theories and methodologies

Assia Djebar: Writing between Land and Language

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THE DEATH OF ASSIA DJEBAR ON 7 FEBRUARY 2015 MARKS THE END OF AN ERA IN LITERARY AND WORLD HISTORY. THE LAST SURVIVOR OF the generation of Algerian writers who took up the pen in the mid-1950s as their country embarked on its historic struggle for independence from France, Djebar continued writing long after the deaths of Mouloud Feraoun (1962), Kateb Yacine (1989), Mouloud Mammeri (1989), and Mohammed Dib (2003). With her death, the age of decolonization and African revolution as it resonated in literature seems truly to have come to a close. Djebar was the only woman among the Algerian literary pioneers, and her work, which includes novels, essays, documentary films, and plays, explores, above all, the experience of Algerian women. Challenging official nationalism, these counternarratives tell stories about women's roles in war in which the political doesn't efface the personal and victory doesn't signal the end of suffering or the fading of loss. This oppositional stance was carried even into the rituals observed in the aftermath of her death. Official services conducted at the airport and the Palais de la Culture in Algiers were shadowed and indeed overshadowed by less-formal ceremonies in which family, friends, and members of Algerian women's movements recited poetry and chanted Berber songs.[1]

This plethora of commemorations befit a writer who devoted many pages to bereavement and the rites of mourning. An archivist and memorialist of Algeria, Djebar could also be considered her country's literary biographer and obituarist. Her 1996 novel *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (*Algerian White*), written during Algeria's decade of acute violence, indeed imagines a procession of Algerian men and women of letters apprehended in the days before their death.[2] Djebar's own death leads us to wonder in what spirit she, in turn, will be read and remembered. Kamel Daoud, whose novel *Meursault contre-enquête* (2014; *The Meursault Investigation*) has attracted widespread attention, wrote pessimistically in his blog that while streets in Algeria are named after martyrs of the revolution and religious luminaries from Saudi Arabia, Djebar's name will appear only on her tomb. He added,

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however, that she can be brought back to life by anyone who cares to open her books.[3]

Djebar will undoubtedly continue to be read in some circles. Her works have been central to the structural transformation by which, since the 1980s, French literature has gradually been reframed as francophone literature. Her novels are now fixtures of academic syllabi and reading lists, an adoption that began in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany and later reached France, where recognition culminated in her election, in 2005, to the Académie Française. The more difficult question, as Daoud's comments imply, is whether she will be read in Algeria. There, obituaries reflect a mix of belated pride and self-reproach—Why aren't her books taught in schools and universities? Why didn't the regime do more to advance her candidacy for a Nobel Prize?—as well as indifference tinged with hostility: If I've never heard of her, maybe it's because she wrote in French for a French audience and spent much of her life in Paris. . . .[4]

The question of the status of Djebar's work in Algeria is multilayered. Cultural policy since independence has been dominated by calculated neglect. Though the ruling regime has rarely censored literary writers, it hasn't needed to. Whether for political or professional reasons, many of the country's leading French-language writers have been published in France. Their works are hard to find in Algeria's handful of bookstores, and they are more or less absent from school and university curricula. A few days after Djebar's death, the French-language newspaper *El watan* published a piece about a young masters student at the University of Oran who is writing her thesis on Djebar's first novel, *La soif* (1957; *The Mischief*). Though the article clearly means to sound hopeful, the subtext is that the young woman is working from a photocopy, having been unable to obtain the book from any library or bookstore in Algeria ("Étudiantes").

A second, more tangled issue in Djebar's reception in Algeria is the fact that, like several other prominent writers of her generation, she published in French. For some readers, writers, and critics the fact that Djebar wrote in French places her work not only outside the canon of Arabic literature but also beyond the sphere of Arab culture. Writing in French has sometimes been considered tantamount to writing from a French viewpoint or for a French readership. Djebar has been criticized, for example, for depicting Algerian women in ways that reflect an international feminist agenda imbued with a neocolonial spirit rather than a locally informed understanding of women's experiences and modes of agency. In *The Eloquence of Silence* (1994), the sociologist Marnia Lazreg detects in Djebar's novels a "primary feminist perspective that is remarkable for its decontextualized, uncritical and abstract character," a perspective marked by the rejection of "native women's lifestyles" and filled with "a litany of complaints about 'tradition' and Islam" (200–01). But if there are grounds for such critiques of international feminist discourses about women's rights, Djebar's novels are hardly appropriate targets.[5] Her historically situated novels depict female characters from a wide range of social backgrounds who hold different cultural and political perspectives. If they are shown to be subject to constraints, they are also portrayed as agents, and while they contend with Muslim patriarchy, they suffer, above all, from the violence inflicted during colonial rule and its enduring aftereffects. Djebar's writing career spanned five decades, and her thematic concerns evolved in conjunction with changing social and political dynamics in and beyond Algeria. The novels in which she seems most preoccupied with issues such as veiling and women's relation to Islam, *Ombre sultane* (1987; *A Sister to Scheherazade*) and *Loin de Médine* (1991; *Far from Medina*), were published in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in a context shaped by

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the transnational religious revival catalyzed by the Iranian Revolution and, more locally, by the Algerian senate's adoption of a new code of laws regulating marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Inspired by Islamic legal codes, the 1984 Family Code was rejected by many Algerians, who took to the streets in demonstrations that anticipated the prodemocracy activism that exploded in 1988. To contemplate women's relation to Islam at this historical conjuncture was not to portray women as the eternal victims of a timeless Islamic patriarchy but rather to address new social and political dynamics emerging at the level of the state as well as in religious movements.

Discussions of the practice of writing in French tend either toward the subtle affirmation of *francophonie* as a vehicle of cultural universalism or toward a form of linguistic nativism that treats Arabic as the only authentic language of Algerian culture.[6] On the one hand, scholars of francophone literature often neglect the cohabitation of French with Arabic in the cultural context of the Maghreb. Our deconstruction of "language"—that is, the recognition that languages are inhabited by other idioms and that translation takes place within as well as between languages—has sometimes supported the claim that the question of language is somehow resolved within the francophone text (Dobie). Conversely, writing in French has sometimes been represented as a token of alienation, as though language and "identity" were consistently aligned.

In her first novel, *Dhakirat al-jasad* (1993; *Memory in the Flesh*), the Arabic-language writer Ahlem Mosteghanemi suggests that instead of clinging to the francophone colonial past, Algerians should embrace their arabophone future. In 1998, when she received the Naguib Mahfouz Prize for Literature from the American University in Cairo Press, Mosteghanemi made this argument more explicitly, paying tribute to the efforts of the "Algerian writers writing in Arabic who confront unarmed the onslaughts of francophony and its diverse temptations" ("To Colleagues"). As the critic Shaden Tageldin has explained, Mosteghanemi clearly had Djebar in mind, since *Dhakirat al-Jasad* reworks the figural economy of Djebar's 1985 novel *L'amour, la fantasia* (*Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*), transferring its metaphors and metonymies of writing from French to Arabic. Noting that Mosteghanemi dedicates the novel to Malek Haddad, an Algerian writer who gave up his literary career because he was unable to write in Arabic, Tageldin paraphrases Mosteghanemi: "Since French has silenced arabophone Algeria for so long, Algerians must silence French in turn—even if this silencing renders them temporarily 'mute'—so that their land can be liberated anew, this time in Arabic" (98–99).

Algeria needs a literature in Arabic, and Mosteghanemi and Tageldin are certainly justified in advocating for its development. But there is something disturbing about their depiction of the relation between French and Arabic as a zero-sum game. If it's true that the French colonial authorities in Algeria did their best to silence literary Arabic, does it follow that these roles should now be reversed? Such a move seems particularly troubling when we consider Algeria's recent history of violent conflict over language. In the 1998 address in which she advocated for Arabic over French, Mosteghanemi paid tribute to the many Algerian writers and journalists who had lost their lives to terrorism during the preceding years. What she didn't mention is that many of them were targeted because they wrote in French. In such a context, what does it mean to endorse the silencing of one language by another?

Arguments in this vein would certainly have been rejected by Djebar, who tirelessly defended the pluralism of Algerian culture against attempts to impose a single language, historical narrative, or criterion of identity. She described herself in this spirit as a

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woman of French education and writing as well as of "Algerian, or Arabo-Berber, or even Muslim" sensibility (*Ces voix* 26).

In her novels, essays, and lectures Djebar returned repeatedly to the question of what it meant to write in French and, as a result, to be regarded by readers (of various origins) as an outsider.[7] Gathered in the volume *Ces voix qui m'assiègent* (1999), these reflections show that for Djebar the question of language was never closed. In the wake of her death it seems crucially important to remember these contributions to the thinking of language, literature, and identity.

Much like Jacques Derrida, Djebar insists on the noncoincidence of speech and writing. The text, she observes, is never just a "mise en écrit de la voix" ("putting into writing of the voice" [*Ces voix* 26]). Thus, if the label "*francophone voice*" applied to her at all, she maintained, it was as a scholar who delivers lectures in French, not as a writer (25). Writing, she further proposed, is not the material extension of a specific language but rather a distillation of the essence of language.

Yet if Djebar perceived writing as something more than speech, she also saw it as much less. A point made over and over in her novels is that writing lacks the immediacy and intimacy of oral communication, and when it attempts to capture this spontaneity, it inevitably fails. Writing is not the transcription of speech but its distant trace or echo. Given this gap, what matters is not so much the language in which one writes as the manner in which one translates—that is, the effort that is made to render the rhythms of oral communication in written language. One of the most prominent themes of Djebar's writing is the struggle to capture the voices of women speaking in the Algerian vernaculars: *darija* and the various Berber dialects. In her eyes, translation is required whether the language of writing is French or formal Arabic (*fusha*).[8]

In a final turn, Djebar proposes that the disjuncture between speech and writing opens up a space of critical distance and oppositionality. In a manner that, once again, recalls Derrida's thinking, she portrays her own linguistic deterritorialization as emblematic of the writer's position. Literature, she maintains, is always in some way deterritorialized. Consequently, writers can never be the "porte-parole" of their community. Rather, they are, if anything, "le remords . . . d'un monde voguant sur l'océan des ténèbres" ("the remorse . . . of a world drifting on an ocean of darkness" [*Ces voix* 216]).

The perception of writing as a form of deterritorialization is thoroughly interwoven with Djebar's reflection on literature and gender. Navigating between cultural contexts, she connects the foundational migration of Islam (*hejira*) and the movement of women between households for the purpose of marriage to the place of migration in the work of women writers. Is it incidental, she asks, that the three most important French-language women writers of the twentieth century—Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, and Marguerite Yourcenar—were all, in one sense or another, expatriates whose writing bears the traces of rootlessness and exile? If Djebar dwells, above all, on Duras's "réenracinement," or "rerooting"—the writer's return, in her bestselling novel *L'amant*, written when she was in her seventies, to her childhood in Vietnam and the themes of her early novels—it's perhaps because the notion of rerooting speaks to the dynamics of her own removal from and returns to Algeria (*Ces voix* 211). If, by a combination of choice and necessity, Djebar spent much of her life outside Algeria, in France and the United States, she repeatedly returned, prefiguring the final return of her remains to be buried alongside those of her father in the cemetery of Cherchell.

Rerooting is essential to the way we read Djebar. If it's true that her life exemplified the exilic and hybrid bent of postcolonial culture, her works bear surprisingly little trace of this cosmopolitan wandering. With the exception

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of one novel, *Les nuits de Strasbourg* (1997; *Strasbourg Nights*), they speak not of third spaces, diasporic identities, the transnational, or the global but of Algeria, whose history and geography they survey in comprehensive fashion. "J'ai passé presque la moitié de ma vie entre Alger et Paris, entre la France et l'Algérie," she observes in one essay, "Mais j'ai tout ce temps, le plus souvent, écrit « sur » l'Algérie, de près ou de loin" ("I've spent almost half my life between Algiers and Paris, between France and Algeria . . . , but in all this time I've most often written 'on' Algeria, from near or far." [*Ces voix* 233]). Though her work was rewarded, in 1996, with the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature, it would be more accurately labeled as an exercise in literary nationalism, albeit a nationalism of an oppositional and antiauthoritarian kind.

In the light of Djebar's focus on the homeland, it seems particularly tragic that she is not more widely read in Algeria and that some of her readers view her as an outsider. What can or should be done to remedy this? Let us hope that in the future more of her works will be translated into Arabic, a transmission betokening not the replacement of one language by another but rather a linguistic transition grounded in the historical multiplicity of Algeria's languages.[9]

Notes

1. At the request of Djebar's family the Réseau Wassila, an Algerian women's organization, successfully pressured the authorities to accommodate a gathering in the margins of the official ceremony at the Palais de la Culture. A second informal service was held in the communal library of the writer's birthplace, Cherchell.

2. Between 1992 and 2000 at least 150,000 Algerians were killed in a spiraling conflict in which state security forces battled Islamist militias.

3. "Assia Djebbar ne donnera son nom qu'à sa propre tombe en Algérie; sauf pour ceux qui veulent encore donner la vie en rouvrant ses livres là où le pays se ferme" ("Assia Djebar's name will appear in Algeria only on her own tomb, except for those who still want to bring [her to] life by opening her books while the country closes on itself"). This and all other unattributed translations are my own.

4. An obituary published on 7 February 2015 on the news site *Algerie patriotique*, e.g., elicited reactions of these various kinds (Commentary).

5. See, e.g., Lila Abu-Lughod's cogent critique of international feminist activism on behalf of the undifferentiated category of "Muslimwomen."

6. On these contrasting though in some respects parallel tendencies, see Gafaïti.

7. As Djebar observes in the preface to *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, "L'écrivain est parfois interrogé comme en justice: « Pourquoi écrivez-vous? » A cette première question banale, une seconde souvent succède: « Pourquoi écrivez-vous en français? » Si vous êtes ainsi interpellée, c'est, bien sûr, pour rappeler que vous venez d'ailleurs" ("The writer is sometimes asked, as though he or she were in a court of law, 'Why do you write?' This first, banal question is often followed by a second: 'Why do you write in French?' If you're interrogated in this way it is, of course, to remind you that you come from somewhere else" [7]).

8. Djebar objected to the Arabic translation of her early play *Rouge l'aube* ("Red Dawn"), cowritten with her first husband, Walid Garn, on the grounds that dialogue was rendered in Classical Arabic rather than in the form of spoken Arabic used in Algeria (*Ces voix* 178).

9. While Djebar's novels have been translated into many world languages, only two works have appeared in Arabic: *Rouge l'aube*, one of her first published works, and her last autobiographical novel, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* ("Nowhere in My Father's House").

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