

Restoring Sight and Sound to the Algerian Woman: A Postcolonial Reading of Djebbar's novels

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Abstract Known as Algeria's most prominent woman novelist, Assia Djebbar has successfully brought to the forefront issues of a feminist nature all the while keeping her texts immersed within the discourse of nationalism. Djebbar's novels exhibit a multitude of female personalities and experiences that defeat all attempts at fixating women into objects of textual representation. This paper aims at presenting Djebbar's novels as counter narratives to the phallogocentric constructions of the female figure as lack and Orientalist implications of the feminine as marginal and inconsequential through the use of feminist and postcolonial approaches. By analyzing the multi-faceted accounts of women in *Fantasia* and *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, this paper seeks to replace old notions of a stagnant female subject with one where women are vibrant figures of resistance, agency and change. It is mainly through the language of the body as exemplified in the sound, gesture and 'gaze' that Djebbar gives women a chance to be 'visible,' to represent themselves and to speak with a voice that is unique and singular in its diversity from the norm, yet plural and multi-dimensional in its functionality and role.

Assia Djebbar's novels have received a great deal of critical attention for the way they grapple with women's issues in relation to matters of patriarchy, language and colonization. In these novels the Algerian nation is portrayed as suffering from colonial transgression and post-colonial haunting, at the same as women are depicted as suffering from the double victimization of both French colonialism and Algerian patriarchy. As soon as the war ended, the Algerian woman found herself out of the power equation, relegated to either a peripheral role in a male dominated society or disfigured by the panoptical Orientalist gaze. Djebbar's novels function as a counter discourse negating both of these two positions in favor of a post-colonial paradigm that is in keeping with Derrida's notion of 'supplementarity' and 'différance,' one where the Algerian woman is singular and unique in her identity yet multi-dimensional and indeterminable in her position.

As Djebbar grappled with issues of colonization and patriarchy, she wrote her novels intent on not only exhibiting to the world the history of Algeria from the perspective of women, but also on finding a suitable medium that women could adopt to share their stories of resistance and agency. By re-appropriating language, history, the female body and the 'gaze,' Djebbar succeeded in giving women a voice distinct from those prototypes that have kept the Algerian woman entangled in narratives of a Eurocentric and/or patriarchal nature. In giving due credit to Foucault's theories regarding the power/knowledge dichotomy of modern oculacentric society, Djebbar successfully employs the female body as a vessel through which to enforce her new power equations.

The aim of this paper will be to offer an alternative model of the post-colonial subject where female voices are vibrant figures of resistance, agency and change counteracting any attempts at fixating the Algerian woman into a simplistic and rigid model of passivity, submissiveness and inconsequentiality. By analyzing the female figures in *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* and *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, this paper will reveal a variety of female voices that stand resilient and strong in the face of attempts to stifle her voice, paralyze her movement and ultimately misrepresent her role in Algerian society as found in Delacroix's painting of "Women of Algiers". It is mainly through the language of the body as exemplified in the sound, gesture and 'gaze' that Djebbar gives women a chance to be 'visible,' to represent themselves and to speak with a voice that is unique and singular in its diversity from the norm, yet plural and multi-dimensional in its functionality and role. Djebbar says:

The fourth language, for all females, young or old . . . remains that of 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 (*Fantasia*, 1993, 180).

This fourth language of the body becomes even more significant in light of Djebbar's quarrel with the vernacular. Having chosen to use the French language of the colonizer to write her stories, the language of the body becomes a source of empowerment for Djebbar who finally finds a way to inscribe the French language with traces of Algerian culture and oral Arabic language.

In *Women of Algiers* and *Fantasia*, Djebbar employs the tropes of sight and sound to expose and deconstruct patriarchal and colonialist implications of silence and invisibility. The first encounter with the tropes of sight and sound and its significance within the larger dichotomy of phallogocentric scopophilia is to be found in Delacroix's painting "Women of Algiers" on the cover page of this collection of stories (*Women of Algiers*). In placing this painting as a framework against which all the stories are juxtaposed, Djebbar emphasizes the importance of representation within a feminist post-

colonial world that is in search for ways to become free from any prior limitations or entanglements. In the afterword to her collection she states, "Delacroix's painting 'Women of Algiers in Their Apartment' is all about this. Who gazes at whom? . . . Who is subject and who is object?" (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 173-174). Djebbar's questions reveal a concern with representation as the prime locator of meaning. Griselda Pollock (2003) in her essay on visual culture emphasizes the importance of visual images in the construction of meanings and states that feminists' obsession with representation as constituted in "who is represented and who does the representing?" is an indelible sign of the power/knowledge dichotomy of present day oculacentric society (174). With Delacroix acting as if he were a dependable source of information about the Algerian woman, his painting becomes yet another opportunity to impose Orientalist discourses of superiority over the Arab world. In juxtaposing her position as insider against Delacroix's position as outsider, Djebbar challenges these lifeless representations reinstating the Algerian woman in the position of subject who has power of representation over her world.

In the opening tale of *Women of Algiers*, Sara's story is interdispersed with memories of the time she was forced to spend in prison. As she recounts how she now enjoys the freedom to go out as much as she wants "improvising" as she goes along in whatever way she saw fit, she compares her life to the desolate and silent way her mother used to live. Angry at how her mother's life was bleak and stifled, she promises to avenge her mother's silence. She asks Anne, "What should we do? Lock ourselves in again, begin to weep for her again, live again for her?" (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 50). At a loss as to how avenge her mother's life, she resolves to live a life free from restrictions. She tells Anne:

For Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves, in all the women's quarters, the traditional ones as well as those in the housing projects, Talk among ourselves and look. Look outside, look outside the walls and the prisons! . . . The Woman as look and the Woman as voice. (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 50)

In giving women the opportunity to narrate their life stories, to resonate their grievances and express their hopes and dreams, Djebbar reinstates power within the domain of feminine. The woman as "look" and the woman as "voice" become instruments of liberation from patriarchal as well as colonial forces that have restricted women's every move and denied them any sort of self-expression.

The scene where Sara and her husband, Ali, are laying close to each other in bed, yet each one is "closed off" from the other reveals how silence and lack of communication has been detrimental to both men and women. Unable to comprehend her husband's state of mind or what he is feeling, Sara finds him "opaque" and elusively distant. He is so detached from her that she confesses that "if he were dead it would be just the same" because they no longer have anything to share (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 28). This lack of connection manifests itself between many other characters in the story. When a female patient arrives at Ali's office, he is unable to understand her words until a secretary intercedes and manages to translate what the patient is trying to say. This inability to use language to communicate seems to manifest itself also among the female characters. When Leila asks Sara to explain to her what happened in prison, instead of explaining to Leila how she was tortured, Sara undoes her blouse and uncovers "the blue scar" on her abdomen (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 45). Finding that words are inadequate, Sara unleashes the language of the body to speak and reveal the tortures and inhibitions it has been subjected to throughout the years. She replaces the linguistic expressions that have been long lost to her with gestures and movements that have been ingrained on her body. As Leila also looks "for words, like a deaf-mute, words of love, informal words," she also runs her fingers over Sara's forehead and the arches of her eyebrows (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 45) as a way to express her feelings of sympathy and love. In what is at best a primitive instinctual drive, Leila is overwhelmed with a desire to start licking Sara's face in a gesture of motherly love.

In the section entitled "Yesterday," the story "There is no Exile" introduces the concept of cries and vociferations as viable and adequate means of communication. In this story, the narrator describes the sense of grief and misery of the neighbors in their wailing cries of sadness over their son. Described as "all lamenting in chorus, each one settling, forever it seemed, into the muddled outbreak of their grief" (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 62), their sounds seem to resound into "one long, gasping chant" that was a thousand times more powerful than any words of grief. Similarly, in the tale "The Woman Who Weeps," the widow who used to be beaten by her husband is described as having finally found her long stifled voice. She exchanges her silence with whispers where she was "confessing, mumbling, letting it all flow out" in a chant that is very much similar to that of the sea (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 56). In "The Dead Speak," what used to be "gagged mouths," "suffocated cries" of women under the double control of patriarchy and colonial rule, is also released through "inflections, frayed sighs" and "spasmodic" cries that are finally articulated in the form of words in "There is no Exile." In this story, Aicha openly expresses her disagreement with her parents clearly stating: "But I don't want to get married" (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 77-78).

Fantasia (1993) is filled with female characters whose main source of protest is “the cry of the live body” (106). In the “Second Movement: the Trance,” the grandmother’s vociferations and chants offer reprieve from the many restrictions that have long stifled her movement and silenced her voice. As the lady musicians roll their drums and the blind woman chants her song, the grandmother dances her way into a trance. With chocking cries coming “thick and fast” so that “all the voices of the past,” which were imprisoned in her present existence, are “now set free and leapt away from her,” her body convulses and then falls to the ground in a movement of intense surrender. Having found comfort in the pure language of the body, the narrator explains how it can at times even supersede the effects of verbal language (Arabic, French) which can be a “source of all our sorrows: like half-obliterated signs which we spend the rest of our lives trying to decipher” (*Fantasia*, 1993, 145). This unadulterated yet powerful language of the body creates such a strong female bond among the women in the stories that it actually becomes an occasion to break away from all that has captivated women, introducing gesture and voice within the female domain of power.

In *Fantasia*, Djebbar extends the power of the body and the voice by adding to it the force of writing. “In our towns,” she says, “the first woman-reality is the voice, a dart which flies off into space, an arrow which slowly falls to earth; next comes writing” (*Fantasia*, 1993, 180). In the chapter entitled “My father Writes to My Mother,” she breaks all taboos with the “cult of silence” (*Fantasia*, 1993, 145) attributed to Arab society and instead shows how her father acknowledged her mother by sending her a postcard that had her name written on it (*Fantasia*, 1993, 37). In directly addressing his wife, her father broke with traditional formalities and opened a “flood-gate” of light where his wife was no longer an invisible being, but a person with a name, and an identity worthwhile to be acknowledged (*Fantasia*, 1993, 35).

In the “Voice,” Djebbar recounts the story of Cherifa whose physical strength and strong will-power make her a powerful agent of resistance against the French colonizer. In this story, Cherifa exhibits all signs of courage and will-power as she leaves her home and goes into the mountains to fight against the French. Learning the skill of nursing, she helps clean the fighters’ wounds and nurses them back to health. When they ask her to marry so that she can be under the protection of a man, she refuses saying, “You can kill me if you like, but I won’t get married” (*Fantasia*, 1993, 131). Even after she is captured by the enemy, she does not allow anyone to harass her or tell her what to do. As the French soldiers try to tie her up, she shouts “Never . . . Nobody’s going to touch me!” (*Fantasia*, 1993, 133). As they persistently question her about her involvement in the freedom movement, she puts up a front and refuses to give them any answers that might hurt her compatriots. Even when they are about to shoot her, she is brazen enough to say that “It makes no difference” to her and that she felt no fear of them (*Fantasia*, 1993, 135). She is tortured, whipped, beaten and electrified, yet she remains strong and refuses to be a traitor to her country. In fighting against the French and standing up to them when they capture her, she fulfills her destiny as a freedom fighter and proves how women can be agents of resistance, agency and change.

What gestures and sounds uncover about the Algerian woman’s agency, the ‘gaze’ opens up in the form of looks, haughty demeanors and resolute stares. In the story “The Dead Speak” in *Women of Algiers* (1992), the reader is introduced to a powerful female called Hadda or Yemma. Having overcome the hardships of two divorces and still managed to keep her own business affairs intact, Hadda is revered by both the women and men of the town. “Because of her knowledge of religious matters, her wisdom regarding ancestral mores,” they even consider her to be part of the city’s nobility who has power of influence over others (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 101). When Said thinks of marrying a second wife, the only person he finds worth consulting is Yemma. Her presence is so imposing on those around her that her “intimidating gaze” is described as “a look that went right through” and made you re-examine your position in the world (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 105). Like a “mountain hawk” which is able to spot things from far away and practice power over other animals, Yemma’s authority culminates in her ability to be a subject rather than object of the gaze and enforce her own set of rules and standards on the people in her town.

In chapter one of *Fantasia*, the gaze that is in and of itself “the eye of power,” appears on the side of the Algerian women who watch the French fleet approach the North African coastline (Pollock, 2003, 189). Though the French colonizer has always given himself the right to ‘gaze’ at this other, in this story it is the Algerian woman who stands resolute in her right to watch and observe their every move. Unlike the French army who are standing in the thin air without any shelter, the women who gaze at them seem to possess both the right to stare at these intruders and the security of being able to watch from behind concrete roof tops. What privileges and rights these colonizers seemed to have over the Algerian nation have been reversed and the ‘gaze’ has now become on the side of the Algerians. As Djebbar notes, “In these lawful glances . . . the eye of the dominator first seeks out the other’s eye, the eye of the dominated, before it takes possession of the body” (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 139). What applies to the postcolonial scene is also transferable to phallogocentric equations. The Algerian woman seems to be in possession of this ‘gaze’ and she unabashedly uses it to disempower the male intruder.

In juxtaposing these vibrant images of women who have regained their voices against Delacroix's painting of females frozen in time and lacking in expression, Djébar is able to expose and deconstruct phallogocentric and colonialist implications of Algerian women whose silence and submission places them in the discursive position of mere objects of representation. As objects to other people's gazes to be manipulated and objectified, the women in Delacroix's painting are abstract figures who have been lost in translation. Knowing little about the culture he was writing about, Delacroix was unable to capture any of the intricacies or nuances of the Algerian women, but inevitably ended up leaving them "absent to themselves, to their body, to their sensuality, to their happiness" (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 137). Gazing in space and doing nothing, these women seem to float in a world of non-existence where they are "both literally and figuratively lost" both to themselves and to others (Huughe, 1996, 869).

Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (1998) explains how visual images can lose any semblance of reality and become mere objects of representation. He says that once an image turns into "object a," it "circumscribes us, and which in the first instance makes us beings who are looked at" (Lacan, 1998, 75). As objects of the others gaze, characters take on the "function of desire" of the artist, reflecting his own fantasies and dreams upon his object of representation. Denied the right to even gaze at their surroundings or have any significant relationship with the other females in the painting, the characters in Delacroix's painting become mere reflections of his Orientalist fantasies of the Algerian female. In "Aphasia of Love" in *Fantasia* (2003), the female characters do not cover up when a Frenchman passes by because as the narrator explains, "When the stranger is faced with all these women . . . does he really see them . . . thinking he's taken them by surprise? No, he imagines he sees them" (125). His Orientalist preconception about these women colors his eyes and, like Delacroix, makes him blind to their true nature. Knowing this, the female characters never bother to cover themselves up from the blind gaze of the Frenchman.

The function of the gaze takes on even stronger significance and value in light of Djébar's experiences within narrative cinema. Aligning the lens of the camera with the predominant mastery of the male gaze, Djébar shows how women are further objectified and immobilized into a "wasteland" of silence and invisibility of the "seraglio" (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 151). Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1989) explains that "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (19). As figures imprisoned within the male lens, Delacroix's females are doubly objectified and frozen in time. Unable to represent themselves or have any control over their feelings, they neither accept the colonial male gaze nor refuse it, but are totally oblivious to its existence. Unlike Mernissi's female images in *Dreams of Trespass* (1994) who deny the look as a postcolonial gesture of resistance, these voiceless and 'gazeless' women are figments of the imagination of a male colonial presence that finds it easier to reflect his own narcissistic fantasies and desires on his objects of representation rather than to search for the plural meanings and evolving knowledge of the Algerian woman.

What Delacroix depicted in his painting as stagnant, passive and submissive, Djébar resuscitates into figures of agency, power and change. As the weight of decades of patriarchal and Orientalist discourses are exposed and lifted off of the Algerian woman's shoulders, she is empowered to use her voice and her body to resituate herself as the rightful author of her own life story. Though in most of these novels she comes out as defiant and ruthless in her fight against the aggressor, Djébar is very careful not to singularize her into one particular framework or one subject position so as to avoid the mistakes that Delacroix and others have made by turning her into a fetish or prototype that is resistant to progress or change. In presenting women from all walks of life with different levels of education and background, she bypasses the distortions that accompany the limitation of representation and gives each Algerian woman the right to narrate her own life story.

Djébar's preoccupation with matters of representation is directly linked to her awareness of the role that the artist plays in the power/knowledge dichotomy of postcolonial discourse. Her earlier questions regarding Delacroix's painting as "Who gazes at whom?" and "Who is subject and who is object," are essentially about who has monopoly over the other and for what purpose? (*Women of Algiers*, 1992, 173-174). In taking Delacroix as an example, she shows how insufficient or distorted knowledge about the body can be manipulated and used in the service of power. Elaborating on Foucault's theory of power, Elizabeth Grosz (1995) states:

Power can thus be seen to operate directly on bodies, behaviors, and pleasures, extracting from them information necessary for the emergence of the knowledges that constitute the social sciences and humanities. Knowledges require the interaction of power and bodies; correlatively power requires knowledges of bodies and behaviors in order to remain effective and "in play" (32).

In using the language of the body to speak about the Algerian woman, Djébar succeeds at negating Orientalist and phallogocentric preconceptions and uses her narratives as an occasion at gazing back at the colonizer who suddenly finds himself in the position of object rather than subject of this gaze. Decentered and displaced, the colonizer's knowledge is

replaced by one that comes directly from the Algerian woman in a voice that is loud and strong enough to be heard. The picture on the cover page of *Fantasia* of women defiantly gazing at the spectator is representative of their new found determination and strength to narrate their life stories and to restore both sight and sound to the silent study of Orientalist imagery as found in Delacroix's painting.

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