

**THE REACTION TO ALGERIAN WOMEN FREEDOM FIGHTERS' SILENCED  
ORDEALS IN ASSIA DJEBAR'S WORKS**

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**ABSTRACT:**

**The present paper deals with**

When the Algerian war broke out, women decided to cross the rigid boundaries of male space and participate actively in the fight for their country's freedom. Although constituting a tiny minority, they could prove their courage and patriotism. They quickly received attention as heroines of the Revolution who challenged stereotypes of Muslim women as passive creatures confined under the severe thumb of patriarchy. However, after the war, their history was almost erased from collective memory. Assia Djébar felt the need to uncover the truth about these women's contribution to the war and the different hardships they endured.

**KeyWords:** Algerian , Muslim, Patriarchy , Rape, Silence, Torture, War.

During French colonialism of Algeria, the Algerian woman became subject to competing claims from the two masculine cultural systems prevailing in the country which were the traditional Algerian society, and the European colonial one. These two systems fought each other for the control of the Algerian woman who became a territory to conquer and possess much like the land of the country. The colonial powers, for instance, believed that controlling the behaviour of the Algerian women was an important component of successful rule as the main goal of their policy

was to indoctrinate these women with the cultural values of the French colonizers and promote their loyalty to France. In response, Algerian nationalists countered this policy by promoting the image of women as the teachers and guardians of the nation's identity whose main role was to raise a new generation of patriotic Algerians, and inculcate to them Algerian culture in order to be able to oppose French colonialism. Accordingly, the Algerian nationalist discourse ascribed to women the role of chaste patriotic icons. They confined their bodies, restricting their physical presence in public space, and obliging them to keep silent.<sup>1</sup> In order to make sense of the new order imposed by colonialism, men sought refuge in an 'authentic' cultural system and an Islamic heritage that positioned women as guardians of male honour. As a result, women's identities became fixed by the attribution given by the 'other', the fathers, husbands and brothers who embody the sexist conventions of society. The patriarchal hold manifested itself not only in the legal apparatus and social organization, but also in the daily behaviour of men with women. Thus, in the eyes of customs and tradition, domesticity and housework became a natural state for women and the purpose of their existence.

On the other hand, Western hegemony had always equated the presence of the colonizing powers on the colonized territories with the masculine principle while the dominated group had been equated with femininity. The dominating group had conquered and 'raped' the land of the colonized while the latter had been defeated and subjected to the colonial act, losing in the process voice and identity. "Masculinity is equated with strength and rationality and assigned ideologically to the French, in opposition to the feminine, emotional, weak, and ultimately inferior and subordinate residents of Algeria. Ideologies of gender reinforce those of race and nation to authorize and legitimate the imposition of French (masculine, superior, civilized) rule." (Steadman, 180) Accordingly, the people, the land, and the culture thus conquered through the use of European male violence became, in symbolic terms, 'feminized'. All these conditions did not prevent women from joining their male counterparts on the battlefield. Indeed, when the Algerian war of independence broke out, women decided to cross the rigid boundaries of male space and change from passive victims of traditions and patriarchy to active participants for their country's freedom. Thus, eleven thousand of them joined the battlefield, among which two thousand joined the armed organization FLN. But they were not easily accepted. Their participation was actively discouraged and their presence was tolerated only in so far as they were confined to 'feminine' tasks. As a result, women were assigned to work as nurses, cooks, fundraisers and couriers.

Although constituting a tiny minority, the women-fighters could prove their courage and patriotism. The ones who transmitted weapons and bombs in the urban networks or served as nurses in the 'maquis' had received enormous attention in FLN propaganda and international media as heroines of the Revolution who challenged stereotypes of Muslim women as passive creatures confined under the severe thumb of patriarchy. Algerian women, it would seem, had through their heroic acts won their right to full post-independence equality.

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<sup>1</sup>. Miriam Cooke in *Women and the War Story* states that "The Algerians were well aware of the ways in which the French were trying to infiltrate their homes, trying to tear apart the fabric of their culture. Women disappeared from spaces where the French might appear." University of California Press, 1997, p.120.

Indeed, as Algeria moved towards independence in 1962, many commentators on the national and international scale were optimistic that the new Republic would liberate Algerian women simultaneously from ignorance and the crushing weight of patriarchal domination. Frantz Fanon, for example, in *L'An V de la révolution algérienne*, optimistically forecast the birth of a “new society” and a “radical mutation” in the role of women, gender relations, and traditional family structures. Algerian post-independence nationalists and feminists tended to believe that the newly independent Algerian state, after a long war of decolonization in which women played a major role, would sweep away all the old forms of domination and oppression that had affected women. However, this was not to be. As Jane Huddleston states so well:

These courageous individuals [women fighters] have subsequently been forgotten at once by politics, by social organization and by collective memory. Although Fanon predicted in ‘L’Algérie se dévoile’ that women’s active contribution to the war effort would lead to their increased and long-awaited emancipation in Algerian society, successive governments since independence have limited rather than promoted the liberation of women. Social expectations regarding women’s roles in the home and their rights in relation to their husbands have become more rather than less restrictive. Ironically, though they helped to free their country from occupation and oppression, the activity and agency of the female combatants was quickly seen as a threat to Islamic values and as a collusion with what was seen as Western individualism. As a result, after the war women were forced back into traditional roles, their achievements were forgotten, and they became again invisible. (Hiddleston,35)

In her book, *La guerre d’Algerie ( 1954-1962): Femmes au combat*, Amrane- Minne tried to depict the life of Algerian woman’s life before the revolution, and what barriers she had to overcome in order to recover her “muted” voice, and how she is coping today under the most strenuous circumstances. She expresses her deception at the quasi inexistence of any kind of reference to the contribution of Algerian women to the war of liberation of the country. (Amrane-Minne,13)

Thus, Assia Djébar felt the urgent need to uncover the truth about women’s contribution to the war of independence and the different kinds of hardships they endured at the hands of the colonizer. She also wanted to refute the representations of the Algerian women either as the symbols of the mother country or as the exotic objects of the colonialist’s sexual desire. In order to reconstruct their revolutionary history, Djébar “ [...] appropriates matriarchal ways of seeing and speaking in Algeria that legitimize Algerian women’s oral tradition and position Algerian women as transmitters of Algerian history.” (Weber-Feve,2)By reconstructing their revolutionary history, she has aimed at revising continuing colonial/patriarchal stereotypes of Algerian women as mute and passive victims. From *Les Enfants du nouveau monde/Children of the New world* (1962) to *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père/Nowhere in my Father’s House* (2007) , passing by *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement/women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1980) , *L’Amour la fantasia /Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* (1985),and *La Femme sans sepulture/The Woman Without a Grave* (2002) Assia Djébar tried to reinsert women into the pages of history by probing Algerian

women's collective memory. In addition to the diaries and accounts of French soldiers and officials, Assia Djebar depended on her own memories of the war and the stories of her aunts and female cousins to restore women's lost history.

Suddenly these pages begin to emit a strange power. They start to act like a mediator: I tell myself that this cluster of strangled cries is addressed – why not? - to all the other women whom no word has ever reached. Those of past generations who bequeathed me the places of their confinement, those women who never received a letter: no word taut with desire, stretched like a bow, no message run through with supplication. Their only path to freedom was by intoning their obsessional chants.

The letter that I put away became a first for me: the first expression of what those anonymous women who preceded me were waiting for me and of which I was the unwitting bearer.<sup>2</sup>

Assia Djebar went, in the depiction of the lost history of colonized Algeria, as far as the battle of Staouéli on 19 June 1830 in order to document women's courageous defence of their country against foreign invasion. From her readings about the Frenchmen's account of the battle, she learnt about two Algerian women who challenged French power, and who died a heroic death. She then writes about them to pay tribute to their courage and sacrifice.

Arab tribes are always accompanied by great numbers of women who had shown the greatest zeal in mutilating their victims. One of these women lay dead beside the corpse of a French soldier whose heart she had torn out! Another had been fleeing with a child in her arm when a shot wounded her; she seized a stone and crushed the infant's head, to prevent it falling alive into our hand; the soldiers finished her off with their bayonets.' (Fantasia, 18)

In fact, Assia Djebar did not limited herself to the depiction of women in their fighting, but went beyond that to show how these 'passive and mute' women challenged French authority and faced torture and imprisonment without fear.

Salima, in *Les Enfants du nouveau monde/ Children of the New World*, implements the same deeds as the ones expected from men. She does not hesitate to enter the dangerous arena of politics and to see herself as the representative of her people. "She'd always been gripped by the conceit of believing herself to be the delegate of her people to another world."<sup>3</sup> (*Children*, 64) More than that,

<sup>2</sup> Assia Djebar, *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*. Trans, Dorothy S. Blair. London: Quartet, 1985, pp. 59-60. All future references to the novel will be taken from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Djebar, Assia. *Les enfants du nouveau monde* (1962) Trans, Marjolijn de Jager. *Children of the New World: A Novel of the Algerian War*. New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2005. All future references to the novel will be taken from this edition.

Salima considers that her strong will and her pride have not been inherited from the men around her, even though she imitates them in their deeds, but rather “from all the silenced women she used to know.” (*Children*, 64) When she is caught by the French police because of her political activities, Salima suffers, like her male counterparts, from mistreatment, and ‘harsh’ questioning methods during her imprisonment.

[Salima] doesn’t know what time or day it is. This morning they let her rest, at last. They even brought her a bed. It’s been so long since she’s been able to lie down. A bed! What a miracle after constantly sitting on a chair or standing up for the ten days of interrogation, or eleven, or twenty; she doesn’t know anymore. On the cot, she stretches out her body, her back; the pain in her lower back won’t stop. Not to move anymore, never to move! She would so much like to sleep, but she can’t. She’s cold. (*Children*, 56)

Through the character of Salima, Assia Djébar defines Algerian women prisoners as strong subjects able to stoically withstand mental and physical torture as they suffer in silence in their persistence to protect their loved ones on the outside. Although physical and mental punishment is intended to break the spirit of the prisoners and bring them into submission, it serves only to strengthen their spirit as well as their belief in the national cause.

In *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement/ Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, the same violent scenes against women freedom fighters are depicted. From the opening scene of the collection of short stories, we become aware of the brutality and harshness of the French soldiers when ‘questioning’ women prisoners. All kinds of methods and techniques are legitimized to make these women ‘confess’. In fact, even children are tortured in the same harsh way. Cherifa in *L’Amour la fantasia/Fantasia* is less than fourteen years old when she is imprisoned and tortured. Her young age has not protected her from the brutality of the French when she is captured .

One of the officers lost his temper and hit me twice across the face. Then they brought a toy-gun.

‘Confess! Tell us what we want to know or we’ll shout!’

[...]they brought a whip. They beat me. They switched on the electricity for their machines. They tortured me. (*Fantasia* , 135)

In his insightful article, “Madness and Colonization: Psychiatry in The British and French Empires, 1800-1962”, Richard Keller states that French psychiatrists provided scientific justifications for the implementation of violence against the native Algerians. According to him, psychiatrists like Antoine Porot and Don Come Arrii stated that the French presence in Algeria required stronger policing than anywhere else in the world since the Algerians showed strong psychological predispositions towards violence. They stated that “it is above all through...sanctions that we teach these thwarted and overly instinctive beings that human life must be respected...a thankless but

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necessary task in the general work of civilization.” (Keller, 298) These supposed scientific assumptions legitimized the use of violence against the Algerian people without distinction of gender or age. They justified its use as the ultimate solution to the protection of the colony. In the same way as men, women prisoners were tortured as part of the French effort to terrorize and subdue the indigenous population.

Thus, by depicting torture and violence perpetrated by the French officers against Algerian women, Assia Djébar calls into question the French colonizers’ claim for civilization and enlightenment. The French colonizers who were celebrated for their bravery in previous historical accounts are shown, in the writer’s works, to be cruel executioners. Their mission is not, as their reports state, peaceful and selfless. Rather, the intentions that these colonizers show are malicious and their methods brutal. Assia Djébar’s portrayal of the Europeans’ ways and intentions has helped chip away at their superiority, and has given more voice for the colonized Algerians to talk back.

Her [Assia Djébar] historical accounts, while based on the evidence, are nevertheless not unprejudiced. The French soldiers and commanders, who had been lauded in their home country, become the villains in Djébar’s version of events, ambassadors of civilization recast as heartless murderers. The former enemy to the French, once represented as a faceless mass of people that should be controlled, now has a presence, their deaths pitied and their resistance celebrated. (Wardle, 251-52)

Through her descriptions of French violence and Algerian resistance to it, Assia Djébar has disrupted colonial notions of Algerian passivity. She has also disrupted the notion of the Algerian woman as a ‘weak and passive’ being, unable to act or speak without the consent or approbation of the males around her.

On the other hand, despite the efforts made to speak about the contribution of Algerian women to the war, very little, if any information is given about the European soldiers’ rape of these women. In fact, the history of war rape has almost been erased from collective memory. This has as much to do with the silence of rape victims as with conservative attitudes in Algerian society and male dominance in historiography. Indeed, in the first years after independence, the revised history of the colonized nation became a male-centered history in which women became passive objects again. Despite their contribution to the independence of their country, women were silenced another time and forced to return to the private space that had always been reserved for them. Those who suffered any kind of physical or psychological violence were ignored and their history erased. The new gate keepers of Algerian revolutionary history started “silencing those whose stories fall outside the boundaries of convention.” (Kali, 14) While the acceptance of their narratives would have allowed the reintegration of these women who suffered from the trauma of torture and rape as war heroines, their experiences of sexual assault were kept deeply concealed.

Despite their erasure from the male written history of the war of independence, female oral testimonies frequently refer to torture and rape of Algerian women as a common practice



during the arrival of the Senegalese paratroopers to Algeria, or during the attacks of villages by army soldiers. In fact torture and rape took place even in jail where women were kept prisoners. Such practices were clearly intended not only to intimidate and humiliate the victims and their menfolk, but also to destroy the community's cohesion. Indeed, verbal sexual assaults of Algerian women during the war of independence became deliberate, hostile, and violent acts of degradation and possession on the part of the French army in order to intimidate and inspire fear. Assia Djebar has felt it important to consider the silence of historians about war sexual assaults in the context of the local culture and the existing gender relations. In her 1989 New York Times Magazine article, "Speaking of the Unspeakable," Alice Sebold states that, "Women disassociate themselves from rape because the vast majority of people still believe that a woman who has been raped is filthy, better off dead, irrational, or got what she was looking for." (Sebold, 1989) The Algerian women combatants who were victims of sexual assaults/ rape felt as the fallen heroines of the revolution. The general and consented silence around their suffering as rape victims made them feel as the new outcasts of society and prevented their psychological healing.

Apart from torture and rape, other forms of sexual or physical assault are documented. Many women were stripped naked and then beaten or received verbal sexual assaults. Such acts were considered to be equally grave offenses against the victim's family honour since all these forms of violence on women were considered as transgressions of the social code of honour.<sup>4</sup> According to Amrane-Minne, women suffered from different kinds of abuse in detention camps or prisons. (Amrane-Minne, 190) Another reference to the suffering of Algerian female prisoners during the war was made by Aaronette M. White. In her article, she describes some of the techniques used by the colonizers to intimidate and subjugate their female prisoners.

.. specific techniques target women's sexuality. Male interrogators rely on deep - rooted cultural concepts of shame and honor to break women combatants. Thus, most women are raped when taken as prisoners [...] To sleep deprivation, physical beatings, and electric shocks to genitals, male guards have engaged in humiliating body searches and vaginal examinations, [...] most women combatants are ashamed to speak about these incidents, so first-person accounts are few, often kept brief, and confidential. (White, 17-18)

Philippa Levine, on the other hand, states that "Colonial authorities employed sexual violence and torture on women prisoners. Violent genital penetration, genital electric shocks, rape or the threat of rape were all common techniques used against women militants, despite the fact that rape remained technically a crime when committed by soldiers." (Levine, 9) Through her literary works, Assia

<sup>4</sup> When reporting the torture to which Djamila Boupacha, one of the heroines of the Algerian revolution, has been subjected, de Beauvoir and Halimi describe the same method used by the French when torturing Lakhdar in *Nedjma*: "Djamila did her best, but the position was a difficult one to describe to the court]. They had trussed up her wrists and ankles, tied her knees and elbows close together, and thrust a large stick through the space between them, horizontally. It was rather like the way a hunter hangs his game. Then two torturers each took one end of the stick and carried Djamila, still suspended from it, over to the bath. The bath was full of water. When the stick was set down across it, Djamila at once sank below the surface. Simone De Beauvoir and Gisele Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha : the Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl which Shocked Liberal French Opinion*. New York: McMillan & Co., 1968, p.149.

Djebar has attempted to rewrite history and give voice to these muted women who were silenced both by conventions and by patriarchy. “She engages throughout all of her work in the non-dire—that which societies or cultures deem taboo or unspeakable” (Weber-Feve,2) She has tried to break the walls of silence of Algerian women fighters and denounce all the atrocities they endured during the war and after. The aim of the Algerian writer has been to give voice to the “muted” women who gave so much to their country. She has tried to break the barrier of silence, which has kept these women victims in isolation from the social community where they belong and can be heard.

As a witness and participant at the Algerian war of independence, Assia Djebar, in fact, has opened, through her literary works, the avenue for communication, giving voice to the unspoken stories of many women. This proves the redeeming power of narrative, and how words can lead to liberation. She has translated and voiced the plight of the Algerian women who were taught to remain silent whatever befell them. However, and despite the fact that Assia Djebar has always believed in the power of storytelling in breaking down barriers; she has shown in her narratives how difficult is the fact of tackling the issues of torture and rape with the female war victims. In *Fantasia*, she describes the difficulty she has in finding the courage to formulate the question.

*‘My’ question quivers persistently on my tongue. In order to put it into words I ought to prepare the outward appearance of my body: I sit cross-legged on cushions or on the are tiles, pals upward in pose of humility, my shoulders hunched to forestall weakness, y lap ready to receive the flood of emotion, legs curled up under my skirt, to prevent me running off screaming through the trees.*

*To say the private word ‘damage’, or at the lost, ‘hurt’:*

*‘sister, did you ever, at any time, suffer “damage”?’*

*One or other of the matriarchs will ask the question, to seize on the silence and build a barrier against misfortune. . . . Rape will not be mentioned, will be respected. Swallowed. Until the next alarm. (Fantasia, 202)*

The first woman who has the courage to speak about her rape experience is Chérifa. At the moment she recounts her story, Chérifa is a middle aged woman married to a widower with five children. Although she recounts her story twenty years after independence, Chérifa is still reluctant to speak about what happened to her. She seems to have buried her secret deep within her. However, the depth of her repression has led to problems with memory. She has repressed the memories to such an extent that she seems to have forgotten some parts of her experience.

In fact, the worst experiences are not told because to express them would destroy once more an identity already shattered by the experience. In her narration of her encounter with the colonizer and the dramatic consequences it had engendered, Cherifa omits two important facts: the burial of her young brother and her own rape since the two experiences took place simultaneously and were both the most painful experiences she had ever lived. The killing of her brother is linked in her mind directly with her rape by the French soldiers, that is why her mind refuses to remember any of them. Twenty years later, she still does not accept the trauma of these two experience. “When *she tells her story, twenty years later, she mentions no interment nor any other form of burial for the brother lying in the river bed.*” (*Fantasia*,124) In Trauma and Recovery, Herman states that,



“healing requires the reconstruction of memory; the unspeakable must be spoken and heard” (Herman,177) Women victims of rape are reluctant to speak about what had happened to them. When asked if they were victims of rape, they generally build a wall of silence around them. Feeling defeated and permanently scarred, they resign themselves to silence. Having been silent for more than twenty years, they find it very difficult to speak out about their hardships at war.

[Cherifa] speaks slowly. Her voice lifts the burden of memory; it now wings its way towards that summer of 1956, when she was just a girl, the summer of the devastation...do her words bring it to light? She braves the suspicious mother-in-law who prowls around us, hoping to discover what the hesitating narrative reveals: what exigency in the story, what secret, what sin, or simply what is missing... (Fantasia, 141)

Cherifa experiences conflicting emotions over her power to communicate through narrative. Her memories draw emotions to the surface she has tried to keep deeply concealed. She tries to deal with the confusion and anxiety that arise from the recall of the abuse. However, the recall process has been fitting together the pieces she can no longer keep restrained. In fact, although they strive to remain mentally and verbally strong, and start a new life for themselves, Cherifa and the female freedom fighters who went through the same experience, remain haunted by memories of the war. These memories have kept them from successfully reintegrating into society. For these rape victims, in reality, the experience of rape itself has not changed. What may have changed is the way in which they try to cope with their ordeal. Keeping silent has taken a physical toll. While holding the trauma inside, these women no longer feel present in their own bodies, and become dissociated with the body that has been violated. Although it is something very difficult to articulate, Cherifa digs deep and finds the courage to speak up about her own pain. She reaches out and speaks up. “Cherifa ageing ,in poor health, is housebound. As she sets her voice free for me , she sets herself free again; what nostalgia will cause her voice to fail presently...?” (Fantasia, 141-142). Despite the fact that these women need someone to share their stories with, and to ease the pain buried deep within them, they have decided to keep silent and conceal the story of their rapes in order to shelter their families, neighbours and community from their personal pain, to prevent their shame.

In Djebbar’s works , there are many more stories, many more voices to be heard. The writer has used the power of using the victim’s voice, through her art of writing, to try and change the written history of the revolution. She is convinced that as long as women remain silent, they will remain outside the historical process, as presented from the perspective of the males in society. Thus, she transforms the patriarchal restraints in which they are confined. When so many voices combine, it becomes possible to challenge the imposed silence that has been caused by the trauma of torture and sexual assault. Through their efforts, Algerian women whose contribution to the war of independence has been overlooked, forgotten, or simply not known, emerge as active participants in the Algerian armed struggle.

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