

Debunking Patriarchal Discourse in Assia Djébar's Narrative *Children of the New World* (1962)

تفكيك هيمنة الخطاب الذكوري في رواية أبناء العالم الجديد لأسيا جبار (1962)

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Abstract:

A groundbreaking work of interrelated perspectives, *Children of the New World* (1962) is a novel of insurgency and resistance. Written in a post-colonial context by the Algerian writer Assia Djébar, the novel is feminist and anti-colonial centering women in patriarchal and political resistance. Caught in a time of violent change, the novel gives insights into the complex relations between men and women demonstrating those who cannot help but succumb to their rigid patriarchs and those who refute their pejoration along with the harsh oppression of colonialism. This paper aims at delineating the linguistic defiance used by these women to denounce patriarchal discourse and hence, decry their peripheral position. The findings of this study outline that Algerian women managed to make their voices heard through undoing the pejorative imperial and patriarchal standards.

Keywords: Algerian women, discourse, defiance, resistance, patriarchy.

ملخص:

تعد رواية أطفال العالم الجديد (1962) للكاتبة الجزائرية أسيا جبار عملاً رائداً يجمع بين سرديات المقاومة و التحدي التي كتبت في سياق ما بعد الاستعمار حيث ظهرت الرواية خلال فترة من التحوّل السياسي العنيف مركزة على التجارب النسوية في قلب النضالات المناهضة للاستعمار. تكشف الرواية عن تعقيدات العلاقة بين الجنسين ، مبيّنة الفروقات بين الشخصيات النسوية اللاتي استسلمن للمنظومة الاجتماعية الذكورية الصارمة وأولئك اللواتي تحدّينها جنباً إلى جنب مع مقاومة القهر الاستعماري. وتسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل الخطاب الأنثوي بوصفه أداة لغوية لمواجهة الخطاب الذكوري المهيمن، للتعبير عن موقعهن المهمّش داخل بنى استعمارية وتقليدية متشابكة. تظهر النتائج أن النساء الجزائريات تمكّن، عبر توظيف اللغة بوصفها أداة تفكيك وتحدي ، من تقويض البنى الذكورية و الاستعمارية السلطوية و بالتالي استعادة أصواتهن المعنّية داخل سياق تاريخي طبعه التهميش والصمت القسري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النساء الجزائريات ، الخطاب، التحدي، المقاومة، النظام الذكوري.

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1- Introduction:

Written by both male and female writers settling or originating from former French colonies, Francophone literature appeared to be among the most thought-provoking and interesting literatures in the last decades. The term francophone implies French-speaking just, like the terms Anglophone and hispanophone indicate English speakers or Spanish speakers as adhered by (Corcoran, 2007). The most interesting aspect about francophone literature lies in its postcolonial aspect. Thus, francophone literature is not confined to metropolitan French literature. Interestingly, writers of francophone literature may go through vigorous efforts to express a typical cultural identity and reject French cultural norms. The Congolese poet and author Mabanckou states that being a francophone writer implies being a source "of cultures a whirlwind of universes" (2017, p: 5).

So being a francophone writer is to profit "from the heritage of French literature in general, but it is above all to bring a personal touch to a harmonious whole; one that dissolves borders, erases race, reduces the distance between continents in order to achieve a fraternity in both language and the universe" (qtd. in Katz, 2011,p: n.p.). (Mabanckou, 2017) found it pertinently convenient to combine the two worlds of French and francophone literature. He adds that the term francophone is highly questionable as it implies imperialism. Extending this idea, he assumes that when a person talks about francophone literature, it subsequently implies a literature inaugurated outside France, mainly by authors from former French colonies. One of the main aims of the new world literature in French is to stop looking at the world as if it were a pure production of the colonial period putting European writers at the center and other writers at the gate

Since French literature is associated with any literary production produced by French writers, it is generally aligned with marginalized and colonized cultures. If French literature is a literature written by people in France, francophone literature is, thus, equated with marginalized cultures. Regarding this, Mabanckou (2017) explains further that French literature is the literary production of writers of French origins since the French language "has always played the role of a unit of measurement with regard to its own literary tradition and its place among the other 'great literatures' that have supposedly established the universal model of literary creation" (qtd. in Katz, 2011, p: n.p.). Hence, francophone literature appears to be a minor literature if compared to world literatures.

Garnier remarks that literary appellations such as 'périphériques', 'francophones' and 'postcoloniales' are the epitomes of a center and a periphery (2015, p: 09). In addition, he states that what is applicable to peripheral literature is also applicable to francophone literature that is often interlinked with French literature and postcolonial literature since it is concerned with reacting to a colonial or neocolonial power. In worse situations of bigotry and prejudice, peripheral literature is excluded from literary spheres. For example, the Sudanese writer Jamal Mahjoub said that finding his

debut novel at Foyles which is a major bookstore in London made him feel proud. However, after an unsuccessful preliminary seek out, he asked a salesperson if they accepted the book. The salesperson asked him to check the anthropology section. Mahjoub describes his disappointment:

Until then, I was convinced that I was a writer; I had published a novel; but in front of that shelf on the third floor, hidden in a corner like a secret shame, it was clear that I had been fooling myself: I was a humble anthropological informant. For obvious reasons (lack of interest and understanding, market, uselessness...) this literature was only considered for its function of providing information about little-known worlds (Mahjoub, 1998, p: n.p).

Commenting on this quote, we see that Mahjoub reports the moment he found his novel placed not in the fiction or literary section where novels are typically shelved, but in the anthropology section of Foyles, a major bookstore in London. This is profoundly symbolic suggesting that his work was not viewed as a creative or literary achievement but rather an ethnographic or cultural curiosity, similar to an anthropological case study of African life.

French remained dominant even in countries that have been brutalized by the French regime like Algeria where the main aim was to resist French and proclaim cultural self-affirmations, whereas, the policy of 'Arabisation' did not really flourish if compared to francophone literature written by Algerian writers. Regarding this, the Algerian poet Tahar Djaout explained in a 1996 interview that, regardless of the decision to change Algeria's official language into Arabic after the Franco-Algerian War, French remained the primary language of literary production (qtd in Katz, 2011, p: 11). In this context, Djaout (2011) argues that the main objective of the policy of Arabization was eclipsing the French language. Yet, the French language persisted even after those long years of Arabization.

Thus, the production of Knowledge in Algeria is done mainly in French. He adds: "whether we like it or not, it must be taken into account when all is said and done, what we must be interested in nowadays is not the language in which one expresses oneself but what it is saying (qtd in Katz 2011, p: 4). This quote implies that the use of French as a medium of expression after the war of liberation was compulsory even after the Arabization of education. This similarly means that the French language is inevitable and it cannot be excluded from the literary and scientific panorama of the new Algeria, because it is already acquired. However, the French language became a means to

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denounce colonialism and its aftermaths. Therefore, the focus should not be in what language the authors and critics are going to share their ideas, but rather on the qualities of ideas this language conveys. Through *Children of the New World* (1962) Female characters have their own unique means of using language to define themselves.

However, while trying to do so, the dialogue between these two entities seems to be, most of the time, misbalanced. In this view of things, the novel can be viewed as a double anti-colonial discourse in the sense that it can be considered as a feminist discourse, for it depicts women as strong creatures who are no longer willing to be submissive to their patriarchs. Nonetheless, it condemns the French colonialism.

Despite the vast scholarship on Djébar's works, insufficient studies were maintained on the significance of discourse and language in her *Children of the New World* (1962) by focusing on women's efforts to sound their voices, with the aim of scrutinizing whether the dialogue and language they use will enable them to find their own being in a male dominated society. After making a close reading to Assia Djébar's novel *Children of the New World* (1962), two types of female characters are distinguished; those who succumb to patriarchy and those who denounce it. Yet, both are enduring a tough life of endless pain and agony; an agony of pain due to colonialism which all Algerians suffer of and another agony of male dominance which only women suffer from. The first are female characters who chose to refute the harsh conventions of society in general and male-dominance in particular by blasting the ice of silence. Those female characters are tenacious enough to resist this form of double colonialism. They proved that a woman has the potential of accomplishing a multitude of feats and achieve boundless success. They pursued academic enrichment, dedicating themselves to educational advancement and intellectual growth and had even joined the fighters devoting themselves to the liberation of Algeria during the war of independence. Divergently, the second category of female characters is that of those who succumb to their bitter reality and chose to sigh silently instead of resisting male-chauvinism (Sadiqi, 2009, p: 23).

Based on the aforementioned introduction, we may address the following questions: first, how does Assia Djébar's *Children of the New World* (1962) use language and discourse to allow Algerian women to declare their identity within the overlapping oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy? Second, in what way does the novel's portrayal of women's linguistic expression challenge traditional gender roles and double colonialism in Algerian society? Finally, What role does language (play in shaping postcolonial identity and feminist resistance in the novel? To answer these questions, the study adopts a qualitative interdisciplinary approach integrating literary discourse analysis to examine the representation of female voices and discourse in the novel. To undertake this, a close reading of the novel has been conducted to analyze the narrative strategies, dialogue,

and language use that portray women's resistance and submission. Henceforth, the research will focus on discourse analysis to uncover how patriarchal language structures are built, defied, or reinforced in the text. Furthermore, postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks are adopted to contextualize linguistic resistance within broader political, social and cultural dimensions of colonialism, nationalism and gender oppression.

2- Female Characters Resisting Patriarchal Discourse through Language

The following extracts are instances of female characters challenging existing social structures and empowering themselves through female bonding, as male-female bonding is portrayed as demanding in a patriarchal society. Represented as educated women or traditional housewives, Algerian women display outstanding courage and insistence in challenging male dominance and societal conventions. Their quest of self-fulfillment is powerfully exemplified through their interactions with male counterparts. Even when they wrestled patriarchal supremacy, they kept pursuing purpose and agency in a society that often overturns their individuality.

2.1- Cherifa's Reaction:

To start with, when her husband inquires her to leave home with aggression, "Cherifa was facing him; her eyes were not lowered; a simple movement of her head shook back a lock of dark hair; her mouth opened slowly only to trace a mercilessly gentle smile, the smile of triumph" (Djebar, 1962, p:16). Here, although Cherifa does not react to her husband's rebuke, she does not shed a tear. Rather, she revealed a silent but brutal self-defense mechanism; a cold "merciless gentle smile" which implies her fearless and firm attitude to this scolding.

Another instance where the same character shows a powerful reaction to social ill thoughts and stereotypical believes is provoked when Cherifa was whistled at insolently as she has been found around ten looking for her husband Youssef; as the following quote indicates: Cherifa has finally found Youssef's shop-after stopping two boys at around ten. The first, whistling insolently, took her for a prostitute. And let out a cheerful series of obscenities (Djebar, 1962, P: 142). Though Cherifa was so worried about her husband who was sought-after by the French officers and was in a hurry to ask him to hide, male characters thought her a promiscuous woman just because she went out in a day hour where women were not supposed to go out as it was conventionally assumed. As a reaction she protests:

I am his wife, May God strike me blind if I'm lying! I am his wife and I must wait for him. Yahia doesn't trust the situation. He's sorry he can't do it. He's sure of himself and his principles: a veiled woman in the street at this hour

who told him that she's just crossed the whole town? That can't be Youssef's wife.

(Djébar, 1962, p: 142)

However, even the shop assistant didn't allow her to wait for her husband there; despite the fact that she swore by Allah that she is Youssef's wife. Though she was veiled, she was considered as a dishonored woman, for a woman should be staying at home during that day hour so as to confirm to the norms of a patriarchal society. Denouncing this disclaimer, Cherifa remained there until she met her husband.

2.2-Amna's Reaction:

As for Amna, Cherifa's friend, she is also able to confront her husband, Hakim: a police inspector, when he asks her about Youssef, fearlessly. Again, her reaction speaks louder. When he asks her, she stares at him and does not tell him the truth although she has never done so. Even Hakim notices that she has changed and toughened. He "thinks of [her], of the tone of her voice when she answered, of her eyes....He had long ago become used to her silent presence, a wan person who listens to orders, bends her head, goes away, a faithful echo"(Djébar, 1962, p:50). Amna's husband is staggered by the new version of his wife, for he is accustomed to her being submissive, obedient, and fearful. His astonishment gives the readers a hint that these women are living in an unbending patriarchal society that hamper women's potential. Subsequently, Amna's internal monologues and long ago submissive attitudes symbolizes the failure of spousal communication in the Algerian society.

2.3- Zineb's Reaction:

Zineb, anti-patriarchal reaction is well illustrated when her brother, Youssef, asks her to marry while not being convinced with the suitor.

She had dared to answer back to her brother;[H]e questioned her in a worried voice. "What do you hold against him?" Rebellion in her tone, she answered, 'Nothing, I just can't stand him,' and then, more gently, to herself, 'He isn't handsome, he isn't ugly, but I don't want him to come near me, I don't want him touching me!' (Djébar, 1962, p: 28)

With full determination, Zineb dared to face her brother telling him about the reason why she rejected the man who proposed to her revealing that physical attraction is as important as mental compatibility and intellectual equivalence. Like Cherifa and Amna, Zineb also has that courage to use a rebellious tone.

2.4- Salima's Reaction:

Salima plays the role of the matriarch in this example as she became the family provider. Being the eldest, she undertook the burden of males and started to cater for the family's well-being. She "saw

herself..., since she was the oldest, that she would 'behave like a man.' She'd confront any difficulty so she could take care of the rest of her family as soon as possible" (Djebar, 1962, p: 64). This indicates Salima's strength and courage as she sustains an entire family in a male-dominated society. Another example that makes the idea clearer is when the narrator states: "the first time she felt ... pride was when she left high school, her diploma secured, and then again later, under similar circumstances, she'd always been gripped by the conceit of believing herself to be the delegate of her people to another world" (Djebar, 1962, p: 64).

In the light of this quotation, one can conclude that as an educated woman, Salima acts as a voice for her people making decisions and advocating their needs and concerns after she took the responsibilities of the whole family as soon as she left school. The narrator later on adds: "After all, yes, she'd proved herself to be faithful to her oath: she'd behaved like a man" (Djebar, 1962, p: 65). Her 'oath' and great impulse to act like a man indicates Salima's desire and attempt to free herself from the imposed male authority that limit women's potential and prove them helpless creatures. Furthermore, her educative level also seems to contribute in shaping, strengthening, and inspiring her to behave likewise.

2.5-Lila's Reaction:

In addition to the above-mentioned characters, Lila, the university student, also manifests tendencies of obstinacy and this appears when Ali tells her: "Defiance looks good on you. He says vaguely, not realizing he's paid her a compliment. Addressing her, Ali would say "Lila....Ali repeats and stares at her blush and pout furiously at the same time, as she makes every effort to maintain the fierce glare in her eyes (yes, he was right, it was defiance)" (Djebar, 1962, p: 110). Though silence denotes a passive attitude, Lila's fierce glare; or frown implies the hidden strength of her personality. He tried to tease her telling her 'defiance looks good on you', but she feels flattered instead.

2.6-Hassiba's Reaction:

Another character who proved to be a powerful and daring woman is Hassiba especially when she declares that she wants to join the fighters despite her young age of sixteen saying: "I want to shed my blood for the revolution" (Djebar, 1962, p: 148-146). The Algerian fighters were critical about this situation and have inquired what she could do if she joined them and then, she answered: "nurse, make bandages, give injections, etc" (Djebar, 1962, p: 146). So, she ensures them that she could hold nursing responsibilities. To sound more serious, the fighters confirm that they have to travel by night barefoot if needed. Well determined about her decision, Hassiba certifies: "I want to work with the fighters night and day. Hassiba is well prepared; no other thought has occupied her mind. She never

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questioned the cause (Djébar, 1962, p: 148-146). This reveals Hassiba's unwavering attitude and strong desire to serve the Algerian revolution.

Unlike other Algerian women who could absolutely do nothing about their situations; those who had succumbed to pain, to the ill social thoughts, to male pejorative dominance, etc. Hassiba became as a martyr and was considered a symbol of Algerian women's participation in the Algerian war for independence.

3- Other Examples of Females Linguistic Defiance:

An example which clearly indicates men's way of thinking and their opinions about women education is clear through Lila's grandfather comment about the education of his granddaughter : "She's a girl! She can perfectly well attend the Koranic school, just like the rest. It'll be just quite enough for her (Djébar, 1962, p: 129). Yet, Lila's father, Rachid, was against. Disapproving his father's argument, he said: "times are changing and even girls will need to be properly prepared (Ibid)! The grandfather responds saying that as long as she is young, she is his daughter, but "when she's a woman she must be the repository of our honor" (Ibid). Through this excerpt, Lila's grandfather thinks that a koranic education is sufficient to his granddaughter as the social and religious norms dictate. His intellectual son, Lila's father, thinks that a girl should learn other sciences besides Koran and that girls are supposed to be equally educated because the times are changing as well. However, the grandfather thinks that a highly educated girl would damage the family reputation and honor. Through using their voice, female characters tried to challenge the outdated styles of thinking believing that a family's reputation should not be tied to suppressing women's aspirations but to fostering their success. Educated Algerian women tried to suppress these regressive social attitudes through breaking such stereotypes rather than conforming to them.

Another instance which indicates a similar way of thinking to that of the grandfather is when the narrator depicts the way Ali prevent his fiancée from teaching because of his ill thoughts and uncontrolled jealousy; and this is obvious when he says: "I've been told that such and such students go there just to see you to make advances to you" (Djébar, 1962, p: 148-146). Ali would forbid Lila from teaching because of his selfishness and ill- thoughts. He assumes that students are only coming to stare at her dazzling beauty and that would arose his jealousy. However, she showed an inward resistance, an inward loathing to the man who is going to be her husband. That feeling would sooth her and bring a feeling of ecstasy as it is made clear through the quote:

Annoyed, she'd say nothing. He'd also say I want you all to myself. she thought inwardly: you think you have me under your thumb....you think you're my master. And unruffled hate went through her like mad laughter hardened and ambushed that was how she later fallen into happiness.

(Djebar, 1962, p: 156)

Later on, Lila emphasizes her emancipated view when she expresses her feelings to her educated father; ensuring him about her desire to remain a maiden for the rest of her life ensuring that her independence and freedom were to be devoted entirely to her country. Rachid would say later on: "my daughter is a liberated woman (Djebar,1962.p:133).Lila thinks that to devote her own freedom and liberty to her own country is far away better than recklessly devoting it to a man who does not deserve her and for that reason she dismissed the idea of marriage. Her intellectual father thinks that his daughter is liberated from the shackles of patriarchy.

4- Conclusion:

Through Assia Djebar's *Children of the New World*(1962), a cornerstone of modern Algerian Francophone literature, female protagonists symbolize resistance against entangled colonial coercion and patriarchal hegemony, transcending binary oppositions to assert agency. By avoiding a singular heroine for a polyphonic ensemble, Djebar rewrites history as a feminist manifesto, exposing postcolonial hypocrisy while asserting women's resilience and vocal agency.

Accordingly, the novel that belongs to modern Algerian literature aims at valorizing the contributions of women; warriors or housewives, after being unseen and unheard. The particularity of this novel is the fact that the writer does not have an individual heroine or protagonist, but a set of heroines. Djebar examines the type of relationship that links each couple. Henceforth, the novel is said to be told from the third person point of view as it involves the audience into the stories of multiple couples and their standpoints regarding one another and their position regarding the Algerian war of independence. Through analyzing the way women characters use discourse to challenge patriarchal practices, we notice that the selected female characters showed resistance, courage and resilience to proclaim their rights and change the existing stereotypical conceptions towards Algerian women. This narrative is critical of the hypocrisy of the newly independent society that pursues political release though refuting ladies independence. Patriarchs similar to Lila's grandfather, who believe that intellectual women will damage family honor, epitomize the ingrained conservatism that Djebar defies. In dissimilarity, figures like Lila's father and the brave women demonstrate the possibility of development, evidencing that real freedom cannot be realized without providing women with equal opportunities. Eventually, *Children of the New World*(1962) transcends the historical narrative of the Algerian quest for independence and is reckoned to be a feminist manifesto supporting women's self-assertion, and autonomy.

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Djébar's depiction of women who reject this imposed silence either by colonial imperialism or domestic oppression strengthens the impression that resilience is achieved with the declaration of one's voice. The novel, hence, functions as both a criticism of Algeria's postcolonial inconsistencies and is, thus, evidence to the influence of women's defiance in reforming dominant systems. By making the voiceless voiced, Djébar does not purely manuscripts history, but rather rewrites it, confirming that women's fights and victories are no longer downgraded. Subsequently, the novel under discussion is considered a prominent literary work, throughout the Francophone, postcolonial and feminist discourse.

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