

# Mourning in a Minority Language: Assia Djebar's *Algerian White*

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## Abstract

Numerous books and articles have dealt with the violence of the 1990s civil war in Algeria. Sociological and historical studies, as well as news reports and literary works have sought to contain the violence by describing and explaining it and, in some way, give meaning to what seemed to be, at times, meaningless and random killing. In looking for the origins of the violence, these written works seek to place blame, to find comfort in understanding and, finally, to move on. Yet they remain unsatisfactory because their focus on origins and causes does not allow for adequate consideration of current experience of this past violence. Algerian writer Assia Djebar's 1995 work *Algerian White* is particularly interesting in this respect as she links recent violence, death and loss to her choice of language both in this painful period of Algerian history and in earlier periods of conflict. This paper further argues that Djebar's reference to traditional modes of mourning, such as the elegy, are particularly appropriate to the subject of her book.

## Introduction

As she commemorates Algeria's lost writers and intellectuals, Assia Djebar looks at possible origins of the violence in her country, but she also considers the current experience of her own loss and suggests that the two must be considered together: "How to withstand mourning for our colleagues without first having sought to understand the why of yesterday's funerals, those of the Algerian utopia?" (2000: 230).<sup>1</sup> In Djebar's text, this Algerian utopia is one of linguistic and cultural tolerance and thus to write in French is to pursue that utopia. Like any

utopia, however, that of the past, was an ideal rather than a reality but an ideal that Djébar is unwilling to give up.

## The Status of French in Algeria

French is not usually thought of as a minority language, even in postcolonial contexts where French is either rejected outright or incorporated as an official national language. The history of French in Algeria is more complex than in many of France's other ex-colonies. This is largely because of Algeria's previous status, not as a colony but as a "département", making it administratively part of France and, in principle, no different than any other province. The French first invaded Algeria in 1830 and remained there as a colonial power for more than 130 years until they were forced out at the end of the Algerian War in 1962. By the 1870s, the country was largely "pacified" and the flow of colonists from the metropole increased significantly. French became the language that allowed access to education, trade and political power, while local languages were relegated to the family and other informal or private spheres. In principle, a French education was to be available to all children, but in practice, very few Algerian children ever attended French schools. As late as 1914, only five percent of Algerian children were enrolled and the vast majority of these were boys (Ruedy 1992: 205). By the outbreak of the Algerian war in 1954, the numbers were slightly higher, but French was still clearly a minority language spoken by a very small Algerian elite and, of course, by French colonists. While the number of speakers made French, statistically, a minor language in terms of influence, it nonetheless dominated education, politics and business. Despite nationalist rhetoric to the contrary, this situation continued to some degree even after independence in 1962, and French enjoyed a kind of undercover prestige. While those in power touted the importance of Arabization of education and government administration, they themselves sent their own children to French schools and, in fact, job prospects were far better for students graduating from Francophone departments in the universities than for those graduating from Arabophone departments – even into the 1980s. Still, French remained a minority language in terms of numbers, and those who publicly advocated any official role for French were ideologically suspect in newly independent Algeria.

Francophone North African writers have often had a difficult relationship with French. On the one hand, it is the language that makes it possible for them to study, write and publish. On the other, it is a language that sets them apart from their families and communities and it is the language of the former colonizer. Some Francophone authors have written of the need for North African writers to manipulate and change the French language in order to make it their own. Others have abandoned French altogether as a language of publication. For most of these writers, language is not a simple tool, it is something that affects not

only what they can say and how they can say it, but also who they become in the writing. For most, language inevitably intertwines ideas of community belonging and family with individual embodiedness. Symbolically leaving the community by writing in another language, these writers experience and write about this break as one of bodily harm. Certainly, North Africa is not monolingual, but unlike Berber or dialectal Arabic, French is tainted by its associations with the former colonizer. It is not that French is necessarily an outsider's language, but precisely that under colonialism French was too dominant a part of North African society, and thus for an Algerian to write in French constitutes, at the very least, a distancing from the community of origin and, at worst, an outright betrayal.

### The Language of Love and Betrayal

Assia Djebar publishes in Paris and most of her readers are French, so it might seem inaccurate to say that she writes in a minority language; after all, she certainly faces none of the problems of many who write in a minority language: limited readership, a lack of publishing houses or a critical establishment to respond to her writing. Her election to the Académie Française in 2005 may seem to place her squarely in the mainstream but if we look, not from the point of view of where she publishes, but instead from Djebar's own position, we see a slightly different picture. Until the civil war of the 1990s, she lived and worked as a professor of history in Algeria. Despite her current status in the world of French letters, she herself continues to interrogate her position as an Algerian writer who writes in French. In doing so, she experiences some of the same difficulties as other minority writers, particularly, that of being "badly seated," as Francophone Tunisian writer Albert Memmi has put it, referring to the sense of sitting on two chairs without really sitting on either one. In 1956 Djebar published her first novel in French, *The Thirst*, which dealt with Algerian women's struggles for freedom. Published during the Algerian War of Independence, the book was hailed by the French literary establishment and she became known as a Muslim Françoise Sagan, another young, female writer famous at the time for her novel *Bonjour Tristesse*. But as a young Algerian woman writing in the middle of the struggle for independence from France, both French and Algerian critics saw her novel about Algerian women as support for French propaganda about France's responsibility to protect Algerian women from supposedly oppressive indigenous traditions. Algerian responses furthermore focused on the fact that she had dared to write her novel in the language of the colonial oppressor without denouncing colonialism.

Although Djebar is fluent in both French and Arabic, her formal education was primarily in French. Her father was a teacher in the French school system and, as Djebar tells the story in her semi-autobiographical work, *L'amour, la*

*fantasia* (*Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade*), it is thanks to him that she attended school. Djébar writes of being one of only a few girls in her elementary class and, by high school, of being the only Algerian young woman. For Djébar, access to French is, from the beginning, tied up with her relationship to her father. Reflecting on her access to education, she opens her novel *Fantasia* with the words: "A little Arab girl going to school for the first time, one autumn morning, walking hand in hand with her father" (1992: 3). While she acknowledges a French education as a loving gift from her father, she also mourns the loss of connection with her mother and other female relatives. As she writes: "French is my 'step-mother' tongue. Which is my long-lost mother-tongue, that left me standing and disappeared? ... Mother-tongue, either idealized or unloved, neglected and left to fairground barkers and jailers! (1992: 214).<sup>2</sup> Much of Djébar's discussion of language takes place within a vocabulary of guilt. Who is responsible for this separation of mother and daughter? The use of the word "step-mother" suggests that the father has abandoned the mother for another woman. By leaving both mother and mother-tongue at home, the father renews each day his relationship with another woman, another tongue. And by learning the second language, the daughter becomes complicit with the father. She asks herself if she has not failed in her duty: "[I]sn't it my 'duty' to stay behind with my peers in the gynaeceum?" (1992: 213).<sup>3</sup>

Djébar represents her grief at this first separation by making reference to the Greek myth of Nessus. According to legend, the centaur Nessus tries to abduct Hercules' new bride Deianeira. Hercules shoots and kills Nessus with an arrow, and as Nessus lies 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, hoping to win back his love. 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. What is striking about his story, as Djébar uses it to talk about learning French in colonial Algeria, is that it is a gift given out of love and yet once it is accepted, the recipient can never get rid of it as it adheres to the skin and becomes part of the self. In the context of North Africa, writers, especially women writers, often describe Francophone culture and language as something that provides them with access to power and education, while acknowledging a sense of being violently marked and set apart, their whole lives, from their families and communities. What is particularly striking about Djébar's use of the story of Nessus is the way in which it intertwines language with themes of love and violence – and tells them in graphically physical terms. Clearly, for Djébar, the very fact of writing in French already

involves loss and mourning. In her earlier novel *Fantasia*, published in 1985, Djébar presents this choice of language as a strict dichotomy: French or Arabic, her father or her mother. She feels torn between them but, as the text suggests, she must nonetheless make a decision. In her subsequent work, she has continued to explore the stakes of her choice of language, but in less dichotomous terms, as will be apparent in the discussion below of her 1995 work *Algerian White*.

Algerian men have been publishing in French since the 1930s and 1940s and faced criticism for doing so, but the stakes are different for a woman who writes in the outsider's language. As Djébar writes in *Fantasia*, her access to French and the written word granted her an important additional freedom that Algerian boys took for granted: the freedom to move about outside in public space. Education for girls involved crossing established social boundaries separating male and female spheres, exterior and interior, as well as different linguistic spaces. As noted above, French was the language of the public sphere, and thus associated primarily with men's activities, while Arabic and Berber remained associated with home and family, primarily feminine spaces. In the novel, although contemporaries of the narrator's parents find this initial transgression of a girl entering the public and masculine space of the school system alarming, educating a girl also meant that however cloistered she might be, one day her literacy would allow her to circulate even further in public, male space: "The jailer who guards a body that has no words – and written words can travel—may sleep in peace. ... And what if the maiden does write? Her voice, albeit silenced, will circulate" (1992: 3).<sup>4</sup> As this suggests, as long as the voice is connected to the body, its movement can be controlled. Once a girl or woman's voice is put into writing, the words can travel, taking the body where it could not go alone. In that it can take her, metaphorically, into the company of foreign men, it is all the more dangerous. It is as if, in taking her to school, her father gave her away in an arranged marriage to "an enemy camp," as Djébar puts it, thus once again linking language to family relations. In *Algerian White*, Djébar comes back to this issue of women's confinement and notes that during the civil war men were also imprisoned in their own homes, rampant violence making them afraid to venture out on the streets: "Half the land of Algeria has just been seized by moving, terrifying and sometimes hideous shadows ... It is no longer just the night of women separated, isolated, exploited as mere child-bearers – for generations on end!" (2000: 217).<sup>5</sup>

### Language as a Metaphor for Tolerance

Djébar's concern with language, its relationship to love and violence and the cohesion or fracture of communities comes together in *Algerian White*. In this text, Djébar remembers Algerian writers and intellectuals killed in the violence that engulfed the country in the 1990s. While her text underscores how violence

often targeted the Francophone minority, she also recognizes Arabophone friends and important historical figures, noting the importance of Arabic even for Francophone Algerians like herself. In particular, she remembers three close friends, all assassinated in the 1990s. Significantly, she begins by remembering the languages she and her friends spoke together: “My friends spoke to me in French, in the past” (2000: 15),<sup>6</sup> but, as she notes a few lines later, they would occasionally converse in Arabic and Berber as well. While much more could be said about the significance she gives to each language, it is striking that this is an issue important enough for her that she begins her commemoration of her assassinated friends by reflecting on their language. In this text, language stands for a much larger issue of intolerance, which allows her to make connections between the violence of the 1990s and the violence of earlier periods in Algeria’s history. For example, Djébar links the murders of the 1990s to purges within the Algerian forces during the Independence War, purges which treated idealistic middle-class youth, many of them French speakers, as likely traitors to the independence movement:

Less than forty years later, they are killing journalists, doctors, teachers, female professors and nurses, they are killing anyone with “degrees” even though they have no power, don’t seek to protect themselves ... Kill the just, because the unjust are behind closed doors, find shelter, and continue to reap profits. Target the one who speaks, who says “I,” who expresses an opinion; who thinks he is defending democracy. Kill the one who is on the path: *the path of many languages*, many lifestyles, the one who stays on the fringe, who walks, unconcerned about himself or *each day invents his own truth*. (2000: 200, my emphasis)<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, while Djébar condemns the killing of Francophone intellectuals, she condemns equally the killing dictated by the totalitarian views of the government and of the Islamists who would eliminate those who “invent [their] own truth.” Hers is a critique of intolerance of all kinds.

### ***Algerian White as Elegy***

Others have looked at Djébar’s *Algerian White* in terms of the assault on intellectuals and the links she establishes between different periods of violence in Algeria’s history. This article, however, looks more specifically at the *form* of Djébar’s commemoration and suggests that it may not entirely follow the process of mourning described in traditional accounts of the elegy. Elegies have traditionally fulfilled three functions: praising the dead, expressing the sorrow of the survi-

vors, and finally providing consolation. Critic Peter Sacks sees the elegy not simply as a *record* of grief, but as an *action*, that if “successful,” as he phrases it, will lead mourners to “accept an adequate figure for what they have lost” (1985: 6). Following Freud’s work in *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sacks writes that healthy mourning “requires a withdrawal of affection from the lost object and a subsequent reattachment ... to some substitute” (1985: 6). Referring to early Greek elegies, Sacks recalls the story of Pan who pursued the nymph Syrinx. When she is trapped by him, she asks help from other nymphs who turn her into marsh reeds, from which Pan creates his signature musical pipes. As Sacks interprets the story, it is Pan’s ability to accept the erotic loss of the maiden and transform that loss into an aesthetic gain that makes him a successful mourner. This process is similar to that by which the writer of elegy transforms personal loss into aesthetic gain in the form of the poetic elegy. For Sacks, this is more than just a metaphor; it reflects psychic models of mourning.

Critics of elegies by women argue, however, that this model does not adequately account for women’s elegies because its focus on the male mourner does not take into account how a woman mourner’s situation might be different and it ignores the plight of the mourned women transformed into objects. As Melissa F. Zeiger notes regarding Sack’s argument, when women in these stories are faced with rape or transformation into an inanimate object, the myth chooses transformation and thus “men’s losses are made to seem the ones that count” (1997: 5). Critics argue that while women writers may use the elegiac form, they transform it. World War I, in particular, provided ample subject matter for women’s elegies, perhaps because many writers of the time mourned, not only the dead, but also what they saw as the passing of a way of life. Whereas the elegy traditionally functioned as a way of working through loss, some critics have argued that, in the context of the First World War, women’s writing tended to go through the process of praising the dead and expressing sorrow, but this did not necessarily result in consolation. Celeste Schenck (1986), for example, notes that, unlike male practitioners of the elegiac art, women poets “seem unwilling to render up their dead.” Rather than seeking separation from the dead or attempting to transform their loss, Schenck argues, women elegists share a tradition of wishing to maintain contact: “Refusal of consolation ... is perhaps the female elegist’s most characteristic subversion of the masculine elegiac” (1986: 24).

In Algerian tradition, women’s elegies are primarily sung, and Djebar reminds readers of the centrality of both the elegy and music to women in Algeria. Where women may traditionally have been denied a public voice or the literacy to write, Djebar also recalls the importance of other kinds of expression through music and the body, including the elegy. Her work is filled with examples of her interest in traditional Algerian musical forms and in what women say via these forms. In her 1980 novella *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, one of her main characters works as an ethnomusicologist and the narrative includes excerpts

from her transcripts of women's traditional music, including funeral chants. Her novel *Fantasia* is structured around the Western musical form of the fantasia, but it also includes numerous references to women's traditional singing, not least of which is the story of a woman who spurs men to battle through her poetic taunts. The title of her novel *Vaste est la prison*, published in 1995, the same year as *Algerian White*, echoes a line from a traditional Berber lament. Recalling the musical structure of her earlier novel *Fantasia*, the third part of *Algerian White* is also structured in seven "processions," or movements. The link between women's expression, music, and the body is clear when she describes regular gatherings of older women at her grandmother's house, where some of the women would begin drumming while her grandmother would dance herself into a trance until she eventually collapsed. Thus in Djébar's work, elegy and music are privileged spaces for women's expression, even while she also argues for the importance of women's written expression.<sup>8</sup> As we can see from the work of critics on female elegies, relief through physical exhaustion and collapse into silence stand as a metaphor for the kind of elegiac writing produced by women. As these critics note, where death cannot be transformed or transcended, as is the case in elegies by men described by Peter Sacks, death can push at the limits of language and what it can meaningfully express to the point of silence. Kathleen Wall, for example, writing about Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, says: "[T]he loss that generates the elegiac gesture pushes the boundaries of language and genre ... toward a paradoxical effort to represent absence, both of the loved one and of any knowledge of death" (2002: 307). This contradictory attempt to both admit and deny knowledge of death can result in a kind of paralysis.

While the elegy might, at first, seem an intensely private form of expression (and thus particularly suited to women's traditional status), several critics have noted that an important aspect of the elegy is the way it transforms private grief into public mourning (see Wall 2002: 306). Elaine Scarry, writing about physical pain, notes that suffering destroys language, and yet "verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain" (1985: 9). As the mourner attempts to communicate her grief, she contributes to this "collective task," even if her communication is limited by the hearer's own experience of loss, as Scarry argues. Djébar's narrative also fulfills this function, to an even greater degree than traditional women singers, because she takes it to a written form that circulates further than the voice. The risk of this transformation to public mourning is that it can then be easily co-opted by authoritarian forces, whether Islamist, nationalist or international. Djébar comments on this possibility when she describes politicians flocking to attend the funeral of writer Kateb Yacine. By presenting her text in French, she refuses to be used by Islamists who might support her condemnation of government violence. Her text, in fact, pushes them away with their claims that the only true language of Algeria is Arabic. On the other hand, knowing that the majority of her readers will be people outside



of Algeria, and in particular, citizens of the former colonial power, France, Djébar's reference to a traditional form also maintains a distance from those would-be supporters. Critic Elizabeth Falaize (2005) further argues that Djébar avoids just this type of "political theater," as she terms it, by reminding the reader of all the different and conflicting stories that go into making up official history. She does this by combining imagined and historical accounts of the days leading up to each of the deaths, as well as the testimony of bystanders, family and friends, thus undermining the possibility of a single narrative that might speak to that person's life and death. This plethora of viewpoints also keeps the dead from fading silently away. As Djébar writes, writing can be "like keeping a full moon, hovering and serene, over your head. ... Nights of the full moon are never shores of death but fountains of hope ..." (2000: 220).<sup>9</sup>

As Djébar's text evokes traditional Arabic and Berber elegies for the dead, it follows at least two aspects of the traditional elegy by expressing the pain of loss and lauding the qualities of the deceased. But in her portrayal of one singer, it seems that consolation may be more elusive. At the funeral of her friend Abdelkader Alloula, Djébar describes Zoubida, "age-old friend of Kader, teaching French literature in the university, transformed by despair into a weeper, a tragic singer ... She who in the old days was the one who was always laughing!" (2000: 78). As Djébar notes, in times of war, traditional elegies also served to urge survivors on to greater feats of bravery, and thus Zoubida sings not in French but in the "Arabic of Oran":

So where are you, men of Algeria, where do you stand,  
Now that Oran has lost its lion, its mast!  
Where are you then when the best of Algeria's sons fall?  
(ibid: 78)<sup>10</sup>

While Zoubida, in the traditional manner, does praise her fallen friend and call on others to take his place, Djébar also suggests that as she does this, it is as much for the singer's own benefit as it is out of a desire to urge her listeners on to acts of bravery or revenge, "wanting to sharpen her sorrow, or perhaps quiet it by trying to free herself from it, [she] revolts, her anger crossed with a despairing scorn" (ibid: 78).<sup>11</sup> The lament is not, as sometimes perceived, simply one of cathartic exaggeration of sorrow; it also allows for the possibility of expressing anger and revolt.

## Conclusion

As suggested by the earlier discussion of French as a gift to Djébar from her father, language is inextricably tied up with love, and Djébar has much to say about loving in a foreign language. I would argue that the interest of the elegy

for Djébar is precisely its ability to express deeply felt emotion for a loved one in a public context. Much of Djébar's writing is a loving, if critical, commemoration of her country of birth which is represented as a lost space of multilingualism. Peter Sacks and others, as noted earlier, also emphasize the importance of desire in the elegy, and Djébar's remembrance of fallen colleagues certainly serves two of the primary purposes of the elegy, that of sorrowing and praising. But this might occur equally in Arabic. What are the consequences of targeting a French readership? In the case of narrating violence committed during the Independence War, one might argue that the text places the blame on the French government and those of its citizens who were responsible for much of the violence, even while it acknowledges the faults of Algerians themselves. When it comes to the civil war of the 1990s, however, the answer must be different. Djébar is mourning not only friends and colleagues, but also a multilingual Algeria that once was and might have continued. Referring to Algeria's lost multilingualism, she quotes Jacques Berque, who writes: "Algeria has shown a talent for creating a major problem out of something that began as an advantage!" (2000: 229). The victims in Djébar's texts are primarily members of the Francophone minority, but the text makes clear that she is equally concerned with Arabophone victims of intolerance. It is in this in-between status and her emphasis on criticizing all forms of intolerance, that Djébar avoids her elegy being taken over for political purposes by others, even while she stakes out her own political critique. When Djébar writes of her friends: "I don't believe in their deaths: for me, their deaths are works in progress" (2000: 218). This is not a failure of mourning and an inability to let go, but a sign that she is speaking of her friends, not as individuals, but as representatives of a potentially multilingual and tolerant Algeria. It is useful here to recall the quote from the beginning of this paper in which she explicitly links mourning for her friends to the loss of an "Algerian utopia," as she calls it. She is, as she puts it, "[w]riting to express Algeria vacillating and for which some are already preparing the white of the shroud" (ibid: 227). While she may accept the loss of her fallen friends as individuals, she is not yet willing to bury her hope for Algeria.

## Notes

- 1 "Comment dès lors porter le deuil de nos amis, de nos confrères, sans auparavant avoir cherché à comprendre le pourquoi des funérailles d'hier, celles de l'utopie algérienne?" (1995: 275). All page number references to the English translations of Djébar's texts will appear in the text, unless otherwise noted. Footnotes provide the page numbers for the original French.
- 2 "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!...” (1985: 240).
- 3 “[M]on «devoir» n’est-il pas de rester «en arrière», dans le gynécée, avec mes semblables?” (1985: 239). These comments about the lost mother tongue are drawn from a longer discussion in Schneider (1998).
  - 4 “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” (1985: 11).
  - 5 “La moitié de la terre Algérie vient d’être saisie par des ténèbres mouvantes, effrayantes et parfois hideuses... Il n’y a donc plus seulement la nuit des femmes parquées, resserrées, exploitées comme simples génitrices—et ce, des générations durant!” (1995 : 259).
  - 6 “Mes amis me parlaient en langue française, auparavant” (1995: 15).
  - 7 “Moins de quarante ans après, on tue des journalistes, des médecins, des instituteurs, des femmes professeurs ou infirmières, on tue des « diplômés » quand ils ne sont pas au pouvoir, qu’ils ne veulent pas se protéger ...  
 “Tuer les justes, puisque les injustes se calfeutrent, s’abritent, continuent à engranger leurs profits. Viser celui qui parle, qui dit « je », qui émet un avis ; qui croit défendre la démocratie. Abattre celui qui se situe sur le passage : de la pluralité de langues, de styles de vie, celui qui se tient en marge, celui qui marche, insoucieux de lui-même ou inventant chaque jour sa personnelle vérité” (1995: 238).
  - 8 Antjie Krog (2001) considers the importance of music and poetry for women in African cultural contexts who are traditionally tasked with the role of transmitting culture.
  - 9 “ce serait garder au-dessus de sa tête, planant et placide, une lune pleine. ... Les nuits de pleine lune ne sont jamais rives de la mort, mais fontaines de l’espoir” (1995 : 263).
  - 10 “Où êtes-vous donc, hommes d’Algérie, où vous trouvez-vous donc, Alors qu’Oran a perdu son lion, sa poutre maîtresse !  
 Où êtes-vous donc tandis que les meilleurs fils de l’Algérie tombent?” (1995: 89).
  - 11 “voulant aviver, ou plutôt apaiser sa peine en tentant de s’en délivrer, se révolte, sa colère se zèbre d’un mépris désespéré” (1995: 89).

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