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## Abstract

*The Algerian independence did not bring that much independence for the Algerian woman. The new liberated women found themselves in a Third World patriarchal society that controls all their actions. Assia Djebbar is one of the Algerian women writers who portray the struggle of the Algerian woman to establish and assert herself according or against the Algerian codes. Djebbar depicts in A Sister to Scheherazade the mechanics of oppression and the awareness of the Algerian woman of her inferior position and her need for a revolution. This article tries to point at the juxtaposition between resistance and submission. The controversies between Isma and Hajila prove the distance between passively accepting social norms and rebelliously taking on independent feminist attitudes. Evaluating the world around these protagonists is related to being veiled or unveiled. Both women go through two different journeys and come up with two different understandings and methods to liberate the Algerian woman. This paper succeeds to show how the "haik", which symbolizes the Algerian conventional tradition, can become preservation or destruction of women identities.*

**Keywords:** Algerian women emancipation, A Sister to Sheherazade, resistance, veiling, women oppression,

## ملخص

لم يجلب الاستقلال الجزائري نفس القدر من الاستقلال للمرأة الجزائرية. وجدت النساء المحررات أنفسهن في عالم ثالث يسيطر عليه مجتمع أبوي يتحكم في جميع أفعالهن. آسيا جبار هي واحدة من الكاتبات الجزائريات اللواتي يصورن كفاح المرأة الجزائرية لتأسيس وتأكيد نفسها وفقًا أو ضد القوانين الجزائرية. تصور جبار في أخت لشهرزاد آليات القهر وإدراك المرأة الجزائرية لمكانتها المتدنية وحاجتها إلى ثورة. تحاول هذه المقالة الإشارة إلى الترافف بين المقاومة والخضوع. تثبت الخلافات بين إسماء وحجيبة الاختلاف بين القبول السلبي للأعراف الاجتماعية وبين اتخاذ المواقف النسوية المستقلة بشكل متمرد. يقيم العالم من حول هاتين البطلتين على حسب حجابها من عدمه. تمر المرأتان برحلتين مختلفتين وتخرجنا بفهمين وطريقتين مختلفتين لتحرير المرأة الجزائرية. نجحت هذه الورقة إلى إظهار كيف يمكن لـ "الحايك"، الذي يرمز إلى التقاليد الجزائرية التقليدية، أن يصبح وسيلة للحفاظ على هويات النساء أو تدميرها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** اضطهاد المرأة، الحجاب، أخت لشهرزاد، مقاومة، تحرر المرأة الجزائرية.

After its independence, the Algerian society was reluctant to abandon some of its most oppressive attitudes, which are mainly directed towards women. These attitudes construct the heart of a society that became patriarchal par excellence. After dark and sad period of colonization, Algeria was supposed to be moving towards a brighter future for all its citizens. Nevertheless, this move does not seem to be concerned with women. They were trapped in a labyrinth of oppression and humiliation. The independence Algeria gained in 1962 was still a distant dream for Algerian women. As it analyses Assia Djebar's novel *A Sister to Shaherazed* (1987), this article sheds light on the practical mechanisms that women use to get rid of the shackles of society. This article follows a postcolonial feminist legacy to present the two main female characters in the story, Isma and Hajila, as the two faces of the same coin. It tries to prove that women should find the most appropriate way to unleash the feminine power that has been residing inside of them since ever. This article tries to point at the juxtaposition between resistance and submission. It tries to show how a traditional symbol presented through the "haik" can become preservation or a destruction of the woman's identity. In doing so, we aim to use a postcolonial feminist approach since it fits into Djebar's context.

The female struggle for her identity, autonomy, and self-validation has become one of the most important concerns for women writers, especially in the postcolonial era where concerns were redirected to a better society for an independent Algeria. This concern has been encouraged by Western feminism and African postcolonial feminism. The male presentation of female characters was not that different from women's perception in the Algerian society. They were seen only as mothers, wives, and lovers, whose only work was to be at the service of men. The female identity was neglected and never given much importance, let alone her struggle to assert herself in a male-oriented society that seeks to chain her down.

Unfortunately, we may fall short of presenting a comprehensive list of Algerian female writers who have taken it upon

themselves to present a fair image of the Algerian woman in literature. This image is mainly related to the traditional shackles, which not only prevent women from fulfilling their lives, but also distort them and make them aliens in their own homes as they lose sense of what they should and should not do. Fortunately, though, Assia Djebbar jumped into the scene to accomplish this mission. She has made her own contributions to feminism, postcolonialism, and postcolonial feminism.;

Assia Djebbar, compelled by circumstances to write about the daily life of Algerian women (her inherited subject) in a tongue which is not theirs, has, nevertheless, with her novels and stories, her poetry, a play, and her films, exposed the plight of her countrywomen to the wide world. With her perceptive, sensual, and resourceful French, which reaches us now hidden under one more layer of foreign language, she has drawn open this curtained culture and spoken of it without shrillness, without endangering the modesty of her models, without the pleasures of righteous indignation, but with a pen so pitiless it spares us nothing of this massive crime, a condition which faces its future by walking backward into the past, as Assia Djebbar, a trained historian and teacher, knows well, so that her characters include women living at the dawn of Islam as well as those suffering from its nightfall (Gass, 1996, p. 781)

Fighting for the feminine case appears to be Djebbar's legacy; a legacy that places her at the center of attention. Djebbar focuses on everything that concerns the lives of Algerian women in a Muslim society. As she shows her respect for these women, she demonstrates her contempt for patriarchal society. Assia Djebbar depicts in her works, especially in *A Sister to Sheherazade*, the mechanics of oppression that tradition imposes on women and the awareness of the Algerian woman of her inferior position and her need for a revolution.

Postcolonialism covers different concerns like gender, race, class, and ethnicity. One can assume that, in Africa and Third World countries, the women's '*writing back*' is of a postcolonial born, since they both have a lot in common. Hence, we can draw a lot of similarities between postcolonialism and feminism. *The Empire Writes Back* can be used as the first source to prove the similarity between the two schools. When post colonialists start marching back to an imperialistic center, feminists start, also, marching back to a patriarchal center. The notion of a literary revolution is the connecting vein that is giving life to both schools. In their second edition of the book, the writers assume that,

Feminist perspectives are of increasing importance in post-colonial criticism and indeed the strategies of recent feminist and recent post-colonial theory overlap and inform each other. Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall and Margaret Atwood have all drawn an analogy between the relationships of men and women and those of the imperial power and the colon. While critics like Gayatri Spivak (1985b, 1987) have articulated the relationship between feminist, post-structuralism and post-coloniality. (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p. 30)

Feminism and postcolonialism appear to be merging because they connect two very appealing binaries: men/women and colonizer/colonized. It is essential, then, to emphasize the unique relationship, since it was a quest for the right to talk for oneself and to stop the wrong '*Otherness*' that is described by the oppressor as the true norm for that '*One*'.

In accordance with the postcolonial legacy, feminists declared the importance of language. Some of them called for a total separation from the male language, since this language is used to subordinate and humiliate women, the way English and French were used to subordinate the colonized people. Other theorists agreed that language is not gendered. Thus, we can manipulate men's language to

serve women literature; since men do not know another language. Decolonizing the language is, then, a common aspect that has been studied by the two schools in the same way. Ashcroft et al., however, insist not on the importance of a particular language but on the crucial role writing itself has to play within postcolonial societies. Such societies have never had the chance to write themselves. They have always been written by someone else;

The presence or absence of writing is possibly the most important element in the colonial situation. Writing does not merely introduce a communicative instrument, but also involves an entirely different and intrusive (invasive) orientation to knowledge and interpretation. In many post-colonial societies, it was not the English language which had the greatest effect, but writing itself. (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p. 31).

Writing, therefore, empowers victims. The problem is no longer in the patriarchal language, but rather in the absence of a woman's text that speaks loudly and enables woman to woman and woman to world communication.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak asks the biggest, most controversial feminist question. She focuses on the ability of the oppressed colonized to speak and to have '*her*' voice heard throughout the world. As a postcolonial woman, Spivak feels that postcolonial women are oppressed in two ways. They are subjugated by the colonizer first and by men second. She agrees with Foucault on his idea of '*epistemic violence*'. This idea focuses on the imposition of powerful ideas and beliefs on the powerless (Morton, 2007, p. 114). The colonizer depicts the colonized on '*his*' own terms. The colonized, thus, finds '*herself*' imprisoned in the colonizer's mind and book. More to the point, the focus should be on the different relations that are highlighted by postcolonialism. These relations are the ones between the colonizer and the colonized, the white and the black, the oppressor and the oppressed, and the imperialist and the victim. If we are to consider these relations, we can easily assume that women are

always related to the 'ed' part. That is, men are oppressors, colonizers, white, and imperialists, whereas women are oppressed, colonized, black, and victims.

As a consequence of the post-colonial era, some feminists started calling themselves *Post-colonial Feminists*. They, consequently, argued that women's marginalization is related first to the colonial experience and second to the anarchical postcolonial societies second. They refused the depiction of the Third World woman as passive, voiceless and of no importance in contrast to her Western counterpart, who was depicted as educated, independent, and powerful. They turn, later, to fighting gendered oppression in their own post-colonial cultures. Different writers, such as Djebbar, begin writing back to the male-dominated 'post-colonial center,' rather than the Western center. They believe that colonialism has influenced the position of women in their own societies, and this oppression has not changed after independence. In "Paradigms of an Intertextual Dialogue: 'Race and Gender in Nigerian Literature'", the writer states,

In the literature of writing back written by men, the colonialist novels are called into question only as far as their presentation of African men is concerned; their view of African women is not criticized. Thus, and this is a tendency that can be ascribed to African men's literature in general. Women are marginalized or depicted stereotypically. Either they act in social and biological dependency on men and children, or they are stylized as feminine fatales. Part and parcel of this presentation is the fact that women characters remain mute, lacking history, individuality and often even a name. (Arndt, 2006, p. 209)

Instead of facing the Western unjust depiction of their world with their male comrades, women find themselves obliged to face their post-colonial male comrades and their societies as well. This foreshadows a never-ending war that would keep women fighting for their rights for decades.

Reading *A Sister to Sheherazade* proves Djebbar's postcolonial/feminist orientations. The writer focuses on the stereotypical positioning of women in the Algerian society. She chose to use the colonizer's and the patriarch's language in order to lay her case clear. In *A Sister to Sheherazade*, Djebbar confronts her society through Isma's and Hajila's journeys. Both characters present a different perception of the veil and different behaviors within their societies. The main focus here is related to the veil since it has been used as a tool for multiple purposes.

French efforts to alter the social structure of Algerian society for their own purposes included some attempts to influence customs relating to women's behaviour, including, for example, encouraging urban women to remove the veil customarily worn out of doors. Thus for many men, the veiling and seclusion of women also became a symbol of resistance to the French and of the preservation of 'traditional' Algerian culture. (Graham-Brown, 1988, p. 1336)

In this context, the Algerian traditional haik becomes a problematic issue since it might entail oppression or emancipation. For Isma and Hajila, veiling is not just an act but a process. In their journeys to veil or unveil themselves, both characters come across their real identities. Malek Alloula insists on the important role the haik plays in women's lives since it helps them to venture into men's spaces unconditionally;

But the veil has another function: to recall, in individualized fashion, the closure of private space. It signifies an injunction of no trespassing upon this space, and it extends it to another space, the one in which the photographer is to be found: public space. (Alloula, 1986, p. 13)

The "haik" is an Algerian traditional icon, and its status renders women's bodies traditional icon as well. The body that wears it becomes a national property that is void of any subjectivity. As it is shown within the folds of the story, the veil is meant to protect women

from men's gazing. This is why it created such controversies in women's lives. Mildred Mortimer emphasizes the triangular relationship between the veil, the gaze, and women's emancipation in Djebbar's works. He states,

For Dejebar, the gaze is crucial; the prohibition against women seeing and being seen is at the heart of Maghrebien patriarchy, an ideological system in which the master's eye alone exists. Women challenge the phallogocentric system by appropriating the gaze for themselves. (Mortimer, 1990, p. 7)

Djebbar's novel, therefore, challenges the traditional perception of the veil and the veiled bodies as well. In doing so, Djebbar presents two contrasted female identities. She gives us a traditional woman presented through Hajila, and a non-traditional woman presented through Isma. These protagonists have two different personalities and two different veiling perceptions that continue to differ after the journey they took.

The paths of these two women cross when Isma, the non-traditional woman, comes across Hajila, an uneducated, bound-to-society woman, in a poor neighborhood. With Hajila's family's help, Isma arranges Hajila's marriage to her husband. Djebbar writes this story as an allusion to *A Thousand and One nights* or *Arabian Nights*, in which the emperor decides to kill all virgin women in his kingdom. Scheherazade was the one to step in, in order to save all the women of her village. Each night she tells the emperor a story that makes him eager to listen to the next one. Scheherazade got help from her sister Dinarzade, who sleeps under the bed to wake her up at the time of stories. Scheherazade in Djebbar's story is figured by Isma, who failed; at the beginning of the story; to accomplish her "sister" role when she arranged a loveless marriage between her husband and Hajila, confining the latter into a violent oppressed marriage. From the very beginning, Hajila is presented as a woman who has no say regarding her life. She blindly follows what her society and family propose for her. As they were arranging her marriage, she was portrayed as

someone who would be "conveyed like an object". Hajila's marriage was not for herself. Through it, she managed to improve her family situation, and proved, hence, to be the stereotypical daughter who neglects herself for the wellbeing of her family.

Isam shows another character who is radically different from Hajila. She is a self-asserted woman who comes across her identity and decides to start her real journey in life. She is a revolutionary woman who left her husband, her daughter Meriem, and her homeland and traveled to France as an act of rebellion. Through Isma,

Djebar targets the feminist poetics of self, space, and the "Other." She resorts to traditional tropes which she utilizes to shape the politics and poetics of her feminist arguments. Shahrazad, as a popular cultural icon, figures as the communal ancestor of Arab-women story-tellers. She becomes a spokeswoman for the feminist agenda. Instead of sufficing herself with placating the monstrous ties of Shahrayar, the contemporary Shahrazad explores the issues of female creativity and women's solidarity. (Suyoufie, 2008, p. 238)

When Hajila relates her traditional situation to her veil, Isma saw that unveiling herself is the best way to break through and assert her special identity. Both women's personalities contain two opposing bodies of oppression awareness. This awareness pushed them not only into two different paths, but they both appose their prescribed roles. Within their awareness and journeys, the two women decide to be individual subjects rather than objects of oppression as they used to be.

Hajila starts her rebellion as she watches her husband's easy shift between the private and public spheres. She states,

Every morning, you splash water over your face, neck and arms. These are not the ablutions preparatory to

prostrating yourself in prayer, no, they are a preparation for the act of leaving the house... Once you have put on your suits, knotted your ties, you can cross the threshold, every threshold... You can present yourself to the world, you fortunate males! Every morning of everyday you can convey your bodies into the dazzling light. (Djebar, 1987, p. 9)

Hajila seems to envy men for the opportunity they have, and it is obvious that she links this opportunity to the way they dress. She envies her husband for being the master of the house and for being able to show the world who he really is. She knows that he is granted access to the public and private spheres when she is shackled only to the private, to the point that she has to cover her body whenever she gets out of it.

Hajila proves her desire to venture into the "dazzling light" like all the other lucky males. As she realized how oppressed she was and what was oppressing her, Hajila decided to wear the "haik" and begin her adventure into the public sphere without any male companion, and she saw it as a giant step towards her own emancipation since her first time. Hajila believes that she is now going out for the first time in her life. As the narration states,

You are wearing slippers like an old woman, your head muffled in the heavy wool, your face completely hidden, leaving only one tiny gap exposed through which you peep to see where you are going. You enter the lift, stumbling over the folds of the heavy veil. *Once you are outside, all alone, you will walk.*" (Djebar, 1987, P. 19)

As she ventures into the public sphere, Hajila proves the good relationship between the "haik" and women's freedom since she used it as a tool to get rid of men's companionship and her social constraints.

The previous picture was enhanced in Hajila's mind when she saw an unveiled woman playing in the public garden with her

children. Hajila succeeded in seeing a woman who is free from any social constraints and without any confinement to the private sphere. After she saw that, Hajila found herself unable to walk while wearing the haik as freely as she used to be. She felt the urge to take it off and expose herself to the world, which she actually did. After she finally unveiled herself, she changed into a new "naked" woman who is embarrassed by the public sphere and who succeeded in crashing the social codes. In this sense,

When Hajila leaves the domicile to emerge in open space, she crosses a seemingly insurmountable threshold. She goes against deeply embedded traditional taboos and defies her husband's authority in doing so. Compared with this "rebellious" border crossing, the crossing of borders by Djebbar as an international traveler seems tame. But the questions of identity that accompany Hajila's departure from the enclosed space of the home find a resemblance in the crossing of borders between countries. (Rice, 2004, p. 74)

In Hajila's context, we can clearly see the veil as a symbol of patriarchy; a way to oppress women even more. It is used not just to cover women's bodies, but to cover their identities and selfhood and to prevent them from venturing into their proper potentials. As she unveils herself, she thrives as she realizes, "I am Hajila, stripped naked" (Djebbar. 1987, p. 32). She starts to realize who she really is for the first time in her life since she is not literally naked, but she is otherwise naked from traditions and social expectations. Hajila liberates herself when she assimilates her naked body with the outside world; when she starts to think that there is no difference between herself and her husband since they now expose themselves equally to the world. Their bodies are equally free and unshackled. This new woman believes that there is nothing that can be compared to this kind of freedom. Further, she thinks that this freedom is a birth right that

was taken from her by her society. As she moves on with her unveiled body, she sometimes seems nostalgic for her childhood since it was the only time when she was totally free. It seems that,

A fleeting smile on an unveiled face; can we women resuscitate our lost childhood, we who were mutilated in our adolescence, our happiness excised, cast out from the enclosing warmth of a home? ...Where shall we find a resting-place? Our peals of laughter have faded, our dances degenerated into a confused stampede; what sun or what love will offer us stability?  
(Djebar, 1987, p. 160)

Hajila's nostalgia appears to be directed toward a time when she had no roles or codes to follow; when she could go wherever she pleased and dress however she pleased simply because she was a child. She considers these days to be her happier days. She knows that nothing can replace these times, but her unveiling experience was the closest thing she could have had to her childhood memories. Within this context, Djebar mentions veiling as a process that girls learn from their mothers and grandmothers. She shows how they start to partially cover themselves until they finally disappear in darkness. Hajila was frightened when she realized the darkness around her, and this is what pushed her to venture into the light. This darkness starts to eat her soul up and end her life. Nancy Arenberg relates to this idea as she states,

Hajila shows her resistance to her assigned feminine role. In Islamic culture, only men can frequent public spaces, whereas women are confined to the private domain, or domestic space. But Hajila, unaware that she is following in the invisible footsteps of her secret sister, Isma, ventures into male territory, which defies customary sex roles. (Arenberg, 2008, p. 355)

Hajila's story seems to mirror Asma's. The only difference is that the latter's is invisible. She seems to be unshackled out of her depressing orders of her society right from the beginning. She went through the path of freedom and recognition but during an early age. As she grows

up into a strong woman, she did not have to imitate men to be as strong as they are.

Contrary to Hajila, Isma seems to miss her veiled tradition. As the story progresses, Isma shows the wrongfulness of her unveiled behavior. Her non-traditional rebellious identity in the beginning of the story resembles the result Hajila comes to, but Isma's result was so different. Shockingly enough to the reader who expects a revolutionary woman, Isma states, "I am afraid of any more traveling." I too want to put down roots. To wear the veil again in my own fashion... to treat into shadows; bury myself "(Djebar, 1987, p. 156). Isma's personality does not seem to fit into the spotlight. She sounds fed up with her nakedness in front of the outside world; it seems to take a lot of things away from her rather than enhance her personality. Isma takes on the role of Scheherazade in order to protect all the other women in her society. She feels guilty after she realizes that she found her freedom by oppressing Hajila when she arranged her marriage to the "man" who is both the oppressor and the resistance link between the two women. After the discovery of Hajila's secret naked venturing into the streets, it was Isma who helped her escape from the house. Isma, as stated before, occupies the role of Dinarzade, but she displaces herself from under the bed into behind Hajila's veil. This role is also manifested in the fact that Isma is the one to tell Hajila's story. *A Sister to Scheherazade's* narration articulates between Isma's stories and memories on one hand and Hajila's actual struggle within her marriage on the other hand. Both women seem to connect through this story. The story shows Hajila as an uneducated traditional woman who cannot even speak for herself since she knows only vulgar Arabic and does not know how to use it. Isma's help comes with her education and her bilingual capacity. She is the one who speaks up for the poor, oppressed woman.

In essence, Isma creates Hajila by translating the experience of her suffering body from Arabic into French and also by deciphering her body language, since Hajila's voice is silent and cannot articulate her

plight without an interpreter. Isma watches over her like a mother does a child until she can become sufficiently self-reliant to forge her own path out of domestic confinement. But only like a sister can Isma relate to Hajila's entrapment by the enemy, the husband, which inevitably leads to domestic conflict. (Arenberg, 2008, p. 360)

To redeem herself, Isma assumed the role of the protective mother, willing to go to any length not only to protect Hajila but also to make her voice heard. Like a mother, Isma led Hajila to the right path of womanhood, away from social constraints.

Isma seems to be concerned with the situation of all women. She wanted to be close to them and march with them to the shores of independence, and the veil seems to be the perfect tool to provide for her an easy entrance into the world of Muslim women. Wearing the veil was a kind of rebirth for her. She chooses to “bury” herself in order to rise again, but not alone, but with all the other women of her society. Isma was successful in transforming, if not manipulating, the veil, which was a source of oppression, into a means of liberation. It helps her to be close and connect with other women and make them fully aware of their social and political positions. Sisterhood and women's bonding were the main focus of Isma, and it is a concern that covers Djebbar's story even since the beginning, when Isma was condemned for entrapping Hajila into that marriage.

Djebbar starts her story with depictions of traditional household life. She tackled the issue of the co-wife, or, *dorra* in Arabic, which is not a very pleasant subject in Algerian society, mainly among women. The co-wife is supposed to be the enemy; the devil, but Djebbar gives us another picture that is painted with complicity. Isma is the one to choose the new wife and the one who helps her throughout the story. Having the husband referred to as the man proves their complicity too. It shows that he is a shared enemy that they need to fight together.

Even though they seem apposing, Isma's and Hajila's stories are not that different. In their relationship with the veil, they prove the

subjective/personal consciousness of oppression and their way to resist and rebel from a patriarchal society. In this sense, Djebbar succeeded to prove that veiling is actually a process not an act. Within this process, the Algerian woman becomes able to realize her own position in society and what she can do to improve this position. The same veil that can be a prison for the woman's body and identity can be the same thing that guarantees her freedom and self-assertion. When the novel started, Isma freed herself from the constraints of society, but Hajila confines herself to them; and they both believed it was the right way. Ultimately, Isma returns back to these constraints and Hajila frees herself from them; and they both believed that it is the right way since they found themselves and their real identities. Hajila's new control over her body pushed her to refuse her pregnancy at the end confining all kinds of traditional and moral codes believing that imprisons her. Isma, on a different scale, decided to be a sister to Scheherazade in order to help other women emancipate.

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