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Assia Djébar's Fiction: Negotiating Independent Space and Identity of Women in Algeria

Abstract

Assia Djébar (1936-2015) is a pivotal female voice from the Algeria who explores the identity struggle of Algerian women. Through her writing she advocates women's rights and highlights the plight of the Algerian women battling the double burden of patriarchy and colonialism. She uses her writing as a tool to combat the social and patriarchal injustice meted out to women. Djébar in her writing addresses the issues affecting women such as restricted freedom, women's long-term silence and the suppression of identity. To free them from the stereotypical images of submission and passivity, Djébar challenges the oppressive mechanisms of patriarchy. Quest for identity is a central concern for her protagonists whose bodies and minds are imprisoned by walls and veils enforced by patriarchy.

Djébar's writing questions the entrenched gender inequality and patriarchal hegemony and exposes its manifestations. She examines the women from the perspective of 'herstory' of self-discovery and re-assertion of her identity. She struggles for the right of women, gives voice to their protest and in the process attempts to reclaim their identity. The female voice often submissive and silenced in the patriarchal society is placed at the centre in her narratives. She has contributed effectively to liberate the voices and gaze of Algerian women

through her discourse. Djébar becomes a voice for women across the globe whether they are from East or West; women veiled or unveiled, oppressed and subjugated by patriarchal forces. The paper explores how Djébar's protagonists resist the established patriarchal strictures and how her female protagonists negotiate for the independent space and identity.

Key words: double marginalization, women, gender, identity, oppression.

Women's writing is a mechanism to combat the social and patriarchal oppression of the women in the male-dominated culture. Writing in a male-controlled society the endeavour is to reclaim their agency, body, and crave a space for themselves. The female identity, authorship and subjectivity are suppressed by the patriarchal powers and the colonial authority is also an accomplice in the marginalisation of women. The patriarchal-colonial enterprise defines women as mute, ignorant, submissive and 'other'. The ideological project of patriarchy and colonialism aims at relegating women to the periphery. Thus women need to construct their identity through a narrative that gives voice to their suffering and inverts the structure of domination. Helen Cixous states, "woman must write woman... women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem." (881)

Assia Djébar (1936-2015) the novelist endeavours to retrieve the suppressed female identity amidst the subjugation and injustice meted out to women in the patriarchal-colonial Algeria. Her involvement in the politics of resistance and her autobiographical novels explore the Algerian history from a gynocentric point of view. Her writing creates a self-determining space for the Algerian women whose voice has been subdued, unheard and oppressed; thus resisting the colonial hegemony and male authority. Women in her fiction question the conventional patriarchal societal bonds and seek to move away from that captivity by

reclaiming their identity. Victoria Best observes, “Djebar is an idiosyncratic stylist, but her texts nevertheless provide a representative chronicle of women’s battle to inscribe themselves in space, a space that is paradigmatic of postcolonial life where past and present, tradition and innovation, and a multiplicity of voices and discourses can comfortably cohabit” (875). Djebar in her writing challenges the issues affecting women such as restricted freedom, women’s long-term silence in order to promote the liberation and emancipation of Algerian women. Djebar becomes a voice for women across the globe whether they are from East or West; women veiled or unveiled, oppressed and subjugated by patriarchal forces.

The Female body often portrayed as submissive and wilfully silenced in androtexts is placed at the centre in Djebar’s writing. She explores the female experience and highlights the subjugation of women by gender and French hegemony. Djebar raises her voice against the oppression of women in the Algerian society, so as to empower and restore their subjectivity and dignity. Her work exposes the patriarchal oppression and colonial suppression responsible for casting women as ‘the other’. By articulating their stories, Djebar exposes the history that relegated women to the margins and manifested them as submissive and ignorant. Djebar in her works unearths the deep rooted subjugation of women and envisions that women become the creators of their destiny.

Assia Djebar’s novels *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1993) and *So Vast the Prison* (1995) re-define the womanhood by subverting the established patriarchal notion of female identity. Djebar gives voice to the female version of the story, by exploring the struggle of women to eradicate stereotypes which delineate them as subordinate, marginalized, misrepresented and oppressed. She challenges the oppressive ideology of patriarchy by exploring the identity struggle of the female characters combatting with the stereotypical images of submission and passivity. In both the novels Djebar unveils the desires and also the plight of the Algerian women battling the double burden of patriarchy and colonialism. She dedicates her voice for

the purpose of emancipating the female protagonists from the domineering voices that reduce them to silence. Throughout her work, the female protagonists negotiate for an independent space, self and voice. The legitimacy of gender inequality and racial discrimination by imperial powers is questioned by the female protagonists in her novels. In the process of reclaiming the female identity and self they give voice to their protest by crossing the dominating paradigm of colonial-masculine society.

In the narrative of the semi-autobiographical novel *A Sister to Scheherazade*, Djébar's female protagonists challenge the notion of male supremacy and the socio-cultural dictates that construct the identity of the woman as 'the other'. The novel revolves around two female protagonists Isma and Hajila, and their struggle against the established norms which eventually helps them to construct an independent space and identity. Isma the educated, outspoken and liberated woman narrates the story of Hajila and also arranges her marriage with her former husband. She rejects the established masculine domination which she finds unacceptable and struggles to realise her true identity that is constricted by patriarchal walls and veils. She prospers in liberating herself from the bonds of her marriage and goes to France in search of her freedom. Djébar in this novel "seeks to acquire a form of feminine writing that liberates women from men's oppression exercised in polygamy and to "unveil" the existence of Algerian women". (Mrenne 45)

Hajila, uneducated, poor, and traditional sacrifices herself by marrying a wealthy man with two children. She does not object to her mother's decision of getting her married as it ensures the welfare and comfort of her family. She is submissive: "And the gossipmongers mused at dusk: the bride would be conveyed like an object, gaze turned inwards, face bathed in tears, just fit to be buried... What masochism, whereas fate, already so hard on women, did at least guarantee them the glamour of a wedding day!" (123) However, Hajila soon discovers her desire for freedom from the patriarchal society when she realizes that her body is

objectified and silenced by the desires of her husband. Her resistance and search for her identity begins when she subverts the patriarchal domination by secretly venturing out in the streets and explores the city. She says to herself “you are ‘going out’ first time, Hajila. You are wearing slippers like an old woman, your head muffled in the old wool; your face completely hidden, leaving only one tiny gap exposed through which you peep to see where you are going.” (19)

Hajila transgresses the threshold by making an escape from her apartment when her children and husband leave and enters into new space. She leaps out of the marginalised space into the liberated one: She realises that she too has an identity:

“And so every day you make you escape. You become quite familiar with the little public gardens and squares of this neighbourhood. To find your way about, you recall where you went the day before, and the day before that, and so on... in the evening when you return with aching legs and the rumblings from the outside world drown the beating of your heart, you tell yourself that you too have a history.” (41)

Once her husband gets to know of her wanderings he beats her up mercilessly and even tries to blind her. Her husband “takes an empty bottle, breaks it on the edge of the sink and mutters, listening to his own eloquence, ‘I’ll put out your eyes and then you’ll never see again! And no one will ever see you either!’... ‘I’ll break your legs and then you will never go out again, you’ll be nailed to a bed and...’” (87)

Later in the novel Isma’s quest for identity and independent self becomes a voice to liberate other women. She understands that all women are confined by the patriarchal rule thus she stands with Hajila against the patriarchal authority by giving a duplicate key of her apartment so that she can regain her much cherished freedom. Djébar is critical of social discrimination and subjugation of women and unites Hajila and Isma against it. She also highlights the female protagonist’s endeavour to resist the established patriarchal strictures

inflicted on them by the male autocracy and ultimately make efforts to free themselves from the captivity of patriarchal customs and social codes.

So Vast the Prison is autobiographical as Djébar explores her own agonizing experience of patriarchal and colonial oppression and the shared history of Algerian women. The title of the novel manifests the notion of patriarchal ideology and colonialism as one vast prison from which women are seeking an independent identity. The novel examines the resistance of the female protagonist Isma also battling the double burden of patriarchy and colonialism. Isma locked up in the confined space of her husband's house feels the need to break her silence and searches for her own identity. She fights for her identity and escapes from the captivity of her married life to become a film maker. By choosing camera as a tool to break down the silence, Isma enters into the male gaze thus reclaims her true self and body. "This hole is the only lens she has to throw out toward space. For me the eye, questioning from behind and in spite of all the screens, was no longer there just so that the wretched woman could see her way: just a bit of light, a gleam to see where to go and how to escape, as she walked away from man's gaze"(180). Jane Hiddleton observes that "Djébar's text recounts her experiences as a filmmaker, developing further the notion of the female gaze and its role as a symbol of resistance. The adjustment of controlling the camera signifies self-affirmation and rebellion. Significantly again, however, self-expression is paradoxically a collective project, taken explicitly in the name of all the women who suffered repression in the harem" (100).

The novel also narrates an episode which takes place in the hammam (public bath), where Algerian women are speaking among themselves about the shared problem of male dominance. The hammam provides a space for women to share their feelings in the absence of the chains of patriarchal power. The male supremacy is reflected when one of the female characters retorts: "I cannot possibly stay later today. The enemy is at home"...don't you

know how women in our town talk among themselves?...don't you understand? By enemy, she meant her husband...enemy is just a manner of speaking. Woman as I said before, have called them for ages...without the men knowing it"... (13-14). Djébar discusses the 'enemy' as a shared problem to all the oppressed women in an Algerian society.

When Isma confesses her relationship with another man her husband physically abuses her and attempts to blind her with a broken whiskey bottle, "First he insulted. Then he struck. Protect my eyes. Because his frenzy was proving to be strange: He intended to blind me. "Adulteress," he muttered, in his hands the whiskey bottle broken in two. All I could think of were my eyes and the danger represented by the too-wide-open window (85).

Assia Djébar through her writings explores a "postcolonial feminist literature [that] foregrounds the presence and voices of women silenced by a history that discounts them and fails to consider their agency" (Donneday 142). In both the novels Djébar present a chronicle of suffering and subordination. Inequality, discrimination and disparity are part of the shared history of the Algerian women. The works recount the stories of individuals yet these stories articulate the lived experiences of most of the Algerian women. By giving voice to her protagonists Assia Debar envisions a space where women can realise their true essence.

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