THE POISONOUS GIFT: LANGUAGE IN ASSIA DJEBAR'S *L'AMOUR, LA FANTASIA*

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The text of Assia Djebar's novel *L'amour, la fantasia* encourages the reader to line up French, writing and the masculine on one side, and Arabic, orality and the feminine on the other. While it is true that one can distinguish men's voices through their writing and that it is through her writing that Djebar makes heard women's voices, she nonetheless recuperates *directly* from women only their oral stories and from men only their written accounts.[1] Although there were certainly illiterate men during the periods Djebar describes, these men do not speak in the novel and they do not appear in the narrative except through women's stories. When Djebar gives voice to women, it is their oral histories that she evokes. Other than the narrator, the only woman to appear in the text via her own written words is the Frenchwoman Pauline Rolland.[2] Her status, however, as the only Frenchwoman to have her testimony included in Djebar's narrative and as the only writing woman (again, other than the narrator) underscores more than it contradicts the largely oral character of Algerian women's expression in the novel. Significantly, in this novel it is only women who write in French who write at all.

This division is reflected in the linguistic segregation described by Djebar. Contrary to women's voices, men's voices are never heard directly, and are never related in the first or the second person. As the narrator explains:

> Ma mère, comme toutes les femmes de sa ville, ne désignait jamais mon père autrement que par le pronom personnel arabe correspondant à «lui». (...)
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> [L]es autres femmes ne daignaient jamais les nommer, eux, les mâles... Ces oncles, cousins, parents par alliance se retrouvaient confondus dans l'anonymat du genre masculin, neutralité réductrice que leur réservait le parler allusif des épouses. (46-47)

As dictated by tradition, men, referred to only by the third person masculine pronoun, are excluded from women's vocabularies. In fact, in Arabic, the grammatical term which indicates the third person masculine, *gha'ib*, means literally the "absent" one.

The text is full of such binary oppositions, but Djebar, whether as author or narrator, undermines these oppositions. As a writer, she is a woman, but she writes in French, which is presented in the text as men's language. She writes, but she listens to women's oral histories. The narrator is the heir of

both Pauline Rolland and the Algerian women storytellers, but also of the French men who invade Algeria and of her father who made it possible for her to learn French. Djebar places herself at the border of each of these territories and moves from one to the other, refusing to remain definitively in any one of them.

In the early 1940s when Djebar began attending elementary school, it was rare that any Algerian child be enrolled; for an Algerian girl, it was almost unheard of. Attending school required girls to transgress the social boundaries separating male and female spheres, exterior and interior, as well as Arabic and French. In the novel, although contemporaries of the narrator's parents find this initial transgression alarming, educating a girl also meant that however cloistered she might be, one day her literacy would allow her, through her writing, to circulate in public space, that is to say, in male space. Djebar, however, was able to cross these boundaries because her father, a teacher in the French colonial system, removed her from the female space of the house and took her to school.

Although the narrator acknowledges the opportunities provided by her French education, the effects of this separation from the women of her family, especially her mother, are reflected in her attitude to French: "Le français m'est langue marâtre. Quelle est ma langue mère disparue, qui m'a abandonnée sur le trottoir et s'est enfuie?... Langue mère idéalisée ou mal-aimée, livrée aux hérauts de foire ou aux seuls geôliers!..." (240). It is clear that the narrator feels the effects of this separation, but it is less clear that she succeeds in attributing responsibility for this separation to one person. On the one hand, it is the mother who abandons the child; on the other hand, the word "marâtre" suggests that it is the father who has replaced the mother with another woman. By leaving the mother tongue at home, and according to the logic of the text, the mother herself, the father renews each day his relation with another language, and by extension, another woman. By learning this second language, the daughter becomes complicit with the father. She asks herself if she has not failed in her duty: "[M]on «devoir» n'est-il pas de rester «en arrière», dans le gynécée, avec mes semblables?" (239).

Despite the mother's possible flight or the narrator's complicity, in the end, the narrator clearly assigns responsibility to her father for this foreign tongue, brought as an untrustworthy stranger into the family. "La langue encore coagulée des Autres m'a enveloppée, dès l'enfance, en tunique de Nessus, don d'amour de mon père qui, chaque matin, me tenait par la main sur le chemin de l'école" (243). This sentence tellingly hinges around the phrase "don d'amour de mon père," so that if the first half of the sentence is read by itself, it presents the language of others, or the tunic of Nessus, as the gift from her father. Starting from the words "don d'amour," however, and reading to

the end, this gift is so closely linked to the narrator's father escorting her to school, that she, too, seems to be a gift. As Djebar writes a few pages earlier, "[Le père] m'aurait *'donnée'* avant l'âge nubile — certains pères n'abandonnaient-ils pas leur fille à un prétendant inconnu ou, comme dans ce cas, au camp ennemi?" (239, emphasis added). The question of responsibility will remain unresolved, and in a narrative filled with stories of battles, the military resonance of the words "camp ennemi" will once again raise the issue of the narrator's complicity, if not outright betrayal.

The problem of the gift is further complicated by the allusion Djebar makes to the tunic of Nessus, referring to the legend in which Hercules kills the centaur Nessus, who had tried to carry away his wife Deianeira. As Nessus is dying, he tells Deianeira that if she saves some of his blood and rubs it on a garment, it will cause the wearer to love her forever. Years later, when Hercules falls in love with another woman, Deianeira gives him just such a bloodstained garment. Since Hercules had killed Nessus with a poisoned arrow, however, the centaur's blood is also poisoned. When Hercules puts on the cloak, it adheres to his skin, and the poison causes him terrible pain. Unable to remove the garment which has become part of his skin, and unable to bear the pain, Hercules, an immortal, pleads with the gods for death, which his father Zeus finally grants him. Whether a magic cloak or foreign language, the intention with which a gift is given does not always have the intended outcome.

The narrator of Djebar's novel writes that it was a French education which allowed her father to pull himself out of poverty, suggesting that he may have seen the gift of French education as an unqualified good for his daughter, not foreseeing, as Deianeira did not, the possible negative consequences of his gift. In evoking the story of Nessus, however, Djebar transforms the love story between Hercules and Deianeira into a narrative of linguistic inheritance passed from father to daughter. She underscores this revision of the story by equating the bloodstained garment given by Deianeira to Hercules with "la langue coagulée" given by the father to his daughter.

The narrator underscores this connection between language and blood several times in the text, often substituting the body for blood. When at a party a guest asks the narrator's mother why her daughter, who is then thirteen or fourteen, does not veil, the mother responds that her daughter "reads," which, as the narrator explains, means in dialectal Arabic that she "studies." But the narrator notes a few pages later that not only does she read, she reads in a foreign language. "Quand j'écris et lis la langue étrangère: [mon corps] voyage, il va et vient dans l'espace subversif, malgré les voisins et les matronnes soupçonneuses; pour peu, il s'envolerait!" (208). Hers is a body in movement, unhindered, even by a veil, a situation recalling the neighbors'

warnings when she went to school for the first time: "Le geôlier d'un corps sans mots—et les mots écrits sont mobiles—peut finir, lui, par dormir tranquille... Si la jouvencelle écrit? Sa voix en dépit du silence, circule" (11).

Exposing herself this way, however, she risks the disapproval of others. According to a hadith, a principal source of Islamic law, a woman must "veil" her voice for the same reason that she must veil her body. This hadith classifies the voice as *cawra*, which means literally weak or vulnerable, and in the plural, designates the sex of both men and women. As one traditional exegete argued, a woman's voice, "must be covered with the same care as the pudenda of men... [T]he exposure of any part of her public view causes shame and embarassment, not to mention the corruption of public morals" (qtd. in Hoffman-Ladd 28). Although this interpretation of a woman's voice and entire body as *'awra* is not a part of the Qur'anic text, this argument is nonetheless often made in secondary literature and in the contemporary debate on women's modesty, as well as in popular sayings. As Djebar writes,

> Dans le langage quotidien, me revient une condamnation que la gravité rendait définitive: plus que la femme pauvre (la richesse et le luxe se vivaient relatifs dans cet espace social restreint), plus que la femme répudiée ou veuve, destin que Dieu seul lui réserve, la seule réellement coupable, la seule que l'on pouvait mépriser légèrement, à propos de laquelle se manifestait une condescendance ostensible, était «la femme qui crie» (...) celle dont la plainte contre le sort ne s'abîmait pas ni dans la prière ni dans le murmure des diseuses, mais *s'élevait nue*, improvisée, en protestation *franchissant les murs*. (228, emphasis added)

With this rendering of the voice as physical, as something that can be unclothed and is capable of crossing walls, the condemnation of a free voice simultaneously condemns the free body, which is all the more subject to the risks of exposure and flight. This voice and body that circulate also evoke the narrator as the young girl whom writing and language allowed to circulate beyond the walls of the gyneceum.

The narrator, however, is further censured because, in moving about, she breaks another rule of her society. During women's gatherings, whether they have good or bad news to relate, "Jamais le «je» de la première personne ne sera utilisé: la voix a déposé, en formules stéréotypées, sa charge de rancune et de râles échardant la gorge" (176). The narrator, by contrast, talks about herself, and does so without recourse to "formes d'allusions, de dictons ou de paraboles" (175). As she declares, "Écrire, n'est-ce pas 'me' dire?" (72). If

"la femme qui crie" is to be condemned, how much greater must be the condemnation of a woman like narrator who not only exposes herself, but does so in crying out "je."[3]

The narrator's behavior, thus already suspect according to the rules of the society she describes, is further compromised as her association with the "enemy camp" to which her father has given her marks her with the sigu of a possible treason. As Claude Lévi-Strauss points out, the fate of women in a patriarcal and exogamic society is to leave their families, their own people, in order to attempt a relationship with another family. According to the rules of such a society, the father is obliged to turn over his daughter to another man, but the narrator's father turns her over to the men of an entire linguistic community, and most dangerously, a foreign linguistic community. The narrator, or at least her words (and we have already seen the degree to which these two are linked), circulates promiscuously in a space and language described as masculine.

If the woman who speaks out and moves about in public space among strangers is suspect, can we then be sure of the silent, cloistered woman? By definition, a witness must testify and must speak, but if such witnesses speak only to a compromised narrator, their testimony must also be seen as tainted, at least according to the standards presented by the narrator herself. While it might be argued that the narrator describes these standards only to critique them, the standards are no less present — and in a narrative so predicated on an "insider's" mediation, such standards must be taken into account. When Djebar relates, or transmits, the stories of previously silent women, one sees that even if silence is often imposed or the women and their narratives simply forgotten, their silence is also sometimes their own choice. We might note, for example, the circumlocutions and silences around the non-dit of rape: as the narrator writes, "le viol, non-dit, ne sera pas violé" (226).

If in the case of war-time rapes, it is a question of silence "[pour] construire un barrage au malheur" (226), two other incidents from the Algerian war illustrate women's refusal to speak out in order to avoid testifying. A woman who aided the maquis describes how she was betrayed by a neighbor's son. When he is arrested, he immediately reveals everything he knows to the police. The woman, however, excuses him, saying, "Il était trop jeune pour savoir! Il devait avoir quinze ans" (167). A few pages later, however, we learn the story of another young person, this time a "petite fille," adopted by another woman who also helped the maquis. She had told the girl, "— Quand ils t'interrogent, met-toi aussitôt à pleurer! S'ils te disent: «Ts mère, qui vient chez elle? Que fait-elle?», il faut te mettre à pleurer aussitôt..." The woman then describes the girl's actions: "Elle agissait ainsi. Elle pleurait, elle se roulait dans le sable, elle s'enfuyait tout en pleurs" (181). This

"petite fille," however, said nothing, and revealed nothing. Juxtaposing these two incidents suggests that feminine dissembling serves better than male loquacity and underscores feminine control of language.

If the women in this novel consciously manipulate silence for specific ends, their manipulation of language remains problematic. One might cite, for example, the contradictory metaphors the narrator uses when she writes about the French language. First, she describes French as the narrator's "marâtre." Then French becomes the tunic of Nessus, ambiguous gift from father to daughter. French, however, is also someone responsible for having permitted the father to escape "la gêne familiale." And the father, to acquit himself of his debt to this benefactor, offers his daughter, "en mariage forcé." As she writes, "[elle] cohabite avec la langue française," with whom, she has "une ordinaire vie de ménage"(239). Gift, painful legacy, stepmother, benefactor, matchmaker, language thus becomes even the narrator's husband. Such a multiplicity around the image of the French language leaves the reader with no stable point of reference to consider what the French language might be in the text.

This accumulation of contradictory metaphors, as much as the variety of voices and stories, the oscillation between the said and the unsaid, between testimony and the impossibility of testimony, might seem to end up by destabilizing the idea of a unique and definitive history.[4] The multiplicity of Djebar's text might also seem to counter the monolithic voice of the nation, as portrayed by official national histories. I would argue, however, that this apparent challenge is not without its problems.

First of all, how is it possible that this diversity of stories, this grand number of testimonies, these different time periods, all make up the material of a single narrative? What links them? The only connection among all of these individual histories gathered together into one narrative is that these events and stories happen in a geographical space that is today called Algeria. As Benedict Anderson has noted, a nation does not exist without writings that allow people who will never know each other to consider themselves alike by means of common history.[5] Without the tie created by the idea of a single nation, this grouping of the multiple narratives of *L'amour, la fantasia* would have to assume an entirely different meaning—if their significance as a group did not disappear altogether. And if Djebar writes a national narrative, even a contra-national narrative, she nonetheless validates the idea of a nation whose history must encompass all others.

Secondly, despite the multiplicity of voices, even those voices such as women's previously on the margins of traditional history, all of the stories are filtered through Djebar's narration, which inevitably attenuates the multiplicity that would make up the fabric of this narrative. Here we might cite Michel de

Certeau who noted that historical subjects can find access to writing only on the condition of remaining silent, and if they are silent, in the end, the narration is composed of only one voice, that of the narrator. Furthermore, as noted earlier, the community whose stories the narrator transmits is a community from which she herself says she has been excluded, so that even the faithfulness of her transmission is in doubt.

Although Djebar opens up national history to include women's experiences of the nation and its formation, those voices seem to find a place only as they contribute to the national story, and one is left wondering if there is room for those voices outside the national narrative, or if like the women who fought beside men for Algerian Independence, they will be asked once again to withdraw quietly after their contribution to the national cause.

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NOTES

[1] Mortimer also notes this dichotomy, but uses this observation to explore how the division of spoken and written language mirrors the divide between male public and female private space.

[2] See Woodhull (82-83) for futher discussion of the way Djebar links the struggles of Rolland, a Saint-Simonian deported to Algeria as one of the "irréductibles de la révolution de 48" (Djebar 249), with those of Algerian women.

[3]Gadant provides an in-depth discussion of the double prohibition against women speaking and against speaking about oneself.

[4] Miraglia makes this argument regarding Djebar's *Loin de Médine*.

[5]The nation "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6).

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