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## Writing as Resistance: Assia Djébar's *Vaste est la prison*

By Joyce Lazarus<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This essay examines contemporary Algerian women's condition, as it is articulated in Djébar's autobiographical novel, *Vaste est la prison* (1995). After giving an overview of modern Algerian history, I offer a reading of Djébar's novel that takes account of its potential to produce social change. This essay demonstrates that Djébar blurs the boundaries between autobiography, fiction and history in order to fully utilize the subversive potential of writing. Using the perspective of new historicism, I show how Djébar responds to her country's unilateralism in language and its exclusion of women by her unique rhetorical strategies, in order to restore women's rightful place in Algerian history and present-day society. Djébar challenges traditional patriarchal structures by demonstrating how Algerian women throughout history have been agents of change who have transmitted their multilingual cultural heritage from generation to generation.

*Keywords:* Algerian feminism, Assia Djébar, Algerian autobiographical fiction.

### Writing as Resistance: Assia Djébar's *Vaste est la prison*

Assia Djébar's writings have a sense of urgency that compels her readers to listen. The brutal legacy of 130 years of colonialism in Algeria, followed by the bloody eight-year Algerian Revolution (1954-1962) have left scars on a nation still struggling today to find its political identity. Emerging from a decade-long civil war (1992-2002) that claimed as many as 200,000 lives,<sup>1</sup> Algeria has still not brought to justice many of those responsible for massacres, torture and "disappearance" of civilians.<sup>2</sup>

For Assia Djébar – Algerian historian, novelist and filmmaker – the repression of her compatriots, and in particular that of Algerian women, is not part of the past, but is with us still today, as terrorist attacks and civil rights violations continue. Djébar succinctly describes her reason for writing: "I only know one rule...: to write only out of necessity...What sustains [me] is the will to say or the fierce desire to not forget..."<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, after presenting an overview of Algerian history since independence, I will examine Algerian women's condition as it is articulated in Djébar's autobiographical novel, *Vaste est la prison* (1995).<sup>4</sup> Just as new historicists<sup>5</sup> have probed the boundaries between literature and history and have explored the subversive potential of writing,<sup>6</sup> I want to offer a reading of Djébar's work that takes account of its potential

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to produce social change. What rhetorical strategies does Djébar employ in response to the Algerian tragedy? What are the subversive poetics of her novel?

### Contemporary Algerian History

Algeria was a French colony from 1830 to 1962, a longer period of colonization than that of other Maghrebian countries.<sup>7</sup> During the eight-year Algerian Revolution, led by the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) women participated actively as nurses, cooks, spies and also as armed combatants, and they bore a heavy weight of hardship during the repression carried out against Algerians by French forces: one out of every five female revolutionaries suffered imprisonment or death.<sup>8</sup>

Women, however, did not share equally with men in the benefits accrued from establishing an independent nation in 1962. The FLN, which became the single ruling political party after independence, used the common denominator of Islam to mobilize public support both during the war and during its aftermath. In the postwar struggle to create a blueprint for a new Algeria, the spirit of reform and innovation gave way to the immediate need of preserving the Arab-Islamic character of the nation and of ridding it of the vestiges of French domination.<sup>9</sup> A conscious effort was made to re-establish traditional conservative values in Algeria. For women, this meant that the enactment of family law was postponed for more than two decades during successive crises of political leadership and that the ancient patriarchal structure of Algerian society was maintained.<sup>10</sup> During the presidential regime of Ahmed Ben Bella (1962-1965), women made substantial gains in civil and political rights, achieving the right to vote and to be elected to political office.<sup>11</sup> The constitution protected women's civil rights in several important articles. Article 39 states: "Any discrimination based on sex, race or occupation is forbidden." Similarly, Article 42 states: "All political, economic, social and cultural rights of Algerian women are guaranteed by the constitution."<sup>12</sup> Despite their political gains, women's social advancement was hampered by Algeria's conservative economic and social policies during the late nineteen sixties and seventies. While the number of women enrolled in school jumped to 1.5 million between 1967 and 1977, Algeria had one of the lowest rates of women in the workplace.<sup>13</sup>

In 1984, President Chadli Benjedid's government promulgated a conservative Family Code that was faithful to *shari'a* (Islamic law). According to historian Mounira Charrad, Algeria's Family Code had been held hostage for more than two decades to political divisions. The code that was finally implemented was based on patrilineal tribal kinship ties, in order to win the support of the country's conservative political base.<sup>14</sup> Benjedid's exclusion of women from participation in the formulation of this code and the commission's secrecy during the five years of the law's creation (1979-1984) gave rise to women's widespread protests and demonstrations.<sup>15</sup> This activism gave birth to Algeria's first grassroots feminist movement – "Collectif 95 Maghreb Égalité" – which continues its lobbying efforts for reform today.<sup>16</sup>

With the enactment of the Family Code, the legal status of women became that of permanent minors compared with the rights and duties of Algerian men.<sup>17</sup> Under the statutes of this code, women are discriminated against in matters of marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. *Walis* (male guardians) continue to dictate the terms of matrimonial agreements and Algerian women are forbidden from marrying non-Muslims, while Algerian men have no restrictions on whom they may marry. A woman's right to

divorce is subject to a series of qualifications, while men have retained an absolute right to unilateral repudiation of a wife.<sup>18</sup> While child custody is normally awarded to the mother, she may not make decisions on education or take a child out of the country without the father's authorization. Polygamy is legal for an Algerian man; he may take up to four wives. In inheritance claims, women are entitled to a smaller portion of an estate than male children or a deceased husband's brothers.<sup>19</sup> The legalized inequalities of the Family Code have often played out in physical violence against women in the home. A 2008 Human Rights Report of the U. S. Department of State emphasized that the home was the "privileged place for spousal violence," and reported about 4,500 assaults against women during the first half of that year alone.<sup>20</sup>

Algerian family law is far more conservative than that of Tunisia or Morocco, countries which, according to one international report, have given women rights not enjoyed anywhere else in the Arab world.<sup>21</sup> Although the Family Code was amended in 2005, both the U.S. Department of State and Amnesty International continue to criticize its human rights violations.<sup>22</sup> Family law was ultimately sacrificed to political expediency, making women pawns in the larger issue of Algeria's identity crisis.<sup>23</sup> During the presidency of Chadli Benjedid, Algeria's growing socioeconomic crisis worsened, fed by overpopulation, rising unemployment, a severe housing shortage in urban areas, and the presence of a large alienated, disgruntled youth (70% of the Algerian population is under 25),<sup>24</sup> who despaired of finding work. Benjedid's policy of Arabization of schools exacerbated the crisis by creating a cleavage between French-educated youth who had access to lucrative international positions and Arabic-speaking youth who were frequently unemployed. In addition, the importation of Arabic teachers from Egypt meant that many teachers sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>25</sup> spread this violent ideology in schools and mosques.<sup>26</sup>

Into the mixture in the 1980's of growing social malaise and political frustration stepped radical Islam. In fact, radical Islamic movements have been a major factor of Algerian political life since the 1970's. Radical Islam explicitly rejects the very idea of an Algerian nation and opposes to this the concept of the *umma*, a universal community of believers which transcends regional differences and which requires a government based entirely on *shari'a*.<sup>27</sup> The adoption of a multiparty system by Benjedid and the emergence of a powerful Islamic party in 1991– the FIS (Islamic Front for Salvation) – was viewed with consternation by the military High Command, fearing a loss of their role in the government along with their economic privileges. Following the parliamentary elections of January, 1992, the military carried out a coup d'état and forced the resignation of President Benjedid. The ensuing Islamic insurgency led by the FIS and its militant offshoot, GIA (Armed Islamic Group) initiated a murderous campaign against both the military regime and civilians.

The bloody decade of 1992-2002 began with the assassination of President Mohamed Boudiaf, one of the revered leaders of the Algerian Revolution and an architect of the modern Algerian nation.<sup>28</sup> Armed Islamic fundamentalists<sup>29</sup> during this decade attacked both military and civilian targets, singling out journalists, physicians, school teachers, artists and intellectuals – educated people who represented a threat to their rigid authoritarian ideology. In addition, many human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, International Women's Human Rights Law Clinic, and Women Living under Muslim Laws, have reported that women have been particularly targeted for

violence and have been victims of rape, abduction, torture and murder whenever they have deviated from the fundamentalist movement's narrow interpretation of *shari'a*.<sup>30</sup> According to the scholar Hafid Gafaïti, the opposing groups in the civil war – members of the FIS and representatives of the military regime – are similar in that they both represent a continuation of the same ruling political party, the FLN, and both are based on “an obsession with unity, monotheism, be it secular or religious, that by definition, cannot bear multiplicity.”<sup>31</sup>

President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika (1999-present), while defeating the Islamic insurgency and restoring relative calm to Algeria, has still failed to address many concerns of the Algerian population: an end to corruption in government, greater economic opportunity for all citizens and protection against civil rights violations. In spite of constitutional guarantees of their equality with men, women continue to be excluded from positions of leadership, particularly in politics, business and law.<sup>32</sup> Bouteflika's government, moreover, has been sharply criticized for failing to protect Algerian citizens against continued terrorist attacks<sup>33</sup> and for granting amnesty to state-armed militia and Islamic militants responsible for gross human rights violations.<sup>34</sup> Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), the theoretician of the Algerian Revolution and pre-eminent thinker on the issue of decolonization, was also one of the first political analysts to examine Algerian women's condition. In “Algeria Unveiled,” from his essay, *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), Fanon attempts to elucidate Algerian women's role in the Algerian Revolution while also examining her condition and demystifying her. Fanon correctly points out how Algerian women participated actively in the Algerian Revolution and used their veil as a strategic tactic, veiling or unveiling at different times, in order to conceal weapons, to make themselves less easily identifiable in the eyes of the French occupiers, or to demonstrate their rejection of the values of the occupier.<sup>35</sup>

While trying to attack stereotypes of Algerian women, however, Fanon perpetuates some of these very stereotypes. Fanon, along with many other political thinkers of his generation, treats the topic of the Algerian woman as a single, homogeneous societal group. According to Fanon, the Algerian woman herself has chosen a life restricted to the home, in order to prepare for battle: “The Algerian woman, in imposing such a restriction on herself, in choosing a form of existence limited in scope, was deepening her consciousness of struggle and preparing for combat...” Fanon fails to examine the role played by Algerian men in the creation of a society in which women have been largely cloistered. He also attempts to explain their perceived “sclerosis”<sup>36</sup> and silence without analyzing historical circumstances that have prevented many women from participating in society.

### **Assia Djébar's novel, *Vaste est la prison***

Assia Djébar's autobiographical novel, *Vaste est la prison* (1995), the third volume of her “Algerian quartet,” is set against the backdrop of the Algerian civil war, which claimed the lives of many of her closest friends, and against Algerian women's condition throughout history. Djébar's novel raises many important questions: How can art and reality overlap? How can fiction contribute to socio-political change? What are the subversive poetics of her novel? How does Djébar's autobiographical novel constitute activism?

As a Muslim, Arab woman, Djébar comes to autobiographical fiction with great unease, since in her culture, women are traditionally silent and invisible, and representation of the self is seen as a transgression. Djébar's real name is Fatima-Zohra Imalayène. She adopted the pseudonym Assia ("consolation") Djébar ("intransigent") in 1957 when she published her first novel, *La Soif*, because, as she expressed it, "In Maghrebian society, women do not write. To write is to expose oneself."<sup>37</sup> She describes the Algerian quartet as an "unveiling:" "In my first books, I stepped forward veiled. In the quartet, I show myself."<sup>38</sup>

A product of Western acculturation, Djébar mastered French thanks to the encouragement of her father, a French instructor, and she thereby gained mobility and the freedom to pursue her dreams as a writer, filmmaker, historian and academic in Europe, Africa and North America. But her bicultural and bilingual journey also left her estranged from her maternal languages, Berber and dialectical Arabic, and from her Algerian cultural heritage. In *Vaste est la prison*, Djébar weaves a complex fabric composed of references to personal history, Algerian history, an ongoing film project and events in present-day Algeria. One thread holds all of these elements together: the theme of Algerian women's condition. Djébar describes her Algerian quartet as a double autobiography: "Mine – with a chorus of other women – and that of my country."<sup>39</sup> Her autobiography becomes a means of evaluating Algerian society and exploring its identity through the eyes and voices of women, traditionally invisible.

Djébar contests her culture's repression of women by dismantling the traditional structures of autobiography, history and fiction to create hybrid narrative forms and by juxtaposing them. Djébar said in a recent interview: "I could only find myself in the breakdown of structures, in a confrontation with opposites."<sup>40</sup> Linear history is replaced by temporal leaps between past, present and future that disturb the reader's frame of reference. I will focus on Djébar's objective correlatives for women's alienation as seen in her complex narrative structures and temporal patterns, her fluid representation of point of view, and her personal metaphors for exile and alienation.

Djébar frames her autobiographical novel with short chapters that question the value of writing. She describes writing in the opening chapter as "dying, slowly dying," since it petrifies or freezes something living, "trembling and pawing the ground" (11). In the opening chapter she describes her struggle against her impulse to be "self-effacing" and to distrust language (15). Her concluding chapter questions again how she can write today, surrounded by so many dead witnesses, victims of her country's violence. She then expresses the urgency of writing in order to speak for those silenced: "We think the dead are absent but, transformed into witnesses, they want to write through us" (357). Through her framing of *Vaste est la prison*, Djébar gives a rebuttal to her initial view of fiction as distinct from reality. Instead, her final chapter is a call to remember and to bear witness to the unspeakable crimes committed in Algeria. By her framing technique, Djébar urges the reader to leave behind his or her passive role as reader and to become an activist. Art becomes an important tool for intervention and social transformation.

*Vaste est la prison* is a rebuttal to an authoritarian Algerian regime which has imposed unilateralism in language (modern literary Arabic) and in ideology, particularly by its application of retrograde Islamic laws to present-day political and social life. The historian Peter R. Knauss describes present-day Algeria as crippled by an enduring syndrome of patriarchy: "The persistence of patriarchy, the dramatic tenacity of a system

of male dominance and female subordination, has been the dominant pattern in Algeria...Algeria has regressed rather than advanced in terms of improving the status of women..."<sup>41</sup> In response, Djébar engages in a search for Algerian identity that is based on the multilingual voices – in Berber and dialectical Arabic – of Algerian women from her family and from the nation's collective history.

The word "enemy," spoken in dialectical Arabic by a middle-aged woman in a Moorish bath, referring to her husband, is the catalyst for the narrator's reflection on relations between the sexes in Part I: "This word – [*l'e'dou*] – not one of hatred, no, rather one of despair long frozen in place between the sexes..." (15). In an autobiographical sequence of one hundred pages, the narrator relives the story of her unconsummated passion for a man, which ended in a violent physical confrontation with her husband and in their separation and divorce. The husband, beating his wife and nearly blinding her, becomes the enemy, thereby playing "the role that for generations he had been assigned by the memory of the city" (109). What appears to be an autobiographical sequence seems to be negated over a hundred pages later when Djébar gives the narrator a fictional name, "Isma" (234), thereby breaking the traditional "autobiographical pact" which allows the reader to equate the narrator with the author.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the story of domestic abuse in Part I is echoed in Part IV by the historical account of a young professor and journalist, Yasmina, who is murdered by armed insurgents in 1994.

Djébar leaps between personal and collective history and deliberately leaves her autobiographical sequence ambiguous, blurring boundaries between fiction and reality in order to raise awareness of an acute societal crisis in present-day Algeria – that of violence targeting women. Djébar experienced personally Algeria's repressive social policies against women and intellectuals: as a victim of domestic violence, as a writer who lost many of her dearest friends to the civil war of 1992-2002, and as an intellectual who was forced to live in exile in France and the United States for much of her adult life. While Part I traces the narrator's personal history, Part II jumps to the archeological discovery of an ancient Berber inscription more than two thousand years old in Dougga, Tunisia. The temporal leap and the genre change from autobiography to African history break the linear chronology of her novel. In an italicized, lyrical passage at the end of Part II, however, Djébar connects this fifty-page narration to the novel's theme of women's exclusion and resistance to roles prescribed by traditional male-centered history. Tin Hinan, a Berber princess, was able to resist the Arab conquest of Northern Africa and to transmit her ancient Berber alphabet to other women, thereby preserving the oldest language of Algeria still spoken today. In response to her government's monolingual policy which threatens to erase Algeria's multicultural history, Djébar offers a different reading of Algerian history and identity, one based on multilingualism and women's active contributions to Algeria's cultural heritage.

Djébar relates the story of the Dougga inscription as an historical account, while also making references to the legends surrounding the princess and her mysterious alphabet: "Her history had long been told like a dream wreathed in legends, a fleeting silhouette as evanescent as smoke, or a ghost, or a myth, an imaginary figure. She suddenly became solid thanks to archeological discoveries...in 1925" (164). Djébar crosses boundaries between history and fiction, myth and reality, since both myth and history contribute to the foundations of Algerian identity.

In Part III of *Vaste est la prison*, at 172 pages the longest section of the novel, Djebar alternates between references to her family, ancestors and friends, to a literary character and to her ongoing film project. Djebar once more replaces linear chronology with a polyphonic structure of narratives about women in past, present and future, real or fictitious, linked by the double leitmotifs of women's confinement and resistance. Titles of the chapters reinforce Part III's musical structure: "First Movement, Second Movement..." alternating with film chapters entitled "Arable Woman I, II..." a pun on the word "arable," meaning both fertile and capable of being cultivated (literally and figuratively).

### **Djebar's Family History in *Vaste est la prison***

Writing in order to "inscribe the silent and often obscured history of women," and therefore "to repair ... the amnesia of our society concerning an essential part of it,"<sup>43</sup> Djebar contests her nation's rigid patriarchal ideology by "challenging the reduction of national identity to a unity defined by religion or culture."<sup>44</sup> Djebar relives the lives of her grandmother Fatima, her mother Bahia, and that of her many aunts, focusing both on the constraints of their unique historical situation and on their actions to rise above these constraints to become agents of change. At the same time, Djebar pays tribute to her progressive father who strongly advocated education for girls: "[We need] to send our daughters to school, all of our daughters, in these villages and in the old cities as well, where traditions benumb them" (301).

Djebar's grandmother, Fatima, given away by her father at age fourteen to a rich elderly man who already had two wives, managed to run a large household and to buy and sell property when she became widowed at age seventeen. She acquired complete autonomy over her life when she separated from her third husband, becoming for her granddaughter "the model of feminine decisiveness and intelligence" (231). Fatima had the resourcefulness and modern instinct to contact a French doctor during a typhus epidemic, "the first Arab 'lady' in the city who dared to do so" (239), thereby saving the life of Assia's mother and making her own existence possible.

Djebar evokes the aristocratic demeanor of her mother Bahia, who as a child of six lost her voice for a year because of grief over her sister Chérifa's death in the typhus epidemic. Her mother, constrained by tradition, managed nevertheless to become independent at times. She was "engulfed beneath her veils," and hidden in the back of a car, while her husband took a long detour to avoid having public eyes catch even a glimpse of her, for according to him, "a lady... must not, because of her very worthiness, be thus exposed to the gaze of ...spectators" (288-289). Yet she demonstrated her independence by traveling alone to France during the Algerian Revolution to visit her son in prison. She also showed her free intellectual spirit by reciting Andalusian poetry, the cultural legacy of her ancestors who had fled Spain during the seventeenth century to escape religious persecution (175-176). Andalusian poetry becomes a metaphor for the lost multicultural heritage of Algeria, part of the nation's identity which women have preserved and transmitted for generations, like the ancient Berber alphabet that survived thanks to Tin Hinan and her female entourage.

Djebar's narrative of personal and collective history of friends and relatives in *Vaste est la prison* elucidates the regressive social policies of Algerian society and their repercussions on women's lives. During the narrator's divorce proceedings, the judge

and her ex-husband speak “man to man” in literary Arabic (315), a language the narrator has not mastered. Perceiving that a trap is being set for her, she simply replies “no” to all questions and is silent about the domestic abuse she suffered. Her lawyer later informs her that because of a faint smile on her face, the judge decided to rule against her in the divorce settlement (315). A recent Human Rights Report on Algeria by the United States Department of State confirms that thousands of domestic abuse cases have gone unreported because of societal pressures and inequities in the penal code.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Djebbar’s story of Hania, a friend who died of a miscarriage after having five pregnancies in short succession (319-320) addresses another urgent social issue: women’s lack of adequate access to family planning and to legal abortions in Algeria.<sup>46</sup>

### **Djebbar's Film Project**

For Djebbar, writing is a form of resistance, of revolt when “the too heavy power of the State, of a religion, or of an evident oppression” forces her to permanently say “no.”<sup>47</sup> Narrative genres and structure, point of view and aesthetic distance all become blurred with the urgency of writing. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the sections of Part III devoted to her film project.

In the section entitled “Femme arable I,” the narrator describes, as if in a diary entry, the first shooting of a scene in an unnamed film. She then interrupts the narrative to directly address the women who are the subject of the film: “Community of women shut away yesterday and today, an image-symbol that is the true action, the drive behind this hunt for images that is beginning. A female body completely veiled in white cloth, her face completely concealed, only a hole left free for the eyes...” The narrator then suddenly adopts the first-person plural form of address to identify totally with the confined women of time immemorial: “[The veiled woman] a shadowy shape that has strolled along for centuries, never screaming that we were enshrouded, never tearing off the veil and even our skin with it if required” (179). She jumps back to first-person singular: “This image is the reality of my childhood, and the childhood of my mother and my aunts, and my girl cousins who were sometimes the same age as me...” (179). Djebbar then inserts a passage in the familiar “tu” form, using direct discourse, as if an anonymous woman is speaking: “You cannot exist outside: the street is theirs, the world is theirs. Theoretically you have the right to equality, but shut up ‘inside,’ confined. Incarcerated” (180).

The final paragraph of this chapter jumps again from first-person singular to first-person plural to suggest how the act of producing a film may have repercussions in the wider society: “This strange slit...a little black triangle where the eye should be, this miniature gaze will henceforth be my camera. All of us from the world of the shadow women, reversing the process: We are the ones finally who are looking, who are beginning” (180). Djebbar opens up the boundaries between art and society: the art of filmmaking by a woman and about women may herald social and political changes.

Djebbar conveys the immediacy and urgency of her film project by crossing boundaries in narrative point of view and also by blurring distinctions between fiction and reality. Two female actresses in the film project are young children whose real lives intrude on their work. Zohra, a twelve-year-old girl, is fascinated to see an adult female actress in the film moving about freely, an astonishing event for her (309). The narrator tells us that she and another child actress, Aichoucha, are illiterate, something that the narrator calls

“scandalous in today’s Algeria” (257). The narrator “hears” Zohra’s mute appeal to the adult actress: “No, don’t be a dream, you at least, win this freedom of movement, to question, to see, that we will all envy you for afterward” (310). Djebar raises the question, by means of her narrative, of whether a documentary film project can intervene to produce change in the real lives of present and future generations, even if characters are merely “symbols of hope” (310). She demonstrates that her camera as well as her pen can be important political tools with which to challenge authority.

Djebar expropriates French, the colonizer’s language with its painful legacy of oppression and enriches it with the rhythm and phrasing of her maternal languages – dialectical Arabic and Berber. The title of the novel refers to an ancient Berber song, which she transcribes in both Berber and French (242-243). The title, *Vaste est la prison*, alludes to both suffering and to the song containing those words in her native tongue, which seems to calm her grieving mother after the death of her older sister (243). Djebar suggests that by incorporating the rich linguistic heritage of Algeria’s past into present-day society, Algeria can reclaim its true national identity.

In *Vaste est la prison*, Djebar expresses objective correlatives for women’s alienation by her complex narrative and temporal patterns and by her personal metaphors for exile and exclusion. The cloistered woman whom she addresses in her film is a metaphor for the “five hundred million or so segregated women in the Muslim world” (179-180) who do not fully enjoy human rights. The young illiterate shepherdess, Aichoucha, becomes a symbol of bankrupt Algerian social policies that neglect girls’ education. Djebar sees metaphors for women’s condition in both history and fiction. The character of Zoraidé in Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1605 -1615) represents the presence of an Algerian woman in the first great modern novel. For Djebar, Zoraidé personifies Algerian women writers today, since in the famous novel Zoraidé, much like Djebar, is an Algerian fugitive from her native country who escapes confinement for a new world of uncertainty and unlimited possibilities (173).

### **Writing as Resistance and Activism**

Djebar is ultimately pessimistic about the potential of writing to bring about change in Algeria. Using a metaphor that suggests both the frailty and the power of language to confront injustice and violence, she sees herself propelled by a ghostly army: “the white procession of ghost-grandmothers behind me becomes an army propelling me on; words of the quavering, lost language rise up while the males out in front gesticulate in the field of death” (350). Her narrative of personal and collective history, written with the accent and rhythms of dialectical Arabic and Berber, becomes an “army” to stop the carnage in Algeria.

We return to questions asked earlier in this essay: How is it possible to write in a way that contributes to socio-political change? How can a writer address mass scale human tragedy and social injustice? How can fiction become resistance and activism? In the final chapter of *Vaste est la prison*, Djebar asks these questions and finds an answer to them in poetic metaphors that appeal deeply to human emotion, at a time when prose seems inadequate. Narrative prose gives way to poetic verse and to wordplay as traditional syntax breaks down. Blood spilled by victims of political violence becomes the ink with which to write: “Write, the dead of today want to write: now, how can one write with blood?” (357)

With its smell, perhaps.  
With its vomit or its phlegm, easily.  
With the fear that is its halo.  
Writing, of course, even a novel...  
    About flight.  
    About shame (358).

Addressing her country directly, she calls her mother “bitter,” (making a pun on the French words “mère” and “amère”) and calls her own writing “screaming” (making a pun on “j’écris”[I write] and “je crie”[I scream]):

I do not call you mother, bitter Algeria,  
That I write,  
That I cry, voice, hand, eye (358).

Although she acknowledges that she possesses only an “army of words” as a weapon, Assia Djebar uses the subversive potential of language to attack her country’s misogyny, along with its authoritarian and retrograde ideology. According to the theories of new historicity, there is no one “history” in the sense of a narrative of indisputable past events. Instead, there are only our versions, our representations of the past.<sup>48</sup> Djebar constructs an alternate history of Algeria which restores women’s rightful place in Algerian society as agents of social change and as preservers of their nation’s multilingual and multicultural heritage. Djebar’s writing contributes to socio-political change by undermining the dominant view of Algerian history as promoted for decades by authoritarian regimes, and by challenging these misogynist views.

While maintaining a cautious distance from feminist movements in Algeria, Djebar prefers to achieve activism through multiple forms of artistic production. Within the single work, *Vaste est la prison*, Djebar speaks as an historian, correcting erroneous representations of women, as a writer of autobiography giving personal testimonials of women, as a novelist subverting traditional rhetorical forms and as a filmmaker creating new role models of women engaged actively in society. She speaks in the last chapter, finally, as a poet, appealing deeply to human emotions which have the potential to inspire others to act. Her works, published first in French and then translated into many languages, have not been widely read in Algeria because of her government’s policy of Arabization, which has promoted Arabic monolingualism at the expense of French literacy. Instead of speaking directly to Algerians, Djebar addresses social injustice while living in exile. She hopes to spark change by engaging international readers in the Diaspora.

Djebar creates in *Vaste est la prison* a Maghrebian novel that examines one of the roots of Algeria’s identity crisis: its exclusion and alienation of women. Like the heroine of Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone* (442 BCE), who went into exile to carry out her own form of resistance to injustice, Djebar rejects the duplicity of much of today’s political discourse. Instead, she speaks to us through her novel of personal testimonial and historical narrative and she summons us, her readers, to respond.

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**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Amnesty International Document – Algeria: Briefing to the Human Rights Committee (2007). Retrieved August 17, 2009, from <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE28/017/2007/en/8cd5b224-d367-11dd-a329-2:1>.
- <sup>2</sup> Amnesty International Document: 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Assia Djebar, "Le Désir sauvage de ne pas oublier," *Le Monde*, 26 octobre, 2000: 18. My translation.
- <sup>4</sup> Assia Djebar, *Vaste est la prison*. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995). English language version, *So Vast the Prison* (New York: Seven Stories, 1999). All further references to this novel will be to this English edition, with page numbers given in parentheses.
- <sup>5</sup> The term "new historicists" refers to a school of literary critics associated with Stephen Greenblatt, who first popularized the term in 1982 in his preface to a collection of essays published in the journal *Genre*. These critics believe that literary texts cannot be isolated as entities that lie outside of history. Instead, they believe that artistic texts actively help to shape history and produce social change. See M. Robson, *Stephen Greenblatt* (London: Routledge, 2008): 1-13.
- <sup>6</sup> Mark Robson, *Stephen Greenblatt* (London: Routledge, 2008): 2-7.
- <sup>7</sup> The term "Maghreb" refers to three Arab-Islamic countries that are geographically contiguous in northern Africa: Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. They experienced French colonization and achieved independence in the mid-1950's for Morocco and Tunisia and in 1962 for Algeria. See Mounira Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2001): 2.
- <sup>8</sup> Peter R. Knauss, *The Persistence of Patriarchy: Class, Gender and Ideology in Twentieth Century Algeria* (New York: Praeger, 1987): 76-77.
- <sup>9</sup> Karima Bennoune, "Between Betrayal and Betrayal: Fundamentalism, Family Law and Feminist Struggle in Algeria," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 17 (Winter, Spring, 1995): 55.
- <sup>10</sup> Zakya Daoud, "La Condition féminine au Maghreb: féminisme et politique," in Isabel T. Leonetti, *Les Femmes et l'Islam: entre modernité et intégrisme* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2004): 53.
- <sup>11</sup> Karima Bennoune: 54.
- <sup>12</sup> Marie-Victoire Louis, "Les Algériennes, la Lutte," *Les Temps Modernes* 432-433 (juillet-août 1982): 189-190.
- <sup>13</sup> Karima Bennoune: 56.
- <sup>14</sup> Mounira Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: the Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2001): 237-238.
- <sup>15</sup> Marie-Victoire Louis: 159-183.
- <sup>16</sup> Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 151-155.
- <sup>17</sup> Peter R. Knauss: 135.
- <sup>18</sup> Brad Archer, "Family Law Reform and the Feminist Debate: Actually-Existing Islamic Feminism in the Maghreb and Malaysia," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8.4 (May 2007): 55.
- <sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of State 2008 Human Rights Report: Algeria. Retrieved August 17, 2009 from <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/nea/119112.htm>: 17-18.
- <sup>20</sup> U. S. Department of State 2008 Human Rights Report: Algeria: 16-17.
- <sup>21</sup> Mounira Charrad: 1.
- <sup>22</sup> Amnesty International Report: 9; U. S. Department of State 2008 Human Rights Report: 18.
- <sup>23</sup> Zakya Daoud: 58.
- <sup>24</sup> Gideon Gera, "Reflections on the Aftermath of Civil Strife: Algeria, 2006," in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Daniel Zisenwine, eds., *The Maghrib in the New Century: Identity, Religion and Politics* (Gainesville: U. Press of Florida, 2007): 79.
- <sup>25</sup> Adam M. Abdelmoula, "The 'Fundamentalist' Agenda for Human Rights: the Sudan and Algeria," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 18.1 (Winter 1996): 4.
- <sup>26</sup> Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield Algeria: 1988-2002* (London: Verso, 2003): 12.
- <sup>27</sup> Hugh Roberts: 4-5.

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<sup>28</sup> Hafid Gafaïti, "Culture and Violence: the Algerian Intelligentsia between two Political Illegitimacies," *Parallax* 4.2 (1998): 71.

<sup>29</sup> I am using the term "Islamic fundamentalism" to refer to a movement based on static, literal interpretations of the *Quran* and *Sunna* which seeks to impose an all-embracing political system on a society and which excludes all other movements. See Karima Bennoune: 69.

<sup>30</sup> Amnesty International Document on Algeria: 5-6.

<sup>31</sup> Hafid Gafaïti: 73.

<sup>32</sup> United Nations Statistics Division, Gender Information, 2007. Retrieved August 19, 2009 from <http://unstats.un.org/unsd>.

<sup>33</sup> The U.S. Department of State reported 321 deaths in 2008 related to terrorist violence. Most terrorist attacks were attributed to the group al-Qaïda in the Islamic Maghreb. See 2008 Human Rights Report: Algeria: 1.

<sup>34</sup> Amnesty International Document: 1-3.

<sup>35</sup> Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove, 1967): 61-63. French language version: *L'An V de la Révolution algérienne* (Paris: Maspéro, 1959).

<sup>36</sup> Frantz Fanon: 66.

<sup>37</sup> Cathérine Bédarida, "L' Académie française ouvre ses portes à Assia Djebar," *Le Monde* (18 juin 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Mildred Mortimer, "Assia Djebar's Algerian Quartet: A Study in Fragmented Autobiography," *Research in African Literatures* 28.2. Retrieved August 18, 2009 from <http://www.iupress.indiana.edu/journals/ral/ral28-2.html>: 2.

<sup>39</sup> Aliette Armel, "Assia Djebar: la mémoire des femmes," *Magazine Littéraire* 410 (juin 2002): 100.

<sup>40</sup> Aliette Armel: 100.

<sup>41</sup> Peter R. Knauss: 141.

<sup>42</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

<sup>43</sup> Aliette Armel: 103.

<sup>44</sup> Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1993): 52.

<sup>45</sup> U. S. Department of State 2008 Human Rights Report on Algeria: 16-17.

<sup>46</sup> Amnesty International Document on Algeria: 6.

<sup>47</sup> Assia Djebar, "Le désir sauvage de ne pas oublier": 18.

<sup>48</sup> Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Literature* (New York, HarperCollins, 1996): 130.

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United States Department of State 2008 Human Rights Report: Algeria, 1-22. Retrieved August 17, 2009 from <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/nea/119112.htm>.  
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