

**Unveiling the Self through
Autobiography and
Language in Assia Djébar's
l'Amour, la fantasia.**

**Louisa Matmati
Department of English
LECUCRA Laboratory
Badji Mokhtar
University- Annaba**

Language is no longer linked to the knowing of things, but to human freedom. (Michel Foucault)

You see, I'm writing, and there is no harm in it, no impropriety! It's simply a way of saying I exist, pulsating with life! Is not writing a way of telling what "I" am? (Assia Djébar)

Abstract

*My paper focuses on Assia Djébar's particularity of writing in her novel **l'Amour, la fantasia**. It will emphasize the writer's approach to autobiography as a polyphonic text and her treatment of the struggle for identity in a self that is divided by language and culture. It explores Djébar's troubled relationship with the French language in her writing of an autobiography which she considers both veiling and unveiling*

Assia Djébar is one of Algeria's most prolific writers and one of the most internationally acclaimed women writers. Her work is mainly linked to Algeria's contemporary social reality and history, to her female identity, to women's predicaments and to the question of language, among others.

In this paper, I will focus on her novel *l'Amour, la Fantasia* (*Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*), published in 1985, the first of her 'Algerian quartet' and the one which

Résumé

*Mon papier traite de la particularité de l'écriture de Assia Djébar dans son roman **l'Amour, la fantasia**. Il fera ressortir l'approche autobiographique de l'écrivaine en tant que texte polyphonique ainsi que son traitement de la quête de l'identité dans un Moi divisé par la langue et la culture. Ce papier traitera par conséquent de la relation trouble et paradoxale qu'entretient Djébar avec la langue Française dans son écriture de l'autobiographie, la considérant comme étant à la fois voilante et dévoilante.*

best illustrates the particularity of her writing: her approach to autobiography as a polyphonic text, as well as her treatment of the struggle for identity in a self divided by language and culture.

In *l'Amour, la Fantasia*, Djébar starts a “dialogue” between herself (*her* story) and the *history* of her people, in a constant search for identity. Being split between two cultures and two languages she finds herself pulled by a double heritage which forces her to examine herself independently of the two cultures which influenced her. Her approach is egocentric in the sense that the great part of her work is motivated by her own interrogations, her frustrations and pains. She remains at the core of her literature even when she gives the voice to the other women characters. This gives her work a strong autobiographical tendency.

The first chapter opens with, “A little Arab girl going to school for the first time, walking hand in hand with her father” (*Fantasia...3*)¹, and ends with “I set off at dawn, with my little girl’s hand in mine”(5)². The second chapter appears to change topics since Djébar opens it with “Dawn on this thirteenth day of June 1830”(4)³ the day of Algeria’s conquest, but in truth it is as if the individual story and the Algerian collective history are tightly linked to each other and therefore go hand in hand. This is precisely what the novel is about. The collective is a kind of starting point, an identity base on which to lean to assert the self-fulfillment of the “je” (“I”). So Djébar’s search for identity is established through a continuous authorial movement between “I” and the “others.” She situates her origin beyond her personal story.

Knowing her identity is only possible through the others who bring her progressively to the initial point and give her the whole human and political history from which she comes, she owes her own story to the successive generations of women who helped her understand the origin of her own femininity, the nature of her heritage, which would shed light on her story as an Algerian woman. Djébar’s self-identity depends on her relation to the other women of her country, but the latter need her experience to get rid of the weight of patriarchal tradition and then be closer to each other as a collective (Mortimer 76). The writer’s search and that of her anonymous characters are symbiotic and could be fulfilled through their shared experiences as women.

Since her childhood, Djébar felt that she was torn between two cultures. From her father, she gets the access to knowledge and she develops a certain intellectual curiosity due to her double education: French and Kuranic. She then deepens her studies and escapes from the veil and confinement of the women of her generation. From her mother and grandmothers she inherits a certain sense of decency, within a culture in which women are silenced, resigned and submissive. This double culture has two direct consequences on the writer: on one hand, formal education and exile give her self-confidence and reinforce her desire for self-expression and liberty of movement. On the other, this acquired freedom and education exclude her from the circle of women to which she would have belonged.

In this culture where self-expression and self-assertion are forbidden, women are part of a microcosm where they remain anonymous but feel solidarity and protection. Aware of her differences, the writer never experiences such security. Assia Djébar feels exiled, uprooted. She explains her duality: “These two different apprenticeships, undertaken simultaneously, land me in a dichotomy of location...an incipient vertige” (184-5) ⁴. Torn between two cultural models, and frightened by the situation of her fellow women, the narrator lets her ego develop by itself. Her ego becomes her point of reference, her only refuge. She has to say “je” (“I”) to survive the duality and grow up in the light of these two sources of education, hence the paradox: the individual needs the collective in order to express herself and be validated. A search for origins—a necessary step—proposes a trip in time that will become the initiating path to the self. As Jennifer Steadman observes, “travel serves as a powerful tool for Djébar operating as a trope for her recovery of Algerian women’s history”

L’Amour, la Fantasia constitutes a journey into the past and present of Algerian women. For Steadman, “[Djébar’s] journeys to collect and present women’s voices, allow them to be heard and to become shapers of discourse and agents of social and political change” (174).

Djébar consciously mixes and “blurs genres by incorporating travel narrative, historical colonial documents, interviews and autobiography” (Steadman 175). Djébar focuses on the French conquest, as recorded in archives and written documents, in the first two parts of the novel. However, it is destabilized by the oral

testimonies of women freedom fighters in the third part. In fact, the very structure of the text is a journey full of meaning: the interweaving of the writer's childhood memories with historical accounts of the colonial invasion of Algeria and the oral testimonies connects the history of resistance to colonial oppression. Djébar implies that women continue to be active agents engaged in past and present freedom struggles, and she then claims their heritage of resistance. Likewise, the juxtaposition of past and present highlights Djébar's individual relationship to her foremothers. Steadman points out that her travels to collect stories "take her from her own position as a Western educated intellectual to the houses and lives of her subaltern counterparts, middle class women silenced by the harem and peasant women who fought with the Algerian resistance" (175-6). Her travel suggests "the necessity of moving from silence to speech" (Steadman 176).

Djébar attempts to shed light on a certain blindness concerning women by revealing the multiplicity of their experiences and voices in her text. However, this attempt to illuminate women's history is complicated by her writing in the language of the colonizer and her ambivalent attitude towards the French language, ("the stepmother tongue")^[5] as she defines it. French language offers the narrator access to texts in archives that narrate the conquest and contain traces of Algerian women's violent past: it allows her to search for historical connections that have formed her identity. But this western education and the language also, cut her off from the women's history she seeks to bring to light. This matter is nicely illustrated by the passage in her novel entitled "La Tunique de Nessus" ("Nessus' Tunic") and its meaning, evoking all the contradictions of that image.

The passage opens like the novel itself with the image of the narrator going to school with her father: "My father, a tall erect figure in a fez, walks down the village street; he pulls me by the hand and I, who for so long was so proud of myself—the first girl in the family to have French dolls bought for her,...I walk down the street, holding my father's hand"(213)⁶.

The opportunity to be able to go to school, which is denied to the other little girls, is simultaneously positive and negative to the narrator. This "gift" of a western education that her father offered her means that she can leave the harem, but also that she must be estranged from the other women. The narrator's conflicted attitude

towards the language is heightened when she compares her schooling to a “forced marriage.” Her father has “‘given’ [her] before [she] was nubile” (213)⁷. He has given her to the “enemy camp” (213), symbolizing the French language. But this negative image of the father giving his daughter to the enemy is followed by a more positive opinion “it was understood among my female cousins that I was privileged to be my father’s ‘favorite’ since he has unhesitatingly preserved me from cloistering” (14)⁸.

The paradox remains in the narrator’s mind: is her father’s gift a proof of love or of condemnation? In other words, is it a gift or a curse? And the ambivalence recurs several times in the text when the narrator talks about writing. Mildred Mortimer explains:

the day that Assia Djebar’s father escorted her to school...he set her on bilingual, bicultural, indeed an ambiguous journey that freed her from the female enclosure but sent her into a form of exile away from the majority of her sisters. (Mortimer 202)

Djebar acknowledges that French could be her “liberation corporelle” (body’s freedom), or women’s liberation (liberation de femme):

“Doesn’t your daughter wear a veil yet?” asks one or other of the matrons...I must be thirteen, or possibly fourteen’

“She reads!”(meaning she studies) my mother replies stiffly’ (179)⁹.

The study of the French language brings her the right to be unveiled and also the freedom of movement in the public space. “as soon as I learned the foreign script, my body began to move as if by instinct!” (181)¹⁰.

Ironically, it is her father (the guardian of the patriarchal law) who takes her out of the section of the village into the world of colonial France. The neighbors are horrified, predicting that “Misfortune will inevitably befall them. Any girl who has had some schooling will have learned to write and will without a doubt write ‘that’ fatal letter” (3)¹¹. Inevitably, this prediction takes place some years later. Djebar’s father intercepts a letter from a boy written in French and intended for the narrator. He destroys it very quickly before she reads it, not without showing anger. The father’s anger and destruction of the letter transforms it into “the cryptic expression of some sudden, desperate passion” (4)¹²

This event starts her “education sentimentale,” (sentimental education), which leads to other love affairs mediated through French language: “our secret correspondence is carried on in French” (4)¹³ Given to her by her father, the French language “serves as a go-between” (4)¹⁴. From the start, the French language seems to be a source of conflict for the narrator. Like her, the language is in the hands of the father. It is the language of the male-gendered public space which liberates her from the cloistered life of her cousins and all the other women. But her father’s rage shows that for her, French is also the language of violence. The father’s action informs the narrator that French is the language of a public space in which she is free to move, but the private space of the body –“the site of love and rape is to be denied her.” It seems that the father’s control of language is putting another sort of veil on the body of the narrator which has been freed from the confines of the harem by that same language.

Yet Djébar also suggests that the French language could be an agent of potential change. The narrator relates an anecdote about her father mailing a postcard to her mother during one of his absences. This “commonplace enough event in any other society”, (36) became a revolution: “the radical change in customs was apparent for all to see: my father had written his wife’s name, in his own handwriting, on a postcard which was going to travel from one town to another, which was going to be exposed to so many masculine eyes” (37)¹⁵

The women were scandalized! “He wrote his wife’s name and the postman must have read it? Shame!...” (37)¹⁶. As Monique Gadant points out, the women in such a society has no name, no voice: “la femme est celle que les hommes ne doivent pas évoquer en public autrement que par l’impersonnel”: ‘Comment va la maison?’” (“In public, men must evoke the woman only through the impersonal: ‘How is the household?’”; the translation is mine). The “radical change” is that her father not only names his wife but he denotes their status as a couple when he writes “Madame” followed by his surname.

This postcard is also meaningful in the light of her mother’s learning French. “I must remind you that I’ve learned to read French now!” (38)¹⁷. Studying French empowers the narrator’s mother to wage many revolutions at the level of personal identity. It allows her to address her husband with the possessive pronoun *my* (husband) instead of the impersonal *him* (lui). She even starts to call her husband by his name, Tahar.

In this sense, Djébar considers the French language as an instrument of female empowerment. By learning French, Djébar's mother reformulates her relation to her husband and by extension, to herself and the outside world. The narrator notes:

My father had dared "to write" to my mother. Both of them referred to each other by name, which was tantamount to declaring openly their love for each other, my father by writing to her, my mother by quoting my father hence forward without false shame in all her conversations (38)¹⁸.

The power of the French language comes from its nature as being the language "du dehors" (Djébar, A. "Entretien avec Assia Djébar" 186), meaning the language of the outside, of the foreigner, of the public space. It makes possible the "exit" from the harem—whether symbolic or real—where women are cloistered. However, such exit, such freedom may be possible, but its price is high. Women such as Assia Djébar, who have been "liberated" thanks to writing and the French language, find themselves exiled from their Algerian female counterparts.

Assia Djébar writes:

I have been moving freely outside the harem, since my adolescence, but every place I travel through is nothing but a wilderness. In cafés, in Paris, or elsewhere, I am surrounded by murmuring strangers (219)¹⁹.

To come back to the image of the Nessus Tunic and its representation, we can say that it is both beneficial and harmful. It functions both as a burden and as a blessing, but it is unavoidable.

Djébar, who considers the French language her "stepmother tongue", given to her by her father, cherishes the freedom of movement, but laments the estrangement from the silent women to whom she wants to give voices:

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 (142)²⁰.

She felt that this language of the conquerors structured her identity and that as she says, "the French tongue, with its body and voice has established a proud presidio within me while the mother-tongue all oral tradition, all rags and tatters, resists and attacks between two

breathing spaces” (215)²¹. Instead of permitting this battle to continue to tear her apart, as Katherine Gracki mentions, Assia Djébar has no other alternative than to “redefine her problematic relationship to the French language not by reconciling herself harmoniously with French but by taking it as one would –what Kateb Yacine called– a ‘war booty’ (“un butin de guerre”) (836).

The colonizer’s language, this “butin de guerre”, becomes an effective instrument in the hands of Djébar in her search for identity and recuperation of the collective memory. In other words, she uses the colonizer’s weapons to fight him. As Gracki points out, this appropriation is best symbolized by the mutilated hand of an anonymous Algerian woman that Eugene Fromentin, French artist, threw away at the time of the conquest. The section entitled “Air on a Nay” closes the novel with a scene taken from the writing of Fromentin. Fromentin, who visits Laghouat after a terrible siege, describes one “sinister detail”: “as he is leaving the oasis which six months after the massacre is still filled with its stench, Fromentin picks up out of the dust the severed hand of an anonymous Algerian woman. He throws it again in the path” (226)²². The narrator adds: “later I seize on this living hand, hand of mutilation and of memory, and I attempt to bring it to the qalam” (pen) (226)²³.

So, whereas Fromentin rejects the hand, testament of the violence, Djébar places it in the center of her text, giving life back to this fragment of the unknown woman, creating a chain of memories. The hands of mutilated Algerian women are testaments to the violent fragmentation that physically and psychologically occurred to these women. Gracki notes: “the wounded female body comes to represent an Algeria raped and left bleeding in the dust” (836).

Similarly, the idea of appropriation of the collective history of Algeria through the French language is explained by Pélissier’s gesture when, as the narrator mentions, he “*hands* me his report” (79). She is almost grateful to him. She explains:

I am moved by the impulse to thank Pelissier for his report...which allows me to

reach out today to our own dead and weave a pattern of French words around them

(DSB 78)...Pelissier, speaking on behalf of his long drawn-out-agony, on behalf of

fifteen hundred corpses buried beneath El-Kantara, with their flocks, hands me his report, and I accept this palimpsest on which I now inscribe the charred passion of my ancestors (79)²⁴.

But Djébar is ridden with guilt as she records this tragedy in the “enemy’s tongue.” With the colonizer’s tools, what can writing be for the writer, if not another imperative to explore the annals of history, to descend deeper, and to dig under?

Nearly one and a half centuries after Pelissier and Saint Arnaud, I am practicing a very special kind of spelaeology, since in my descent into those dark caverns my only hand-holds are words in the French language—reports, accounts, evidence from the past (77)²⁵.

Because she writes in the language of the oppressor Djébar is indeed aware of the painful dividedness of this gesture. And in spite of the hopes to use the enemy’s tongue to start a fire, the writer is aware of the power of the language to mask rather than reveal identity:

By laying myself bare in this language, I start a fire that may consume me...Autobiography practiced in the enemy’s language has the texture of fiction, at least as long as you are desensitized by forgetting the dead that writing insurrects. While I thought I was undertaking a “journey through myself, I find I am simply choosing another veil” (215-6)²⁶.

She adds: How shall I find the strength to tear off my veil, unless I have to use it to bandage the running sore nearby from which words exude? (219)²⁷.

She resumes:

The French language for me had nothing to do with Sartre or Camus; it is the language of those people coming into my land with colonial conquest...They write and they kill as they write...before driving into my present life and sounding my own inner self, I had to describe the childhood of this language that structures me. So...in *l’Amour, la Fantasia*, I evoke the language of the nineteenth century conquest in

conjunction with that little girl learning to write for the first time (qt. in von Rosk).

Using the French narratives of conquest that she uncovers in the archives, Djébar writes in the language of Amable Matterer, the conqueror who: “writes of the confrontation, dispassionately, objectively...I, in my turn, write, using his language, but more than one hundred and fifty years later” (7)²⁸.

Likewise, the women’s testimonies in the third part of the novel emphasize her troubled relationship with the French language while showing that it is “part and parcel” of Algeria’s colonial past. In this section, Djébar has to forge a chain of memories that link marginalized voices. Those women need a go-between to transcribe their testimonies as they are illiterate:

“Alas! We can’t read or write. We don’t leave any accounts of what we lived through and all we suffered!” (148)²⁹.

Djébar listens to them and allows them to bear witness within her own life story. Thus, she strengthens her conception of autobiography as collaborative work dependent on fragments from her own life and that of the women to whom she gives voice, who were forgotten and ignored by their male fellows once the independence of the country was acquired. These forgotten witnesses attempt to break through the sedimentary layers of the memory by giving first person accounts of their painful experiences of war. “In speaking to the listening group every woman finds relief from her deep inner hurt.” (154)³⁰.

Their suffering and that of the author cannot be healed because that is impossible—but it can be “mitigated through the ‘autobiography in the plural’” (Hughes). This collective autobiography through a polyphonic text may be the solution for Djébar when it comes to “escaping the alienation inherent in expression in the enemy’s language” (Huughe).

For Djébar, as mentioned before, writing autobiography in French is traumatic; she has to confront the silenced cries and affinities that inform her identity as an Algerian woman:

“To attempt an autobiography using French words alone is to lend oneself to the vivisector’s scalpel, revealing what lies beneath the skin. Wounds are reopened, veins weep, one’s own blood flows and that of others, which has never dried.” (156)³¹.

In other words, speaking of oneself in the language of the “Outsider” is indeed to unveil oneself, to strip oneself “naked” as the Algerian Arabic means by the word “Unveil.”

Language is indeed a very important means for self-definition. But the most important thing is to be able to feel free to say “I” in whatever language without any consideration.

The novel concludes with a play on “voices” constructed in a musical pattern. Is it not a kind of harmony that Djébar is yearning for herself, for the women, for the country?

Endnotes:

* *Fantasia* is the abbreviation of *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade*, Dorothy s Blair's translation of Assia Djebbar's *L'Amour, La Fantasia* All subsequent citation are from Blair's translation.

¹ "fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l'école, main dans la main du père".

² "ma fillette me tenant la main, je suis partie à l'aube" (13).

³ "Aube de ce 13 Juin 1830" (14).

⁴ "Ces apprentissages simultanés mais de mode si différent, m'installent...dans une dichotomie de l'espace...un début de vertige" (261).

⁵ "la langue mâtresse" (298).

⁶ "le père, silhouette droite et le fez sur la tête marche dans la rue du village; sa main me tire moi qui longtemps me croyait si fière—moi la première de la famille à laquelle on achetait des poupées françaises,... je marche, fillette, au dehors main dans la main du père" (297).

⁷ "m'aurait donné avant l'âge nubile" (298).

⁸ "je jouissais du privilège reconnu d'être l'aimée de mon père, puisqu'il m'avait préservée sans hésiter de la claustration" (298).

⁹ Elle ne se voile donc pas encore ta fille? interroge telle on telle mantrone...Je dois

avoir treize, quatorze ans peut-être.

Elle lit! répond avec raideur ma mère (254).

¹⁰ "Mon corps s'est trouvé en mouvement dès la pratique de la langue étrangère" (256).

¹¹ "le malheur fondra inmanquablement sur eux [car] toute vierge savante saura écrire, écrira à coup sûr «la» lettre" (11).

¹² "un désir imprévu, hyperbolique" (12).

¹³ "la correspondance secrète se fait en Français" (12).

¹⁴ "devient entremetteuse" (12).

¹⁵ "Le fait, banal dans un autre monde, devenait" une révolution: "la révolution était manifeste: mon père de sa propre écriture, et sur une carte qui allait voyager de ville en ville, qui allait passer sous tant et tant de regards masculins, avait osé écrire le nom de sa femme".

¹⁶ "Il a mis le nom de sa femme et le facteur a dû ainsi le lire? Honte!" (57).

¹⁷ "Je vous apprends que j'ai appris à lire le Français maintenant!" (58).

¹⁸ Mon père avait osé «écrire» à ma mère. L'un et l'autre, mon père par l'écrit, ma mère dans ses nouvelles conversations où elle citait désormais

sans fausse honte son époux, se nommaient réciproquement, autant dire s'aimaient ouvertement. (58).

¹⁹ Circulant depuis mon adolescence hors du harem, je ne parcours qu'un désert des lieux. Les cafés, à Paris ou ailleurs, bourdonnent, des inconnus m'entourent: je m'oublie des heures à percevoir des voix sans visages (303).

²⁰ Mots torches qui éclairent mes compagnes, mes complices; d'elles, définitivement, ils me séparent. Et sous leur poids, je m'expatrie (203).

²¹ la langue Française, corps et voix, s'installe en moi comme un orgueilleux preside, tandis que la langue maternelle, toute en oralité, en hardes dépenaillées, résiste et attaque, entre deux essoufflements":(AF 299).

²²“au sortir de l'oasis que le massacre six mois après empuantait, Fromentin ramasse, dans la poussière une main coupée d'Algérienne anonyme. Il la jette ensuite sur son chemin” (313).

²³ “plus tard, je me saisis de cette main vivante, main de la mutilation, et du souvenir et je tente de lui faire porter le ‘qalam’” (313).

²⁴ Remercier Pélissier pour son rapport qui déclencha à Paris une tempête politique, mais aussi qui me renvoie nos morts vers lesquels j'élève aujourd'hui ma trame de mots français (113)...Pélissier, l'intercesseur de cette mort longue, pour mille cinq cent cadavres sous El Kantara, avec leurs troupeaux bêlant indéfiniment au trépas, me tend son rapport et je reçois ce palimpseste pour y inscrire à mon tour la passion calcinée des ancêtres. (115).

²⁵ Près d'un siècle et demi après Pélissier et Saint-Arnaud, je m'exerce à une spéléologie bien particulière, puisque je m'agrippe aux arêtes des mots français—rapports, narration, témoignages du passé. (113).

²⁶ Me mettre à nu dans cette langue me fait entretenir un danger permanent de déflagration...L'autobiographie pratiquée dans la langue adverse se tisse comme fiction, du moins tant que l'oubli des morts charriés par l'écriture n'opère pas son anesthésie. Croyant «me parcourir», je ne fais que choisir un autre voile. (300, 302).

²⁷ « Comment trouver la force de m'arracher le voile, sinon parce qu'il me faut en couvrir la plaie inguérissable, suant les mots tout à côté? » (304).

²⁸ “décrit cette confrontation, dans la plate sobriété du compte-rendu...A mon tour, j'écris dans sa langue, mais plus de cent cinquante ans après” (16).

²⁹ Hélas! Nous sommes des analphabètes. Nous ne laissons pas de récits de ce que nous avons enduré ou vécu! (212).

³⁰ Chaque femme, écorchée au-dedans, s'est apaisée dans l'écoute collective (221).

³¹ Tenter l'autobiographie par les seuls mots français, c'est, sous le lent scalpel de l'autopsie à vif, montrer plus que sa peau. Sa chair se desquame, semble-t-il, en lambeaux du parler d'enfance qui ne s'écrit plus. Les blessures s'ouvrent, les veines pleurent, coule le sang de soi et des autres, qui n'a jamais séché. (224).

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