

Affirmation of Algerian Women's Identity through the Subaltern Voices in Woman without a Burial Space of Assia Djébar

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Assia Djébar is the pen name of Fatima-Zohra Imalayen. She was born on 30 June 1936 in Cherchell (Algeria) and died on 6 February 2015 in Paris. She was a writer, a historian, a poet and a filmmaker. She was the first Maghrebini writer to be elected in the French academy on 16 June 2005, the body which oversees developments in the French language. Her works have been translated into at least 20 languages, although not yet in Arabic. In 1996, she was awarded Neustadt International Prize for her contribution to the world literature. In 1997, she won the Marguerite Yourcenar Prize. In 1998, she won the International Prize of Palmi. Unlike other Muslim girls who are forced to remain within the four walls of the house, Djébar had an opportunity to attend Quranic and French school in Blida. Her father who was teaching French language in a school at that time, encouraged her to continue with her education. Later, she was the first Algerian and Muslim woman to go to Sèvres, one of the France's top universities, but her education suffered due to Algerian war. She later continued her education in Tunisia.

Her career as a novelist began in the year 1957, with the publication of her first novel, *La Soif* (The Mischief). Until the publication of her last autobiographical novel in the year 2008, she had produced almost 20 literary works, which included 2 films. Most of her literary works have been translated in English for the non-Francophone countries. Hence, the readers from all over the world have an opportunity to become aware about Algeria, its historical past and present, the situation of woman within the Algerian society, which can be designated as patriarchal.

Her works deal with various themes, such as, the colonisation of Algeria by the French (1830-1954), the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962). These two themes not only evoke the brutalities committed by the French during the colonial occupation, but also bring to light the strong resistance of the Algerians against the French hegemony.

At the same time, her works also focus on women and their place in Algerian society. The Algerian women have mostly been victims of domestic violence, divorce, polygamy in this male dominated society. Even today, they continue to fight for equality and recognition within the Algerian society¹. Hence, Djébar, can also be designated as a feminist writer, who writes to affirm the existence of Algerian women, who have played an important role in the Algerian war of Independence, along with the Algerian men. Since independence of Algeria in 1962, most women are deprived of public and political space:

Djébar works often examined and exposed the lack of rights for Muslim women across the Arab world.

She focused on the role of women, which she believed was ignored by other writers, in Algeria's struggle before and after independence.²

The woman without a burial space:

The novel which was published in 2002 in French, titled, *La Femme sans sépulture*, reconstructs mainly the historical and brutal events which took place during the Algerian war of independence (1956 to 1958). It is comprised of 221 pages, and has 12 chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. The novel which also touches briefly upon the pre-Islamic history of Algeria, reconstructs mainly the Algerian war of liberation through the life of the protagonist Zoulikha, who left her home in the year 1956 to take part in the war, but disappeared in the year 1958:

In 1956 and 1957, Zoulikha had occupied a central position: not only in the war in Césarée, but she also maintained the network and the links between the mountains-with the supporters –and the city dwellers partly engaged, trembling, careful, full of hope (...).³

Djébar, returns to her native town, Cherchell, after almost 20 years of exile⁴: “The first time, it was in the spring of 1976, it seems to me. I am in the city, in the house of the protagonist daughter. In my city, “Césarée”, it is the name of the past, (...).⁵ The writer takes on the role of a filmmaker, and tries to throw light on the personal life

¹ Palash Ghosh, “Women in Algeria: progress and paradox”, *International Business Times*, 10/26/12. URL: <https://www.ibtimes.com/women-algeria-progress-paradox-853988>

² “Assia Djébar: Algeria's ‘immortal ‘literary hero’”, *Aljazeera*, 30 June 2017. URL : <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/assia-djébar-algeria-immortal-literary-hero-170630073650868.html>

³ Assia Djébar, *La Femme sans sépulture*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2002, p.213 ; my translation

⁴ Assia Djébar left Algeria in the year 1958

⁵ Assia Djébar, 2002, *op.cit.*, p. 13; my translation

of Zoulikha (from her birth in 1916 to her adulthood, her married life with three different men), and describes in detail her participation in the Algerian war of independence. The narrative is not in a chronological order:

Again, it is the spring season. Two years later. I am over with the editing of the film dedicated to Zoulikha, the heroine. Dedicated also to Bela Bartok. Zoulikha's history starts from the beginning. It's a slow film of almost 2 hours. Fiction and documentary, often direct sound, some dialogues between the women; inflows of music, traditional as well as contemporary.⁶

However, while reading the novel it seems that the quest of identity⁷ is not only relevant to Zoulikha, but Djébar who has been in exile for so many years because of her literary works, has been trying to affirm her existence within the Arab world. In the novel, the writer is addressed as "the visitor", "the guest", "the outsider", which indicates that she is still struggling for her identity and her existence within the Arab world, in the postcolonial era⁸:

"The visitor", "the invited". "the outsider" or, at times "outsider not so much outsider", all the terms would represent me?⁹

Giving voice to the marginalized: role of the collective memory:

According to French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory:

(...) is not a given but rather a socially constructed notion. Nor is it some mystical group mind. As Halbwachs specifies in *The Collective Memory*: "While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember."¹⁰

It is through the collective memories of the city-dwellers of Cherchell, that Djébar is able to describe the life of Zoulikha, and reconstruct the important historical events which took place between the years 1956-1958. On her return to her native village, she interviews the women of different generations, such as, Hania and Mina daughters of Zoulikha, Dame Lionne: the friend of Zoulikha, Zohra Oudai: the sister-in-law of Zoulikha who evoke different incidents which took place at that time. Hence, the narrative which is in non-chronological order is comprised of polyphonic voices, means "multi-voicedness"¹¹, to recall the contribution made by Zoulikha and other women and young girls in the Algerian war of Independence:

Me, the daughter of the city returns from the exile for few days, not more, yes, for sure "outsider not so much outsider:, me, all the strength to listen to Mina and Hania, Dame Lionne as well as, in the hills above the city, Zohra Oudai (...), here I am back."¹²

These individual voices, reincarnates the educated and fearless Zoulikha, who dominates the patriarchal society:

(...), the overlapping voices brings to light the destiny of the lady: recalling for few minutes where the camera explores slowly the empty avenues, the places and the statues. As if Zoulikha who has not been buried, was moving around, invisible, audible above the red city.¹³

Here, one may point out at the fact that, the fundamentalists or the patriarchal society forbids the woman in the Arab world, from using "I", which gives them the power to relate directly to the world outside and affirm their existence. Hence, the multiple voices of Algerian women, use the third person singular "She" to recall the remarkable contribution made by Zoulikha as a militant. In this context, Mortimer has mentioned: "Islamic culture is bound to the *non-dire*, or unspoken, in other words, to silence; it prohibits personal disclosure."¹⁴

However, under the given circumstances, Djébar also tries to give voice to the protagonist, Zoulikha in the literary world. In the four chapters, titled, "monologue of Zoulikha"¹⁵, the protagonist narrates in non-

⁶ *Ibid.* p.15 and 16; my translation

⁷ Rogers Brubaker "Identity", *Colonialism in question: theory, knowledge, History*, Frederick Cooper, England, University of California Press, 2005, p.65. "(...) identity denotes a fundamental sameness among members of a group or a category."

⁸ Algeria gained independence on July1, 1962

⁹ Assia Djébar, 2002, *op.cit.*, p.213; my translation

¹⁰ Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.8

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtine, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, United States, Univ of Minnesota Press, 1984, p.279

¹² Assia Djébar, 2002, *op.cit.*, p.215; my translation

¹³ *Ibid.* p.16 and 17; my translation

¹⁴ Mildred Mortimer, "Assia Djébar's Algerian quartet: A study in fragmented autobiography", *Research in African Literatures*, Columbus, Indiana University Press and The Ohio State University, 1997, volume 28, no.2, p.102-p.117

¹⁵ Assia Djébar, 2002, *op.cit.*, p. 221; my translation. "Chapter 3. First monologue of Zoulikha, over the terraces of Césarée, Chapter 7. Second monologue of Zoulikha, Chapter 10. Third monologue of Zoulikha, Chapter 12. Last monologue of Zoulikha without burial space

chronological order different phases of her life, such as, the days when Mina came to the mountains to meet her, the moment when she was arrested by the French soldiers, the brutal torture she had to undergo after having been arrested, her life in the mountains as a militant, continuous interrogation by the police commissioner Costa, after the killing of her husband El Hadj, a revolutionary, and her ardent love for her children, whom she had sacrificed for her country.

Hence, the subaltern speaks and their voices, such as the voice of Hania, Mina, Zohra Oudai, Dame Lionne, Zoulikha and Djebbar, evokes the contribution of Algerian women in the war of Independence, which has been ignored and forgotten by the Algerian society. In this context, Professor Anne Donadey, refers to the theorist Gayatri Spivak, who highlights the important role played by the writers, such as Assia Djebbar, in bringing out the buried voices:

For Spivak, the task of the female intellectual is not to speak for the subaltern, but to expose the mechanisms by which she is silenced. (...) The female intellectual must also learn to speak to the subaltern woman in ways that will make sense to her and will engage with her issues.¹⁶

While interacting with Djebbar, Hania characterizes her mother as a modern, brave, outspoken and intellectual:

Hania continues to recall the youth of her mother: she is an exception among the other women in the society. Zoulikha moving around in the village as a European: neither a veil nor a headscarf.¹⁷

Unlike other Muslim women, she had the capability to take her own decisions and married thrice. She had her own valid reasons to leave her first two husbands. Hania, being the eldest daughter from Zoulikha's first husband, has observed her mother's life very closely. As soon as Zoulikha had left for the mountains, she took the responsibility of her younger brother and her youngest sister, Mina: "I had nearly raised him. My mother, when she hesitates, a second, when she left us for the mountain, left him in my arms. Hardly five years. He was."¹⁸

On one hand, Hania and Mina had spent their childhood and adulthood, with lot of bitterness and anger. But, on the other hand, they were proud of their mother, who sacrificed her personal life and her family, for her country and her people oppressed by the colonial rule. Hania recalls the year 1957, when Zoulikha who was living in clandestine, wanted to meet her family, but was spied by the French police. Her life was in danger:

My mother went into hiding. She is waiting to speak to you! Then, she will leave. So, to have a conversation with my husband, and as we were aware, since for days and days, the residence of Zoulikha was watched over by the neighbours, (...).¹⁹

Hania recalls the day when she received a telegram and a letter mentioning that her mother was in danger:

One day, on a Thursday, we received a telegram and a letter. Both were containing these words: "The mother is sick from Asian influenza." We both understood that Zoulikha was in danger.²⁰

In the year 1957, when Zoulikha was captured by the French army in Cherchell, Hania remembers that she went all the way alone from Burdeau (village in the interiors) to Cherchell, disguised as a European, to free her mother, in spite of danger and risks:

Naturally, since my departure from Burdeau where I left my husband, I had folded my veil and kept it in my bag. Thus, dressed as a European, people believed that I was from Corsica, a Jewish woman, in short, a woman from their community. My hidden headscarf, my perfect French accent, I could move around easily.²¹

Then, Zohra Oudai in her interview with Djebbar recalls the days when she used to provide shelter to Zoulikha in the city: "But it seems that she is now completely in the company of Zoulikha, immersed fifteen years into the past."²² The French army used to search for the rebels, who raised their voice against the French colonial rule. In the city, there was a women network of which Oudai was an integral part. Their aim was to provide shelter and support to the militants, engaged in the Algerian war of liberation, while putting their own lives in danger:

Once, Zoulikha had found shelter at my place and then surged all of a sudden, some danger. French army had occupied in our houses. There was no possibility to escape; immediately I

¹⁶ Anne Donadey, "Francophone women writers and postcolonial theory", *Francophone postcolonial studies*, Ed. Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, UK, 2003, p.207

¹⁷ Assia Djebbar, 2002, *op.cit.*, p.19; my translation

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.45; my translation

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.53 and 54; my translation

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.54; my translation

²¹ *Ibid.* p.56. my translation

²² *Ibid.*, p.128; my translation

told Zoulikha: -Remain there, do not move from the side table! Keep your heads down and be busy while pulling out the barely.²³

Oudai had lost her husband in war and her three sons were martyred, but she continued to support and work for the revolutionaries. She hated the French who had killed her family members and destroyed the home of the natives. Her only mission was to liberate Algeria from the French rule: "The French army entered our houses. "Get out!" They told us and they burnt everything. Twelve houses belonged to the Oudai: (...). They burnt everything we had."²⁴

Dame Lionne or one may call her as Lla Lbia has been also a great supporter of Zoulikha. During the 1950s. She was the kingpin of the women network in the city, who used to supply medicines, garments, money and food to the militants in the mountains. She also stitched and supplied the Algerian national flag which was the symbol of freedom for all the Algerians:

(...) Dame Lionne who had stitched six flags, flags which would represent Algeria's independence. It was the year 1957(still four to five years of war period!)

Stitched, then folded and placed at the bottom of the basket! (...)

"As Lla Lbia knows how to hide the treasures. There on, the medicines are packed, then, above, the vegetables are placed in bulk."²⁵

Dame Lionne remembers the day when the third husband of Zoulikha, El Hadj was killed in the year 1950s by the French army. He was a strong nationalist and went to the mountains in the year 1955 to oust the French. It was after the death of El Hadj, that Zoulikha took the responsibility and went to the mountains to achieve freedom for her country and her people:

Zoulikha isolates herself in the hall in front of the body of her husband, his eyes closed. She bows down, touches his wounds on the chest, on the head and on the arms. She soaks her two hands in the blood of El Hadj. She does not cry; her lips whisper, what, Islamic prayer, a pledge, "that from now on, it is she..." perhaps she tells him some loving words, the promise that she will continue his action...²⁶

Dame Lionne recalls how Zoulikha was harassed by the Commissioner Costa, after the death of El Hadj and the disappearance of her son El Habib. The latter was an officer in the French army, but he supplied arms to the militants in the mountains. Zoulikha was interrogated almost every day and threatened by the commissioner:

The commissioner Costa, of Cherchell, started calling her for continuous interrogation. (...).

In reality, her house was watched over day and night: They hoped to find some connection through her.²⁷

Lastly, like Hina, Zohra Oudai, and Dame Lionne, Mina remembers the days she had spent with her mother in the mountains at the age of 12. Her mother was the only women among the militants in the mountains. Mina witnessed the difficult times her mother went through as a revolutionary. There was no food, medicines and garments during winter. Several times, they had to change their hiding place as the French soldier had been looking for them:

My mother was the only woman among the mujahideen. I remained with them all four days. Once, during this time, the French soldiers were almost near to us. We had to our hiding places (...).²⁸

The journey of self-discovery: Zoulikha a modern, brave and exceptional woman:

In the third monologue, Zoulikha recalls the significant role of her father in her life. It was because of him that she was able to go to the French school and continue with her education, unlike other Muslim girls:

At my father's house, the day when I left the school (French school, of course!), my father was very proud of repeating everywhere: "The first Arab girl to have had the basic school certificate in the region, perhaps in the entire province."²⁹

Zoulikha had a lot of respect for her culture and her tradition, but she refused to wear the veil which is obligatory for young girls and women. For her audacity and boldness, she was criticised by the city-dwellers of Cherchell: "Chaieb daughter dressed as a European female."³⁰ But, Zoulikha was always encouraged and supported by her father, which is very rare in a traditional society. Here, we would like to mention that the

²³ *Ibid.* p.77; my translation.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.133; my translation

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.153 and 154; my translation

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.109 and 110; my translation

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.114; my translation

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.192; my translation

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.166; my translation

³⁰ *Ibid.* p.166; my translation

fathers of both Zoulikha and Assia Djebar³¹ have had a very important role to play in their lives. It is because of them, that they have been able to make a certain place within the traditional society. At the same time, the colonial education and the French language gave them the opportunity to interact with the outside world. However, it does not mean that they are in the favour of French colonisation of Algeria: "(...) I told myself, for a second, it was true, that I was disguised, but to challenge the settlers and their wives, to be as good as their daughters, to insult their boys (...)." ³²

In her second monologue, Zoulikha describes the interrogations and the torture which she had undergone after the death of her husband El Hadj and after having been arrested as a militant in the mountains. After the death of El Hadj, she was questioned day and night by the Commissioner Costa. He threatened her and warned her of terrible consequences, if she did not support the French police. Not only her life, but the life of her children was also in danger. Costa harassed her a lot during the interrogation, but she never broke down:

Costa used to call her once or twice every week, since the death of El Hadj, your father. Then, it was almost every second day. Interrogation went on entire morning, three hours, sometimes four. Each meeting was terminated by the same sentence:

You have small children to feed. It is the time for dinner for them! You have a chance to be a mother of your family (...).³³

In her third monologue, Zoulikha describes herself as a determined and a courageous woman. She acknowledged that she was both mentally and physically strong to face all the challenges in her life. A true nationalist, her only aim was to preserve the identity of her country and her people: "Arriving at the mountains, with the militants, I had the feeling of resuming my walk: towards where, towards which goal, I used to say, till the end."³⁴ Hence in her last monologue, she discovers herself to be a very tough woman. After having been arrested from the mountains, by the French army, she was tortured, electrified, tortured with salt water which was highly painful. For the French army, these torturous means were used to extract information from the rebels:

But everything was mixed, only the pain along my thighs tore me apart, haunted me, and went up to my ears.³⁵

As soon as they started interrogating me, first time, unnecessary sentence, ineffectiveness, I knew the ritual: electric shocks, they used to bring water container for bath, they sharpened the knives (...).³⁶

Conclusion:

In conclusion we can say that, the women have played a very important role in the History of Algeria. During the Algerian war, the women have fought with bravery against the French army. Along with the Algerian men, they have undergone torture and danger, faced threats and have done major sacrifices, which the Algerian society has forgotten in the postcolonial era. Like Hania, Mina, Dame Lionne and Zoulikha, there were other Algerian women, such as, Fatima Amich, Assia, and Djamila in the novel, who tried their best to make a significant contribution during the war. Hence, through this article, we have observed as to how Assia Djebar tries to affirm the identity of Algerian women by giving them voices and making them visible in the public space: "Some women, the ones of Cherchell! With long bird legs ready to fly above the sea."³⁷

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³¹ Refer to page 1 of this article

³² Assia Djebar, 2002, *op.cit.*, p.167; my translation

³³ *Ibid.*, p.117

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.175

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 197; my translation

³⁶ *Ibid.* 200; my translation

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.106; my translation