



## **The Muted Voice in Assia Djébar's *Children of the New World* (1962)**

### **La Voix Sourde dans *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (1962) par Assia Djébar**

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#### **Abstract**

Assia Djébar's *Children of the New World* (1962) is an example of a novel that illustrates two different categories of Algerian female characters: daring and submissive. The present study, then, is an attempt to pinpoint the group of female characters who are aware of their inferiority compared to males but they cannot cast off the shackles of patriarchy. Their inaction is the result of their certainty that their voices will not be heard due to the colonial and patriarchal structures in their society. Therefore, this research will highlight these female characters' silence. To reach the stated objective, the researcher will rely heavily on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's perspective on the subaltern voices and their inability to speak. The main focus will be on male dominance as a reason of females' submissive character.

**Keywords:** Djébar, female inferiority, male dominance, Spivak, subaltern

#### **Résumé**

*Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* (1962) d'Assia Djébar est un exemple de roman qui illustre deux catégories différentes de personnages féminins Algériens : audacieux et soumis. La présente étude tente donc d'identifier le groupe de personnages féminins qui est conscients de leur infériorité par rapport aux hommes mais qui ne peuvent pas se libérer du carcan du patriarcat. Leur inaction est le résultat de leur certitude que leurs voix ne seront pas entendues en raison des structures coloniales et patriarcales de leur société. Cette recherche mettra donc en lumière le silence de ces personnages féminins. Pour atteindre l'objectif annoncé, le chercheur s'appuiera fortement sur le point de vue de Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak sur les voix subalternes et leur incapacité à parler. L'accent sera mis sur la domination masculine comme raison du caractère soumis des femmes.

**Mots-clés :** Djébar, infériorité féminine, dominance masculine, Spivak, subalterne

#### **Introduction**

The representation of women in African literature, in general, and Algerian literature, in particular, varied between empowerment and disempowerment. Such an image mainly depends on the author of the work whose gender affects his/ her perspective. In other words, when the picture of women is painted from a male's perspective, they are portrayed as weak, passive, and inferior. However, a female's point of view differs. The majority of African women writers attempt to counter the dominant discourse of femininity through the depiction of this group as equal to men or at least as struggling to prove themselves. Still, several female characters reflect the reality of women and their treatment by their male counterparts as it is experienced in their society. The Algerian feminist novelist Assia Djébar, for instance, tried to give a voice to the voiceless in many of her works. In her *Children of the New World*, her choice of female characters varied between those who react daringly in several situations in order to inch towards self-assertion and those who remain silent and passive without moving a step forward to achieve freedom. This analytical study,

then, is an attempt to shed light on the second category. That is, it will focus on female characters that choose to repress their desire to be emancipated and cope with their reality.

### **Review of Related Literature**

The scholarship on Djébar's *Children of the New World* has analyzed the novel from several angles. The issues dealt with in the novel varied between feminism, the colonial subject, and the novel as an illustration of Francophone literature. Robert Mortimer analyzes the novel from colonial and feminist angles. He paid attention to the fact that women in Djébar's novel are doubly oppressed. They suffer from the French colonizer on one hand and the Algerian patriarchal culture on the other. As a result, Mortimer believes they cannot be considered as free after getting independence from the French colonizer since they still need to get their freedom from patriarchy (Mortimer).

In a similar study, Farah Channaa focused on Djébar's personal perspective towards gender issues and colonial resistance. Her main idea revolves around the characters created by the novelist as an embodiment of her own view towards the mentioned issues (Channaa).

In an attempt to analyze the improvement as well as the topics dealt with in the Algerian Francophone novel, Zahia Salhi selected several Algerian novelists from different literary periods. Assia Djébar was among the selected authors. Her *Children of the New World* in addition to other novels by her were highlighted.

Despite the various studies conducted on Djébar's *Children of the New World*, no study, to the best of my knowledge, has been initiated to focus on the unheard voice of the subaltern from the perspective of Spivak. As previously stated, several researchers worked on male dominance and the representation of females in the novel under scrutiny. However, the same issue has not been analyzed under the lens of Spivak's ideas.

### **The Muted Subaltern's Voice**

Several female characters in the novel are depicted as submissive and willing to accept male authority over them. The first character one can start with is Cherifa. The latter is pictured as a character who has a strong desire to express her opinion which opposes that of her husband, Youssef. However, Cherifa is not strong enough to do it. In one instance, the narrator mentions that

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 (Djébar 84).

Cherifa's inner feelings show her will to act in order to get rid of male dominance but her 'fear' prevents her from doing such a daring step. Hence, this character's inability to do a step forward can be related to patriarchal norms as well as social conventions. That is, women believe that as wives, they have to obey their husbands while they are completely aware of the fact that they are objectified by their husbands. As a result, they cannot resist because for them, resistance is a form of disobedience. This kind of wives can be related to what Spivak (1988) calls 'Sati'. She explains: "the feminine of this word, simply means 'good wife'" (101). Cherifa here is an

example of the ‘good wife’ in her society’s culture so she is respecting the role she is supposed to play.

Cherifa, as any other human being, can prove herself and react but her ‘fear’ is justified, to a certain extent. In other words, this woman does not believe in herself. She takes her value and capacities for granted. The following excerpt illustrates Cherifa’s lack of self-assertion.

‘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 (Djebar 84).

This quotation shows Cherifa as a female character who is fearful of showing any signs of resistance because she believes in her inferior position in society. That belief is the reason behind “tak[ing] herself for a person at ease” (Djebar 84). At the same time, she has to improve her way of thinking and viewing the world so that she can take a daring decision to improve her situation. Therefore, as explained above, Cherifa is caught between her strong desire to react and her ‘fear’ to take a step forward, mainly due to the inferior position given to females in her society; and the social norms she has to respect. Hence, her hesitation indicates that if she resists, her reaction will “be diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion” (Spivak 103). That is, based on the patriarchal culture and the social conventions she is constrained by, her opposition to these norms will be interpreted as unacceptable and ‘illegitimate’. Thus, for Spivak, the “subaltern female ... cannot be heard” (Khatoon 32-33) because her efforts to act outside the box or the patriarchal norms is not equally received by the other members of the society (Khatoon).

According to Spivak, “[t]here is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak” (103). That is, there is no possibility that the voice of the subaltern will be heard one day. It is muted forever. Similar to Spivak’s perspective, the voice of Cherifa in the novel seems to be muted forever. Her silence is illustrated in the following example when she remembers the day of her marriage.

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).

It is clear, then, that Cherifa strongly rejects the idea of being married to that person and deep inside, she needs to shout ‘no’. Still, she cannot do it. At that moment, she thinks of other women’s feelings towards the same subject. Though she has no love emotions to share with her future husband, she tries to cope with the situation. Therefore, Cherifa’s decision to marry the man she does not love and to repress her hate feelings strongly indicates that “serpentine patriarchal structures... [is] still controlling knowledge and its production” (Khatoon 35). Worded differently, males are still occupying a higher position in her society and hence, the discourse of masculinity is still dominant. As a result, they are responsible on the production of knowledge which is the reality of males as superior and females as inferior. Such a classification, which is the result of knowledge production, can be termed as Spivak called it “subject-constitution and object-formation” (102). In this case, females are objectified and males are acting as ‘subjects’.

This objectification of women appears in the reaction of Ali to his wife Lila, a university student. The latter attempts to deceive her husband through attracting his emotions. She says:

‘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).

The emotional side seems unimportant to Ali since he underestimates her. He does not give too much attention to her words and gestures, showing her that he is in a hurry to join his colleagues at work. Hence, when Lila and other female characters are treated in similar ways frequently, their “figure of woman disappears...into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (Spivak 102). That is, women underestimation leads to the disappearance of their voices as well as their struggle to get rid of the patriarchal traditional norms and the modern emancipated world and way of life.

Lila, though depicted as an educated character, has not the courage to express her feeling of anger to her husband. In order to release her feeling of oppression, she calls her friend Suzanne. In Lila’s marital life, when Ali becomes

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).

Then, Lila’s only way to complain about her husband is to talk to the silent Suzanne. That is, she does not need her friend’s opinion to solve the issue. She only needs her presence and silence to listen to herself and her own ideas. Thus, Lila clearly embodies Spivak’s subaltern female who “cannot be heard or read” (Spivak 104) because if Lila has a prospect of being taken seriously, she will not react in such a way. Her choice of a silent listener proves that if she faces her husband and expresses her ideas freely, her voice will not be heard.

Lila’s silence and inability to act bravely lead to emptiness in her life. She tries to fill that gap through doing many things as the following instance indicates:

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).

This means that Lila tries to escape her lived reality through practicing such tasks. Instead of inching toward her freedom and self-assertion, Lila chooses to remain silent and seeks solace in sleeping, laughter, music, etc. She thinks of several things to release her suffering except her husband. She has never referred to her husband as a source of comfort and she has never tried to make him one. Hence, Lila’s reaction directs one’s attention toward Spivak’s claim that “the

subaltern woman will be as mute as ever” (Spivak 90). That is, she will keep succumbing to male dominance forever because she is not moving toward her emancipation.

In several occasions, Spivak confirms the hopeless end of the subaltern woman to be heard and that “the space for her to speak cannot be achieved within imperialist and patriarchal structures” (Khatoon 36). In the world of the novel, female characters feel that double colonization because they are restricted by both male dominance and French colonization. For instance, when her husband joins the mountain, Lila thinks: “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). Lila’s words indicate that she is aware of her double oppression. On one hand, she is experiencing nothingness due to her husband’s absence and on the other hand, several people are losing their lives due to the French colonizer. In this case, the ‘space’ for Lila to prove herself is very limited, if not absent, as Spivak argued.

Like Ali, Omar (Suzanne’s husband) also embodies the image of the dominant patriarch. He acts as a husband who underestimates his wife’s behavior and emotions. The patriarchal structure, his society accepts as the norm, is the reason behind males’ empowerment over females. For instance, “[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” (Djebar 73). Such a reply deeply hurts Suzanne and she responds: “‘you’re so rigid,’ she said to him calmly and coolly” (Djebar 73). Thus, Suzanne as one instance of the other females cannot feel at ease in the company of her husband. She is unable to see him as the right person she has to share everything with. Hence, due to Suzanne’s inability to get heard or understood, she can be considered as an embodiment of Spivak’s “subaltern [that] cannot speak” (“Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak”).

Although Suzanne continues to act as Lila’s good listener, she too faces the same problem. However, Lila’s situation is worse since she has no one to express her suffering from male dominance to. It is clearly mentioned in the novel that “[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” (Djebar 76). Like Lila, Suzanne also desires to share similar moments with someone so that she can escape from her reality and feels released for a moment. However, her disability to rebel or to find a way of refusing her current situation well illustrates Spivak’s perspective on the subaltern’s inability to prove themselves. For her, the subaltern woman cannot speak because she is always represented by others while she has never represented herself. And if she dares to act as an active subject in society, no one will listen to her seriously (Riach 12).

Spivak strongly argues that the subaltern voices are muted in society because they are represented by those who occupy higher positions while the latter do not cause any change in favor of these groups. Not only these voices cannot speak but they cannot be *heard*. She believes they can achieve their aim if they are heard (Riach 9). A similar perspective is highlighted by Djebar who paints these female characters as unable to speak. Again, one can refer to Suzanne who listens to Lila and when “[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” (Djebar 77). Deep inside her, Suzanne

is aware of the fact that even if she speaks, her voice will not be heard due to the patriarchal norm in her society. That is why she is crying and suffering in silence.

### Conclusion

In a nutshell, one can say that although the selected female characters, Cherifa, Lila, and Suzanne, are conscious of their inferior position compared to men, they cannot get rid of male dominance. These women are drowning in their sufferings and tears. However, their husbands could not understand their sentiments and the gap they need to fill in their wives' lives. As a result, these women are good examples of Spivak's the subaltern. She emphasized the impossibility of making subaltern voices heard and one notices that these characters, as subaltern women, could not resist or prove themselves. Hence, it seems that their voices are muted forever.

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