

Arab Women's Narrative: Inventing Images of the Self by means of the Writing Act.

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Abstract

It is vital to call attention to a multiplicity of viewpoints regarding Feminism, religion and personality that are to be made known in French Arab Women's writings. Drawing attention to some major narratives and typical accounts produced by Arab women authors is also necessary due to the fact that Arab Muslim women's autobiographical writings have been portrayed by the West in general as submissive, silenced, dependent and oppressed.

This paper demonstrates that Muslim women writers, Assia Djebbar and Leila Abouzeid our selected writers, are active, intellectual feminists who are able to speak up for themselves, instead of being spoken by others, and respect their own religion and culture in diversity of ways.

Key Words: Arab French-speaking women's narratives, minor literature, cultural translation, written discourse, feminism, patriarchy, postcolonial literature⁴

Introduction

This article attempts to identify narratives created in French by women authors who are Arab or Arab immigrant of postcolonialismⁱ. These narratives are merely samples of

⁴ Postcolonial literature deals with the problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country and of a nation, especially the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated colonial peoples.

two famous women writers who are currently extensively known by Western critics and are of interest to numerous academics as well as researchers. Without a doubt, the earlier few decades have been marked by a noteworthy growth of concern in literary works created in foreign languages by Arab female writers who are described either as French speakers or Arabic.

The aim behind this small sample of Arabic fiction by women, throughout modern times is meant to focus on their voices, so as to understand that they are not in agreement with the distressing stereotyping of what some western scholars and non-scholars alike affirm Arab/Muslim women to be. These writers are without a shred of doubt neither docile, nor silent! They are basically making inquiries and questioning by way of their proud and ardent cleverness. All in all, they exist, through their vigorous voices for the simple reason that they are alive.

Interest in modern northern African women writers is becoming slowly but surely documented⁵. It was commonly believed that almost no former women were educated. In spite of that, empirical facts show that women writers who are no longer well-known today played surprisingly varied roles in the literary field throughout national liberation wars. In fact, scholars stress that the importance of attempting to discover and appreciate women's literature today is more visible nowadays than it was two decades ago. The documents collected in this paper deal with two modern female authorships during the twenties, ranging geographically from Morocco to Algeria.

Formerly, a small number of women came to public attention having the status of writers throughout the era mentioned above. Here are some names one may be familiar with. The first writer, Assia Djebbar (أسيا جبار), is a

⁵ The topic of Arab women's literature is not only poorly explored and reliant on supplementary investigations, but remains underdeveloped as well in view of the "critical and theoretical questioning of Arab women's modes of self-representation and personal narratives and the political function of their self/selves-writing.

Muslim woman, who was born Fatma Zohra Imalayen in Algeria to parents from the Berkani tribe of Dahra (Algeria). She adopted the pseudonym Assia Djebar when her first novel, *“La Soif”* [*“Hunger”*] was printed in France in 1957.

During the Algerian liberation war, she travelled with her husband in 1958 to Tunis, wherein she worked as a reporter, among Algerian refugee camps on the Tunisian border with the Red Cross. In 1962, she went back to Algeria to give accounts on the first days of Algeria’s independence. She started teaching at the University of Algiers in 1974. Four years later, she managed to make a film entitled *“The Nouba of the Women on Mont Chenoua”* with an Algerian TV company; which won the critics' prize at Venice. Her second film, *“La Zerda”*, won a prize at Berlin in 1983. When terrorism was raging in Algeria, around 1995, she began teaching at the University of Louisiana, Baton Rouge, and in 2002 was given the title of a Silver Chair at New York University. She is both a member of the Belgian Royal Academy and of the Académie Française.

The second writer, Leila Abouzeid, is regarded as an innovator among her Moroccan peers, mostly because of her affinity to write in Arabic instead of French. Her fascinating literary works have been translated into English, Dutch, German and Urdu. After brilliant studies at both the University of Texas and then the Mohamed V University in Rabat, she preferred to be a TV and radio journalist but soon felt the inner necessity to opt for a literary destination.

Writers like Assia Djebbar or the Moroccan Leila Abouzeid converge in particular, on two most important themes: the structure of female spaces or communities and women's exploitation of accessible and evolving literary genres. Their narratives for the most part examine the heterogeneity of third world women's experience since the lower class woman's voice dominates the text, therefore disordering the hierarchy among women. Usually, crucial focus is on texts in which women convey how they are

conscious of themselves and their world, or even of the prevailing repressive customs of patriarchy and colonialism.

With the hybridization⁶ of culture resulting from colonialism, native women's bodies have come to mean, within native male beliefs, areas of cultural infection, bodies contaminated by "diseases" of Western influence. In spite of that, these women writers get back women's bodies as sites of conflict to both the deep-seated "diseases" of the patriarchal class organization in addition to the surface "disease" of Western colonialism.

Leila Abouzeid as a Literary Innovator

Leila Abouzeid, an innovator among her Moroccan peers, mostly because of her affinity to write in Arabic instead of French. Her fascinating literary works have been translated into English, Dutch, German and Urdu. After brilliant studies at both the University of Texas and then the Mohamed V University in Rabat, she preferred to be a TV and radio journalist but soon felt the inner necessity to devote the rest of her career essentially on writing fiction.

Her first novel, "*Year of the Elephant*"⁷ (1983), tackled common themes in modern Moroccan literature, such as family conflict and divorce. However, Leila Abouzeid took a unique approach to these themes, by looking at them from the

⁶ According to Bakhtin, Mikhail (1988) hybridization is defined as a combination of two social languages inside the limits of a particular utterance (...) connecting two dissimilar linguistic perceptions, detached from one another by an era, by societal demarcation or by some other aspect.

⁷ Her first book called *Year of the Elephant* was published in 1980, and was published in English in 1989 by Texas University. Her book was not translated into French at any point. *Year of the Elephant* was named after a battle in Islamic history. The story of the battle is that during an early religious based battle, a flock of birds came and dropped stones on the enemy elephants, causing them to turn around. She compares this historic battle to the Moroccans battling for independence because they are mere birds compared to the gigantic global power of their French rulers.

perspective of a woman and exploring issues such as the conflict that often occurs between traditional culture and modernism, the value of a woman in Moroccan society and the true meaning of independence.

Among other Leila Abouzeid's work, one can cite for example her auto-biographical work *"Return to Childhood"* in which she narrates about of her personal family's fights throughout the nationalist struggle for the Moroccan independence. She calls attention to the obscurities and conflicts that a woman has to cope with in this type of conflict situation. Considered by critics as a gifted writer, she managed first to write themes exploring issues such as family struggle and separation, the clash that constantly takes place between customary culture and avant-gardism⁸.

Hatred with the French

Although she has become skilled at three languages-Arabic, French and English, she fervently refuses to make use of French as part of her writings, her radio program as well as her oral dramatic performances⁹. The reason behind this behavior is quite simple: French represents the language of the oppressor. Arabic is not only the real language of the Moroccan society, the sole language of her culture but also the language of Islam. In one of her book *The Last Chapter*, she clearly affirms in the closing chapter called *Afterword* that

"I was in a private school in Rabat where Arabic and French were the languages of instruction. I loathed reading in French and developed an aversion to using it outside the classroom. This early position against the language of the colonialist proved fortunate, as it kept me from becoming one of the post-colonial Maghrebi [North

⁸ Leila Abouzeid's primary focus is to make known for both Western and Middle Eastern readers the significance of a woman according to Moroccan beliefs as well as the loyal importance of independence.

⁹ For example, Leila read over the air the well known Malcom X's autobiography⁹ after being able to translate the script from English to Arabic.

African] writers producing a national literature in a foreign language. My intense aversion toward French may explain why I turned to English as my means of communication with the West” (Abouzeid, The Last Chapter 153).

Assia Djebbar the precursor of postcolonial narratives

Assia Djebbar, one of the most well-known writers that contemporary Algeria has ever known, has long been at the vanguard of postcolonial discussion on gender, identity, as well as literary translation. Her work, embraces a great number of themes related to intimate and personal narratives with national and historical motifs. Throughout half a century, she managed to write famous novels, such as *L'Amour, la fantasia* from 1985 (*Fantasia* in English). It offers a set of distressing accounts of Algerian history - focusing on the French conquest of Algeria in the 1830s and the war of liberation in the 1950s - juxtaposed with an autobiographical narrative of Djebbar's own entry, as a schoolgirl, into the ambiguous world of the French language. Her most recent book, the autobiographical *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (*Nowhere in my father's house*, 2007), returns to the late-colonial period and gives yet another, richly textured, account of her French schooling and her negotiation of complex transcultural experiences.

Throughout her work, and not only in “*Fantasia*” or “*Nulle part*”, the subject position from which Djebbar creates through writing is splintered. This due to her unstable and constant wandering shift across different languages, disjunctive cultural positions, conflictual political areas, and mainly because of her “feminine plurality”; i.e. the different feasible (and unfeasible) styles of femininity provided by the Algerian and French societies.

It has often been argued that Djebbar's position relative to her multilingualism and her writing in French changes over time. One can feel this dual transfer between herself as an Algerian woman in relation to French as a literary language

and of French in relation to the silenced but translated languages that her writing always makes reference to.

An emphasis on language and subjectivity is something of a commonplace in the vast body of criticism that has emerged in response to Djebbar's work. Many critics call attention to how Djebbar 'writes forth' a mode of transcultural bias. According to Jane Hiddleston, Djebbar's literary work describes a non-linear movement throughout a chain of special understandings of subjectivity. This subjectivity always draws a parallel in some way to Algeria, but in no way explicitly¹⁰.

Her literary works are dominated by consciousness: to position herself between Algeria and France, between Algeria of today and the one during the French colonization, between Berber considered as the native language of all the Maghreb, Arabic, her mother tongue and French. In her narration one has the feeling that she goes back and forth among different periods or between different chronological circumstances giving to her writing a deep breath wherein the narrator plays with these spatio temporal to create a space of freedom and release. Learning the language of the other helps anyone to appreciate his culture

As a women writer Assia Djebbar explores the daily life of the Algerian woman in a straightforward and brave way or yet; at times, in a repulsive or attractive style. Woman writer spokeswoman of imprisoned women, witness writer of a historic period, writer inspiring ancestors' memory and shaking archives, Assia Djebbar is also an architect writer whose sole existence is to make linguistic objects so as to innovate within the field of both semiologic research and also the creation process.

¹⁰ French language itself cuts off her from her Algerian fellow citizens and places her in an undecided opinion concerning colonialism and Arabisation.

It is widely known that writing in French was considered by the Algerian government as a subversive act. Therefore, why does one write in French? In reply, she states that writing in French does not prevent her from rejecting her other mother tongues which are deeply rooted in her black box. She is aware of this fundamental choice as French allows her to express honestly tales and Arab/Berber myths. She was, as explicitly stated in her writings, brought up in a Muslim faith, the one of her ancestors for a great number of generations. She thus writes in French, the language of the former colonizer, which has become certainly that of her thought, while she continues to like, to suffer, also to pray in Arabic, her mother tongue. She believes, moreover, that her native language, that of all Maghreb, is the Berber language.

General Observations

In literary discourse, these two Maghrebin women writers were vibrating their pains. Why were most women excluded from education? How were women treated in education? Was gender a proper reason? What sorts of literature did they write? It is behind the times to have a word of ‘feminism¹¹’ in the Muslim countries, but is it wise to recognize a ‘woman’s voice’, or a remarkably female standpoint in writing by modern women? Did women write about very analogous subjects as men? Were there prohibited subjects for women authors? How does this cultural context influence women’s writing (and reading)?

The women’s motivation for writing seldom gives the impression to be first and foremost literary: it is usually more frankly serious than is common among men writers. It is a consequence rushing from inner needs, more than an artistic or didactic liking. Men writers were throwing out the

¹¹ Boxer Marylyn Jacob defines feminism as “a movement or even a consciousness departed from the perception that there is a discrimination of women all over the world, and an action in order to discharge the imbalance situation both by men or women” (Boxer Marylyn Jacob (1998: 10) in *When Women Ask the Questions in America*.

confidence that women's voices are a disgrace and shame. There is, as a rule in men's writing, lack of prearranged positions; for example, there are efforts to cope with human troubles in their specificity, i.e. seeking answers that are suitable. Writing, which recommends a split from a gender-determined role, became a vehicle for original ideas. This pioneering stage in women's writings brought an indisputable investigation as it not only protects their particular needs but also makes women powerful. It might confront the patriarchy and support change within the protected spot of the home.

Women played in the past a loyal and fundamental position in all areas of society, even if these roles have frequently been ignored both in education and in well-known ideas. It is not astonishing that religion grants equal chance for all mostly for women. Women were writing in privacy from the standard literary rule and from each other. They have, in reality, been dynamic and converting factors. Their writings were less descriptive, less violent and perhaps less known. Fiction rapidly proliferated inside the Arab world while men and women worked together in the direction of this original literary type. Sustaining their feminism is at the present time the sole chance of an additional purpose for themselves, but a possibility for a special type of world encouraging both men as well as women.

More specifically, these women write to argue against the pressing contexts of war and politics to destroy the rigid beliefs about religious, cultural and social gaps. all in all, one can affirm that these women put in writing their unified and plentiful experiences as their side of legitimacy and their portion of Arab modern gender identity.

Conclusion

It is wise to affirm that the field of Arab women's autobiographical writings is not only "under researched and

in need of further investigation”, but also remains immature with regards to the “critical and theoretical questioning of Arab women's modes of self-representation and personal narratives” and the political function of their self/selves-writing. Arab women's autobiographical writings provide both to create images of the self through the writing act, and to find a voice—whether private or public—through which to express what cannot be expressed in any other form¹².

In this paper I have endeavored to stick to a track, which one may expect, will release Arabs from devoting intense interest to the veil discourse and to clear the space for exploring Arab women's voices on their own terms. As a whole, it is fundamental for Western readers to be aware of the brutality that their writers do to third world women, both in real political terms, and through their interpretation of their experience. Westerners’ inference in the collective work of revolution is required to multiply common comprehension among people.

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