

**UCLA**

**Paroles gelées**

**Title**

Assia Djebar's Vaste est la prison: Platform for a New Space of Agency and Feminine Enunciation in Algeria

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8zr1t8xj>

**Journal**

Paroles gelées, 15(1)

**ISSN**

1094-7264

**Author**

Orlando, Valerie

**Publication Date**

1997

**DOI**

10.5070/PG7151003058

Peer reviewed

## Assia Djebar's *Vaste est la prison*: Platform for a New Space of Agency and Feminine Enunciation in Algeria

---

Valerie Orlando

Assia Djebar may be defined as many things: activist, intellectual, feminist, filmmaker, novelist, and historian. Winner of the prestigious 1996 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, Djebar (along with Egypt's Nawal El Sadaawi) is one of the most influential North African women writers in the world. Djebar was born in Algeria during that country's nearly century-long battle for freedom from French colonization. That revolution culminated in 1954, creating an Algerian republic. However, even though some Algerian women unveiled themselves in various roles as freedom fighters (as documented in such works as Frantz Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism*), after the revolution many women of all classes found themselves being forced back into subservient roles, according to supposed Islamic tradition. Djebar, whose father taught French, was sent to school in France, and thus grew up with a sensibility closer to her French feminist counterparts, rather than to fundamentalist ideals. This international experience set the stage for Djebar's lifetime of activist struggle on behalf of subordinated Algerian women.

From her early novels, *La Soif* (1958), *Les Impatients* (1958), and *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (1962) to her most recent works, Djebar has offered her readers over thirty years of feminine "exploration." This exploration most often encompasses the difficulties of being a woman in the three phases of Algerian history: the colonial era, the revolutionary years (1954-62), and the post-independence period (1962 to the present). However, regardless of the era, Djebar speaks out, demanding to define and to interpret women's roles in Algerian history, politics, and culture. These roles more often than not have been neglected due to women's lack of representation, voice, and presence in both Algerian and French annals of history. Djebar was originally trained as an historian, but while still a student, she determined that, in order to reach a wider audience, she would translate her research into fiction rather than use straight historical documentation. In and out of trouble with

Algerian authorities for her outspoken work, she silenced herself voluntarily for ten years. It would not be until 1978 that she would reemerge, but this time with a film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, thus launching the third stage of her career. Throughout the last thirty years, Djebbar has sought to reinstate the nearly obliterated Algerian female presence through her films and her texts in order to keep its memory alive. From cataloguing the stories of women who fought in the Franco-Algerian Revolution, to searching in ancient archives for the stories of lost Algerian princesses and heroines, Assia Djebbar has made it her life's work to make a place of importance for women in her homeland.

"Je ne pleurerai pas mes amies d'Algérie," the author states in an article in *Le Monde*. Instead of tears, Djebbar creates a platform on which she writes of herself, other women, and the present atrocities being committed against the people of Algeria.<sup>1</sup> She does not cry, because,

[c]'est précisément ce qu'on demande aux femmes chez nous, à celles qui sont douées de parole et d'éloquence: d'être des pleureuses, d'apporter un certain niveau de lyrisme à la catastrophe et au malheur. Leur rôle traditionnel, c'est cela: une parole d'après le désastre. Je ne veux pas m'y plier. Non, je ne pleurerai pas mes amies meurtries en terre algérienne. ("Assia Djebbar" XII)

Djebbar's work is as controversial as ever in Algeria, a sign of which is the fact that she has had to live and work abroad for the last several years. She is currently Director of the Center for French and Francophone Studies at Louisiana State University, as dramatic events continue to rock Algeria. Djebbar's platform outside Algeria is the result of a number of factors, the principal one of which is the hostile political climate created by the fundamentalist movement (led by the political party known as the Front Islamique du Salut).<sup>2</sup> This movement, full of religious zealots, has gained momentum, menacing intellectuals, academics, authors, and philosophers since 1990.<sup>3</sup> The country's present conflict centers around a violent *jihad* or holy war, which has continued ruthlessly since 1992 between Islamic fundamentalists and the latest Algerian government, that of President Liamine Zeroual. Algerian feminists like Djebbar are concerned that if hard-line religious extremists take control, the

women of the country will continue to be forced into subservient positions.

In *Vaste est la prison* Assia Djébar not only rewrites history and critiques the present-day violence against Algerian women, she also condemns the oppression of an entire intellectual milieu which is viewed as threatening by the current fundamentalist movement. Therefore, her objective as an Algerian-feminist-historian-author-filmmaker-intellectual is to note down not only a history for Algeria as seen from a woman's point of view, but also to fight for intellectual freedom in favor of all those who have been oppressed. The successful outcome of both these objectives has proved to be dangerous and almost impossible since the end of the Franco-Algerian revolution.

As an author and an intellectual living in exile, Djébar must forge a new interactive space of reflection for herself and others who live on the "outside." She achieves this by *returning to history* and *rewriting/refilming* its past for Algeria in the hope of establishing new ground on which to open a dialogue for intellectual freedom and female emancipation. Not only does the author seek to write in/on her new space of Algerian feminine intellectual discourse, she also hopes to create a platform for a new institution of cultural, intellectual and artistic thought; something which has had little guarantee in post-revolutionary Algeria. Since 1962, little has been done to offer intellectuals the freedom required to install any tradition of political or cultural debate in Algerian society (Bensmaïa 86). Any intellectual practice has had to be set up "on the fringes"—almost secretly—or in exile. This "ex-centric" space, which expands outwards to France, the United States, and other parts of North Africa, recreates a peripheral intellectual milieu. The maintenance of this space has become necessary for some semblance of free intellectual process among Algerian academics, journalists, authors and philosophers. As Djébar states in her most recent novel, *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, "getting away" and reviewing Algeria's socio-political situation from the outside is the only means by which an author/intellectual will gain the courage "à retourner, là-bas, au milieu du sang qui gicle, faces de jeunes tueurs sugissant ..." (21).

It seems that a safe-haven must first be created "on the outside" of Algeria's interneicine warfare to cultivate intellectualism and to promote its eventual institutionalization in Algeria. (In-

deed, the name "Djebar" is a pen name which means "healer" in Arabic.) In this regard, for Djebar, creating social and cultural institutions which might hold together new systems of discourse is a paramount theme in *Vaste est la prison*. Djebar envisions such institutions as being able to encompass not only historical discourse, but also discourses of feminism, language, culture, as well as identities such as "French" and "Algerian." In a sense, within her ex-centric space, Djebar is forming a "plane of consistency,"<sup>4</sup> or a site of multi-faceted thought, on which terms her identity as a woman, researcher, intellectual, historian, and Algerian author writing in French, may be mediated.

Djebar's popularity in the Western world counters her lack of support (both as a public intellectual and politically as an activist) in Algeria due to that country's deeply-rooted anti-intellectual climate after independence, which was slowly woven into the sociopolitical fabric of Algerian society. This anti-intellectualism (against males and females) unfortunately is a legacy of colonialism and a product of the post-revolutionary military governments which, although espousing a progressive socialist rhetoric in the early years of independence, in reality chose to rule Algeria with an iron fist since the revolution. Réda Bensmaïa reiterates this, stating that one of the reasons Algerian journalists, authors, artists and philosophers have been the brunt of so many vehement and violent attacks by Islamic fanatics is that they have never achieved any status, recognition, or support from the public in post-revolutionary Algeria. Therefore, they are little-known or recognized for the benefits they would offer the public and society as a whole:

If we refer to what is happening at this moment in Algeria, what is striking is the contrast which exists between the insignificance of intellectuals as a 'group' and the violence which is harming them. If there is a paradox, it is to see the distance which separates the little regard for intellectuals during almost three decades of independence and the fury inflicted upon them now which throws them in prison, forces them into exile, kills them or assures that they lose all taste for being teachers, advocates for political liberty, defenders of personal rights or even architects of a transparent society where the individual and the citizen would coincide. (86)

In the same context and in light of the current Algerian political instability and public hostility toward intellectuals, Djebbar's novel *Vaste est la prison* may be considered as targeting two essential items of importance for the fostering of a new intellectual movement in Algeria.

First is the need for "writing down" women's stories from history. As the author indicates, it is not until women write *their own* history and stories, and thus establish agency, will they gain *their own* place in Algeria. The collective "they"—the effaced—become empowered through the author's pen on both personal and larger social levels. It is this "they," family and friends, which is revived in *Vaste est la prison*, forced by Djebbar to recapture a lost voice; to review their history through her pen strokes:

Le sang dans mon écriture? Pas encore, mais la voix? La voix me quitte chaque nuit tandis que je réveille les asphyxies douceâtres de tantes, de cousines entrevues par moi, fillette qui ne comprenait pas, qui les contemplait, yeux élargis, pour plus tard les réimaginer et finir par comprendre. (337)

By extension, this passage also suggests that it is imperative to create and subsequently maintain a space of intellectual thought, where freedom of speech is guaranteed and where feminist, philosophical, and theoretical discourses may be cultivated. However, whether Djebbar is in France, the United States, or other parts of the globe, her message is always clear: one must establish a platform from which to speak and one must be guaranteed the power of enunciation.<sup>5</sup>

Tzvetan Todorov underlines the importance of speaking as a key to subjectivity in his work, *Du bilinguisme*. He writes "Si je perds mon lieu d'énonciation, je ne parle pas, donc je ne suis pas" (24). Djebbar continues to dedicate herself to the "re-vision" of women's history in Algeria in *Vaste est la prison* (1995), which depicts the plight of a wide range of Algerian women who have the same thing in common: an overarching patriarchal domination. To demonstrate commonality within such diversity, Djebbar employs a narrative strategy which is equally diverse; one which blends historic accounts, autobiography, legends, and traditional folk tales. Added to these, Djebbar's narrative agenda in *Vaste est la prison* incorporates many aspects of her own life. Indeed, some sections are nearly autobiographical.

Besides content, Djébar experiments with the stylistic aspects of her work as well. For instance, she weaves in an element of the cinematographic, reusing scenes and phrases from her films (well-known to many of her Francophone readers). This cinematic overlay not only adds her experiences as a filmmaker to those of the other women she describes, but this device also provides another lens through which she may lay bare for her readers a different interpretation of supposedly "accepted" masculine constructions of the feminine body, while problematizing women's expected place/role in the phallographic constructions of Algeria. Through the venues of historic revisionism, autobiographical details and cinematographic representation, this new space of agency is forged, solidified, and destined to be maintained by Djébar who struggles for human rights as an author and as an intellectual. It is Djébar's exploration of "outside" agency and the development of a three-pronged narrative strategy promoting the aforementioned modalities of autobiography, post-colonial and colonial historic revision, and her cinematographic journal that grounds a new intellectual milieu of enunciation for the author and for the exiled of Algeria.

*Vaste est la prison* is a multiply-organized<sup>6</sup> text which crosses positionalities of history, autobiography and cinematic journalism, therefore denoting the constant transitory manner of Djébar's new kind of speech—one which promotes the goal of feminine empowerment. Through the ever-shifting boundaries of these textual modalities, Djébar once again empowers women, as she breaks apart stagnant, traditionally-fixed parameters of feminine identity to explore the unknown of Algerian women's unwritten history. Brought out through these varied textual modalities of history, autobiography, and cinematographic journal are the themes of movement and exploration. Djébar's feminine characters of many classes, like herself, search for identity and feminine place outside stereotypes, masculine domination and religious dogmatic oppression. These constraints, Djébar suggests, have hindered Algerian women's access to self-representation in history as well as in the sociopolitical arena of contemporary Algeria.

*Vaste est la prison* is not a novel in a traditional sense. Each chapter centers around a different female figure who may speak in either the first or third person. From chronicling the life of the Countess Adélaïde, exiled to Naples after the fall of Napoléon in

1815, to an Algerian mother who in 1960 takes off her veil to travel to France to visit her son (a political prisoner being detained in Metz, France), Djebbar's women grapple with instability and the consequences of experiences outside their socioculturally designated roles. As nomads and fugitives, Djebbar's heroines in *Vaste est la prison* tell their stories of war, oppression, and abjection. Often these women are forced to find new spaces of feminine identity in diverse areas. In *Vaste est la prison*, language, love, dance, film and travel all become roads to self-expression and liberty in an "outside" active space of agency.

The first few pages of *Vaste est la prison* depict Djebbar's struggle not to lose the power of voice. She maintains that construction of such an enunciative milieu implicates a transition from the oral to the written text. Djebbar realizes that although painful, "Longtemps, j'ai cru qu'écrire c'était mourir, mourir lentement" (11), writing is a necessary act; one which stabilizes and counters the passage of time and memory and solidifies the oral stories of Algerian women:

Oui, longtemps, parce que, écrivant, je me remémorais, j'ai voulu m'appuyer contre la digue de la mémoire, ou contre son envers de pénombre, pénétrée peu à peu de son froid. Et la vie s'émiette; et la trace vive se dilue. (11)

Her space of agency acts as a sheltering site<sup>7</sup> where Djebbar is able to critique all aspects of society, culture, and history in both collective and autobiographical terms. Within *Vaste est la prison*, all facets of historical revision have equal ground, all places have equal influence, all "prisons are opened" and all women have a voice:

Je n'inscris pas, hélas, les paroles des *noubas* trop savantes pour moi. Je me les remémoire: où que j'aïlle, une voix persistante, ou de baryton tendre ou de soprano aveugle, les chante dans ma tête, tandis que je déambule dans les rues de quelque cité d'Europe, ou d'ailleurs, alors que quelques pas dans la première rue d'Alger me font percevoir aussitôt chaque prison ouverte au ciel, ou fermée. (172)

Djebbar's "rememorizing"<sup>8</sup> narrative rests as an example of what Pierre Bourdieu remarks is "the logic and effectiveness of a language institution [which depends on] authority." This authority "comes to language from the outside" and invests within the



orator the power of speech (109). Creating her sheltering site of enunciation in exile grants Djébar the authority to remember and to reinscribe. Although exiled from Algeria, she establishes agency through a "re-memorization" process which, constructed from the modalities of autobiographic accounts, historic revision, and cinematographic journal entries grounds her novel as a metaphorical "polyphonic discourse" for Algeria where "les morts qu'on croit absents se muent en témoins qui, à travers nous, désirent écrire!" (346).

Reviewing the past and the present both historically and autobiographically, although painful, is a necessary process in rewriting a feminine history for Algeria. Djébar's polyphonic discourse, incorporating both sides of her own heritage, affords her the means to review her politico-cultural situation as a feminine author writing from abroad about her country's history. Because she is forced to review Algerian history and present-day conflicts from the "outside" in France, the United States, and elsewhere, Djébar is able to redefine the meaning of "bi-culturality" and "duality." Her disdain over France's colonization of Algeria cannot be denied. However, at the same time, because France has provided the author with a platform from which to write, it evokes a certain tolerance for what Djébar calls, "l'autre en moi." This Other is explored as an appendage to her Self as well as something exterior: "La France alors, c'était pour moi simplement le dehors" (*Vaste* 260). Although use of the French language is problematic for many contemporary authors writing in the language of their former colonizers, Djébar has subverted its stigma in order to find a means of liberty; the freedom to venture out and to explore. French evokes for the author a feeling of detachment, thus allowing for a method of access both professionally (because it enables her to research Algerian history as depicted in French archival colonial documentation) and personally, through memories she has divided between Algerian and French worlds.

Djébar uses her autobiography often to allude to larger social situations concerning Algerian women. The author's introspection is realized through the narrative of her own painful experiences living as a woman who comes up against constant male barriers. Although autobiographical, her pain reflects that of many women who find themselves caught: victims of Muslim tradition, masculine domination, and limited freedom within the confines of

home and family. One example Djebbar provides in *Vaste est la prison* is her separation from her husband. The upheaval, she notes, erases her own subjectivity because her identity depends solely on her role as wife and mother. When she announces her divorce, her family is more concerned with saving face and family honor than her own individual well-being:

"Après", me dis-je—je ne sais plus si j'entends par là "après la séparation définitive d'avec l'Aimé", ou simplement après la scène que je vécus ensuite avec l'époux, la nuit de mes aveux dérisoires, ce scandale dont j'imposai les conséquences, certes, dans un mutisme hautain, à mes parents désorientés—la brutalité et le désordre conjugal leur paraissaient naïvement relever de mœurs d'un passé révolu, ou d'un modernisme corrompu. Or ils faisaient confiance à ma "droiture"—, une cousine me rapportait leur commentaire tandis que je ne pouvais que me taire. Après ... L'invraisemblable, je ne m'en explique pas tout à fait la raison! En effet, deux ou trois semaines après cette rupture, j'acceptai, oui, j'acceptai de reprendre ma vie d'épouse. ... J'acceptai, oui, je revois le déroulé du retour—qui semble s'effriter, maintenant que tout est fini, que tous les liens sont à terre et ma passion évaporée.... Oui, je retournai à la prison. (95-96)

Djebbar's experience and the subsequent choices she is forced to make because of family, tradition, and culture are furnished as general examples of the constricting universe which all Algerian women face. This universe is split between the freedom of independence (which often carries the price of exile) and the reality of oppression (the product of feminine submission and conjugal imprisonment):

La résolution qui me hantait au cours de mes nuits agitées imposa ses mots—mots français, enrobés étrangement de l'ardeur rauque de l'aïeule, la terrible morte:—Entre l'époux et moi, dorénavant mettre une porte! A jamais. (108)

The author's final choice to rid herself of her domestic bonds seems almost "foreign" because it is so rare in her traditional Muslim milieu. Even more curious is the fact that the idea to flee from her husband comes to the author in French words rather than in her native Arabic.

Djebar also aligns herself with other women forgotten in Algerian history. She too remarks on the feelings of "la dépouille" brought on by exile and isolation. Whether from the past or the present, playing large or small roles as queens or peasants, these heroines prove their strength to persevere and to pull themselves from the depths of seclusion and oppression in order to reach a free space of agency. To "have a self and a world," therefore assuring "a certain kind of being in the world, which [could] be called [a feminine] politics" (Spivak 105-6) is the fruit women will enjoy through the reinstallation of their stories in history. By rewriting history, Djebar reestablishes feminine communicative agency. Such agency is beneficial for women because it grants a space of commonality for feminine subjectivity, politics, and socio-economic freedom. Therefore, Djebar's global message favoring feminine intellectual thought also may be viewed as promoting feminine community. Whether from the mountains of Algeria or the streets of Paris, Djebar's women form "political solidarity." This kind of solidarity does not objectify all women under one guise of sameness, but instead incorporates all the cultural, personal, and political transformations of women.<sup>9</sup> By rewriting feminine history, Djebar fuses historic and contemporary voices into a space of resistance, reestablishing political solidarity, and the desire to cross-fertilize a new discourse for feminine intellectual thought.

Djebar's language in *Vaste est la prison* thus is molded between her autobiographic voice and her process of historic revision, thus reifying in her own manner language, the world of women, silence and love:

Silence de l'écriture, vent du désert qui tourne sa meule inexorable, alors que ma main court, que la langue du père (langue d'ailleurs muée en langue paternelle) dénoue peu à peu, sûrement, les langes de l'amour mort; et le murmure affaibli des aïeules loin derrière, la plainte hululante des ombres voilées flottant à l'horizon, tant de voix s'éclaboussent dans un lent vertige de deuil—alors que ma main court.... (11)

The act of writing forges the link of her own autobiography in the present to these historic "ombres voilées," and therefore leads Djebar to resurrect the unsolved feminine mysteries of the pre-/post-colonial specters of her homeland.

Issues from Algerian history both during and after colonialism are integrated in Djebbar's narrative agenda in *Vaste est la prison*. Clarifying the female role in such issues constitutes the theme of the second and third portions of this novel.

One previously orally-transmitted story about women in colonial Algeria which Djebbar reifies in written form is that of "la fille du mokkadem du saint Ahmed ou Abdallah." The author re-narrates the young woman's story, explaining how she married two husbands "de la montagne" only to leave them to migrate back to her native village in order to raise her daughter on her own. This act of defiance is a clear break from the traditionally subservient role most readers expect of Muslim women. The young girl's rebelliousness is resurrected as an important story when Djebbar takes the ancient oral narrative, passed down by her own grandmother, and rewrites it on paper:

Encore maintenant, trois quarts de siècle après, je ne sais pas, moi, Isma, la narratrice, moi, la descendante—par la dernière des filles, si Lla Fatima ("mamane") a aimé ses deux maris successifs ensuite, ou l'un plutôt que l'autre, ou l'un plus que l'autre.... Je suis bien certes la seule à m'interroger ainsi sur des morts! (228)

In writing down Algerian oral history and incorporating it into the novel, Djebbar gives concrete presence to both the narrative and this protagonist. For the first time, the transitory oral speech of this lost Algerian woman is fixed in time and space. Writing down their histories transforms her female characters into empowered women who are rendered into subjects rather than objects. In such a space, the author's voice becomes *collective*, virtually "le sang de l'écriture," (345) full of power and presence, where at last those women who were erased by male domination during the passage of time are resurrected; "Ecrire, les morts d'aujourd'hui désirent écrire" (346).

On a more global level, Djebbar's rewritten feminine history-as-novel extends outward to form new "border zones" of culture, historicity, intellectual thought, and feminism among thinkers in the world. These "border zones" become the sites of a "creative resistance to the dominant conceptual paradigms" of the West (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices* 6). This resistance thus redefines the processes of the West's appropriation of the language and the

culture of the Other's space. Djébar remarks that it is important to maintain these zones in order to reinstall the lost "mémoire" of Algeria into the modern day.<sup>10</sup>

Reinstating an Algerian memory with a complete female presence and creating a platform from which to instigate the commencement of a new process of documentation for Algerian post-revolutionary history are two objectives Assia Djébar seeks to fulfill in *Vaste est la prison*. These are particularly important for women of Algeria and of the Maghreb as a whole, since feminine representation (whether in colonial or Muslim documentation) has either been grossly orientalized in the case of the former, or oppressed by the latter. The historic "trou de mémoire" of Algeria and all of the Maghreb, as Fatima Mernissi suggests in her book *Sultanes oubliées*, has drastically reduced feminine representation in Islamic countries to a bare minimum.

[L]es femmes musulmanes en général, arabes en particulier, ne peuvent compter sur personne, érudit ou pas, "impliqué" ou "neutre", pour lire leur histoire. Cette lecture est leur entière responsabilité et leur devoir. Notre revendication de la jouissance pleine et entière de nos droits humains universels, ici et maintenant, passe nécessairement par une réappropriation de la mémoire, une re-lecture—reconstruction d'un passé musulman large et ouvert. Certains devoirs peuvent d'ailleurs se révéler non des tâches austères et contraignantes, mais de délicieux voyages vers les rivages du plaisir. (188)

Therefore it is necessary for women of the Maghreb to make a transition toward reinscription of their own stories—toward the reappropriation of feminine memory.

Djébar also constructs her space of agency in *Vaste est la prison* in aesthetic terms, paying considerable attention to the cultivation of the visual, sensual, and "musical" in her text. In this third section of her novel, the author now also becomes a "narrative filmmaker," as she casts her characters in filmic roles which mirror her actual work as a cinematographer. In a blend of cinematographic "allusions" in the text, Djébar compels the readers to follow a textual camera. This section entitled "Un silencieux désir" becomes a narrative film complete with a musical score. Djébar writes seven small "movements" (each with a separate title) to be used in the *montage* of her text to tell her autobiographical experi-

ences as a film director, recount the tales she has heard passed down to her, and describe her life-long efforts to filmically chronicle the lives of other women. This "filmic" section of the novel consists of cultural and historical events, glimpsed through the lens of her narrative camera, as she shoots the diverse aspects of the feminine: body, voice, and personification.

Within this cinematographic space, "Un silencieux désir" continues the novel's themes of feminine exile and nomadism. This section of the novel moves quickly, developing strength and resonance. Interspersed are short, staccato scenes entitled "Femme arable I", "II", "III"<sup>11</sup> in which Djebbar narrates the difficulty and the pleasure she experiences in directing her films. "Femme arable I" begins with Djebbar's personal reflections on making her earlier films in post-revolutionary Algeria. She pays particular attention to her 1978 film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*.<sup>12</sup> This film, made in Arabic, also weaves historic feminine stories with contemporary feminine issues. *La Nouba* is particularly interesting because its feminine theme forces the audience to "take stock" of women's position in Algerian society some fifteen years after the revolution. The fact that Djebbar, a woman filmmaker, "ventures out" to discover and expose the real participation of women in the revolutionary process, reminds the audience of the feminine contribution that has been overshadowed because of traditions which only favored the male elite once the revolution was won.

In order to link the themes from her film (*La Nouba* now almost twenty years old) to her novel, *Vaste est la prison*, Djebbar brings out the common thread of the continuing necessity for a revision of feminine history and of the importance of a woman (particularly a Muslim woman) "venturing out" to establish subjectivity and to affirm her place of agency. The particular issue of "venturing out" is explored in *Vaste* and in the 1978 film in parallel scenes. In the film "her" husband (presumed to be Djebbar, the filmmaker) is a shadowy presence, confined to a wheelchair, "castrated because of his broken body" after a fall from a horse. Her liberty from domestic servitude, poignantly indicated in the film, leaves the young researcher free to travel and to gather information on her own.

As in the *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, Djebbar begins her narration in "Femme arable I" of *Vaste est la prison* with the identical image of a handicapped man depicted in shadow, con-

fined, and kept from entering the space of women by his own incapacitated body:

Le 18 décembre de cette année-là, j'ai tourné le premier plan de ma vie: un homme assis sur une chaise de paralytique regarde, arrêté sur le seuil d'une chambre, y dormir sa femme. Il ne peut entrer: deux marches qui surélèvent ce lieu font obstacle à sa chaise d'infirmes. Chambre comme une autre, chaude, si proche et si lointaine à la fois: le lit est large, bas, entouré de multiples peaux de mouton blanches adoucissant la rudesse des murs hauts de la demeure paysanne. A la manière ancienne, la dormeuse a serré ses cheveux dans un foulard rouge. L'époux immobilisé regarde de loin. Il a un mouvement du torse; sa main s'appuie au chambranle, une seconde avant que finisse le plan. (173)

By rendering this one man physically handicapped, Djebbar evokes a certain feminine allegiance with the *dormeuse* (who, in the film, curiously resembles the author) and with the historic women figures of the ancient harems the young *actrice* is representing. These women were confined in a space created, formed, and maintained by men. This destabilizing or castrating of the male gaze and dominance; "L'époux immobilisé regarde de loin," turns the tables on masculine power and feminine objectification.

Djebbar's male figure is unable to dominate the feminine body with his gaze, he is rendered incapacitated and unable to penetrate the room of the sleeping woman. Disordering the ordered normalized male role of "gazer" and appropriator of the feminine redefines what Laura Mulvey describes as "a world ordered by sexual imbalance [where] pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female [it is here where] the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly" (27).

Djebbar's film-text in *Vaste est la prison* gives to Algerian women of all echelons the "active" world they have rarely enjoyed. Her destabilization of this traditional passive feminine space (in this case an inviting harem room set up for optimal male pleasure) grants women freedom from masculine penetration in both metaphorical and physical terms. The cloistered passive women of Algeria's past succeed in compelling Djebbar to act as an agent for their visual and narrative reinscription into history.

By evoking her film work in the novel, Djebbar calls our attention to the fact that the cinematographic space, like the writing space, allows the author/director to create and subsequently organize a feminine space of agency, reconfiguring normalized images in favor of feminine control. These images promote new parameters for Algerian feminine subjectivity. Djebbar remarks in *Vaste est la prison* on the stimulation she feels as a woman in total control of her subjective space and as the promoter of feminine agency:

Premiers 'plans' de mon travail: une certaine défaite de l'homme. J'ai dit: 'Moteur.' Une émotion m'a saisie. Comme si, avec moi, toutes les femmes de tous les harems avaient chuchoté: 'moteur'. Connivence qui me stimule. D'elles seules dorénavant le regard m'importe. Posé sur ces images que j'organise et que ces présences invisibles derrière mon épaule aident à fermenter. (173-74)

The author's cinematographic space built on this "défaite de l'homme" also becomes a negotiating space for feminine freedom. The driving force—*le moteur*—behind each scene reinstates "ces présences invisibles" from the historic past.

Djebbar concludes *Vaste est la prison* as she began it, from an activist's point of view. She devotes the last few pages to a young woman journalist who died in Algeria. Djebbar describes her life and death as "le sang de l'écriture" (341). The scene revolves around Yasmina, "jeune professeur, mais aussi correctrice d'un journal indépendant" (343). This woman provides an example; she is but one martyr among many who die each day in Algeria. After stating she could never leave her country, "Je ne peux vivre hors d'Algérie, non!" (344). Yasmina, demonstrating strength and courage like so many women before her, is gunned down in 1994.

In order to keep alive the memory of Yasmina and so many others like her who have died, Djebbar continues to write and make films. Continuing to hone a new space for intellectual thought and historic revision, she attests that her very existence depends on her writing and that she must always write as if tomorrow were her last day:

Quand j'écris, j'écris toujours comme si j'allais mourir demain. Et chaque fois que j'ai fini je me demande si c'est vraiment ce qu'on attendait de moi, puisque les meurtres continuent. Je me demande à quoi ça sert. Sinon à serrer les dents, et à ne pas pleurer. ("Assia Djebbar" XII)



For Djébar, writing is the sole means of protesting a prison that is so vast its borders and its exits are almost indeterminable. It is only from her polyphonic place of exile that Djébar finds the means to break free of the violence which characterizes Algeria today.

From Djébar's dissident exiled status she can speak out, question and draw the attention of others to the current violence in Algeria. She and her nation have suffered the perpetuation of a culture of war "qui évacue les origines politiques du nationalisme contemporain, [et qui] a fini par généré des automatismes redoutables auprès d'une partie de la jeune génération" (Stora, "Absence" 67). It is up to Djébar, as well as to other authors and intellectuals like her, to reconstruct history as they think it should have been told; to forge a new space for future Algerian intellectual discourse: a space which will foster a more complete remembrance and subsequent rewriting of a forgotten history. Writing in exile as a "fugitive en ne le sachant pas" (*Vaste* 167),<sup>13</sup> Djébar nurtures the voice within her Self in *Vaste est la prison* as well as that of all the Selves of Algeria which cannot speak, or have not yet spoken:

Ecrire pour cerner la poursuite inlassable  
Le cercle ouvert à chaque pas se referme  
La mort devant, antilope cernée  
L'Algérie chasserresse, en moi, est avalée. (348)

*Valerie Orlando is a Visiting Assistant Professor of French at Purdue University.*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> At the writing of this paper Islamic terrorist groups continue to threaten, kill, rape and maim women in Algeria. The intensity of the war against the people (most particularly women and children) has only increased in the last year. In January 1997 one BBC World Service report (of which there have been many since on the turmoil in Algeria) stated:

Today it has been reported that fourteen people had their throats cut in a small village in Algeria. Five of the people killed were young girls. It is believed that the ultra militant Islamic fundamentalist group, the GIA, are to blame for the massacre.

<sup>2</sup> Curiously, as Djebbar states in an interview with Clarisse Zimra in 1992, the fundamentalists accuse her of "pandering to the expectations of the former masters," rather than targeting her gender as the principal reason for their actions against her (Zimra 151).

<sup>3</sup> At the writing of this article it is widely believed that, although highly visible as an organized body which inflicts violence on the populace, the FIS is not the sole entity to be exclusively blamed for murders. Many Algerian experts believe that the official military (predominately the FLN party) is also to blame for a number of murders of intellectuals and journalists.

<sup>4</sup> "Plane of consistency" is a term borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari's work, *A Thousand Plateaus*. The plane is a mediating space on which entities collide, fuse, *detritorialize* and *reterritorialize* to form new connections and diverse cultural exchanges.

<sup>5</sup> The idea of movement "outside," to another space in order to enunciate her history is also carried on in her later work, *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*. In that 1995 work, Djebbar's autobiographical journal repeatedly is written from somewhere else: Paris, California, Europe. The outside provides a milieu of peace and reflection, a means in/by which to reflect on "là-bas, au milieu du sang..." (*Blanc* 21).

<sup>6</sup> See Françoise Lionnet's work *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity*, particularly her reappropriation of Teresa De Laurentis's theories on Third World women writer's "multiply organized" texts. This sort of text, Lionnet explains, implicates a subject which "speaks several different languages (male and female, colonial and indigenous, global and local, among others" (5).

<sup>7</sup> This term I have appropriated from Françoise Lionnet's critical work, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*.

<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison has cultivated and used the concept of "rememory" extensively in her work.

<sup>9</sup> See Lionnet's *Postcolonial Representations*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> This has played a part in stifling any memory process. This memory "numbing" and the consequent rewriting of the Algerian war and colonial history by the newly installed militant government immediately after the war in the mid-1960s has led Benjamin Stora and other historians of Franco-Algerian history to ask, "faut-il voir dans la falsification, dans la réécriture de la guerre de l'Indépendance, en Algérie, l'une des causes de la nouvelle guerre?" (Stora, *Absence* 63); that is a rise in fundamentalism and lack of human rights which are engulfing a generation of Algerians. In 1965, following the coup d'état de Boumediene, the "new" government of Algeria opted to "rewrite" the history of the Franco-Algerian war. The FLN became the new power of "légitimation symbolique" (Stora, *Gangrène* 229) wiping the slate clean of all individual actors/heros of the liberation struggle in order to install the massive socialist notion of a history "par le peuple pour le peuple." (229):

Les idéologues du parti optent délibérément pour une histoire massive résumée par la formule lapidaire "par le peuple et pour le peuple", qui, en réalité, consiste à éliminer tous les acteurs du mouvement national (avant et pendant la guerre) que les canons du système n'ont pas retenus. (229)

From 1966 onward, this new *écriture de l'histoire* provided that all libraries and bookstores would be controlled by a strict code of historic interpretation handed down by the government. In 1974, this system was permanently installed by the creation of the *Centre national d'études historiques*. The *Centre* became responsible for monitoring and controlling all historic research (229).

<sup>11</sup> A "femme arable" indicates a woman who is "cultivated" in the sense of "worked," transformed, molded—almost like clay—into something better, *améliorée*.

<sup>12</sup> Very few copies of this film exist as it was not widely distributed. It won the Critic's Prize at the Venice Biennale in 1979. For more information, see Blair.

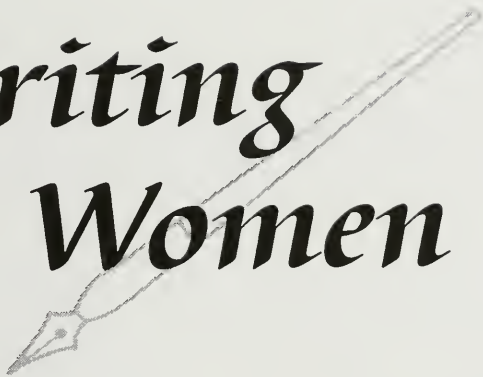
<sup>13</sup> See also Djebbar's article of this name in *L'Esprit Créateur*.

### Works Cited

- "Assia Djebbar." *Le Monde* 28 April 1995, XII.
- Bensmaïa, Réda. "The Phantom Mediators: Reflections on the Nature of the Violence in Algeria." Trans. Hassan Melehi. *Writing Between the Lines/Censored. Diacritics* 27.2 (Summer 1997): 85-97.
- Blair, Dorothy S. Introduction. *An Algerian Cavalcade*. Trans. Blair. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press, 1993. Rpt. of *L'amour, la fantasia*. 1985. i-vi.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language & Symbolic Power*. Trans. Gino Raymond, Matthew Adamson. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1987.
- Djebbar, Assia. *An Algerian Cavalcade*. Trans. Dorothy S. Blair. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press, 1993. Rpt. of *L'Amour, la fantasia*. 1985.
- . "Fugitive, et ne le sachant pas." *L'Esprit créateur* 33.2 (Summer 1993): 129-33.
- . *La Soif*. Paris: Julliard, 1957.
- . *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1995.
- . *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*. Paris: Julliard, 1962.
- . *Les Impatients*. Paris: Juillard, 1958.
- . *Vaste est la prison*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1995.
- Fanon, Frantz. *A Dying Colonialism*. Trans. Haakon Chevalier. NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1965.

- Lionnet, Françoise. *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.
- . *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995.
- Mernissi, Fatima. *Le Harem politique*. Paris: Editions Complexe, 1987.
- . *Sultanes Oubliées*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1990.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*. NY: Routledge, 1992. 22-34.
- Spivak, Gayatri. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Stora, Benjamin. *La Gangrène et l'oubli: La Mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie*. Paris: La Découverte, 1991.
- . "Algérie: Absence et surabondance de mémoire." *L'Esprit*. (January 1995): 62-67.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "Bilinguisme, dialogisme et schizophrénie." *Du Bilinguisme*. Eds. Bennani-Boukous-Bounfour, et al. Paris: Denoël, 1985. 11-26.
- Zimra, Clarisse. "Disorienting the Subject in Djebbar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*." *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995): 149-70.

# *Writing Women*



**PAROLES GELEES**

UCLA French Studies

Volume 15.1 1997



# PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*





## CONTENTS

---

The (Wo)Man in the Iron Mask: Cross-dressing, Writing and Sexuality in <i>L'Histoire de la Marquise-Marquis de Banneville</i> .....	5
<i>Deborah Hahn</i>	
"That God Within:" Writing Female Genius from Diderot to Staël .....	27
<i>Cecilia Feilla</i>	
Beauty and Borderlands in <i>Mademoiselle de Maupin</i> .....	43
<i>Lena Udall</i>	
Les <i>Mémoires</i> de Louise Michel: Travail de deuil et quête identitaire .....	63
<i>Juliette Parnell-Smith</i>	
Assia Djebar's <i>Vaste est la prison</i> : Platform for a New Space of Agency and Feminine Enunciation in Algeria .....	83
<i>Valerie Orlando</i>	
UCLA French Department Lecture Series .....	103
Ordering Information .....	106
Call for Papers .....	107