

WORD AS POWER: ASSIA DJEBAR'S "LA FEMME EN MORCEAUX"

CHRISTINA NOVAKOV-RITCHEY

THESIS ADVISOR: NOHA RADWAN, PHD

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

SPRING 2013

ASSIA DJEBAR'S "LA FEMME EN MORCEAUX"

Assia Djebbar

- Fatima-Zohra Imalayen, b. 1936
- Writing
 - Early texts
 - Politicization
 - 1990 and beyond

"La femme en morceaux" (The Woman in Pieces) 1996

- *Oran, langue morte* (The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry)

The *Arabian Nights*' "The Story of the Three Apples"

VIOLENCE

“I was livid. Carried away by my jealous fury, I plunged a knife into her throat. The throat of the one I believed to be unfaithful...Was it me, was it really me who, in the same blind rage, cut off her head and mutilated her body? Then, my heart growing ever colder, decided to wrap the body in pieces in a linen veil?’ This is the confession,”

Djebar “The Woman in Pieces”

VIOLENCE

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*

- Abjection: “the abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2)
- “The body, the head. But the voice? Where has Atyka’s voice taken refuge?...The body of the woman cut into pieces. The body, the head. But the voice?” (Djebar 125)

VIOLENCE

When narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first. If it continues nevertheless, its makeup changes; its linearity is shattered, it proceeds by flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompleteness, tangles, and cuts. **At a later stage, the unbearable identity of the narrator and of the surroundings that are supposed to sustain him can no longer be narrated but cries out or is described with maximal stylistic intensity (language of violence, of obscenity, or of a rhetoric that relates the text to poetry).** The narrative yields to a *crying-out theme* that, when it tends to coincide with the incandescent states of a boundary-subjectivity that I have called abjection, is the crying-out theme of suffering-horror.

Kristeva

VIOLENCE

Djebar's resistance: the lament

- She loved me and served me and I saw no evil in her, for I also loved her with fondest love. Now on the first day of this month she fell ill with grievous sickness and I fetched in physicians to her, but recovery came to her little by little...

Burton *Arabian Nights*

- The enfeebled young woman is overcome by sudden fits of fatigue every morning, sometimes prey to vague desires, making her worry that she is pregnant again... Sapped anew of her powers, she wonders who she can confide in. Who can she tell that she is weary of life, especially of the charge of giving life? And how to live—that is, to love—without giving life?... What woman can she speak to about such things?

Djebar "The Woman in Pieces"

VIOLENCE

Djebar appropriates the language of conquest and death not to kill, but rather to revive the dead and bear witness to their mortal combat

Hiddleston "Political Violence and Singular Testimony:
Assia Djebar's *Algerian White*"

TRADITION

Michael Taussig: colonial mirroring

- “the terror and tortures they devised mirrored the horror of the savagery they both feared and fictionalized,” (Taussig 133)

Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger *The Invention of Tradition*

- political Islam in Algeria sets itself up as a ‘return to the past’, designed to help restore a sense of identity and origin, but its narratives are for the most part, conversely, projections into the future. **Notions of Islamic ‘tradition’ are often constructed rather than lifted intact from early sources.** Conceptions of the position of women, for example, stem from a desire to define Algerian identity in contradistinction to the Western, neocolonial influence rather than from careful readings of the Koran or the Hadiths.

Hiddleston *Assia Djebar: Out of Algeria*

TRADITION

In some sections of Algerian society, according to Djébar's portraits, customs appear to have ossified, partly because of the threat posed to them by colonialism/neocolonialism, while other sections, in which Djébar herself and/or her work may be situated, appear post-traditional in Tony Giddens's sense (1996): that is to say, traditions (including religious traditions) still make themselves felt, but adherence to them can no longer be automatic or unquestioned, and tradition's ability to lend meaning to quotidian activities is correspondingly diminished.

Harrison 66

TRADITION

Arabian Nights

One clearly feels that the Arabian Nights is moving toward the status of second-rate literature, far from scholarly literature, that of the honnete homme (adib). Three reasons might argue for this isolation. First is the oral, popular tradition of the tales and their teachings: what they teach might not always have complied with official moral standards. **Here we are (J.E. Benchiekh would say) in an area of freedom which (in order to be free) operates outside official literature.**

Miquel 8

TRADITION

“I’ve noticed that Djaffar, but taking his turn as storyteller becomes...Scheherazade’s double. And for both, it’s a case of an imagination...under pressure.”

Djebar “The Woman in Pieces” 116

“But,” retorts his neighbor, a brunette with a piercing glare, “Scheherazade risks her life every night. Or actually ever dawn. But Djaffar, who has of course escaped death twice, is protecting the life of his slave!”

Djebar 117

HISTORY

Chronological

- Islamic Golden Age
- French colonial rule
- Algerian War for Independence (1963)
 - National Liberation Front (FLN)
- Algerian Civil War
 - Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)
 - 44,000 deaths by the end of the war (2002)

Djebar discards the traditional notion of history as a timeline and a past

HISTORY

The accusation of the intruders is that Atyka is, “a self-proclaimed teacher who, it appears, nonetheless tells these young children obscene stories

Djebar 122

HISTORY

Colonial Mirroring

French

- These daily raids were defended by the French and their desire to forcefully “liberate” and assimilate the Algerians into their culture, while they simultaneously told the world at large that this control was for their own benefit (Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled”)

FLN

- Massacre of 95 Algerians in Oran, a pied noir community opposed to independence

HISTORY

Her trajectory dramatizes a struggle between a search for specificity in Foucault's sense, and an increasing awareness of the dissolution of any such specificity as a result of the ruptures and discontinuities of Algerian history...In Peter Hallward's words, 'Foucault moves away from an impossibly literal or immediate experience of a singular "outside" (madness, death, language-in-itself), toward **the composition of specific histories of how our experience has been specified and confined.**'

Hiddleston *Assia Djébar: Out of Algeria*