherited this tightness ; from my adolescence, I experienced a kind of amorous aphasia: the words written, the words learned, withdrew in front of me, as soon as the slightest impulse of my heart wanted to express itself.

(Translated from French by the researcher)

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When a man of my native language could, speaking to me in French, allow himself an approach, the words are transformed into a mask that, in the preliminaries of the sketched game, the interlocutor resigns himself to take. It was he, in short, who veiled himself, to dare to advance in my person.

(Translated from French by the researcher)

¹⁵As cited by Abu El Kacem Saadallah in the *Journal of Modern African Studies* in an article entitled : *The Rise of the Algerian Elite 1900-1914*, pp. 70-72).

¹⁶The researcher depends on AssiaDjebar's work in its original version (in French), and on the translated versions in English and Arabic. The use of translated versions explains the use/usage of both French and Arabic in the core of the paper (Some translations within analyses are of the researcher).

