



Research Paper

Crossing the Threshold: A Critical Analysis of Women's Subversion and Solidarity in Assia Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade*

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ABSTRACT: Assia Djebar is one of the leading literary figures in the contemporary literature. Her writing poses a challenge to the deeply entrenched gender inequality, patriarchal hegemony and culturally constructed codes of gender status and roles. Djebar gives voice to the female version of the story, which she believes is mostly subdued and sidelined in a world ruled by the patriarchal norms. Through her novels she speaks up for all women; veiled or unveiled, repressed and restrained, at home, in diaspora, in exile, in East, in West or in any corner of the world. Her novels highlight the incredible female perspective on religion, politics, culture and tradition. The women in her novels struggle against different forms of oppression and valiantly expose its various manifestations. The present paper will analyze her novel *A Sister to Scheherazade* from a feminist perspective to examine how different female characters in the novel are involved in a quest for identity, freedom and an independent space. With the focus on the theme of "threshold" and what crossing it symbolizes for Djebar's female characters in the novel, the paper will explore how the novel challenges the established patriarchal strictures and paradigm.

Keywords: Algeria, Assia, Djebar, feminism, gender inequality, oppression, patriarchy, threshold.

I. INTRODUCTION

The threshold gains the central stage in Assia Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade*. It is depicted as a margin between silence and speech, fear and freedom, desires and fulfillment, anonymity and identity. For Djebar, threshold denotes more than a demarcation between the two worlds; the private and the public space; it represents the parameters within which a Woman is supposed to live, think, dream, act, speak, react, suffer, protest, know and exist. For her a threshold is a borderline of a Woman's personal, social, religious and political rights, drawn by the traditional society rooted in the patriarchal notions of gender, culture and religion. In her writings Djebar describes the "threshold" as a dominant symbol of female oppression and male authority, arguing that for centuries women's segregation, justified either in the name of culture or religion, has pushed them in to obscurity. She believes that women's seclusion turned them into passive members of the society and hence barred their participation in the formation of societal rules, religious laws and cultural practices.

Assia Djebar is one of most eminent historian and feminist postcolonial novelists. She is a recipient of a number of prestigious prizes including 1996 Neustadt International Prize, 1997 African Literature Association's Fonlon Nichols Prize and was for a long time considered to be a strong contender for the Nobel Prize for literature. In her novels she vehemently exposes the issues of women's isolation which she believes led to their collective invisibility and marginality in the society. Her novel, *A Sister to Scheherazade*, originally written in 1987, highlights the predicament and resistance of women estranged in the socially constructed gender roles in a patriarchal social system. The novel revolves around the lives of two women, Isma and Hajila, as they struggle against the strictures imposed on them in their male-dominated family and society. The story begins with Hajila, caught up in between her role and responsibilities as a submissive wife and her insistent desire for freedom, on verge of a rebellion against the strictures imposed on her. Her story is narrated by Isma, the first wife of her husband who arranged her marriage.

The enticement of a luxurious life seduces young Hajila's impoverished family to marry her off to a divorcee with two children. More than the man, the family living in the shantytown takes interest in his assets. Touma, Hajila's mother lured by the hope of a better future for the entire family straightaway accepts the

marriage offer which is more like a business agreement in which the bride is nothing more than an exchanged object. In return Hajila's husband offers financial help to the family and promises to help them get a house of their own. Soon after the marriage, Hajila discovers that her husband is a drunkard. He treats her like a subordinate while been completely indifferent to her. Their lovemaking is described as a rape. Djebbar compares Hajila's first sexual intercourse with her husband to a "battle fought out on a mattress in a tangle of crumpled sheets" (57). She profusely uses words like "resistance", "surrender", "sword thrust", "castigate" to describe their sexual act. As a married woman, Hajila becomes a virtual prisoner, "a doll kept in luxury" (57) in the spacious apartment. Her monotonous existence makes her envy men, "who can all go forth into the sunshine" (Djebbar 9). After months of loneliness and restraint, Hajila decides to go out whenever possible without her husband's consent or, even, knowledge.

Hajila first attempts to escape the entrapment of the deeply entrenched patriarchal customs of her society by secretly venturing out on the streets. Every day when her husband and his children leave, she surreptitiously sneaks out of her apartment block wearing her veil and explores the city on her own. At first she is uneasy and terrified at the thought of being exposed to the outside world but with time her desire for freedom overpowers her apprehensions. Later, she takes off her veil as well. When her husband find about her going out, he beats her and tries to blind her with the broken beer bottle. Her husband believes that he possesses her because he paid for her at the time of marriage and financially helped her family. Like him, her mother, Toumatoo believe that he owns her daughter which is why she always refers to him as Hajila's master or lord rather than her husband. She expects Hajila to submissively stay indoors and oblige her husband and is furious when she finds out about her secret walks. Hajila is tortured, castigate and abused for leaving the precinct of her home without the permission of her husband. But, later it is during the act of her "marital rape" when she first breaks her silence and tries to struggle, although inefficaciously. After her marriage is consummated, she emerges as a new woman: audible and defiant. Her traumatic physical encounter with her husband empowers her in a way that it gives her voice and strength to protest. She begins to confront him, and, even, resists his advances while demanding her right to go to the Turkish public bath.

Hajila's act of crossing the threshold of her apartment is her first attempt to reclaim her body, because by doing so she displaces her husband's position as her owner, which is followed by her another symbolic act of unveiling and studying her body in the mirror. Her act of stepping out of her home, is not only her revolt against the constraints of the patriarchal system but also a struggle for identity and search for self. It is her attempt to step out of the marginalized space into the liberated one. Her struggle to regain the ownership of her body culminates when, after getting the duplicate apartment keys from Isma in the hamman, she goes out again and aborts her fetus by throwing herself under a car. She survives the accident but loses her baby, who is depicted as a symbol of herenforcedmarital responsibilities, domestic obligations and her husband's dominance. Terminating her pregnancy is her ultimate attempt to free herself from the bondage of patriarchal customs and social codes.

In her struggle to escape her confinement Hajila is helped and encouraged by Isma, the ex-wife of her husband. Isma is a voluble, sexually and physically liberated woman who returns to Algeria from France to help other women fight oppression and attain freedom. After freeing herself from the responsibilities of her marital life by divorcing her husband and finding a step mother to look after her daughter Mereim, Isma travels to France. But, later she returns to Algeria after realizing that her "unearned privileges can be oppressive of other women, unless put to work to further their freedom, not hers" (Elia 35). She decides to settle down in her hometown with her daughter and also to help Hajila, for whose ill circumstances she is herself largely responsible. She also asserts to speak up for other women and puts on a veil to reconnect with her tradition. According to Alison Rice, the author of *Polygraphies: Francophone Women WritingAlgeria*, Isma dons the veils to "reestablish a sense of stability in a world that may be just as "voracious" as the bonds of marital commitment" (139). Through Isma's decision to take a stand for all women, Djebbar highlights the importance of women's solidarity in their struggle against oppression. Nada Elia in her book, *Trances, Dances, and Vociferations: Agency and Resistance in Africana Women's Narratives*, too opines that the novel "reinscribes the message that women's solidarity can help them escape patriarchal oppression, while their internecine rivalry aggravates it" (34). Similarly, Priscilla Ringrose in her book, *Assia Djebbar in Dialogues with Feminisms*, states that the novel strongly emphasizes the message of women sisterhood and solidarity. According to her the relationship between Isma and Hajila "begins in ambiguity and ends in solidarity" (24). The two women in the novel, Isma and Hajila are wives of the same man but they are not rivals. Isma herself, in order to find a mother for her daughter Meriem arranges her husband's marriage to the young Hajila with the help of the local matchmaker. But, after the marriage Isma realizes that she has played a main role in Hajila's victimization by entrapping her in a grim situation from which she herself escaped. She realizes that she freed only herself from the shackles of patriarchy but in the process abandoned her daughter Meriem and wronged Hajila. Therefore, she decides to fight for the freedom of all women as she, according to Anne Donadey, the author of *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing between Worlds*, "discoversthe impossibility of separating herself from other

women's fates" (84). Which is why, she, during one of their meetings at the hamman, persuades Hajila to escape and gives her the duplicate keys of the apartment. Throughout the novel Djebbar critically explores how patriarchy function through women. First it is Isma who, in her own pursuit for freedom, entangles another woman in a loveless and abusive marriage. Apart from her, Hajila's mother Touma too contributes to her daughter's sufferings by urging her to be subservient to her husband in spite of the constraints he imposes on her. Djebbar writes: "now, the mothers keep guard and have no need of the policeman's badge of office...fear is transmitted from generation to generation. The matriarchs swaddle their little girls in their insidious anguish, before they even reach puberty (145). On her part Touma, as a young woman, too is mistreated by another woman; her mother-in-law. Married at an early age of twelve, Touma faces great hardship in her marital life after she gives birth to two daughters. Her mother-in-law begins to treat her harshly while at the same time devolving all the domestic responsibilities on her. Similarly, she detests her granddaughters, often starves them and prays for their death. According to Djebbar, women themselves serve as allies to men in perpetuating the oppression and segregation of women in the society. Isma, for instance in one of her narratives recalls a childhood incident when she overheard one of her mother's friends lamenting her distressful life as a married woman before she is hushed by other women. Isma too is rebuked by them when she naively repeats her complaints without understanding its meaning. Years later Isma recalls the lamenting complaint of that woman and the indifferent response of other women who instead of comforting her reprovingly silenced her. Isma repeats the complaint once again, this time fully aware of its meaning, with the intention to open the consciousness of all women through her narrative. The representation of the dire consequences of lack of solidarity helps Djebbar to highlight the importance of unity among women. According to Elia, the novel calls for "coalition building and a joint denunciation of women's oppression from the "internal colonizers", the Arab men whose power rests, in parts, in the lack of solidarity and support among women" (12). Djebbar, through her main female characters, clearly states women can overcome their subjugation and escape the enforced confinement through their solidarity. According to Donadey, the novel presents solidarity and sisterhood as a challenge which women must "embrace in order to free themselves from the death sentence pronounced against them, overcoming institutionalized female rivalry to protect each other..." (84)

II. CONCLUSION

In this novel Djebbar portrays her female characters as rebellious and courageous. They valiantly cross the threshold of the male-controlled domain and challenge the patriarchal notion of female ownership. They refuse to follow the rules set for them and struggle to break free from all the restraints. For Djebbar, they; Hajila, Isma, Meriem, Touma and Kenza represent all women, "barring midwives, barring mothers standing guard and those carrion beetle-matriarchs" who were mutilated in "adolescence... cast out from the enclosing warmth of a home"(Djebbar). Their struggle, silence and suffering denote the eternal story of womanhood. Their awakening symbolizes a new dawn.

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