

## «I SHALL INTERVENE, WITH NOMAD MEMORY AND INTERMITTENT VOICE»: RESURRECTING COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN ASSIA DJEBAR'S *FANTASIA, AN ALGERIAN CAVALCADE*

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**Abstract** || In Assia Djebar's war narratives, it is women's voices and experiences that are at the centre of narration, in contrast to traditional male-centred narratives of war and conflict. In *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*, there are multiple female protagonists, survivors of independence war, who, through storytelling, present shifting perspectives and a multiplicity of voices that contest monological historical versions. By reassembling the fragments of individual identities, lost and forgotten by history, the writer forges collective identity, focussing on the communal rather than private aspect of memory.

The paper highlights the gender-specific nature of war memories; it examines the role of the narrative as a means of countering deficiencies of memory and combating historic amnesia.

Centred on the idea that memory constructs identity, the paper investigates the extent to which a gendered memory of war can contribute in shaping collective identity, bearing in mind the interdependence but also the dissonance of orality and texting.

**Key-words** || Memory | Collective identity | Algerian war of independence | Gender.

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«I imagine you, the unknown woman, whose tale has been handed down by story-tellers... For now I too take my place in the fixed circle of listeners [...] I recreate you, the invisible woman [...] I resurrect you [...] that no letter from any French soldier was to describe»  
(Djebar, 1985: 189).

## 0. Introduction

Gendering and warring are cultural formations dialectically constructed in colonial and postcolonial contexts and are reproduced in fictional narratives. Assia Djebar, the Algerian woman writer, allows readers to look at narratives of war and their intersection with narratives of gender. My title flags up the dynamic exchange between gender and memory, inaugurating what Lindsey Moore calls a «feminist archaeology of traces» (Moore, 2008:63), where voice inspires memory and where women, warriors and survivors of the struggle for independence, strive to establish their identities as women but also as active agents of change.

Indeed, the exclusion of women's histories from male hegemonic discourses attempts to correct itself in Assia Djebar's war narratives as women create a counter script that gives voice to their forgotten and forbidden histories, empowering them in the process. It is through storytelling—a practice of indirect “witnessing” to an alienating history—that Djebar projects female collective memory of the trauma of war. Storytelling in this instance provides the arena for a unique occasion for subaltern women to edit the masochistic archives of Algerian colonial history. In this context, Cooke explains:

Women who choose to write about wars they have lived are defying an age old silencing code. Their speaking about now and in knowledge of their transgressions allows us to read back into the gaps and silences of the War Story. Their stories threaten the privilege assumed proper to the right to tell the War Story. As the right to tell diffuses among all who may claim to have had a war experience, however unrecognizable as such by the standard conventions, the masculine contract between violence, sexuality, and glory comes undone (Cooke, 1997: 293).

In light of this, I argue that reconciling the female self with history, whether for the author herself or for the fragmented voices of the diverse narrators, is essential for their identity formation and should inevitably include a gendered performativity of memory. So the first part of the article traces aspects of gendered remembrance and forgetfulness; the second part delineates the effects—both positive and negative—of remembering the body or *through* the body on female identity, while the last part muses over whether collective memory could survive in a foreign tongue, in other words the place of orality in her literary text.

The urgent need to rewrite history through fiction is voiced out by one female narrator: «Alas! We can't read or write. We don't leave any accounts of what we lived through and all we suffered!» (Djebar, 1985: 184) Put more theoretically:

Literary evidence affirms that during the Revolution, the Algerian women were not conscious of their opportunities... Consequently, it is not so surprising that they made no attempt to inscribe into the war text experiences that may have been transformative. When they have written, they have done so with little awareness of what military participation had meant [...] The Algerian Revolution came too soon in the history of Modern Arab women's discursive activism to serve as a catalyst for the inscription of feminist issues into the nationalist agenda [...] The difference between the Algerian and the Lebanese women who participated in their two wars was that the Algerian women did not have a feminist context, for example, no indigenous, independent feminist organization, within which to situate their struggle (Cooke, 1993: 185-186).

Thematically, the trope of memory in Djebar's war narratives opens up a space to write «a collective autobiography of the women of Algeria» (Hiddleston, 2006: 68), triggering a desire for self-knowledge that resist what Foucault calls «subjugated knowledges, knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task» (Foucault, 1980: 82). Mehta postulates that «In their role as communal scribes entrusted with the task of preserving collective memory from destruction and erasure, these women subscribe to an anti-war politics of remembering» (Mehta, 2007: 2). In this new politics of remembering, oral testimonies represent the vehicle through which memory operates outside and beyond the norms of writing. In *Fantasia*, if the war of colonization is retrieved from a documented history, the war of independence relies on the oral testimony of the women who took part in the struggle. Already chapter titles, "Voice", "Murmurs", "Clamour", "Whispers", "Dialogues" and "Soliloquy", emerge from the recesses of silence, that of the mother, daughter, sister, wife, and even child, to fill the gaps and ditch the holes of the cracked history in diverse locations as mountains, prisons, "douars" and poor hamlets.

On the structural level, memory is a unifying trope bringing harmony to the dissident and fragmented female narratives into a whole. The narration of memory offers a new style in each chapter; it violates narrative conventions which keep representation stable —especially the assumption that a single voice is tied to a specific character whose speech and memory are her own. There is a multivocality, a heteroglossia as Bakhtin would call it (Bakhtin, 1981: 272), that is structurally reflected in the various styles adopted in narration. On a metalevel, the novel vitiates the expectation that the text can be seen as the product of a coherent authorial agent as it is the case with the official master narratives. It also testifies to the fact that there

is no single War Story; the standard narrative —and with it the way we think about and conduct war— are dialogic rather than monologic (Bakhtin, 1981: 276).

Djebar's projection of a traumatized discursivity encapsulating the trauma of loss and mourning of partisan women, her syncretic manner of representation, her feminist approach to Algerian nationalism, her complex attitude to language and cultural memory anticipate the complexity of resurrecting female collective memory. The ethics of remembering and forgetting intertwine, blurring the boundaries between the two. Forgetting, as Nietzsche posits, becomes a positive strategy:

Forgetting is not simply a kind of inertia, as superficial minds tend to believe, but rather the active faculty to [...] provide some silence, a 'clean slate' for the unconscious, to make place for the new [...] those are the uses of what I have called an active forgetting.

The female voices «lif[ing] the burden of memory» (1985: 141), wrestling with the affliction of remembering, intimidate the author with their caution, with their distrust. The subjugated voices strategically decide of what to remember and what to forget: «Only speak of what conforms, my grandmother would reprove me: to deviate is dangerous, inviting disaster in its multiple disguises» (1985: 156). Transcribing female collective memory announces to be a difficult task for the writer:

Strange little sister, whom henceforth I leave veiled or whose story I now transcribe in a foreign tongue. Her body and her face are once more engulfed in shadow as she whispers her story – a butterfly displayed on a pin with the dust from its crushed wing staining one's finger (1985: 141) .

The fragility of the female narrator attests to her conformity to gender roles, committing her to silence and marginality: «the stilled voice bides its time, groans are stifled, grievances sublimated» (1985: 177). If she chooses to speak, she consciously sifts her buried memory to let out only what is less degrading. As evidenced in the novel, the hiding and deliberate self-effacement that female narrators opt for are not solitary activities, but are resorted to by women whenever the hurt is too deep and the trauma at its full: «What trials shall I tell you about, and which shall I leave to be forgotten» (1985: 160). If forgetfulness or selective remembering helps to overcome traumas, it also alludes to a loss of personal identity, and the fragmentation of subjectivity.

Of particular relevance to fragmentation of identity is when the storyteller evades the memory of rape. Once Algerian men have fled to join the maquis, the threat of rape becomes an endemic threat from which no woman is exempt: «I submitted to 'France', the

thirteen-year-old shepherd-girl might have said» (1985: 202). Almost all testimonies avoided relating sexual violence and embraced a code of silence to save their identities as mothers, sisters and wives: «As soon as we young women saw the French coming we never stayed inside. The old women stayed in the houses with the children; we went to hide in the undergrowth or near the wadi. If the enemy caught us we never said a word» (1985: 206-207). Memory becomes a site for struggle, not just of what to remember or forget but also of what to select and what to ignore, jeopardizing collective memory in the process. The author, in that case, is confronted with the dilemma of speaking the unspeakable, the unhearable, the taboo, and is urgent to allude to this fractured memory:

Once the soldiers were gone, once she has washed, tidied herself up, plaited her hair and tied the scarlet ribbon, all these actions reflected in the brackish water of the wadi, the woman, every woman, returns, one hour or two hours later, advances to face the world to prevent the chancre being opened in the tribal circle [...] rape will not be mentioned, will be respected. Swallowed. Until the next alarm (1985: 202).

Sometimes with a rhetoric question, the writer evasively wonders: «Can you imagine what would happen when they [French soldiers] arrived at a house and found women alone?» (1985: 187) The collective amnesia and silence concerning the issue of rape are inscribed and rooted in the colonial legacy and in gendered social and cultural productions, which are hard to contest. The author's duty is to challenge this legacy in order to help women reconcile with their memories and their identities:

How could a woman speak aloud, even in Arabic, unless on the threshold of extreme age? How could she say "I", since that would be to scorn the blanket-formulae which ensure that each individual journeys through life is a collective resignation? [...] How can she undertake to analyze her childhood, even if it turns out different? The difference if not spoken of, disappears.

[...] My oral tradition has gradually been overlaid and is in danger of vanishing [...] In writing of my childhood memories I am taken back to those bodies bereft of voices (1985: 156).

If forgetfulness testifies to women's alienation from their bodies and their identity and discloses their inability to cope with the trauma of violence, remembering is fulfilling and identity forming. In the majority of female narratives, the storyteller is highly voluble and intends to inscribe her own history of resistance both as an individual agent and as part of a collective scheme; and the author presents a wealth of female memories in relation to the war of resistance, contributing, hence, in the reconstruction of individual and collective female identity. What Mona Fayad has noted, in her article "Reinscribing Identity: Nation and Community in Arab Women's Writing", that «traditionally, women in nationalist narratives are posited as begetter, inspirer and

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protector of male subjectivity. The disembodiment of Woman in the national narrative and her mythification render it impossible to position her as an agent of change» (Fayad, 1995: 158), is of little relevance in Assia Djebar's accounts of female resistance. The female stories, then, blend together to shape a women's collective narrative, forming an amalgam of voices and experiences. Each individual memory presents a woman in a state of fulfillment, as aggressive, fearless, single-minded, actively engaged with resistance; there is for instance the memory of a thirteen year old shepherd-girl joining her brothers in the maquis, who had to carry the burden of burial and mourning of a brother killed in front of her eyes.

[...] that of the mother who bore the soldiers' tortures with never a whimper, that of the little cooped-up sisters, too young to understand, but bearing the message of wild-eyed anguish, the voice of the old women of the douar who face the horror of the approaching death-knell, open-mouthed, with palms of fleshless hands turned upwards (1985: 123).

But also of those who gave shelter and food to the *mûdjâhidîn*, carried arms up to the rebels in the mountains, joined the struggle, and were imprisoned, tortured, and murdered, and even those who sewed uniforms and flags, nursed the wounded, served as reporters, and even as money collectors.

Remembering the war for women means, inevitably, remembering the body. With Assia Djebar, collective memory is gendered, and has therefore to tamper with the body through which women find voice. What really escapes the documented war tales is that, in her narratives, Djebar lets women speak their bodies, with all the pain and trauma inherent in it. The way women bespeak their pain in front of the war atrocities is imbued with a body language absent from official historic versions. The dynamics of counter-discourse occurs through the recourse to a female prerequisite that is sensual and intuitive. Indeed:

The fourth language, for all females, young or old, cloistered or half-emancipated, remains that of the body: the body which [...] in trances, dances or vociferations, in fits of hope or despair, rebels, and unable to read or write, seeks some unknown shore as destination for its message of love (1985: 180).

Elia rightly postulates that «the venue left for these women is the preverbal —physical expression, movements, sounds, trances and dances— functioning outside the reach of any Symbolic discourse and which can thereby communicate the inducible» (Elia, 2001: 22). So, it is all incomprehensible and enigmatic to those representing not only Patriarchy but also Imperialism. When the war is waged, «the women's shrill ululation improvises for the fighting men a threnody of war in some alien idiom: our chroniclers are haunted by the distant

sound of half-human cries, cacophony of keening, ear-splitting hieroglyphs of a wild, collective voice» (1985: 56). In this frenzied hysteria of primeval sounds and movements, the body fulfills itself and identity is complete. Rhythm and sense displace language and discourse in a ritual that expels pain and invokes serenity. In the trance scene, for instance, women, the grandmother as such, fights lethargy and silence with dances not words:

The matriarch was normally the only one of the women who never complained; she condescended to mouth the formulas of submission disdainfully; but this extravagant or derisory ceremonial which she regularly organized was her own way of protesting... Against whom? Against the others or against fate? I wondered. But when she danced, she became indubitably queen of the city. Cocooned in the primitive music, she drew her daily strength before our very eyes.

The haughty matron's voice and body gave me a glimpse of the source of all our sorrows: like half obliterated signs which we spend the rest of our lives trying to decipher (1985: 145).

Bodily performances by female protagonists take the form of verbal and physical challenges, highlighting the strategic use of those same female bodies, often the only available avenue for resistance. Women seem to wield power through their bodies, transforming them to active agents serving resistance, and discarding their biological and sexual functions as begetters of life and desired objects.

Any discussion of the war and its lingering memories is painful. Pain, inseparable from the subaltern body, shapes the construction of female identity. The reader is projected within the language and bodies of trauma; the rendering of physical suffering is accentuated by a deeper feeling of humiliation and disgrace. We have a body that is tortured, maimed, beaten, and broken; but all the more provoking and shameless. Instances in the novel are numerous from Cherifa who is tortured with electric chocks and who defies colonial authority with her hunger strikes, to Lla Zohra, the elderly woman, whose house and farm were burnt several times, and who was herself eventually burnt:

My hair caught fire. And the child who was crying with fright, shouted, 'Mother, the fire's eating you up! The fire is eating you up!'

That's how I lost all my hair. I hurled myself into the water. But more burning embers fell on me [...] (1985: 161).

Surprisingly enough, pain liberated these women and urged them to speak. Elaine Scarry argues that during torture «the body is its pain, a shrill sentience that hurts and is hugely alarmed by its hurt, and the body is its scars, thick and forgetful unmindful of its hurt, unmindful of anything, mute and insensate» (Scarry, 1985: 31). Whether speaking for themselves or being spoken for by other female mediators, the body is at the center of physical and moral

articulation. Through narrating their suffering, subaltern women are empowered and effectively take control of that pain, wresting power from their torturer and appropriating it for themselves. In that sense, rendering personal memory public is liberating.

Remembering the body entails remembering *through* the body. As pain defines voice and body, it is also discursively inscribed and affects writing itself. Djébar underscores the nexus between pain and language, betraying an eventual failure to resurrect female private memories, and announcing the difficulty of the task. The sensory numbness that a male officer experiences as he reports colonial violence could very well apply to the writer herself:

Bosquet muses over the youth killed defending his sister in the luxurious tent; he recalls the anonymous woman whose foot had been hacked off, 'cut off for the sake of the *khalkhal*...' Suddenly as he inserts these words, they prevent the ink of the whole letter from drying: because of the obscenity of the torn flesh that he could not suppress in his description (1985: 56).

In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry claims that resistance to language is essential to pain: «Intense pain is [...] language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and subject» (Scarry, 1985: 35). The narrator adheres to non-verbal expressions «I do not claim here to be either a story-teller or a scribe. On the territory of dispossession, I would that I could sing» (Djébar, 1985: 142). This could explain the narrator's inability of verbal articulation and her recourse to semiotics: preverbal, sensual lexicography in face of language's inability to transcend pain:

To read this writing, I must lean over backwards, plunge my face into the shadows, closely examine the vaulted roof of rock or chalk, lend an ear to the whispers that rise up from time out of mind, study this geology stained red with blood. What magma of sounds lies rotting there? What stench of petrification seeps out? I grope about, my sense of smell aroused, my ears alert, in this rising tide of ancient pain. Alone, stripped bare, unveiled, I face these images of darkness...

How are the sounds of the past to be met as they emerge from the well of bygone centuries?... What love must still be sought, what future be planned, despite the call of the dead? And my body reverberates with sounds from the endless landslide of generations of my lineage (1985: 64).

The transactions between language and body that could help identity formation —both for the writer and her foremothers— dissolve, for «the language of pain», as posited, «could only be a kind of hysteria —the surface of the body becomes a carnival of images and the depth becomes a site for hysterical pregnancies— the language having all the phonetic excess of hysteria that destroys apparent meaning»

(Das, 2004: 331). The writer's fractured relation to language, evidenced in her failure to articulate her compatriots' memory of pain is a testimony that colonial subjugation did not affect female social identity but also the artistic one; for «denial of the other's pain is not about the failing of the intellect but the failings of the spirit. In the register of the imaginary, the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language, but also seeks a home in the body» (Das, 2004: 332).

For Algerian women, the memory of war entailed a revision and reappropriation of their gendered identities since their war stories contested and deconstructed the discursive layers of phallogentric war discourse, where gender hierarchies are established on binary oppositions. Indeed, in Cooke's words:

Their stories contest the acceptance of a dyadically structured world and make a mockery of such notions as Defender and Defended. If women describe and write themselves as having had a war experience at home then they deny two critical binaries: home versus front and civilian versus combatant. The breakdown of those binaries then allows us to see the cracks in others such as victory versus defeat, fact versus fiction, action versus writing, experience versus recording, war versus peace (Cooke, 1997: 296).

This compels attention to «women's transgressive presence in a space and experience programmatically said to exclude them. Women are showing how the binaries used to construct the War Story are fictions» (Cooke, 1997: 19). One of these binaries is the private sphere versus the public. In women's memory of war, the immune space of home, representing the feminine and the domestic is entirely eroded. The domestic spaces traditionally occupied by women were often more of a frontline than the mountains where male resistance occurs: «Our men ran away: they didn't want to wait for the enemy's reprisals. We women were left to bear the brunt» (1985: 206). In another context, the idea of home —the harem— disappears altogether when houses are repeatedly burned or violated by the colonizer's gaze. Women are lauded for the passive form their resistance took; their protest was feminine, silent, caring and maternal: «All the women in the house did the same thing, howling louder and louder: enough to deafen them all» (1985: 207). Action/ non-action, passivity/ activity, knowledge/ignorance binaries fuse as silence becomes an active tool of resisting the enemy. This is how a girl defeated the enemy's desire to make her speak:

To the little girl I'd adopted; I kept on saying, 'if they question you, begin to cry! If they ask, 'Who comes to visit your mother? What does she do' you must begin to cry immediately... if you say a word, they will ask more questions! Just cry! That's all you must do!' and that's what she did. She burst into tears, she rolled about in the sand, she ran away in a flood of tears (1985: 160).

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The memory of war, though painful, contested historic discourses that stigmatized women to invisibility and marginality, and attested to the fact that female identity is volatile and escapes coded definitions.

The fact that Djébar has to inscribe female collective memory of war in a foreign tongue has far reaching consequences. Her «dual maternal/paternal identification» (Ringrose, 2006: 58) —writing about her foremothers in the language of the colonizer that the father taught her— is deemed both liberating and repressive. In fact, «linguistic choices encode cultural belonging or alienation; the loss and recovery of one’s own tongue juggling new words and new worlds is a constant negotiation for these writers» (Katrak, 2006: 27). Djébar acknowledges this dichotomy and alludes to the inherent dissonance between orality and texting:

I have captured your voice ; disguised it with my French without clothing it... the words that I thought to put in your mouth are shrouded in the same mourning garb as those of Bosquet or Saint-Arnaud. Actually, it is they who are writing to each other, using my hand, since I condone this bastardy, the only cross-breeding that the ancestral beliefs do not condemn : that of language, not that of the blood... torch-words which light up my women companions, my accomplices ; these words divide me from them once and for all. And weigh me down as I leave my native land (1985: 142).

Her sense of guilt at being alienated from the mother tongue while acknowledging the artistic potential the language of the conqueror has allowed destabilizes the writer’s sense of identity: «I know that every language is a dark depository for piled-up corpses[...] but faced with the language of the former conqueror, which offers me its ornaments, its jewels, its flowers, I find they are the flowers of death —chrysanthemums on tombs» (1985: 181). The writer’s exclusion and sense of betrayal trigger her desire to reconcile with her motherland, her identity; so, she records women’s stories and reproduces them resurrecting their collective identities and hers in the process. In this context, having shown her ability to speak, the question of whether the subaltern can read her own war testimonies is of little importance. If Assia Djébar writes, it is not just for the sake of these individual forgotten women, but for collective women’s memory in general, for posterity. If these stories of resistance are not recorded, the risk of their erasure from historical memory is imminent. Testimonial narratives, once delivered, are stripped from their privacy and become public properties, acquiring a polymorphic, multi-bodied voice. The voice of these women will keep resonating through the blending of Berberic and Arabic accents and intonations into the French text. This linguistic hybridity allows the creation of a “third space”, neither Arabic nor French, where the writer could reconcile with her exilic self and her dispersed origins; a space where

“torch-words... light up my women-companions, my accomplices.”  
(Djebar, 142).

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With Boehmer’s queries in mind «if the structures of nations or nation-states are soldered onto the struts of gender hierarchies, and if the organisation of power in the nation is profoundly informed by those structures, how then is the nation to be imagined outside of gender?» (Boehmer, 2005: 30). Djebar reiterates the trouble in intersecting gender and war, especially when the medium is memory. Through her compelling rhetoric to give preeminence to the role of women in the national struggle, her diligent efforts to give them voice and to combat the ways in which they have been silenced by colonial and patriarchal power structures, she emphasized their role as witnesses and survivors, and as the backbone of the struggle. Collective memory has proved the archetypal force that gave shape to subaltern identity and experience, but also the healing force that reconciled the writer with her origins.

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