

**W-RITING WOMAN'S BODY IN ASSIA DJEBAR'S *FANTASIA: AN ALGERIAN CAVALCADE***

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**ABSTRACT**

Assia Djébar's *Fantasia: an Algerian Cavalcade*, (*L'Amour, La Fantasia*, 1985) is an autobiographical narrative indenting women as historiographers. *Fantasia* juxtaposes the nineteenth-century history of French colonization in Algeria and the war of independence. This Essay explores the "Women Question and Condition" vis-à-vis the writings of Assia Djébar under the sign of Algerian historical, political and social milieu. Women's voices and experiences are at the epicenter of Assia's narration. Djébar examines how female figures seek to challenge the sexual colonialism dwelling in a sexist culture. Employing the idea of *Insurrection* in her writings about Algeria, Assia has woven a narrative around freedom and liberation vis-à-vis Algeria in order to validate the experiences of Algerian women. In her narrative, there are numerous female protagonists and survivors of the war of independence, who by their storytelling provide a kaleidoscopic view of their world. By reassembling the fragments of individual identities lost and forgotten by history, Assia forges a collective identity, focusing on the shared rather than the individual aspect of memory. This Essay also examines how and what Djébar communicates with the language of the female body taking recourse to Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*.

**Keywords:** *écriture féminine*, memory, collective identity, colonization, history

**INTRODUCTION**

The tradition of recording life stories or autobiographies has a long and extended history, going back to St. Augustine's *Confessions* in AD 397. As a genre, critics have generally considered Autobiography as a complex genre because of its disruptive, unsettling and interdisciplinary nature as it challenges the traditional boundaries between fact and fiction, theory and practice, literature and history, the personal and the collective, the mundane and the literary. In the words of Laura Marcus an autobiographical text appears "either as a dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions, or as a magical instrument of reconciliation" (1994:7).

However, the autobiographical practice becomes even more compounded and complex when examined from the perspective of gender politics. Feminist writers have often criticized this genre as being essentially constructed from the masculine point of view. This view projects the notion of the ideal autobiographer as a unified, awe-inspiring subject emphasizing the presence of white male writers, while a woman's voice remains marginalized and unrepresented within the canon of autobiography. The "authentic" female figure is inevitably absorbed into the male representation since, as Eagleton points out, "woman is not just an other in the sense of something beyond [man's] ken, but an other intimately related to him as the image of what he is not, and therefore as an essential reminder of what he is" (Terry Eagleton: 1983:132).

Since the 1980s feminist critics concerned with the absence of women's voices, have increasingly engaged with the genre of autobiography, contributing to a critical reassessment of diverse issues such as subjectivity, knowledge and power, sexuality, memory, and collective identity (Cosslett, Lury, and Summerfield, 2000). It is only towards the end of the twentieth century that women came to the realization of the narratives that have been controlling their lives. The increasing academic interest in women's representation through autobiography has seen two conspicuous consequences: that of traditional category of autobiography which *objectifies* women from the patriarchal gaze, and the recent emphasis on women's autobiographies which serves to *subjectify* the female voice. It has increasingly been found that a large number of female authors prefer to write autobiographies rather than write on factors from diverse categories of difference which include race, class, nationality, and sexual orientation (Stanley, 1992: 247-248).

## **REWRITING HISTORY**

Assia Djébar's *L'amour, la Fantasia* (1985) is the first volume of a Quartet which attempts a daring attempt at retracing the historical events of colonization, subjugation and oppression in Algeria from variegated feminine perspectives. *Fantasia* not only describes the French conquest of Algiers but it is also a refusal and a protest against the oppression imposed on Algerians in general and on women in particular. Out of the sufferings and silent cries of these broken and exploited women, Djébar creates a new model of feminine subjectivity weaving a novel woman centered narrative.

The musical cavalcade or *Fantasia* unfolds in the form of a multi-layered love story recounted from the perspective of a woman with a polymorphic identity. The city of Algiers itself is depicted as a woman shedding her veils. The woman in *Fantasia* is depicted in many guises: as a beloved waiting for her lover, as a school going Arab girl, as a woman author with a hybridized identity, and as a female city viewing the stealthy approach of the male invader. In *Fantasia*, Djébar projects history as a collection of fragmented stories, recuperating, forgotten experiences

and grappling with the complex relationship between the personal and the collective. *Fantasia* also demonstrates the importance of the female body, and reveals the embodiment of Algerian women via-a-vis historical events.

Employing the autobiographical narrative mode to portray women as protagonists of history, who seek to challenge the dominant power imposed by patriarchy and colonialism, Assia recreates and rewrites history, and in the process provides room for variegated women voices to revisit their forgotten experiences.

### **‘ÉCRITURE FÉMININE’**

In her work *The Laugh of the Medusa* 1975 (*Le Rire de la Méduse*) Cixous’ speaks of feminine writing as

“...about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing.”

(Jstor, *The Laugh of the Medusa* translated by Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, 1976, p.875)

Cixous views on feminine writing signifies that women must undertake women’s writing in such a manner that a woman should apply herself to a text like she gives birth, and to history, in order to start a movement : «que la femme se mette au texte - comme au monde, et à l’histoire-, de son propre mouvement» (Cixous, 2010: pp. 38-39). For her, feminine writing is largely about : “...woman”, I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus her model of women’s writing is one which is revolutionary, specific to women and above all in which the woman talks in contexts that defy gender laws and which will eventually uphold the opposition to masculine ideology eventually leading to women’s progress. However, Cixous admits to the impossibility of defining the practice of women’s writings as something that cannot be theorized, cannot be confined and cannot be coded, she recognizes the fact that it exists but it will always go beyond the confines of discourse which is essentially a system that is phallogocentric. She states that there has not yet been any writing that “inscribes feminity”... “exceptions so rare, in fact, that, after plowing through literature across languages, cultures, and ages, one can only be startled at this vain scouting mission.”

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<sup>1</sup>Jstor, *The Laugh of the Medusa* translated by Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, 1976, pp.875, 878.

She says that women's writing must not be subjected to any rule, to anything that limits her ability to describe her world. It is interesting to note that the thoughts of Cixous get very prominently reflected in the writings of Assia Djebar. Djebar's oeuvre *Fantasia* corresponds to Cixous *écriture féminine*. Written in the Franco-Algerian backdrop *Fantasia* grapples with new ideas while presenting women. Assia's writings on Algerian women under French colonial rule are different from traditional models of women's writings in Algerian literature written in French. Cixous, words are pertinent here. According to her this new form of women's writings is a revolt, and a moment of liberation which will allow women to break away from traditional forms and make necessary transformations that are indispensable to her: "... woman must write woman. And man, man..." (p.877);

"She must write her self, because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history..." which she states in at two levels – by 'writing herself' and thus return to the body by '*seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based *on her suppression*." (author's emphasis)  
(Cohen: 1976, p. 880)

Djebar shares this idea of a new form of insurgent women's writing as she also strongly feels that women must write and write with new textual and contextual strategies to deconstruct the masculine authority, prerogatives and practices. For Djebar, this form of women's writing is essential in order to free and liberate women.

Djebar emphasizes on the inscription of women's body while writing as an Algerian woman; she inscribes her own body into *Fantasia*, thus highlighting its importance in the creation of her narrative. Djebar states that writing "...looks into the mirror of its scrolls and curlicues and sees itself a woman, not the reflection of a voice." (p. 181). Incidentally this corresponds to what Cixous observes in the Laugh of the Medusa. In adjudicating Djebar's work, it is pertinent to note that one must interpret the author's writing as a feminine extension of her own embodied subjectivity. Assia admits that that her body/text possesses a subversive power. "When I write and read ... my body travels far in subversive space, in spite of the neighbours and suspicious matrons; it would not need much for it to take wings and fly!" (p.184).

Further, in her book, she does not merely inscribe her own body into her text, but she states that all Algerian women have recourse to four languages and the last one is "... remains that of the

body” (p. 180). Thus along with the body, language, she says emancipates women. For her French is a language that has emancipated her, and it is by her writings in French which is a language inherited from the colonizer and taught by her father that she has been freed. Assia avers:

“As if the French language suddenly had eyes, and lent them me to see into liberty; as if the French language blinded the peeping-toms of my clan and, at this price, I could move freely, run headlong down every street, annex the outdoors for my cloistered companions, for the matriarchs of my family who endured a living death. As if ... Derision!

I know that every language is a dark depository for piled-up corpses, refuse, sewage, but faced with the language of the former conqueror, which offers me its ornaments, its jewels, its flowers, I find they are flowers of death – chrysanthemums on tombs!” (1993, p.181)

## **ROLE OF MEMORY**

Another important aspect of women’s autobiographies lies in the question of memory. Since an autobiography promises an exploration or a revelation of the “self” through a literary text, the author seeks to recover a constant shifting of personal and collective memories that constitute the foundation of female subjectivity.

Sidonie Smith (1987) claims that memory represents a crucial element in autobiographical practice, and it is through this genre that a “fictional” self creates certain connections with the past. Smith further highlights that the autobiographical “self” is not a fixed entity but rather a “cultural and linguistic” “fiction” constituted through historical ideologies of selfhood and the processes of our storytelling” (p. 45). Thus the narrative “I” is therefore essentially a fictive persona and the act of recovering memories symbolizes an attempt to describe the “fictional” nature of the historical autobiography. Consequently, Algeria’s history of French colonization plays a crucial role in the formation of Djebbar’s subjectivity as the narrative “I” which is constructed through the rewriting of the national history.

In undertaking this autobiographical mission in *Fantasia* Djebbar says: “(...) in my first books, I went veiled, in the quartet, I expose myself” (In Mortimer, 1997: 102). Djebbar’s challenge is to rewrite the history of her nation, and this history cannot be described by any colonizing subject. *Fantasia* thus chronicles the process in which the autobiographical self develops her perceptions

about the two conflicting cultures in which she lives: the Algerian and the French. Djébar uses French, the former colonizer's language, to describe different stages of her life - her teenage years valorizing French culture, - her subsequent alienation from the Arabic community, - her educational experience and academic success, - the moment of concern and apprehension caught between the two cultures, and lastly, -her intense desire to return to the past in order to reconnect with the Arabic world through the medium of a literary text. In this context, Mildred Mortimer states that, "...autobiography becomes Djébar's way back to the cherished maternal world of her past, where she seeks healing and reconciliation for a self fragmented by the colonial experience" (1997:103). For Assia Djébar, it is a personal journey in which she describes herself as : "A little Arab girl in a village in the Algerian Sahel." (p.3) who eventually becomes an adult woman perplexed and disoriented in the multicultural paradox of "foreign" and "native" land "between two breathing spaces" and she expresses further that : "[...] I am alternately the besieged foreigner and the native swaggering off to die, so there is seemingly endless strife between the spoken and written word. (p. 215).

Thus in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade (1985)*, women are portrayed as protagonists of history wherein they seek to challenge the dominant power imposed on them by patriarchy. *Fantasia* juxtaposes the nineteenth century history of French colonization in Algeria and the war of independence. In attempting to recover the forgotten voices of Algerian women Djébar's female protagonists seek to challenge the dominant power imposed by patriarchy and colonialism. History is portrayed in *Fantasia* as a collection of fragmented stories grappling with the complex relationship between the personal and the collective. The narrative thus tackles the difficulties in trying to provide the marginalized and silenced women with a voice.

### **PRESENCE OF WOMEN'S VOICES**

In Djébar's *Fantasia*, the presence of women's voice appears to provide mixed and varied interpretations of their countries' colonial history seen from a female centered perspective. She earnestly seeks to "resurrect" the countless voices of her "vanished sisters" (p. 204), the voices that were silenced and adapted according to the paternalistic image of Algerian nationalism. For Djébar, writing thus serves to reconstruct the lost affinities and forms a connection with her maternal, Arab world, as she observes: "[...] writing has brought me to the cries of the women silently rebelling in my youth, to my own true origins. Writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters" (p. 204), thereby allowing the existence of diverse female "voices."

One can notice that the autobiographical fragments in *Fantasia* are intertwined with collective voices reflecting what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "polyphonic texts," in which one sees "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin:1984, p. 6). When Djébar

attempts to rewrite her country's history, she claims that the true hero of the Algerian resistance is not the legendary hero, Sultan Abd al-Qadir, but the long-forgotten female figures of the Revolution: the fumigated and asphyxiated tragic victims of the Dahra caves, the naked but proud "Bride of Mazuna," and many other anonymous women whose existence have been neglected by the official male writers of history. In the course of the novel Assia offers many oral testimonies of Algerian female revolutionaries who recall their memories during the War of Independence. Priscilla Ringrose highlights that these women's "verbal" testimonies are contrasted with colonizers' "written" testimonies: "[...]the simplicity and terseness of these transliterated oral testimonies provide a sharp and deliberate contrast not only to the written testimonies of the colonizers [...] but also to the richness of Djébar's own virtuoso use of the French language" (2006, p.43).

The last section of the book entitled "*Voices from the Past*" is a narrative exposé of Algerian women's collective memories. Divided into five chapters which Djébar calls "Movements," she includes several essays whose titles specify diverse forms of Algerian women's orality like, "Voice," under which is integrated "Clamour," "Aphasia of Love," "Murmurs," "Whispers," "A Widow's Voice," "Embraces" etc. In one of the "Voice" sections, Djébar gives a detailed history of an Algerian woman fighter who selflessly dedicates herself to the struggles of independence by working at field hospitals and by serving wounded soldiers. She is eventually captured by the French army, imprisoned, interrogated, and tortured. When a French *goumier* (Moroccan soldier in the French army) insults her, she bravely declares, "Come closer, if you dare! You call us rats, so let's see if we're rats or lions!" (p. 138). Djébar describes how the French soldiers later leave her in peace and the *goumier* disappears from the scene after she hits him with a coffee pot and fractures his "collar- bone". This anonymous female fighter's experience as an authentic revolutionary becomes apparent in her conversation with an official from the Red Cross:

"What were you doing in the mountains?"

"I was fighting!"

"Why were you fighting?"

"For what I believe in, for my ideals!"

"And now, seeing you're a prisoner?"

"I'm a prisoner, so what!"

"What have you gained?"

"I've gained the respect for my compatriots and my own self respect!"

"Did you arrest me for stealing or for murder? I never stole!"

"My conscience is clear!"(pp. 138, 140)

“*Voice*” is based on the oral testimonies of female revolutionaries that the author collected; deeply committed to the country’s liberation, Djébar expresses her respect for other female fighters. The episode clearly demonstrates the strong bonds of solidarity that existed among Algerian women. Djébar translates the recorded Arabic conversation into French in order to preserve the oral speech in the written form. Recording in writing is an attempt by the author to recreate Algeria’s history based on women’s testimonies that no colonizer can fully describe in his official report or documentation. Nonetheless, Djébar’s attempt to gather and restore the collective “voices” and memories of other women is a challenge as the author describes the loss of her Arabic tradition: “My oral tradition has gradually been overlaid and is in danger of vanishing: at the age of eleven or twelve I was abruptly ejected from this theater of feminine confidences” (p. 156). Uncertain about her ability to represent the Algerian female voice and to speak for the collective whole, Djébar faces a dilemma, which is her own “aphasia.” She asks herself, “...can I, twenty years later, claim to revive these stifled voices? And speak for them? Shall I not at best find dried up streams? [...] I see the reflection of my own barrenness, my own aphasia.” (p. 202). Here the split between her autobiographical self and the collective whole is apparent. Although Djébar evidently seeks an ideal reunion with the Arabic female community, such unity seems impossible since the author realizes that she can never return to her childhood, her nostalgic past (p.156). She avers: “To attempt an autobiography using French words alone is to lend oneself to the vivisector’s scalpel ... [...] the flesh flakes off [...]the last shreds of the unwritten language of my childhood.” (ibid.). She is, in fact, ultimately “ejected” from the collective whole.

A reading of the *Fantasia* reveals that the central focus of the novel is not so much the restitution of “many vanished sisters” as much as the reconstruction of the narrative subject of “I.” It is the “I” who “imagines” the “unknown woman,” who “recreates” the “invisible woman,” and who “resurrects” her ancestors’ experience during the Algerian War (p. 189). From this perspective, what Djébar calls “stifled voices” of Algerian women are disguised and transformed into strategies from which the author’s autobiographical subject emerges. Djébar explains that she is able to produce her own discourse through these voices:

“Before I catch the sound of my own voice I can hear the death-rattles, the moans of those immured in the Dahra Mountains and the prisoners on the Island of Saint Marguerite; they provide my orchestral accompaniment. They summon me, encouraging my faltering steps, so that at the given signal my solitary song takes off” (p. 217).

The women's voices, according to this symbolic orchestra emanates as "the moans of those immured in the Dahra Mountains [...]". The role of the collective voices is to disclose her own self and to satisfy her desire for self-representation, which "...acts like a perfume, a draft of fresh water for the dry throat" (p. 180). Here, Djébar's historical narrative, therefore, draws heavily on her autobiographical "self" rather than the collective "other." At this point, the Algerian women's voices seem impossible to represent themselves within Djébar's discourse because the author functions as a *translator* whose task is to reproduce the other voices in the colonizer's language instead of enabling those voices to emerge through their own agency. Djébar tells her "vanished sisters" that "[...] twenty years later I report the scene to you, you widows, so that you can see it in your turn, so that you in turn can keep silent. And the old women sit motionless, listening to the unknown village girl giving herself" (p. 211). In this scene, their voices remain silenced after years, their body immobilized, and their storytelling muted, although a persistent chord in the author's narration.

### **CHILDHOOD RECOLLECTIONS**

While going through Assia Djébar's *Fantasia* one finds that it is an unveiling and a revelation of different moments of her life's story, of her family's journey, of social and political conditions and the narrative is deeply marked by her country's colonial history which has been reproduced, felt and experienced in a fictional and feminine world. Cioux relates writing of personal disclosure in *écriture féminine* to the inexhaustible<sup>2</sup> imagination of women and their ability of describing their world which secretly haunts them since their infancy (p. 38). In *Fantasia*, Djébar writes constantly of her youth, marked by the presence of her family, she often speaks respectfully of her father, cries in memory of her paternal grandmother and resuscitates the voices of her ancestors to whom she pays homage:

"...writing has brought me to the cries of the women silently rebelling in my youth, to my own true origins. Writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters." (p. 204)

Djébar transgresses the barriers which are obstacles to Algerian women and to which she belongs, she puts these women in different historical and socio-cultural contexts at the same time being inspired by her own childhood experiences. She recollects important events of her

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<sup>2</sup>« L'imaginaire des femmes est inépuisable, comme la musique [...]. J'ai plus d'une fois été émerveillée par ce qu'une femme me décrivait d'un monde sien qu'elle hantait secrètement depuis sa petite enfance. » (Cixous:2010, p.38).

childhood which mark the patriarchal system of her country and confronts it with her own personal experiences that destabilize the old system, thus constructing new strategies of resistance to counter a phallogocentric culture. By reminiscing her childhood (Djebar, 1993:03), she recollects the liberties and privileges accorded by her father, an Arab school teacher who teaches French and who allows her to attend a French school. A practice unprecedented in the lives of the Algerians under colonial rule; this gets etched remarkably in:

“A little Arab girl going to school for the first time, one autumn morning, walking hand in hand with her father. [...] Towns or villages of narrow white alleyways and windowless houses. From the very first day that the little girl leaves her home to learn the ABC, the neighbours adopt that knowing look of those who in ten or fifteen years’ time will be able to say ‘I told you so!’ while commiserating with the foolhardy father, the irresponsible brother.” (p. 3)

Recollections and writing the past is marked in *Fantasia*. There are two specific moments in Algerian history that are disturbing: the French conquest of 1830 and the Algerian Revolution which took place between 1954 and 1962, which marks the end of 132 years of French rule in the country. When the French troops invaded “the Impregnable City,” the city remained calm and serene and “no sound accompanies this transformation” (p. 6-7). The noiseless and silent scene of the city also implicates the presence of silent spectators: “Thousands of watchful eyes are doubtless estimating the number of vessels”. It is this presence of the silent spectators that reveal the impossibility of a historical narration solely from the colonized perspective. This perspective is depicted in the novel after Assia illustrates people’s reaction to this invasion and she wonders: “Who will pass on the number [of vessels]? Who will write of it? Which of all these silent spectators will live to tell the tale when the encounter is over?” (p. 7).

### **POLITICS OF LANGUAGE**

Djebar states that Amable Matterer, the French officer of the French frigate *Ville de Marseille*, is apparently unable to recount the siege (p.7), as she feels he writes of the “confrontation, dispassionately, objectively”. It is at this point Assia declares her intention to write the history of her own people, which is in fact, a response to the scene of complete silence: “I, in my turn, write, using his language, but more than one hundred and fifty years later” (p. 7). French, or as one would say the “enemy’s language” then becomes an invaluable tool for Djebar for producing an autobiography and recording the colonial history of Algeria reminding one of the famous

Prospero-Caliban relationship in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. For Djébar the choice of language is important so much so as it is central to nationalist discourse:

“... no-man's-land still exists between the French and the indigenous languages, between two national memories: the French tongue, with its body and voice, has established a proud *presidio* within me, while the mother tongue, all oral tradition, all rags and tatters, resists and attacks between two breathing spaces. [...] I am alternately the besieged foreigner and the native swaggering off to die, so there is endless strife between the spoken and written word.” (p. 215)

The significance of her mission lies in translating Arabic, her “mother tongue,” which has been “neglected and left to fairground barkers and jailers” (p. 214), into French, her “stepmother tongue,” which she says “has established a proud *presidio*” within herself (pp. 214-215). Consequently, it is through this act of translation that Djébar appropriates, or “steals” as she prefers to describe it (p. 216), the power which is inherent in the French language. As a result, by combining her own story with the official history provided by the French colonial regime (gathered from military reports, chronicles, personal letters, etc.), Djébar successfully deconstructs the colonizer's vision of history. However, at the core of Djébar's story is the history of the resistance movement against French colonization as well as against the patriarchal Algerian society.

*Fantasia* narrates the history of the 1845 insurrection and the subsequent fumigation and death by asphyxiation of hundreds of people of the Ouled Riah tribe in the Dhara caves where they were hiding. Djébar thus uses the colonizer's language to retell and rewrite Algerian history. In depicting the tragedy that occurred in the Dahra Mountains, she juxtaposes Colonel Pélissier's military accounts (official chronicle) with her own narrative taken from two witnesses (unofficial story). According to her, Pélissier is unable to recount the history of this “incongruous *Fantasia*”(p. 74) because he bases his story on authorized documents. Djébar, on the other hand, uses the Colonel's information to write a different historical narrative based on personal testimonies: “I accept this palimpsest [written by Pélissier] on which I now inscribe the charred passion of my ancestors” (p.79). Rather than submitting to the authority of the dominant language, Djébar inverts the power relationship between French and Arabic thus providing an alternate account of Algeria's history based on the perspective of the colonized. After smoking out hundreds of Algerians from their hideout, killing almost all of them, Pélissier writes a report so realistic that it caused chaos in Paris. As Pélissier had a talent for writing and it is this very act

of Pélissier's realistic and poetic writing that allows Djébar to "weave a pattern of French words around them" (p.78), around the events to appropriate Algerian history for herself, for the women who fought and for the Algerians.<sup>3</sup>

Cixous states that: "In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history. As a militant, she is an integral part of all liberations." (Cohen, p. 882). Consequently Djébar feels that the French language that her father so "lovingly bestowed" (p. 217) on her has drawn her closer to creating a female narrative, at the same time pushing her away from a feminine history of orality, and also giving her visibility and a voice which can be heard by everyone:

"This language was formerly used to entomb my people; [...] By laying myself bare in this language I start a fire which may consume me. For attempting an autobiography in the former enemy's language..." (p.215)

In *Fanstasia*, Djébar recollects her childhood days and in her narrative her father is evoked several times. She shares her ideas and emotions of the liberty that was allowed her through a French education by an indulgent father and this serves as a model for those women, prisoners of patriarchy and colonial practices. Her writings reveal this close relationship and the difference that the education he gave her made to her life.

"Thus, my father, the schoolteacher, for whom a French education provided a means of escape from his family's poverty, had 'given' me before I was nubile – did not certain fathers abandon their daughters to an unknown suitor, or, as in my case, deliver them into the enemy camp? The failure to realize the implications of this traditional behavior took on me a different significance: when I was ten or eleven, it was understood among my female cousins that I was privileged to be my father's 'favourite' since he had unhesitatingly preserved me from cloistering." (pp. 213-214)

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<sup>3</sup> "Women, Children, Oxen Dying in Caves", *Fantasia*, pp. 64-79.

## **LIBERATING THE BODY**

For Djébar, it is the entry into this domain of *écriture féminine* that allowed her the freedom to enter forbidden spaces and give her mobility and visibility, in fact, to the freedom promised through writing. Moreover, because of her mastery of the French language she could free herself from the traditional Arab-Muslim traditional roles meant for women and inveigle into spaces which were uniquely reserved for men, she says :

“Just as the pentathlon runner of old needed the started, so, as soon as I learned the foreign script, my body began to move as if by instinct.” (p.181)

Recourse to women’s writing and to the female body allows women to escape from closed spaces, from colonial marginalization and exclusion of the woman towards free and open spaces, to the mobility of the body and of the spirit. It is then at this stage that the second stage of writing that Cixous talks about plays a part i.e. “à l’encre blanche” which is an act which marks the taking over of speech by women, hence her sudden and sensational entry into history:

“An act that will also be marked by woman’s *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based *on her suppression*. To write and thus forge for herself the antilogos weapon. To become *at will* the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process. It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language. [...] it is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she *inscribes* what she’s saying [...]” (In Cohen: 880-881)

Thus the liberation of the female body is important for Djébar, because it is the tangible expression of feminine discourse. For her, it is then a question to warn against the censorship of the body and above all to encourage this new mode of writing of the female body in order to realize her thoughts and exercise her speech:

“So wrap the nubile girl in veils. Make her invisible. Make her more unseeing than the sightless, destroy in her every memory of the world without. And what if she has learned to write? The jailer who guards a body that has no words - and written words can travel - may sleep in peace: it will suffice to brick up the windows, padlock the sole entrance door, and erect a blank wall rising up to heaven.” (p. 3)

In the Arab-Muslim world a woman is forbidden all forms of speech and imagery, thus, her appearance is always associated with the veil. Islam forbids uncovering of most parts of the female body except for the face. For Djébar this oppression by patriarchy and French laws mortify the female body. She says that this censorship of the body makes the body invisible and reduces it to the appearance of a ghost “*un phantom*”. This invisibility according to Djébar further censors the voice and devalues the presence of women.

In his preface to *Le Rire de la Méduse* (2010:14), Frédéric Regard says that writing is based on opposition and exclusion due to a political system which is based on these very factors and that opposition and exclusion are carried out in the name of sex, race, religion, geographic origin, social class, or again suitability even beauty. To free and liberate the speech of women from this system founded on sexual segregation, Djébar gives examples that are autobiographical while evoking her own life experiences of refusing to wear the veil:

“The shock of the first words blurted out: the truth emerging from a break in my stammering voice. From what nocturnal reef of pleasure did I manage to wrest the truth? I blew the space within me to pieces, a space filled with desperate voiceless cries, frozen long ago in a prehistory of love. Once I had discovered the meaning of the words – those same words that we are revealed to the unveiled body – I cut myself adrift.” (pp. 4-5)

This experience relative to her unveiling the body constitutes a break with traditional Algerian norms which impose wearing the restrictive veil from a very young age. The process of freeing oneself from this restriction appears violent as Djébar transgresses the principles of traditional education. In this way the writer insists on mobility of the body and its expressions which are essential for liberating the spirit of women. For Djébar, the space created by *l'écriture féminine* must incorporate and invest in the corporality of women which expresses itself in the same way as speech. Cixous states that a woman without body is a deaf person, a blind person who cannot be a good fighter. (2010:46).

For the writer, revealing the body gives a certain presence to women in history and makes voices and memories buried in ancient women fighters spring up in Algeria's war of independence. It is in this way that she registers the revolt of these women from her community against the silence imposed by Algerian men and submission to colonial laws.

According to Cixous, women's writing on corporality expresses the very nature of female discourse which is neither simple, linear nor was it generalized and objective; woman brings into history her story (Cixous, 2010:47). In fact Djébar uses these same nuances of female discourse in her narrative, thus inscribing women's collective memory in colonial history. Her discourse intermingles with the history of her people, most certainly of women with her experiences as a young adolescent. Her writing is marked by personal experiences, writing the lives of Algerian women who led an exemplary battle against rules that were imposed by Muslim society and colonial rule. Explicating this, Djébar says that at the age of seventeen years she entered into the history of love because of a letter that an unknown person had written to her. An enraged father tore the letter and in the years that follow she was engulfed in the story of love or rather as she says "in the prohibition laid on love", she says that this secret correspondence written in French, was a language bestowed by her father to her and which became an intermediary and initiated her into writing. Ever since that time French became a double symbol for her, a contradiction, as she shattered the space inside her:

"At seventeen I am introduced to my first experience of love through a letter written by a boy, a stranger. [...] My father, in a fit of silent fury, tears up the letter [...]. During the months and years of that followed, I became absorbed by this business of love, or rather by the prohibition laid on love; [...], our secret correspondence is carried out in French: thus the language that my father had been at pains for me to learn, serves as a go-between, and from now a double contradictory sign [...] I blew the space within me to pieces, a space filled with desperate voiceless cries, [...]" (pp. 3-4)

Djébar makes several references to the movement of the female body during the crucial periods of the Algerian war. The female body is always in movement and its transformations are an integral part of the experience and the evolution of women. The author traces the journey of the Algerian woman and their experiences in the story. From Algeria's colonization by the French in 1830 upto its independence in 1962 she traces the constant changes and transformations in its corporality. In this fashion Djébar engages in writing history while combining and uniting the

history of Algeria with fiction. This fictional rewriting of the story of her country is done through different corporal manifestations of the woman which is reflected in the narrative. In this way she opposes gender laws and leads the reader to a new perception of women in conditions which allow them to reverse the inequitable system and the story of masculine discourse. Thereby, creating a new destiny for women through *l'écriture féminine*.

### **‘HER’STORY**

According to Cixous, we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather of one that becomes several histories which criss-cross one from the other. (2010:49). With this perspective, Djébar unveils another important point of view - that of creating and elaborating a new relationship which acts as a unifier of the feminine world. The novelist imagines the rapport between women in her feminine creation of the story of her country. The historical rewriting of women's stories have been done innovatively by linking multiple forces – the history of the country in its absolute past and its recent past linked with women's stories. Djébar awakens this past where she portrays women's bodies crushed under jewels as under its heavy past, like the writings of forgotten witnesses : "... the bodies of the women, crushed beneath the weight of their jewels; cities weighed down by the burden of their past; and so too the epigraphs left by long-forgotten witnesses." (p. 100).

Her work contains narrations from many different women: the garrulous person in her locality, Pauline Roland (a forty year old school teacher fighting for her faith and ideals), the words of the humble shepherd from the mountains, voices of Cherifa, Lila Zohra who wanders in the fires of the countryside, the chorus of widows who are anonymous now, their cries and the triumphant ululations of the women, all interwoven together and given a voice in Djébar's rewritten history.

The narrator addresses women, shares their stories and recounts their struggles in the rewriting of the history of their Algerian ancestors, which she recreates according to her historiographic consciousness: "Later, I seize on this living hand, hand of mutilation and of memory, and I attempt to bring it to the *qalam*."(p. 226). Thus, her work records the struggles and the journey of women in the colonial past as it addresses today's women for whom the desire to change the feminine condition is relentlessly claimed in the book:

“imagine you, the unknown woman, whose tale has been handed down by story-tellers over the ten decades which lead to my childhood years. For now I too take my place in the fixed circle of listeners, near the Menacer Mountains ... I re-create you, the invisible woman, sailing with the others [...], O ancestress of ancestress! The first expatriate [...] I

resurrect you during the crossing that no letter from any French soldier was to describe ..." (p. 189).

Then, there is this symbolic relation between women "Femme pour femme" (woman for woman) that Cixous speaks of, because it is in women that there is the child bearing force, that force which is shared with other women (Cixous, 2010:48). The force which enables woman to become more than one person, transforming into many persons at the same time - mother and child, daughter and sister and she says that it is in this that there is the magic of women's writing which is like a bridge of passage, particle accelerator and the maelstrom of identities.<sup>4</sup>

This force in the unity and preservation of women produces the *other* which is also seen in feminine subjectivity and which is seen in the singular "I/Je" of the novelist. This translates Djebbar's desire to pass the stories on to other women and to share their life stories because everything changes when women pass on the notion of a woman to other women. (Cixous, 2010:48).

## CONCLUSION

In sum, Djebbar's writing can be easily remodeled to women's writing that Hélène Cixous has conceived in her article *The Laugh of the Medusa*; it is the postulation of a writing which is produced by women. It is in the new feminine style that Djebbar 'writes herself' (*s'écrit*) and gives women the possibility of knowing what they are, share their experiences, and invite them to recognize themselves by their writings. The writing or "*à l'encre blanche*" as she calls it is not only the act of writing the self that goes from and towards woman but also enables a woman to perform the Jungian Individuation, to possess an integrated 'Self'. By doing this, that is returning the 'gaze' women force the male world to first view a woman as a human and a woman next.

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<sup>4</sup>«...devenir plus d'une, en l'occurrence à la fois sa mère et son enfant, sa fille et sa sœur, voila ce qu'opère la magie de l'écriture féminine, pont de passage, accélérateur de particules, maelstrom d'identités» (Regard dans Le Rire de la Méduse, 2010 :17).

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