

Women's Bodies as Mode of Resistance: *Women of Algiers in their Apartments*

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Abstract:

Assia Djebar, Algerian novelist, noted for her feminist stance was the only Muslim student in high school who later became the first Algerian woman to be accepted into the École Normale Supérieure. At the age of twenty, Djebar joined the Algerian student strikes in support of Algeria's struggle for independence from France, a cause that became more personal to her when her brother was held in a French prison and French soldiers ransacked her mother's home. In her novels Djebar turned the language of the colonizer into language of resistance. She used the language of the Others for her autobiographical works. In this paper I would like to show how the female body becomes an écriture of resistance in her collection of short stories called Women of Algiers in their Apartments.

As an Algerian and a Muslim woman, dominated by colonial masculine society, she challenges them through her writing, which became a mode of resistance to colonial male oppression. Woman who were erased from history were brought to the forefront. She challenged the overbearing patriarchy by examining the place of Algerian women under patriarchal nationalists, finding women's bodies and minds imprisoned by physical walls and mental veils. Through her discourse, she contributed to liberate their voices and gaze which emanated from their bodies. Thus the bodies, literally as well as metaphorically become a mode of resistance to their oppression.

Key words: Body, Resistance, Postcolonial Feminism, Gaze, Autobiography Assia Djebar.

Women writers from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia write mostly on women's issues- the correlation between feminine writing and feminist writing, between writing and resistance to multiple domination to which they are victims everywhere. The theme of the body, the gaze, orality, space and history are recurrent in these women's writing. Not only do women write on the themes which reveal the constraints from which they suffer, but the act of writing itself is presented as transgressive, because it breaches the religious and patriarchal prohibitions by condemning them speech as individuals and as women. Writing allows them reappropriation of that which is denied to them by society and patriarchal traditions.

These affirmations and subversions of resistance by the principle of writing have partially become the compelling subsumption of all literary studies on maghrebine women, for example one of the pioneering writers like Assia Djébar who started writing at the beginning of the 60s. By using the French language to write her novels, Djébar turns the language of the colonizer into the language of resistance. She uses the language of the Other for her autobiographical works. In this paper I would like to show how the Algerian woman's body becomes an écriture of resistance in her collection of short stories entitled *Women of Algiers in their Apartments*. In the first part of my paper I will show (how the body of) language becomes a mode of resistance for women writers like Djébar who have a limited access to their pen. In the second part I will show how historically Algerian women have used their bodies to fight colonialism and a patriarchal society especially during the Algerian war of independence. Finally I would like to show how Djébar through her discourse contributed to liberate women's voices and gaze which emanated from their bodies. Thus, the Algerian women's bodies, literally as well as metaphorically became a mode of resistance to their oppressions.

Algerian novelist, translator, filmmaker, Assia Djebar was born in the town of Algiers in 1936. She learnt French in school and later went to Paris for her studies in history. She became the first Algerian woman to be accepted at the École Normale Supérieure. Her educational experiences inspired feelings of Algerian nationalism. In 1956 she joined the Algerian student strike in support of Algeria's struggle for independence from France, a cause that became more personal to her when her brother was held in a French prison and French soldiers ransacked her mother's home. In her works, Djebar explores the struggle for social emancipation and the complexities of the Algerian Muslim woman's world. Her works deal with the impact of war on women's minds. Some of her novels include *La Soif* which was written in two months during the student uprising in 1956. Fearing her father's disapproval, she adopted her pen name Assia Djebar and has kept ever since. *Les Impatients* written in 1958 is set before the independence struggle and centres upon a young woman Dalila who feels trapped in a family environment of domineering men and frustrated women. *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde* written in 1962 explores the awakening of Algerian women to new demands. The heroine is in the collective action for political changes and the themes of love and war depicts a woman's rebel against patriarchy.

During the liberation war, Djebar collaborated with the anti-colonial FLN (Nation Liberation Front) newspaper *El-Moujahid* by conducting interviews with the Algerian refugees in Morocco and Tunisia.

Women of Algiers in the Apartment is a collection of short stories and is a turning point in Djebar's career as a writer: "I had just turned forty. It is at that point that I finally felt myself fully a writer of French language, while remaining deeply Algerian." It took its title from Delacroix's painting and depicted the cloistered Algerian women who are still imprisoned in the harem, glimpsed beyond a raised curtain.

A 20th century reinterpretation by Picasso depicts the women made nude and sitting in an open setting, Djébar's ten stories categorized under the division "Yesterday" and "Today" show that the conditions for Algerian women have hardly changed since Delacroix's time. Her stories are based on her own discussions with Algerian women between 1958 and 1978 and show the officially unrecognized conditions women made to Algerian liberation and the lack of dialogue between the sexes.

Writing is a form of requisitioning their place. It authorises a displacement of barriers of space which is allocated to them. Gaining space is equal to coming out of the imposed barriers which is the role of a mother and a wife. Thus writing is a means of existence for these women, beyond the domestic allocation, to situate themselves as intellectual individuals. Writing and publication of books by women disturbs the balance which is controlled by men (writers). In recent years, the body has been seen as taking part in the constitutive process of the subject in its own right, and as acting in conjunction with other processes of subjectivity-building such as language. The written representation of the body is necessarily mediated by the working of time and memory.

Writing induces displacements and modifies the gender allocation. It is the practice of writing itself which is described as in issue for struggle as a concrete activity which takes time and place, and which effectively is a transgression of traditional frontiers, a demand for one's identity and individuality which is limited by the family space.

Part 1

Women's writing has been rarely talked about especially in Africa. Their histories have always been written by men, where women had no role to play and had no rights to interject. But women having different corporeal reality promoted a sexually

differentiated structure of the speaking subject. This body is seen as linked to a plurality of systems- political, cultural, economic and historical. These socio-cultural and political struggles are transmitted by a woman's own terms. Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist says:

It is [with] access to public space, employment, and education that women's lives have undergone the most fundamental changes. Space, employment, and education seem to be the areas where the struggle which agitate society (especially the class struggle) show up in the life of women with the greatest clarity. (Mernissi 1989, 3)

When women leave the domestic space are they most clearly seen. Gayatri Spivak says that when women step in the public space they become agents of their destiny and enter in an environment of marginality and exile where they are only few of them. This is where they define themselves and where they are in the process of '*becoming*'. Women who begin to write start discovering themselves and are in metamorphosis. For authors like Assia Djebar, the importance of women's voices used to rectify history and establish a place for them there is a central topic in her works. She has used writing as a political act of defiance. Kristeva says that "liberty" and "solitude" come from writing in the margins of established norms. Etrangeté is a means of resistance, a price that is paid by them for having crossed over boundaries to communicate in the public space. "In crossing a border, the étranger has changed [her] discomfort into a base of resistance, a citadel of life... Without a home, [she] disseminates..., multiplying masks and false self". (Kristeva 1991) She says that by crossing over the boundary, the woman becomes a stranger to both the spaces- the male as well as the female space. From the male's view she is seen as violating all limits and becomes a stranger there because there are not too many of her kind there. She is stranger to the female space because she has crossed the space that was limited to them and cannot be accepted back. But by accepting

the discomfort she feels in a strange place she makes that a base for her resistance. As she is estranged from both the spaces she creates a third space for herself which is the space of writing. Now this space becomes her home where she is free to do what she wishes and metamorphosizes her as she wills.

Writing has accorded women authors the means to strike back and reclaim their agency. Helene Cixous says, "Woman must write woman". By writing "women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by [men]." (Cixous 1976, 881) Women have always fought men to gain their voice in society through acquisition of the pen. The pen represents a viable tool women have had to *right/ write* themselves in[to] history. This denial of access to the pen has excluded them from culture and becomes a mysterious Other. Access to the pen has put women in equal footing with men. Assia djebar, in one of her interviews says that her existence depends on her writing and she writes as if tomorrow is her last day.

The act of writing is an act of transgression which defines the woman's place. The concept of the *hijab* or the veil plays an important role in the definition of this status. We know that as the outside space is reserved to men, women are forced to wear the veil while passing through this masculine space. If she has any work outside her domestic sphere she is veiled and this stops her from becoming the object of gaze by the men. So for Djebar to be able to go out into the public space, which is that of writing, she must veil herself. Therefore she assumes a pseudonym Assia Djebar which enables her to evolve under cover of anonymity. But above all it is the French language that allows her to stealthily break into the "outside" space while at the same time preserving herself. Djebar says that French has been a veil for her. It was a way of dissembling because she constantly felt that her relation to the outside that no one could perceive her image. In relation to the French language and to the gaze, in her novel *Fantasia* she says:

As if the French language suddenly had eyes, and lent them me to see in to liberty; as if the French language blinded the peeping-toms of my clan and, at this price, I could move freely, run headlong down every street, annex the outdoors for my cloistered companions, or the matriarchs of my family who endured a living death. (Djebar 1993, 181)

By writing in the enemy's language, the woman can escape the panoptical gaze. This language allows her to circulate freely without being seen.

Part 2

Just as language was the first mode through which Assia Djebar could come out into the masculine space, in her short stories she shows how the women's bodies were the first things accessible to them by which they could come out into the masculine space and at the same time resist colonialism as well as patriarchal domination. Thus during the Algerian war of liberation women came out of their homes.

The Algerian revolution can be divided into three phases. During the first stage of the Algerian Revolution, the pre- 1956 circumstances dictate that Algerians resist the colonial offensive by taking up the "cult of the veil." In response to the colonizer, the veiled Algerian woman secures her covering more tightly. This is the first step of resistance by the women towards the colonizers. After 1955, the enemy got adapted to this form of combat by the FLN. This leads to the second stage which is the unveiling of the woman- a combat strategy which was created by the male leaders of the FLN. This second phase promotes the cause of revolution. Soon after this, in 1957, the veil reappears as the final mode of resistance after which the Algerians are successful in winning over the French colonizers.

In this first stage the Algerian women are veiled. The colonizers wanted the veil removed as their mission was to

modernize the colonial people. Seeing the veiled women the colonial administrators defined a political doctrine which Fanon describes as:

If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight. (Fanon 1964, 37)

The colonisers saw the women as being “humiliated, sequestered, cloistered” and wanted to liberate them. By winning over the women the colonizers wanted to “achieve a real power over the man and attaining a practical, effective means of destructuring Algerian culture” (39). But in response to this women covered themselves more tightly. This form of resistance is very frustrating to the colonizers because women are seeing without being seen. “There is no reciprocity” (44). This is what Foucault calls as the panoptical gaze where one is seeing without being seen. Here the woman is in the advantageous position, where she can see without seeing. The veiled Algerian woman is not passive; she provokes many reactions in the colonizer depending on how she moves about them. There is reversal in role here as now the one who gaze are the gendered colonized and those who are gazed at are the colonizing male. During this first stage, only the men are involved in the armed struggle. After 1955, women join the public struggle and this is where the second stage starts. Here there is a shift in the battlefield- from the countryside they enter the European quarters of the cities. Here the terrorist tactics are used by the presence and action of the women which promotes the cause of the revolution. Here it becomes necessary to unveil the Algerian women and allow her to take her revolutionary mission and as a woman alone in the street. “These test-women, with bare faces and free bodies, henceforth circulated like sound currency in the European society of

Algeria” (42). This unveiling made the colonisers feel that they had succeeded in taking control of the women. Fanon says,

Every new Algerian woman unveiled announced to the occupier an Algerian society whose systems of defence were in the process of dislocation, open and breached. Every veil that fell, every body that became liberated from traditional embrace of the *haik*, every face that offered itself to the bold and impatient glance of the occupier, was a negative expression of the past that Algeria was beginning to deny herself and was accepting the rape of the colonizer. (42)

But they were proved to be wrong. There were hidden tactics behind the unveiling. This anti-essentialist gesture that the Arab women make created a heterogeneous form of power which Fanon calls as the “revolutionary fashion” of the Algerian woman who can refashion as a weapon for resistance.

As an unveiled terrorist woman in the European quarters of the colonial city centres she has many roles to play. She bears messages, carried money in her hand bag for the families of the prisoners, to buy medicines and for the supplies for the guerrillas. The Algerian woman penetrated the “flesh of the revolution” which suggests the phallic position to which she has reached and revising her previous position as an object of patriarchal and colonial desire. This allows her to disrupt the colonial order through a manipulation of racial and sexual presence and absence, power and lack. This revolutionary mission assigned to women required exceptional strength of character from them so that there would be a harmony to the spirit of sacrifice made by men. They had to adequately meet with the tasks attested to them. This was a new experience to which women adapted themselves very well and became useful to them not only as a national revolution but also as a gender revolution. They thus assigned themselves the second role of resistance to colonialism as well as their male counterpart.

She also became “*porteuse de feu*” which is a “woman arsenal” who carries revolvers, grenades, false identity cards

and bombs in her suitcase or on herself and passes the Western waters in ease, smiling as she passes and are not suspected of carrying pistols that will kill some members of the patrols. Even those women who were not participating in the struggle were removing their veils. Some of the women who were caught carried arms were tortured and the truth was revealed. This made the mission more difficult and now the colonizers started suspecting every other woman as carriers of bombs. This suspicion gave rise to the third stage of the revolution where women were back under the veil.

In 1957 the veil reappeared and this time took a new significance. The veil was no more as a dress code for Arab women. Rather, it was to aid “conceal the package from the eye of the occupier and again to cover oneself with the protective *haik*.” (61). The women once again walked amongst the colonizer veiled, equipped with armouries but looking at the same time like insignificant young girls and so were not suspected as their hands were free and mobile which is the “sign that disarms the enemy soldier” (62). At this stage of the revolution the figures of the women had to be modified as Fanon says,

The Algerian woman's body, which in an initial phase was pared down, now swelled. Whereas in the previous period the body had to be made slim and disciplined to make it attractive and seductive, it now had to be squashed, made shapeless and even ridiculous. This, as we have seen, is the phase during which she undertook to carry bombs, grenades machine-gun clips. (62)

In all three phases she uses her whole body as well as the taboos which are connected to her bodies to fight the colonizers. She makes them victims of the gaze and this constant reversal of their role is in the hand of these women cum warriors. They have not only succeeded in manipulating the colonizers and putting them in a destabilized position but they have also

defeated the purpose of the veil and thus the dominant Algerian patriarchy.

Part 3

Assia Djebar's collection of short stories was influenced by Eugene Delacroix's painting called *Women of Algiers*. His painting portrays Algerian women sitting cloistered in their harem with blank gazes and fully covered. He shows only one dimension of these women's victimization signifying that they are not allowed to go out and where other men are not allowed to come. He gives his painting an Orientalist view. What Djebar does in her short stories is that she gives them voices and makes them speak through her. In *Women of Algiers in their apartment*, she juxtaposes colonial past and postcolonial present, drawing on depiction from Orientalist art to contrast the oppressive atmosphere in Delacroix's painting. She becomes the voice for all the Algerian women from a feminist perspective. She juxtaposed different kinds of narrative: dialogue, conversation, description of reverie allusions, flashbacks, which makes it possible to piece together an authentic image of the life of Algerian women of the past and the present. Perceptions of the war, of prison, of exile, of the gaze; the experiences of rejection, polygamy, solitude, etc are all aspects of this life which if placed one next to the other supplant Delacroix's painting. The pictorial representation which privileged an order and unity was easily penetrated by the gaze is replaced by Djebar's creation, by the dispersal of the fictional tableau which makes it possible for her to fracture what she calls "the spying eye". She gives mobility in space and time to the atemporal fixity of Delacroix's painting. She translates reality as perceived by the female gaze. The tableau is recomposed through the gaze of an Algerian woman. In taking inspiration from the Orientalist painting Djebar suggests that the closed stifling world of women depicted in the

painting has not changed despite the country's independence and despite the women's participation in the struggle against patriarchy and colonialism. Delacroix's painting inspired other artist also one of them being Pablo Picasso and which also influence djebar in writing the second short story of her collection, entitled "La Femme qui Pleur". (The woman who is crying).

This short story begins with a quote from Adamov, a playwright about Picasso's painting, making the reference explicit. In the story a woman meets a man on the beach. She tells him that she was beating by her husband who literally broke her neck. They meet on a second day and on the third day soldiers come to take the man away. The story concludes by saying that the woman is sitting facing the beach, her hands in her veil, crying. The image reflects Picasso's women that are doomed to suffer, mourn and lament and be oppressed wherever they are. Djebar's role in depicting these women in prose is to resonate the gaze of the western male artists' gaze.

Djebar sees in Picasso's work a liberating contrast to the life of Algerian women evoked by Delacroix. Picasso wanted to liberate the Algerian women from there harem. In her short story Djebar says that this version evokes a glorious liberation of space. There is not more harem and the door is wide open and light flows in. Women are totally nude as if Picasso found that in Arabic "unveiling" is considered as getting nude. She says that by doing this Picasso was not only showing a sign of emancipation but rather a renaissance of these women and their bodies.

Painting can serve as a lens through which to see the themes in Djebar's stories and the writer's role in the (re)presentation of oppressed Algerian women. She is creating voice for these women who are closed in by the western male gaze and which she is trying to liberate.

Conclusion

In her short story collection, we see that there are two modes of resistance- one is active and the other is passive. The former one is what we explicitly see during the Algerian war of independence where women came out of their space and fought an opposing force which was the colonizer. Here women actively participated for their freedom as Algerian and not as women specifically. On the contrary the other resistance inherently and secretly performed was against patriarchy. This was against an active force which is the Algerian Muslim men who dominated on the freedom of women to keep them under control. The Algerian women by participating actively against the war of independence and removing their veils and entering the male space behaving as if they were fighting only for the cause of freedom is not the case. They were making full use of their short freedom to attain their liberty as women. The wearing of the veil having changed its significance during the war- from a Muslim religious garment to a dress for concealing bombs, grenades etc. shows that these Algerian women have advanced in their conditions of subjugation and can use it to their own will.

Narrative is a way of giving shape to their suffering. Assia Djebar by using the colonizers language to liberate the Algerian women voices shows that she now has full control over this language and can manipulate and use it to her own will which once in history used to be the opposite. It was the language of the colonizers which suppressed the Algerian (women) and had control over them through this language. These women's bodies is constructed through language, it a product and representation of language, which is that of the colonizers. Texts can be seen as bodies: they grow, change, develop or fall apart just as biological organisms. Conversely, bodies can be seen as texts on which a person's history is

written line by line. The Algerian woman's dress speaks a language just as verbal and written languages can.

All taboos are connected with the body. Tabooed behaviour and language most often apply to things that are borderline. The taboo which can be connected to Djebbar is that she is an Algerian woman and therefore should not have the freedom to express herself and be educated. She must do only what her society tells her to do. But on the contrary Djebbar expresses not only herself but also her Algerian sisters by using French as a medium which is not the language of her society, and she does not veil herself any more- rather she is exposed to the colonizers' and the men's' gaze. By doing this she resists both the taboos which have shadowed the Algerian women's world. Djebbar's role was to liberate these women's bodies and gaze and break all the taboos that came in her way which she has successfully done. But one needs to ask oneself as Djebbar did whether the Algerian women's conditions have really improved since the war of independence until now or are they still oppressed. Now the question remains open as to whether the conditions of women in other societies are the same and analyse one's society and to the needful.

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