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**Assia Djebar: A Life of Resistance and Inspiration**

**Life**

Fatima Zohra Imalayen was born in 1936 in the town of Cherchell, Algeria (Chronology Assia Djebar 1996). She grew up learning both Arabic and French although French would come to be her enemy tongue in the beginning of her writing career (De la Baume). She proved to be a promising and bright child early on, and was encouraged to continue her education throughout her childhood by her father, even though that was almost unheard of (De la Baume). Though progressive for that time, he did not necessarily approve of his daughter’s writing career later on.

By the time she was 19, in 1955, Imalayen was the first Algerian woman admitted to the notable and prestigious French École Normale Superieure de Sevres (Chronology Assia Djebar) where her writing career truly began. Two years later in 1957, she published her first novel, *La Soif (Thirst)* (Chronology Assia Djebar). Afraid that her father would be upset with her for publishing a book, she changed her birth name to the pen name of Assia Djebar before publishing it. Though her father eventually found out, she would keep this name for the entirety of her career.

In 1958, Djebar married Ahmed Ould-Rouis while still in France. At this point, the Algerian War of Independence had been well under way for four years. Ahmed fought as a freedom fighter in the war and was wanted by the French police at the time of their marriage (Voices From the Continent, 37). During this period, Djebar began teaching at the Universities of Rabat and Tunis and also worked as a journalist (Voices From the Continent, 37). In 1962, they returned to Algeria after independence and the war had ended (De la Baume).

Djebar would focus on writing and poetry for the next 16 years. Then, in 1978, she directed the film *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (*The Party of the Women of Mount Chnoua*)(Chronology Assia Djebar). In 1979, she won an International Critics Prize for *La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua*, making the film her first international success (De la Baume). Soon thereafter in 1980, she published *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and in 1985 *My Father Writes to my Mother* and *L’Amour la fantasia (Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade).* In 1990, she became a member of the jury for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (Chronology Assia Djebar), and would later win a Neustadt Prize herself for her contributions to world literature (De la Baume). In 1995, Djebar and her second husband moved to the United States so she could teach at Louisiana State University and New York University (De la Baume). Her work *Vaste est la prison (Vast is the Prison)* was also published during this year. In 1997, she assumed the position of Distinguished Professor and Director of the Center for French and Francophone Studies at Louisiana State University (Chronology Assia Djebar).

In recognition of her prolific career, especially relating to French language, Djebar was accepted into the prestigious Académie Française in 2005. Along with her many awards throughout her career, she was frequently mentioned as a contender for the Nobel Prize in Literature (De la Baume). Overall, Djebar was a pioneer and a revolutionary woman, widely recognized for her work in writing and film. Her work focused on women’s rights and resistance, in the context of Islam and in the context of Algeria’s history.

**Context**

The history of Algeria and the religion of Islam overlap in many ways within the context of Djebar’s life, and in the broader history of the region.

After many years of development and prosperity, the French began occupying the coastal towns of Algiers and Oran in 1830 (Voices From the Continent, 35). For the thirty years prior to this occupation, Algeria’s Turkish ruler had little control over the independent Berber towns. When the French invaded, the Turkish ruler was exiled. At this point, the Muslims resisted the French, starting a *jihad,* or Holy War. After 50 years of a violent and inhumane war, the French finally settled Algeria in 1879, and treated the territory as though it was an extension of France (Voices From the Continent, 35).

From then until 1945, the French maintained a somewhat peaceful but forceful rule and control of Algeria. Resistance had been brewing for years, but it wasn’t until 1945 that colonial police opened fire on a peaceful Muslim demonstration, an act which triggered the war of independence in Algeria. Almost ten years later in 1954, the Front de Liberation Nationale resistance movement was founded, helping the independence movement gain more traction. After eight years of violent fighting in one of the most violent wars of independence Africa had seen that caused nearly 1 million Algerian deaths (A Voyage of Discovery), the country finally achieved independence in 1962. The Front de Liberation Nationale leader, Ahmed Ben Bella, became the first President (Voices From the Continent, 35). The intensity with which France had colonized resulted in years of conflict and violence long after independence.

Because the war ended when Djebar was beginning her career, she did most of her writing in the wake of the socialist independence movements left from the war (Joseph and Naǧmābādī, 230). As head of the new government, Bella began a variety of reforms including the redistribution of land and establishment of “closer ties with the European communist-bloc nations” (Dickovick, 31). Due to internal tensions, he was removed in 1965, however, the leaders that followed continued these reforms. Reforms included the establishment that same year of a Revolutionary Council that would govern the country, adopting a new Marxist-oriented constitution in 1976, and a new National Assembly in 1977 (Dickovick, 31).

While Algeria had remained one of the “most secular nations of the Arab world” (Dickovick, 31), this secularism was challenged after the successful Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979. Islamic fundamentalism began to threaten the Front de Liberation Nationale party at a time when the nation and the government were unstable and in significant debt. The Islamic Salvation Front (ISF) party registered in 1989 and quickly gained the majority of seats in government (Dickovick, 31). In only three more years, the military had declared a state of emergency, the ISF had disbanded, and its leader was assassinated. This led Algeria into a civil war between the Islamic parties and the government. In the 1997 elections under the new government, tensions escalated. These tensions have persisted up to the present, with the addition of terrorist campaigns starting in the early 2000.s (Dickovick, 33).

All of the tensions between the Islamic parties and the state throughout this time had major effects on Muslim women and their rights, and many of these effects persist today. One example is the family code, which “treats women as minors under the legal guardianship of a husband or male relative”, though laws restricting women weren’t always enforced (U.S. Department of State). Another example is that Muslim women are not allowed to marry outside the religion, whereas Muslim men can, although this is not strictly enforced either (U.S. Department of State). A woman’s gaze is considered sexual in Islamic culture. During colonization, the French tried to prevent women from wearing veils in public, but most of them resisted and ended up becoming opposition fighters (Best, 874). Finally, in Islamic culture, “It is a serious sin to run away from a *jihad* or a holy war” which was partly the cause for the persistent violence and resistance from some of the Islamic parties during the Algerian Civil War (Voices From the Continent, 33).

Djebar personally experienced many of the oppressive laws and they very much influenced her work. The destruction and devastation in the war of independence and the aftermath affected her work as well. At some point between colonialism and imperialism, Third World women and Ottoman women in particular were turned into “the book prisoners of tradition and modernization” (Assia Djebar – interview en 1990). They were not allowed to tell their stories or be recognized as female writers. By the time Djebar was writing, norms were changing, however the majority of women were still marginalized in the world of writing and publishing.

**Writings and Resistance**

Assia Djebar had an impressive career, not only in overcoming the social and political challenges of her day, but using them as a basis for her work. She has been widely recognized for her works, and won many awards. According to O’Brien and Schatteman:

Assia Djebar is one of North Africa’s most widely acclaimed writers. Overall, her work portrays the quandary Muslim women face as victims of a double colonization by the French regime and the Islamic patriarchy. Djebar retells Algerian history and illustrates women’s struggles to redefine their role in post-colonial Algerian society (37).

She uses various methods in her writings to highlight Algerian history, the role of women and women’s struggles. These methods include intertwining stories from her personal life with historical facts, and consistently using fragmentation and non-linear plot lines to convey her stories (Assia Djebar – interview en 1990). Her texts build tier by tier instead of unfolding in a linear movement, and are rediscoveries and reinventions of Algerian history and women’s struggles (Dobie, 1). Many of her novels can be characterized as “exercises in ‘imaginative training’” through her theoretical writing (Dobie, 2-3).

Running through her work are tactics for how women can receive emancipation; the hidden stories of people (especially women); and the insertion of “lost voices into conversation with modern feminists and writers” (Assia Djebar – interview en 1990). Mourning is not only a major theme, but a mechanism in Djebar’s writing (Dobie, 2), though women’s struggle for social freedom is the deepest and most consistent theme in her writing (Parekh and Jagne, 135). In many instances, Djebar admits, she does not know if she writes out of despair or hope (Assia Djebar au Cooloque du 8 mars 1990 a Fes). Other themes include love and war, the past and present, the role of the French language in forming the identity of colonial and postcolonial subjects, the cultural legacy of centuries of invasion, settlement, and colonialism in Algeria (Parekh and Jagne, 136). Most of her writings are in French, but she also uses alternative languages as a way of including languages that once were and still are on the margins of the literary world. She wrote between cultures and was a major voice of postcolonial thought in Algeria, the African continent, and around the world (Dobie, 2).

There are also many examples of resistance throughout her work, mainly focusing on highlighting women whose history had been erased (Assia Djebar – interview en 1990), writing about history to restore women’s past and to critique the “present sociopolitical situation in Algeria” (Parekh and Jagne, 139), and using polyphonic texts that represent a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and dialects (Best, 873).

All of her modes of writing help create a “personal identity and a collective identity of Algerian women that both acknowledges their past and looks toward their future” (Parekh and Jagne, 136). An extremely important aspect of her writing was language. Because French wasn’t the original language of her country, she recognized it as the language of the colonizer and at the beginning treated it as the enemy language. However, she also used it as a mode of empowerment (Parekh and Jagne, 137).

In one of her short stories, “My Father Writes to My Mother,” she recounts specific details of her childhood. She tells of her mother and father’s relationship, and how it was different from other couples in the village. Culturally in her village of Cherchell, there didn’t seem to be much outward affection between a man and a woman in a relationship, but from an early age, Djebar could tell that her parents were different. At the beginning of her childhood, they didn’t call each other by their first names, but rather *husband* and *wife.* She recounts the first time that her father called her mother by her first name was through a letter, and it astonished the entire village.

It seems as though she was proud of her parents for being different, and liked that they were more liberated then maybe some of the other couples were. It also seems that she drew the connection between her parent’s affection and women’s rights from that young age, although she wrote more thoroughly about it later in her life when she had time to reflect on her childhood. Another important part of the story is her witnessing of the process of her mother learning to read French, something she recognized as part of her mother’s growing rights as a woman at the time, and quite possibly some of her inspiration during her career. Overall *My Father Writes to my Mother* gives us an understanding of how her childhood shaped her life and career through observing her parents.

In *Women of Algiers in their apartment,* written in 1980, she raises the question of whether feminism and women’s solidarity can actually change social relations in Algeria today (Parekh and Jagne, 137). She questions how to maintain a national past while moving forward into the future (Best, 874). At the time of its writing, Djebar’s community was traumatized by the Algerian War of Independence, so this was a sensitive and poignant topic for many people that would read it (Best, 874).

She uses not only her own personal life stories as a basis for addressing women’s issues, but also others’ stories. This is a trend in many of her works, however we can also see this in *Women of Algiers in their apartment* where she uses the stories of three Muslim Algerian women to show their strength and dignity throughout their lives. She intertwines the stories, in part to show how these stories overlap and what that means for women’s rights in Algeria. She forms a “postcolonial space in which multiple fragmented voices are unified by the narrative voice”, which is Djebar herself in the case of this book (Best, 874). There are many examples of resistance throughout the stories in this particular work. She argues that without freedom, there can be no female sexuality at all (Best, 876). This was a radical statement for the time, especially for the Muslim community and it caused tension between those who agreed and those who did not agree with her. The stories themselves are a form of resistance, because she highlighted women who had been silenced and still had not gained an equal position in society.

In *Vaste est la prison (Vast is the Prison),* written in 1999, Djebar herself plays the role of storyteller. The theme is how silence has imprisoned women for generations. She inscribes her own story in the book, and invites her readers to travel “across the boundaries of centuries to discover the histories of their languages and writings” (Ahnouch and Genova, 795). The book seems to awaken the collective consciousness of her audience and inspire readers to remember and honor Algeria’s rich history and culture. Djebar accomplishes this by placing cultural identity on the words and language in this work (Ahnouch and Genova, 796). The overall resistance message in *Vaste est la prison* is that present-day Algeria denies its cultural diversity, cuts off all relations to the outside, and tries to suppress women’s voices and hide their bodies (Parekh and Jagne, 138). Bringing the issues to the forefront of literary thought is an act of resistance; Djebar suggests that solutions lie in remembering Algeria’s history and culture.

At the age of 18, Djebar wrote *L’Amour la Fantasia (Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade)* where she intertwines her personal life with historical facts. She makes French language her own, reflecting the language laws during colonization and the divisions they created (Assia Djebar – interview en 1990). The fragmented plotline tells an alternative history, and the use of second languages becomes a metaphor of silence to resist local patriarchal traditions (Assia Djebar – interview en 1990).

Djebar also worked in the medium of film, her most well-known films being *La Nouba de Femmes du Mont-Chenoua (The Party of the Women of Mount Chnoua*)*,* which was produced in 1977. It is structured around the “Nouba,” a traditional song with five movements (Women Make Movies). Like many of Djebar’s writings it intertwines narrative and documentary in order to present women’s personal and cultural histories (Women Make Movies). It follows some of her most consistent themes: silence and comparing the past to the present (Women Make Movies). She condemns the silence women have been put under, and she highlights the past which some people try to hide.

**Conclusion**

Overall, Assia Djebar was a major international figure in both the literature and film of the 20th and 21st centuries. She grew up and began her career at a period that was crucial to the progress of women’s rights and to the independence and rebuilding of her country of Algeria, and indeed, the entire continent of Africa. Beginning her writing career in the wake of independence and socialist movements, she used many resistance tactics in her works, including highlighting women whose history had been erased, examining the social and political situation in Algeria at the time, and using polyphonic texts that represent a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and dialects. Her writing helped bring women together, both in acknowledging their past and looking toward their future. Djebar was an inspiration to many in Algeria and the world during her life, and her works continue to be a source of inspiration and resistance.

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