

The Subaltern Voices in *Fantasia*

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ABSTRACT: *This essay seeks to explore Fantasia as Assia Djebar's bold attempt at retracing the historical patterns of colonization, subjugation and subalternity from multiple feminine perspectives. The article provides, on one hand, an answer to certain questions about subaltern speech posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her famous article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and on the other, it also challenges Spivak's central question of whether subaltern speech is possible in post-colonial discourse.*

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Assia Djebar's *L'amour, la Fantasia* is, in fact, the first volume of an Algerian Quartet published in 1985. The second volume, *A Sister to Scheherzade* appeared in 1987. Each novel, in its own right, is an anecdotal entity and has an independent structure. This essay seeks to explore *Fantasia* as Assia Djebar's bold attempt at retracing the historical patterns of colonization, subjugation and subalternity from multiple feminine perspectives. Her fiction is not only an exploration of the nature of the French conquest of Algiers, which began in 1830, but it is also a negation of and a protest against the condition of subalternity imposed on the Algerians in general and on women in particular. Out of the sufferings and silent cries of these subaltern women Djebar carves a new model of feminine subjectivity and weaves a new narrative with the Algerian woman as the real active subject. The novelist's poetic imagination, consummate descriptive and narrative powers and above all her lyrical prose renders historical characters alive on the pages of the book.

The novel provides, on one hand, an answer to certain questions posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her famous article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and on the other, it also challenges Spivak's central question about the impossibility of subaltern speech in post-colonial scenario.

The musical Algerian cavalcade or *Fantasia* unfolds in the form of a poly-layered love story recounted from the perspective of a woman with a multi-faceted identity. The very city is delineated as an Algerian woman shedding her veils. The female city of Algiers returns the gaze of the invaders. The arrival of the French soldiers is described, "[a]s if the invaders were coming as lovers!" and the primeval love-story begins (Djebar 8). The female in *Fantasia* appears in many guises: as a beloved waiting for her lover at night, as a school going Arab girl, as a female author with hybrid identity, and as a female city viewing the stealthy approach of the male invader. Love-hate motif is the unifying force which is further interwoven with varied other enigmatic issues pertaining to subaltern positions and recognition of the natives during the colonial era.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak describes the circumstances surrounding the suicide of a young Bengali woman that indicates an abortive attempt at self-representation (103-104). She concludes that the subaltern female or subaltern woman cannot be heard as her attempt at voicing herself outside the bounds of conventional patriarchal structures

is not mutually supported by the listeners. In “On the other side of the international division of labour,” Spivak argues, “the subject of exploitation cannot know and speak the text of female exploitation even if the absurdity of the non representing intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved” (84). In *Fantasia* Djébar challenges Spivak’s conclusions about the impossibility of subaltern speech. The author of *Fantasia* has sculpted a unique model of subaltern female in the “Bride of Mazuna” (Djébar 83) as a counterfoil to Spivak’s Bengali woman. Bengali woman’s failed suicidal attempt goes unheard whereas the bride’s act of taking off her tiara evokes a contrary response:

With an ample gesture, as if she were in her bridal chamber, she laid down her tiara, then her heavy earrings, then the four, five, six pearl necklaces, then the broaches- ten at least- then... ‘Allah! Allah!’ sighed the *chaouch* and asked for another casket. The scribe, his eyes dazzled as much by the splendour of the precious stones as by the beauty of the bride herself, forgot to write down the inventory. (Djébar 98)

Unlike the Bengali woman’s failed attempt at recognition, the Bride’s attempt at recognition is successful as “she wrapped her arms around the frail adolescent, clothed only in her emerald gown, her hair streaming in the wind, her face raised to the sky, and repeating softly, ‘I am naked! Praise be to God, I am naked! Praise...’”(Djébar 99). The novelist’s bride is an empowered female whose dignified gesture of stripping herself naked achieves the level of a powerful protest which is heard and read as it evokes varied responses from the beholders implying that her act has been witnessed and registered. The bride does not require words to register her protest for her striptease has evoked an active response from the people.

The contrapuntal pattern of Djébar’s epic of Algerian History has the rhythm of the chisel of a skilful sculptor moving dexterously to carve out a sculpture that speaks and has a voice that is primeval and postcolonial simultaneously. “Can I, twenty years later, claim to revive these stifled voices? And speak for them?”(Djébar 202). The authorial voice **disinterested** Algerian history from a new feminine perspective curving the narrative shedding the light on the neglected resilient subaltern corners.

It is the Algerian woman who, in all her complex and multi-faceted positions, is the protagonist of lyrical *Fantasia*. Her resilience, defiance and refusal to submit to colonizing powers make her the active subject of the narrative. She expresses her resolve to “go on to the bitter end” (Djebar 148).

In the first part of the novel, the conquest of the city is described in terms of a veiled love story that is committed to paper. Part II of the novel underlines the pride of Algerian peasant women and their undaunted courage in the face of the invaders and the conquerors. It is they who are the subaltern heroes, and whose sufferings and epic struggle against the French conquest constitute the second part of the narrative. At one level, the enormous trials and the great resilience of Algerian women that characterizes the second part of the novel establishes its structural superiority to the first half of the story. The stealthy arrival of the male invader in silence and under the cover of darkness is portrayed as notoriously inferior to the active struggle of the Algerian women.

At another level, Djebar’s narrative seems to answer Spivak’s question about circuits of knowledge-production that preclude the hearing of a subaltern voice (102). In her article Spivak suggests that the subaltern cannot speak as a subaltern collectivity would be problematic (78) in a heterogeneous culture and it would also lead to dependence on the western and indigenous privileged intellectuals who will speak for him. The subaltern, consequently, will remain in shadows (82-98). Djebar seems to have found an answer to the problem of subaltern voice by constructing a voice that is poly-layered and speaking from different subject positions; as a colonized Algerian female, as a beloved, as a bride, as mother earth, and as a freedom fighter. The Algerian orature and the written word that take flight like a bird help the writer construct a diversified model of female subjectivity that defies any attempt at subaltern collectivity or subaltern position and answers Spivak’s questions. These varied voices in *Fantasia* erupting from the various phases of Algerian history forestall any attempt at logo centric assumption of cultural singularity among heterogeneous Algerian cultures. The empowered voices defy any attempt from the outside to ameliorate the subaltern position as subject or object or as a group. The indigenous Algerian voices speak for themselves and are free of dependence on the privileged first world and the third world intellectuals to speak for them. In fact, Spivak seems to draw an inappropriate conclusion when she questions the possibility of subaltern speech (78).

Although the framing of the question, “*can the subaltern speak?*” in the active voice reveals the active subject position of the subaltern, Spivak’s conclusion that subaltern cannot speak implies that the subaltern can never speak and that the colonizing forces and serpentine patriarchal structures are still controlling knowledge and its production (82).

In her article Spivak also argues that the postcolonial critics ought to abandon their privileged position in order to let the subaltern speak for themselves (91). Assia Djebar positions herself in a subaltern space as a “little Arab girl”(3), a “space filled with desperate voiceless cries, frozen long ago in a prehistory of love” (4). Her renunciation of the benefits of the privileged position of a writer in the process of documenting Algerian history enables her to unlearn and find gaps in the imperialist narratives and colonial discourses. She, then, retrieves these female voices from the archives of history and revitalizes them as a new empowered female voice that is not a stifled ineffectual cry but free and manifold like a cuckoo’s two fold shout. In fact, *Fantasia* takes a step forward by questioning the subaltern condition that Spivak talks of in her discourse. Why presume, like Spivak, that there is such a thing as subaltern condition and ask if it allows the oppressed to speak out. Djebar seems to suggest an alternative in the emerging voices so far unheard of, absent or spoken for proclaiming the birth of a new female position that is neither mute nor subaltern in relation to imperialist, neo-colonial discourses and patriarchal frameworks. The speech has been there buried in the post-colonial accounts and discourses and it has now erupted through the fissures of the works of those intellectuals who have renounced their privileges. The subaltern voice of Djebar’s protagonists is not one female speaking but it is myriad voices that claim their new identity as the real subjects by speaking, and disrupting the narrative structures. In this love story of the conqueror and the vanquished it is the female voices that first blow the space to pieces and set voiceless cries free. Therefore, Spivak’s question about the possibility of subaltern speech and the inefficacy of such a speech becomes quite redundant in *Fantasia*.

The first person participant narrative voice is subjective and female and it signals author’s departure from all those phallogocentric constructions that continue to figure subjectivity as only masculine. This new model of female subjectivity takes on various voices as the narrative develops. In the initial chapters of her narrative, the author attempts to resurrect the history of the conquest of Algiers through a primeval female voice. As

the drama unfolds the silences and the unintelligible ravings of “the old crone” (Djebar 9) are gradually transformed into an empowered female voice that speaks vigorously in the peasant Algerian dialect. And then we hear the voice proclaiming, “The voice, my voice (or rather the voice that issues from my open mouth, gaping as if to vomit, or chant some dirge cannot be suppressed” which is an attempt at breaking the interior silence that has kept these women mute for centuries (Djebar 115). The actions of “vomit” and “dirge” hold similar implications, for Djebar as both pour out what is blocked inside be it sickness or grief.

In recounting the struggle of *Fantasia*'s Cherifa in her own words, Djebar has given her enough space and also an empowered voice. The ‘standard’ version of “the metropolitan language” and the “hierarchical structure of power” are ruptured and a new tale emerges in a different language. In Introduction Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that the power of colonial discourses and patriarchal structures is “rejected in the emergence of an effective feminine post-colonial voice” (7). Here we see the subaltern Cherifa speaking for herself as a woman who stood against oppression:

‘Why were you fighting?’

‘For what I believe in, for my ideas!’

‘And now, seeing you are a prisoner?’

‘I’m a prisoner, so what!’

‘What have you gained?’

‘I’ve gained the respect of my compatriots and my own self-respect! Did you arrest me for stealing or for murder? I never stole!’ (Djebar 140).

When Cherifa recounts her story twenty years later her voice not only recounts and embraces the bygone days but it also digs out the fear, the defiance, and the intoxication that entails the entire history of colonization. On the contrary, Spivak speaks of the impossibility of encompassing the heterogeneous Other and maintains that as the subaltern woman’s consciousness is doubly wrapped in shadows, the space for her to speak cannot be achieved within imperialist and patriarchal structures (102).

The very act of speaking and writing in a language other than that of the elders is indeed tantamount to “unveil[ing] oneself” (Djebar 56) and stripping oneself naked. It is the female author, undoubtedly, who transcribes the story in a foreign tongue but the speaking voice is Cherifa’s. The writing hand is the novelist’s but it is guided by an active female voice tracing her fear, her pride. A queer cross-breeding of the written and the oral traditions, empowers Djebar to give up her privileged position and encourages the woman in veils and shadows to speak for herself from her own end.

The novelist is writing back to civilization in the language of the civilized but the speaking voice that breaks through imperialist and linguistic structures is very much indigenous. Djebar’s strategy of leaving some Arabic words untranslated underlines a sense of cultural distinctiveness (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 64). Cherifa, Zohra and the bride of Mazuna in the novel are Assia Djebar’s varied models of female subjectivity who, in all their diversity and multiplicity, speak a powerful language of resilience.

While empowering the female voice, the novelist is aware of the problem of a woman speaking aloud, of the impossibility of saying “I” the unified “I”. But *Fantasia* reveals her attempt at reconstructing an “I” that emerges as a symbol of female subjectivity, and encompasses the past, present, and future and which is embodied in the narrative voice that relates the history of Algeria from 1830 up to present time. In unveiling the history of colonization and resistance, the novelist not only reveals herself as an Algerian female but also unveils the speaking voices that can no longer be “subalternized” suppressed or veiled. This female “I” is the spirit of Algeria speaking of the absences and those silent gaps and spaces in the history that have so far never been registered. The title *Fantasia*, a musical composition, also refers to the mournful cry of a swan before death implying the death of postcolonial representation of subaltern classes and the birth of a new musical composition comprising motley voices. The musical narrative, thus, becomes a celebration of female expression and experience like a “dream spills over ... like a fog and seems never-ending. A cry deep as the ocean” (Djebar 193).

In relating the story of subjugation, the novelist also wrestles with the question of language (142). The agonizing question, “Which language to speak in?” reveals the novelist’s dilemma of post colonial heterogeneous identity. Although her protagonists do not require words to communicate their response, the issue of language remains problematic and enigmatic

for the author. Blair writes of this conflict in the Introduction to *Fantasia* when she maintains that Djébar seems to be colonizing the language of the colonizers in an effort to break the shackles of writing in the invaders' language. But the novelist seems to find an answer when she says that she has "stolen" (216) the former enemy's language and that she cohabits with it. It is only when Djébar has renounced her position as a writer that she succeeds in cohabiting with the French language to "tell a tale" (165). She has written an unabridged history of her country as an answer to civilization in the language of the civilized, but it is a language that she has modified and synchronized as a step towards unlearning her "female privilege" which involves learning to "critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not merely substituting "the lost figure of the colonized" (91) for the real subjects of speech to speak and be recognized. "It is now my turn to tell a tale. To hand on words that were spoken, then written down. Words from more than a century ago, like those that we, two women from the same tribe, exchange today" (Djébar 165). It is Djébar's characters who mould her language into a new language of resistance and liberation. Taking control of the narrative, and rediscovering the power of words exemplifies author's concepts of resistance and liberation. This "linguistic multiplicity outlines both the complexity of the society and the complexity of a [new] language in the formation"(Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 75). It is they who guide her which language to write in. The writing hand is Djébar's own but the speaking voices and words are not of subalterns but those of Algerians.

In relating Algerian historical pageant Assia Djébar is not only writing back but writing backwards and downwards without omitting a word. "Writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters" (Djébar 204).

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