

Women's Education in Colonial Algeria: Emancipation, Alienation, and the Aphasia of Love in Assia Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985)

Ahlem Harrat

LLC Lab

Department of English

Faculty of Letters and Languages

Abou Bekr Belkaïd University

Tlemcen, Algeria

Senouci Meberbeche Faiza

Department of English

Faculty of Letters and Languages

Abou Bekr Belkaïd University

Tlemcen, Algeria

Abstract

This paper examines the contradictory yet complementary forces that connect women's spatial liberation to the colonial power's institutions. It explores the cacophony between women's education, emancipation, and alienation in Assia Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985). It argues that spatial mobility bears the potential to challenge patriarchy and colonial violence. Djébar's struggle to reconcile with or condemn her Western education foregrounds the ambivalent relationship the author entertains with the vehicle of her empowerment. The appropriation of the language of the other equips the schoolgirl with the instruments needed to subvert extra-Islamic traditions, and to regender the history of Algeria by voicing the stories of her matriarchs, withal, it sentences her to an aphasia of love.

Keywords: Aphasia, Emancipation, French school, Quranic school, Spatial Liberation.

Cite as: Harrat, A., & Meberbeche-Senouci, F. (2020). Women's Education in Colonial Algeria: Emancipation, Alienation, and the Aphasia of Love in Assia Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985). *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies* 4 (2) 233 -239.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol4no2.17>

Women's Education in Colonial Algeria: Emancipation, Alienation, and the Aphasia of Love in Assia Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985)

During the French colonial era, Algeria endured two wars of conquest: a territorial conquest that involved, for almost half a century, brutal military methods of subjugation, and a moral conquest, that entailed a comprehensive gallicization of the Algerian society by processes of assimilation (Rogers, 2013). Colonial schools constituted emblems of an imperial enterprise galvanized by a mission to civilize. French pedagogical institutions in colonial Algeria served a discriminatory agenda and a policy of deracination that excluded the teaching of anything that was not French. In her "Letter to Zohra Drif," Hélène Cixous describes her schooling experience at the *Lycée Fromentin* in Algiers: "... I detected the lingering odors of racism and colonialism in teachers. A cult to France reigned and was not questioned. We learned France" (2003, p. 88). Colonial administrators argued that women's education should constitute the locus of the French pedagogical mission in Algeria for they had the potential to act as cultural emissaries. (Gosnell, 2002, p. 36). The meagre efforts that were contrived in order to provide an education for Algerian girls were challenged by the *colons* and the Arabo-Berber population alike. Assia Djébar, pen name of Fatima-Zohra Imalayen, appertains to the minority of women that received an education in colonial Algeria. The central point of interest in the present contribution is the illumination of the tensions between women's simultaneous dependence upon and resistance against colonial hegemony. This paper endeavors to examine the perplexing correlation between women's education, emancipation, and alienation in Assia Djébar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985).

The Politics of Women's Education in Colonial Algeria

The establishment of girls' schools in colonial Algeria was initiated prior to the implementation of the Jules Ferry reforms, under the Third French Republic (1870-1940), that favored an educational system inclusive of the fairer flake of society. Lay and Catholic Frenchwomen migrated to the colony impelled by a belief in the righteousness of the civilizing mission rendering women the instruments and subjects of France's pedagogical venture (Rogers, 2005). Madame Eugénie Allix Luce, founder of the first school for Arab girls established in Algiers in 1845, urged the colonial administration to endorse her educational project. The schoolteacher argued that her students, the bearers of posterity, would serve as "veritable intermediaries in the fusion of the two races" (Rogers, 2013, p.65). The Luce-Benaben school operated like metropolitan schools of the period, the students received lessons in the French language in the mornings while the evenings were dedicated to the teaching of the art of embroidery. The state recognized the dangers of religious proselytism, and licensed the teaching of Quran in French schools. To ensure the success of her mission, Madame Luce appeased the families of her students. She designed a school program that respected religious holidays, and social customs. Though Luce's Arab-French school struggled to survive in the midst of tides of criticism, it served as a model for four girls' schools, and five boys' schools created, in three cities, by a governmental decree in 1850 (Rogers, 2013, p. 83).

Prior to colonization, there existed in the Algerian nation approximately two thousand schools, and numerous universities in the city of Algiers, Constantine, Mazouna, Tlemcen, and Oran. Education was conducted in Quranic schools or *Zaouïas* at the expense of mosques, the

material taught in these schools was no different from those dispensed in other parts of the Arab world, children recited the *Quran*, studied its teachings, and learned the Arabic language (Ferhat, 2005, p. 56-57). By virtue of being theocentric, religion was an integral part of education and since women were subjected to confinement they were excluded from schools on account of the social role attributed to them as future wives and mothers. In her essay "Women in Islam: their Roles in Religious and Traditional Culture" (1972), Saleh attributes the inferior status of women in Islamic societies to extra-Islamic traditions. She contends that women's seclusion is imbedded in a conceptual cultural context not an Islamic one. Islam is the religion of equity and equality, it grants women and men complementary equal roles, and dictates that women and men have equal mental capacities. Accordingly, women were pushed to the *harem* to serve patriarchal notions that are not Islamic in nature.

Diane Sambron (2013) maintains that the percentage of Algerian children that were granted access to the French colonial educational system was very low, girls' education especially was severely limited. In 1908, Algerian children formed 4.3% of the schooled populace, and in 1929 they represented 6 % of registered students. In 1907, there existed only 9 schools for girls in colonial Algeria (195). The "1955 Report of the Commission of the Plan of Modernization and Equipment" states that until the end of World War II, Algerian children's literacy has witnessed little progress. In 1930-1931, a century after the conquest, out of 192 000 primary schoolchildren, Algerian *écoliers* of both sexes constituted 67 700 students, 59 300 boys and 8400 girls, a total of 5.4% of the schoolable Algerian population. In 1939-1940, out of 258 000 pupils, Algerian children represented a population of 114 000, 92 400 schoolboys and 21 600 schoolgirls (as cited in Sambron, 2013, p. 199). The relatively low percentage of schooled children of both sexes is accredited to the resistance of the settlers' population that were hostile towards Algerians' education, and that of the Algerian families that were hostile to French education.

Schools, and Bodily Integrity

Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* offers a perspicuous insight into the mechanism of the French colonial educational system. The author's Western education proved to be a source of trials and tribulations. Symbols of colonial oppression, French schools granted the promise of a life beyond the bounds of the harem. The opening scene of the autobiography foregrounds the congruity between colonial education and women's emancipation. The author's depiction of her path to the French school connotes that the colonial pedagogical enterprise represents a contested site of bodily integrity. As she walks, escorted by her father, Djebar evades female seclusion: "A little Arab girl going to school for the first time, one autumn morning, walking hand in hand with her father. A tall erect figure in a fez and a European suit, carrying a bag of school books. He is a teacher at the French primary school. A little Arab girl in a village in the Algerian Sahel" (p. 3). The tenor of the text illustrates the orotundity of the episode, the author emphasizes the Arabness and the gender identity of the *écolière* attesting to the uncommonness of the occurrence. As the schoolgirl trespasses the public space, dismantling extra-Islamic traditions, the neighbors foster a gaze of protest, they lament the men in the little Arab girl's family for mischief will ensue. The gaze of patriarchy is sympathetic in nature, if a girl is schooled she will learn the alphabet and will,

eventually, write “that fatal letter,” the love-letter (p. 3). The world of Western education harbored the revelation of the body, and the exhumation of the word.

The little Arab schoolgirl in *Fantasia*'s colonial Algeria received a hybrid education, she simultaneously attended the Quranic school and the French school. The author believes she was part of the last secular form of Quranic instruction, for a modern wave of Arab schools, that resembled French schools in many ways, were established by the Nationalist Association of Muslim *Oulémas* (p. 182). School awards ceremonies held at the *Kuttâb* were a source of great pride, Djébar's mother celebrated “the walnut tablet decorated with arabesques,” she was awarded for memorizing a long Quranic verse, with the utterance of the ancestral ululation “...that semi-barbaric 'you-you'. That prolonged, irregular, spasmodic cooing, which in our building reserved for teachers' families - all European except for ours- must have appeared incongruous, a truly primitive cry” (p. 182). The circumstances necessitated to be celebrated in a traditional fashion, Quranic schools embodied a form of non-Western education that predated the pedagogical conquest of Algeria. These institutions served as emblems of the people's cultural resistance. In her recollections of her schooling experience at the Quranic school, Djébar conflates the learning of Quran to bodily movement. Her description of the gestures and the posture one adopts in order to carve the *sura* into the board suggest that the *Zaouïa* accords, paradoxically, a terrain of spatial mobility (p. 183).

Bicultural education allocates the young learner a dichotomy of space, when she studies the Arabic language her body incarnates the fabric of her “native city” echoing its fences and enclosed doorways. While she reads the colonizer's language her body migrates in spite of the social customs, in spite of the patriarchal gaze (p. 184). Prior to maturing into womanhood, the Arab *écolière* quit the Quranic school and joined a secondary boarding school while her school comrade, the baker's daughter, was “...veiled, withdrawn overnight from school: betrayed by her figure. Her swelling breasts, her slender legs, in a word, the emergence of her woman's personality transformed her into an incarcerated body!” (p. 183). Dispossessed of spatial mobility and deprived of the right to an education; the baker's daughter, like many of her peers, endures forceful confinement in the *harem*. A form of oppression that the author eludes since Western education avows bodily liberation.

Unveiled, Voiced

Throughout the text, elements of the colonial educational project are intertwined with perceptions of female empowerment. Djébar's mother - wife of a teacher at the French school - was a privileged woman as well. In her early years of marriage, she, like the rest of the female community, spoke of her partner using the personal pronoun ‘him’: “Thus, every time she used a verb in the third personal singular which didn't have a noun subject, she was naturally referring to her husband” (p. 35). It was a canonical form of discourse, women used to speak of their husbands using verbal evasion, spouses were simply nameless. As the years went on, the author's mother learned a sliver of French. She would no longer conjure her husband in a euphemistic manner; she would call him by name. Such freedom of language distinguished her from the women in her entourage, enabling her to maintain a superior demeanor (p. 36). The author's parents gradually abdicated social customs and traditions, by challenging hegemonic gender norms. The author

recollects a rare instance that had the potential to rehabilitate her parents' relationship, a triviality in Western society, but an uncommon occurrence in their world. When he was away on a mission her father wrote to her mother: "My father had dared 'to write' to my mother," without reverting to "the vague periphrasis: *the household*," reinstated by, "The Western manner as *Madame So-and-So...*" (p. 37-38). The emphasis the author allocates to the act of writing, and that of inscribing her mother's name as the addressee demonstrates that her father's letter was a rebellious act that granted the child faith in the marital institution.

The appropriation of the French language and the attainment of bodily integrity equipped Djébar with the instruments required in the subversion of the colonial and patriarchal discourse. Accordingly to Connell (2013), Djébar is unable to fully credit or condemn the French education she received during the colonial era. The Algerian novelist juxtaposes images of female empowerment and colonial oppression by depicting the effects of the imposition of the French language on the Algerian linguistic body. Her success within the French educational system resulted in an ambivalent case of simultaneous dependence upon and resistance against colonial processes of acculturation. When a matriarch protests the unveiling of the Arabo-Berber teenager, her mother answers arduously: "She reads!" (p. 179). Djébar associates her mother's reply to the first command of the Quran: *Read*, she declares that the act of reading even in the language of the colonized "...is always a source of revelation: in my case of the mobility of my body, and so of my future freedom" (p. 180). By evoking the scripture of the holy revelation, the author attempts to manifest the righteousness of her quest for freedom.

Alienation, and the Aphasia of Love

Along a different vein, the author probes the contradictory, yet complementary correlation between her Western education and her appropriation of space and language. She emphasizes that she had no freedom of choice, thus, the relationship she retains with the French language is that of a forced marriage: "Thus, my father, the schoolteacher, for whom a French education provided a means of escape from his family's poverty, had probably '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?" (p. 213). Although the step-mother language has granted Djébar bodily liberation and the means to forge a subversive discourse, she approaches the language with ambivalence conveying that she has been compelled to engage with colonial forces. The novelist's tone shifts when she evinces, one more time, her first journey to the French school: "My father, a tall erect figure in a fez, walks down the village street; he pulls me by the hand... Suddenly, I begin to have qualms isn't it my 'duty' to stay behind in the gynaeceum?" (p. 213). Though she reaps the benefits of her Western education, the little girl questions her allegiances.

Accession of bodily integrity and the appropriation of the language of the Other, singled out the little Arabo-Berber girl from the body of incarcerated women. Anchoring within her a feeling of double estrangement; she neither belongs in the *harem* nor does she belong in the French school. Images of segregated women on rooftops come to her mind as she bemoans her inability to partake in the traditional dance, her frailty to mouth the collective ancestral cry: "...My throat lent itself uneasily, discordantly, to this ancestral plangent cry - which is emitted by spasmodic

vibrations of the glottis. Instead of arising spontaneously, it tore me apart" (p. 127). In an attempt to restore the link with the matrilineal world, the Western-educated novelist resurrects her ancestresses, they invade the text voicing stories of their struggle against colonial and patriarchal oppression.

To depict the virulent relationship the author maintains with the language of colonial education, she summons the tale of the death of the Greek hero Hercules and declares that her father's gift is tantamount to Deianira's toxic offering to her husband:

The language of the Others, in which I was enveloped from childhood, the gift my father lovingly bestowed on me, that language has adhered to me ever since like the tunic of Nessus: that gift from my father who, every morning, took me by the hand to accompany me to school. A little Arab girl, in a village of the Algerian Sahel . . . (p. 217).

The enchanted shirt conferred as a gift of affection bore lethal pain as the Hydra poison relentlessly fed of the flesh and bone of Hercules; rendering the body and the poisonous fabric one. In the end, the Greek hero chose to be burned alive to thwart the effects of the mortal tunic (Fry, 2019, p. 131-132). Djebbar contends that her admission into the colonial school is a toxic offering endowed by a caring father. While the author acknowledges the virtues of colonial education she bewails the loss of the Arabic language, and the ligation between her and her cultural heritage.

To write in the language of the colonizer is to relive the death of Hercules and to writhe, once again, the effects of the Tunic of Nessus: "To attempt an autobiography using French words alone is to lend oneself to the vivisector's scalpel, revealing what lies beneath the skin. The flesh flakes off and with it, seemingly, the last shreds of the unwritten language of my childhood. Wounds are reopened, veins weep, one's own blood flows and that of others, which has never dried" (p. 156). The language of the Other infests the author's *qalem* with the history of violence the Algerian people endured. The novelist attributes her Aphasia of love, the inability to express affection, to French colonial education. The dislocation of the Arabic language harbored a state of emotional distress issued by the mastery of the language of the colonizer, a barren language devoid of words of love. In an attempt to heal, Djebbar echoes in her oeuvre her ancestresses' ululations.

Djebbar's first journey to the French school delivered her into a world in collision. In her autobiographical novel *L'Amour, la fantasia*, the author attempts to negotiate an escape. She arraigns her Western education for inducing her aphasia of speech, and her aphasia of love, she also laments the severing of the bond that ties her to her ancestral heritage. Be that as it may, she reveres her attainment of bodily integrity, and her appropriation of the French language, that allows her to challenge extra-Islamic traditions and to reinvent Algerian cultural memory. The correlation between emancipation, alienation, and linguistic displacement foregrounds the little Arab schoolgirl's quest for atonement.

About the Authors:

Ahlem Harrat is a doctoral student at Abou Bekr Belkaïd University of Tlemcen majoring in comparative literature. She holds a master degree in language, literature, and civilization of the Anglophonic world from Badji Mokhtar University of Annaba where she worked as an ESP teacher. She currently works as an assistant teacher of English literary studies at the department of English, Abou Bekr Belkaïd University of Tlemcen.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9548-4321>

Prof. Faiza Senouci Meberbeche is a full professor at the department of English, University of Abou Bekr Belkaïd Tlemcen. She is the head of a doctorate research project on "Postcolonial Studies." She is also the head of two national research projects (CNEPRU and PRFU), and a member in the PNR research project. Her field of interest is mainly concerned with: Culture, Identity, and Gender Studies.

<https://orci.org/0000-0001-5153-9987>

References

- Cixous, H. (2003). Letter to Zohra Drif. (Eric, Prenowitz, Trans). *College Literature*, 30, (1), 82-90.
- Connell, L. (2013). Movement, education, and empowerment in Assia Djebar's L'Amour, la fantasia and Nulle part dans la maison de mon père. *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 7, (3), 291-308.
- Djebar, A. (1993). Fantasia: an Algerian cavalcade. (Dorothy S. Blair, Trans.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. (Original work published 1985).
- Ferhat, A. (2005). Guerre et révolution d'Algérie: la nuit colonial. Editions ANEP.
- Fry, S. (2019). Heroes: volume II of mythos. Penguin Books: UK.
- Gosnell, Jonathan K. The Politics of Frenchness in colonial Algeria, 1930-1954. University of Rochester Press, 2002.
- Rogers, R. (2013). A Frenchwoman's imperial story: madame Luce in nineteenth-century Algeria. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- . -. (2005). From the salon to the schoolroom: educating bourgeois girls in nineteenth-century France. The Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, Pennsylvania.
- Saleh, S. (1972). Women in Islam: their roles in religious and traditional culture. *International Journal of sociology of the Family*, 2, (2), 193-203.
- Samborn, D. (2013). Les Femmes algériennes pendant la colonisation. Gasbah Editions: Alger.