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Between Subjugation and Agency: Female Identity in Assia Djebar's A Sister to Scheherazade

Dr Misba Majeed

Abstract

Patriarchy in Third World operates not only as a socio-political system but as an oppressive force that constrains the lives of women through subjugation, spatial confinement and silence. This deep-rooted patriarchal hegemony tends to prioritize male supremacy while neglectingwomen's independence, aspirations and choices. The patriarchal strictures undermine the identityof women and often reduce them to marginalised and submissive positions. The paper analyses Assia Djebar's A Sister to Scheherazade (1987) and explores how the female body under the restraints of patriarchy becomes the very site of both subjugation and emergent subjectivity. The novel focuses on the struggles of two female protagonists Isma and Hajila for quest of identity and freedom by dismantling patriarchal constraints. The paper analyses how their strugglefor identity is symbolised by crossing the threshold that denotes a kind of a margin between the two worlds subjugated and liberated. Djebar delivers voice to female characters so that they can register their protest and claim their subjective position.She restores their independent identity by challenging the established patriarchal strictures and paradigm thus reconfigures and reconstitutes feminine subjectivity. The paper attempts to analyse how Assia Djebar redefines the female body as a strategic tool for struggle and self-assertion.

Keywords: Womanhood, Subjugation, Female resistance, Agency, Representation

Introduction

A Sister to Scheherazade (1993) originally written in French as OmbreSultane (1987) is semi-autobiographical and forms the second novel of Djebar's 'Algerian-Quartet' series. The novel is a revolutionary female challenge to patriarchal strictures and confinement in the harem in Algeria. Neither sisters nor rivals, the two protagonists Isma and Hajila are wives to the same man at different periods of time. The central female figure of the novel is Isma, an educated, outspoken, modern and liberated Algerian woman who lived in France and subsequently returns to Algeria. Hajila on the other hand is uneducated, poor, submissive, timid and traditional Algerian woman. The novel juxtaposes their personalities in the Algerian society. One unveiled, emancipated, bourgeois and multilingual, the other veiled, secluded, dialect-speaking and silenced. At first both remain subservient to their indigenous customs and traditions and remain confined to harem, the male-dominated prison.

The novel concerns the marital challenges of Isma and Hajila in the home of their autocratic husband and how they defy the authority of their polygamous husband. Isma, the liberated one among the two embarks on a journey of film making. While as Hajila the traditional Algerian woman, chooses to cross her husband's apartment to explore the city in pursuit of freedom.Their lived experiences are varied, yet they share corresponding history of Algeria women as victimized and marginalized subjects. Through

Isma and Hajila, Djebar recounts the history of Algerian women as victims of subjugation and discrimination in the patrilineal society. She explores and challenges the dominant Algerian socio-cultural practices and patriarchal norms which treats women as 'other', 'inferior' and 'marginalised'. These revolutionary female characters as narrators of their own stories aim at symbolically recovering the silenced voices of Algerian women who were muted and supressed under the hegemony of mainstream discourse. The challenges that these Algerian female characters face are crucial to postcolonial feminist concerns. She draws attention to the struggle of third world women to free themselves from patriarchal chains in order to embark on a journey of self-discovery and self-independence. Her focus on the resistance by women is associated with her native land in particular and to Arab women in general.

The novel illustrates how the female protagonists contest gender stereotypes and patriarchal dictatorship by questioning the male-oriented mechanism that puts curbs on their agency and independence. In the novel, Djebar presents postcolonial Algerian women to negotiate their deliverance from the dominant masculine society and depicts the socio-cultural treatment of women as 'other' and 'ostracized'.The novel endeavours to unshackle women from the enclosed spaces i.e harem by giving voice to the 'subaltern female' silenced both by convention and patriarchy. For Isma and Hajila 'Harem' is a prison imposed on them by traditions and patriarchal law of the Algerian society.H. Adlai Murdoch argues that Djebar's narrative in the novel A Sister to Scheherazadechallenges conventional "assumptions of female positionality as subject to submission or exclusion, positing instead articulative patterns of presence that rewrite discursive possibilities of voice and agency for her female subjects" (28).

The novel reflects the oppressive nature of patriarchal structure by emphasizing the experience of the Algerian women within the rigid barriers of domestic space. Djebar seeks to challenge the domestic monotony which thrives on subjugation of women and restricts their movement. The radical confrontation of Isma and Hajila leads them to reject the oppressive patriarchy. The female characters of the novel represent the voice and identity of women which is silenced and restricted in the Algerian society. They share a strong connection as Isma symbolizes Hajila's hope and yearning for an emancipated life, and, on the other hand, Hajila represents Isma's past and suppressed self. The female characters disengage themselves from the dominance of the patriarchal world. Ringrose states the novel is "interpreted in terms of the female subject awakening … in the face of patriarchal domination", and the main issues addressed by the narrative is the protagonists attempt to subvert patriarchy (57).

Throughout the novel the female protagonists struggle to retrieve their feminine voice from the clutches of patriarchy. Ana Donadey illustrates Djebar not only "reappropriates and subverts the discourse of (Western and Arabic) patriarchy about women, but also the discourse of colonialist imperialism about the [natives] – thereby creating an original form of female Algerian mimicry" (Poetics of Subversion 110-111). The traditional practice of veiling and polygamy play an important role in subjugating the Algerian women and in rendering them passive and mute. In the Algeria society patriarchy still attempt to confine and control women's movement and gaze, thus denying Algerian women the right to move out in public space where her identity may be recognized and her voice may be heard. Djebar's female characters at an individual level, critique the Algerian history and subjugation which women face in society. These female protagonists cross the threshold and create a world of their own. Mildred Mortimer in Reappropriating the Gaze in AssiaDjebar's Fiction and Film (1996) writes:

Djebar in the postcolonial period is projecting the process of woman's empowerment as she herself has witnessed the dismantling of the colonial empire and with it, the departure of the colonizer. She is aware

[of the pervasive control of male dominance] and warns that although one scrutinizing agency is gone, the other remains an active force in some areas of personal and public sphere (863).

Djebar charts their transformation from passive objects under the control of patriarchal and colonial powers to the active subjects who can voice their own discourse.

Transgression is the female response to the patriarchal supremacy that destabilizes established norms, and brings independence of women. Isma and Hajila also transgress the traditional boundaries and their process of liberation calls for an end to patriarchal and oppressive system. Djebar's marginalized subaltern females employ different strategies to transform the gendered space by challenging the patriarchal oppression thus emerges as the postcolonial female subjects in their discourse. Isma and Hajila live a life of confinement mainly in their homes and under the veil. They cross the gender boundaries by venturing outdoors and thus destabilize the gender-confined submissive space of the harem. Also, Hajila the subaltern and silenced female gets voice and feminine space as never before.

The issues of representation and identity of female body in the patriarchal milieu are central to the novel. The lived experiences and representation of the female characters are contrasted with each other. Hajila's position as described by Westernized Isma is- repressed, subjugated, indigenous, and passive. The opposing nature of Isma and Hajila signifies freedom and enslavement respectively. The novel examines the intriguing bond of the Algerian women who are victims of colonial and gendered oppression and holds patriarchy accountable for their marginalized position. Isma in quest of freedom challenges the traditional position carved for women in Algerian society. By leaving her husband Isma rejects patriarchy and native traditions and makes her way in the world outside. Isma's life is contrasted with Djebar's own as she moves outside Algeria and gains French exposure. Isma counters the gender injustice, sociocultural customs and patriarchal oppression which she finds unendurable in her married life. Her freedom is restricted by masculine control and orthodox customs and traditions of the Algerian society. She subverts her role as a traditional Algerian wife who leaves her man, and thus shakes the very ideology of patriarchy. She retorts by emancipating herself from the imprisonment of the traditional marriage structure that confines women within the walls and veil.

Djebar's protagonists negotiate their liberation from patriarchal domination and constructed norms of socio-cultural behaviour that silence and subjugate women of color. When Hajila arrives in her new apartment or harem, she is exemplified as submissive. She is an epitome of a traditional Algerian woman who accepts her role as an obedient daughter, wife and sister. She admits herself to the established societal roles and traditions that are destined for women. Her mother Touma gets tempted by the promise of a luxurious life and forces her daughter to get married to a divorcee. Hajila unquestioningly stands with her mother's decision and is subservient. She accepts the marriage proposal of this wealthy man with two children for the welfare and comfort of her family. As the plot progresses, Hajila realises the consequences of being married to a male chauvinist. Defying the traditional feminine passivity Hajila enters into the masculine space. She comes close in the forbidden space by wandering into the city in quest of freedom. She takes charge of her life by secretly removing herself from the prison of male gaze. Djebar portrays "the rebelliousness of women [which symbolises] their right to occupy the territory that male aristocrats try to reserve for themselves" (Woodhull Islamic Tradition 37). The conquest of Hajila to move into the male space is the first step towards liberation. She crosses the gender boundaries and arrives into the realm of self-discovery and self-independence.

Hajila feels tormented in her abusive marriage that demands her to clean the breakfast table, wipe the wooden surface, and wash the cups with the eyes filled with tears and body crumbled under the burden

of domestic chores.She experiences harsh treatment and feels enslaved and imprisoned in her husband's home and is treated as an object. Following this experience, Hajila decides to overcome melancholy and breaks away the oppressive monotony of her married life and secretly escapes from the apartment and eventually decides to remove the veil. Hajila's passivity is gradually substituted by aggressiveness as she reacts towards her husband's ill treatment. The sense of isolation dawns upon Hajila when her husband refuses to pay attention either to her tears or her thoughts. He seems to be unmindful to her presence and alienates and marginalises her. Consequently, she discovers her desire for self-determination and recognizes that her body is objectified and silenced by the desires of her husband. She understands that she is basically caged in a worthless marriage.

Hajila experiences a sense of alienation when she realises that she finds she shares no marital bond with her husband as he treats her as a maid with no rights. She feels embattled as she perceives her marginalised position and this leads to her revolt. She announces rebellion and decides to explore life outdoors after months of loneliness. Hajila gradually begins to sense the value of independence that Isma had always demanded for herself by crossing the threshold. Hajila realizes her identity outside the apartment and envisions not returning to the prison of marriage. She inverts the forbidden space by frequently entering into public space and venturing into male territory. Hajila disrupts the patriarchal authority of her husband as her owner when she crosses the harem secretly.

As the novel progresses Hajila's traumatic experiences shake her conscience and she decides to counter patriarchal oppressions and overcomes her submissiveness. In her first attempt she takes the unbleached woollen veil in order to hide herself from the scrutiny of male gaze. Her journey into the forbidden outside world reveals her pursuit for feminine space, self-discovery and identity. Hajila's escapades into the world outside after her husband's departure becomes an instrument for her consciousness of identity. Ringrose observes the engrossment of Algerian woman "into the outside world is an important step towards the restoration of female corporeality and the accession to subjectivity" (182-83). The crossing of the Algerian woman from enclosure to emancipation, from veiling to unveiling and from silence to the right to speak appropriates the woman into a discourse that can be heard and recognized at the global level. The yearning for a liberated space begins when Hajila decides to don the veil when she is out of her apartment. The veil represents a traditional and patriarchal domination and the attempt to take off the veil symbolises the quest of identity and apparently rejecting the patriarchal customs.The gradual 'unveiling' happens as the frequency of her outside visits become a routine for her. Thus, Hajila's act of moving towards freedom and emancipation from the male authority is reinforced when she endeavours to cross the threshold unveiled.

The perception of the outside realm and the objects of Hajila's gaze become an instrument of restoration of feminine body and subjectivity. As she enters from private space to public space in search of her identity, Djebar "foregrounds the connection between her exploration of public spaces and the discovery of her own body-space" (Ringrose 183). Hajila aims to move into a liberated space where she can express her female desire without being censured. Her escape from the harem implies the yearning for liberation from the confined space.The journey to the outside realm is an essential step for refurbishment of female body and subjectivity. Moreover, Hajila feels liberated by releasing her body to the outside world and realizes her history. She recounts to herself her daily negotiation with life: "Every day you make your escape. You [navigate]. . . public gardens and squares of this neighbourhood. . . . you recall where you went the day before, and the day before that, and so on. . . . In the evening, when you return with aching legs and the rumblings . . . the beating of your heart, [assure you of your] history". (41) By

moving out from her husband's house Hajila rejects the marginalised space for women and enters in the liberated space. The daily strolls help Hajila to explore herself an individual in her own right.

Hajila eventually challenges the physical and mental oppression faced by her. She thinks that the servitude expected of women in marriage is traumatising. She says: "'Is this what coitus really is for every woman? this physical pain?' Has no woman ever rebelled? Do other forms of slavery not suffice?" (63). Hajila realises that a woman is doubly oppressed by patriarchal power and colonial power. The males subjugate women in bodily terms and the ideology of colonial power makes the woman a slave. The oppressive effect of confinement appears once again when her husband gets to know of her habit of wandering outdoors. She is tortured, probed, beaten mercilessly and interrogated. He questions: "Who [she meets, where she goes]?Who did [she] talk to in the public gardens? What strange man, what old or new friend accompanied [her] on these [visits]? … What make-up did [she] choose?" What skirt did [she] wear under [her]veil and, why? What loud-coloured dress? (86).

Hajil's admission of her secret walks signals her resistance. She retorts: "'I liked to take off my veil in a narrow alley-way . . . and then walk about naked!'" (86). Her husband gets astonished at the word 'naked' and this further sparks off violence, "blow after blow accompanied by the repetition of this word as if he recognized it. As if . . . hurled it at him; it was I who had hurled it at him" (86). Mad with rage Hajila's husband tries to blind her:

He strikes you across the face. You make no move to avoid the blow. He takes an empty bottle breaks it on the edge of the sink and mutters . . . 'I'll put out your eyes and then you'll never see again! And no one will ever see you either!' When he raises the broken bottle, you protect your eyes … the blow catches you on the arm and the man stands, his hand poised, staring at the blood that spurts from the gash . . . I'll break your legs and then you will never go out again, you'll be nailed to a bed … (87).

Hajila's husband claims male ownership of female body and his brutality is articulated in the pain and suffering of Hajila. The husband's brutal behaviour springs from his wife's deviation from her marital duties and she is penalised "for daring to review her life and redefine it" (Mortimer Djebar's Fiction and Film 864). Her husband thinks that her daily walks are an act of rebellion and have to be countered by violence. Hajila claims the right to circulate freely in masculinist or public spaces. Her identity is subject to her act of crossing the threshold and her voice becomes an important marker of her subjectivity.

Terminating pregnancy is Hajila's ultimate attempt to get away from the bondage of socio-cultural and patriarchal oppression. She ponders on her lived reality of imprisonment and oppression and decides to abort the unwanted pregnancy, and "stands on the threshold, devouring the space" (159). She throws herself in front of a car to abort the baby and is knocked down in the accident. Hajila's "piercing cry at the time of the accident seems to proclaim her victory over the patriarchal hegemony, for she found a way out of her predetermined subjugated role" (Arenberg 363). Though Isma encouraged Hajila to contest her condition but the final decision about her life is Hajila's own. Isma is not an accomplice but only a spectator. At last, with the loss of the child Hajila liberates herself from the abusive marriage and dictatorship that confined her within the wall and under the veil. Isma leaves for her hometown with her daughter and chooses her tradition by wearing a veil again, "I too want to put down roots. To wear the veil again, in my own fashion … To retreat into the shadows; bury myself" (156). Her emancipated self-reconnects to her roots. She chooses to reconnect to her native land so that she can support the liberation struggle of Algerian women and also her daughter. She wants to reconstruct a sense of identity among Algerian women.

Djebar is critical of the bias against women and unites Hajila and Isma against it. In the novel she highlights the endeavour of female characters to resist the orthodox patriarchal strictures thrusted upon them and shows how they ultimately free themselves from the captivity of customs and social codes constructed by male autocracy. The novel maps how they choose to contest taboos created by patriarchal supremacy. Djebar calls upon women from all over the globe to represent and reflect on their cultural and locational situations and oppression, and speak and act against the marginalized position in which they live and work. She brings the subaltern women of Algeria to discourse and sows in them the capacity for speech and expression. Djebar's exploration of marginal characters challenges the patriarchal strictures and are given opportunity to redefine and recreatetheir subjectivity and identity.

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