

## Language, Identity and Conflict : The Colonizer /Colonized Dichotomy in the Writings of Assia Djébar

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Assia Djébar is one of the prominent francophone writers of Algeria who, like other Algerian writers was influenced by Arabian culture and wrote in French, the language of the country's former colonizer. With the intention of exposing the malaise of French colonial rule in Algeria, Assia Djébar in her novels ,explores the relationship between écriture (the written language in French ) and Kalaam ,the spoken word in Arabic, the two contradicting forces that shaped her writings .This article is based on two celebrated novels of the writer :*La femme sans sépulture* and *L'Amour, la fantasia* and it seeks to reflect on how the colonizer /colonized dichotomy led to a conflict of linguistic identity in her works. The writer often had to deal with the binary nature of Arabic and French that weighed heavily on her psyche: French represents both the language of the enemy and its access to the modern world; Arabic, for its part, represents both the family roots and the repression that impedes the progress of the Algerian people. Hence this article seeks to study how in the face of the challenging orient/west dichotomy the writer succeeds in reconciling these two opposing forces in her works.

**Keywords:** Colonizer; Dichotomy; Francophone; Language.

Anchored in two radically different cultures, two stories, two languages, the Franco phone literature in Algeria developed especially after the Second World War, during the post-colonial period, in 1962. Influenced by Arab and Berber heritage, this literature is written in French, the language of the former colonizer. It is therefore necessarily the place of a rupture, a contradiction: Algerian writers must denounce the injustices, discrimination and intolerance of the colonizers in their own language which was the only instrument of liberation. Thus, the struggle for identity becomes an essential question that cannot be dissociated from Algerian literature. The problems and issues related to the Francophonie in Algeria determine and constitute its literature which remains the isthmus between- the two languages: French and Arabic.

The writer under discussion , Assia Djébar does not escape this predicament: born in Algeria, and then exiled in France, she maintains a problematic and

contradictory relationship with the language of her literary works. About this, she says :

“If the first step is to bring back the past through writing in French, the second is to listen to women who evoke the past by voice, by the mother tongue. Then, we must bring this evocation through the mother tongue to the paternal language. Because French is also for me the paternal language. The language of yesterday’s enemy became for me the language of the father, because my father was a teacher in a French school; but in this language there is death, by the testimony of the conquest I am bringing back. But there is also the movement, the liberation of the body of the woman because, for me, little girl going to the French school, this is how I can avoid the harem. However, when the body is still motionless, the mother tongue is memory, song of the past”. (Mortimer, 1988: 201). She further said that learning French language was a liberating experience for her, because by going to a French school she could avoid the harem.

Thus, the French language in Algeria is the object of a strong ambivalence, which involves social, cultural, political identity of its people. Since the 1850s, colonized by France, Algeria has been denied its identity. The French language has taken the place of Arabic in education and official usages, it has become, on the one hand, language of social prestige and openness to modernity, education and universal culture ; on the other hand, it was seen as the language of the enemy who wanted to subject the weakest to its power. This dichotomy was treated with balance in two of the celebrated novels of Assia Djebar: *La femme sans sépulture* and *L’amour et la fantasia*.

In *La femme sans sépulture*, we find both perspectives: that of the colonizer and of the colonized. and the objective of Assia Djebar is precisely to show them together in order to arrive at a mollifying union.

We will now analyze, from various fragments taken from this novel the antagonistic aspects under which appear both languages: French and Arabic. If French represents both the language of the enemy and the language of openness to the modern world, Arabic also has two faces: one representing roots, culture and identity of origins, while the other represents the repression of women, the authoritarianism and the taboos that prevent the progress of the people of the country.

Regarding French, its positive side is embodied strongly by Zoulikha, the female protagonist of the novel: her access to education and her subsequent mastery of French allow her to feel liberated from the yoke imposed on women. She sees in the French language a weapon to fight against anything that seems unfair to her. By rejecting the veil in the 1920s, Zoulikha asserts herself as a pioneer of emancipation in Algeria. In a similar way, the writer Assia Djebar too considers the French language as an instrument of struggle

and liberation. In her opinion, writing in French is the most appropriate way to assert her freedom:

(...) to write, for the woman, it is to steal the words, to tear them out of the social rule, of the masculine grip. The writing is discovery of the world, of another life. It is also a weapon of protest and refusal of the blind authority of tradition. (Gafaiti, 1999)

Even though the negative image of French is much more pronounced and evident, for the author, the "sympathetic" image, which represents the language of her father as well as the only means of liberation, is stronger and important.

The French language is seen as "the enemy", for example, in this episode narrated by Zohra Oudai where after being approached by a French officer she could defend herself because she knew the language, and she says: It's because fear, my little ones, makes you learn everything, French, and even the language of the devil, if need be. (Djebar, 2002: 85-86)

This negative view of French reappears in Zoulikha's last monologue, where she talks about the last moments of her life. While she is brutally tortured by soldiers of the French army, it is the ancient Arabic, "water of tenderness in this crossing" (page 122) the only language where she finds relief.

As with French, the relationship with Arabic is also contradictory and problematic. On the one hand, Assia Djebar shows a "positive" vision of the Arabic language, that which represents the memory, the origins, and the core of the Algerian identity. The author retains in her novel a rather large number of Arabic words that designate elements and realities intimately linked to the culture and customs of the people of Algeria. Their translation could have led to the suppression of the peculiarities that characterize Algeria as a nation with its own identity. These words predominate in women's oral discourses: they convey feelings, emotions and family traditions. Here are some examples from *La femme sans sépulture*: "Fellahs" "Aman" "Douirates" "Hamman" "Mujahideen" "Meskounates" "Medersa" "Menfi" "Meida" "Baraka" etc.

This positive view of Arabic is constructed in a polemical dialogue with another negative representation: in her novel, Assia Djebar questions and criticizes the authoritarianism, the repression and the fanatical nationalism of the new Algerian power assumed by the Government after independence. This reproachful aspect of Arabic as a language of authoritarianism is denounced especially by the female protagonist Zohra Oudai who tells how she argued with the corrupt new Algerian authorities when she asked for a house for her and her grandchildren.

The conflict between two languages resurfaces in another novel of the author, *L'amour la fantasia* where the author focuses on the intricate lives and

experiences of ordinary Algerian women who strive to liberate themselves from the oppressive bonds of traditional Muslim family roles and social norms. The French / Arabic dichotomy is very much evident. Dwelling on the positive aspects of both the author compares the act of writing in French to a surgical process laying bare the wounds suffered by the women under patriarchy during colonial rule. This makes her reflect on the problem of language as a tool of psychological conditioning, particularly in matters of female self-identity and sexuality. And at the same time her references to Arabic words bring forth a sense of nostalgia. For the narrator in *L'amour et la fantasia* fondly remembers how she and her brother were called "hannouni", a term of affection used specifically in their community by their aunts. In spite of the difficulty of translating the term into French, and its memory seems to conjure a sense of nostalgia, "cela fait chaud au cœur".

Thus to conclude we can say that multiple voices intertwine and overlap to reveal a vast and complex reality, in which the French and Arabic languages show two faces: French is both the language of the enemy and of access to education; Arabic, for its part, is associated with family roots, nostalgia and at the same time the repression that prevents the progress of the Algerian people. However, this insular vision is finally sought to be dismissed by Assia Djébar who manages to infuse the oral histories of Algerian women into her writing in French. This is how French becomes a weapon of struggle against oppression, forgetfulness and devaluation of the women of Algeria. If it is true that Algerian literature remains in the cleft between two languages, the tendency is to write towards the pursuit for dialogues and the re-appropriation of a plural Algeria where languages, cultures and religions can live together in a cordial and tolerant environment. It is especially for this purpose that Assia Djébar writes her novel: forging a solid identity built by a balanced bilingualism.

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