

## Assia Djébar's *Ombre Sultane*: The Docile Bodies as a History of Algerian Women's Oppression

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### Abstract:

In several ways, this article examines Algerian women as docile bodies, as it is articulated in Djébar's novel *Ombre Sultane* (1987). After giving an overview of the history of Algerian women's oppression, the paper offers a feminist reading of Djébar's text and argues that it lends itself to the Foucauldian analysis of bodies that struggle with multiple kinds of power relations.

The analysis comes, then, with a specific account of the crucial strategies to produce social change. Using Foucault's major feminist thoughts, the article shows Djébar's talent in responding against women's otherness and constitutional marginalization. So she challenges the traditional patriarchal structure through demonstrating her female protagonist as an agent of change and self-creation.

**Keywords:** power relations; body; gender inequality; emancipation; women's identities.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault's book, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (1991) explores the evolution of powers since the middle ages. His main argument is that the body was and remains an object and target in power relations as "a means of both punishment and of investigation" (42). He argues that the purpose from body discipline is to ensure the continuity of society through creating docile and obedient bodies. Thus he suggests that in the modern institutions, individuals are kept under regulations and surveillance as a key instrument to control and govern them, and that by means of these regulations, individuals are produced and prepared for collective goals. Accordingly, the disciplinary methods that are employed in schools, prisons, armies and many other institutions are considered as ways of controlling individuals to produce socially docile and profitable members. Furthermore, Foucault (1991) explains the motif behind focusing on the body as follows: "the body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property" (11). Juxtaposed with the one's liberty is the notion of oppression and otherness. Foucault stresses the fact that power legitimizes the mistreatment and the marginalization of specific categories of society through labeling them with inferior qualities because of race, gender, sex, color, and class.

Assia Djebar's *Ombre Sultane* (1987) lends itself to the foucauldian analysis of bodies that struggle with the various forms of power relations, which aim at breaking the body on the one hand and one's personality on the other hand. The reason behind offering a foucauldian reading of Djebar's novel is her talent to recover women's silenced voices and bodies through criticizing the invisible system of postcolonial Algeria and its disciplinary institutions, which press and limit the individual's freedom. This article, thus, suggests that the novel revolves around Foucault's theoretical framework, providing almost similar ideas through presenting the female suffocation under the disciplinary regulations of the postcolonial system and the patriarchal domination. In this regard, the novel will be analyzed in the light of feminist perspectives of Foucault's developed notion of "docile bodies". Consequently, the study will come with a specific examination of crucial strategies through which the female oppressed character attempts to subvert the power relations and change the imposed otherness through negotiating her liberty to cross the gender borders to explore the outside world.

## 2. Algerian Women's History of Oppression

Algeria was a French colony from 1830 to 1962. During the war for independence, Algerian women were active participants as nurses, cooks, and armed brave combatants. They fought equally with men and suffered from the French brutal means of repression, imprisonment, and death. Their historical participation in the bloody war of 1962 marked their vital role in the country's liberation. Indeed, the actual aim behind their thirst to liberate Algeria was twofold: They worked hard for the whole population's independence on the one hand and looked for a future self-emancipation. They were convinced that they will provoke a potential social change if they go hand in hand with men, which may bring the gender inequality to its end and create new constitutions about the Algerian women's conditions. Many contemporary writers wrote that "many Algerian women did not question the priority of liberating the country over gender

equality, since they believed independence would surely end discrimination” (Leonhardt, 2013, p. 51).

However, they did not share equally with men the benefits of independence and were strictly thrown aside and marginalized. The FLN, which became the only ruling political party in the postcolonial Algeria, made a conscious effort to re-establish the traditional Islamic conservative values of the Algerian society. For women, their structural silence was enhanced and “this meant that the enactment of family law was postponed for more than two decades during successive crises of political leadership and that the ancient patriarchal structure of Algerian society was maintained” (Lazarus, 2010, p. 84). From that period onward, Algerian women’s status was subject to diverse historical changes and institutional injustice. Ahmed Ben Bella’s presidential regime, which took place from 1962 to 1965, agreed a new constitution, which promoted a number of civil and political gains for women. They achieved access to political offices as they assured the right of voting. The constitution defended also the economic, cultural, and social rights of Algerian women and protected them from any kind of sexual or racial discrimination “All political, economic, social, and cultural rights of Algerian women are guaranteed by the constitution” (Lazarus, 2010, p. 84). Though this change was considered efficient in the lives of these women, it is widely argued that the years of sixties and seventies signaled the beginning of the backlash against the progress of women’s rights. In her article, *Algerian Women, Citizenship, and the ‘Family Code’*, Z. S. Salhi (2003) interprets the Algerian women’s situation as follows:

What is clear is that the majority of Algerian men did not acknowledge the need for women’s emancipation. Those who did often saw it as a secondary priority in relation to the endless list of other issues facing the government. Soon after independence, Algerian men cut the strong ties that they had forged with their female compatriots, and denied them their basic civil rights. (p. 28)

During the presidential regime of Chadli Benjedid, who was named President of Algeria by the Islamo-ba’thist clan in 1978 (Salhi, 2003, p.29). The period marked the appearance of new and more severe restrictions on women. A new ministerial order was signed and broke the constitutional commitment of women’s freedom to movement. They were prohibited from travelling alone without being accompanied with male relative. This act ensured the secondary position of the Algerian women and proved that their citizenship was perceived as a privilege that could be withdrawn at any time. As a response, Women organized a huge demonstration on 8 March, 1980 to express their disapproval and ask for the abolishment of such restrictions. Finally, the ministerial order was concealed.

Nevertheless, Benjedid’s restrictions did not reach their end. A new Family Code was prepared one year later. By remaining faithful to Islamic laws, the code reflected conservative policy inspired from *sharia*. Through studying women’s rights in the context of Islamic societies, the historian Mounira M. Charrad (2001) states that “family law policies resulted from the strategies pursued by the newly sovereign states to establish authority over the society as a whole” (p. 6). Charrad’s comment suggests that the purpose from implementing the Family Code was political more than anything else, “in order to win the support of the country’s conservative political base” (Lazarus, 2010, 84). The exclusion of women from the participation in the code preparation was an apparent betrayal of what they fought for, which resulted in turn with a large

number of protests and demonstrations, uncovering the Algerian female progressive consciousness. Slogans were carried to voice their rejection and wrath of the government's enactment of the Family Code "No to Silence, Yes to Democracy!" and "No to the betrayal of the ideals of November 1, 1954". At this time exactly, Algeria witnessed the appearance of feminist movements that were active to achieve social change and establish the ideal of gender equality in the country.

With the government's introduction of the Family code, which became a law in June 1984, Algerian women were discriminated in terms of marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. Marnia Lazreg maintains that "Family law has often codified the ownership of wives and children by fathers/husbands" (Lazreg, cited in Salhi 2003, p. 30). The law determines women's status as submissive members and object of patriarchal restrictions. It makes it a legal duty for them to obey and serve their husbands, parents, and relatives. The law was seriously criticized because of its unequal assignments of women's and men's roles. It has clearly privileged men over women through restricting the female freedom and supporting the male authority. It forbids Algerian women from arranging their own marriage contracts without the representation of a matrimonial guardian (*wali*) as it forbids them also from marrying non-Muslims. Meanwhile, Algerian men have the total freedom to marry whoever they want. Women's inferiority is clearly seen through this code. While men are given the absolute right to divorce and decision-making, women's divorce cannot occur easily without passing through a series of qualifications. Furthermore, though the child custody is awarded to the mother, she has no authority to decide on its education or to take the child out of the country without the father's acceptance.

As it has been alluded before, the family code established the concept of a conservative family structure characterized by patriarchal authority. It affirms the Islamic practice of allowing men to marry as many as four wives. Polygamy remains legal in the Algerian society where women were largely recognized as guardians of men and traditions rather than as autonomous individuals (Kelly and Breslin, 2010, p. 2). Fatima Mernissi comments on Muslim men's problem concerning women's rights and equality as follows:

If women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran [sic] nor the prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite. The elite faction is trying to convince us that their egotistic, highly subjective, and mediocre view of culture and society has sacred basis. (Mernissi, 1991, p. ix)

Mernissi's quote articulates the true cause behind men's aim to keep women in their traditional role. She explains that women are always seen as being dependent on male supremacy, and their independence will break the Algerian culture and customs. Though the Family was amended in 2005 because of women's unstoppable reclamations, the code is still criticized by several parts of world for its violence and human rights violation.

During the bloody decade (1992-2002), Algerian women were target of violence, especially rape and physical abuse. The Fundamentalists began to threaten women's lives through their savage plans against women. A woman from Ouargla was burnt because she was living alone with her seven children. Acid was thrown on women in public places to threaten them and imprison them behind the walls. The FIS members focused much more on women's Islam and its

importance because according to their understanding women are a vivid symbol of religious, national, and cultural identity. They attributed specific roles as mothers, sisters, and wives, or simply put men's wealth. Their beliefs seem extremist and seek to destroy the human dignity and individuality, especially through their attacks of intellectual people and successful women such as Hassiba Boulmerka who was declared a shameless because she ran half naked.

The end of 1990 brought a crucial change in the Algerian history in general and women's experience in particular. Abdel Aziz Bouteflika was elected president and lead terrorism in the country to its end. Algerian women supported the new president and believed in his good faith. The new government made considerable efforts to guarantee women's constitutional equality with men. However, women continue to be excluded from politics, law, and business. As a result, the country witnessed the emergence of different feminist movement as well as literature, which aims principally at voicing the female struggle with gender inequality.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Assia Djebar's second novel, *Ombre Sultane* (1987), delves into the Algerian traditional culture of gender inequality and social categories, which support the masculine superiority and female inferiority. The text presents the disciplinary aspects of the Algerian postcolonial society that aims at legitimating the appearance of a total control over people through systems of surveillance and tactics which go back to Foucault's 'docile bodies'. In his article, Monique Deveaux (1994) argues that "this new regime of control is minimalist in its approach (in the sense of lesser expenditure of force and finance) but more far reaching and localized in its effect on bodies" (224). Foucault suggests further that "sex is the pivotal factor in the proliferation of mechanisms of discipline and normalization" (Deveaux, 1994, p. 224). Djebar's literature is filled with multiple depictions of female otherness and marginalization, body violation as well as identity distortion upon which a battle to change for equality and emancipation do appear. It highlights an essential dialogue between the female body and the sense of self definition through revealing the effect of the social disciplines upon the body control and identity evolution.

The novel is largely inspired from the Algerian social reality which is characterised by the notion of "the harem", a space designated for women's confinement. The latter does not consist simply in forcing women to stay at home for a particular time, but imposes the entire condemnation of their bodies as well as spirits in closed spaces. The majority of Djebar's texts, among which *Ombre Sultane* is well known, present the Algerian women as condemned prisoners, veiled bodies, restricted from parole and gaze. Respecting the rules is the right behaviour that women are supposed to show and any transgression suggests punishment of the woman who dares to break these social constraints. In other words, the body that does not show its docility to these disciplines will be treated severely for its rupture and disobedience.

The argument of this article turns around discussing the lives of two different women, wives of the same man, through whom Djebar situates two distinct categories of women according to their reactions against the patriarchal domination: the woman who uses another woman to assure her own emancipation "Isma", and the woman who shows a radical resistance and struggles for social change "Hajila". Both characters espouse feminist strategies to co-exist with the patriarchal system which classify them as objects and their bodies as production machinery. Instead of promoting a family love, co-existence, attempts toward sympathy and

kindness, the cultural and religious institutions play a key role in enhancing their inferiority and keeping their suffering.

Isma is a character of high importance in the novel. She is the narrator of events and the creator of Hajila. All along the story, Isma and Hajila portray two contrasting relationships to the Algerian social life. Though both of them are said to share the same husband, their existence differs. Isma rejects the duties of submissive wife and a nurturing mother and escapes to France. She is associated with a more active personality and free spirit. Unlike Hajila, Isma is an emancipated woman and not subject of her husband's authority. Despite the fact that each detail in the novel seems to separate these two characters, Djebar brings them together and presents them implicitly as sisters, which may reveal her insistence on solidarity between women.

The novel begins by situating Hajila in a key space, which seems to have a central significance in her life. She is described in the kitchen "le lieu du mélodrame" (15). Enclosed in the house, her body is portrayed as a condemned body sadly circulating from one room to another. Here, Djebar transmits the disciplining forces of the Algerian culture which associates women's existence with the domestic space. As the Foucauldian theoretical framework suggests, it is assumed that through enforcing these individuals to physical imprisonment, they will become psychologically convinced to follow the social rules. But, Hajila stands also to designate the female deep desire to freedom when she is attracted by the external light like a butterfly, but unable to cross the shuttered space. While *Ombre Sultane* is about the disciplining ways to prepare docile individuals, it is similarly about the female efficient tactics to resist and escape these regulations.

This article will develop its argument through discussing the female protagonist in two different situations: at home and outside. According to Foucault, the home is also considered as an institution and disciplinary space. In these two distinct spaces, Hajila develops two corresponding discourses, which may show her with two different identities. At home, the authority of the husband is the controlling force. She relies on her shadowy existence through the construction of a strategic silence. Her body moves feebly from part to part with an absent sign of expression. Though it hides a deep sadness and dissatisfaction, this remains unrevealed "La même douleur irraisonnée t'habite. Les murs nus te cernent. Des larmes coulent sur ton visage fin et brun ; un rayon oblique de soleil dissipe la grisaille autour. Mais tu ploie dans une bruine de tristesse" (Djebar, 1987, p. 16). As revealed by Hajila's trajectory, it is possible for enclosed woman to escape her imprisonment, and this can be achieved through settling intelligent plans to gain access to the forbidden outside world. In this public place exactly, she succeeds to reach the freedom to stroll in the large cities where she finds the way toward constructing her true identity. Ultimately, we may argue that through creating an independent identity and silence, she seeks to detach herself from the oppressed conditions as a strategy of resistance on the one hand and as a tactic to gain self-autonomy on the other hand.

Since 1962, the Algerian culture emphasized on women's domesticity to ensure the continuity of social system. By the end of the revolutionary war, women were encouraged to go back home where they can be productive members as housewives. This process was based on convincing these individuals to stay at home, which transformed them to objects of social control and power relations. Foucault explains the relation between the body and power and argues that

the body is a cultural construct instead of being a natural phenomenon. He contends, further, that these bodies are manipulated and trained by disciplinary power. The application of these social regulations is accompanied with constant surveillance and examination to foster the body's usefulness and docility. The main aim of such a process is to achieve the internalization of collective goals.

Djebar shows what Foucault tries to clarify throughout his study in her account with the female struggle against the hegemonic postcolonial culture. Hajila struggles against the repressing patriarchal power, which encloses and deprives her from liberty. As it has been alluded before, she manages to live her life within the harem through silence as a strategy of radical resistance. She is depicted as a cultural product rather than a human being. Her oppression and docility reach their extended breadth with the life of forced marriage and her mother's exaggerating way in prevailing gender inequalities "Touma la vieille prend l'initiative de l'inspection et toi, Hajila, tu suis docilement" (Djebar, 1987, p. 23). Through this character, Hajila, Djebar does not present the female body as an individual body but instead as a collective body under the control of many other factors. The novel explores the social, cultural, and religious factors which take part in creating female docile bodies because women are not innately inferior but society leads to their inferiority. Simon De Beauvoir (1997) argues that:

One is not born a woman but rather becomes a woman. No biological or economical fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces that produces these creature...only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as another. (p. 267)

What is hidden behind the aim of creating docile bodies is the reduction of individual differences, which may facilitate the domination of power through social control. Djebar suggests that Hajila's experience of physical and psychological segregation pushes her toward awareness about her own distinctions. Hence, she does not innately deny her differences yet she learns how to cover them and behave like the majority of other women. She starts to act by revealing her conformity and submissive attitudes to avoid social exclusion. Commenting on her reliance on passive and obedient features, Hajila develops a "gendered identity" when she is at home in front of her husband and family. Lois McNay (1998) maintains that the creation of docile bodies is resulted with the formation of gendered identity (p. 71). She perceives Foucault's feminist ideas as limiting the individual and depriving him/her of his/her autonomy. Furthermore, she argues that the practice of the self remains always an object of power, which made this power the primary determinant of the individual's gender. Her reading of Foucault's ideas highlight, then, De Beauvoir's (1997) well known statement "one is not borne, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 267), which relates docility to femininity. However, what is remarked in the novel is that Hajila's consciousness defeats the surrounding power. Her gender identity is only a performance through which she aims to reach identity-construction, similar to Judith Butler's "gender performativity". Throughout the novel, we may argue that Hajila's performances are shaped by the pressure of two elements of central importance: the disciplinary gaze and the disciplinary space.

In Foucauldian terms "the principle of the gaze as a disciplining technique is not rooted in the actual act of watching, but in the individual's internalized belief on the possibility of constant



observation” (Sabanci, 2013, p. 65). It is clearly revealed that Hajila is haunted by the fear to be observed, especially during her secrets visits of large cities:

Tu tentes d'éteindre ta panique :

« Les hommes de ma famille, l'oncle, le frère, les trois cousins paternels qui viennent une fois par an de leur ferme éloignée, tous détourneraient les yeux avec respect, ils se diraient que mon mari m'a fait enlever le voile ! »

Ton esprit cherche :

« De son côté à lui qui me connaît ?...Des enfants, des parents, non, lui seulement ! ».

(Djébar, 1987, p. 49)

An analysis of Djébar's novel shows that her portrayal of domestic space allows us to identify Foucault's ideas about disciplinary space, which is arranged to control the body and ensure its docility through enclosure. Within the walls of the harem, which functions as the disciplinary space, Hajila's body is enclosed and kept far from the outside disturbances. She manages to neutralize and discipline herself by herself through her constant silence. The rules and guidelines are clearly established where the supreme power belongs to the husband “Ici, sur cette terre, on vous tue en vous enfermant derrière des murs et des fenêtres occultées” (Djébar, 1987, p. 114).

*Ombre Sultane* shows Djébar's discontent to illustrate and denounce the Muslim women's experience with captivity. Rather, it is worthy to note that the novel is more concerned with demonstrating the tactics and strategies that can be used by captive women in their quest for self-liberation. Through following Hajila's path, this study will summarize the crucial phases that she espouses to change her life from imprisonment toward emancipation. Isolated in her room, the smallest room in the apartment, she starts creating her imaginative contact with the outside world. It is apparent that the more her confinement is restricted the more she develops ways of resistance and escape. Without leaving the walls of her house, she gains a mental access to the male dominated streets through her senses and auditory skills. She challenges her husband's desire to strictly enclose her and travels through the noise which comes outside and through the images that she keeps in her memory.

Djébar insists on the fact that the harem functions to isolate women and preserve them from the male gaze. From the very beginning of the novel, readers are told about something rebellious to occur. Despite her constant silence, Hajila throws a very different character from other women, especially her mother. She reflects a strong reluctance toward respecting the dictated rules. Djébar gives a prominent example in which her emphasis upon Hajila's rebellious personality is well shown:

Durant cette première visite et après avoir toutes deux tourné au centre de la cuisine, tu t'étais aventurée sur le balcon. Le panorama te laissa émerveillée, par ses contrastes de lumière, surtout par l'exubérance des couleurs, comme sur le point pourtant de s'évaporer sous le ciel immuable... Toi, tu fixais toujours le paysage, les yeux aveuglés par cet éclat du jour inaltéré. Pour la première fois dominer la ville, ne plus se sentir un grain de poussière dans un des cachots du monde, un pou enfoncé dans quelque encoignure, ne plus...Ce tremblement qui t'habitait depuis l'enfance, s'épuiserait-il enfin là, à cette fenêtre ! (p. 25-26)



This extract articulates Hajila's first adventure to the exterior of her house. She is described as being drawn by the irresistible call of the spectacle of the city. It marks the beginning of her experience with resistance.

Foucault (1994) argues that "to resist is not simply a negation but a creative process; to create and recreate, to change the situation, actually to be an active member of that process" (p. 168). As Foucault questions to what degree can a dominated subject create its own discourse? Djebbar raises the question in what way an oppressed woman can create her own way of resistance? Through silence, Hajila decides to reach self-emancipation. In Foucauldian terms, she becomes an active social member through her resistance, so Foucault (1994) maintains that "if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience. You have to use power relations to refer to the situation where are not doing what you want" (p. 167). From Foucault's clarification, resistance doesn't mean negation but how the individual tries to find a way of change. Hajila does not negate the domination of her husband and society upon her, but instead she intelligently creates secret manners to free herself from their oppression.

Therefore, her silence is not portrayed as a passive one, but as an active strategy accompanied by her successive plans to visit the outside world. Her constant silence humiliates people around her, especially her husband, and gives her strength and self-confidence. Through her silence, Hajila gives an important lesson in patience and reveals that captivity is never absolute. It helps her to approach the forbidden streets without openly challenging the social rules. The passivity of her body displays a crucial role in reflecting her gender identity, and in maintaining her resistance against the patriarchal oppression rather than being her natural one. Consequently, Hajila's body appears as a target of power and a social subject. To quote from Susan Bordo (1990) the body is a text of culture:

Loss of mobility, loss of voice, inability to leave the home, feeding others while starving oneself, taking up space, and whittling down the space one's body takes up- all have symbolic meaning, all have political meaning under the varying rules governing the historical construction of gender. (p. 16)

As noticed by Djebbar (1987), Hajila uses the veil to facilitate her escape:

Tu vas sortir pour la première fois, Hajila. Tu portes tes babouches de vieille, la laine pèse sur ta tête ; dans ton visage entièrement masqué, un seul œil est découvert, la trouée juste nécessaire pour que ce regard d'ensevelie puisse te guider. Tu entres dans l'ascenseur, tu vas déboucher en pleine rue, le corps empêtré dans les plis du voile lourd. Seule, au-dehors, tu marcheras. (p. 31)

Here, the passage illustrates how Hajila uses the veil, which was a tool of controlling her, as a tool of emancipation. It allows her to leave the apartment without openly challenging the other members of her harem. It also enables her to cross the borders of her home, which we can suggest as a Foucauldian prison, where the residents especially women pass under the gaze of guardians "passant devant le concierge, tu baisses la tête. Tu t'immobilises ensuite devant l'ascenseur qui tarde à descendre. Derrière toi, le gardien te jauge. Il remarque le voile froissé qui t'enveloppe ; il imagine un rendez-vous, des étreintes" (Djebbar, 1987, p. 52).

The novel is also about women's corporeal Punishment. Hajila is severely punished by her husband to discipline her and change her behaviours. Djébar analyzes the situation of women during the postcolonial period and criticizes the brutal way in which they are forced to enclosure and punishment:

- Je t'aveuglerai pour que tu ne voies pas! Pour qu'on ne te voie pas!

Il te blesse au bras, le sang jaillit de l'entaille et l'homme demeure bras tendu, à fixer le sang...

-Te briser les pattes, pour que tu ne sortes plus, pour que tu restes rivée à un lit, pour que...

Ton corps tremble spasmodiquement, comme si une horlogerie secrète s'affolait en lui. (Djébar, 1987, p. 123)

Foucault sees that punishment does not discipline the individual but instead it aims at depriving him of his freedom in order to marginalize and control popular behavior. Djébar suggests that the aim behind the patriarchal brutality is to persist the male domination over women

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this article has discussed Assia Djébar's novel *Ombre Sultane* as an intelligent critic of the roots of identity crisis in Postcolonial Algeria, which is caused through women's exclusion and alienation. As a result, Djébar creates her novel to shed light on the individual's process to adjust and change the cultural conditions of Algerian society after 1962. In the light of Foucault's feminist perspective and his notion of 'Docile Bodies', this article has argued that the novel is about the major changes that the individual needs to lead himself/herself toward self-recognition and identity formation. It suggests the effective ways in which the self can defeat the social norms and learn to act freely.

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