

2009

Assia Djebars La femme sans spulture as Postcolonial Primer

Dana Strand
Carleton College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.carleton.edu/fren_faculty



Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Strand, Dana. "Assia Djebars La femme sans spulture as Postcolonial Primer." *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 13.3 (2009): 339-347. Accessed via Faculty Work. French. *Carleton Digital Commons*.

The definitive version is available at <https://doi.org/https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17409290902938768>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the French and Francophone Studies at Carleton Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work by an authorized administrator of Carleton Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@carleton.edu.

ASSIA DJEBAR'S *LA FEMME SANS SÉPULTURE* AS POSTCOLONIAL PRIMER

Dana Strand

As the organizers of the conference on Franco-Arab Cultures noted in their Call for Papers, one of the principal questions they hoped participants would address was “what intellectual, pedagogical, ideological and cultural frameworks have shaped comparative scholarly inquiries into the fields of Francophone and Arabic Studies.” I would like to suggest that the works of Assia Djébar offer a fertile ground for exploring many of the issues raised by such inquiries. Written in French, but frequently drawing upon oral Arabic (or Berber) traditions, her works continually call into question received ideas about Franco-Arab cultures by underscoring what is at stake in the battle for their representation. As a consequence, Djébar’s writings may very well function in the classroom (and beyond) as a testing ground for reassessing current paradigms as well as a laboratory for developing new ones.

Often hovering between essay, memoir, and fiction, her works serve as a reflection on the dynamics of colonial representation, in part as an exploration of the silencing of women in and out of Algerian culture, and in part as a critique of official practices of History. Because of their overtly reflexive focus on such fundamental preoccupations of postcolonial analysis, I want to argue here that Djébar’s novels can productively serve in the undergraduate classroom as a useful introduction to postcolonial theory. In fact, in the course of teaching an interdisciplinary class entitled “Algeria-France,” I found that theory and practice proved to be mutually illuminating: on the one hand, reading Djébar’s 2002 novel, *La femme sans sépulture*, provided a model for applying the fundamental concepts in postcolonial thought to the particular

case of a North African woman writing in French. On the other hand, opening the novel up to different critical methodologies offered a contextual framework for understanding Djébar's project.

Taking as its central purpose the exploration of the *trait d'union* tenuously holding together the two terms in what historian Gilbert Meynier has referred to as a "forced marriage," ending as we know in a bitter divorce the ramifications of which are still reverberating on both sides of the Mediterranean, the Algeria-France course adopted an approach grounded in theory. Now, anyone who has introduced undergraduates to the heady ideas of such postcolonial critics as Homi Bhabha, Gyatri Spivak, Frantz Fanon, and Edouard Glissant knows how resistant even the most open-minded students can be to approaches that challenge their familiar ways of seeing and knowing. These theories, rooted in postmodern thought (or in the case of Fanon, psychoanalytic theory), often ask students to forsake a reassuring fixed disciplinary lens (one for which they may have only recently been fitted) for the considerably more unsettling kaleidoscopic (perhaps fractured) vision of the inter- or even counter-disciplinary. What is potentially more unsettling is that such critical practices oblige students to call into question conventional (and comfortable) assumptions about history, selfhood, identity, and knowledge that have structured their understanding of the world and their place in it.

Searching for an effective way to bring theory to bear on the course material, I found in the opening paragraphs of Robert Young's study of post-structuralist historiography, *White Mythologies: Writing History in the West*, a promising suggestion of how the gap might be bridged. To quote Young: "If... 'so-called poststructuralism' is the product of a single historical moment, then that moment is... probably the Algerian War of Independence—no doubt itself both a symptom and a product" (1).

He goes on to cite H el ene Cixous' personal account of what it felt like to grow up as an Algerian French Jewish girl in the 1950s: "I learned everything from this first spectacle: I saw how the white (French) superior, plutocratic, civilized world founded its power on the repression of populations who had suddenly become 'invisible,' like proletarians, immigrant workers, minorities who are not the right 'color.' Women. Invisible as humans... I saw that the great, noble, 'advanced' countries established themselves by expelling what was 'strange'; excluding it but not dismissing it; enslaving it. A commonplace gesture of History..." (qtd Young 1).

Young sees this passage, taken from *La jeune n e*, as an exemplary postcolonial critique that dramatically links historical structures of knowledge with colonial forms of oppression—racism, sexism, and economic exploitation. It seemed to me, after reflecting on Young's remarks, that Dj ebar's *La femme sans s epulture* made the same case, tracing the effects of colonial oppression and its aftermath through its compelling story of a "real" female guerilla fighter, while at the same time relying upon formal innovations to showcase

strategies that combat the use of History to consolidate power or appropriate the other.

In fact, in reading Djébar's novel with students, I discovered that despite its unconventional narrative structure, generic ambiguities and complicated chronology, the text provided both a vivid illustration and an interrogation of many of the basic premises of postcolonial theory we were studying. For the purposes of my discussion here I take those premises to be subsumed under Ali Behdad's general definition of the objective of postcolonial critique as seeking "to unravel the complexities of Western cultural hegemony and the hidden relations of power that are always at work but always kept invisible in their working" (74). As we read Djébar's novel, concepts with which we had struggled in the abstract were fleshed out by a literary text that functioned as a sort of postcolonial user's manual exploring fundamental methodological issues we would have to address throughout the course.

Furthermore, the text proved particularly well-suited to addressing the question, raised so pertinently by Dominique Fisher in her recent study of the works of Djébar and Tahar Djaout, *Ecrire l'urgence*, namely how to engage in an intercultural reading of such French-language novels that nonetheless participate in North African literary traditions. According to Fisher, the challenge such authors present calls for a sustained assessment of critical reading practices: "La question qui continue à se poser pour des écrivains maghrébins est non seulement de savoir comment décoloniser la littérature, mais aussi sa lecture" (14). Again, a judicious consideration of the cultural and historical origins (and, in some cases, limitations) of theoretical approaches can serve to "decolonize" the interpretive exercise.¹

Devoted to resurrecting the story of Zoulikha, the female freedom fighter during the Algerian war of independence, *La femme sans sépulture* recounts her capture, torture, and murder at the hands of the French colonial forces. The novel thus seeks to re-inscribe that occulted female experience in Algeria's troubled pre- and post-liberation history. Yet the quest, undertaken by an autobiographical narrator in concert with other generations of women, is richly complicated by many of the same challenges the postcolonial scholar must confront: for example, the difficulty of giving voice to a fixed common past, the ambiguity introduced by position, location, and language, and the fierce battles waged over sites of memory and commemoration. Like many of Djébar's works, her pointedly elusive "story of Zoulikha" thus serves several purposes: at the same time that it sheds light on an important chapter in French-Algerian relations and clears a place for Algerian women in a history from which they have largely been absent, it also tests the limits of postcolonial critique.

In what follows, I would like to spell out in greater detail some of the ways in which Djébar's novel might function as what I call a postcolonial primer. She begins her book with a short, but richly nuanced forward in which she paradoxically underscores the care she took in writing the novel to protect

historical accuracy and her liberal use of the tools of fiction to shed light on the “truth” of Zoulikha’s life. She situates that truth at the center of “une large fresque féminine” (11) modeled, she concludes, on a mosaic of the ancient city of Césarée (today called Cherchell), a mosaic depicting Ulysses’ struggle to ward off the sirens. Since the action of the novel is centered in Cherchell, not coincidentally hometown to both Djébar and Zoulikha, this reference immediately anchors her story in a place that is semiotically loaded, marked both synchronically and diachronically by multiple layers of meaning. Evoking the ancient origins of the city, Djébar’s opening remarks thus tie Cherchell (Césarée) to herself as author but also as narrator personally implicated in the process of reconstructing the story, as well as to the almost mythical figure of Zoulikha.

Furthermore, in a chapter entitled, “Les oiseaux de la mosaïque,” strategically placed in the center of her novel, she establishes the connection between the figures represented in the ancient mosaic, whom she describes as “femmes-oiseaux prêtes à s’envoler,” (116) and the present-day women of Cherchell. Constituting what numerous critics have described as a *mise-en-abyme* of the novel’s project, the powerful songs of the liberated women from antiquity are symbolically taken up by what the narrator identifies as their modern counterparts: Zoulikha, her daughters, Dame Lionne, and others yet to speak up against the violence of the post-liberation years. Likening the seductive chants of the sirens to the elusive but insistent voices of Zoulikha and those following in her wake, the narrator imagines an undisciplined chorus of female voices that might ultimately supplant the stifling narrative foisted on them by both the colonial powers and radical Islamists.

In the book’s epilogue, Djébar underscores once again the claim that both she and Zoulikha have on the place from which they have been exiled:

Césarée—deux mille ans d’histoire—la ville où j’ai été bébé rampant, fillette ânonnante, titubante, puis heureuse de sauter à la corde, dans un humble patio tout proche de celui de Zoulikha, Césarée de Maurétanie—autrefois Iol, un nom de vent et d’orage, devenu plus tard nid de corsaires et refuge d’Andalous expatriés, puis ville pour les relégués des successifs pouvoirs d’Alger, y compris celui de l’ex-autorité coloniale française—, je la vois désormais, elle, ma ‘capitale des douleurs.’ dans un espace totalement inversé. . . Les pierres seules sont sa mémoire à vif, tandis que des ruines s’effondrent sans fin dans la tête de ses habitants. (237)

In this lyrical passage, Djébar reclaims the city in the name of a sort of liberated history, subject neither to the demands of colonial discourse nor to the dictates of post-independence militant nationalist agendas, in both cases replacing the practice of successively erasing the past with a more palimpsestic model.²

In addition, Djébar's foreword serves another important purpose: by asserting that historical accuracy can only be achieved through a creative reconstitution of that part of the past that has been previously repressed, she destabilizes conventional assumptions about historical truth, acknowledging in particular the distorting effects of the silencing of women. In fact, the question of the authority of the narrative voice is central to the novel's assault on History and on modes of storytelling that purport to remain faithful to the facts. Casting herself as a character in the novel alternatively in the role of visitor, guest, or "stranger who is not all that much a stranger" (77), Djébar systematically complicates her relationship to Zoulikha's story. She calls attention to her position as both insider (an Algerian woman raised in Césarée, a writer, filmmaker, and historian whose interest in Zoulikha's story led her to dedicate her 1978 film, *La noubia du mont Chenoua* to the freedom fighter) and outsider (an exiled author writing in French, the language of the colonizer, who has experienced the most recent violent events in Algerian history from afar). By doing so, she makes the reader aware of her own positioning in relation to the story, an essential step, according to scholars such as Gyatri Spivak, in avoiding one of the pitfalls to which postcolonial critique often falls prey.³

Despite (or perhaps because of) her training as a historian, she shies away from claiming authority over a piece of Algerian history that she rather seeks to inscribe or as she corrects herself "re-inscribe" through the intervention of multiple female narrators, including Zoulikha herself, whose monologues echo from beyond her unmarked grave throughout the text. She parcels out the story to a collection of female voices representing different social classes and generations, taking care to emphasize the intersection of languages, dialects and subject positions that characterizes their communication. As the story unfolds in overlapping, discontinuous and distinctly non-chronological oral exchanges among women, the reader becomes increasingly aware that Djébar is offering an alternative to the hegemonic History that has worked its violence in pre- and post-independence Algeria. In fact, the novel provides a model of doing History that corresponds surprisingly closely to the one that Ella Shohat proposes in her "Notes on the Postcolonial": "a notion of the past that might . . . be negotiated differently not as a static fetishized phase to be literally reproduced but as fragmented sets of narrated memories and experiences on the basis of which to mobilize contemporary communities" (136).

Reading Djébar in the light of Abdelfattah Kilito's engaging study of the forms of classical Arabic literature, *L'auteur et ses doubles*, Dominique Fisher argues convincingly that many of her writing practices, which may at first appear to be tools of the Western postmodernist trade, are in fact commonly found in the classical and popular Arabic literary repertoire (14). Viewed from this vantage point, Djébar's reluctance to lay claim to an authoritative voice, her liberal mingling of fiction and fact, her reliance upon polyphonic texts, places her squarely within a centuries-old Arabic literary tradition. As she situates

Djebar's project culturally and historically, Fisher underscores the importance of expanding the theoretical canon to include perspectives reflective of non-Western influences, while at the same time calling attention to the possibility that hegemonic bias may taint certain postcolonial critiques.

By resurrecting Zoulikha and her story as a "fragmented set of narrated memories," Djebar also confronts two major dangers often singled out by postcolonial theorists: collective forgetting and the appropriation of memory. As the title of Benjamin Stora's study of the aftermath of the French withdrawal from Algeria, *La gangrène et l'oubli*, underscores, the deleterious effects of state-supported amnesia has intensified the tragic history of French-Algerian relations. Djebar's novel seeks to overcome that forgetting (of women's roles in the struggle for independence, of the strategic positioning of women's lives and bodies as contested territory in that struggle, of the French use of torture) by having women's voices reclaim that past as living history. The ghostly return of the repressed in the form of Zoulikha and her irrepressible story is thus an example of what Homi Bhabha calls "the disembodied evil eye, the subaltern instance, that wreaks its revenge by circulating *without being seen*" (Bhabha 55).

As for the dangers of appropriating memory, in a well-argued piece devoted to a discussion of *La femme sans sépulture* as an example of the workings of "postcolonial haunting," Michael O'Riley concludes that the novel in some respects addresses the question: "How . . . does one recover specific occulted colonial histories without participating in the imperialist gesture of appropriation . . . , without . . . entering into the dynamics of lingering colonial specters in contemporary claims to cultural and national identity?" (67). We hear from Zoulikha herself about the colonizers' attempts to co-opt her story (and her female body) by linking both to an immutable past, "ce qu'ils désirent tous, ces Européens de la ville, c'est me faire comme Jeanne d'Arc" (Djebar 115). As O'Riley pertinently notes, appropriating Joan of Arc for causes that run the gamut of the political spectrum has been a commonplace occurrence throughout history.

But the Europeans are not the only ones engaging in the gesture of appropriation. Towards the end of the war, a young extremist resistance fighter, threatened by the potential power of Zoulikha's unclaimed body, buries her. As she laments, "il réussit à m'enfermer, à me plomber" (210). Seeking to create a commemorative site for the nationalist movement, the young Algerian's gesture calls to mind the uses and abuses to which post-independence nationalists put the memories of the war dead in Tahar Djaout's bitterly ironic novel, *Chercheurs d'os*. Zoulikha thus resists both imperialist appropriation and the no less disempowering claim the nationalists make on her story. Her cautionary tale serves as an illustration of the warnings of many critics not to confuse the "post" in postcolonial with a positive movement beyond what Ella Shohat calls "a relatively binaristic, fixed and stable mapping of power relations . . ." (134).

Finally, Djebbar's text takes on the question of identity, an issue that in recent years has been fiercely debated in postcolonial circles. Although certain critics favor embracing a specific identity as an important political stance that provides a basis for solidarity among those who share the same position, others argue that abandoning restrictive, essentialist definitions is a liberating gesture that offers resistance to colonial or neocolonial oppression. In *La femme sans sépulture*, Djebbar systematically resists both the Scylla of "depoliticized" hybridity and the Charybdis of "simplistic" identity politics. As Jane Hiddleston concludes, Djebbar often "adopts a variety of specified positions, examining the relation between herself or her characters and society, but she also troubles these positions and draws attention to their limitations" (376). By foregrounding a disarray of multiple voices loosely anchored in an evolving and dynamic collective memory, the novel opens the way for the sort of "groundless solidarity" championed by the feminist critic, Diane Elam, as a means of establishing an ethical community that transcends conventional identitarian boundaries (107). In a gesture that steadfastly refuses to supplant one form of fetishized history with another, Djebbar's text seems to reject the binary opposition animating at least some of the current postcolonial debates over the issue of identity.

I might add, by way of conclusion, that one theoretical response to the question of identity, which is arguably more relevant to Djebbar's project, can be found in Edouard Glissant's substitution of the rhizome for roots as the conventional metaphor signaling national or cultural belonging. Building on the distinction, first proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Mille Plateaux*, Glissant writes:

La racine est unique, c'est une souche qui prend tout sur elle et tue alentour; [Guattari et Deleuze] lui opposent le rhizome qui est une racine démultipliée, étendue en réseaux dans la terre ou dans l'air, sans qu'aucune souche y intervienne en prédateur irrémédiable. La notion du rhizome maintiendrait donc le fait de l'enracinement, mais récuse l'idée d'une racine totalitaire. La pensée du rhizome serait au principe de ce que j'appelle une poétique de la Relation, selon laquelle toute identité s'étend dans un rapport à l'Autre. (32)

Glissant's fluid definition of identity, which rejects both the nationalistic and imperialistic agendas that have shaped previous approaches to the issue, encourages community-building based on principles of similarity and contiguity, rather than difference and opposition.

While the limited scope of this essay prohibits me from exploring the full extent of the contribution Djebbar's writings have made to our understanding of Franco-Arab cultures, I do hope that it has at least suggested some of the ways in which calling upon theory to inform our literary interpretation and, inversely,

using textual evidence to ground theory may ultimately encourage a productive “reshaping” of scholarly inquiries in the field.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to Dominique Fisher for calling my attention to the importance of reading Djebbar’s novels interculturally.
- 2 For a sustained analysis of the palimpsest as a fundamental metaphor informing Djebbar’s work, see Donadey.
- 3 See, for example, Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Behdad, Ali. “Une Pratique Sauvage: Postcolonial Belatedness and Cultural Politics.” *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Fawzia, Afzal-Khan and Kalpana, Seshadri-Crookes. Durham: Duke UP, 2000: 69–85.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix, Guattari. *Mille Plateaux*. Paris: Minuit, 1980.
- Djaout, Tahar. *Chercheurs d’os*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984.
- Djebbar, Assia. *La femme sans sépulture*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2002.
- Donadey, Anne. “The Multilingual Strategies of Postcolonial Literature: Assia Djebbar’s Algerian Palimpsest.” *World Literature Today* 74.1 (Winter 2000): 27–36.
- Elam, Diane. *Feminism and Deconstruction*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Fisher, Dominique D. *Ecrire l’urgence: Assia Djebbar et Tahar Djaout*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2007.
- Glissant, Edouard. *La poétique de la relation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.
- Hiddleston, Jane. “The Specific Plurality of Assia Djebbar.” *French Studies* 58.3 (2004): 371–84.
- Kilito, Abdelfattah. *L’auteur et se doubles: essai sur la culture arabe classique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984.
- Meynier, Gilbert. “France-Algérie: un mariage forcé, une séparation sanglante.” *Le Monde*, 31 octobre 2004.
- O’Riley, Michael F. Place. “Position, and Postcolonial Haunting in Assia Djebbar’s *La Femme Sans Sépulture*.” *Research in African Literatures* 35.1 (2004): 66–86.
- Shohat, Ella. “Notes on the Post-Colonial.” *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Fawzia, Afzal-Khan and Kalpana, Seshadri-Crookes. Durham: Duke UP, 2000: 126–139.
- Spivak, Gyatri. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999.
- Stora, Benjamin. *La gangrène et l’oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d’Algérie*. Paris: Ed. de la Découverte, 1991.

Young, Robert. *White Mythologies: Writing History in the West*. London: Routledge, 1991.

Dana Strand is Andrew W. Mellon Professor of French and the Humanities at Carleton College where she teaches courses in French and Francophone literature, culture, and film. She is the author of a monograph on Colette's short stories and co-editor of a collection of essays on French Cultural Studies. Her current research explores the relationship between place and identity in contemporary French literature and film.

Copyright of Contemporary French & Francophone Studies is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.