

Aspects of Feminism and Transgression in Assia Djébar's Novel *So Vast the Prison*

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Abstract

The Algerian woman is among those women who were living profound agony during the difficult times of the country passed through and mainly from the rigid restrictions of their patriarchal society. Algeria's struggle for independence was considered as one of the most bitter and bloody wars of self-determination in history. It penetrated all levels of society and impacted the consciousness of both the colonizers and the colonized. During this war, the Algerian literary scene witnessed certain forbearance of the majority of the writers refraining from writing and publishing. However, after the independence, a considerable number of new authors emerged to impose several records encompassing poetry, novels and essays by which they have given a great insight into the social issues faced by the Algerian people in general and woman in particular. Assia Djébar was one of the outstanding Algerian writers who emerged before the independence trying to reveal in her works the hidden reality that the Algerian woman was living and how she managed to defy and challenge the social mores. Moreover, Djébar was considered as the first feminist historian novelist to pave the way for her "sisters" to launch the cry for the right to the emancipation of women in Algeria. Accordingly, the present paper tries to shed light upon the aspects of feminism and transgression in the Algerian society in the 20th century relying on Assia Djébar's magnum opus, *So Vast the Prison*.

Key Words: Assia Djébar, Feminism, Transgression, the Algerian Literature, *So Vast the Prison*.

1. Introduction

No one can deny that Algeria witnessed a dark and devastating period that marked its history, culture, language and most notably its citizens. The Algerian revolution overshadows the nation's long and torturous history which has strengthened the Algerians' identity and stimulated many Algerian writers to write for the sake of protecting their personality. A study of Assia Djébar's Novel *So Vast the Prison* is undertaken in order to depict the aspects of feminism and transgression in the novel. In order to reach this goal, one may reveal the characteristics of the Algerian history, culture and literature, demonstrate the state of the Algerian women during the 20th century and analyze the feminist features of the Algerian literature and its influence on Assia Djébar's novel *So Vast the Prison*.

2. An Overview about Algeria

Algeria is a very rich country for its historical, cultural and religious backgrounds. These aspects shape the Algerian identity which is based on a combination of Berber and Arab cultures. Further, this identity was once shaken by the cruel French colonization which lasted 132 years. During the 19th and 20th centuries, Algerians were systematically pauperized since the French settlers were allowed to confiscate their land. Thus, the French language becomes a legacy of colonialism. In addition, the impact of acculturation and all forms of oppression exercised by colonizer gave rise to a particular form of expression which is "The Francophone Algerian Literature".

3. The Francophone Algerian Literature

The Algerian literature is conceived as a mirror to all the cruel incidents that happened in Algeria during many years of colonization and after. Besides, this literature is written in both French and

Arabic and it can be divided into five main periods as the Literature of Acculturation (1920) which is related to the cultural adaptation of foreigners to a new culture that is examined. The best example of this period is: *Zohra La Femme d'un Mineur* of Abdelkader Hadj Hamou where he portrays the realities of the colonial system and the daily lives of Muslims in Algeria. Then, the Emergence of Autobiographical Literature that occurs at the early period of 1950s where the French directly becomes the main vector of the great debates which raise Algeria. The main works of that period are: *Le Fils du Pauvre* of Mouloud Feraoun, *La Colline Oubliée* of Mouloud Mameri and *La Grande Maison* of Mohamed Dib. Further, the Militant Literature (1954/1962) is a literature in which the historical material is reinforced and the nationalist sentiment is culminated in it. This period becomes famous by Kateb Yacine who publishes *Nedjma* surprising by its original form and its modern novel technique. Furthermore, the Post-Independence Literature (1962/1990) witnessed an explosion of conflicts between Arabic and French, a literature that combines the harsh reality to keep the language of the French and the inability to speak Arabic. Among its main works *Le Fleuve Détourné* by Rachid Mimouni. Finally, the Contemporary Literature (1990/2014) is produced by a set of authors as journalists, doctors, academics and historians. It represents the birth of a brutal writing which describes a deep reality made of chaos and inhumanity. For instance *Peurs et Mensonges* of Aissa Khelladi, *À quoi Rêvent les Loups* of Yasmina Khadra and *Fils de la Haine* of Rachid Boudjedra.

4. The Feminist Algerian Literature

Many Algerian writers tackled the issues of women's identity and oppression in society. This fact gave birth to the "Feminist Algerian Literature" which gained for over a quarter century a significant ground since many feminists produced mesmerizing novels by which they raised the curtains on women's position and how they were confined by their rigid social system. Besides, Assia Djébar (1999) asserts that French was an imposed language which Algerians used as a weapon against the colonial power, it gave more freedom to write especially about women: "**Read and write in that language, in the 1950s, was also for the Algerian women a way to be free, access to knowledge and to be out of the circle exclusively feminist**" (29). However, at the same time the choice to write in this language was considered as a form of suffering. Hence, this literature is notable by the Algerian social and historical realities and it is much attached to cultural and socio-political heritage. The feminist Algerian writers concentrated on women's roles and rights as well as they refused their silence and rejected the limited space owned on them. The main works of this kind of literature are *l'Interdite* of Malika Mokaddem, *La Prière de la Peur* of Latifa Ben Mansour and *Au Commencement Était la Mer* of Maïssa Bey.

5. The State of the Algerian Women in Society within the 20th century

The woman is a human being entirely shaped by her upbringing. "Being a woman" in Algeria means a woman capable of assuming her role as a woman, being able to face the outside world, to reconcile paid and domestic works, being able to replace her householder in several areas as well as to protect his honor and the name he bears. Besides, the Algerian women played a large role in the war for independence from France and affecting change in their society. They have always been alongside men for all challenges during both the war of liberation and the dark decade. Thus, their position has always been a major social and political issue in the Algerian society. However, they have violated and transgressed the prohibitions of their society through different ways as writing, acting or singing to reach a sense of their own identity and a way to overcome oppression. Hence, due to social developments, their position has been notably changed and they succeeded to emancipate themselves.

6. Assia Djébar (1936-2015) as a Feminist Writer

Assia –consolation- Djébar –intransigent- is the pen name of Fatma Zohra Imalhayène who was born on June 30, 1936 in Cherchell a small coastal town near Algiers and died in 2015 in Paris,

France. She appears as an Algerian woman writer of great talent who depicts harshly restraints on the Algerian silenced women. She writes about her native country, but mostly about Algerian women. In her novel *Fantasia: an Algerian Cavalcade*, she stated: **“Writing in a foreign language ... has brought me to the cries of the women silently rebelling in my youth, to my own true origins”**. (1993: 204)

Additionally, Labra (1997) confirmed that as a result of French acculturation and her father’s encouragement; Djébar achieved freedom to follow her dreams. However, her western thought and modernity left her separated from her maternal world and the Algerian cultural heritage.

Assia Djébar’s writings have a sense of necessity and importance that induce her readers to listen the nasty legacy of 130 years of colonialism in Algeria followed by the bloody eight years of Algerian Revolution (1954-1962) then the dark decade (1992-2002) that caused the loss of many lives because she personally experienced Algeria's tyrannical social policies against women and intellectuals especially who were her friends as: Abdelkader Alloula, Tahar Djaout, Youssef Sebti, Mahfoud Boucebsi, M’haneh Boukhobza and many others. (Lazarus 2010)

Assia Djébar shows the current struggle of Algerian women with the outbreak of voices and feelings after a long history of submission in her work the Algerian Quartet which consists of three novels: *So Vast the Prison*, *Fantasia: an Algerian Cavalcade* and *A Sister to Scheherazade*. Thus, this feminine memory encounters history, fiction and personal memories of the novelist.

7. Aspects of Feminism and Transgression in Assia Djébar’s Novel *So Vast the Prison*

In 1995, Assia Djébar wrote *Vaste est La Prison* translated by Betsy Wing in 1999 to *So Vast the Prison* where she combines both autobiography and fiction. This novel’s title comes from that deep song out of the Berber past and its ancient language: **“So vast the prison crushing me, Release, where will you come from?”** (1999. 243). This is the prologue of the Berber song that inspired the title of Assia Djébar’s novel *So Vast the Prison*. This Berber song was sung by women of the native tribe of the author. Therefore, this prison was imposed on Algerian culture by the French occupiers, on women by men and finally it was imposed on Arab women who were required by tradition. (Kuehlwein 2013)

The novel produces a social change in demonstrating that Djébar shadows the boundaries between autobiography, fiction and history in order to use the rebellious potential of writing. She intertwines a complex outline composed of references to Algerian history, a current film project and events in post-colonial Algeria and tries to re-establish women’s correct place in the Algerian society and reveals their conditions throughout history.

As a Muslim and Arab woman, Djébar wrote anxiously her novel since women, in her traditional culture, are silent and representation of the self is seen as transgression. (Bédarida 2005) The Lebanese novelist Leila Ba’albaki pointed out (1966) that a woman who writes in the Arab world is **“like a woman who does belly dancing in a nightclub”**. (M’rabet 1983: 282) The attitudes have not been changed and the Algerian writer exclaimed in 1985: **“writing is unveiling in public, in front of voyeurs who sneer...”** (1983: 208)

7.1. Aspects of Feminism in the Novel

This novel is written in four parts: "Part One: What is erased in the Heart", "Part Two: Erased in Stone", "Part Three: A Silent Desire" and "Part Four: The Blood of Writing." "The Silence of Writing" can be conceived as an opening to the coming parts and it may be considered as a journey for the heroine who has found her last connections with the deeply rooted traditions and customs. Thus, the Hammam becomes for her a refuge wherein she restores her lost traditions. Moreover, this small female community in the Hammam reveals the oppression and cruelty of patriarchy, since women there called their fathers, brothers and husbands with ugly names that mirror their bad nature.

Throughout this mysterious journey, the heroine starts to discover the Algerian women who are terrified and tired from the patriarchal domination. She expresses her astonishment in these words:

This word, l'e'dou, I first heard in this way, in the damp of the vestibule from which women arrived almost naked and left enveloped head to toe. The word enemy, uttered in that most warmth, entered me, strange missile, like an arrow of silence piercing the depths of my then too tender heart. In truth the simple term, bitter in its Arab flesh, bored endlessly into the depths of my soul, and thus into the source of my writing... Suddenly one language, one tongue, struck the other inside me (1999: 14).

Thus, the word “enemy” or “l'e'dou” indicates the cruelty of men. That is why women start to consider them as enemies who torment and imprison them. Furthermore, the link between this expression and the Algerian patriarchy choked the heroine who thought that the word “enemy” refers only to the French colonizer.

In the second part of the novel, Djébar tackles the rich heritage of her country. She shifts from telling the story of Isma to the Algerian history, in particular the story of Tin Hinan which refers to a Berber fugitive princess who makes her way into the heart of desert and ends with a grievance for the modern Algeria, a land of dark and incomprehensible deaths.

Tin Hinan offers her female community a writing which is:

As ancient as Etruscan or the writing of the runes, but unlike these writing still noisy with the sounds and breath of today, is indeed the legacy of a woman in the deepest desert. Tin Hinan buried in the belly of Africa (1999: 167).

This quotation reveals that this heroine teaches other women the ancient Berber alphabet which she calls it “**our most secret writing**”. (1999: 167)

In response to her government’s monolingual policy which threatens to erase Algeria’s multicultural history, Djébar gives another way of reading the Algerian history and identity based on multilingualism and women’s active contributions to Algeria’s cultural heritage. She then creates a world in her novel where history and fiction, myth and reality go hand in hand in order to reveal the Algerian Identity.

Furthermore, the subtitle of “the Arable woman” mirrors the suffering of Arab women whose life has been watered by melancholy, sorrow and tears, a woman who has been passive and controlled by the rigid traditional rules. A woman whose body is:

Completely veiled in white cloth, her face completely concealed, only a hole left free for her eyes. Ghost who, reversing appearances is rendered even more sexual by prohibition; shadowy shape that has strolled along for centuries, never screaming that we were enshrouded, never tearing off the veil and even our skin with it if required (2000: 179).

Djébar seeks to tell in her moody and lyrical novel about both present and past of the Algerian lives and the story of this Arable woman. Her mission as she puts is “**to recapture the deep song strangled in the throat of many people, finding it again with images, with the murmur beneath images.**” (1999: 206)

The last part shows how women in Algeria were violated and assassinated during the dark decade. This fact is revealed by the characterization of Yassmina who is a teacher and a friend of a Polish woman. She sacrifices her life in order to protect her friend. In such light, Djébar leaves her novel confusing by shaping boundaries between fiction and reality in order to raise awareness of harsh societal calamity in Algeria that violence was targeting women. Hence, the narrator evokes the memory of the dead, the last moments and last acts missing yesterday and today.

7.2. Aspects of Transgression in the Novel

In an autobiographical sequence of one hundred pages, the narrator Isma is portrayed as a high educated and modern woman who does not care about the religious and societal restrictions which are imposed on the Algerian women. She tells the story of her forbidden passion for a man with whom she transcended the religious and social norms. As she states: **If I went a day or two without meeting him, I would begin to suffer not from his absence so much as from the insidious fog clouding his image in my memory!** (1999; 28)

She thus gets over all the societal limitations because her marital life was oppressed and imprisoned. That is why; Djébar compares her domestic life with her cruel husband to a vast prison. Therefore, Isma flees from her husband and his tyranny and rebels against those who made her suffering by transgressing traditional norms in an illicit relationship.

In Part III which is entitled "A silent desire", the author raises the curtains on a very important fact which is about the Algerian women's desires that are practiced in a hidden manner. Hence, each of the seven movements that include this section mirrors an individual journey and a transgression of the patriarchal rules. Assia Djébar links her narration about women in the past, present and future by the double spaces of women's imprisonment and resistance.

Moreover, the subtitle "Fugitive and not knowing" reveals the desires of women to discover new places. The fugitive escaped from her country unconsciously, she knows neither the future direction nor the new harms: **"The writing of a fugitive: a writing whose very essence is ephemeral"**. (1999: 172). Thus, she does this due to suffering and oppression that she experiences.

Additionally, there are two examples of women. On one hand, Zoraidé becomes the metaphor of a woman who breaks the rules by writing as a step towards liberation. As it is enlightened in the novel:

This note of alarm was sent by a woman who was perhaps not necessarily the most beautiful nor the wealthiest nor the sole heir of her father, no, but certainly she was a woman who was locked away (1999: 171).

She thus exchanges the imprisonment of the paternal law, for the vast imprisonment of exile and changed her culture. Further, she particularly examines the Algerian woman locked but who dares to wear a support by transgressing social and religious codes that define her.

On the other hand, the next emancipated woman who seeks freedom is the mother of the narrator "Bahia" who transcends her society and religion by pulling her veil and traveling to France several times to visit her son who was in prison: **"One summer, a summer of journeys for my mother who had removed her traditional veil to visit her only son in France, where he was imprisoned in Loraine"** (1999: 175).

While growing up in Algeria, Djébar's character Isma discovers that her culture is also conceived as a prison and she cannot release herself from the oppression and confinement that she feels even as a child. Thus, she starts to study the lives of her grandmother and mother who marry, fall in love and have bittersweet affairs and they change their destiny by breaking the space and challenge their society. After much suffering and struggles, she liberates herself and becomes a filmmaker, turning her camera on the faces of "Arable women" which refers to the Maghrebian women.

In *So Vast the Prison*, each chapter centers on different female figures who may speak in either the first or the third person. Djébar's female characters struggle with instability as nomads and fugitives and they told their experiences of war, oppression and abjection. Often, these women were forced to find new spaces of feminine identity in diverse areas. At last, all languages, love, dance, film and travels became in this novel roads to self-expression and liberty in an "outside" active space of agency.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, the awe-inspiring efforts of many outstanding Algerian feminist writers like Assia Djebar voice the complaint of Arab women and inscribe the silenced ones. She uses the rebellious potential of the French language in both her speaking and writings to attack, escape and defy her patriarchal country. However, she was criticized for writing in this language when writers were supposed to switch to the national Arabic. She, thus, immigrated to write and publish freely her works. Hence, she succeeded to reveal the veiled reality of oppressed women to become dynamic actors in the political, economic and social life of the country's reconstruction efforts and its struggle for liberty and democracy.

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