

The Teacher as Performer and Activist in Assia Djébar's "*La femme en morceaux*"

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Francophone literature from the Maghreb has been characterized as *littérature d'urgence* by Maghrebian novelists and critics alike, a term that has also been used by Assia Djébar (Bonn & Boualit, 1999; Chaulet-Achour, 1998; Djébar & Trouillet, 2006). In Sartrian terms, it is a *littérature engagée*, writing that takes a political stance by addressing a variety of critical societal issues, including female oppression, patriarchy, education, religion, terrorism, mono-versus multi-linguism, and violence – in this case the murder of a French teacher in 1990s Algeria. In keeping with postcolonial theory, it is also a literature of resistance and rebellion by taking up the cause of Arab women writers, many of whom have fought to make themselves heard in what remain largely patriarchal societies that view women writers with suspicion (Ireland, 2001; Segarra, 1997; Morsly & Mernissi, 1994). I propose to explore the political, societal, and educational stances played out in "*La femme en morceaux*" (1996), a piece of Assia Djébar's collection of short stories titled *Oran, Langue Morte*. Set in postwar Algeria, the book presents itself as a "chronicle of shootings, fears and alarms" (Djébar, 2001, p. 245). Given its documentary spirit, Djébar feels personally invested in the project. While *Oran, Langue Morte* is fiction and clearly not a journalistic piece of writing it is a creative and curative set of texts that aim to honor the victims of violence. In that respect it helped the author come to terms with a nightmarish reality she, as many of her peers, were obliged to confront on a daily basis, every time they opened a newspaper. An estimated 80,000 to 120,000 of Algeria's 28 million citizens died in the civil war that started in 1992 and lasted throughout the decade (Aït-Larbi et al., 1999). In the 1990s, many French teachers were killed for daring to teach French in Algeria (Djébar and Trouillot, 2006). Often, the perpetrators remain unidentified and unpunished, as killings were not reported and largely ignored by the Algerian army, security forces, international media, and the international community at large. Among the victims were politicians, intellectuals, writers, musicians, journalists, foreigners, and ordinary Algerians. These massacres led to a mass exodus, as the Algerian government and army were unable to ensure the safety of the civilian population. It is in this socio-politically charged context that Djébar's volume of short stories *Oran, Langue Morte* originated.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, "*Algérie, entre désir et mort*", features four short stories and one fairy tale, "*La femme en morceaux*", which closes the first

part. The second part, “*Entre France et Algérie*”, comprises one *récit*, one short story, and a postscript, entitled “*Le sang ne sèche pas dans la langue*”. Nearly all of the texts refer to Algeria’s recent history, the Algerian War of Liberation, and post-colonial Algeria. The eponymous “*La femme en morceaux*” refers to the tale “The Three Apples”, told by Shahrazad in the *The Arabian Nights*. Set in mythic Baghdad, it tells the story of the discovery of the body of a dismembered young woman found in the city of Baghdad and the ensuing efforts of the caliph and his vizir to find and punish the assassin.¹

In this article, I aim to show that “*La femme en morceaux*” is a form of literary activism built on a number of platforms – feminist, political, educational, journalistic, sociological, and religious. Consequently, it is a fine example of both *littérature engagée* and *littérature d’urgence* as it analyzes contemporary Algeria through the art of storytelling and ingenious stylistic variations of writing, notably the use of a *mise-en-abyme* technique. Djebbar’s masterful use of *mise-en-abyme* – the continuity of Atyka’s lesson which alternates with the *mise-en-abyme* of the tale from *The Arabian Nights* is accompanied by stylistic change. While Djebbar makes ample use of poetry and symbolist imagery in the parts relating to the tale from *The Arabian Nights*, the frame story – Atyka’s story – is written in a more sober, journalistic style which befits 1990s Algeria. Djebbar, as a writer and a teacher, expresses her own investment in the story by highlighting the important function of the various storytellers – Shahrazad, Djaffar, Atyka, and the third-person narrator of Atyka’s story. The storytellers are truly powerful as they are able to invent stories that will please an omnipotent tyrant; they have the power to ensure their own survival thanks to their creativity and ingenuity.

The text has powerful, cinematographic qualities; by using a flashback technique to visit ancient Baghdad and the sliced up woman lying in an open coffin, and fast forwarding to twentieth century *Oran* to the murder of French teacher Atyka, and her severed, talking head continuing to lecture on the desk, it shows that cruelty against women continues to exist in our world and that this issue warrants discussion. The text culminates in a brutal scene, in which the reader’s eye is drawn to the teacher’s severed head, its mouth and its eyes, as if a camera zoomed in on it in close-up fashion, a technique that amplifies the impact created by the visual cruelty of the previously depicted sliced up woman in the tale of *The Arabian Nights*. The text is also striking in terms of its *worldliness* – the “... intellectual’s engagement with contemporary political realities and commitment to connecting the text to the world” (as cited in Mortimer, 2005, p. 57). I would add that the worldliness of Djebbar’s politically charged writing is greatly enhanced by its masterful narrative technique, as well as its lyrical and performative qualities. The text’s worldliness is reinforced by the intertwining of four stylistically distinct narratives, two of which are tales from *The Arabian Nights*: Shahrazad’s and Djaffar’s stories; set in ancient Baghdad they are lyrical, fictional, imaginary, and mythic. These stories are strangely echoed in two other narratives that refer to current events: Atyka’s story, that of a young teacher working in a *lycée* in 1994 Algiers, as well as that of “*La femme en morceaux*” as a whole, in the larger context of *Oran, Langue Morte*. Thus, Djebbar deploys a “contrapuntal” technique; she creates a mirror effect by pitting discourses against discourses. By placing Atyka’s narrative in counterpoint to the tale of the *The Arabian Nights*, Djebbar “calls attention to the need for women’s participation in public discourse, in politics and education, while acknowledging the dangers of a tradition of women’s silence” (Mortimer, 2005,

1. All subsequent citations from the short story are taken from its English language translation: Djebbar, A. (T. Raleigh, trans.) 2006.

p. 65). Beyond recounting a violent history in which the “female body constitutes the text, and beyond the obvious thematic of victimization, the text also raises the question of illicit listening and illicit speaking” (Zimra, 1999, p. 109). This is certainly true and it raises the question of whether Djébar would have been able to publish this collection with an Algerian publisher, rather than a French one. She might have deliberately chosen a French publisher in order to raise awareness in France for the dramatic situation in Algeria.

It is my contention that the text’s powerful force stems from its enriching and creative dialogism which underscores its uncompromisingly activist stance. In Djébar’s short story, the teacher and main character Atyka who herself is to become a dismembered woman discusses a tale from *The Arabian Nights* in which a female character suffers the same fate. However, given the fact that the frame story – Atyka’s story – is set in a twentieth century classroom in *Oran*, the story suggests that in 1990s Algeria women continue to be victimized and that their voices are all too often silenced. Within the narratives, the importance of speech/voice versus hearing/reception is highlighted by the short stories’ very last sentences, which address the issue of transmission. Though the woman has been killed, her death was not in vain, as her voice continues to be heard, as long as people mourn her death: “The body of the woman cut into pieces. The body, the head. But the voice? In the white city of today, so far from the Tigris, Omar hears the caliph Haroun el-Rachid weeping ceaselessly before the body of the woman in pieces” (p. 125). The *dénouement* stresses the importance of the transmission of voices from past to present as well as a reception across gender divides. In the end, the voice of the dismembered woman lives on and dialogue continues. Thus, the text engages the students – and readers – in an ongoing discussion about past and present, since it directly refers to the daily massacres that are shaking up Algeria in the 1990s. Readers and critics are thus invited to engage in a dialogue, to become active participants in the public debate on the need for a political, linguistic, and societal renewal of the country.

Interestingly, “*La femme en morceaux*” features oppositional literary devices: while the tale from *The Arabian Nights* stresses the art of storytelling by means of strong pictorial, visual, and lyrical qualities, Atyka’s story is set in a classroom; hence it is didactic and content-driven: it is essentially a routine five-lesson teaching unit, made up of lectures, readings, and discussions centered around the dismembered woman. Hence, it is essentially pedagogical, descriptive, dialogical, and performative. However, as the semester progresses, her lesson amplifies and takes on a truly theatrical, larger-than-life dimension, which culminates in a sacrificial bloodshed. To put it in Bakhtinian terms, the text’s dual, deliberately oppositional and intertwined narrative threads create a polyphony of voices, which give the text a particularly powerful activist force. “*La femme en morceaux*” is fiction, and yet it forces readers to open their eyes to the civil war-like situation of 1990s Algeria, which, as noted by other critics, is also reflected in a “war” within the couple: violence, patriarchy, the silencing of women, and sexual segregation (Chatelard, 1999; Callegruber, 2001). As francophone critic Clarisse Zimra has pointed out, the complexity of Djébar’s writing is partially due to a “conceptual fusion of viewers as readers and readers as viewers”, and I would add, spectators, as well as critics and writers, given the response and critical discussion her texts continue to provoke

(Zimra, 1999, p. 108). In “*La femme en morceaux*”, the deliberate blurring of past and present, fiction and fact, which eventually leads to fiction turning into reality, is troublesome. It raises the question of how it can be possible for such a horrible crime to happen at the turn of the twenty-first century. Why is it possible that educators whose job it is to teach, accompany and support their students as they become responsible adults, are massacred in front of their own classrooms? The *mise-en-abyme* of the dismembered woman – a victim’s story – is mediated by a peer, a young, freshly married woman, who herself becomes a victim of male and terrorist violence. Crucially, Atyka’s lesson and her own fate occur in a classroom setting. Thus, the teacher becomes an activist herself while her students – and, on the level of meta-narrative, the readers – witness cruelty unfold and become themselves part of a crime scene. By contrasting the stories of mutilated women’s bodies fictionally (and positing *The Arabian Nights* as a meta-text), as well as semi-fictionally – in the form of a short story which is essentially a fictionalized account of 1990s terrorist-struck Algeria – the narrative further raises the question whether the condition of women has really fundamentally changed over the centuries. At first glance, the text suggests that this is not the case, since both women die: the anonymous young wife and mother of three boys in the *The Arabian Nights* and Atyka. However, the striking image of the metonymic head of Atyka that finishes off the lesson, and by extension, the sheer survival of the tale and its century-long transmission, suggests that women’s issues have not fallen into oblivion. Quite the opposite, women’s stories continue to circulate and are discussed, in fiction, in the media, as well as in our classrooms.

In the tale from the *The Arabian Nights*, the young woman is weakened and tired after having given birth three times in the space of a few years. She is terrified at the thought that she might be expecting a fourth child. Atyka, on the other hand, has no children. She is newly married and we expect that she can empathize with the young woman in the tale. The text is activist in that it showcases female solidarity and bodily politics, the right of self-determination and independence in the case of Atyka, versus that of having to give birth in the tale. The choice of the textual *mise-en-abyme* – a highly lyrical episode taken from the time of the first caliph Haroun el-Rachid from *The Arabian Nights* – which contrasts with the more matter-of-fact journalistic account of a contemporary classroom lesson stylistically set off in italics – Atyka’s story – is a highly effective means of reaching a contemporary readership and raising awareness and empathy for oppressed women. Both the tale from *The Arabian Nights* and the “real-time” short story tell the same story, that of an innocent woman who is savagely dismembered. The *dénouement* of Atyka’s story, the close-up of her head and her moving lips finishing off the lesson is a powerful image. Through the metonymic images of Atyka’s mouth and her voice, her students watch and hear history repeat itself in front of their very eyes, and by extension, readers engage in a voyeuristic horror-show. On the level of meta-narrative, the narrator thus appears as a masterful puppeteer by setting the stage for a lyrical tale, which is cruelly echoed and played out in the classroom, which turns into a theater of cruelty. The text takes up gender issues on both levels of narration, as Atyka talks about the tragic fate of a woman to a classroom audience, which is made up of both girls and boys, while Shahrazad invents a male storyteller, Djaffar, who must tell stories in order to be spared execution.

Atyka's lesson is one of tolerance and open-mindedness. As Winifred Woodhull (2001) pertinently notes, "Djebar's narratives consistently promote a multilingual, palimpsestic society in the face of state-policy of enforced Arabization" (p. 25). Atyka is an Arab woman who is fluent in the Berber and the Arabic languages. Though she excels in Islamic exegesis, she chooses to become a French teacher. Thus, she embodies the model of a multilingual, tolerant, and open-minded woman. Her linguistic and cultural expertise allow her to engage in transculturalism; she is an intellectual traveler capable of crossing historical and geographical boundaries. As she tells her parents, her students' future does not lie in an enforced arabization, but in cultural and linguistic diversity. Consequently, students can decide whether they want to read *The Arabian Nights* in Arabic or in French translation. Beyond the issue of language, the narrative construct is further complicated by a female student's recitation of the following *hadith*: "As said by our prophet, may the grace of God be on Him: The best among the believers shall lead my people, even if it's a Sudanese slave! You see", she concludes in a soft voice, "Islam promotes equality" (p. 116). The *hadith* is used to prove that men and women are equal and at the same time places the narrative in a religious context that overshadows all other discourses (see Zimra 1999 for a discussion of this important aspect).

Desire, love, and jealousy in the tale from *The Arabian Nights*

The lyrical quality of the text lies in its symbolism and its imagery – the evocation of perfumes, exotic fruits, scents, such as that of orange flower blossoms, rosebushes, jasmine, as well as the insertion of a poem in the text itself:

O watcher of the star,
Be my boon companion,
And O wakeful spy on the lightning,
Be my nocturnal comrade! (p. 103)

This love poem expresses carnal desire; it is an imploration or invitation to a night of love and tenderness. In the context of the tale, it harks back to a happier, earlier time when the couple was madly in love and sexually active. At present, the young mother in the tale is sick, weakened by constant childbirth. Her husband is anxious to rekindle her desire, recalling the previous year, the time of conception of their third son. At the time, the young wife expressed her sexual desire through her craving for a red apple in the middle of winter – thus, she desired something quasi inaccessible. She was not afraid to express her desire: "I want apples! Golden apples and red apples. [...] I want to nibble on an apple before you nibble me tonight!" (p. 104). Red: color of blood, life, violence, and murder. The red apple is charged with meaning; it is a magical fruit, generally endowed with healing powers: giving life or youth (Lacoste-Dujardin, 1970). A symbol of life and renewal, the apple can heal sterility; it can also be thrown to designate a chosen spouse thus ensuring the continuity of life.² The apple also evokes the biblical story of the forbidden fruit and Eve and Adam's nakedness and banishment from the garden Eden after Eve tastes the forbidden fruit. In the present tale, the bitter and sweet apple carries an ambivalent meaning. The apple is meant to reinvigorate the weakened young woman, to revive her libido and entice her to produce more male offspring. From the young woman's perspective, it symbolizes sexual pleasure.

2. In the Moorish tale "The Apple of Youth" for instance, a king's daughter designates her spouse by throwing an apple at his chest, while the king experiences the magic, rejuvenating powers of the apple (Basset & Starkweather, 1901).

To make his wife happy, her husband decides to find her a red apple: “[...] He must buy her apples. As before” (p. 104). After crisscrossing the country for ten days, he finds three shiny, hard, beautifully shaped red apples in the town of Bassora, which he joyfully takes back to his wife. But his happiness is short-lived. The abrupt arrival of a harsh northern wind prefigures the imminent advent of a disaster in the shape of a black man: an elegant young man whom he assumes to be a eunuch employed by the caliph. He is described as “[...] a young black man with noble bearing – well proportioned and broad shouldered, with truly black, luminous skin, and delicate features” (p. 109). The clothes he wears are extremely bright, almost garish: “He was dressed in bold colors, with his head covered in green silk taffeta. A flamboyant headdress, angled rakishly over his wooly hair” (p. 109). The brightness of colors in the tale, which is set against a background of semi-tones – the young woman’s translucent skin, scents, perfumes, sounds, shades of light, and flowers – foreshadows the imminence of a dramatic turn of events. The symbolism of the bright and lavish clothes worn by the black man is reminiscent of that evoked by the apple: beautiful, shiny, luscious, rich, full of life and vigor – perfect and desirable. The black man holds a shiny apple in his hand and when asked who gave it to him, he makes up a story, which is half true, half fiction:

It’s an apple my friend gave me. My dear friend, her name be praised and her smile endure! Her cuckold of a husband had to go all the way to Bassora to fulfill her wish. He brought her back three apples, purchased at three dinars a piece. Remembering me, she gave me this one as a symbol of our love. May he return and go all the way to India this time to bring her back what she wants, so long as he leaves us to love in peace. Yes, it was my friend who gave me this apple may she among beauties be praised, she, the most attentive lover in the city. (p. 110)

While it is true that the husband went all the way to Bassora to find apples, his wife did not cheat on him, nor did she give an apple to her presumed lover. The symbolism of the apple has thus treacherously shifted from a symbol of love and desire to a symbol of betrayal and hatred. The spouse perceives the red apple as a token of betrayal and adultery: a gift from his wife to her lover in recognition of his manhood and in celebration of their adulterous love. Therefore, the wife must die. The red of the apple now symbolizes the blood of the sliced up woman, a color that clashes with the young woman’s pale, diaphanous complexion.

Blind with anger and jealousy, the husband mutilates his wife without even granting her the opportunity to speak. He then confesses the murder and is put on trial. Interestingly, the murder scene is glossed over entirely, while Atyka’s dismemberment is described in harrowing detail, suggesting that the massacre of a woman gains more visibility and recognition in today’s society than it did in the past. This is corroborated by the fact that the population empathizes with both husband and the dismembered woman’s father, while nobody laments the dismembered woman’s untimely death: “The body of the woman in pieces rests near the room where the caliph hears his counsel. Unburied. Unmourned” (p. 113). The students are shocked to read that the dead woman in the tale is erased from memory – she has born her husband three sons and thus fulfilled her function – while the fate of the murderer takes center stage. As they read the tale in class day after day, students learn that a black man, a slave called Rihan, is

identified as the true culprit. It emerges that he did not take the apple from Atyka but from her son who had been playing with it on the street. Therefore, the caliph rules, Rihan must die. To save Rihan from execution, Djaffar agrees to become a storyteller. Interestingly, a man takes over a woman's role, that of Shahrazad the storyteller, who also must tell stories in order to ensure her survival. The trial, which is discussed in the classroom, sparks a political and religious discussion about the rights of women in Muslim society, and the role of the storyteller on the fifth day of class. Atyka feels compelled to remind her students that she is teaching literature – not political science, religion, or women's studies. But the impact of the lesson is so powerful that she must partake in the discussion. At the same time, she feels a sense of premonition and urgency to finish up the lesson in order to come back to the issue of the woman cut in pieces. As she keeps wondering if she will have time to finish discussing the tale the following day, five men storm into the classroom. Four of them are armed, uniformed, and bearded, while the fifth man, a hunchback, is dressed like a civilian and holds a knife in his hand. It is he who addresses Atyka in perfect French, asking her: "You are Atyka F., a self-proclaimed teacher who, it appears, nonetheless tells these young children obscene stories?" (p. 122). The men then order the students to hide under their desks and open fire in the classroom. The hunchback slices Atyka's head off, closely watched by her youngest student Omar from the back of the classroom. He brutally jerks Atyka's head by her long red mane and sits it on the desk. Miraculously, the head finishes off the lesson – both Shahrazad's and Djaffar's stories – sitting in a pool of blood that strangely recalls the color of the red apple: "Atyka, her head severed, the new storyteller. Atyka speaks in a steady voice. A pool of blood spreads around her neck, across the wood of the table. Atyka continues the tale. Atyka, woman in pieces" (p. 123). Thus, Atyka ends up impersonating the anonymous young woman from the very tale she teaches (Lievois, 2006). The *pars pro toto*, the locus of resistance, symbolizes speech and in particular the voice, which though it is eventually silenced, imprints itself on her students' minds, leaving a powerful and everlasting impression on them.

The final, unfinished sentence uttered by Atyka's head addresses the bleak situation of Algeria in 1994. It is no longer Shahrazad's account but her own, personal and by extension, her students' story: "Each of our days is a night, a thousand and one days, here, at home, at ..." (p. 124). In conclusion to her lesson, Atyka addresses Algeria's present day situation, the daily killings, suggesting that violence has come to permeate the entire society, regardless of social status, gender, or age. Both the tale from *The Arabian Nights* and the "real-time" short story tell the same story, that of the danger of power abuse, the massacre of innocent people, and censorship at work in journalism and in the classroom. The polyphonic, multi-layered text raises awareness of and empathy for the victims of violence, which when it emerges, is generally directed against innocent people, men and women – via intertwined stories that engage both the imaginary, the visual, and real life. The short story is activist given that it breaches a taboo by engaging students – and readers – in an open discussion of sexuality, desire, religion, politics, gender issues, and violence.

The text's dialogism raises the question of adequate punishment: how should the murderers of the dismembered woman and how should Atyka's murderers be punished? Who should be punished: the liar (Rihan), the murderer(s), all of them, or nobody?

And in the context of 1990s Algeria: how should the perpetrators of the thousands of massacres, abductions, and disappearances be brought to justice? Is it possible to identify the culprits in the first place? What can be done to ensure that this decade of extreme violence does not repeat itself in an endless circle of violence? Significantly, Atyka's last sentence does not provide narrative closure, but opens up a post-mortem dialogue. By teaching and performing her lesson in French about thirteenth century Baghdad at a time when Algeria is in the midst of a civil war-like situation and when teachers, journalists, and intellectuals are literally massacred for speaking their minds, Atyka engages both with the present and the past using her classroom as a tool for societal change, passionately defending women's rights and pointing out the importance of tolerance, peace, and the need for developing a multilingual, non-violent, and tolerant society going forward.

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