

# Salima Ghezali: The Quintessence of Subversive Creativity

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## I. Introduction

“Salima Ghezali is a subversive woman”. This is how the Algerian regime considers this teacher-turned-journalist, women’s rights activist and novelist, and a winner of a string of human rights awards. In her works of fiction and non-fiction as well as her radio shows, this Francophone writer has questioned the legitimacy of the Algerian postcolonial state and has reacted to the current state of political violence by taking up the pen in order to bear witness to the affliction of the Algerian people. Her ultimate intention is to depict the Algerian civil crisis (1992-1999) to a French-language reading public both at home and abroad, as well as to document, for future generations, the impact of this civil war on women in post-independence Algeria.

In the 1990s, political violence in Algeria has certainly added a layer of brutality to the domestic and institutional violence directed against women. And Algerian writers who lived to tell the tale are tormented by the woeful socio-political situation. They feel compelled to couch it on paper and pay homage to those who have been murdered. Similarly to Assia Djebar, *Vaste est la prison* (1995), and Tahar Ouetta, *Le pêcheur et le palais* (1986), Salima Ghezali reveals the autocratic nature of the Algerian regime and how it is inimical to the emancipation of Algerians.

In *Les amants de Shahrazade* (1999), Ghezali challenges the discourse of nationalism and patriarchy. This essay aims at showing how this woman writer uses her activism to problematize Algerian post-independence history. It also underscores the way Ghezali reveals Algerian women as the mythical Shahrazade, “surviving, remembering, and negotiating the impossible choices between destructive patriarchies of a military government and [its] “fundamentalist” rebels” (Ireland, 2001, p. 172).

1. Hisham Sharabi (1988) has coined the term “neo-patriarchal state”. It perfectly illustrates the nature of the Algerian state. According to Sharabi, unlike liberal or social democratic societies, in the “neo-patriarchal state”, the ruler, state, or ruling party plays the role of the patriarch.

It has to be mentioned right from the outset that despotic and “neopatriarchal” states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are by definition detrimental to democratic governance and are a serious impediment to women’s political participation.<sup>1</sup> In these circumstances, Algerian women, and Algerian men too, have lacked a political environment that is favorable to the expression of their legitimate claims. This is a corollary of the governance structures in postcolonial Algeria which have been in their fundamental nature undemocratic and *clientéliste*. The military-backed Algerian republican state is and has always been “exclusivist and [has] relied [heavily] on a

narrow set of ties based on kin or client relations, thus excluding broad participation in political institutions” (Brumberg, 2002, p. 58).

In an unprecedented across-the-board government reshuffle in May 2002, the Algerian powers that be, appointed five women to President Bouteflika’s cabinet. This is an unparalleled decision in post-independence Algeria. Be that as it may, I have to indicate that if in some liberal democracies such appointments may reflect women’s accomplishments and the government’s appreciation of women’s contributions to development and modernization, in Algeria, they are but a smoke screen of a democratic façade. They are but a form of “pay hush money” to those women who took an active part in the struggle against “Islamism and terrorism”. As the feminist scholar and activist Valentine Moghadam (2008) has rightly observed, these women’s nomination to government positions is essentially a form of tokenism. Therefore, how do feminist activists such as Salima Ghezali engage with a state that is despotic, *clientéliste*, and nepotistic?

At first, I have to point out that the push for women’s emancipation stems mostly from the educated segments of the Algerian society. In a nutshell, for the most part, those women with a college education have been active in creating magazines and associations, as well as challenging the status quo. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to examine the way Salima Ghezali, as an academic and a women’s rights campaigner, has channeled her creativity into activism, and how she strives to combat oppression, abuse, and violence. Moreover, the essay attempts to examine how in laying emphasis on literature’s nexus to its matrix, i.e., the Algerian society, Ghezali has managed to flesh out a progressive vision for the future that empowers men and women and gives them a voice to make claims on the Algerian powers that be for legitimate rights and genuine political participation.

The main body of the essay comes in five sections. In the Introduction, I lay the foundation of the essay which revolves around the authoritarian nature of governance structures in postcolonial Algeria, women’s limited political participation, and the action/reaction of state-independent women’s rights groups and women activists such as Salima Ghezali. In the section “Background and History”, I highlight Ghezali’s ideological and professional background and draw attention to her activism during the “1988-1991 democratic break”.<sup>2</sup> During the civil war, Ghezali has been a committed campaigner for human rights and democracy in Algeria and this led to conflict with the authorities and the Armed Islamic Groups (known under the French acronym GIA). She stood against censorship, extrajudicial executions, and demanded freedom of expression for all. As the editor-in-chief of *La Nation*, the most widely read French language weekly in Algeria, she advocated political dialogue for all sides in the war.

In the section titled “Salima Ghezali and the Mythical Shahrazade”, I bring to light the “provocative feminity” (Miquel, Ben Cheikh & Brémond, 1991), and the intertextuality of Ghezali’s novel and the *Arabian Nights*. If Shahrazade, in the *Arabian Nights*, intercedes in favor of women to save them from man’s subjugation and brutality as represented by King Shahrayar and hence saving all humanity from a programmed annihilation, Ghezali is driven by her belief that her activism, creative writing, the press, and the arts in general, can achieve peace and progress.

2. On October 5, 1988, thousands of youth took to the streets destroying the symbols of state authority. Consequently, the system drafted a new constitution in 1989, and legalized political pluralism. Algerians enjoyed some freedom until the aborted legislative elections in December 1991, and the subsequent coup d’état.

In “Disenchantment, Political Violence, and Bitterness”, I examine, in light of Frantz Fanon’s work *Les damnés de la terre* (1961), how Ghezali’s novel, *Les amants de Shahrazade*, explores the current political violence as a repercussion of the chaos generated by the disenchantment and bitterness of the post-independence period. To be exact, there is violence because memory is blocked and events and responsibilities are muddled. And in my conclusion, I lay emphasis on Ghezali’s artistic work and activism which critique and condemn human rights abuses and political marginalization, and expose the criminal nature of the Algerian regime.

## II. Background and History

As I have noted elsewhere, Salima Ghezali is a prominent trade unionist and feminist whose courageous journalism keeps her in almost constant danger (Cheref, 2006). Yet one has to bear in mind that Ghezali was brought up in an atmosphere of revolutionary idealism initiated by the generation of women who fought in the Algerian Liberation War against France (1954-1962). These women incited schoolgirls during the 1960s to envision a future where marriage/motherhood is not the ultimate goal; and believed Algerian women’s rights would progress with democracy. In an interview, she affirms: “when I was young it was the end of the war and I grew up with this idea that we would succeed in making our country free”, she says. “That’s why, ever since I can remember I was always involved in politics” (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 10).

While she was trained to become a teacher, Ghezali was a student organizer. Then she worked in the trade union movement before taking on an active role in the women’s movement by founding the Association for Women’s Emancipation in 1988. She was also among the founding members of Women of Europe and the Maghreb, of which she is vice-president. During the “1988-1991 democratic break” she was the editor-in-chief of *Nissa*, a women’s magazine she herself had founded in 1991. Although this magazine ran features on conformist subjects such as home economics, beauty, fashion, and health, Ghezali says it “expressed a feminist point of view” and “encouraged women to think about their lives in radically different ways” (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 12). When *Nissa* ran into financial problems, she joined *La Nation* as a columnist. “I had this special page and it was a big success because I wrote in a subversive way about the problems of today and compared them with what we had lived through during the War of Liberation” (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 13).

Ghezali is known for both her feminist activism and journalistic bravery. She constantly condemns the authorities’ attacks on freedom of expression, human rights, and the grassroots opposition. In a country where more than sixty journalists and media workers have been killed since 1992, Ghezali was asked in 1993 to become the editor-in-chief of the leading Algerian French-language weekly *La Nation* when it resumed publishing after a four-month shutdown by the government. This made her perhaps the only woman responsible for a newspaper in the Arab-Islamic world (Cheref, 2006).

On April 25, 1996, the European Parliament’s Subcommittee on Human Rights organized a hearing on press and media freedom. Ghezali’s testimony revealed the atrocities of the Algerian civil war, in which more than 200,000 people, including no fewer than 59 journalists, were murdered. She also spoke about pervasive censorship and the fear felt by and the restrictions imposed on the independent media. But she

made it clear that their paramount objective should be to carry on reporting the truth about the atrocities.

After the authorities temporarily shut down *La Nation* on numerous occasions, it was banned for good in 1996 as a retaliatory measure to the publication in *Le Monde Diplomatique* of an article written by Ghezali on human rights abuses in Algeria. In fact, *La Nation* compiled a *dossier* on the regime's alleged connivance in disappearances, extra-judicial executions, car bombs, and massacres of civilians (Cheref, 2004). It also gave minute details of incarceration camps for Islamist and secularist dissidents. The Interior Ministry responded by seizing the March 4, 1996 issue of *La Nation* containing the *dossier*.

Ghezali was arrested and detained for refusing to comply with government censorship. Her arrest indubitably shows the merit of this women's rights activist who swiftly turned into a committed campaigner for human rights and democracy in Algeria. As editor-in-chief of *La Nation*, she has put her life in the line of fire to protest against the political violence and chaos into which Algeria has been plunged since the 1992 coup d'état by the Generals. Ghezali's articles relentlessly highlighted the necessity for a peaceful and democratic solution to the crisis in Algeria. In one of her interviews she affirmed:

There are a lot of executions of civilians, and women have been raped and killed. The authorities use these violations against women for propaganda purposes, ... But the authorities commit their own very grave violations against the people, against women, against men - and these have never been denounced. (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 6)

As a rule, the Algerian state-owned press serves the interests of the regime. Ever since the independence of the country, the media has been a vehicle for misinformation and propaganda. The entire "public press" hysteria during the 1992 post-coup and the ensuing civil war is a vivid example of the state-sponsored media choosing to be an instrument in the hand of the system, rather than questioning the validity of its agenda. Nevertheless, Ghezali audaciously and regularly revealed the abusive and criminal nature of the Algerian *Nomenklatura* and exposed their "war on terror". She had problems with both sides in the conflict. While the public press promptly reports the atrocities committed by the GIA, *La Nation* has been the only paper in documenting and denouncing the regime's own brand of terrorism. The system could not stomach the reports of *La Nation*, especially the articles signed by Ghezali, Abed Cheref, and Youcef Zirem.

"*Choisir son camp, c'est simplement choisir ses victimes*", (i.e. when you choose a side, you choose your victims)<sup>3</sup>, Ghezali declares in an interview (Kerchouche, 1995, ¶ 2). She has made it quite clear that all sides are to blame, but in 1992 the Government "made a clear choice for violence to control society" (Van der Gaag, 2001, ¶ 5). She adds, "Now, the Government doesn't know any other way to rule, and too many people are caught up in the violence or too frightened to speak out" (Van der Gaag, 2001, ¶ 6). For Ghezali, "to be a journalist, to be an editor-in-chief, particularly when we condemn violence on both sides, needs some strength and I think I've got it" (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 2). "Courage is needed to perform the difficult balancing act of finding ways and means of circumventing censorship and escaping your opponent's deadly anger".<sup>4</sup> Ghezali continues to incriminate

3. All translations are the author's.

4. Retrieved December 10, 2008, from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/afet/droi/sakharov/sach1997\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/comparl/afet/droi/sakharov/sach1997_en.pdf)

both government forces and the GIA and opposes any human rights violation and action which disregards women's rights. In 1996, she was distinguished as "Best Chief Editor" by the *World Press Review*, and in 1997, she was a recipient of the Sakharov Prize by The European Parliament. In 1998, she received the Olof Palme prize, and in 1999, she published her first novel, *Les amants de Shahrazade* (1999). At present, she writes, campaigns, and travels the world to defend the cause of peace in Algeria.

### III. Salima Ghezali and the Mythical Shahrazade

*Les amants de Shahrazade* unfolds with the muezzin's call for prayer. Right from the outset, we know that the narrative is situated in a Muslim country. It is nighttime, and an adult woman named Shahrazade – an obvious allusion to Shahrazade of *The Arabian Nights*, is unable to sleep. In contrast to her long-gone model, she is alone in her room and the night is a night of wartime:

*Shahrazade s'étira de tout son long. La nuit allait être rude et l'aube ne viendrait que lorsque quelque chose se serait accomplie. Il fallait faire provision de mémoire panoramique pour ne pas céder à l'irrésistible montée d'adrénaline furieuse. Pour tenir, elle avait besoin d'aimer (...) Aimer pour ne pas laisser la meute vous fracasser l'âme. (Ghezali, 1999, pp. 6-7)*

(i.e. Shahrazade stretched out her body. The night would be tough and dawn would only come when something would have happened. It was necessary to have ample memory in order not to yield to the irresistible and furious rise of adrenalin. To keep going, she needed to love ... to love in order not to let the crowd crush your soul).

If, in *The Arabian Nights*, Shahrazade's mission is to narrate night by night a new story to King Shahrayar in order to escape the fatal fate of all those who preceded her in the royal bed, Shahrazade, in Ghezali's novel, *Les amants de Shahrazade*, is glued to her TV set all day long. Her journey bears a resemblance to her own country: in the years of the "resurrection", i.e., right after independence in 1962, she teams up with a young man to form a nice couple of "*instituteurs aux pieds nus*" (i.e. barefoot school teachers.) Some time later, she is forced to let him down and get married with an army officer. "*Après la période militante, la période militaire*" (i.e. after the militant period, the military period!) (Ghezali, 1999, pp. 75-76).

These first pages of the novel represent a remarkable portrait of Shahrazade. She is depicted as a disoriented woman yet eager to comprehend the world; insatiable and demanding yet realistic. Having vainly sought some sleep, deliverance, and evasion through television, she falls back to daydreaming. She imagines her meeting beside the river with Salah. But annoyed by his arrogance and lack of understanding, Shahrazade ruthlessly confronts him, and compels him to see his inconsequentiality:

*T'aimer toi serait comme dresser sa couche nuptiale sur une tombe. Tu me demandes d'où vient ma cruauté et tu ne vois pas que c'est ta futilité qui l'inspire ! Nos enfants meurent et tuent dans la fureur et la haine, hommes et femmes se prostituent de Bagdad à Alger, partout règnent brutalité et imposture et tu voudrais que je t'aime, toi dont la cécité se double de forfanterie! (Ghezali, 1999, p. 56)*

(i.e. To love you would be like setting up one's matrimonial bed on a grave. You are asking me where my cruelty comes from and you do not see that it is inspired by your futility! Our children die and kill in fury and hatred; men and women prostitute themselves from Baghdad to Algiers. Brutality and imposture reign everywhere and you would like me to love you, you whose sightlessness is doubled up with vanity!)

If we take into account the opening chapter of *The Arabian Nights* and *Les amants de Shahrâzade*, Shahrâzade can only be a feminist, in the broad sense of the term. And it would be logical and understandable that Shahrâzade's subversive voice, attacked in its very socio-cultural milieu, would motivate others. She would also be a voice for the muzzled. According to the Algerian postcolonial scholar Djamel Eddine Ben Cheikh: "[Shahrâzade] is the sentinel of the place. She confronts death not to save her neck, but to preserve her ability to speak. Moreover, she does not represent women, but every living soul".<sup>5</sup> Significantly, the voice of Shahrâzade makes it possible for the "weaker sex" to be visible and to be heard in a society which has denied its existence. With her action/reaction, Shahrâzade stands against a manifest injustice and a prejudiced system. Concurring with André Miquel and Djamel Eddine Ben Cheikh, I believe this "provocative femininity" should serve as a blueprint and an effective art form for the masses, whether present or future:

*A qui veut bien aiguïser le regard, par delà l'absence de tout plaidoyer en règle, de toute déclaration abrupte, que sont Les Nuits, sinon un applaudissement sincère à ces femmes que Shahrâzade représente ? Le conte-cadre justifierait à lui seul une approche féministe des Nuits. Mais il y a plus que cette histoire : il y a toutes les autres, ici et là, où la femme mène le jeu, s'impose à l'attention, au regard, à l'estime, à l'amour même, par un comportement bien souvent supérieur à celui des mâles (...) Preuve d'un débat qui n'en finit pas de se poser, au moins en coulisse, dans une société où les hommes accaparent le devant de la scène. (Miquel, Ben Cheikh & Brémond, 1991, pp. 50-51)*

(i.e. To those who would like to hone their glimpse, beyond the absence of any appropriate plea, any hasty assertion, what are *The Arabian Nights* if not a genuine ovation to these women that Shahrâzade represents? The structure of the narrative would in itself justify a feminist approach to *The Arabian Nights*. But there is more than just this story: there are plenty of examples where woman is playing the game, and is perceived, glanced at, respected, and even loved, due to actions which often times are a cut above males' conduct ... Proof of a debate which is taking place, at least behind closed doors, in a society where men monopolize the limelight).

5. The original text in French "[Shahrâzade] est gardienne du lieu. Elle affronte la mort non pour sauver sa tête, mais pour garder la parole. D'ailleurs, elle ne représente pas les femmes mais tout être de désir".

As Shahrâzade in *The Arabian Nights* intercedes in favor of women to save them from men's subjugation and brutality as represented by Shahrâyar and hence saves all humanity from a programmed annihilation, Ghezali is driven by her belief that her activism, creative writing, the press, and the arts in general, can achieve peace and progress. In addition to fighting for democracy, freedom of the press, and human rights in Algeria, she has grown ever more concerned about how Western media pay more attention to suicide-bombers, flag-burners, and throat-slitters while overlooking the

effervescent debate within the Muslim world about its stance vis-à-vis women. As she argues, “the West’s most persistent image of an Arab woman is a body enveloped in black, her face veiled and her eyes downcast” (Wheelwright, 1998, ¶ 15). Ghezali finds this irksome.

#### IV. Disenchantment, Political Violence, and Bitterness

Toward the end of the 1980s, and as far as Arabophone and Francophone Algerian literature is concerned, one could note the emergence of several works which explored the salient events of the post-independence period.<sup>6</sup> But the escalation of violence in the country since 1992 brought to mind the effects of a previous violence, i.e., the violence of the Algerian Liberation War (1954–62). For most of these literary works, this violence is attributed to the absence of perspectives, i.e., memory is blocked and socio-political malaise is exacerbated by the rulers’ mismanagement and corruption. And as Arabophone and Francophone postcolonial literature is primarily interested in the intricate and ambiguous facets of Algerian society, I believe that Ghezali’s novel is a paradigm of this literary production.

Yet, the way the current violence is depicted brings back memories of other acts of violence. And this recollection has to be tackled with a cautionary note from Frantz Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la terre*:

*(...) Nos actes ne cessent jamais de nous poursuivre. Leur arrangement, leur mise en ordre, leur motivation peuvent parfaitement a posteriori se trouver profondément modifiés. Ce n’est pas l’un des moindres pièges que nous tend l’Histoire et ses multiples déterminations. Mais pouvons-nous échapper au vertige? Qui oserait prétendre que le vertige ne hante pas toute existence?*  
(Fanon, 1981, p. 203)

(i.e. Our acts would never stop haunting us. In hindsight, their arrangement, their succession, and their motivation may indeed be drastically modified. It is not merely a trap that History and its multiple determinations have set for us. But can we escape this instability? Who would dare to claim that instability does not haunt every existence?).

It should also be noted that *Les amants de Shéhérazade*, which is considered a major contribution to Francophone Maghrebi literature, shares similar concerns with other contemporary Algerian novelists such as Aïssa Khelladi (1998), Assia Djebar (2002), and Boualem Sansal (1999 & 2000). These works explore historical amnesia and dissect the current political violence as a repercussion of the chaos generated by the disenchantment and bitterness of the post-independence period. By no means do they challenge the legitimacy of the Algerian Liberation War but they question the nature of the regime that the struggle for independence has generated.

A case in point would be indeed Ghezali’s *Les amants de Shéhérazade*. We learn from this novel that some time before sunrise Shéhérazade closes her book. She has failed to find the dream lover who would help her carry the weight of the day which is cracking on the misfortunes of the unprivileged (Ghezali, 1999). She is also referred to in the text as “*un être-labyrinthe*” (i.e. a labyrinthine-being) faithful to the image of Algiers

6. See for example, Rachid Mimouni, 1982; Tahar Ouettar, 1984; Fettouma Touati, 1984; and Assia Djebar, 1985.

which can simultaneously or successively offer radiance or revulsion. She meditates, she thinks, and she remembers the assassination of Yasmina Drici. Yasmina was a friend and colleague of Salima Ghezali. In an interview, Ghezali stated: "Yasmina, worked for the evening daily, *Le Soir*. We were in college together. Just like me, she was a French teacher before becoming a journalist. We worked long years together. One day she was abducted, and killed in a horrible way, like so many others. You cannot count all the people we have lost during this war".<sup>7</sup> As Ghezali's *Shahrazade* is a reliable eyewitness of the 1990s political violence, her reminiscence is an echo of the same tragic incident reported by Assia Djebar in *Vaste est la Prison* (1995).<sup>8</sup>

If for the Algerian government the GIA were behind Yasmina's murder, I have to argue that Yasmina's ruthless murder suggests that the cruelty facing Algerian women who refuse to give in to silence and subordination is petrifying.<sup>9</sup> As Ghezali's stand for human rights has won her several prizes and awards, what she wants is action.

When we go to Europe and the United States, and we talk to politicians, they say they can do nothing. Nothing. They cannot interfere. But is it morally acceptable that thirty million Algerians are now asked to die in silence, to be tortured in silence, to kill themselves in silence, because the Algerian government refuses any international interference in its internal affairs? (Amnesty International, 1998, ¶ 16).

## V. Conclusion

*Crois-tu qu'elles songent à mourir là-bas, les jeunes femmes de chez nous ? Non je ne pense pas. Elles sont habitées d'une frénésie de vie que j'admire. Elles sont en lutte contre le temps, la misère, leurs coépouses. Elles ne pensent qu'à vivre, comme si elles venaient au monde chaque matin pour la première fois* (Zouari, 1999, p. 101).

(i.e. Do you think that the young women in our homeland wish to die there? No, I do not think so. They are suffused with a vital spark which I admire. They are constantly fighting time, misery, and their co-wives. They just think of being alive, as if each morning they come to the world for the first time).

Ghezali could very well have written the above-mentioned passage by the Tunisian woman novelist Fawzia Zouari. It shows that these "Shahrazades" have just one objective: they want to be visible and to be heard. But as Ghezali has pointed out, the autocratic nature of the Algerian regime and its despotic governance structures are inimical to the emancipation of Algerians. She believes that until the military-backed government accepts to have talks with all its opponents, whether Islamists or secularists, Algeria will spiral further into chaos. For the time being, her activism is unwavering. She is determined to publish as much of the truth as she can, and believes in the power of the press to bring about a much-needed change.

I have argued throughout this essay that Ghezali's "subversive" artistic work and activism is to denounce human rights abuses and political marginalization in Algeria. Literally, in *Les amants de Shahrazade*, Ghezali, like other Maghrebi women writers such as Assia Djebar, Ahlem Mosteghanemi, Khnata Bennouna, Leïla Abouzeid,

7. Retrieved December 10, 2008, from [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Salima\\_Ghezali](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Salima_Ghezali)

8. In *Vaste est la Prison*, Djebar contends with the 1990s civil war in chapter four, entitled "*Le sang de l'écriture*". She poignantly describes the assassination of Yasmina, a twenty-eight-year-old teacher of French and proofreader in *Le Soir d'Algérie*, a leftist Algerian daily.

9. This is the subject of an ongoing debate. See for instance, Mohammed Samraoui, 2003.



Hélé Béji, and Fawzia Zouari, has vividly depicted the deleterious and implacable atmosphere which brings about political chaos and hampers any human development. As in her articles or radio talk shows, in this first novel we may notice that, as a fiction writer, Ghezali is still the critical journalist with a sharp-witted insight. This first feminist novel is also an ode to love, sorrow, and revolt offered to a country and its victimized people.

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