

From Steven G. Kellman, ed.  
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ASSIA DJEBAR (1936--)

One of the most prominent and prolific of contemporary Algerian authors, Assia Djébar focuses on the situation of women in a post-colonial society, one that, after a long and violent struggle, achieved independence from France in 1962 but remains beset by tensions between secular and Islamic cultures. Though Djébar, who was born Fatima Zohra Imalayen into a Bedouin family in Cherchell, Algeria, writes in French and has lived for extended periods outside her troubled native country, her books are layered with traces of Arabic and Berber. Her most notable novels include *La Soif* (The mischief, 1957); *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (The children of the new world, 1962); *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Women in Algiers in their apartments, 1980); *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Fantasia: An Algerian cavalcade, 1985); and *Ombre sultane* (A sister to Scheherazade, 1987). Djébar's work as a poet includes *Poèmes pour l'Algérie heureuse* (Poems for a happy Algeria, 1969). She has also been active as a filmmaker and stage director. She is currently professor of French and Francophone Literature at New York University. In the following excerpt from the chapter "Ecrire dans la langue de l'autre" (Writing in the language of the other), in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent . . . en marge de ma francophonie* (These voices that besiege me . . . from the periphery of my Francophonie, 1999), Djébar examines her linguistic situation.

From "Writing in the Language of the Other"

1. *A novelist of the French language* – It is thus that I could introduce myself today, hands held out in presentation, and what is it that I have to offer after having entered literature more than thirty years ago now, if not six novels, a collection of short stories, a play, and a short collection of poetry, a copy of each of these works in one hand (let's make it the right hand since, while writing, I am not a "left-handed woman") and in the left hand two rolls of 16 millimeter color film (1,500 meters and 800 meters), the two feature films that I have written and directed. . . .

Such is the small harvest of this mature woman, distinguishing me from any other woman of the same age who could introduce herself with, for example, four grown-up children and two or three younger ones, even perhaps with one or two grandchildren standing at the front of the group; there would be her human progeny. . . .

But today, my words are present – and my words are in the French language. I am a woman, and "a French speaker." My speech might certainly have been deployed in another register – in Arabic, or eventually in another language. The bottom line is that my writing, in its original form, could be only French.

Thus my words, which might be double, and perhaps even triple, participate in several cultures, while my writing is exclusively French.

One used to say: "I am a man (or woman) of my word." One also maintained: "I say only one thing," and the meaning was taken as an affirmation of honor. Well, I choose to present myself summarily

to you through this affirmation: "I am a woman of writing." And I add in a tone blending gravity and love:

*I have only one writing: that of the French language, with which I trace each page of each book, whether fiction or reflection.*

2. I am an Algerian woman, though instead of my native land I ought to make reference at least to the language of the men and women who were my ancestors: "I am an Arab-Berber woman," and, in addition, "of French writing."

Since my first novel was published, thirty years have gone by, altering nothing in my identity, if it consists of paper, passport, blood, and soil.

However, thirty years later, I declare: I present myself above all as a writer, as a novelist, as if the act of writing, when it is daily, solitary to the point of ascetic, has come to modify the balance of belonging. Because identity is not only a matter of paper or of blood but also of language. And if it seems that language is, as is so often said, "a medium of communication," it is above all for me, a writer, "a medium of transformation," to the extent that I engage in writing as *adventure*.

In May 1982, in Ottawa, during my first trip to Canada, I was set to give a talk at a conference on French literature. As I recall, I had begun thinking about it early in the morning, until just before the time scheduled for my presentation.

I had, under pressure of my public talk, suddenly realized this truth:

*I had until then utilized the French language as a veil. A veil over my individual person, a veil over my woman's body; I might almost say a veil over my own voice.*

And I had evoked (the energy of anamnesis releasing itself that morning in Ottawa) my experience as a little girl going out into the street with a lady (my mother), a city woman enveloped in her white silk veil, a small gauze covering embroidered across her face, and I a little girl with her hand clinging to the rough surface of the immaculate silk, becoming aware of the prying eyes that the vil-

lagers cast on that veiled city woman who came every Thursday to the public bath. . . .

A veil that was neither a disguise nor a mask but that offered suggestion and ambiguity, a veil that certainly blocked out desire, but also a veil that subsumed the desire of men. . . .

So for me, in the first stage of my trajectory as a writer, I wanted to keep writing far from me, as if in its spirals, its upstrokes, and its downstrokes, I was hiding myself in it, aware of the extraliterary curiosity that my writings might arouse in advance – in all, a little like my urban mother's silhouette parading through the center of the village, in front of the country folk. . . .

I had then attempted to explain, for those who had read my most recent books (notably *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*), what price I had paid for that ambiguity: for about ten years of nonpublication, experienced like a kind of voluntary mutism, I might almost say like a sudden aphasia. . . . As if, symbolically tangled up in this silk veil, I were attempting to step outside the French language without, however, abandoning it! To tour it from the outside and then to choose to reenter.

To penetrate it again as a guest, if not as a resident with hereditary rights.

French is thus becoming for me a veritable guest house, perhaps even a permanent place from which to observe each day the impermanence of occupation. Yet in the end, I performed the prophetic action of crossing the threshold myself, I, freely, no longer submitting to colonial conditions.

So much so that this language has come to seem to me a house that I inhabit and that I try to mark each day – while knowing that I have no right at all to the ground on which it stands. But if I make no claim according to *jus soli*, at least, risking a facile play on words, I can look for my right not in the soil but in the sun! . . .

For, while my characters, in *Femmes d'Alger* as much as in the novel published most recently (*Ombre sultane*), struggle against the traditional veil, try to remove it and yet bother with it, I as author have found my space in this writing.

Woman's space that inscribes at will both its inside and its outside, its intimacy and its unveiling, its anchorage as well as its navigation. . . . Writing that could signify historically my extraterritoriality, and that little by little, however, becomes my own only true territory.

3. "*Language of the other*," I have declared. After 1982, while spending two years writing *L'Amour, la fantasia*, the first installment in a novelistic tetralogy that aims to be a "search for identity" and that is admittedly semi-autobiographical, I asked myself: This language of the other, what does it represent for me? How did it enter so deeply into me? Is it at the point that I become "the other" in my society, is it at the point that I take on the part of "the other," the strangeness inevitably included in a group of origin? . . . Yes, what is for me that language of the other, I who, precisely at the age of twenty, enter into literature as if blindfolded yet feeling overwhelmed with light?

The first sentence of that book, *L'Amour, la fantasia*, is an immediate response – and of course to every question about foundations multiple answers arise and disappear, successive waves over the sands of the shore, without exhausting that interrogation. Yes, my first response, obviously, was the hand of the father:

A little Arab girl going to school for the first time, one autumn morning, her hand in the hand of her father.

If I myself could recall the situation of every child immigrant today, in Europe or in Canada, going to school and assimilating into the language of the host country, into "the foreign language," I would say: That child returns home every day and finds her mother most often, her father sometimes as well, speaking the *language of elsewhere*, that of rupture and separation. It is in that language that the child *hears* the mother, in the sound of their origins, sometimes without being able to answer. . . . As if Absence, as absence in the child herself, interrogated her. . . . For she has been plunged too hastily into the *ambient language* – language of the other, foreign

language, and by an intimate contrast, a language that has become that of "here and now."

Let us imagine what subtle lurch, what imperceptible equilibrium, at times what cunning risk of vertigo – if not schizophrenia – enters into this precocious identity. . . .

My childhood, I wanted to recount it, shared equally between two languages, my interior partition paralleling the division between the world of cloistered women and the world of men, native men as much as foreigners. . . . I discovered then that, for me, a nubile girl who would never be cloistered, French which was throughout a century the language of conquerors, of colonizers, of new owners, that language was silenced for me in the *language of the father*.

4. "*Linguistic territory between two peoples*." Have I noted: that communal language shared with other migrants, those who come from other cultures and other languages, how – when one chooses or when one is pushed to write – yes, how that language thus appropriated "conforms," so to speak, to usage in the hands of a "professional" writer?

I answer by advancing the idea that, when one is a writer but a newcomer to the language – without, let's say, cultural baggage that it carries – to write in the language of the other is very often to use all the resources of language to convey, to make visible "the other," its power of alterity.

Let me explain. In 1982, I was finishing up a second, very unusual film project: using archival footage to reconstruct the recent past of the Maghreb. . . . Not another simple illustrated history, not an audio commentary accompanying images arranged in chronological order. No.

I sensed rather quickly that those who photographed, who recorded the images of the past brought to it the glance of an "other" (the glance, might I say, of a "tourist"). They photographed everything – in other words, nothing essential. Because the essential was then clandestine, hidden, out of range. . . .

To reconstruct on a screen several decades of a colonized people was to make palpable how much, in every image, the real was in the margins, how everything in the past was barely seen, emptied of its meaning. . . . In sum, those images concealed the past, projected it onto a deforming, illusory screen. . . .

How then does one attempt to approach that "identity" of a bygone past? The sound, *under* the images, could not be commentary; it had to fill a vacuum, make that vacuum felt. . . . It had to "denounce," alert, without being polemical or even "committed." So I understood that, by means of sound, I had to retrieve, suggest, perhaps resuscitate *the invisible voices*, of those who had not been photographed, because they were lurking in the shadows, because they were spurned. . . .

Memory is a woman's voice,  
 night after night  
 we strangle it  
 under the bed  
 of a leaden sleep!

sang an actress, heard over the bodies of the first North African women photographed in color, at the beginning of the 1920s. . . .

5. And I return to this "other" in all writing.

Thus, from this work on visual memory (nine months in post-production, editing the footage, but also getting musicians to sing, to recover in fragments the anonymous popular tunes . . .), I understood that similarly in literature the excluded, the forgotten of my native group had to be brought back into the light, particularly through the French language.

Throughout Algeria's nineteenth century, a century of confrontations, of violence, of ferment, no combat artist had attended to the struggles of the ancestors who pranced about in the sunshine defying and dying. . . . I felt in myself an urgent need to resuscitate those images and yet to use French words.

Thus, in the language considered another's, I found myself

obliged to fulfill a mnemonic responsibility, a mission of recalling an elsewhere, an extinct Arab-Berber past, my own. . . . As if bloodlines needed to be conveyed through the host language; and that is indeed the true hospitality, not merely being able to cross the threshold of the other. . . .

So, for me, my Ariadne's thread was becoming my ear. . . . Yes, I was hearing Arabic and Berber (the lamentations, the cries, the ululations of my nineteenth-century ancestors), I was really hearing them and, in order to resuscitate them, the savages, in the French language.

So much so that writing became inscribing, transcribing, writing in depth, retrieving into the text, the paper, the manuscript, the hand, retrieving simultaneously funeral chants and buried corpses: yes, retrieving the other (previously the enemy and unassimilable) into the language.

Have I succeeded in conveying what was for me this labor of exhumation, of disinterring what the language treats as "other"? Perhaps that is what a writer does first: always bring back what is buried, what is shut up, the shadow engulfed so long in the language. . . . Bring the obscure into the light.

6. In conclusion, I might interrogate myself: to live in two cultures, to lurch between two memories, two languages, to retrieve in a single writing the black part, the repressed – ultimately, what transformation does it lead me to?

Am I committed to being a woman of transition, the writer of passage, to deliver a message on two channels (so that instead of double fidelity it is double drift or even double "treason" that awaits me)? . . . To cease writing, because of the risk of, little by little, no longer speaking *the words of the tribe* (according to the very beautiful Italian novel by Natalia Ginsburg), would that mean no longer belonging to any tribe, to any group, without being able in fact to blend two pasts, two treasures?

Progressive displacement, slow and infinite deracination, no

doubt: as if it were necessary to uproot incessantly. To uproot while rediscovering myself, rediscover myself because I am uprooting. . . .

Who am I? I had answered at the beginning: first, a novelist of the French language. . . . Why not finish by asking myself the question again? Who am I? A woman whose culture of origin is Arab and Islamic. . . . So, let me underline this: in Islam, the woman is a guest – in other words, temporary; risking, every moment, unilateral repudiation, she cannot truly claim any permanent location.

Thus, in a religion that begins with an emigration virtually sacralized, the woman becomes an eternal emigrant, with no point of arrival and for that a creature deserving both the best and the worst! The best symbolically, the worst historically.

For my part, though I write daily in the French language, or precisely because of writing thus, I am in fact only one of the women of that multitude. . . . Simply a migrant. The most beautiful designation, I believe, in Islamic culture.

Translated by Steven G. Kellman