


## Oppression of Women in Assia Djébar's *So Vast The Prison*

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### Abstract

In *So Vast the Prison* (1995), Assia Djébar examines whether deliverance from the oppression of patriarchy is possible for women and by which means it can be achieved. The title of the novel suggests that a country shaped by colonialism and patriarchy is one vast prison. The power of conservative (patriarchal) ideology is manifested in almost every aspect of women's lives. The novel is written in the form of a journey. In this sense, the novel can be read as a quest narrative and the movement from one place to another also corresponds to movement from one language to another. The female narrator blends her personal story with the collective history of Algerian women. She is torn between her desire to live the liberated life of a modern woman and life dictated by traditional Islamic mores. Djébar associates the adoption of the colonialist's language with a form of death. French, the paternal language of the narrator, is a gateway to freedom in the social world - yet it is the language of colonial authority. It severs the narrator's ties with her maternal tongue which is Arabic. In order to find her true identity, she has to reach out to her ancestors in her maternal tongue. In the light of these observations, the aim of this article is to critically examine the oppression of women as portrayed in *So Vast the Prison*.

**Keywords:** Assia Djébar, *So Vast the Prison*, colonialism, language, oppression.

## Assia Djébar'ın *Uçsuz Bucaksız Hapishane* İsimli Eserinde Kadınların Uğradığı Zulüm

### Öz

Cezayirli yazar Assia Djébar, *Uçsuz Bucaksız Hapishane* (1995) isimli eserinde, ataerkil düzenin zulmünden kurtulmanın kadınlar için mümkün olup olmadığını ve hangi yöntemlerle mümkün olabileceğini inceler. Romanın başlığı sömürgecilik ve ataerkil düzenin şekillendirdiği bir ülkenin uçsuz bucaksız bir hapishane olduğunu ima eder. Muhafazakar (ataerkil) ideolojinin gücü, kadınların hayatının pekçok boyutunda kendini gösterir. Roman bir yolculuğu anlatır. Bu anlamda bir arayış anlatısı olarak da okunabilir ve bir yerden diğerine olan yolculuk aynı zamanda bir dilden diğerine geçişe tekabül eder. Kadın anlatıcı kendi şahsi hikayesini Cezayirli kadınların kollektif hikayesiyle harmanlar. Modern bir kadın olarak özgürce yaşama arzusu ve geleneksel İslami kuralların dikte ettiği yaşam arasında bölünmüştür. Diğer yandan Djébar, sömürgecinin dilini benimsemeyi bir çeşit ölüm ile özdeşleştirir. Baba dili olan Fransızca sosyal hayatta özgürlüğe açılan bir kapı olsa da aynı zamanda sömürgeci otoritesinin dilidir ve anlatıcının anadili olan Arapçayla bağlarını koparır. Anlatıcının gerçek kimliğini bulmak için atalarına anadilini kullanarak ulaşması gerekmektedir. Bu gözlemler ışığında, bu makalenin amacı *Uçsuz Bucaksız Hapishane* isimli eserde yansıtıldığı şekilde kadınların gördüğü zulmü eleştirel olarak incelemektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Assia Djébar, *Uçsuz Bucaksız Hapishane*, sömürgecilik, dil, zulüm.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: IN THE GRIPS OF COLONIALISM AND PATRIARCHY

Published in 1995, Assia Djebar's *So Vast the Prison* examines the life of women under the double oppression of French colonial rule and conservative social forces in Algeria. It is significant that Djebar associates the adoption of the colonialist's language with a form of death. French, the paternal language of the narrator, is a gateway to freedom in the social world - yet it is the language of colonial authority. It severs the narrator's ties with her maternal tongue which is Arabic. In order to find her true identity, she has to reach out to her ancestors in her maternal tongue.

On another level, the novel foregrounds the quest for the deliverance of the female voice. It is written in the form of a journey. In this sense the novel can be read as a quest narrative and the movement from one place to another also corresponds to movement from one language to another. It is important to remember that social mobility was not something that the Algerian woman could take for granted. The female narrator blends her personal story with the collective history of Algerian women. She is torn between her desire to live the liberated life of a modern woman and life dictated by traditional Islamic mores. Even at the start of the twenty-first century, Algerian women's search for deliverance from oppression still continues.

In *So Vast the Prison*, Djebar examines whether deliverance from the oppression of patriarchy is possible and by which means it can be achieved. The title suggests that a country shaped by colonialism and patriarchy is one vast prison from which there is no easy way out. The power of conservative (patriarchal) ideology is manifest in almost every aspect of women's lives. Djebar successfully explores the implications of this situation by using the analogy of the prison.

Blurring the boundaries of autobiography, fiction and history, Assia Djebar writes about the repressive conditions in Algeria. Her books explore the struggle for women's emancipation and the difficulties of living as a woman in a deeply patriarchal and religiously conservative country. As Lazarus observes "*130 years of colonialism in Algeria, followed by eight years of Algerian revolution and the long civil war has left its scars on a nation still struggling to find its political identity*" (2010: 1). The ongoing social and political turmoil in the country has made it even more difficult for women to find their voice and claim their place in such a chaotic environment.

Algeria was a French colony for 130 years **until** 1962 when the country declared its independence. During the revolution women contributed to the struggle as workers, spies and nurses. "After the F.L.U became the governing political party, during the Rule of Ahmed Bin Bella, women gained a lot of rights such as the vote and the right to hold a political office. The political, economic, social and cultural rights of Algerian women were guaranteed by the constitution" (Lazarus 2010:12). Later, in 1984, the ruling president Chadli Benjadid, passed a family code based on the Islamic sharia law. With the acceptance of the sharia code, the "*female legal status declined to that of minors. A woman could get the custody of a child but could not take her out of the country and polygamy became legal for Algerian men*" (Lazarus 2010: 3).

In her novel, Djebar tries to examine whether there is a way out of the oppressive patriarchal system. The book is divided into four sections; each part very different from the others. In the introduction part of her book, Djebar recounts an incident which took place when she visited the hammam with her mother in law. The hammam is depicted as a female space where women enjoy a sense of freedom in the absence of the male gaze. There, her

mother in law encounters an acquaintance with whom she wants to have a lengthy conversation. But the lady is in a hurry, when asked if she can not spare another fifteen minutes, her face darkens and she answers: *"I can not possibly stay later today. The enemy is at home"* (Djébar 1999: 13). *"l'édoue"* means enemy, when Djébar says that the lady looks quite happy, mother-in-law smiles and says: *"Her husband is no different from any other husband, 'Enemy' is just a manner of speaking. Women, as I said before, have called them that for ages.... without the men knowing it of course"* (Djébar 1999: 14).

The first part titled *"What is Erased in the Heart"* relates the story of Isma who tries to challenge the patriarchal system by finding a lover. He is roughly ten years younger than her and a platonic relationship starts between the two. This affair will be like a resurrection for Isma. She imagines her relationship with *"Aimee"* in a distant past childhood, a realm of innocence, a garden of Eden where there was no segregation. But she is sharply brought back to the present. Aimee represents a different kind of masculinity that will allow the protagonist to find a *sortie* from the confines of patriarchy.

Djébar's view of the beloved also reverses the *"gaze"*. In this part of the novel, the narrator is controlling the gaze by verifying the existence of *"the beloved."* She observes: *"I was seized by a violent convulsion to verify his existence in the original and almost that very instant with my own eyes"* (Djébar 1999: 30). The lamentations of relatives and ancestors mix with the voice of the narrator: *"Blood in my writing? Not yet, but voice? Every night my voice leaves me. As I awaken the sickly sweet suffocations of aunts and girl cousins that I a little girl, glimpsed and did not understand. Wide eyed, I contemplated them, and later was able to picture them again and finally understand"* (Djébar 1999: 348).

At first, she thinks of him as a paternal cousin, but then thinking of the patriarchal legacy laws where all property belongs to the paternal line, she prefers to think of him as a maternal cousin. Isma had long ceased to love her husband and felt alienated from him. She observes: *"I watched my husband, we were no longer a couple, just two old friends who no longer knew how to talk to each other"* (Djébar 1999: 50). She feels as if Aimé has taken her to a new world. Her husband tries to keep her by resorting to violence but he fails to do so. He finishes a bottle of whisky and asks her to speak and finally she confesses her feelings for her lover. The narrator observes: *"first he insulted. Then he struck. Protect my eyes. Because his frenzy was proving to be strange. He intended to blind me"* (Djébar 1999: 85). However, thinking of her wifely duties, she decides to return to her husband in the end and feels as if she is back in the *"prison"*. As Isma's story illustrates, it is very difficult for women to declare their freedom from oppression. Even when they try, they are - more often than not - crushed by forces beyond their control.

## 2. THE BURDENS OF HISTORY

The second part of the book tells the story of a historical quest to find a script that has been erased from the stone, from memory. Djébar believes that she has lost her mother tongue and starts looking for an inscription belonging to Tuareg society which was matrilineal. Women were central to this society given that nobility was passed down through the women of the tribe. Thomas D'Arcos was born in 1565 near Marseille, and was captured by Turks in 1628. After putting aside enough money to pay his ransom he did not return to Marseille but settled in **Tunisia**. In the autumn of 1631, he participated in an expedition in Dougga. At the center of a vast plain, he discovered a mausoleum. On two sides of it there were inscriptions in two different letters. Thomas copied these meticulously,

but who would be able to decipher them? A Moronite, Abraham Echellen, an expert in oriental languages, examined these inscriptions but could not read them. He decided to take them to **the** Vatican with him and for two centuries they lay there in the Vatican archives. The Borgias in the 19th century and other travellers in the twentieth century were able to decipher these texts, proving that they were written in the lost language of Tuaregs, the Barber language. (Djebar, 1999: 129) The importance of French, which had become the adopted language of Algerians during colonial rule is stressed throughout the book. According to Fanon: *“Still on the level of communication, attention must be called to the acquisition of new values by the French language. The French language, a language of occupation, a vehicle of the oppressing power, seemed doomed for eternity to judge the Algerian in a pejorative way. Every French speech heard was an order, a threat, an insult”* (1965: 73). As Fanon suggests, taking on a new language means taking on a new worldview. In this sense, the language of the colonial power is employed in the service of colonial rule and further consolidates its hold over the subject people. There is, in other words, no possibility for true independence as long as the minds are controlled by the colonialist’s “tongue”.

The discovery of the new language, though matriarchal in origin, does not bring liberation to the narrator from the confines of the patriarchal language because Barber has been transferrable only orally. Since it had eventually become a lost language, the narrator is once more exiled from it. In part two, the subjective voice of the narrator disappears for the benefit of the historical account. Just before the end of the second part, the narrator mentions an alphabet introduced by Tin Hannem. The narrator dreams of an alphabet that Tin Hannem had given to the care of his friends just prior to her death. All in all, the second part suggests that for a language to be preserved and not buried in oblivion, it has to be written and transferrable.

How is it possible to write an objective historical account of Algeria? For Djebar, there are major obstacles that impede the accomplishment of this **goal**. Flores observes that although Djebar wants to write Algerian colonial history, the only texts she can refer to are the French texts. In her words: *“Assia Djebar’s use of history in So Vast the Prison articulates not the Algerian history one may anticipate but the effect of an inescapability of the narrator’s French subjectivity in recounting it”* (Flores 2000: 236). Thus, Djebar can not deny that French literary discourse was instrumental in her access to her ancestors (Flores 2000: 236). The difficulty Djebar has to face is how to write about the history or identity of Algerians who speak French. While it is undeniable that the language of the colonizer is an imposition on the natives and a violation of their rights, it is impossible to ignore the significance of French as it has become part of Algeria’s colonial history and of postcolonial Algerian subjectivity.

### 3. LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

In part three titled “Silent Desire”, Djebar recounts tales of suffering women she had come to know. This is also the longest part of the book in which the narrator flies into *“temporal, spatial spaces filled with the ululations of yesterday and today”* (Drissi 2005: 7). The individual voice of the narrator and the collective voice of women are intermingled.

Djebar begins part three with the story of Zoraide from *Don Quixote*. Zoraide frees a slave and then runs away. Djebar observes, *“Zoraide’s story is indeed the metaphor for Algerian women writing today, among them myself”* (Djebar 1999: 173). Because Djebar cannot understand barber, her maternal language, she feels like an alien, stripped of her wealth like Zoraide. She observes: *“Like Zoraide stripped. Like her, I have lost the wealth I began with - in my*

case, my maternal heritage - and I have gained only the simple mobility of the bare body, only freedom. A fugitive therefore, without knowing it. Because knowing this too well would make me silent, and the ink of my writing would dry too soon" (Djebar 1999: 177). Each language embodies a world and each lost language is another lost world. Since human beings express themselves in and through language, it is an integral part of their identity. Loss or lack of connection with one's native tongue inevitably entails the loss of connection with one's true self which could further pave the way for painful negotiations of identity.

The third part of the book is in seven movements. In this part, "Djebar reverses the gaze; the women look back through the veil, through a slit, at those who assume objectification, concealment" (Hitchcock 2009: 237). This section also tells of the author's cinematic quest. Djebar uses her film making experience to give voice and visibility to all Algerian women. On the other hand, this section also includes her grandmother's story. Grandmother Fatima was given to Soliman, at least age 60. Soon after they get married Soliman dies and Fatima goes up to the mountain with her daughters. The matrilineal line extends to Bahia her youngest daughter. Typhoid strikes and Cherifa, the eldest daughter dies. Amongst the rising lamentations, Cherifa's cousin speaks to the city dwellers: "So vast is prison crushing me. Release, where will you come from?" (Djebar 1999: 243). Sometimes the stories of the Arable women are merged with the narrator's reflections.

After the sixth movement, the text returns to the first movement and the reader encounters Isma once again. This time she is divorced and has resumed her search of Arable woman. In this section, autobiography and history are intermingled. Isma can not get pregnant again. She wrote about so many births but could not have children herself. She thinks of her daughter in 1988. Isma tries to reunite with her daughter like Djebar did with hers in Algiers.

Djebar discovers that language and cries of women are a strong weapon against the domination of the patriarchal system. Djebar writes: "I write to reveal a path for myself. it is in a language described as foreign that I become more and more disloyal. Having lost my maternal heritage and having gained what? If not freedom, then the simple mobility of the body stripped bare" (Djebar 1999: 172). Writing is a movement toward breaking out of the prison. It is at the same time a strategic vehicle the writer utilizes in the process of self-fashioning and in telling of the exile and migration of culture.

The importance of language as a means of both control and resistance is examined by Fanon in his *A Dying Colonialism*. Fanon observes:

*the advocates of integration, for their part, here saw a new opportunity, to promote a "French Algeria" by making the occupier's language the sole practical means of communication available to Kabyles, Arabs, Chaouias, Mozabites, etc. This thesis, on the level of language, went back to the very basis of colonialism as the intervention of the foreign nation that puts order into the original anarchy of the colonized country. Under these conditions, the French language, the language of the occupier, was given the role of Logos with ontological implications within the Algerian society. (1965: 75)*

Djebar also introduces the reader to a magical universe and leads them to a realm where - in the words of Ahnouch - they can dream of the "past prosperity, of the culture of the past civilizations and culture of Mediterranean and also directing their minds toward the ruptures, the losses, and the destructions which characterized the regions" (Ahnouch 1996: 795). Archaeology for the author is a means of decoding the Mediterranean culture and historical traces (Assia Djebar. *The Song of Writing* 796 **works cited da yok**). In her attempt to unearth

her country's ancestral heritage, Djébar brings it back to life, thereby enabling the people of her country to rediscover and reconnect with their roots.

In this section, Djébar mixes history with the arts and literature. Delacroix, who stayed shortly in Algiers in 1832, later painted "The Women of Algiers in their Apartment". Djébar also writes about Flaubert who was fascinated with Constantina and Carthage twenty years after it was colonized by the French in 1837. In addition, Djébar tells of the statue of a foreign woman which is found in the ruins and interests Sir Temple and Falbe: "*These men are only concerned with her, the unknown woman whose face has been eroded "real or mythical" beautiful unknown timeless pagan, preserved with a that has been eroded by the centuries, foreshadowing for them what if not destruction from now on"* (Djébar 1999: 141).

As Ahnouch observes: "*Djébar thus bestows cultural identity upon words and language, inviting her readers whether they speak the language of Berbers, Arabs or French, **to come together all Mediterranean**, in an intercultural linguistic space, made up of voices, rather than languages"* (Ahnouch 1996: 796). Djébar recalls the original languages of her ancestors, Berber or Arab and feels exiled from her ancestors because of the language barrier. The novel reflects Djébar's search for the open space that will be created through language and writing. Only after such space is created will women enjoy freedom.

In this part of the book, Djébar recounts the tales of her ancestors, her grandmother, Fatima and her life. The little girls are mentioned as veiled in many communities. Frantz Fanon considers this practice to be a reaction to the dominance of the colonizers. "*To the colonialist offensive against the veil, the colonized opposes the cult of the veil... the attitude of a given Algerian woman with respect to the veil, will be constantly related to her overall attitude with respect to the foreign occupation"* (Fanon 1965: 33). Ironically, the practice of veiling that renders women invisible was also utilized by them as a strategic tool of resistance against the oppressors. Thus the third part also reflects the author's attitude towards the gaze. In the words of Fanon: "*The woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer. There is no reciprocity. The Algerian has an attitude towards the Algerian woman which is on the whole clear. He does not see her; she does not yield herself, does not give herself"* (1965: 26).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Djébar believes that despite their differences, women should try to connect because that is the only way by means of which they can form a meaningful force against the oppressive force of patriarchy. However, visions of unity are continuously threatened by fragmentation. Djébar associates language with death and like Fanon she sees a strong connection between the land and women (Faulkner 1996: 847). According to Ringrose, the association with death is made because of the relationship between the present time of writing and the past recounted by the writing (2006: 101). Ringrose observes: "*writing for Djébar occupies the blind groping for the past"* (2006: 102). Writing is active and the past passive. For Djébar writing about her ancestors is sad and painful. In her words: "*The faint murmur of ancestors, the ululations of lament from veiled shadows floating along the horizon- while my hand races on"* (1999: 11-12). In brief, Djébar is both a part of her home culture and (mainly due to her French schooling) alienated from it. As a result, she is a torn individual who is constantly negotiating the ways in which she can articulate a more authentic self.

The last section, "The Blood of Writing" takes the reader back to the present day when she can witness the suffering of Algerian women in the present. It recounts the story of Jasmine, a young proof reader for a local newspaper whose body is found in a ditch. A few

days before that, she was with her family and she told them that she could not live outside Algeria. Jasmin wanders through Algeria with a Polish friend. They are approached by terrorists disguised as policemen. Jasmine tries to save her friend and succeeds but is found dead the next day, her body mutilated and thrown into a ditch. "This was her decision and the outcome was death and blood", the author asks: "what can we call you now Algeria?" (Djébar 1999: 356).

As I have argued throughout, the theme of liberation is one of the key themes in Djébar's novels. Djébar's own lifestyle enabled her to explore this issue more deeply. As a child, the author went to a Koranic school in the afternoons but to a French school in the mornings because her father was a teacher there. Because of her own family upbringing, she was not forced to wear the veil like her aunts and relatives. Her ambivalent position allowed her to write in a unique way about an Algerian woman's fight for freedom informed by her own experiences.

Prisons are frequently depicted as places of confinement where people suffer, feel pain and often lose their lives. In *So Vast the Prison*, Djébar recounts how her mother once visited her son, Selim in the prison. She remembers how the wardens and prison officers stared at her, thinking her too well dressed for a Moorish woman. She could also speak French now without an accent. For Djébar her ancestors are very important; she always feels their presence. "We think the dead are absent, but transformed into witnesses they want to write through us. The dead alone are the ones who want to write, and with the utmost urgency as we like to say" (Djébar 1999: 357).

All in all, *So Vast the Prison* provides important insights into Djébar's feminism. It is important to note that Djébar doesn't completely reject the Islamic tradition and she does not completely accept a feminine language. What she advocates is for the women from different regions of the world to unite and find common goals instead of focusing on their differences. Only then can they strongly resist the patriarchal system. I believe it would be appropriate to conclude with Jane Hiddleston's words: "For Djébar' Women's resistance consists of a continual process of convergence and divergence, solidarity and dissociation. *So Vast the Prison* modulates between these contrasting movements" (2004: 91).

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