

Assia Djébar's *La Femme sans sépulture* (20002) / The Woman without Sepulcher: The Quest for Female Heroism

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Abstract:

Assia Djébar has earned international attention for her poignant, sophisticated portrayals of female characters. Her semi-autobiographical fiction, *La Femme sans sépulture* (2002) / *The Woman without Sepulture*, tells the story of Zoulikha, a forgotten heroine of the Algerian war of independence; she went up to the “maquis” in spring 1957 and was arrested two years later by the French army. She disappeared and her corpse was never found. Through Djébar's narrative this exceptional woman is resuscitated and her radiant presence is everywhere in ‘Césarée’ (Cherchell in West Algeria), the birthplace of Assia Djébar. Zoulikha's story becomes a love song against oblivion and hatred. Her tragic fate, her mutilated and tortured body stands as a symbol of resistance linking the struggle for national liberation with that of women's liberation and highlights the extraordinary role of the Algerian women during the Algerian War.

This paper explores the concept of the hero, more appropriately put, the concept of the heroine in *La Femme sans sepulture* / *The Woman without Sepulcher* and investigates how Djébar adapts the motif Journey (Northrop Frye's element of the quest) to the female character Zoulikha Oudai, a freedom fighter during the Algerian Revolution War. Djébar re-writes history to reevaluate the heroic role of the Algerian women. Thus, Zoulikha's fight stands as a symbol for other women, the whole generation of mothers and daughters before and after independence. We consider that in previous studies concerning the hero-like in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* – women are relegated to a secondary role. Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope in *The Female Hero* claim that women are and have been heroic, but that the culture has often been unable to recognize female heroism (1981: vi). Nowadays, however, it is evident that the study of the woman as a ‘hero/ine’ is necessary to a better understanding of not only of women's writings, but of literature as a whole.

Résumé :

Assia Djebar a su attirer l'attention du monde littéraire internationale par les portraits poignants et sophistiqués de ses personnages féminins. Sa fiction semi-autobiographique intitulée, *La Femme sans sépulture* (2002) raconte l'histoire de Zoulikha, héroïne oubliée de la guerre d'indépendance Algérienne ; montée au maquis au printemps 1957, et portée disparue deux ans plus tard après son arrestation par l'armée française. Sa présence irradiante flotte à jamais au-dessus de Césarée (Cherchell dans l'Ouest Algérien), ville natale d'Assia Djebar. A travers ce récit, l'auteur ressuscite le passé ou l'histoire de Zoulikha devient un chant d'amour contre l'oubli et la haine. Le corps mutilé, torturé de cette héroïne symbolise le combat des femmes pendant la guerre d'Algérie. Le thème central de ce roman met en relief la lutte pour la libération nationale avec celle de la libération des femmes.

Cet article explore le concept du héros, plus précisément, le concept de « l'héroïne » dans le roman cité précédemment et examine comment Assia Djebar adapte « le motif », l'élément de la quête du théoricien Northrop Frye, pour le personnage féminin Zoulikha Oudaï, une combattante de la guerre de la Révolution algérienne. Cet auteur réécrit l'Histoire où elle réévalue le rôle héroïque des femmes algériennes. Ainsi, la lutte de Zoulikha est un symbole pour les autres femmes de toute génération confondue, des mères et des filles, avant et après l'indépendance. Nous considérons que dans les études précédentes concernant la notion du héros - comme dans Joseph Campbell *Le héros aux mille visages* - les femmes sont reléguées à un rôle secondaire duquel Assia Djebar aspire à les faire sortir en leur donnant la parole et le rôle principal. Carol Pearson et Katherine Pope dans *The Female Hero* considère que les femmes sont et ont été héroïque, mais que la culture a souvent été incapables de reconnaître l'héroïsme féminin. Aujourd'hui il est évident que l'étude de la femme comme « héroïne » est nécessaire pour une meilleure compréhension non seulement des écrits des femmes, mais de la littérature en général.

Introduction

Assia Djebar has an extraordinary ability to entrance her listeners (readers) with her voice, modulated by the cadence and musicality of her Algerian origins; and even more impressive, is her capacity to transport her readers into a vast territory where the land and people tell stories with the lyricism of a poet. Djebar does not just write fiction about Algeria, but writes in the voice of women who tell stories of love, longing, poverty, despair, entrapment, endurance,

religious belief, and even freedom and hope. Her novel *La femme sans sépulture* (2002) / *The Woman without Sepulcher* portrays female characters who use language as a means of self-exploration and self-definition within their world. This novel tells the story of Zoulikha, a forgotten heroine of the Algerian war of independence; she went up to the “maquis” in spring 1957 and was arrested two years later by the French army. She disappeared and her corpse was never found. According to Northrop Frye, “if [the hero is] superior in degree to other men but not to his environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression for greater than ours” (Frye, 1957: 33-4). Through Djébar's narrative this exceptional woman is resuscitated; her tragic fate, her mutilated and tortured body stands as a symbol of resistance linking the struggle for national liberation with that of women's liberation. Djébar uses different women's accounts to magnify Zoulikha and make her appear as a heroic figure, the one that stands to highlight the extraordinary role of the Algerian women during the Algerian war for independence.

In Western mythology, the hero is a male protagonist. In Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* the hero-myth describes not only male experience as universal but presents the woman as a part of it. “Woman, in the picture language of mythology,” writes Campbell, “represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is who comes to know,” for “the woman is life, [and] the hero is knower and master” (Campbell, 1972: 116). In attributing simply a passive role to the woman – as the mother from whom the hero must depart, as the temptress he must ignore in his trial, or as the maiden who (once rescued) often becomes his most treasured trophy – Campbell relegates her to a supplementary and subordinate position, turning her into an instrument for the hero's glorious adventure (Ibid. 120). “For a heroine is just that, an image”, as Rachel M. Browstein points out in *Becoming a Heroine*, and images are static and silent, with no voice of their own (1982:xv). Djébar, however, presents in *La femme sans sépulture* / *The Woman without Sepulcher* powerful female characters who struggle with their identities and voices. In the novel in question the ‘hero’ is a woman and her journey as a heroine has taken center

stage; and her active role, in the narrative, is Djebar's way to reinstate the female voice in Algeria. The author, certainly, agrees with Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope who suggest in *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*, that the archetypal hero/ine masters the world by understanding it, not by dominating, controlling, or owning the world and people (1981: vii). The quest motif in this narrative is to re-establish women's voices and the telling of their experiences to vindicate their perception of self and the world around them, and definitely, their repossession of the voice they have lacked as mere heroines. Hence, this novel may be read as a quest for the reinstatement of the female voice and confirm female heroism. From the beginning the author underscores the importance of transcribing Zoulikha's story, the one that has been told by different voices. So, writing, for the author, becomes an act of safeguarding of the heroic fight of the Algerian women during the war. The polyphonic voices of 'Césarée' reverberate, even nowadays, in Algeria where women are trying to fight another enemy: "dragons" of patriarchal society. How does Assia Djebar make the voice articulate the past and present to reflect the importance of women and make Zoulikha come into sight as a hero/ine?

1. The Self-Discovery Journey of Zoulikha

It is true that the female quest share some elements with the male heroic tale; however, the female hero has to face her own "dragons" and themes. So, the quest motif in *La femme sans sepulture / The Woman without Sepulcher* appears in different forms. From the beginning, the author tells us that the narration deals with a vivid account of a tragic story of a woman, and that the aim of this narration is to transcribe her story and confirm her heroism as a female freedom fighter during the Algerian Revolution; thus, re-establishing the honor and bravery of the Algerian women. Djebar states: "The story of Zoulikha is finally going to be recorded, or rather to be re-registered" (2002:13). Her importance is reinforced through the different accounts of Cesarée's women: Hania, Mina, Lla Lbia, Zohra, and others. And above all, it is through Zoulikha's monologues that her voice is heard. She returns not only to clarify certain parts of her story: her childhood, her political choice, and her death; but also to tell another "version" of

history. Her voice haunts the streets and terraces, the Roman site and the lighthouse, fountains and patios of its ancient city.

The female hero in Djébar's novel ventures out in a journey of self-discovery which, as in the archetypal level, is the same for the male and includes the same stages: the departure, the initiation, and the return. What really differs from the pattern of male heroism is the kind of obstacles or "dragons" that appear at any stage and that the female hero must confront. For Pearson and Pope the forces that threaten the female hero and that may prevent her from discovering her identity and her voice in the process are four societal myths: **the myth of sex differences, the myth of virginity, the myth of romantic love, and the myth of maternal self-sacrifice**. They have also noted that the female's actual heroic journey is more complex, more abbreviated, and less linear than the chronological arrangement of the suggested, pointing out: "all female protagonists experience some of the archetypal events, but few experience them all, and individual literary works about the female hero tend to emphasize only one of them" (1981: viii). Zoulikha Oudai is viewed by Djébar as a woman taking a heroic journey. The whole fiction is constructed to confirm Zoulikha as a female hero-myth. Interestingly, her exploration of the female heroic journey reflects the three stages that Pearson and Pope described in their study: the first stage, the female hero exists from "the garden of dependency" and realizes that her former guides (parents, husbands, male friends, and authorities in general) are her captors; in the second stage, she encounters the figure of "the seducer" who, eventually, becomes another captor, and in the third stage, the female hero "journeys to her ancestral home" (Ibid. 68) to reunite with her mother.

Through the different challenges that her protagonist faces in her development, Djébar has made her confront her fears or "dragons", experience the different stages of female development, encounter males who assist her in her self-definition and struggle with voice, and finally return home. Zoulikha is challenged with the first three societal myths that Pearson and Pope present in their study. It is the myth of sex differences that tells exactly what a woman's place is, with the cage and the mirror as the main symbols that express the limiting and

suffocating effect of the traditional female role. From the beginning, Zoulikha tries to escape the traditional role of silent perfection. She was raised in a middle-class family. Her father, a land lord, ensured that she received a formal education, a privilege not accorded to many Algerian women of the era at that time. This set her apart from the other women in her family, whose education was either denied or cut short by the imposition of domestic responsibilities. She also refused to put on a veil, wearing European clothes and speaking very well French language. Zoulikha is also challenged by the myth of virginity that tells her to be chaste, perfect, and selfless. She married despite her father disagreement. She refused to join her husband abroad, and she took the decision to divorce and work to feed her child's needs.

As we can see, Zoulikha does not follow the traditional behavior of women; and even when she is challenged by a romantic love that tells women like her that she can be real only when reflected in the mirror of a loving man's gaze, she refused to stay with her second-loved husband for political divergence. At another point in her journey, she has to confront the myth of maternal self-sacrifice. In the 'maqui', she terribly suffered from the separation of her children that Djébar artistically recorded in Zoulikha's monologues. All these events and actions reinforce her heroic stature. In the figure of Zoulikha, Djébar traces and makes us accept the evolution of a woman into a heroic quest-figure who has succeeded in facing and fighting her "dragons".

2. Zoulikha's 'Return': The Body as a Voice

The importance of returning home takes all its importance since Zoulikha has returned home to show other female protagonists their voices and true identities whereby the female protagonist's quest for voice and body takes all its importance since the body expresses identity. In her search for identity and meaning, rape and violence test Zoulikha's capacity for surviving male authoritarian voices who seek to subdue her, dominating her body and silencing her mind; but she resisted. She demonstrates her heroic power when she "masters" the colonial world by understanding it. Zoulikha's fight and the traumatic experience are used by Djébar to reveal the French colonial system and its atrocities. She seems to have equated the destruction of

Zoulikha's body with the damage of the war to Algeria. In the recurrent image of sexual assault, and the violence and abuse of her body, the author demonstrates the colonial system's capacity of violence and destruction in Algeria. The body stands as a symbol to refer to the land.

The return of Zoulikha may be interpreted as a metaphorical journey into the temporal-spatial spaces. Through her voice in the two monologues, she addresses her daughter, but not only. She addresses women of yesterday and today. The author has, successfully, released her body and has established it as a voice and has appropriated the Algerian female gaze. In doing so, she lifts the veil of silence, of invisibility the one that prevents heroism. The body thus emerges as a voice, and the voice is, consequently, written down in the text. So, Zoulikha's story which was an oral story finally becomes a "written" one, which aims at correcting the history of Algeria.

Ultimately, the end of the novel underscores the knowledge that these women, each in her own way, have been influenced by Zoulikha and have gained from their exposure to her double-edged mirror experience as a woman and as a freedom fighter. Djébar has achieved these "oxymonic" attributes by creating a female character with a mythical investiture. As a woman writer, it is necessary for her to create a heroine to explore women's journeys and their repossession of the voice that they have lost.

Conclusion

Assia Djébar claims: "I came back only to tell. I mean, in my hometown, her words and her silence" (Djébar, 2002: 214). Zoulikha's story allows the author to deal with an important chapter of the Algerian history: the Algerian war of independence and the contribution of women in this war. For the author, this chapter of history is not yet completed. Thus, this novel is Djébar's fight against the omission that would, on the one hand making total death of the character, but also the loss of an important component of the collective memory in relation to the contribution of the Algerian women in the Algerian Revolution. The feminine polyphony is used to save Zoulikha's memory and to re-write the official Algerian government version of history. Thus, her heroism stands as a symbol

for other women, the whole generation of mothers and daughters before and after independence.

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