ATRAS Volume 7 (2), pp. 98-107	15/07/ 2026	ISSN: 2710-8759/ EISSN: 2992-1376

History Features in Algerian Literature Written in French: Selected Works by Assia Djebar and Kaouther Adimi

Hemza BOUDERSA[1]

[1]Higher College for Teacher Training El Katiba Assia Djebar, Constantine 3 University, Algeria

Received: 21 / 02 / 2026 **Accepted**: 06 / 04 / 2026 **Published**: 15 / 07 / 2026

Abstract

This paper examines historical features in Algerian French literature, focusing on selected works by Assia Djebar (1936-2015) and Kaouther Adimi (1986). The paper finds clear permanence of 'Nationalist Meaning,' inspired by the 'Algerian Soul,' in their writings, though they naturally belong to different generations. Capturing this sense of history and the other essence of belonging are means to value and give merit to both writers who serve their 'nationalist values', literary, artistically, and universally. They therefore echoed the Algerian spirit internationally.

Keywords: Algerian Literatures, Assia Djebar, French, Kaouther Adimi, history

ملخص

تهدف هذه الورقة على البحث في تجلّي ملمح التّاريخ كمعلم ل'معنى الوّطنية' وقيّمها' والتّي كانت موضوع لإبداع فنّي وأدبي. لم تكُنْ الكِتَابَات الجزائرية (بالتّعبير الفرنسي) بمنأى عن هذه القيّم والمعاني الوّطنية والتّي كانت استمراريتها شبه جلّية وحاضِرة في أدب أسيا جبّار (1936-2015) كما في كتابات كوثر عظيمي. في نفس السيّاق، لمْ يغِبْ المعنى الوّطني في كتابات الأديبتين المذكورتين وخاصّة في قصائد للجزائر السّعيدة (مجموعة شعرية) وأحمر لون الفجر (مسرحية) لأسيا جبّار وصغار ديسمبر(رواية) وفي الّريح السيّئة/نذير شؤم (رواية) لكوثر عظيمي. تؤكّد نتائج البّحْث استمرارية حُضُور 'معنى الوطنية وذاكرة الوطن وروح الجزائر' ومعهم ' الانتماء التّاريخي' في كتابات الأديبتين رغم اختلاف أجيالهن. تجلّي الحُضُور الوّطني والصّدى العالمي في أدّب الكاتبتين يعطي أدبهما الاستحقاق كما الأحقّية بالاحتفاء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ملمح، التاريخ، الأدب الجزائري، اللغة الفرنسية، أسيا جبار، كوثر عظيمي

Cite as

Boudersa, H. (2026). History Features in Algerian Literature Written in French: Selected Works by Assia Djebar and Kaouther Adimi. *Atras Journal*, *7*(2), 98-107 https://doi.org/10.70091/Atras/vol07no02.07

Email: [1]boudersa.hemza@ensc.dz

Atras Journal/ 2026, published by the University of Saida Dr Moulay Tahar, Algeria
This is an Open Access Article under The CC BY-NC 4.0

Introduction

This paper reveals historical features in Algerian literature in French. It sheds particular light on the writings of Assia Djebar and Kaouther Adimi. Through mixing up some autobiographic features with testimonial memory(ies) and witnessing historical narratives to a nationalist discourse, both writers show clear 'Nationalist Sense' and 'History Presence' in *L'amour, la fantasia*, *Poèmes pour l'Algérie heureuse*, *Rouge, l'aube* (Assia Djebar) and *Nos Richesses*, *Au mauvais vent*, *Les petits de décembre* (Kaouther Adimi). The paper follows an eclectically thematic approach alongside the postcolonial one.

Literature Review

Many research papers, academic dissertations, and essays have addressed both Djebar and Adimi's testimonies, their witness accounts, and their nationalistic cries of the soul and voice. This paper refers to 1) books: *The Algerian Novel and Colonial Discourse. Witnessing to a Différend* by Abdelkader Aoudjit; *La littérature algérièn*ne by Jean Déjeux; Assia Djebar, *Out of Algeria* by Jane Hiddleston, and 2) articles: "*Writing the Cry: French and Francophone Literature*" by Liza Katz; *Le Monté du Nationalism algérien* by Saadallah Abu El Kacem; and Assia Djebar: *In Dialogue with Feminisms* by Priscilla Ringrose. Another book, entitled *Lire Assia Djebar*!, is so enriching for this research. It covers a series of well-built and selected articles by Amel Chouati, Sonia Amazit, Anne-Marie Carthé, Anne Donadey, Jennie Dumont, Kiyoko Ishikawa, Hibo Moumin Assoweh, Patrick Potot, Hervé Sanson, Wassyla Tamzali, and Max Véga-Ritter. Most critics linked Djebar's writings to the following literary axes: Feminist memory reconstruction, polyphony and archive rewriting, and language exile.

Many other published critiques to Kaouther Adimi considered valuable. They are as follows: 1) *Interaction historique au service de la représentation identitaire dans les textes du troisième millénaire* by BENACHOUR Nadia, 2) *Des voix et des histoires dans des ballerines de Papicha* by LATRACHE Reguia, and 3) *La voix de la protestation dans de pierres dans ma poche* by BENZOUA Nour Djihen et al. Most critics linked Kaouther Adimi's writings to the folowing themes: urban memory, post-independence generational critique, and rewriting literary heritage

In light of previous studies of both writers, this paper highlights historical features and a sense of nationalism in some of their selected works.

Assia Djebar: Mixing up Algeria's History and Memory to Autobiographic Features

This part of the paper briefly highlights Assia Djebar's life. It presents a short profile about her achievements, awards, membership in the French Academy, and her nomination for the Nobel Prize. Assia Djebar merits the title of 'the She-Icon of Algerian Literature".

Assia Djebar

Assia Djebar is the pseudonym of Fatima-Zohra Imalayène. She is an author, novelist, filmmaker, and historian. Colossal critics called her the "Grande Dame of Algerian/Maghreb Francophone literature". She was born in 1936 in Cherchell, on the Algerian coast (near Algiers). She wrote many novels, essays, and film scripts. Among her best known works: La Soif (The Mischief/Nadia 1957); *Les Impatients* (The Impatients 1958); *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (Children of the New World 1962); *les Alouette naives* (The Naives Larks 1967); *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Women of Algiers in their Apartment 2002) *L'amour, La Fantasia* (Fantasia. An Algerian Cavalcade 1985). She won many literary prizes in 1985, 1986, 1998, and 2000 for her literary masterpieces. She died in 2015. Indeed, history and memory are almost present in most of Djebar's writings.

History and Memory in L'amour, La fantasia (Novel, 1985)

In *L'amour, La Fantasia* (1985), Assia Djebar's first autobiographical novel, she sought to demystify, with a precise and meticulous voice, the Algerian writers' ambivalence toward history, language, and identity. She demystified this conflict-ridden situation by offering a profound analysis of her own relationship to language as an example[i].

Djebar (1985) described Colonialism as 'Unfaithful' and 'Traitor'. She wrote in one passage « EL-DJEZAIR » était, depuis quinze ans, tombées entre les mains de l'Infidèle » (p. 97). In the same paragraph, Djebar described the way how Colonialism collapsed Algerian cities and citadels one after the other, stating a bit of a statement to an "immune" Constantine described as « La ville des passions » (City of Passions) (p. 97).

Djebar described the atrocities of the French colonizer and unearthed the past horrors. One scene in the novel *L'amour, La Fantasia* (1985) revealed a letter written by one of the colonial officers who had participated in France's invasion of Algiers in July 1830. The officer described heartlessly the body of a woman whose foot had been amputated to steal her jewels on her ankle". [a woman's foot that had been hacked off to appropriate the anklet of gold or silver...suddenly he inserts these words, they prevent the ink of the whole letter from drying, because of the obscenity of torn flesh that he could not suppress in his description] (Djebar, 1985, p. 161). For Djebar, the ink that can never dry represents the cruel and haunted violence of French Colonialism, written in the archives, but not fully revealed publicly (Goellner, 2018, p. 115). Nationalist seeds are explicit accordingly.

Djebar could show, in her *L'amour, la fantasia*: 1) historical profit with autobiographic features (pp. 14-17, 24-28, pp. 39-45, pp. 50-56…). This autobiographic novel (pp 11-13…), by its historical significance and its creative-poetic ability, could easily get into the Algerian literature camp, which itself keeps going in a continuous search for an Algerian' name', 'land',

and 'difference' different from the French (pp11-13, pp 46-49). In fact, reading and analyzing this novel could serve as a liaison and bridge the various textual fragments of form and structure across fiction and narration.

Djebar's novel(s) embodied three main experiences illustrated into three main core discourses: 'Discourse of a Period Testimony' (First arrival/conquest of the French) (pp14-17, pp24-29, pp39-45…); 'Discourse of a Woman Testimony' (pp11-13, pp18-23, pp30-38…), and another of an 'Autobiographic Pursuit' (pp11-13, pp18-22,). Indeed, three other main works illustrate these discourses genuinely, namely: *L'amour, la fantasia*, *Loin de Médina*, and *Vaste est le Prison* (Mebirouk, 2018, pp. 4-14-16).

Assia Djebar proved to be a historian-novelist and filmmaker who used all her talents to revive the colors, uproars, and fantasies of some episodes in Algerian history, interwoven with autobiographical highlights.

***Letters and Poems in love of Algeria*. Poèmes pour l'Algérie Heureuse (Poems, 1969)**

Djebar (1969) describes her love for Algeria artistically by picturing some intrinsic features of Algeria's history and geography. Spatial mapping and Algeria's geography became a sign of national cartography that Djebar appreciated. Playing rigorously with words, recommending emphasis on one's memory, she says:

> Un pays sans mémoire est une femme sans miroir
> Belle mais qui ne le saurait pas
> Un homme qui cherche dans le noir
> Aveugle et qui ne le croit pas …[i] (p. 39)

While describing her country, Assia Djebar creates with letters an image of genuine Algeria. She explores all the riches of her motherland (Algeria), starting with the Jurdjura and ending in Batna. She writes:

> Neige dans la Djurdjura
> Pièges d'alouette au Tikjda
> Des olivettes aux Ouadhias
> On me fouette à Azazga
> ….
> L'éclat du jour à Khenchela
> Un attentat à Biskra
> Des soldats aux Nementcha
> Dernier combat à Batna[ii] (Djebar, *Poèmes pou l'Algérie heureuse*, 1969, pp. 72-74)

Djebar proves to be a picturesque writer who paints Algeria in colors. Her pictorial poems with scenic images make her pieces of letters genius. Writers engaged in the battle of liberation

as they liberated themselves from the Westernist/Colonialist and Eurocentric vision of the time, based on 'Inevitability' of Colonialism (*White Man's Burden*) and its positivity (*The Civilizing Mission*). Assia Djebar challenges these two dogmas vehemently.

Algeria's Revolution First in the Heart of Algerians. Rouge L'aube (Play, 1969)

This play gives another dimension to Djebar's writings. A piece of four acts and ten theatrical play tables with many scenes. Many considered it fully engaged and entirely involved in the Algerian cause. It shows true seeds of anti-colonialism, other commentators say.

With reference to major protagonists of the play, namely: the poet, the guide, the young girl, and the commander in chief, Assia Djebar covers a sociological, social, and societal image of 'Algeria at War'. By referring in a second minor hand to prisoners, the penalty they are condemned to, and their families, the writer conveys the whole image to her audience. Words like 'peasants,' 'curfews,' 'rakings,' and 'Mujahidine' (Algerian fighters) reveal in what ways Assia Djebar draws on her literary and vocabulary reservoir from her national militantism.

Mostefa Lacheraf, Algerian intellectual and militant, expresses himself otherwise at that period. He shows his position towards Assia Djebar and Malek Haddad by saying:

> Des écrivains qui n'ont jamais saisi nos problèmes, mêmes les plus généraux. Ils ont tout ignoré, sinon de leur classe petite bourgeoise, du moins de tout ce qui avait trait à la société algérienne; de tous les écrivains algériens, ce sont ceux qui connaissent le moins bien leurs pays[iii]. (Lacheraf, pp. 733-734)

In this respect, Lacheraf rejected any 'bourgeois pleasure' in an 'Algeria at War'. He wanted all Algerians, including elites, to be part of the 'Liberating Mission'; each at its level. Whether involved or not, many critics are relevant to the final judgment.

Djebar was best known for her outstanding use of literary and narrative techniques that helped her carefully transmit her nationalist message. She skillfully used the 1) Narrative Polyphony (narrative techniques used multiple and distinct voices and perspectives that are used harmoniously within a single work), 2) Poetic verse and lyricism (it offers an artistic pleasure), 3) exploring the intimate and the collective-that is, Djebar explores dynamic social ties and personal trajectories that shape the social, political, and cultural surroundings, 4) Djebar subvers fully the literary genres as challenging nuances between autobiographies, fiction, essays and poetry, 5) Djebar displays an Algerian identity through a French that serves her Algerian identity, 6) Djebar shows soft power through her engagement and involvement in anti-colonial prospects through themes she tackled: colonization, independence, sex equality" (Maouchi, 2024, p. 124).

Kaouther Adimi: Witnessing Algeria's Historical and Memorial Testimonies

This part of the paper briefly highlights Kaouther Adimi's life. It presents a short profile about her achievements, awards, and her nomination for the Goncourt Prize. Kaouther Adimi merits the title of 'the future Algerian writer of good literature'.

Kaouther Adimi

Kaouther Adimi is an Algerian writer. She was born in Algiers in 1986. She wrote many novels: 1) *Au vent mauvais* (In the Bad Wind or Presentiment , 2022); 2) *L'envers des autres* (Against Others, 2011); 3) *Les petits de Décembre* (The Littles of December, 2019); 4) *Des ballerines de papicha* (Papicha's Ballerinas, 2010), 4) *Fernand Pouillon et l'Algérie* (2019); 5) *Des pierres dans ma poche* (Stones in my Pocket, 2016), and *Nos Richesses* (Our Riches or Bookstore in Algiers 2017). Nos richesses was shortlisted for the Goncourt and won the Prix Renaudot, Prix du Style, the Prix Beur FM Méditerranée, and the Choix Concourt de l'Italie.

History and Memory in Nos Richesses[iv] (Novel, 2017)

Adimi has written several novels about Algeria. She covers major cultural, historical, and, at times, political challenges that have characterized Algeria since the 1950s. The writer has clearly demonstrated colonial and postcolonial life through characters that are sometimes real (Edmond Charlot), other times fictitious (Ryad), and in other half-real, half-fictional situations (Abdellah). Kaouther Adimi cleverly includes the love of the book or bibliomania (Edmond Charlot and Abdellah). The other loves notably the love of Claire by Abdellah and his personal love of his native country (Nationalism and literature as a device of resistance), well illustrated in the passages which show the famous historical events of May 8, 1945 (pp 127 -128-129-130-131-132) or November 1, 1954 (pp 167-168-169). Edmond Charlot, at twenty (1935), opens a bookstore in Algiers to serve students and book lovers (the bookstore represents her as carrying the nation's archival space). The bookseller encourages young people to open doors to the other shore of the Mediterranean and to bring the two shores into dialogue, far from any discrimination based on language or religion. The dilemma of this novel is apparently clear: love versus challenge. The love of books (Edmond Charlot and Abdellah) who resist the indifference and sabotage of Ryad, who prefers his beloved Claire and donuts at the expense of the book and its value. Therefore, the conflict is always between the human instinct ("love of sex and consumerism" / "love of food and money") and the other love of human value(s), well illustrated in the love of books, love of reading, and above all, the anti-materialists and noble ideals, notably shown in Abdellah and Edmond Charlot.

Les petits de Décembre (Novel, 2019). Rebelious Voice(s) of Independent Algeria

The story takes place in one of the western suburbs of Algiers, Dely Ibrahim, where the famous Battle of Staoueli occurred in 1830. A space, named after the famous historical strikes and events of September 11, 1960, was the 'spot of dispute' between 'Army Generals' Saïd and Athman and three teenagers of the neighborhood Ines (granddaughter of an FLN fighter Adila), Jamyl (Grandson of an ex-military general), and Mehdi (son of black decade victim, paralyzed in a bomb attack).

One evening, reports vary. The two Generals Saïd and Athmane castigate these thugs and terrorists. They consider them the 'troublemaking scum'. They want the space. It is theirs. It is a military space! (Adimi, 2019, p. 45). The newspaper reports the facts cautiously and in different versions. They called the spot 'terrain of discord'. The Generals file a complaint against Youcef, a supporter of the three teenagers and Adila (grandmother of Ines). Yousef defends himself, saying in anger: They want to take our football field. [...] They already have that entire filthy city (Adimi, 2019, p. 62).

The story took place in February 2016, a period between well-echoed demonstrations of 2011-2014 and the famous Hirak in 2019. Space and time Allegories are present in the story, as the setting (time and place) represents historical and memorial landmarks, implicitly conveying the writer's final message. Symbolism and political metaphor are present. They are explicitly shown in the intergenerational memory conflict that smoothly carries through the novel's plot. The choice of words, names, and expressions is also relevant.

Finding History in Au vent Mauvais (2022)

Through the crossed destinies of three characters, Saïd, Tarek, and Leïla, Kaouther Adimi paints a great fresco of Algeria, over a century or so, from colonization to the struggle for independence, until the summer of 1992, when the country descends into its black decade. From various social backgrounds, hard for Tarek and soft for Saïd, both loved Leïla.

The story gets its climax when the Second World War sends both to the front. Saïd becomes a man of letters. Tarek, back in the village, marries Leïla and adopts the child. Three girls will follow. Soon, he joined the famous Algerian Revolution (1954-1962) for independence, and then took part in the major filming of The Battle of Algiers (1957), before leaving to work in a factory in the Paris region. By a series of unexpected coincidences, he finds himself guardian of a magnificent villa in Rome, time suspended in a tormented trajectory.

In one passage, Adimi aims to depict a crisis/dilemma, with reference to diaspora identity, which generally annoys Algerian immigrants (Tarek) in France. -La vie est trop cher ici.

> Au pays, ta famille est à l'abri du besoin, mais en France, ce serait la misère!
>
> Un ouvrier algérien ajouta:
>
> Et tu sais ce qui passera si tu amènes tes filles ici? Elles deviendront des Françaises! La minijupe et le maquillage.
>
> Tarek sourit en pensant à sa fille ainée vivait seule à Alger[v] .
>
> (Adimi, *Au vent mauvais*, 2022, p. 80)

Both Algeria's war memory, diaspora identity, displacement, and masculinity are present in one of Algeria's famous events, the Battle of Algiers, and in the crisis of second-generation immigrants in France. Adimi peppers artistically her works with a marvelous taste of 'History'

and 'Identity' notions that dazzle in a way or another her audience.

Conclusion

Assia Djebar moved from the distant past (The French Conquest) to the recent past (Post-Independent Algeria), from the third person (He/she) to the first person (I), with an extraordinary evocation of her father, mother, and cousin. She is simply one of the icons of Algerian literature in French. Djebars' pen was an effective camera that flashed the atrocities of the French conquest and its aftermath.

Kaouther Adimi shows a clear-to-the-eye success in peppering her novel with History / Memory and above all 'Sense of Nationalism'. She has peppered well the novel with the history of Algeria and the colonial genocides (May 1945), the glorious Algerian Revolution (1954-1962), Battle of Algiers 1957, December 1960, Ben Bella Times (1962-1965), and the Black Decade (1990's), and the famous year(s) of El Hirak (2019).

About the Author

BOUDERSA Hemza is an Associate Professor in British, American, African, and Algerian Studies. He wrote and translated many academic articles and books. He has participated in many national and international Conferences since 2011. ORCID: 0009-0007-0874-1136

AI Statement

This document has been enhanced through the use of Grammarly which was employed to refine its linguistic style and correct grammar and spelling. While the incorporation of these technologies may introduce some AI-generated linguistic patterns, it is important to note that the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented are entirely the work of the author.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

References

Adimi, K. (2021*). A Bookshop in Algiers* (C. Andrews, Trans). Serpent's Tail; Main, Edition

Adimi, K. (2022). *Au vent mauvais* [In the Harsh Wind]. Alger: barzakh.

Adimi, K. (2017). *Nos Richesses* [Our Riches]. Alger: barzakh.

Adimi, K (2020). *Our Riches* (C. Andrews, Trans). New Directions Publishing Corporation.

Adimi, K. (2019). *Les petits de décembre* [The December Children]. Alger: barzakh.

Djebar, A. (2012). *Lire Assia Djebar* [Reading Assia Djebar]. Alger: Editions Sedia.

Djebar, A. (1985). *L'amour, la fantasia* [Love, Fantasia]. Paris: ENAL.

Djebar, A. (1993). *Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade* [Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade]. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Djebar, A. (1969). *Poèmes pour l'Algérie heureuse* [Poems for a Happy Algeria]. Alger: SNE.

Goellner, S. (2018). *French Orientalist Literature in Algeria, 1845–1882: Colonial Hauntings.* Lexington Books

Lacheraf, M. (n.d.). L'avenir de la culture algérienne [The future of Algerian culture]. *Temps Modernes*. Lexington: Lexington University Press

Maouchi, A. (2024). *Littérature de la langue d'Etudes. Initiation à la littérature algérièn*ne *d'eexpression française* [Literature of the Language of Study: An Introduction to Algerian Literature of French Expression]. Jijel: Rofikriya.

Mebirouk. (2018). *Les Ecrivains Algériens D'éxpression Française* [Algerian Writers of French Expression]. Constantine: Numidia Livres.

Murdoch. Y. (1993). Rewriting Writing: Identity, Exile, and Renewal in Assia Djebar's L'amour, la fantasia. (Y. University, Ed.) *Yale French Studies,* (83), 71-92.

Peters, E. (2012). Assia Djebar and the Algerian Cultural Memory. *Bristol Journal of English Studies, 1*(1), 12-15.

Ringrose. (2006). *Assia Djebar: in Dialogue with feminism*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Saadallah, B. (1978). The Rise of the Algerian Elite. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *5*(1),70-72.

Winkler. (2003*). Plume d'ange* [Angel's Feather]. Paris: P.O.L.

اسيا جبار. (2019) الحبّ، الفنتازيا. الجزائر: موفم للنشر

Endnotes

---

[i] In English :

A country without memory is a woman without a mirror
Beautiful, but who wouldn't know
A man searching in the dark
Blind and who doesn't believe it.

(Translated from French by the researcher)

[ii] Snow in Djurdjura
Lark traps at Tikijda
From olivettes to Ouadhias
They whip me at Azazga
…..
The radiance of the day in Khenchela
An Attack in Biskra
Soldiers in Nememtcha

Last fight in Batna.

(Translated from French by the researcher)

[iii] In English :

« Writers who have never grasped our problem, even the most general ones. They ignored everything, if not of their petty bourgoisie class, at least of everything that had to do with Algerian society ; of all Algerian writers, they know their country the least » (Translated from French by the researcher)

[iv]

In English :

« Our Riches is a marvellous, surprising, hybrid novel about a beloved Algerian bookshop » (As prefaced in the English translation of « *Nos Richesses*) (*A Bookshop in Algiers*).

[v]

In English :

-Life is too expensive here.
In the country, your family is sheltered from want, but in France, it would be misery!
An Algerian worker added :
In addition, you know what will happen if you bring your daughters here?
The family will become French! The miniskirt and the make up!
Tarek smiled and thought of his eldest daughter living alone in Algiers
(Translated from French by the researcher)