

A Palimpsest of Voices and Sounds: Transcribing Orature in Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*

طرس الأصوات: استنساخ الشفوية في رواية الحب، الفانتازيا لآسيا جبار

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Received: 2021-06-05 Accepted: 2021-07-07 Published : 2021-08-07

Abstract : Assia Djebar's foray into cinematography enabled her to challenge canonical forms of representation by constructing a linguistic space where the Arabic language, 'her mother tongue', and the French language, her 'step-mother tongue', may coexist. To reach women as audience, the novelist steered towards the art of filmmaking. She directed her award-winning docufiction *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* in 1978 in which *el-mujahidat* [the revolutionaries] remember the war. To foreground women's contribution to the liberation struggle, Djebar transcribed the oral testimonies of the widows of the revolution into her novel *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985). The present paper examines the use of the strategy of relexification in order to arabize the French language so it may host the trauma of the war.

Keywords: Orality; Palimpsest; Relexification

الملخص: لجوء الكاتبة اسيا جبار الى فن السينما قد مكنتها من تحدى اشكال التمثيل الأوروبية من خلال بناء مساحة لغوية تتعايش فيها "لغتها الام" اللغة العربية، ولغة المستعمر اللغة الفرنسية. للوصول إلى النساء كجمهور، توجهت الروائية نحو فن صناعة الأفلام. في عام 1978، أنتجت فيلمها الفائز بالجوائز " نوبة انساء جبل شينوا" الذي تروي فيه المجاهدات قصص الحرب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الادب الشفوي؛ الاستنساخ؛ إعادة التعجيم

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1. The Introduction:

During the years of her literary silence, Assia Djébar converted to filmmaking wielding the camera and the word in her quest to challenge patriarchy and colonial violence by creating a contestatory artistic discourse that would have for effect the decentering of euro-centered modes of representation. She produced in 1977-78, her first film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* [The “ritual,” festival of the Women of Mount Chenoua]. The movie echoes the caged voices of Algerian rural women, and stresses the importance of the role they play in the transmission of the nation’s history. In an attempt to restore links to her maternal world, the filmmaker traveled back to her native city of Cherchell and visited the countryside, the fields, and the hills that surround Mount Chenoua where she recorded her oral tradition and legacy, and depicted women’s contribution in the war of independence reinserting women into the pages of history. *La nouba*’s orators migrate and inhabit Djébar’s novel *L’amour, la fantasia* (1985). The result is a polyphonic text in which the widows of the revolution claim the space to speak breaking the long sustained silence about the trauma of the war. Their native tongue infects the French language fostering a subversive writing strategy that entails the transcription of orature into the language of the Other. The central point of interest in the present study is the examination of Djébar’s subversive writing strategy that entailed the deconstruction of traditional modes of artistic expression.

2. Writing Orality: the arabization of the French language in Djébar’s fiction:

The third part of *L’amour, la fantasia* is inhabited by a multitude of voices that narrate their story in a native-like language. The discourse of the storytellers in the chapters entitled “Voix” [Voice], unfolds in the absence of referential expressions sculpting a narrative of ambiguity as inscrutable voices claim authority over the text. The French Djébar uses to inscribe the oral testimonies of the women of Mount Chenoua has undergone a

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morphological and a syntactical mutation. The French language the voices narrate in is imbued in the rhetorical and rhythmic patterns of the Arabic language impelling the reader to negotiate between two different cultural codes. In an interview conducted by Mildred Mortimer, Djebar maintained that by transcribing the voices of the women of *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* in her text she: « je tente d'ancrer cette langue française dans l'oralité des femmes traditionnelles, je l'enracine ainsi » [attempt[ed] to anchor this French language in the orality of traditional women, thereby I root it] (Mortimer, 1988, p. 201). Writing in the language of the colonizer has been a source of debate amongst post-colonial Algerian writers, while some reverted to writing in the Arabic language others sought to reappropriate the language of their instruction to create a subversive discourse.

To host the oral tales of the revolutionaries, Djebar's French has been remodeled. The reshaping of the French language is carried out without distorting meaning, the language is reborn not mutilated. In her *The West African Palimpsest: Case-Studies in Relexification* (2007), Chantal Zabus adopted the linguistic term relexification in order to describe the process by which the West African novelist infuses elements of his oral tradition into a European text. Zabus argues that relexification shouldn't be equated with 'translation', 'transference,' and 'transmutation' (p. 111). The term was first evoked by Loreto Todd in his "The English Language in West Africa" (1982), the latter contends that "the relexification of one's mother tongue," entails the "[use] of English vocabulary but indigenous structures and rhythms" (as cited in Zabus, 2007, p. 112). In other words, the process requires the transcription of one's native oral-based devices into the patterns of the European language of the text. Zabus considers relexification a literary practice that denotes "the making of a new register of communication out of an alien *lexicon*... This new register of

communication, which is neither the European target-language nor the indigenous source-language, functions as an ‘interlanguage’ or as a ‘third register’” (pp. 112-113). The refashioning of the French language so it may bear Djébar’s oral cultural heritage is to monolith a linguistic register that’s neither French nor Arabic.

Zabus notes that African writers avow that the process of transcribing orature into euphonic texts is associated with “some sort of translation,” what Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o describes as “mental translations” (p. 114). Djébar declared that the process of writing her maternal culture into the French language depended on listening to the women narrate their stories in their ancestral language to infuse their voices into the language of the colonizer: “vous trouverez dans ces récits de femmes des sortes de tournures populaires que j’insère par une traduction voulue au premier degré » [you will find in the stories of these women some kind of popular phrases and expressions that I insert by a coveted translation] (Mortimer, 1988, p. 201). Relexification signals a return to the oral tradition that encompasses a process of translation however the two approaches shouldn’t be confused, Zabus maintains that:

...relexification is characterized by the absence of an original. It therefore does not operate from the language of one text to the other but from one language to the other within the same text. Such texts... are palimpsests- behind the scriptural authority of the European target-language, the earlier, imperfectly erased remnants of the source language are still visible (p. 118).

The lurking of the Arabic and Berber dialects of the women of *La nouba du Mont Chenoua* in the third part of Djébar’s novel entails the restoration of a repressed language and an un-written history. The palimpsestic nature of Djébar’s text is attributed to the use of a mixture of transcoding and relexification. Transcoding occurs in the passages where the characters narrate in the exact same wording as in the film, relexification manifests itself when the author attempts to defamiliarize the French language so it

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may convey the oral culture of her ancestresses. Relexification can be detected even in the autobiographical sections of the novel.

Deviance from linguistic norms may alienate the European reader from the text, one might argue that the semantic, syntactic, and stylistic distortions has subjected the French language to violence. However, relexification was devised in order to:

...solve an immediate artistic problem: that of rendering African concepts, thought patterns and linguistic features in the European language. ...it seeks to subvert the linguistically codified, to decolonize the language of early, colonial literature and to affirm a revised, non-atavistic orality via the imposed medium (Zabus, 2007, p.118)

In *Fantasia*, Djebar ventured to subvert the hegemonic historical discourse and to authentically portray the realities of colonial, post-colonial Algeria. The French language had to stretch, to mutate in order to ingrain the orality of the women of djbel Chenoua. Djebar stated that "...j'ai voulu une sobriété du style quand il y avait rappel de la souffrance" [when addressing suffering, i wanted a sober style] (Mortimer, 1988, p. 202). The violence these women endured could only be transcribed through their tongues.

3. Relexification in Assia Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia*

The Third part of *Fantasia* is entitled "Les voix ensevelies," [inhumed voices] (Djebar, 1995, p. 160), voices that were once stifled claim the space to speak in the dialects of Mount Chenoua. Their testimonies challenge the French official historical accounts that Djebar revisits in the first and second parts of the novel. Each resurrected memory rises to inscribe an individual and a collective female identity. In the following section we attempt to extract the traces of orality in the women's tales of war:

3.1 Popular expressions:

a- When *el-mujahidat* [the revolutionnaires] evoke the French soldiers they tend to use the word "France":

“La France arriva jusqu’à nous, nous habitions à la zaouia Sidi M’hamed Aberkane... La France est venue et elle nous a brûlés »

[‘France’ came right up to our doorsteps; we were living at the Sidi M’hamed Aberkane zaouia . . . ‘France’ came and burnt us out] (Djebar, 1995, p. 167. Trans. p. 117).

It is a commonly used synecdoche amongst the Algerian people, it denotes that the Algerian people are aware of being under the colonial control of France the state, not the army. We can also note in the same example the use of the “Ethical Dative” or the “Dative of Interest” typically used in the French language but it’s also frequently used in Dialectical Arabic (Regaieg, 1995, p. 251). The ethical dative indicates that the person is emotionally invested in the action expressed by the verb. It has a stylistic function not a syntactical one.

b- Another commonly used phrase in dialectical Arabic:

“Cette fille *est de chez nous*! Nous ne la laisserons pas ici! Nous la remettons dans notre secteur!”

[This girl is from our region! We're not leaving her here! We're taking her back to our sector!'] (p. 167. Trans. p. 188).

The expression *chez nous* is used to indicate having a common tribe or familial links.

c- “Ne pleurez pas, leur ai-je ordonné. *Ne pleurez pas sur moi! J’interdis qu’on pleure sur moi!*”

[‘Don't cry,’ I told them. ‘Don't cry for me! I won't have anyone crying for me!’]

(p. 229. Trans. p. 188).

Note the use of “Ne pleurez pas sur moi” instead of “Ne pleurez pas pour moi,” which means don’t cry for me.

d- “A ce départ d’exode, *tu te sais femme lourde*”

[When the exodus begins you know you are heavy with child] (p. 267. Tran. p. 89).

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The usage of the adjective heavy to refer to pregnancy in a euphemistic way.

e- "...*Ainsi il parla, ainsi tout se passa par la suite...*"

[That's what he said, and that's what happened eventually] (p. 277. Tran. p. 198).

kima gal, kima sra is a commonly used expression in dialectical Arabic.

f- "A tel douar, je t'attends !... *Je suis nu...*"

'[I'm waiting for you at this *douar* or the other!... *I've got nothing to wear...*]
(p. 278 Trans. p. 199)

The use of "I'm naked," instead of "I have nothing to wear."

g- "Les hommes, qui me servaient *d'épaules*, tous ces hommes sont partis !"

[All the men I used to depend on, all those men have gone!] (p. 280. Trans. 200).

The use of the word "shoulder" to describe the support and protection the men in her family offered her prior to their martyrdom.

3.2 Verbs:

a- "J'ai assez perdu de temps! Je vais aller voir où est *tombé* mon frère ! "

['I've wasted enough time! 'I thought. 'I'm going to see where my brother fell!] (Djebar, 1995, p. 173. Trans. p. 121).

"...Tous sont ensuite *tombés* en martyrs"

[...all of them died as martyrs] (p. 186. Trans. p. 131).

Chérifa's brother died a martyr's death, the verb *tombé/tombés* is relexified from *Istashhad*, in French *mourir au champ d'honneur*.

b- "Dans cette histoire de mariage, ils pensaient *me donner* à 'un chef' !
Un chef de Mouzïa"

[In this marriage business, they thought of giving me to a 'chief! A chief from Mouzaïa] (p. 187. Tran. p. 131).

Note the usage of the verb *me donner* to mean to marry me off to, or to give my hand in marriage from the Arabic *madoni*.

c- The use of the verb *vendre* to denote betrayal or treason:

“C’est toi qui vas *vendre* les tiens, toi qui t’engages pour la gamelle et pour la soupe!”

[You're the one who *sells* your own people and enlists for the sake of a bowl of soup!] (p. 190. Trans. p. 133).

“vendre la mèche” is a commonly used phrase in the French language, however, it means to reveal a secret.

d- “la seconde fois où les soldats me brûlèrent la demeure, le feu se développait, le feu ‘*mangeait*’ et le toit partait en morceaux...”

[The second time the soldiers burnt my house down, the fire *spread* and the roof collapsed...] (p. 227. Trans. p. 159).

“... Mère, le feu te *mange* ! Le feu te *mange* ! ”

[... 'Mother, the fire's eating you up! The fire's eating you up!'] (p. 230. Trans. p. 161).

Instead of a construction to this effect “tu a pris feu,” the verb *manger* is used to refer to ‘you caught fire’.

e- “Elle lit ! ”

[She reads] (p. 254. Trans. p. 179)

The verb “lire” substituted the verb “étudier,” which is commonly used in oral dialectical Arabic.

f- “Les Frères avaient fait évacuer cette cabane, en décidant: ‘Cette femme *entrera* là ! ’ ”

[The Brothers had had this hut evacuated, deciding, 'This woman must come and live here! '] (p. 213. Trans. p. 149).

The verb “entrer,” [to enter] is used instead of “habiter la maison, ou vivre dans la maison,” to live or to find shelter here.

g- “Ils nous enlevèrent les habits et nous laissèrent tels quels, *tels que notre mère nous a faits!* ”

[They took our clothes, and left us like that, *naked as the day we were born!*] (Djebar, 1995, p. 227. Trans. p. 159).

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3.3 Rules of address

a- “Qu’ils ne viennent pas, *ô fille de ma sœur!* ”

[Pray they don’t come, *O my sister’s daughter!*] (Djebar, 1995, p. 216.
Trans. p. 151).

“*ô fille de ma sœur* ” is relexified from *bent okhti*, meaning my niece.

To the same effect, “*Fille de mon frère* ” is relexified from *bent akhi*, and

“*O fille de ma mère* ” is relexified from *bent yemma* meaning my sister:

b- “ ‘*Fille de mon frère*’, m’appelait-elle avec un rire fier et sa tendresse me réchauffait ” My niece, Ibnat akhi.

[‘Daughter of my brother’, she called me, laughing proudly, and her affection warmed
my heart] (p. 275. Trans. p. 196).

c- “...*O fille de ma mère*, prends garde de ne pas me laisser aux chacals, le jour où je mourrai !... ”

[‘O daughter of my mother, sec that you don’t leave me for the jackals, when I die ! ...] (p. 277. Trans. p. 198).

d- The daughter in law is commonly referred to in dialectical Arabic as the bride [laaroussa] : “Chaque vieille pénètre, la première, dans le vestibule coudé, débouche dans le patio aux céramiques bleuies ; elle précède sa bru, qu’elle appelle ‘*sa mariée*’, même dix ans après la noce...”

[The most senior is always the first to enter the L-shaped vestibule leading out on to the patio with its bluish ceramic tiles; she is followed by her daughter-in-law, whom she calls ‘*her bride*’ even ten years after the wedding...] (p. 219. Trans. p. 153).

f- Women used to speak of husbands in a euphemistic manner, so instead of naming him a culturally bound expression is used: “Comment va *le maître de ta maison*? Comment va ta couvée ? Et le *Cheikh*, que Dieu lui accorde pèlerinage! ”

['How is the master of the house? How are all the children' And the *Sheikh*, may God grant him the pilgrimage! '] (p. 220. Trans. p. 154).

The word Sheikh connotes the elder of the house, and the expression *le maître de ta maison* is relexified from *moula dar*.

3.4 Prayers:

The stroytellers express their religious identity throughout the text by constantly evoking God, and the Prophet peace be upon him in their prayers:

“Occuper mes mains, ô prophète aux yeux doux, ô Lla Khadija sa bien-aimée! Occuper mes doigts pour desserrer les dents de l’angoisse !...”

[‘Keep my hands busy, O gentle-eyed Prophet, O Lla Khadija, his beloved ! Keep my hands busy to unclench the teeth of anguish!...] (Djebar, 1995, p. 217. Trans. p. 152).

The prayers of the widows of the war are constructed in an unorthodox manner to pattern the way the *conteuses* pray: “...*Que Dieu éloigne de nous le péché !*”

[‘may God preserve us from sin!’] (p. 236. Trans. p. 166). *Que Dieu éloigne de nous le péché* is relexified from *Rabi baad alina shar*.

“... Dieu a conservé sur eux et sur nous le salut !” [God preserved them, and us too] (p. 264. Trans. 187). Instead of a construction to this effect *Dieu nous a préservés*, the prayer *Dieu a conservé sur eux et sur nous le salut* is minted according to the pattern of *Rabi hfadna w hfadhom*.

In the following passage *Les infidèles* is relexified from *el Kofar* which connotes *les non-cryants*, ” [The unbelievers] “...sans frère, sans mari, pour te conduire aux rivages *des Infidèles* [...without father, brother, husband to accompany you to the shores of the Infidels] (p. 268. Trans. p. 189).

4. The conclusion:

To revise the history of Algeria, Djebar recorded in writing and in motion the testimonies of the widows of the war of liberation in her film and fiction. She exhumed the voices of the women of Mount Chenoua so they would, in their native tongues, challenge the authority of the colonial archives. To authentically narrate their history, the novelist reverted to a

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method of language indigenization. We attempt to foreground in the present paper the instances where the orality of the women revokes the normative structures of the French language to relexify it in order to resurrect a female collective memory. Writing violence in the language of the oppressor harbored the potential of forging a new linguistic space, where Djebar's ancestral language and the language of her instruction may coexist.

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