



Assia Djebbar: 'L'Immortelle' of the Algerian French-Speaking Literature Assia Djebbar: 'l'Immortelle' de la littérature algérienne d'expression française

Nabil Djawad BEMMOUSSAT
University of Tlemcen
ESPTLab

Abstract

The present article is a plea for a reconsideration of colonial and post-colonial Algerian French-speaking literature; not least Assia Djebbar's literary works in pre- and post- independence Algeria. It attempts to redraw the boundaries of Djebbar's writings in relation to the status and role of the Algerian woman during and after French colonial rule. This two-fold issue actually represents the rationale of the movement for women's lib in Algeria. It also expands into a discussion of the discrepancies and disparities existing between men's rights and women's duties in light of a newly-emerging nation. This ambivalence, all too often called into question in Djebbar's novels, imposes itself *de facto* in an Algerian deeply male-dominated society. Worth noting, her literary production did not go unnoticed in the Métropole and many French provinces and overseas territories, and subsequently she emerged as a powerful voice to be reckoned within French literature at large.

Keywords: colonial/post-colonial literature, francophone literature, women's lib

Abstract

Cet article est en fait un plaidoyer qui s'inscrit dans une perspective de reconsidération de la littérature algérienne d'expression française, et plus particulièrement les œuvres littéraires pré et postcoloniales d'Assia Djebbar. Il essaie de délimiter les écrits d'Assia Djebbar par rapport au statut et rôle de la femme algérienne durant et après la colonisation. Cette question à double volets représente le fondement de l'émergence du mouvement relatif à l'émancipation de la femme en Algérie. L'article s'étale sur une discussion des différences et des disparités existantes entre les droits des hommes et les devoirs des femmes au sein d'une Algérie nouvelle et indépendante. Cette ambivalence, souvent remise en question dans les romans d'Assia Djebbar, s'impose *de facto* dans une société algérienne à domination masculine. Notons aussi que la production littéraire de l'auteure a eu un écho significatif en Métropole, et dans plusieurs départements français et outre-mer. Ainsi, Assia Djebbar émerge comme une voix puissante et reconnue au sein de la littérature française en général.

Mots clés : littérature coloniale/post coloniale, littérature francophone, émancipation de la femme

Introduction

The timeline of French-speaking literature in Algeria is a tale of the unexpected. A clear-cut division can be made in terms of a pre-colonial literature denouncing openly the injustice between the European-origin society and the 'indigène laissé pour compte' rest of the population. The education system under French rule bore witness to that form of injustice. Two types of schools overtly emerged: the French school (l'école française) for French and European-origin pupils and the indigenous school (l'école indigène) for Arab pupils. Actually, the literary production of Mohamed Dib, Mouloud Feraoun, Kateb Yacine and Assia Djebbar, to mention just a few, are vivid and illustrative examples of a 'fight-fire-with-fire' literature. The use of the French language, the linguistic and cultural flagship of the oppressor, as a means to effectively represent the triadic Islamic-Arabo-Berber emblem of the Algerian society proved to be as efficient as using atomic mushrooms. The beginning of a flourishing francophone Algerian literature set the pace for the premise of 'for whom the bell tolls', as rightly pointed out by the famous American writer Ernest

Hemingway. However, post-colonial literature in its early stages, focused much more on the status and role of women in the shaping of the Algerian identity. Djébar's works reflect such dimension in her novels, mainly *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (1962) *Les Alouettes Naïves* (1967) and *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980).

1. The Author and her work

There have been numerous dissertations, theses, papers, articles and book-length treatments on the literary works of Fatima-Zehra Imalayen (30 June 1936 – 7 February 2015), known by her pen name Assia Djébar, the Algerian novelist, essayist and poet, and one of the leading female writers of pre- and post-independence Algeria. Actually, she adapted that pen name to hide her writings from her traditionalist father. She is seen from various angles, activist, intellectual, feminist, filmmaker, novelist and historian. She has offered “her readers over thirty years of feminine exploration” (Orlando, 2015: 15).

Her works are known for their realism, as she strove to represent socio-political issues truthfully avoiding speculative fiction. Her literary mission was to depict everyday banal activities and experiences. She was the first Muslim woman to enter the prestigious Ecole normale supérieure de jeunes filles, yet soon expelled from it for having obeyed the order launched by the UGEMA (l'Union générale des étudiants musulmans algériens) for a general strike on 19 May 1956. At age twenty-one, she published in Paris her first novel *La Soif* (1957).

Her first four novels, *La Soif*, (1957), *Les Impatients*, (1958), *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde*, (1962) and *Les Alouettes naïves*, (1967) revolve around an anti-colonial component as well as an anti-patriarchal stance. From the very onset of her literary career, she served as a spokeswoman, so to speak, for female empowerment. In recognition of her prolific literary talent, especially a sound mastered knowledge of the French language, Djébar was accepted into the prestigious Académie Française in 2005.

1.1. In Search for Self-creation

Djébar's early writings did not obey the conventional social behaviour and plainly turned their back to the patterns underlying the Algerian highly conservative society, as a resistance to patriarchal values. That form of ‘deviation’ from the Establishment's dictate led her to write under a ‘fake’ name. *La Soif*¹, Djébar's first novel, was regarded as the starting point of a promising literary career; literary maturity needed refinement, yet the beginning in building a literary identity, *youth oblige!*

The search for ‘self-creation’ represents the novel's plot in an ever-changing Algerian landscape in light of an armed revolution- the war in Algerian entered its fourth year. The national liberation war played a major part in pre-independence Algerian literary production. However, no explicit reference is made to the war in Djébar's novel *La Soif*. The self-creation dimension dominates. She notes that the discovery of the body is also an important revolution. The notions of youth and good luck are both evoked in an interrelated way. “My life was quiet, superficial, empty. Just to be cynical and disabused at the age of twenty. I thought that way, satisfied only of my lucidity getting back lonely from a ride” (*The Mischief*: 124). She carried on talking about luck in the following words, “I was a spoilt child- not only by my father, but by luck too; I have always known that. Suffice it to have a secret desire, though vague, that circumstances would come to help me sooner” (*The Mischief*: 72).

There is an essential element in *La Soif*. Djébar is an innovative stylist, adapting the conventional techniques of English fiction, changing her language with the kind of illuminations which are often to be found in poetry (*Poèmes pour l'Algérie heureuse* 1969). The interior

¹ *La Soif*, literally translated into (The Thirst) was made available to the English reader in 1958. It was translated by Frances Frenaye under the title *The Mischief* and published by Elek Books, London. Worth noting, *The Mischief* is supposed to be the first Algerian novel to be translated into English.

monologue technique takes the lead in *La Soif*; an indication of modernist literature underlying the seeds of stream of consciousness, as used by the famous Irish writer James Joyce, adding a heightened sense of realism to the plot.

1.2. Bourgeoisie: When you have a hold on us!

Intrinsically, the deeply-rooted bourgeois values leave no room for women to explore what is supposed to be man's vested rights. *Les Impatients*, Djébar's second novel published in 1958, did not escape a pre-defined road map charting value judgments. These judgments could be applied to many of her writings *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde*, 1962; *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, 1980; *L'Amour, la fantasia*, 1985 and *La Femme sans sépulture*, 2002). The theme of bourgeoisie is a recurring element in the novel. This is a simple statement, but it symbolizes the uncertainty relating to the traditional society acting as a counter-lever for change. The role of the woman in a male-dominated nation is confined to her husband's living space. No place is allocated beyond that limit. No place is allocated either to women in armed warfare, (men on the battlefield, women at home)². To flee or to free the country is 'none of her business'! In *Les Impatients* (1958), Djébar takes part in a critical way by focusing on rebelled characters calling into question the passive and stagnant bourgeoisie, expressing their inner difference, in other words, a questioning which triggers some forms of access to a space that is others'.

1.3. Djébar's Ambiguous Feminist Stance

Literary production has always served women writers to express the rights in an overt lawful and mindful way. At first sight, Assia Djébar, through her writings, seemed to strive against all odds to empower women to realize their full rights. She used abusively her experiences, identity, knowledge and strength to legitimate what is supposed to illegitimate a highly-male centric world. She is a woman novelist in the French language, as she called herself in her essay *Writing in the Language of the Other* exploring the topics of gender oppression and women's silence in the Algerian society. She has always believed in the ideal that 'true equality leaves no one lagging behind'³.

Yet, women's manifestation and expression of resistance to patriarchal oppression, or at least domination, in Algeria consists of an on-going process of ups and downs, of pro's and con's and ultimately of convergence and divergence. The religious component has always been out there to gear many women's writings (cf. Yamina Mechakra and Ahlam Mosteghenemi (2003; 2017).

However, Djébar's sense of feminism, to many critics, did not seem to be explicitly and overtly expressed through many of her writings. As rightly pointed out, Assia Djébar's relationship with "feminism was uncertain and ambiguous. While her work is clearly preoccupied with women's experiences, the notion of a collective feminine identity remains a subject of contention, and female characters are frequently presented as both singular and elusive". (Hiddlestone, 2008: 34)

In *Feminism and Women's Identity*, published online by Cambridge University Press: Dec.'2011, Assia Djébar introduced herself in far from any feminist standpoint as follows: "I introduce myself to you as a writer; that's all. No need, I think, to say a 'Woman writer'. Does it matter?"⁴. She rejected the term 'écrivaine' (woman writer) in an attempt "to transcend conventional gender distinctions and to overthrow the attribution of divisive, classificatory labels such as 'feminist'".

² The political theorist, Jean Bethke Elshtain, explains in her study *Women and War* (1998) that we in the West are indeed the heirs of a tradition that assumes that in time of war men occupy one space, the dangerous battlefield, women another, the safe and secure home. A tradition, we dare say, that lost its intrinsic values when it comes to talking about the destiny of a country and its brave men and combatant women.

³ Interview on Médi 1 Radio « De bonnes nouvelles d'Algérie » Amari Chawki, 14 septembre, 1998.

⁴ Je me présente à vous comme écrivain; un point, c'est tout. Je n'ai pas besoin – je suppose – de dire «femme-écrivain». Quelle importance?

What is more, albeit Djébar is known as an ‘anti-Islamic feminist’, most of her writings, not least *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (1980; *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*) is a collection of novellas calling attention to the widening and lingering disparities between the treatment of men and women. It clearly unravels non-feminist practices following the decolonization of Algeria. in post- independence Algeria.

This collection of short stories exhibits many Western feminist ideas relevant to the French feminism of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray in general and Hélène Cixous⁵ in particular, in more down-to-earth terms, Arab feminism that is greatly influenced by Western-centred feminism.

Yet, she did not find an echo to her feminist calling, “chronicling forms of feminism that sprouted within anti-colonial movements and were inimical both to the colonizers and those who inherited power from them” (Abbas, 2017: 18). This is another way of saying that Djébar’s sense of feminism tended to swing between the local and the alien: a travelogue in search for self-creation. In other words, “a young girl, brought up in colonial Algeria, living in two worlds with different languages and ways of life, oppressed through being a colonial subject but offered an ‘escape’ through the coloniser’s education” (Mc Gregor, 2015: 79).

1.4. Djébar’s Overt Nationalism

Djébar’s sense of nationalistic identity, values and consciousness cannot go unnoticed in her literary production. Her loyalty, devotion and allegiance to the ‘patria’⁶ was above suspicion. She was a ‘formidable’ interlocutor for Algerian nationalism, to use Mc Gregor’s words, and a committed and engaged writer. Her novel *Les Alouettes Naïves*, (*The Naïve Larks*) published in 1967, reflects her experience of the liberation movement reluctantly exiled in Tunis. In these words, she makes reference to ‘struggle’ and ‘victory’, “also talk to me about struggle, about the upcoming victory, about pain, [...] lucky us we were born in an epoch where our country was about to give birth to its liberation”⁷ (p. 45).

The novel also depicts the writer’s aspirations for a change of her generation in post-independence Algeria, not least “hopes for a changed role for women in society” (Matarese, 2013: 145). Woman’s fight for her rights is indeed feminism *per se*, yet by extension, it is another form of nationalism, a dual context in which both the literacy skills and literary excellence can be used as a springboard for empowerment and social justice. That’s the way ‘blended feelings of feminism and nationalism’ can be expressed in Djébar’s literary production.

2. Djébar: L’Immortelle

Assia Djébar, the novelist and the linguist, imposed her parody of the engaged writer and her post-structuralist use of language. This reflects the novelist’s prolific⁸ talent in the mastery of the French language at different levels, hence producing a great challenging literary masterpiece. Such on-going outstanding artistry and linguistic craft led her to confirm her place among ‘les

⁵ “By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display-the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (Hélène Cixous, 2000: 880).

⁶ From an etymological standpoint, “patria”, a Romance-origin word, which stands for both “fatherland” and “motherland”; the former denotes heritage, tradition and order while the latter implies nurturing and a place of birth. Additionally, the male image of country calls for patriotism and loyalty and the female metaphor evokes a sense of belonging and love.

⁷ « ... parler moi aussi de la lutte, de la victoire à venir, de la souffrance, ... de la chance que nous avons d’être nés à une époque où le pays allait accoucher de sa libération »

⁸ Language is literally all that is there in the sense that “It reflects, more or less adequately, what is there. What seems certain is that we use it prolifically in creating and changing our momentary values and that in seeking to understand language, we are seeking to understand the cornerstone of the human mentality” (Malmkoer, 2004: 191).

immortels⁹ of the *Académie française* on 16 June, 2005, succeeding Georges Vedel, though from a socio-historical standpoint, the Institution has always expressed an overt ‘reticence to any female presence’ (Nadier, 2000 p. 46).

One can step even further to say that the presence of a foreign Francophone writer as a full member of the Académie embodies a political dimension, in the sense that, for a non-French writer, *serail littéraire parisien oblige*, i.e. coming from a dominated literary space integrating *de facto* and therefore, having a place and a high status in the literary hierarchy (Casanova, 2008).

Djebar’s rich anthology served as a springboard to the discernment of several international literary prizes. These high-esteemed literary distinctions helped her to demarcate from many Francophone Maghrebi writers, to soundly legitimate her candidacy to the Académie française. As noted by the French journalist, Pierre Assouline, on his literary blog, *La République des livres* “This girl, daughter of a teacher from Cherchell, that all the media are talking about as ‘a Maghrebi in the Académie’”¹⁰.

In this very specific context, it is worth noting that the *Académie française* was established in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu. The statutes of *Académie* define as its principal function: “to labour with all possible care and diligence to give definite rules to our language, and to render it pure, eloquent, and capable of treating the arts and sciences”¹¹. The Académie’s mission is to contribute in a non-profit way to development and prosperity of arts. “The forty academicians [...] were drawn from the ranks of the church, nobility, and military – a bias which continues to the present day” (Crystal, 1989: 4). They owe the nickname of ‘immortels’ after Cardinal Richelieu’s motto “To immortality” which is engraved on the Académie’s seal.

However, Assia Djebar was a Muslim woman; neither was she a member of the French nobility, nor a ‘zouave’ or a ‘spahi’ of the first regiment in the French army. Her father, Tahar Imalayène, was a teacher of French in a primary school. He was trained to be a teacher in the *Ecole normale des instituteurs*, Bouzaréah, Algiers, and whose primary mission was “... to select and to train individuals who are supposed to be eager to disseminate the dominant culture ... an important mission as part of the French colonial strategy in Algeria.”¹² However, most Algerian teachers did not fall into that trap; from a nationalistic standpoint, they never saw themselves as members of the French cultural mission, disparaging the linguistic background of the pupils in favour of the French language (cf. Mr. Hacène In Mohamed Dib’s *La Grande Maison*).

In this very specific context, she addressed the members of the *Académie* in her *discours d’entrée* paying tribute to her father; she noted proudly that her father was, “a teacher in the 1930s, in the Algerian mountain, alone in a school where no road to lead to, taught French to kids, in addition to giving adult courses to mountain dwellers as old as him to whom he offered accelerated training in French, in bid to prepare them to get small jobs in the administration so that their family could have regular resources”¹³.

Admittedly, as noted by many critics, Assia Djebar could have lived in Algeria exercising freely and fully her literary and cinematographic talents, yet she had chosen to live definitely in France in 1980. “We regret that Mrs Assia Djebar did not have the courage to benefit an Algerian

⁹ This notion of ‘durability’ strongly characterizes the social identity of the institution of the Académie française whose members, once elected, are called ‘les immortels’.

¹⁰ « Cette fille d’un instituteur de Cherchell, que toute la presse évoque comme “une Maghrébine à l’Académie ».

¹¹ « Travailler avec tout soin possible et diligence pour donner des règles certaines à notre langue, et la rendre pure, éloquente, et capable de traiter les arts et les sciences ».

¹² « ... sélectionner et de former les individus les plus aptes à être des diffuseurs de la culture dominante ... si importants dans la stratégie coloniale française en Algérie » (Colonna, 1973 : 80).

¹³ « instituteur dans les années trente, en pleine montagne algérienne, seul dans une école où ne parvenait même pas la route, scolarisait en français des garçonnets, il y ajoutait des cours d’adultes pour des montagnards de son âge auxquels il assurait une formation accélérée en français, les préparant ainsi à de petits métiers d’administration pour que leur famille ait des ressources régulières ».

university from her literary talents and to rehabilitate the Arabic and Berber languages, which she was very fond of their qualities and deplored their lost”¹⁴ (Nouvion, June 2005).

3. Djebbar: The Expatriate

Assia Djebbar spent most of the war years outside Algeria, partly in Tunisia and partly in France. But once the war was over and independence regained, she was appointed professor at the University of Algiers. She was the only teacher to offer lectures in modern and contemporary history of Algeria. She appointed Head of the Department in charge of the French Section. However, the debate on the Arabization process had started to gain ground in the education system. That ‘arabisation à la hâte et précipitée’ was ‘la goutte d’eau qui a fait déborder le vase’¹⁵. Like many French-speaking novelists, such as Mohamed Dib, Kateb Yacine, Assia Djebbar packed her bag and left Algeria to settle down once again in France in 1966.

Djebbar’s sense of ambitions of exploration led her to look for greener pastures on the other side of the Atlantic. She moved to the United States in 1995 and taught French literature at Louisiana State University and then at New York University. From 1997 to 2001, she directed the Center for Francophone and French Studies, founded by Édouard Glissant, at Louisiana State University. In 1996 in New York, she received the ‘International Literary Neustadt Prize. A year later in 1997, in Boston, she was the recipient of Le Prix Marguerite Yourcenar¹⁶. This distinguished literary prize has been awarded since 1992 to outstanding French-speaking authors living in United States.

Conclusion

The ‘(im)mortal’ Assia Djebbar passed away on 6 February 2015 in Paris at 78. Yet, her literary excellence and artistic production still witness the writer, the poet and the film maker’s outstanding talent. Her commitment to the feminine cause in colonial and post-colonial Algeria, and by extension, to the Arabic and Muslim woman was a challenge to Euro-centric views which frame the European *Weltanschauung* philosophy as unremittingly positive in every aspect. She was known as a voice of reform for Islam across the Arab world, and beyond, not least in the field of advocating for increased rights for women. Djebbar’s liberalism and progressivism rested on the promotion of progressive values, mainly gender equality and freedom of speech. She exploited wittily her literary ingenuity to voice ‘rightly’ or ‘wrongly’¹⁷ and repeatedly her ambivalence about her ‘self-creation’ as a Westernized-imbued educated, Algerian, feminist, Muslim intellectual, about her role as a spokeswoman for Algerian women in general and for women in particular. Her worldwide success was indeed a tribute to her literary excellence and relentless search and determination for artistic perfection. However, what does that joint ownership, or to a lesser extent, that double belonging, mean in Assia Djebbar’s scholarly literary works?

¹⁴ « Nous regrettons que Madame Assia Djebbar n’ait pas le courage de faire profiter une université algérienne de ses talents littéraires pour réhabiliter les langues arabes et berbères, dont elle vante les qualités et déplore la disparition ». Philippe Nuvion, secrétaire général de l’association Rassemblement et Coordination des Rapatriés et Spoliés d’Outre-Mer, autrement connu sous le nom de *Recours-France*

¹⁵ No sooner had Algeria regained her independence on 5 July, 1962 that the debate on the implementation of the Arabization process was actively launched entering into a phase of friction and language conflict between Arabophones and Francophones. In fact, the project was a noble one, yet implemented in a haste in order to marginalize and discard the French élite, the offspring of the French schooling system. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

¹⁶ Marguerite Yourcenar was the winner of the Prix Femina and the Erasmus Prize. She was the first woman elected to the Académie française in 1980; the second one was obviously Assia Djebbar.

¹⁷ The adverbs ‘rightly’ and ‘wrongly’ are in quotation marks for a good reason. This annotation deliberately reflects Assia Djebbar’s ambivalence in relation to sensitive issues. It also depends on the reader’s personal view on the novelist’s philosophy.

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