

Revising History in Assia Djebar's, *la Femme Sans Sépulture* (2002)

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“Revising history in Assia Djebar’s *La Femme Sans Sépulture* 2002” is aimed to demonstrate the inherent topicality of the literature written by Assia Djebar whose concern with the gender issue underlies the purpose of revising and rewriting history. This will be fulfilled through the description of setting with focus on historical time in *La Femme Sans Sépulture* and through the study of plot structure and narrative perspective. In other words, I will try to show how through the use of plot negation and shifting points of view, the novel offers a revision of traditional history written in male fiction.

La Femme Sans Sépulture is one of Djebar’s recent publications; it has been first published in 2002. Structurally, the novel opens with a prelude and ends with an epilogue. It is about Zoulikha Oudai, the woman without sepulchre and forgotten heroine of the Algerian war of liberation. It is a novel, which through the quest of the past and a return to the period of colonialism precisely the war of liberation as experienced by women, attempts to rewrite history, which is the author’s means to understand the present. In other words, *La Femme Sans Sépulture* is a novel which repeats the theme of the return to the past to write the same story of past struggles but with a difference.

Three historical periods are retrospectively represented through what on its surface structure depicts the recovery of the story of Zoulikha. These periods are the colonial period, early post independence years, the 1990’s and the beginning of the 2000’s.

The colonial period with focus on the Algerian war of liberation as experienced by women in the town Césarée de Mauritanie (present day Cherchell) is the dominant time in the novel. It is described through interaction with the year 1976, the time when the author returns 14 years after the independence to her hometown to collect the story of Zoulikha. Her informants are Zoulikha’s two daughters Hania and Mina, her friend Lala Lbia known also as Dame Lionne living in the city of Césarée, and

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her sister in law Tante Zohra Oudai who lives on the hills of the Dahra mountains lying over Césarée.

The colonial period is first described in the prelude through the presentation of some facts about the life of Zoulilha. Here, Djebbar creates nothing. Just like a historian, sociologist, or journalist, she gives factual information about a war heroine in a specific area and period. Other facts and details from that period have been reported in the testimonies of the different narrators in the novel. In an introductory note to the novel, to stress the historian, journalist task that she undergoes, Djebbar writes: “tous les faits et détails de la vie et de la mort de Zoulilha, héroïne de ma ville d'enfance, pendant la guerre d'indépendance de l'Algérie, sont rapportés avec un souci de fidélité historique, ou, dirai-je ,selon une approche documentaire”¹ p. 9.

The second period corresponds to post colonial years. This period is not sufficiently depicted. It is referred to in the different narratives through some facts reflecting the experiences of other women in the novel with little accuracy. This middle period in the novel seems then a transition between the past and the present. What characterizes this period is deception which is revealed through topical incidents aimed to uncover some aspects of the widespread corruption characteristic of post colonial Algeria.

Some instances of this widespread corruption may be indicated. The novel reveals the deception of the peasant through the significant retreat of Zohra Oudai and her incurable pessimism when she recalls the citizens of Cisarée, who are in her narrative “les chacals”². It reveals the deception of the common people, who like Hania, the oldest daughter of Zoulilha, are over hurt by the betrayal of the memories of the martyrs of the Revolution, and the exploitation of their sacrifices to support official historiography, represented in the novel by television and journalists, distrusted in Hania’s narratives³. It also reveals the deception and deceptiveness of the intellectual, who like Rachid promises love and carefulness to Mina the youngest daughter of the heroine Zoulilha, but he betrays this love when he decides to leave for France for the sake of a pathological relation with a French friend.

¹ Djebbar, Assia, *La Femme Sans Sépulture*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2002. All subsequent quotations from *La Femme Sans Sépulture* will be taken from this edition, and page references will appear in the text in parentheses.

² See *Femme*, pp. 148, 49-50.

³ See *Femme*, pp. 53-54.

The third period corresponds to the 1990's, a particular period in the history of Algeria marked with violence and terrorism. This period is not directly depicted; it is implied in the different narratives throughout the novel, but it is directly referred to in the epilogue in the author's reflections about the past and the present as "ses derniers dix ans [...] cette nouvelle saignée" (240).

The link between the colonial past and the present is violence, which is a good historical indicator. One important subject in the depiction of the colonial period is the violence practiced by the French army against the Algerians. The first chapter after the prelude is a long account of a violent incident—the assassination of three young men "les fils Saadoun," in 1956 in Césarée. Lalla Lbia, who narrates the event to Mina, says "cette nuit où l'on a fusillé les fils Saadoun... je m'en souviens comme d'hier, cela fait maintenant vingt ans!" Then she adds "la nuit de la mort des fils Saadoun, ce fut pour moi dans cette époque de tourmente, la nuit la plus longue ! Noir son souvenir encore devant mes yeux" (31). The violence of the incident is vividly shown intermingled with fear and courage in the narrative of Lalla Lbia. Other incidents of violence follow in the different narratives representing past events recalled indeed through interaction with the present—the time of the narration, which corresponds with the year 1976.

Violence is the link between the past and the present. Violence practiced in the past is described in a way that reminds the reader, who knows the violent years of the 1990's in Algeria, of more recent harmful memories. This reader is reminded of the curfews, of the searches and nocturnal assassinations in the Algerian cities, of the invasion of intimacy by unknown men in the small rural villages even in day time, of the interrogatories of suspect individuals in the commissariats, of tortures in unknown places of people who have never been judged and sentenced, and of the millions of innocent people "portés disparus" sometimes without sepulture.

Actually, through the direct representation of the past and the indirect implied representation of the present, this novel seems to justify Northrop Frye idea that literature is a key to history⁴. Djebar is constantly present in her work. She regularly intervenes through the voice of the third person narrator and even through authorial intrusion to remind the reader and convince him, if it were necessary, of the accurateness of a great majority of her material. She reminds of the

⁴ Northrop, Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957.

relation that exists between the content of the novel and the external world, that is between art and history.

To represent the past and the present, Djebab uses a number of artistic techniques. Some of these techniques are: plot negation, fragmentation of narrative, mosaic structure, broken syntax, shifting tenses, transliterations of popular dialect, mixture of poetry, drama, cinema with fiction, interceptions of narrative with song, resource to oral tradition as the use of the framing device, and metaphorical, symbolic style. In this paper, I have chosen to concentrate on plot negation and shifting points of view to show how the revision of history is undertaken artistically.

On the broadest level, *La Femme Sans Sépulture* depicts a quest of the past to save from forgetfulness and to set the illuminated truth around the life of one of the heroines of the Algerian war of independence, within a large feminine experience. This quest of the past which the text thematizes through the interaction of the past and present directs attention to itself as a central theme of the novel by some narrative strategies, namely the use of the narrative frame and of a special form of plot negation.

To narrate this story, Djebab draws upon the framing device. This device serves on the order of plot to interrupt the received narrative flow of linear narration of the realistic novel, offering at the same time a revision of the conventional plot; it also serves on the order of theme to enable the different voices which narrate the separate elements of the plot to recapitulate, control and narrate their own stories through the interaction of the past and present, and through an interaction between narrator and listener who both grow in self-consciousness.

Djebab matches the use of the frame with the use of negation as a mode of narrating the separate elements of the plot. The text opens with a prelude and ends with an epilogue rendered in the first-person voice of the author. It opens and ends with reproach and remorse. It opens with the same reproach repeated three times “Je vous attendais!?” (p. 13) “Je vous ai attendue des annés, et vous ne venez que maintenant” (p. 14) “je t’ai attendu toute ces années!” (p. 15) addressed by Mina to the next-door neighbour, historian, film maker and author for coming late to register the story of her mother. It ends with the author’s own remorse for returning thrice late “Il me faut l’avouer: je reviens dans ma ville vingt plus tard” (p. 238), “je reviens si tard et je me décide à dérouler enfin le récit! Ce retard me perturbe, me culpabilise” (p. 239), “...j’ai désiré revenir vingt ans plus tard, vingt ans trop tard, pour faire revivre le récit d’hier scandé par les mots, la voix, la présence dans l’air de

Zoulikha" (240). By introducing and ending her text with this evidence of her return late, Djebar negates her text's themes of discovery, deliverance and revival, only to devote the remainder of her text to realizing these same themes.

Djebar works through negation to reconstitute what is denied and forgotten. She uses negation to reject all the other forms irrelevant to write "histoire de Zoulikha" (p. 13) which is "une histoire dans l'histoire," (p. 142) the truth of which can only be wholly revealed if told as part of all the other stories related to it past and present. Therefore, this story cannot be told as a flow of events following a linear itinerary commonly used in realistic writings, as it can not be told within the restrictions of the ordinary conventional plot built through heightening of tension and a final resolution where characters, to use Bakhtin's words, are "objects, fixed elements in the author's design"⁵. Characters in this story within the story are actively conversing with the author "[pour]inscrire enfin, ou plutot réinscrire..." "Histoire de Zoulikha" where the deliberate omission of the definite article indicates the generic reference of the noun phrase. Djebar therefore draws upon the framing device to "reinscribe"⁶ or to "rewrite down" history, to "put down (on paper) in words" what is still engraved on the memory of some women to save it from forgetfulness.

Djebar converses with characters as she has conversed with women who give her not only the story and history, but also a device. Actually, framing is an unconscious technique that the ingenious focalizer⁷ Tante Zohra Oudai adopts to tell the non-erased memories of a past which though harmful and full of bitterness turns through her framed tales into a tale within the tale with healing effects. Djebar draws upon the framing device inspired by the oral tradition that she rediscovers while collecting history among women to rewrite down herself:

⁵ Mikhail, Bakhtin, "From M. M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics, 1963," in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*, ed. Pam Morris London: Edward Arnold, a member of the Hodder Heading Group, 1994, p. 89.

⁶ "Reinscrire" means according to the definition of Larousse Dictionary "graver sur la pierre, le marbre," and it is the English equivalent of "rewrite down" which means according to the definition of Oxford dictionary "put down (on paper) in words" to save something from forgetfulness.

⁷ For a closer analysis of the narrative technique in the novel, I choose to make use of the terminology used in *Figures III* for point of view by Genette, who calls point of view "Focalization." I also choose to make use of some of Wayne C. Booth's concepts of narration in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago & London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961). See Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Seuil, 1972).

Une histoire dans l'histoire, et ainsi de suite [...]. N'est-ce pas une stratégie inconsciente pour, au bout de la chaîne, nous retrouver, nous qui écoutons, qui voyons précisément le fil de la narration se nouer puis se dénouer, se tourner et se retourner...n'est ce pas pour, à la fin, nous découvrir...libérées? (p. 142).

Djebar engages shifting points of view for the task of writing her “*histoire dans l'histoire*” in order to save from forgetfulness the history and the device. In addition, to the first person voice of the prelude and epilogue, which assumes an autonomous presence in the middle of the narrative conversing directly with the other voices of narration, revealing the author’s own thoughts, previously expressed through the third person voice of narrative commentary, *Femme* develops through a complex but accomplished mode of narration. It consists of a third person omniscient and a third person restricted voices, direct speech rendered in the characters’ speech, voices of multiple focalizers⁸, monologues representing the voice of the war heroine rendered in a first person narrative, and even instances of the second person point of view representing the readers’ conversation with the first person voice of the author in the epilogue, and in the middle of the novel.

The novel is as a consequence an especially rich and complex instance of a multiply vocal story nearly entirely animated and told by women focalizers or to use Wayne C. Booth’s term “disguised narrators”⁹ who range from peasant to city dweller, experienced skilled to inexperienced almost innocent and hesitating but wholly reliable, dramatized, and unconscious narrators¹⁰. Actually, to rewrite down her “*histoire dans l'histoire*” Djebar relies on the peasant old woman Tante Zohra Oudai, mother of three martyrs and wife and sister of two, who reassures her apologetic interlocutor, “Même si tu nous viens quelque années plus tard, nous, ...nos paroles restent les mêmes. Nos souvenirs, comme cette pierre ... sont ineffaçable” (p. 80). She equally relies on the aged city-dweller, the skilled ex-foresee of the future, Dame Lionne who proves equally skilled to restore the past. Dame Lionne, who claims “Il n'y a que le passé qui reste cabré en moi” (p. 28), is incomparably

⁸ Multiple focalization is a term used by Genette in *Figures III* to designate that point of view shifts from one character to another or others in the course of the narrative.

⁹ Disguised narrators “are used to tell the audience what it needs to know, while seeming merely to act out their roles.” See *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 152.

¹⁰ “Reliable, dramatized, unconscious” are terms used by Booth to describe narrators. A reliable narrator speaks and acts in accordance with the norms of the work; a dramatized narrator is a character narrator who is as vivid as those he tells us about; an unconscious narrator is a narrator who seems unaware that he is writing, thinking, speaking, or “reflecting” a literary work. See *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, pp. 151-155.

capable to “désormais faire revivre le passé! Le menu et concret passé de ces femmes, la plus part invisible aux *autres*, au *monde* [italics mine]” (p. 166) as admiringly commented by the voice of narrative commentary rendered in the third person voice restricted to the interior responses of Mina, the new frequent visitor of the ex-forseer, to hear the past not the future. Additionally, Djebar relies on less self-reliant, and less experienced younger narrators, the daughters of the Heroine Zoulikha, who however grow into more sophisticated, self-reliant narrators as they gain deliverance and self-consciousness while gradually delivered of the silent past, which burdens their hearts and minds.

These voices of the multiple focalizers start helped by the voice of narrative commentary, and then, as if liberated by the force of the revived past, they assume a self-independent presence free from the comments of the third person narrators. Curiously, Djebar's narrative strategy depends on the shift from the voice of a focalizer interrupted by the voice of narrative commentary to a self-dependent voice generally introduced as “voix de...” followed by the name of the focalizer. This curious shift may be interpreted as Djebar's double aim: first to write the spoken oral stories just as she has heard them, allowing the reader to read as she writes what she has heard, and second to represent the oral forms of storytelling common among women through repeating or echoing these stories, as it is apparent in the several subtexts or embedded narratives presented as the characters speech in a French transliterated from oral dialects.

The monologues in the voice of Zoulikha are free from comments. This voice is free and forceful, rhythmic and lyrical, a song which can be heard by he who is ready to make a voyage back just like our author. These monologues are overheard by Djebar who makes a voyage back in time and space, and therefore she has been able to hear Zoulikha's song since she claims in the prelude,

*Je l'entends, moi, grâce à la music ...j'entends Zoulikha constante, présente.
Vivante au de'ssus des rues étroites, des fontaines, des patios, des hautes
terrasses de Césarée (p. 17).*

She repeats in the epilogue “Je suis revenues seulement pour le dire. J'entends, dans ma ville natale, ses mots et son silence...je l'entends” (p. 236).

The author's voice is represented both indirectly and directly. It is indirectly represented through closeness between the implied author's views and the voice of narrative commentary. In the position of a listener, this voice interferes to comment and enrich the testimonies,

permitting the meeting of voices from the past and voices from the present, and attempting the exploration of feminine experiences from the most heroic to the ritualistic every day toil. It is also represented directly through the first person voice in the prelude, the epilogue and through a very subtle authorial intrusion in the 6th chapter entitled “Les oiseaux de la mosaïque.”

In this chapter, the author, who previously conceals herself in the clothes of “l'étrangère,” blends her voice with the other voices of narration. This chapter starts with the second person voice of the reader conversing with the author who consequently decides to join the other voices of narration symbolically referred to as “les oiseaux de la mosaïque”. She converses directly with the reader who seems to disapprove her concealment and then with Dame LIONNE and Mina blending her voice with theirs. Indeed, as if convinced by the arguments of the reader, our author drops her mask and blends her voice with the voice of her interlocutor Mina. She addresses her with “nous” suggesting the bonding of the voices of the women of post colonial Algeria.

These post colonial women have heard the witnesses indeed the songs of the women who lived the colonial trials, and they may repeat those songs from the past just as they have heard them to the new generation. Repeating the stories or the songs seems one of the objectives of our intrusive writer, who afterwards in this same chapter, alone in her hotel room, repeats through verbal echo the voice of Dame LIONNE—the most objective focalizer in the novel about whom the voice of narrative commentary says “Dame LIONNE elle ne reproche rien à personne, elle enjambe les temps, elle est mémoire pure” (p. 167). Then, in another chapter, she repeats that same voice together with Mina throughout their voyage returning back to Algiers heading from Cisarée, the antic city symbolically representing the past, to Algiers, which represents the present. This repetition of the voice of Dame LIONNE by the two young voyagers is indeed aimed to preserve the song through extending the echo “à deux,... elle vont en prolonger l'echo” (p. 166) as noticed by the voice of narrative commentary.

Our author proves throughout the text of the novel to be an ideal listener, and a perfect echoer. She is an ideal listener who is trusted by all her disguised characters narrators—Hania who claims addressing the author “avec toi, [the author] si je parle d'elle [Zouligha], je me soulage, je me débarrasse des dents de l'amertume” p.51, Mina who confesses her tragic love story before her, Lala Lbia who praises her perspicacity, Zohra who, though distrustful of city-dwellers, she shows hospitality and readiness to tell her ineffaceable memories before her. The author is also

a perfect echoer of the stories or the songs of other women. However, she lacks the perfect objectivity of Lala Lbia in reporting the past since she chooses the voice of an intrusive author who judges and accuses. Her accusations are what I will discuss by the end of this paper as Djebar's feminist indirect criticism of male fiction.

Yet, before starting this last part of my paper, I end my reading of narrative structure in this novel with this final comment about the position of the reader. We the readers read as Djebar writes and overhear some of the tales as told by the different voices—including the voice of Hania, of Lla Lbia, of Zohra, and of Mina—to their auditor—“visiteuse,” “l’invitée,” “l’étrangère,” “l’étrangère pas tellement étrangère,” an ideal listener who overhears the monologue or indeed the song of Zoulikha telling her own story to her youngest daughter. We the readers should then piece together the different tales to get the overall meaning of the novel, which through its different fragments constitutes that part of the story or history neglected in the records of the forgetful witnesses among male writes.

Through this complex narrative mode, strengthened by plot negation and the framing device, Djebar extends the possibilities of the representation of history in art, criticizing ostensibly restrictive modes of representation—at the level of narration and plot building—adopted in male fiction committed to the interpretation of history during the colonial and post colonial periods.

In other words, Djebar, who feels uncomfortable with the fixed structures of the conventional plot, as well as the revised structures of linear narration to write her story seems less comfortable with traditional history written by males within stories with fixed or revised structures. In this novel, the author accuses males for their short memory; males are “[des] témoins oublieux” (p. 167) and have “(des) yeux et mémoires crevés” (p. 95). These claims may constitute an important feminist critique of the complex fiction of male domination. They also may reveal the author’s indirect criticism of male fiction in which the female experience is forgotten or not sufficiently explored. I am thinking here especially of the literature of the largely autobiographical pattern written in the decades which followed the Second World War known for the frequent use of the first person narrative and episodic plots; and male committed literature of the dawn of Revolution written by writers who adopted realism as a method of socio-political analysis and criticism, known for its linear narration rendered through the omniscient narrative point of view. More precisely, Djebar’s criticism implicitly undermines the omniscient narrative point of view of Mohamed Did’s trilogy as well

as the first person narration of such autobiographical novels of such writers as Mouloud Feraoun, Mouloud Mammeri in his early writings, and Malek Hadad, to adequately represent the experience of colonialism in Algeria.

A reading of two quotations by Malek Haddad and Mohamed Dib may clearly show that Djebbar might have been thinking of these very authors when she says “témoins oublieux.” Actually, as writers, Haddad and Dib undertook the task of witnesses of the colonial and post-colonial periods. In his autobiographical novel, *Le Quai aux Fleurs ne Réponds plus*, through the voice of the first person narrator representing the author himself, Malek Hadad claimed:

Il y a un tas de gens qui pensent qu'un écrivain est nécessaire à la vie et à la survie d'une communauté en lutte. La belle erreur ! [...] les écrivains n'ont jamais modifié le sens de l'histoire [...] les écrivains, romanciers et poètes, les artistes en général, ne sont que des témoins et des épiphénomènes¹¹. [Italics mine]

Similarly, Mohamed Dib said in an interview, “Il fallait témoigner pour un pays nouveau et ses réalités nouvelles.[Italics mine]”¹² Both Haddad and Dib seem to agree that their role as writers is that of witnesses “témoins” who are in Djebbar’s text charged of being forgetful witnesses (“témoins oublieux”).

To conclude, I may say that Djebbar’s representation of the past and present, through the use of shifting points of view, and the link between framing and plot negation, offer a new story or indeed a more accurate history than what has been written in the fiction of male domination. Within this story, Djebbar has been able to save from forgetfulness experiences of women who speak for themselves in whatever artistic way they can, in a language, which aims to represent the sheer multiplicity of Algerian oral narrative forms and voices.

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¹¹ Haddad, Malek, *le Quai aux fleurs ne répond plus* 1961, Paris, Julliards – coll., 1973, p. 26.

¹² Chalon, See Jean “Pour Mohamed Dib, romancier Algérien: le temps de l’engagement est passé,” in *Le Figaro Littéraire*, no. 964, June 4th–10th, 1964. Quoted in Arab Abderrahmane, *Politics and the Novel in Africa*, Alger, OPU, 1982, p. 239.

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