

## Foucauldian Discourse in Assia Djébar's *Children of the New World* (1962)

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### Abstract:

Women dis/empowerment is an issue that has been tackled by several female writers, including the Algerian feminist novelist Assia Djébar (1936-2015). The latter's *Children of the New World* (1962) illustrates the genuine desire for females to achieve self-assertion as a consequence of the profound presence of men as oppressive. This work, then, highlights the presence of the discourse of femininity in the novel and its dominance over females. To reach this aim, the researcher will tackle discourse from a Foucauldian perspective, demonstrating women inability of venting their anger. Henceforth, female characters' passive reaction plays a great role in creating a substantial explanation of the power of discourse in generating the truth of females as inferior and passive. In addition to that, their impossibility to develop the voice they were denied enables the reader to trace their mental as well as emotional states.

**Key words:** discourse; Foucault; male dominance; female disempowerment; Djébar.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Assia Djébar is the pen name of Fatima-Zohra Imalayen (1936-2015). She is a great poet, novelist, and short story writer, whose narratives of women oppression and French colonization are classics of the twentieth century francophone literature. Most of Djébar's works embrace feminist and colonial themes, for she is known as a feminist writer par excellence as she used the colonizer's language to narrate Algerian women's thirst and craving for liberation from a doubly oppressed society, French colonization on one hand and male dominance on the other. Some of her works include: *La Soif* (1957) (The Mischief), *Les Alouettes Naïves* (1967) (The Naïve Birds), *L'Amour, la Fantasia* (1985) (Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade), *Vaste est la Prison* (1995) (How vast the Prison is), *La Femme sans Sépulture* (2002) (The Woman without a Sculpture), and *Nulle Part dans la Maison de mon Père* (2008) (Nowhere in my Father's House), *Ombre sultane* 1987 (English: *A Sister to Scheherazade*). In 1996, she was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

Her *Children of the New World* "is overtly anti-colonial and feminist, supportive of Algeria's struggle for independence from France, and critical of the oppressive nature of indigenous patriarchy" (Mortimer 148). It chronicles the lives of several female characters who suffer indignity and severe emotional problems at the hands of their husbands. It illustrates the genuine desire for females to achieve self-assertion as a consequence of the profound presence of men as oppressive. However, while trying to define themselves, the dialogue between the two entities (males and females) seems to be, most of the time, harmonious but deceiving. This work, then, highlights the presence of the discourse of femininity in the novel and its dominance over females. Women seem incapable of venting their anger. Henceforth, female characters' passive reaction plays a great role in creating a substantial explanation of the power of discourse in generating the truth of females as inferior and passive. In addition to that, their impossibility to develop the voice they were denied enables the reader to trace their mental as well as emotional states.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

The scholarship on Djébar's *Children of the New World* has tackled the novel from a variety of perspectives. In "Seeds of Change: Assia Djébar's *Les Enfants du nouveau monde/ Children of the New World: a novel of the Algerian War*", Robert Mortimer examined the novel from an anti-colonial as well as a feminist angle. He argues that Djébar believes that the "Algerian independence alone will not liberate women" (148) for they are also colonized by men. He also pays attention to the writer's portrayal of women as weak in the presence of males and "assuming greater authority" (150) when men are not at home.

In "Diverging Femininities in the Resistance Narratives of Algeria and Palestine", Farah Channaa focused on women's contribution to resistance in Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* (Al-Subbar) (1941) and Assia Djébar's *Children of the New World* (*Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde*) (1962). She argues that female characters are just a reflection of

Djebar's "interrelated views on feminism and political resistance" (19). In other words, the focus was on the novelist's stance towards the Algerian struggle for independence and women suffering from patriarchy.

In a thesis entitled "*Themes in the Francophone Algerian Novel*", Zahia Salhi worked on the development as well as the themes of the Algerian Francophone novel. To reach this end, Salhi selected a variety of Algerian writers from different periods of Algerian literature including Assia Zehar, Kateb Yacine, Mohammed Dib, and many other novelists. She analyzed the roles played by Algerian females in several works by Assia Djebar including her *Children of the New World*.

In their article "*Assia Djebar's Ombre Sultane: The Docile Bodies as a History of Algerian Women's Oppression*", Djohra Oulefki and Linda Belabdelouahab conducted a feminist reading of Assia Djebar's *Ombre Sultane*. The study was mainly based on Michel Foucault's thought and perspective on "bodies". The main focus was on the resistant side of females in the stated novel.

Despite the vast scholarship on Djebar's works, no study has examined the strong presence of Foucauldian discourse in her *Children of the New World* by focusing on the power of discourse in defining women and their position; in addition to scrutinizing the latter's effort to communicate to find their own being in a male dominated society.

### 3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Michel Foucault, "it is through discourse...that we are created" (Pitsoe & Letseka 24) and that discourse derives its power from people's welcoming reaction towards the reality created by it (Pitsoe & Letseka 24). Henceforth, people will become, unconsciously, compliant individuals who do not dare to criticize. In Djebar's novel, the female characters selected for analysis choose to remain silent and helpless as a reaction to male-dominance generally and social conventions particularly. To start with, the reader notices that Cherifa, though she shows some signs of resistance in some instances, she proves to be a character who succumbs to male-dominance and who is unable to unshackle herself from males' restriction. This is clearly indicated when

she sits down, stretches her willpower to make her mind go blank; to catch the decision by surprise: she wants to act. A strange desire overtakes and worries her, to do something, something daring whose luminosity will astound Youssef...She straightens up again, wants to be as clear as on the day when, panting, after her flight, leaning against the door to her room, she had tried to grasp what she needed to do next. 'I have to act,' she says cautiously, invaded by a vague fear (Djebar 84).

This indicates that inside her, there is a great desire to liberate herself from man's authority and the use of the word "luminosity" symbolizes Cherifa's thirst to be free. She wants to do something luminous to shock her husband. This means that she is not thinking about simple reactions instead, there is something bigger and more powerful inside her. Sadly enough, this woman seems not to have the courage to fulfill her desire for she is "invaded by a vague fear" (Djébar 84) when she *thinks* about reacting so, does she dare speak in front of him? Hence, Cherifa's fearful reaction illustrates her unconscious acceptance of her representation as an inferior female created by male discourse in the case of the novel.

What strongly illustrates her inability to react bravely is when the narrator says:

'Me, act? Me?' Perhaps that's what Cherifa is telling herself; perhaps she takes herself for a person at ease with the semidarkness, accidentally thrown into the sun and then overcome by the intuition that she cannot be satisfied with the light that blinds her but must also create a new step, a new approach a different way of seeing, being seen; of existing (Djébar 84).

Thus, she is looking forward to communicate in order to define herself but her "vague fear" symbolizes the impossibility of taking a step forward to achieve her aim. Hence, the source of her fear to act differently is derived from the social conventions that exist in her society. Her reaction and way of thinking illustrate the belief that humans' speech and thought about "a subject" demonstrates their behaviour towards the same "subject", and thoughts are what direct this behavior. Therefore, "social values and norms" play a key role in defining people's way of thinking. This means that discourse is directed, to some extent, by social reality (Bhattarai 1429). In the case of Cherifa, one can notice that her fear to react is the result of the social norm and reality in her society, which is males as dominant and females as submissive. On the other side of the coin, male discourse in the novel is also led by men's way of thinking that is derived from the social conventions, as clarified above.

Foucault believes that "discourse becomes knowledge/ truth only when it is verified by our society" (Bhattarai 1430). That is, when people receive a certain discourse as a norm and act based on that norm as a dominant one in society, they indirectly welcome the spread of that discourse in their society. That is the main reason behind Foucault's insistence on the impossible dissociation between discourse and society (Bhattarai 1430). Referring to another instance that highlights Cherifa's incapability to react is when the narrator says:

By the end of the story, Cherifa would remember with tears in her eyes that by some curious coincidence that day of bloodshed had been the day of her wedding. She remembered the questions of prying women: Do you love him? And since it was necessary to know whether she loved the stranger who had the right to take her that first night, and not wanting to scream no, she had grit her

teeth, not knowing at seventeen if her disgust and empty heart were not after all the lot of every woman. But, she tries to forget the man with broad hands who had become her husband (Djebar 122).

This extract reveals Cherifa's silent suffering, fury and abhorrence. Though she does not love the man she is to be wed (this is clear from the words: disgust, empty heart, the stranger who had the right to take her at the first night, etc), she is motionless as she can do apparently nothing about her situation. Though she is filled with revulsion and loathing to this stranger who has the right to take her virginity at the first night, she has no choice but to accept her fate and act like the social convention dictates. This instance then proves female characters' acceptance of male discourse as a natural truth. As a result, the discourse about females as inferior, silent, obedient, etc. has been welcome, indirectly, by women. Stated differently, though the latter have a strong desire to breathe freedom, they do not dare to do a step forward because they are afraid of the results. This passive reaction towards their situation highlights Foucault's insistence on the close connection between the power of discourse and people's acceptance of it as a truth.

In many occasions, Lila, a university student, seems to deceive her husband by praising him and acting in an emotional way. For instance, one day, when Ali comes home, Lila tells him:

'You are as handsome as a god, as a faun, as...' she would sigh half in jest. In his irritation with so much noise and fuss, he still managed to be touched at times by her admiration and would laugh when she threw herself on his chest and kissed him. She did so without any expertise, the way a child would act with a fabulous toy of which he doesn't tire. Ali would escape from her and scold, 'You're making me waste my time,' wanting to get back to work (Djebar 34).

According to Foucault, the "discourse of femininity" implicitly forms the "identity" of females to the extent that they start to "act out and behave according to what has been labelled as acceptable and true about females" (Pitsoe & Letseka 25). Again, this perspective demonstrates women's acceptance of a situation they are suffering from in fact. Worded differently, women's effort to act in a way that males considered as the norm indicates their acceptance of their reality as inferior. For example, Lila's behavior in the above-mentioned citation proves that her husband is not that important to her as she is trying to show him. What emphasizes this idea is the use of the word "jest" which indicates that she is not serious. Furthermore, the fact that she is treating her husband as a 'toy' may symbolize that her pretension to love her husband is just created to manipulate him. As a "toy", she can control and use him the way she wants. Ironically, her husband does not seem to take her words and actions seriously for he "would laugh when she threw herself on his chest" (Djebar 34) and sees these moments as a "waste" of "time". Hence, that emotional treatment is created by Lila to show a secret power over her husband and at the same time, her action illustrates Foucault's idea.

That is, it is an effort to behave as women are supposed to with their husbands, to respect and follow the social norm. Thus, she must show emotions rather than reacting violently, though she does not stand him.

Whenever Lila is disappointed about her husband, she seeks solace in Suzanne's, her friend, presence and attention. She sees Suzanne's company as a comfort because

[w]ith every incident in her love life, when Ali seemed to be vanishing and with him all connections, when he was becoming the other, the enemy, the stranger, Lila would flap her wings, lurching pitifully. A call to Suzanne. A visit. A note, a phone call. All Lila wanted was Suzanne's presence, Suzanne's attention, Suzanne's silence, so she could then better listen to herself. She'd complain about Ali, his inquisitive jealousy, his impossible mulishness (Djebar 72).

So, through the presence of a listener, Lila can express her feelings better than talking to herself. However, one notices that the listener Lila prefers is a female who keeps silent while listening. This may symbolize the passivity of women. Further, when Lila is angry about her husband, she does not dare to express her feelings of anger in front of him. She just keeps talking to the silent Suzanne, as if talking to herself. Thus, the image of her husband, Ali, is painted as that of a dominant and stubborn person. This idea brings to light Foucault's perspective on discourse as a means to "marginalize, silence and oppress" others (Pitsoe & Letseka 24). He strongly argues that discourse and power are closely interrelated. In this case, males occupy a position of power which serves in generating the discourse of femininity. In addition to that, Ali is a symbol of the other males who succeed in oppressing and marginalizing females.

Surprisingly enough, as an educated woman, instead of reacting, Lila postpones her realization of self-definition to her future child to realize. She declares to her husband: "'He's here,' she said in a wholly different voice as if the child would come and protect her. 'He's here,' and she smiled at Ali with a brave smile to apologize for her fears" (Djebar 37-38). The "brave smile" symbolizes her hope and certainty, at the same time, that her future child will rescue her. But *ironically*, the "HE" indicates that the child will be a boy so, the question that should be raised here is the following: isn't *he* going to have the same attitude and way of thinking as his father and the other men of his society? Will he really help her to achieve liberation successfully? The answer maybe "yes" only because it will be a mother-son relationship but when it comes to that boy's relation with a wife or a sister, it may not be promising.

The following is another example when the narrator describes Lila as motionless by stating:

What was she after all, at the age of twenty-four? She didn't have a clue and find the uncertainty painful. she gradually regained her taste for the tiny facets of a daily life of emptiness( reading, sleeping, sleeping some more, dreaming as she looked up at the sky in front of the open window,

listening to the same symphony ten time over and loving it ten times more, suddenly breaking out into a song in her dusk-lit room , letting her cleaning lady tell her about her life, complaining about her husband, and then philosophing, laughing alone just to hear herself laugh, and a thousand other solitary follies that seemed to spring borth from every stage of her previous life , all the way to tragic sorrow (Djebar 111).

In this example, Lila chooses to live a sedentary style of life due to her matrimonial problems. Though she seems to be living a luxurious life, she suffers of a tedious daily routine that include nothing but some repetitive daily activities that hold her back instead of forth. Those activities do not seem to bring her any joy. Instead, she just forces herself to smile or laugh just to hear herself laugh. In fact, she drowns in melancholy. In fact, Lila's behavior can be interpreted as an effect of discourse. In other words, the dominance of the discourse of femininity forms her "perceptions of the world" (Whisnant 6). Henceforth, the dominant discourse teaches Lila, as one instance of the other female characters, to become submissive and to remain absolutely motionless and passive. This effect confirms the fact that "discourse generates the world of our everyday life" (Whisnant 6). This means once one accepts a certain discourse as a truth in society, it will affect his behavior, way of thinking, and life.

When her husband joins the mountain, Lila is powerfully described as a passive woman who is unable even to think positively especially when she declares: "Is waiting not the same as killing everything inside you, with patience and somnolence? And what did I do during three years of marriage, of happiness? What am I doing now with solitude? Nothing. Nothing, and yet others struggle, others die" (Djebar 155). Through this example, Lila is tired of waiting for her husband who joined the mountain to fight with the other fighters. But, she did not seem to know how to spend her time. She only suffers of solitude and waiting that seem to kill her slowly. She even feels bad about the lost years of marriage that she sarcastically described as years of happiness while in reality they were dreary years of marriage. Instead of investing her time in doing something useful, she keeps waning and complaining about her solitude.

Even her husband does not seem to take her feelings towards him seriously because he clearly emphasizes:

Perhaps that's where the fault lay, in her determination to hang on to the style of her exhilarated adolescence; she the romatic, as Ali used to complain, the romantic gliding by, mostly that she wouldn't recognize the image in the eyes of mature and serious Ali, a real man such as the mountain demanded, the mountain that had subsequently taken him from her (Djebar 108-09).

Throughout the passage, Ali is teasing his wife, Lila, for being 'romantic' as if it is something to be ashamed of. For him, a man who fights in the mountain is supposed to be grim, firm, serious and courageous, and such a man would have no time to spend on futilities like love, romance, etc. Here one can consider Foucault's opinion about power that he believes is responsible of "connecting all social groups in a web of mutual influence" (Bhattarai 1429). As a result, power is what creates that grouping through the reinforcement of discourse and the normalization of a certain truth in society (Bhattarai 1429). As a male character, Ali occupies a position of power and hence, he is able to emphasize his opinion in his house and society in general. Lila, however, is a victim of that grouping as a result of the power of discourse.

Just like Lila's husband, Suzanne's also sees what women think as something trivial. For example, "[w]hen Omar came home later, [Suzanne] enjoyed telling him about their [her and Lila's] conversation...Omar didn't understand. 'Just childish!' he decided, with a severity that Suzanne found unfair" (Djébar 73). Omar's reply indicates that he does not take females' way of thinking seriously and does not see it as important that's why maybe he fails to understand his wife. Suzanne then replies: "'you're so rigid,' she said to him calmly and coolly" (Djébar 73). She is not brave enough to rebel so she just says it in a calm way. Omar's underestimation of Suzanne is similar to Ali's attitude towards his wife which emphasizes the normalization of the discourse of femininity. Therefore, Like Lila's, Suzanne's passive reaction to her husband shows this character as another female who simply accepts her reality as inferior. In this vein, Foucault argues that "each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth" (Pitsoe & Letseka 24). This means, every society is responsible of the acceptance or rejection of discourse and what is considered as "true" or "false". Thus, in the case of Suzanne, her husband's denial of the importance of her speech with Lila is somehow justified because as females, they do not show any signs of resistance to challenge their husbands. Rather, they accept the negative perspective they receive from them and keep suffering secretly.

As Lila's favourite listener, Suzanne, though she has never declared it, seems to have the same feeling as Lila's for "[s]he wishes she, too, could seem overcome for a while, like Lila, who had the willpower to lock herself up in this gloomy place, blinded and paralyzed for a moment before waking up again"(Djébar 76). This quote shows Suzanne as a character who is in a worse situation than that of Lila because at least Lila finds solace in the company of Suzanne. The latter, however, repressed all her feelings which is bitter than the situation of Lila. When they meet so that Suzanne listens to her friend Lila, "[the latter] sleeps and Suzanne would have kept silent anyway. Whatever she feels, whatever she does, she won't be able to burst into tears, let herself go; whatever the presence beside her, she will continue to be mired in her loneliness" (Djébar 77). But why does she prefer silence and loneliness? Is it silence that precedes the storm? Or she is just another passive female who cannot react? As a result, one can consider Suzanne as another submissive woman who succumbed to male dominance and proves to be an effect of discourse because



"[w]omen can be empowered with the help of discourse...[as] they can be steered with [it]" (Bhattarai 1428). This citation brings to light Foucault's idea on the close connection between power and discourse. Power is what make a certain discourse function as true or false. As a result, discourse either helps in the strength or weakness of a certain truth.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To wrap up, one can say that *Children of the New World* is concerned with the everyday resistance of the Algerian people generally and Algerian women particularly under the French occupation and social patriarchy. In the novel, she speaks about female characters that resist both male-dominance and the biased social conventions. The variety of female characters and the variety of their perspectives reveal that all Algerian women whether educated or illiterate are doubly oppressed, as stated by Channaa. This double colonization lies in the French colonialism and the dominating pejorative law of patriarchy. Through the aforementioned extracts, one notices that even those strong intellectual women, like Lila, were not vehemently free, strong and courageous. In some instances, they were reluctant and hesitant in their reactions to male-dominance. Thus, Djebbar's "narrative [can be described as] being incapable of breaking away from the patriarchal structure of ... [Algerian] society" (Channaa 25-26). As a final statement, one can say that men, as depicted in this novel, fail at understanding the significance of listening to their wives and the latter's importance in their lives. Because of their oppressive nature, they are not able to see these women's search for relationships, with their husbands that satisfy their wants and impulses.

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