

“Fugitive Without Knowing it”: Language, Displacement and Identity in Assia Djebar’s Autobiographic Narratives

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Abstract

If in Edward Said’s words, “everyone lives life in a given language; everyone’s experiences therefore are had, absorbed, and recalled in that language” (*Out of Place*, 1999: 217), a writer who chooses to write in a language other than the mother-language is inevitably a victim of displacement. In a geography-decentred world, being linguistically out of place is usually accompanied with a physical displacement, issuing into a problematic interplay between language, self and identity. In Assia Djebar’s autobiographic narratives, the role of the written word is made more complex, not only because Djebar is a Muslim woman, but also due to the conflict between her oral ‘maternal’ Arabic/Berber language, and the written ‘paternal’ language which is French. Djebar has a complex relationship with these two languages *in* and *between* which she lived; two languages that worked in tandem, but also *Othered* each other in a shifting myriad of experiences and forms of being and becoming. This paper aims at discussing the intersectionality of language, identity and displacement. It starts with the view that the written word separates the writer from her maternal language, and her expression in French has become a source of anxiety. Knowing that her association of language and home underlies her double displacement both linguistically and geographically, how does Djebar come to terms with the anxiety of a double exile? At what point was she able to proclaim that writing in “the enemy’s language” heralds the self’s plurality, positionality, alterity and uniqueness. What role has the autobiographic genre played in this self-fulfilment? The paper postulates that linguistic hybridity is the only possible venue for Djebar when it comes to escaping the alienation inherent in her expression in the enemy’s language. The integration of orality in Djebar’s (written) autobiographies allows the author to surmount her linguistic exile, to properly mourn the loss of the maternal tongue, enhancing a linguistic and cultural reconciliation.

Keywords: Linguistic exile- female collective memory- displacement - Algeria- French language

*“So far, I have only been able to use a language that enslaved me,
and therefore, the messengers of my mind always come shackled.*

Ama Ata Aidoo¹

1. Introduction

There is nothing new in having writers of the oppressed culture writing in the oppressor’s language. A sweeping look at Anglophone postcolonial literature shows that it is a commonplace practice by writers as versatile and universal as Yeats, Joyce, Conrad, but also more eclectic and ambitious as Achebe, Rushdie and Head. Francophone postcolonial literature is not spared this lot. North African writers like Ben Jalloun, Memmi, and Dib made their way into international fame while their language is that of the colonizer. Assia Djebar, the Algerian female writer, figures among the list of Maghrebian writers who use French as a medium of expression, and whose complex relationship to language is burdened by gender prerogatives and by the assumption that women, in traditional societies, are bearers of language. In view of this, identity fulfilment for both the “daughter of the nation” (Boehmer 106) and the exiled writer announces to be complex, bearing in mind that any identity quest has inevitably to filter through language. A Muslim woman bred in the Arabo-Berber tradition but schooled in French, a witness of colonial rule and the war of liberation, an exilic figure whose nostalgia for home is purged through the agency of writing, Djebar cannot help but reflect on those myriad of experiences, at the heart of which lies her dilemma of using the “Other’s” language. To disclose these experiences and come to terms with her “linguistic” exile, Djebar resorts to autobiography.

If, as Carol Hanisch points out, “the personal is political,”² then Djebar’s anxiety over language points to a much larger national malaise and inscribes her works within the postcolonial agenda. For much of postcolonial language politics

¹ Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*. Hong Kong: Longman African Writers, 1996. P.112.

² Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political” (2006; reprint of 1969), available at <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PersonalisPol.pdf>

around the world, the clash has chiefly been between a colonial, read language and (a) local, oral language(s). This is true in Algeria where one aspect of the colonial legacy is the enchantment of the elites that emerged from the colonial educational system with the imported language, French, to the detriment of their indigenous languages, Arabic or Berber. Within this destabilized/ing order, Berber is even relegated lower positions. For, while Arabic is Algeria's national language, Berber lacks this advantage of status and power. Its lower position arises not from being a minority language, but from its exclusion and denial of the rights of speakers to use it in crucial domains such as education in general and literacy in particular. The negative connotation attached to Berber is nothing more than prejudice, particularly on the part of speakers of major languages, notably French. Djébar, however, strategically lumps Arabic and Berber together, associating them with the private female world and places French as the public "common" enemy. For her, the point must be made that unless speakers of excluded languages feel honored by their own languages and show a zealous desire to defend them, no amount of external efforts can ensure any status and viable roles for them.

The autobiographic works I am interested in belong to what is referred to as the Algerian Quartet, among which, *Fantasia* (1985, trans. 1995) and *So Vast the Prison* (1995, trans. 1999). By analyzing Djébar's autobiographic narratives, I show how the notion of the postcolonial identity is negotiated in relation to the issue of language. Identity – whether at the microcosmic or macrocosmic scale, whether personal or national – resorts to language as one of the most persistent emblems of cultural authenticity. Incorporating postcolonial feminist thought, I analyse how Djébar positions herself in relation to language dynamics and language ideologies and how her narratives attempt to dispel the hegemonic nature of language itself and to relocate the position of undermined, local languages from the periphery to the centre. The analysis brings to the fore a set of asymmetric relationships in which language-gender nexus plays a crucial role. These are all issues at the heart of postcolonial critique and will be dealt with from a very specific positioning—that of autobiographic literature.

Though the focus of each autobiographic novel is different in terms of exposing personal lines of thoughts and narrative techniques, there is the discernible fact that with the "I" that narrates, the collective "we" lurks behind, making of the personal identity quest – the quest for Djébar's identity as writer and Algerian woman– a more tortuous one as it intermingles with the collective identity quest of millions of subdued, silenced women of her country. This (self) exposure will comprise a recollection of personal memory entangled with stories of female siblings cloistered in the harem, and a rewriting of public history in the light of testimonies given through interviews with anonymous women who had their shares in fighting the colonial regimes but who nevertheless were excluded from official historic records. Autobiographic narratives will promise a valuable excavation of the past – in its different vestiges – , for in Freeman's words "given the beings we are — housed in language, in culture, in history — there is much about us [the individual and the collective] that requires interpretation for sense to be made." (Freeman 5)

Djébar's texts are not autobiographic in the strictest sense of the term; first and third person narrators intermingle. It is a hybrid genre that pledges a revelation of the "self" via the exploration of a collective identity of a female community that has for long been muted and forgotten: "In writing of my childhood memories I am taken back to those bodies bereft of voices" (*Fantasia* 156). The narrator is presented as "a compound subject," in Erickson's terms, "the sum of her present being as well as of the beings of her sisters and women ancestors" (Erickson 15). By deviating from recognizable autobiographic forms, the project of representing the self acquires a political dimension. Julia Swindells refers to these new radical uses of autobiography:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness – women, black people, working-class people – have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself. (Swindells 7)

It is also a genre where memory of a beloved past steeped in maternal genealogy and affected by a violent history of patriarchal and colonial repression offers to reconstruct a sense of fragmentation that is inherently linguistic. The autobiographic nature of the novels under study cannot, however, be missed, for as she states: "[i]n my first books, I went veiled. In the quartet, I expose myself" (qtd. in Mortimer 102), contending elsewhere, "Is not writing a way of telling what I am?" (*Fantasia* 58) Autobiographic accounts in *Fantasia* and *So Vast the Prison* relate a childhood and adolescence where Arabic/ Berber cultural values collide with French ones creating a sense of anxiety and displacement. The narratives also evince the theme of the exile of a writer, whose use of French instead of Arabic or Berber condemns her to live on the edge of two cultures, belonging fully to neither.

I will first consider what the autobiographic mode offers in terms of exposing the various forms in which vestiges of the past survive (whether personal or collective). I then set out what is entailed in constructing an interpretation of these pasts into a narrative whose language alienates the narrator from these nostalgic reconstructions. The third and final section examines the narrative strategies that allowed a negotiation between French and Arabic languages to prove that her novels are rather of emplacement than displacement.

2. The Legacy of Autobiography

"What is a woman who writes within an Arab culture? A scandal," postulates Djébar in an interview (Le Clezio 232). If writing is a transgressive act, the use of autobiography is doubly so; for it is a tacit agreement to reveal the self, a very hazardous enterprise when the narrator/author is female. Indeed, in a Muslim society, the "we" engulfs and

hegemonizes the “I”; explained by Déjeux by the fact that “holism takes precedence over individualism” (Déjeux, qtd. in Arnaud 25). Self-expression remains a foreign practice, as the author herself contends in *Fantasia* “the women dramatize their fate, or exorcize it, but never expose it directly” (155). Djebbar acknowledges the abomination of selflessness in the Muslim society, hinting at her female siblings’ inability to speak for themselves, “since that would be to scorn the blanket-formulae which ensure that each individual [woman] journeys through life in collective resignation” (F. 156). By entrusting herself to “the will of persistent memory” (*So Vast* 323) in a genre alien to her culture, Djebbar risks unveiling herself (voice and body) and therefore alienating herself from her conservative community; for “to deviate is dangerous, inviting disaster in its multiple disguises.” (F. 156)

Djebbar’s autobiographical narratives juxtapose life-writing and historiography. They craft in E. J. Hobsbawm’s words a “twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record which is open to relatively dispassionate inspection and the past as a remembered part of, or background to, one’s own life” (Hobsbawm 3). Resurrecting dormant, stifled ancestral voices ensures the establishment of “Chains of memories... for do not memories fetter us as well as forming our roots?” (F.178) Personal history fuses within the more controversial collective one, giving it legitimacy and authority. A destiny of female siblings and relatives, made up in part of deception and pain, but also of serenity and pleasure, is exposed and dissected not without its own therapeutic effect on the narrator.

What is seen in Djebbar’s autobiographic accounts is the primacy of memory. Memory for her has its politics. The process of self-understanding is inherently recollective. While patriarchy goes on “...wrap[ing] the nubile girl in veils. Mak[ing] her invisible. Mak[ing] her more unseeing than the sightless, destroy[ing] in her every memory of the world without” (F.3), Djebbar attempts to excavate that dormant memory, a task she admits is painstaking; for, she says “[am], an Arab woman, writing classic Arabic poorly, loving and suffering in my mother’s dialect, knowing that I have to recapture the deep song strangled in the throat of my people, finding it again with images, with the murmur beneath images...” (*So Vast* 206). To reconstruct that memory, Djebbar relies on oral tales and stories narrated by old women; “the legacy,” Djebbar explains, “will otherwise be lost - night after night, wave upon wave, the whispers take up the tale, even before the child can understand, even before she finds her words of life, before she speaks in her turn and so that she will not speak alone” (F. 177). About *So Vast the Prison*, the writer says: “That is what this story in images and sound is, an attempt to navigate as smoothly as possible back through the stream of my memory and the memory of other several women” (*So Vast* 279). Obviously then, what Djebbar strives for is a resurrection of her subjective memories and those of her female community. “My open mouth,” she says, “expels continuously, the suffering of others, the suffering of the shrouded women who came before me” (*So Vast* 350). The desire to see for others, to expose their stiffened voices and repressed sufferings amount to an altruistic gesture of solidarity: “Every night my voice leaves me as I awaken the sickly sweet suffocations of aunts and girl cousins that I, a little girl, glimpsed and did not understand. Wide-eyed, I contemplated them, and later was able to picture them again and finally understand” (*So Vast* 348). It is also a political gesture in the sense that history is re-written from the standpoint of the marginalized other. It is eventually a comforting act that allows her, the exilic figure, displaced both geographically and linguistically, to project into her maternal genealogy and identify with their sufferings. On the political value of memory, Minh Ha observes: “words empty out with age. Die and rise again, accordingly invested with new meaning, and always equipped with a second-hand memory. In trying to tell something, a woman is told” (Trinh Minh-Ha 79). In narrating her failed relation with her husband and the pain he made her go through, for instance, the author/narrator associates her suffering with that of generations of female heirs who, out of legitimacy or pure fancy, called their husbands the “enemy”, “thus the husband returned to the role that for generations he had been assigned by the memory of the city. In his renewed rage... he played the role of the enemy even more easily.” (*So Vast* 109)

The (hi)story of a number of female characters resurfaces in Djebbar’s narratives. In *So Vast*, the stories of mythic or fictional characters like Fin Hinan, Zoraida, and real ones like the mother, the grand-mother and the elderly women of the narrator’s tribe are all excavated and superimposed with the narrator’s own (hi)story. Tin Hinan, the princess of Hoggar, ancestor of the Touaregs, a female nomad like Djebbar, is described as the heir of the Berber language with its “archaic alphabet” (176); the legacy of that erased language is buried in the recesses of her body where it has been protected for centuries. Zoraida also, the first Algerian woman ever cited in modern fiction by Don Quixote, is a fugitive whose correspondences in Arabic with a foreign captive did liberate her from the confines of the father’s opulent house, but reduced her to misery. In her sacrifice and destitution, Djebbar sees “a metaphor for Algerian women writing today – among them myself” (*So Vast* 173). The mother too is a major character in Djebbar’s narrative, not only because she represents a solid background for an anchored Arab-Berber identity, but also because in her she sees the repository of Arabic/Berber culture. The mother learns oral French, communicates with her French neighbours during colonial times, even takes off the veil, dresses up in French ways and travels to France on her own; yet deep inside her, ancestral – maternal – wisdom is stored. Her love for Andalusian poetry and music for instance testifies to a keen desire to preserve what has been bequeathed from her grandmothers. When the mother cries over the destruction by French soldiers of this heavy legacy, of the poetry of the noubas of Andalusia that “had come so far, navigating from beyond the centuries and shores, having been transmitted from woman to woman, some of them were in flight, the others locked up” (176), this testifies to a sense of belonging that neither modern ways of living nor cultural exchange could erase. While the mother acquired a sense of ease in shifting between languages, for the author/narrator the boundary between languages is clear cut and implies a mutual exclusion, creating a perpetual anxiety and unease. Whether real or imagined, the emblematic female figure seen in Tin Hinan, Zoraida and her biological mother provides a sense of connectedness and belonging for the narrator: “I write in the shadow of my mother... I write to clear my secret path... I am becoming more and more a renegade in the so-called foreign language. Like Zoraida, stripped. Like her I lost the

wealth I began with – in my case my maternal heritage – and I have only gained the simple mobility of the bare body, only freedom” (177). Her destiny of being “rooted in flight” is made familiar and more bearable by the “comings and goings of women in flight from the long-ago or recent past.” (176)

To write herself, then, the author/narrator has to write off others. In *So Vast the Prison*, writing off others is usually meant to condemn their sequestration and to criticise Patriarchy. During her film shoots in her native village, the narrator, who is the film director, ponders over the issue of veiling and the appropriation of the gaze. Women of her tribe were all shrouded in veils, yet their “miniscule gaze” that peeps from the hole in the eye and from which they “spy, they watch, they search, they snoop” (180), acquires power by being associated with the authoritative gaze of the narrator’s own camera while shooting her film; empowering them in the process; and so “All of us from the world of the shadow women, reversing the process: we are the ones finally who are looking, who are beginning” (180). To “gaze back” both at colonial and patriarchal structures and ideology is a political act of resistance made possible through this reconstructed autobiographic event. Reclaiming both the colonizer’s gaze and the masculine gaze liberates the female body and therefore voice. Another reminisced experience of the narrator is in parties organized by the mother and the grandmother in which, trances and dances are performed, meant to free the asphyxiated voices from the double shadow of Islamic tradition and colonial exclusion. And despite the narrator’s own exclusion from these festivities (due to her Westernized manners of a girl who goes to a French school), such events still anchor her in the female tradition of her community.

In *Fantasia*, memory resurfaces through storytelling more than through personal recollections and enables the writer to revive her tradition and roots. Storytelling is many-voiced, disconnected and sporadic in the manner of an oral tale. Created in the language of everyday life of women characters, the stories celebrate the bonds linking various generations of women including her: “my body reverberates with sounds from the endless landslide of generations of my lineage” (46). The last part of *Fantasia* is weaved around personal stories of elderly women whose “voice[s] lift the burden of memory” (141) as they relate their roles in the War of independence. This trace of orality plays a key role in healing the writer’s fractured identity as it allows her to plunge into the recesses of her self (seen through others), and to pay tribute to a history itself marginalized because unwritten: “Strange little sister... whose story I now transcribe in a foreign tongue. Her body and her face once more engulfed in shadow as she whispers her story” (141). The identification of the writer with her ancestors is complete and makes her comment at the end of the book comprehensible: “the date of my birth is *eighteen hundred and forty-two*, the year when general Saint-Arnauld arrives to burn down the *zaouia* of the Beni Menacer, the tribe from which I am descended” (217). Eventually, she is able to rewrite history and contest the official versions that obliterate women’s role in the war of independence, in so doing, her role as “the daughter of the nation” and the engaged writer is fulfilled. Listen, hear, transcribe, write; this has been Djébar’s endeavour to recapture what is lost. This is how collective autobiography is transcribed, that of the subdued, forgotten and marginalized because illiterate and sequestered. This is also the constructive act of writing trauma, which, La Capra argues, “involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and ‘giving voice’ to the past” (LaCapra 186). Several examples of recuperated female voices are recounted and with them stories of heroism, courage and patriotism: the story of Cherifa, the girl of thirteen who joined the maquisard, was caught and tortured in prison; that of lalla Zohra who lost all her sons as well as home and belongings in the resistance war; that of the widow who succumbed to sexual abuses while her husband was fighting in the mountain, to mention but few examples. The women speak (whisper) for themselves in the presence of the narrator, their veiled voices emerge, and their stories are eventually heard and transcribed in a narrative that, despite its foreignness to oral testimonies, presents a picture of a self that is comfortable, empowered, and able. Autobiography becomes a political act of resistance to the so-called objectivity of official history and the master-narratives that underpin it.

3. The “Double Bind”

Edward Said says “everyone lives life in a given language; everyone’s experiences therefore are had, absorbed, and recalled in that language” (Said 217). Such argument foreshadows a dilemma at the heart of Djébar’s narratives. The autobiographic narrative becomes a contested space to expose and work through the writer’s Linguistic exile. As she clarifies in *So Vast the Prison*: “I write to reveal a secret path for myself, and . . . it is in a language described as ‘foreign’ that I become more and more disloyal. . . . Having lost my maternal heritage, and having gained what? If not freedom, then the simple mobility of the body stripped bare” (172). “The body stripped bare,” is tantamount to unveiling, and is seen as the result of relinquishing the mother tongue, the “protective shell in a forbidding new world” (Robinson, xvii); this act entails the risk of vulnerability and exposure, but also the promise of transparency and liberty. At the heart of Djébar’s narratives also lies a paradox, while she attempts to line up with her sisters whose voices have been strangled for years, she must acknowledge this complicity in a foreign language. She is clearly split between two languages and tries to find her voice, without giving up her origins but also without locking herself up in her native culture’s archaic conservatism. While she confides that “Writing has brought me to the cries of the women silently rebelling in my youth, to my own true origins” (204), gender identification is always attempted but never completely achieved. This is due to the banishing effect of French words, those “Torch-words [which] light up my women-companions, my accomplices; these words divide me from them once and for all. And weigh me down as I leave my native land.” (*Fantasia* 142)

Kateb Yacine once stipulated that the French language is the Algerian “war booty”, and should therefore strategically be used to resist the cultural oppression it engendered. Language is the weapon, the vehicle of violence. The French used it to efface the Algerians and their history, but now Djébar turns it against the French to reclaim her people’s

history. Djebbar describes French as “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” (*F*. 217). The French language, paternal in essence, liberates the narrator and gives her a voice. She admits the fact that learning to read and write French emblemizes “the outdoors and the risk, instead of the prison of my peers” (184); it has the ultimate power to unveil. It is a language that legitimized her transgression of cultural and social values imposed because of her female gender. It is the language that spared her confinement and sequestration. When interrogated on why her girl is not wearing the veil, “she reads,” the mother replies (179). It is also the language that casts off the male gaze and therefore his authority: “As if the French language suddenly had eyes, and lent them to me to see me into liberty; as if the French language blinded the peeping-toms of my clan and at this price, I could move freely” (181). In addition to the personal achievement made possible through adopting the colonizer’s language, it is this language that made of her autobiography a political act of resistance to the hegemonic mode of historic discourse, in the sense that it is a language turned against its propellers, exposing their colonial ravishes and violence.

Empowering as it seems, French is not without its risks. In *Fantasia*, the external exposure, made legitimate by Djebbar’s French schooling, exacerbates her fragility; for it exposes her body and voice, rendering them “bare, unveiled” (46). And although the potential of the Other’s language is recognized, it still thrusts anguish and a sense of threat. Writing in the Other’s language “proves fatal, since it is a sign of compromise” (33). “I know,” she says, “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 the flowers of death--chrysanthemums on tombs!” (181) Djebbar’s mitigated attitude towards the use of French is clear in her statement: “That language was formerly the sarcophagus of my people; I bear it today like a messenger bearing a sealed letter ordering his condemnation to death, or to the dungeon. To strip myself bare in that language makes me chance a permanent danger of being consumed by fire” (Qtd. in Erickson 51). We see in this admission the “double bind”, the dilemma of continuing to write in French that destitutes her emotionally but liberates her voice and body. To write therefore means to be exiled from the feminine universe; her inability to sing (during evening musical parties) like her cousins and maternal relatives, or her uneasiness in sitting cross-legged are instances of her irrevocable displacement. (*So Vast* 127)

Djebbar states that “beyond the territory claimed by Arabic, there is the Berber language, which was my grandmother’s tongue, although as a teenager, I thought it was an oral language, that it did not have an alphabet” (Djebbar qtd in Gauvin 74). This knowledge propelled the investment of her narratives with Berber undertones, with the purpose of recreating “la sonorité de la langue maternelle” [the sound of the mother tongue], of Arabic or Tamazight, “dans la chair de la langue Française” [within the flesh of the French language] (Djebbar qtd in Gauvin 84). “I too”, she says, “seek out the rich vocabulary of love of my mother tongue – milk of which I had been previously deprived” (*F* 62). The yearning for the mother tongue, rendered in libidinal terms of a daughter suckling her mother, is reminiscent of Hélène Cixous’ “Bon lait de mère” and establishes fundamental links between Djebbar and the French feminist Cixous. Interestingly, Cixous bears kernel resemblances in terms of language anxiety with Djebbar. She also writes about being caught not *between* but *with* three languages; inside her mouth, three tongues proliferate, German, French and English, with the belief that German can only be oral. Her *écriture féminine*, the fluidity of language resonating with writing the body, seems in tune with Djebbar’s grotesque transgression of the prevailing order of language through the constant transliteration and transcription of Arabic and Berber words that infiltrate the French overall narrative. Such an endeavour describes an attempt to engage with the locus of the repressed and lost language(s), to abandon the illusion of conscious rational control that the use of French dictates, and to open up to the unconscious as the site of “that which has been repressed by the brutal severing of the corporeal and the linguistic and by the processes of sexual differentiation” (Shiack 70). Djebbar’s own “écriture féminine” or semiotic language is fleshed out in her constant moving in tandem between registers and languages, successfully transgressing and denying the boundaries of the symbolic order and the Law of the Father. She occupies an indeterminate space, or in Cixous’ words a “third body” that “surgit, vole et va voir plus haut le sommet des choses... mais pour que s’ecrive le troisieme corps, il faut que l’exterieur entre et que l’interieur s’ouvre” [“arises, flies and will see above the tops of things ... but for the third body to be inscribed, it is necessary that the outside gets in and the inside opens”] (Cixous *La Venue à l’Ecriture* 53). Though founded upon a sense of loss and exile, language for both Djebbar and Cixous brings a sense of freedom and possibility when it adheres to the oral undertones of the maternal legacy, more so for Djebbar as the indigenization of French restored her self-confidence in the possibility of an eventual reconciliation with her language and nation.

Berber and Arabic languages are intimately connected to home, not just in the physical, domestic sense, but in the sense of belonging, roots and origins. Berber is the grand-mother’s tongue, Arabic is the mother’s, relegating French to the status of “step-mother” (*F* 214) or “enemy’s tongue” (*F* 215). In an interview, Djebbar states “I refused to allow the French language to enter into my life, into my secret. I felt it was the enemy. To write in this language, but to write very close to the self, not to say oneself, with a violent separation, became a very dangerous undertaking” (Le Clezio 238). By “secret”, Djebbar is undoubtedly referring to the private, intimate space of emotions. Indeed, the mother/ Mother’s tongue is viewed as the language of the heart, with its strong umbilical associations with motherly warmth, private feelings and “musical intimacy”. Arabic and Berber are the languages of the harem, they carry with them associations with the mother and home; these, Suleiman argues, “are intimately inscribed in some deeply personal expressions and forms of language use that act as mnemonic and archival sites of belonging and return” (Suleiman 81). French, then, is a harbinger for displacement and alienation in so far as it is situated outside the internal space of home; its objectivity does not allow the narrator to express her feelings, intimacy, and desire. To express love, French becomes sterile,

aphasic, “the words do not charge with any carnal reality,” she notes. (Gauvin 79) So, for instance, when recalling her love story with her “Beloved” in *So Vast*, she reflects on the emotional value of the word “darling” in Arabic or Berber, which a French speaker “would not have guessed its emotional weight” (90). In *Fantasia*, it is a reflection on the word “hannouni”, “half-way between the Berber language of the highlands and the Arabic of the nearby city” (80), untranslatable in French, that displays the sterility of French in matters of love and desire. She admits: “the French language could offer me all its inexhaustible treasures, but not a single one of its terms of endearment would be destined for my use” (27). “The written words, the words I had learned, retreated before me as soon as the slightest heart-felt emotion sought for expression” (128). In an interview with Lise Gauvin, Djébar states: “I became aware, from a particular moment, that French was my language to think, to have friends, to communicate with friends, but when affection and desire are concerned, this language becomes for me aphasic. This desert is vested with scenes of violence and the ancestors’ war, of the cavaliers’ collapse, those who fell in the combat” (Gauvin 79). French is a de-personalized, disconnecting medium, devoid of sensuality and desires.

4. Strategies of Appropriation

In *So Vast the Prison*, there is a persistent, if not haunting, need to repossess the mother’s tongue. Djébar must have felt that a part of her oral transcriptions and interviews will be lost in writing, through the semantic leakage that the transfer of feelings and meanings from one language to another inevitably produces. So, readers can easily hear echoes of the oral rhythm of folk, traditional texts, and of the spoken voice generally. This is clear in the innumerable use of colloquial words and expressions that have not been translated to keep their cultural or religious overtones. “Cadi”, “mahakma”, “jaouleds”, “douar”, “roumi” and “zaouia” are but a few examples of a deliberate transliteration or transference of a typically oral characteristic mode of speech. “Dhiab fi thiab” (319) is a “several centuries old” Arabic proverb that for Djébar could only be transcribed in Arabic to keep its rhythms and musicality. “Treated ‘in France” (240) is a very Arabic locution meaning to go to a French doctor, while “France came” (*F.* 117) is another Arabic turn of phrase, meaning French soldiers came; they are transmuted literally into French to stress the exaggeration and sense of repulsion and fear that French presence engenders for the female community. These expressions add detail and local color to the narrative while placing Arabic and French on equal footing visually. It is in this localized form of the French language that the identity of the speakers is affirmed and assumed. Oral nuances refuse to disappear from Djébar’s discourse; they hang there archeologically, persisting to leave a trace in the written text, to redeem the pain and guilt of “uttering such a constant howl: such a wild, barbaric cry, macabre residue of a former century” (115). These murmurs, whisperings, soliloquies, and confabulations reconnect the writer with her maternal tongue. The marginalized language of the native and the voice of subalternity are displayed, flaunting and resisting the linguistic authority of French. Djébar goes further into transcribing a Berber song, whose first line “so vast the prison” figures as the title of her autobiography. (242) This “feminine memory” that Djébar resuscitates has a structure and a rhythm to which French has to modulate. The cumbersome task of the writer is to adapt the graphism of the French language into the curves of the Arabic and Berber languages. The author not only translates from one language to another, but from a spoken to a written culture. This is what Edouard Glissant has described as “the complex union of writing and orality” (cited by Rodriguez 34) and to which Djébar adheres perfectly well.

The integration of orality in Djébar’s autobiographies allows the author to surmount her linguistic exile, to properly mourn the loss of the maternal tongue; it is both a linguistic and cultural reconciliation. Most postcolonial writers provide multiple layers of interpretation and intentionality that creates a whole cultural context, both past and present that ensure the transgression from the state of colonialism to that of post-colonialism. The “enemy’s language” dissipates in her female community’s oral dialects, so she transmits in French what she could hear in her mother’s tongue; the “I” will be speaking in tongues or heteroglossia, to paraphrase Bakhtin. In *Fantasia*, the plethora of voices redeem the sense of linguistic exclusion; it is what Erickson refers to as “Dialogic exchange” that accounts for the “plurality of propositions and positions; it works against closure and finality; it is atemporal and irreducibly polyvocal, and presents propositions and understandings in essentially non-linear, synthesizing sequences” (Erickson 13). The effect, to quote Erickson again, is to “delegitimize the master narratives” (13), to maintain a dark, unattainable knowledge about the postcolonial identity rather than opt for its accessibility and assimilation. This argument echoes that of Boehmer who notes that “Basically, what is frequently ignored in postcolonial criticism is the difficulty or otherness of the postcolonial text: the implications for us as readers of its possibly untranslatable cultural specificity” (238). As such, Djébar is engaged in a process of “language appropriation”, or fertilization, which is for Ashcroft *et al.* an essentially “subversive strategy... a process by which the language is made to bear the weight and the texture of a different experience” (Ashcroft *et al.* 262). For Zabus, this re-appropriation of language refers to a process of “relexification”, defined as “the making of a new register of communication out of an alien lexicon” (Qtd. in Ashcroft *et al.* 285). So when Djébar addresses her son as “my little liver”, “the apple of my eye”, she has relexified Arabic into French, keeping alive “the sound embedded deep in our childhood” (81). For Zabus, this subversive strategy works at two levels:

On the methodological level, it stems from a need to solve an immediate artistic problem: that of rendering African concepts, thought patterns and linguistic features in the European language. On the strategic level, relexification seeks to subvert the linguistically codified, to decolonize the language of early, colonial literature and to affirm a revised, non-atavistic orality via the imposed medium.” (288)

As such, Djébar frees herself from the aphasic encroachment of French by enriching it with the rhythm and phrasing of her maternal languages; her French, through its hybrid, localized and “fighting back” forms, is now stripped of its colonial trappings and baggage. The narrator/author can claim: “I finally recover my power of speech, use the same understatements, interlace the allusiveness of tone and accent, letting inflections, whispers, sounds and pronunciation be a promise of embraces... At least, voice answers to voice and body can approach body.” (129)

5. Conclusion

An autobiography “in the plural”, in a voice that is hybrid, is the only possible venue for Djébar when it comes to escaping the alienation inherent in her expression in the enemy's language; it is also an empowering medium that made her write about violence without flinching. She contends: “I thought that, by dint of writing about those who died last century in my country in flames, the blood of men today (the blood of History and of the oppression of women) was rising again to splatter my writing and condemn me to silence” (*So Vast* 347). The ability to celebrate the “anonymity of the elders” (*So Vast* 217), to lift women's voices from oblivion, to re-inscribe their marginalized histories, compensated for the use of French and alleviated the violence and pain associated with its use; for as she contends: “I have captured your voice; disguised it with my French without clothing it. I barely brush the shadow of your footsteps” (*F.* 142). Through French also a re-writing of history is made possible, her part of responsibility, what she calls “solidarity”, has allowed the illumination of parts in history that were darkened due to historic amnesia. Relying on the plurivocality of women's voices that entangle the personal with the collective, the private with the public, the use of French has offered the postcolonial self plurality, positionality, alterity and uniqueness. This language, imposed on the author/narrator as the only language of education that expresses neither love nor desire, has nevertheless given her a space. She managed, by writing on her own life, to distance herself from that language. Writing enabled her to feel home again, to reconcile with her origins. Linguistic anxiety is released in the sense that the language split is no longer a dichotomy, a matter of either/or relationship, but a continuum where the two (or three) languages cohabit and interact. The oral and the written together and separately; each first in relation to the other; this is what the autobiographic text celebrates. Arabic/Berber remain the languages of orality that bind and bound Djébar to her female community, the main contender for her identity as Algerian, while French is the written medium that safeguards memory and restores a sense of historic justice.

At the end of *Fantasia*, Djébar says: “While I intended every step forward to make me more clearly identifiable, I find myself progressively sucked down into the anonymity of those women of old - my ancestors!” (217) Such statement questions the extent to which the whole endeavour of writing her autobiography has managed to establish the authorial voice of the writer and to claim the repossession of her nomadic identity. It makes it painfully clear to her that the genesis of her self, her identity as such, will always be circumscribed by the tyranny of French that will keep alienating her, reminding her that she cannot fully reclaim for her female ancestors' subjectivity; it is also an acknowledgment that writing rests on self-deception, for it enshrouds more than unveils. The way the book ends reflects also the extent to which the trauma of loss and exile is endemic “They call me an exile. It is more than that: I have been banished from my homeland to listen and bring back some traces of liberty to the women of my family... I imagine I constitute the link, but I am only floundering in a murky bog [...] My fiction is this attempt at autobiography, weighed down under the oppressive burden of my heritage. Shall I sink beneath the weight?” (218)

And yet, the publication of her Algerian quartet is proof that she has gone over her trauma. The reader can only admire her narrative achievements, her discard of “the autobiographic pact” (Lejeune 1975) of solely focussing on the individual's (his)story, the way she eschews the cult of individuality for the collective potential of expression, considering each woman resurrected her “alter ego” (201). As such, her narratives offer the possibility of resistance and counter-discourse not only to the canonized historic texts, but also to the classical use of autobiography. Memory in a foreign language is tantamount to loss and nostalgia, but Djébar made it constructive and ennobling. An aesthetic of writing that in dispersing the speaking postcolonial subject across languages, affirms an identity that is plural, fluid, and unstable in the postmodern sense of the word. In this, there is victory enough.

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