Unearthing Female Jeopardies and the Quest for Algerian Female Identity through Language and Narrative in Assia Djebar's *So Vast the Prison*

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Abstract:
The present paper sheds light on the issue of female identity reconstruction and negotiation as being contingently manipulated by the lingual collision that ensues from being affiliated to twofold divergent cultural systems through the close reading of Assia Djebar's *So Vast the Prison* (1995, trans. 1999). Using postcolonial feminist insights, the paper attempts to convincingly capture the author's contention to unearth Algerian women predicaments through 'the adversarial tongue', French, due to the lack of mastering the Arabic language. The novel displays Djebar's paradoxical attitude toward addressing postcolonial female plights through French as bewildering and inappropriate, at times, and as threading the path for a favourable, freestanding space for unbound scopes of identity re-inscription, at others. This paper also examines the array of innovative hybrid narrative, namely the polyphonic discourse, and the distinct literary devices employed to untangle the ongoing predicaments that disrupt Algerian women. It is revealed that this discourse permits productive personal as well as collective remodelling of Algerian female identity.
Keywords: Assia Djebar, femininity, identity, jeopardies, language, quest

I- Introduction

In Edward Said's words, "everyone lives life in a given language; everyone's experiences therefore are had, absorbed, and recalled in that language" (1999, p. 217). Indubitably, human language occupies a fundamental part in our identity. Our concerns and plights are often embodied through language, and the process of the quest for identity and its ultimate negotiation essentially requires being mediated through language as well. Accordingly, being of bilingual and bicultural affiliation is more likely a prompt of inadequate self-expression that engenders substantial identity issues.

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The incarnation of postcolonial plights through the colonial tongue is a perpetual debatable issue. Prominent African writers and intellectuals adopted, indeed, uneven attitudes towards such linguistic discrepancy. Significant contributions were particularly made by the two notable African authors Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'O. Ngugi, in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), for example, firmly argues against integrating the colonizer's tongue in expressing African postcolonial issues and calls for preserving their native languages in order to get rid of the lingering cultural oppression and to regain their genuine identity. In contrast, Achebe, in his essay *"The African Writer and the English Language"* (1965), underscores the indispensability of incorporating the colonizer's language in postcolonial expression as a way to revive African cultures. In a similar vein, Frantz Fanon (1965) holds a similar insight to Ngugi's and contends that the French language became an eternal disparaging tool for the Algerian (p. 73). On the flip side, many critics support the inclusion of the colonizer's tongue as a seditious tool and maintain that appropriating French is a subversive strategy exploited to withstand cultural oppression (Ashcroft *et al.,* 2006, p. 262). Assia Djebar is, indeed, among the most notable Algerian authors well-known for underscoring the query of writing about Algerian reality, plights and history in French. In her novels, she conspicuously questions the utility of employing the "adversarial" tongue in expressing postcolonial Algerian female predicaments.

Albeit being accused of the misrepresentation of Algerian women and the inadequate portrayal of their genuine plights through the use of French, *So Vast the Prison* (1999) reveals the subversive appropriation of the colonial tongue to re-write and address their constant ordeals. In a way, it is similar to the way Caliban, the slave, takes advantage of the language his master taught him in order to criticise him in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "You taught me language, and my profit on 't Is I know how to curse (you). The red plague rid you For learning me your language!" (I. ii.) Likewise, the novel utterly represents a wide range of social, economic, political and religious constraints that imprison Algerian women who live in an ongoing strife to find a way out through the use of French. The ultimate goal of their struggle against the array of oppressions is essentially to gain their agency.

Endeavouring to break apart the miscellaneous jeopardies through her polyglot voices, Djebar employs her pen to undo the mental dislocation of her "traditionally invisible" female characters (Lazarus, 2013, p. 87) to foster the construction of Algerian female identity that is open to difference. Despite the fact that some critics contend that the history articulated using French in *So Vast the Prison* reveals nothing but the novelist's inability to truly incarnate and recount it (Flores, 1999, p. 36), the novel scrutiny exhibits Djebar's skilfulness to point out her own account of these issues from exile using French in a subversive way by merging the two divergent constituents of her identity. In fact, many studies have delved into

the role of language to articulate postcolonial ordeals, but only a few pinpointed the challenge undertaken by bicultural and bilingual authors to genuinely portray collective postcolonial female jeopardies and the quest for identity and femininity, on the one hand, and to simultaneously struggle to come to terms with their twoness as a result of being hybrid, on the other. Hence, this study provides an endeavour to examine the twofold manipulation of such linguistic disparity in expressing postcolonial plights in a postcolonial translated work into English via employing also a unique literary form to fulfil this end.

The polyphonic discourse that Djebar employs in *So Vast the Prison* skilfully allows divulging Algerian women's abject history and also enables the author to come to terms with her twoness. In this sense, the purpose of this study is examining the incorporation of structures of autobiography, history, legends and fiction forms a unique hybrid narrative, which underpins Algerian women's perpetuate search for their identity and their favourable reconstruction of the female entity against the plethora of deep-seated forms of jeopardies.

II- Bilingualism, Identity and the Challenge of Articulating Female Multiple Perils

So Vast the Prison is a novel that portrays a deep clash of cultures and, thus, of languages within its narrator. The narrator, who is modelled after Djebar herself, undergoes a sense of linguistic conflict between her maternal languages and the colonizer language. Due to her Western acculturation, Djebar could only write in French or the language of the enemy, or, as she states, 'in the adversarial language', since her father was a French instructor. As much as her mastery of French paved her the way to freely express her ideas as a writer, historian and film maker in Europe, North America and Africa, she constantly felt the inadequacy of her writing. It conducts her to live in a dilemma that is obviously echoed in her writings. In epitomizing such dilemma, Djebar (1999) states in the novel, "…Suddenly one language, one tongue, struck the other inside me" (p. 14). In this sense, Assia Djebar's bicultural and bilingual background led to a linguistic collision that alienated her from her Algerian culture and languages.

Notwithstanding the fact that *So Vast the Prison* is not written in Djebar's native tongue, she fancifies the French language she appropriated and its tormenting cruel inheritance with a variety of Arabic and Berber expressions and words. Throughout the text, she intentionally includes a plethora of instances from the Arabic and Berber languages like "douar", "zaouia", and "mahakma"[1], among many others. This can be read as a way to disrupt the dominance of the mainstream tongue by the peripheral languages, her ancestral ones. Djebar (1999) also relexifies[2] Arabic expressions into French, such as "the apple of my eye", and "my little liver", which underscores her intention to revive "the sound embedded deep in our childhood" (p.

81). Retrieving the authentic national identity of Algeria, according to Djebar, essentially requires comingling its abundant ancestral linguistic heritage with its new-fangled society dynamics. The title itself is taken from an old Berber song that insinuates experiencing agony and extreme suffering. After her older sister passed away, the narrator sings it to soothe her restless mother (Djebar, 1999, p. 243).

The issue of biculturalism and bilingualism, indeed, constituted a pivotal concern in most Djebar's works. Probing into the query of writing about Algerian reality, plights and history in French is perpetually tackled in her novels, essays, and lectures. Her views are explicitly stated in her 1999 volume *"ces voix qui m'assiègent"*. For her, as for many of her other notable contemporaries, this question of language had many never-ending implications since they were viewed by readers, from or outside Algeria, as outsiders. The audience reception of Djebar's works, especially in Algeria, varied between advocating the use of the colonizer's language in writing as a medium of cultural universalism and oppugning this and promoting the preservation of Arabic as the sole native, genuine language of the country.

Some critics, readers and writers contend that producing literature in the colonizer tongue is definitely congruent with writing from the colonizer perspective. In this vein, Fanon (1965) maintains that "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" (p. 73). One would, thereby, adopt alternative perspectives when adopting a new language. Working to disseminate the use of French over Arabic is one of the most important tools that the colonizers use in order to empower its control over the colonized land, culture and language as well. A nation that is still dominated by the colonialists tongue remains, thereby, subordinate to them, in one way or another, even after getting independence. That is why Djebar's work is widely regarded by critics as not belonging to the body of Arabic literature and the overall Arab culture arena as well.

Neglecting the use of Arabic, the native tongue, in writing has mainly been associated with losing one's true identity, for there is an even accordance between one's identity, recalling and absorbing experiences and language (Edward Said, 1999, p. 217). Therefore, writing in French has frequently symbolized antagonism and estrangement. Through employing French, *So Vast the Prison*, thereby, has been censured for its representation of Algerian woman as conforming to the Western feminist standards ingrained with a neo-colonial tone. Djebar was accused of not genuinely portraying the true image of Algerian women's plights. One example is what the sociologist Marnia Lazreg views, in her *The Eloquence of Silence* (1994), as a denial of "native women's lifestyles" along with "a litany of complaints about 'tradition' and Islam" (pp. 200–01). She further believes that the author's works

reflect a "primary feminist perspective that is remarkable for its decontextualized, uncritical and abstract character," (pp. 200–01). Nevertheless, the subject matters and the characters presented in Djebar's works progressively reflected the inconstant social and political conditions of each decade she wrote in.

Scrutinizing Djebar's novels through the lens of postcolonial feminism, besides, reveals a plethora of cultural, social, and political backgrounds that pictures different women who are exposed to many predicaments, but seek constantly to get rid of these shackles. Postcolonial feminism, which essentially occurred in reaction to Western feminism universal notion of women plights and as a critique to postcolonial women exclusion, pinpoints rather the heterogeneity of women's multiple experiences based on gender, race, class, religion, colour, among others. This critique was initiated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her *"Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses"* (2003), in which she opposes othering and muting postcolonial women in general. As such, the rise of postcolonial feminist thought aimed at defying Western feminism hegemonic discourse so as to articulate postcolonial and Black women's marginalized voices. In this way, Assia Djebar, through French, underscores her characters as struggling against societal and patriarchal oppressions as well as Muslim extremism in colonial and postcolonial Algeria in order to ultimately gain agency.

Many other Algerian academics argued against appropriating the colonial language to depict Algerian history and reality. Ahlem Mostagnanemi, the Algerian author who is well-known by her Arabic-written novels, asserts in her first novel, *Dhakirat al- jasad* (1993) (*Memory in the Flesh*), that Algerian writers should take on and consolidate their Arab culture and language rather than holding to the francophone colonial past. Mostaghanemi went further in her criticism when she plainly praised the exertion of the "Algerian writers writing in Arabic who confront unarmed the onslaughts of francophony and its diverse temptations" ("*To Colleagues*"). Yet, in response to this criticism, Djebar (1999) claimed that she is the outcome of French education and writing in addition to "Algerian, or Arabo- Berber, or even Muslim" sensibility (*Ces voix*, p. 26). She then opposed all arguments that called for the urge to preserve a unique language and history of Algeria and supported rather the plurality of Algerian culture (Dobie, 2016. pp. 129-131).

So Vast the Prison seemingly reveals the linguistic struggle in which Assia Djebar is caught; she undergoes a sense of paradox and ambivalence in between cherishing her French education that opened the doors for her to write freely, and simultaneously disdaining it for bringing about her estrangement from her native culture, language and identity. In depicting the meticulous challenge she has faced to showcase such a situation, she writes in the novel, "I[am], an Arab woman, writing classic Arabic poorly, loving and suffering in my mother's dialect, knowing that I have to recapture the deep song strangled in the throat of my people, finding it again

with images, with the murmur beneath images..." (p. 206). In this vein, one cannot disregard the fact that French has turned to be a substantial constituent part in present-day postcolonial Algerian identity notwithstanding being the language of colonialism. In *So Vast the Prison*, there is an evident emphasis on the significance of French that has gained a widespread use within the colonial and the postcolonial Algerian society. Some critics assert that Djebar depended just on French sources to document Algerian history. In this vein, Flores (1999) contends that "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" (p. 236). Albeit Djebar admitted her reliance on some French texts to report her ancestral history, she used these sources to subvert and re-appropriate the French version and to re-write it from the Algerian perspective in the French language to lay bare the predicaments that Algerian women in particular experienced. Accordingly, she states in the novel, "My open mouth expels continuously, the suffering of others, the suffering of the shrouded women who came before me" (p. 350). Appropriating French is then a "subversive strategy… a process by which the language is made to bear the weight and the texture of a different experience" (Ashcroft *et al.,* 2006, p. 262). Likewise, Kateb Yacine maintains that the French language is the nation "war booty"; thus, it should be exploited to withstand the cultural oppression it begot.

Conversely, looking into some of Djebar's writing in *So Vast the Prison* unearths the troublesome state she is in when expressing in French. Her expressions show her profound discomfort and uncertainty. Djebar expresses her uncertainty and pessimism about her French writing now and then since she is unable to write in Arabic. Witting enough of her contradictory condition of embodying the multiple perils of Algerian women in the French language, she at times explicitly exhibits the unbridgeable bond with her roots and the sense of being alienated from her lingual and cultural inheritance. Djebar (1999) depicts her situation as "a renegade" as a result of her incompetence to write efficiently in Arabic: "I am becoming more and more a renegade in the so-called foreign language" (p. 177). Hence, she feels disloyal to her ancestral language and identity, thereof, to the extent she describes her deep pessimism and disruption as she fails to fully document their plights in *So Vast the Prison* through saying "Erase my writing" (p. 341).

Added to chronicling the concealed historical past, Djebar skilfully pictures the fratricide that took place and the current conditions under which women live in postcolonial Algeria. Yet, the allusion to how embodying the subaltern[3] unuttered perils in the colonizer language is manageable always takes a prominent part in Assia Djebar's texts. To portray the hazards of the fratricide that periled postcolonial Algeria and generated an alarming chaos, turmoil and death in *So Vast the Prison*, for example, Djebar found that the French words and language are no longer

expressive or appropriate to epitomize such irreversible torment and anguish that Algerian people undergo. She then inquires "Write, the dead of today want to write: now, how can one write with blood?" she also adds, "write how?" (1999, p. 357). Ultimately, she doubts if any language can transmit the sufferings of the subaltern and contribute one day to disentangle their never-ending predicaments in *The Blood of Writing*, the last chapter in *So Vast the Prison:*

> Blood for me remains ash white.
> It is silence.
> It is repentance.
> Blood does not dry, it simply evaporates.
> I do not call you mother, bitter Algeria,
> That I write,
> That I cry, voice, hand, eye.
> The eye that in the language of our women is a fountain. (p. 358)

Djebar herself is then ambivalent about her bilingual state since she conspicuously oscillates in-between the two languages and cultures. According to Valérie Orlando (1995), "Djebar herself is unable to answer" whether the exemption she obtained from her in-between position is worthwhile (p. 139).

To better incarnate her perplexity about whether her freedom is eventful in the novel, Djebar employs the analogy of the Algerian princess Zoraidé from the Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote.* Similar to Djebar, the princess compulsorily leaves her motherland due to an affair with a Christian slave whom she frees, altering her religion and breaking with the established norms. Eventually, Zoraidé gains nothing after sacrificing everything she possessed and turns out into a fugitive expropriated of her richness. Djebar makes use of Zoraidé's story, who was "the first Algerian woman to write" (p. 172), as "the metaphor for Algerian women writing today, among them myself" (p. 173). Zoraidé, like Djebar, forcibly remains oscillating between her native and foreign culture and language, yet estranged from her native tongue as she can neither speak nor express herself in Berber or Arabic. In this respect, Djebar states in *So Vast the Prison*, *"Like Zoraidé 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"* (p. 177). This reveals she is still problematizing her in-between condition. Her bewilderment about whether the renunciation of her roots and legacy in favour of her presumed freedom is discernible.

The issue of the paradox of language occupies a paramount space in *So Vast the Prison* owing to the fact that human language occupies an essential part in our

identity. Given the fact that the process of the search for identity and its ultimate negotiation requires being straining through language, any linguistic dislocation may drive the person to undergo serious identity dilemmas. This essentially epitomizes Djebar's case as she is constantly captured in both physical and mental dislocation. The two languages mutually exist within her, but they also simultaneously discord at the level of a variety of changing life experiences of being and becoming, for our thoughts, opinions and feelings are voiced through language. Hence, our sense of self will unquestionably get perturbed, and serious inner quandaries will ensue when the bond between the person and his or her native language is inadequately attached.

Despite the ostensible collision of languages within the narrator and, therefore, the author, an alternative scrutiny of *So Vast the Prison* may entail Djebar's opposing apprehension of bilingualism and biculturalism which upholds a favourable sense of leniency and variation. According to Fatima Ahnouch (1996), "For Djebar, writing aspires to an openness, to tolerance, to that which is foreign, and to difference, with no fear of compromise" (p. 795). This can read as a response to the lingual unilateralism that used to set standard Arabic as the only accredited language of the country.

The linguistic factor made up then an impediment for the narrator and Djebar herself against maintaining an immediate connection with her native tongue, which would also enable her to pointedly unearth the multiple oppressions that Algerian women experience. It is contended that "The persistence of patriarchy, the dramatic tenacity of a system of male dominance and female subordination, has been the dominant pattern in Algeria…Algeria has regressed rather than advanced in terms of improving the status of women…" (Knauss, 1987, p. 41); Assia Djebar attempts through her pen to untangle these miscellaneous ordeals through her polyglot voices to promote the construction of Algerian female identity that is open to difference. *So Vast the Prison* suggests that the quest for such an identity can only be fulfilled through openness to multiplicity of languages and cultures. In this context, Ahnouch (1996) asserts that "*Djebar 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*" (p. 796).

In brief, Djebar points out in the novel that it is only through writing and language that women, in general, and writers, in particular, can erupt and disentangle the deep-seated constraints of the vast prison they are doomed to live in. Notwithstanding the nuanced complexities of her linguistic struggle and the sense of alienation and uncertainty that mediates two divergent tongues: the ancestral and the French one, Djebar virtually finds that whatever the medium of revealing the ubiquitous plights is, Algerian women should have a common voice that has one aim: unravelling the multiple systems of oppressions. Accordingly, Djebar denotes

in the novel, *"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"* (p. 172). Hence, writing in any language is a seminal tool that can open the doors for self-construction and negotiation of identities through unfolding the deep-rooted jeopardies.

III- Djebar's Polyphonic Discourse and Unearthing Female Jeopardies

A considerable part of *So Vast the Prison* is, indeed, a reflection of Djebar's personal life. The narrator, as aforementioned, is modelled after the author herself. In the novel, Djebar seeks to retell Algerian women's stories of extreme hardships through depending on a hybrid narrative form. She uses a distinct strategy that destructs the conventional ways of recounting history, autobiography and fiction. In an interview, Djebar maintained: "I could only find myself in the breakdown of structures, in a confrontation with opposites." (Armel, 2002, p. 100) Instead of employing a linear progression of events, her narrative poses these forms together along with old folk tales and legends. Through encompassing them and moving between present, past and future, the polyphonic discourse she created represents the ordeals most women in Algeria suffer from including social inequalities and staggering gender oppression.

Additionally, Djebar's polyphonic discourse in *So Vast the Prison* allows her to delineate her in-between situation as bicultural and bilingual. In this sense, she provided her own account of women's plights from exile through the amalgamation of the two discrepant aspects of her identity. Not only does the fusion of history and autobiography form a skilful strategy in divulging Algerian women's abject history, but it also helped the author come to terms with her twoness.

A major part of Djebar's polyphonic discourse is devoted to her autobiography. Her own stories essentially insinuate to broader experiences of a plethora of Algerian women today and in the past. Thus, she incorporates a new form of autobiography, which oscillates between the personal and the collective in order to articulate every Algerian women plights. Her autobiography, albeit agonizing, acts then as a useful device that ensued from Djebar's self-reflection. Djebar realizes in her novel that it is extremely distressing to give account to the true versions of stories of Algerian women: "… writing meant dying, slowly dying, groping to unfold a shroud of sand or silk over things that one had felt trembling and pawing the ground." (p. 11) This necessitates announcing them through language and writing in order to unveil what is unuttered and to give voice to her voiceless history as well as that of silenced women now and then: "Yes, for a long time I wanted to lean against the dike of memory, or against the shadowy light of its other side, to be gradually penetrated by its cold, because as I wrote I recalled myself. And life dissipates; its living trace dissolves." (p. 11) Thus, the suffering of numerous

women who perpetually undergo miscellaneous forms of oppressions, be it patriarchal, social or domestic, is incarnated through her own vivid life stories. In this vein, Freeman (1993) asserts that "given the beings we are — housed in language, in culture, in history — there is much about us that requires interpretation for sense to be made." (p. 5) The act of recalling or 'rememorization' and rewriting these stories through language for the sake of re-appropriation serves to amplify the voice of Algerian women.

By means of this rememorizing process as part of her autobiographical narratives, as Djebar contends in *So Vast the Prison*, every prison is unobstructed thanks to the power of her ancestral language that she does not learn, yet she can recall while she is at home (p. 172). Thereby, this signals that recalling native culture and language can make every woman free. The novel polyphonic discourse bestows Djebar the potential to competently excoriate the unjust, overwhelming control of patriarchy, society and family restraints. Through the merge of a set of the aforementioned forms, she manages to generate a space of agency by which she can exert power to reinforce her sense of self.

The autobiographical narratives that the narrator chronicles in *So Vast the Prison* manifest Assia Djebar's persistent life predicaments at both the personal and the academic levels**.** Accordingly, the author herself went through the nation social and political unrest throughout one of its most alarming period in history. Added to the black decade that witnessed the murdering of many of her acquaintances, she also extremely suffered as a consequence of her compulsive expatriation from her motherland to France and the United States and her personal family abuse as well. To accurately picture the intricate nuances of the multiple oppressions and ordeals that Algerian women underwent, Djebar intended to make her autobiographical episodes equivocal and open to varying interpretations. Vaguely altering between capturing factual events and fictional sequences, *So Vast the Prison* springs between the rememorization of the author's private life stories as well as her fellow women collective history.

A plethora of instances about women subjugation within the history of Algeria and the personal life stories of Djebar prevail the novel. One of these appears in a section entitled "Femme arable I," which pictures the narrator's personal record of the very first shot in an anonymous movie. The women involved in this movie are abruptly depicted as "Community of women shut away yesterday and today," Djebar moves then to criticize what she described as the collective experience of the long imprisoned women: "[The veiled woman] a shadowy shape that has strolled along for centuries, never screaming that we were enshrouded, never tearing off the veil and even our skin with it if required" (p. 179). Subsequently, Djebar adds that the entanglements she addresses are not only experienced by most women in her ancestral land, but they were also part of her own life: "This image is the reality of

my childhood, and the childhood of my mother and my aunts, and my girl cousins who were sometimes the same age as me…" (p. 179). Evidently, she commingles personal and common history to uncover the deep-rooted violence against Algerian women. She depicts the genuine social inequality, repression against women and their ultimate confinement through reporting the words of an unnamed woman: "You cannot exist outside: the street is theirs, the world is theirs. Theoretically you have the right to equality, but shut up 'inside,' confined. Incarcerated" (p. 180).

A miscellany of literary devices permeates the novel hybrid narrative in order to genuinely embody the state of constant estrangement ensuing from the ongoing repression and stalemate endured by women. For instance, Djebar metaphorically makes use of a reclusive woman in her movie to hint at the "five hundred million or so segregated women in the Muslim world" who are deprived of their natural prerogatives (pp. 179-180). Likewise, the inclusion of the character of Zoraidé from the well-known Spanish novel Don Quixote alludes to the condition of Assia Djebar and several other Algerian intellectuals who, like Zoraidé, compulsorily quitted their countries in search of liberation and unconditioned extrication. To insinuate women illiteracy that was so prevalent in the Algerian society, the author exploits another character, the shepherdess Aichoucha, who personifies a wide-range class of Algerian women and girls prohibited from being educated.

The analogical employment of one of another female legendary figures in the novel, the Tuareg princess Tin Hinan, further consolidate the author's adaptation of feminine pedigree to shed light on women persistent struggle throughout history. After some Arab assailants took control over her territory, the princess, along with her tribe, was forced to leave the land. Yet, albeit uprooted, Tin Hinan hold the Berber alphabet with her to preserve her roots and inheritance. Indeed, Djebar, through this instance, highlights the indispensability to maintain one's original identity even if certain unbearable, inescapable circumstances may coerce him or her to live outside the homeland.

Indeed, encompassing experiences of rootlessness and nomadism as related to female historical figures and preceding legends essentially epitomizes the overall current state of women in Algeria who constantly seek freedom and rebel against deep-seated oppression. Notwithstanding taking different forms, Djebar emphasizes the fact that such historic nomadism is accurately persistent even at present. Their rejection to live within the restraints of the bonds of traditional society, patriarchy and sometimes even Muslim extremism prompts them to cross borders and to, consequently, live almost as nomads oscillating between the host and their ancestral cultures and tongues. In the novel, the narrator recommends that her daughter, whom she thereby becomes "the latest fugitive" (p. 329), leaves her country to better live

and work in France, thinking this would ameliorate her life conditions and save her from the abuse of *l'e'dou*.

Introduced by a middle-aged women in the novel indicating her husband, the word *l'e'dou* in Algerian dialect is synonymous to the English word "enemy". It is exploited to allude to the nature of husband and wife relationship, in the words of Djebar: "This word – [*l'e'dou*] – not one of hatred, no, rather one of despair long frozen in place between the sexes" (p. 15). The troubled implications brought forth as a result of such reckless relations are also autobiographically reported by the narrator in the novel. The long incident is told in one hundred pages, and it revolves around the fierce abuse against women. The wife, who undergoes different sorts of physical violence that engendered serious injuries and led almost to her blindness, refers to her husband as the enemy. Thereby, the husband, or *l'e'dou* in the wife's words, acts "the role that for generations he had been assigned by the memory of the city" (p.109). The wife's violation eventually ends up leading to the marriage breakup.

IV- The Quest for Identity and Femininity

The innovative hybrid narrative form of *So Vast the Prison* that fuses the polyphonic structures of autobiography, history, legends and fiction serve to uphold female ongoing search for identity. In fact, this discourse permits favourable personal as well as collective remodelling of the female entity. It can be also discerned that even Djebar's autobiography in the novel is not told in the traditional manner as she fuses and fluctuates recounting her own stories with those of her submissive fellow women in Algeria. Assia Djebar pinpoints the potential of the female imperilled body, "voice, hand, and eye" to negotiate its blemished sense of identity in order to fulfil self-validation. To this end, she transcends the conventional modes of narration to unearth the hidden historical truths about Algerian women that further examine untangling their perpetual hazards and consolidate their ultimate resistance and empowerment. Through the character of Yasmina, for instance, Djebar (1999) provides a typical incarnation of the female struggle to undo the multiple plights though her *'Kalam'*. Yasmina uses her *'kalam'* or 'pen' in English as a subverting tool to fight multiple oppressions and to re-establish the true Algerian female identity from "Fugitive without knowing it" to "Fugitive and knowing it midflight" (p. 359). Hence, the *'Kalam'* used for appropriately retelling Algerian women stories embodies a subverting weapon that decentres and re-appropriates dominant male control.

By and large, the symbol of the *'Kalam'* is then inclusively broaden to involve all Algerian women who experience similar conditions as Yasmina. The realization of favourable individual and communal change necessitates retaking the long silenced female voice through rewriting and revisiting Algerian women past

and present in order to ensure a decent sense of self in the future. In this vein, Djebar contends,

> 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. (p. 337)

In addition, Djebar further adds that using the pen to redeem Algerian intellectuals and authors' voice to incarnate their concerns freely in their writings without the need to address from beyond their motherland becomes an urgent indispensability. Accordingly, it wasn't possible for Algerian writers or historians to write at ease when talking over disputable issues that concern national or even global issues from the territory since independence. Many writers, especially women, were forced to opt for exile or expatriation for fear they would be denied from laying bare their preoccupations freely and accurately. In Djebar's words in her novel *Le Blanc de I'Algerie* (1995), this is mainly because ""getting away" and reviewing Algeria's socio-political situation from the outside is the only means by which an author/ intellectual will gain the courage "(p. 21). This is also a recurrent theme in Djebar's *Fantasia* (1985) where writing even in the colonial language could be seen as a way lift subalternity, for language turned then into a liberating tool for Algerian authors notably women as it frees them from the deep-rooted bondage historically imposed on them. Djebar, as such, calls for untangling the sticky oppression through establishing an open free space in which Algerian female intellectuals can express their thoughts openly and freely. Such empowering space would also allow Algerian intellectuals to quest for Algerian feminine academic and intellectual identity in order to validate their national and international standing.

The inclusion of an array of diverse characters from different categories serves basically to display the quest for femininity and unconfined sense of identity beyond the shackles of societal, patriarchal oppression or even religious extremism. This can be perceived in the narrator's strained marriage that led her to be caught in a dilemma, bewildering between sacrificing her self-dignity and comfort to satisfy her family reputation and societal norms that find that a divorced woman is a source of humiliation and shame to the whole family. This is because the meaning of female identity, for them, is restricted just to her traditional function as a housewife and a mother to her children. Despite her family's outrageous reaction to her divorce, she eventually chooses to break up with her husband to effectuate a full sense of her feminine identity:

> Afterward, I say to myself-no longer knowing whether by that I mean "after making a final break with my beloved," or after the scene I then lived through

> with my husband the night I made my ridiculous confession. The consequences of this outrageous event I, of course, imposed in haughty silence upon my confused parents, who naively saw this brutality and conjugal havoc as either a remnant of the old days of doing things or else as a result of some corrupt modernism…while all I could do was hold my tongue … afterward … This incredible thing, I can't quite understand why I did it! (Djebar, 1995, pp. 95-96)

In this regard, Djebar reflects that, in spite of the compressing agonizing impetuses that disrupt her, as a woman and a writer, and all other women and bring about depriving them of enjoying their femininity to the fullest, one has to get rid of obstinate abuse and imprisonment. Thereby, the genuine sense of self and coveted femininity that has long been sought-after would ultimately be fulfilled. As a matter of fact, Algerian women have been long denied self-realization both at the national and the global levels due to such discriminating, compelling factors. In *So Vast the Prison*, the representation of female ordeals and their search for identity affirm Gayatri Spivak's contention that the subaltern, in this case women, can indeed speak and give voice to their entanglements and concerns.

V- Conclusion

Through the scrutiny of Djebar's novel, the study pointed out the way bicultural and bilingual affiliations can drive to problematizing processes of identity quest and negotiation for there is a tight accordance between identity and language. Belonging to a hybrid background can conduct the person to undergo intense bewilderment and a sense of loss. As a writer, Djebar is constantly caught in a perpetual challenge of addressing the multiple jeopardies of Algerian women in the French language as she does not often find it expressive or appropriate to embody such irreversible quandaries any more. This also sets her apart and alienates her from her lingual and cultural heritage. Ultimately, Assia Djebar sees the genuine construction and quest for Algerian female identity can only be accomplished via openness to multiplicity of cultures and languages. Albeit foreign, this language allows her to untangle these miscellaneous ordeals through her polyglot voices through her pen. This paper further looked into the novel hybrid discourse that is masterfully crafted out of divergent, yet compatible forms. Such creative narrative engenders a powerful polyphonic space that, notwithstanding addressing from the "outside", releases female multiple entanglements and forges boundless scopes of femininity and productive inscriptions of identity.

Notes

[1] Using these exophoric references, i. e. words and/or expressions that need a glossary to be understood, illustrate the hybrid nature of the author's language and the nativization of French language since most of them originate from African, Muslim

and Berber cultures. In short, Djebar tries to arficanize and algerianize the colonizer's language.

[2] Relexification refers to the process of substituting a specific language words and structures with others from another language without altering its grammatical structures.

[3] Subaltern is a concept developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in his foundational postcolonial essay in postcolonial theory "*Can the Subaltern Speak*?" *(1988)* that provides a feminist critique of the postcolonial experience. The term is used to refer to the postcolonial oppressed, voiceless groups most notably women who lack just representation. It was initially *coined by* the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci to denote the subordinate situation of the working class under the capitalist system in the 1930s.

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