A Daughter’s Call: In Memory of Assia Djebar

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First came a daughter’s e-mail that shot an arrow into my heart: “call me!” A continent away, miles away, worlds away, Assia Djebar was preparing to make her exit. I made the call, “You be sure to tell her she is loved”. A few days later, the friend who had sat with her through her last hours gently relayed the news. Bereft, we remained silent on the line a long time, anguish and grief and memories rustling along the telephone wire. Silent now “la grande dame”, the lady, ya Llala, our most powerful female voice in North Africa, the writer, the poet, the essayist, the war journalist, the stage director, the stage performer, the film-maker, the historian, the chronicler of wars, the generous friend; she who was supposed to outlive us...

Gone to the Ancestors during a Friday night, to be lain in the native land on the following Friday.

With her customary elegance and innate grace, she had chosen the most auspiciously sacred day in the Muslim faith to leave us. She wanted, whispered her daughter, “des adieux sans ostention” (“to say goodbye without ostentation”), in keeping with the sweetly tolerant Sunni faith she never abandoned. She had chosen to be accompanied by the music of Bartok she had used in her first film, La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua. Yet surrounded by men and women both, against the segregated tradition that allows only male
kin to perform the public ceremony, those bleak and sour men-only burials she had first described bitterly in her first short-story collection, “Les morts parlent” (Femmes d’Alger dans leurs appartements).¹

She would rest, looking out to sea, next to her father. In keeping with the names she had chosen for herself, she would console and protect the parent who had so long ago sent her on to another life, out from the harem. “Il y eut d’abord ma sortie du harem” she used to remind us, smiling a bit whimsically, speaking of French as the booty of war. The “haram” is that which is forbidden, but it is also that which is protected. Unbreechable ambivalence.² And to the memory of the Algerian school-teacher, who proudly walked his daughter to her first French school, she dedicated her discourse to the Académie française.

Upon formally welcoming her on 22th June 2005, as protocol required, Jean-Pierre Rémy, had praised her thus: “Assia, c’est la consolation, et Djebar, l’intransigeance. Quel beau choix!” (your first name means consolation and Djebar means intransigeance. What beautiful choice). She had, she said, selected the first name in order to turn her gaze Eastward, “je voulais rester tournée vers l’Orient, et vers l’Égypte” (I meant to keep myself turned, looking Eastward, and toward Egypt).³ A figure honored in Islam, Assia was the Pharaoh’s young wife who had rescued Moses from the bulrushes: protected and consoled. In sweet homage obituary, Egypt called her “a major writer” and praised her Fantasia as “a milestone.”⁴ But the young would-be writer also knew that “assia”, in dialectal Arabic, was the everyday name for the edelweiss, little flower of immortality otherwise called, in French, “immortelle.” There is satisfaction in knowing that, half a century later upon her election

² French as the booty of war; cf. “Du français comme du butin”, Quinzaine littéraire 1985 nº436: 16-31
⁴ Obituary of 14 Feb. 2015 by Mohamed Samawy, in the English internet version of the Egyptian independent Al-Masry Al-youm daily.
to the Académie, she would be henceforth entitled to the honorific
title of “immortelle.” The Parisian newspaper Le Figaro, thus
announced her passing on 7 February “Une Immortelle disparaît.”

As she explained during the long interviews made to accompany
the American translation of Femmes, the last name was selected on
impulse. Moved by the euphonious beauty of the first name, “la
beauté de ce long ‘A féminin répété” (the beauty of this extended
feminine alliteration), she wanted a match, two syllables for
harmony. She selected her last name even before knowing what it
meant, while her fiancé recited the 99 names of Allah, inside the
famous Parisian taxi that hurtled them to the signing of her first
contract. She has often joked that, had they not been stuck in traffic,
she might not have had time to choose: si non è vero è ben trovato.
The resulting French transliteration yielded both “Jabbar”: one who
is mighty and dedicated, “intransigent”; and “Jabir”: the one who
protects. But becoming a member of the most prestigious French
body did not mean blind admiration. Her elegant response of 22
June, printed in full and immediately on the Académie’s website,
did not shy from reminding the colonizer that he still had deeds to
atone for: “Le colonialisme vécu au jour le jour par nos ancêtres,
sur quatre générations au moins, a été une immense plaie!” (This
colonialism, lived through day after day by our ancestors, this over
at least four generations, was but an immense festering wound).
Among the French writers she admired, citing Rabelais and Diderot,
and slipping in Césaire’s indictment of colonialism, she inserted
such African scholars as Averroes, “the Andalusian”, Apuleus, the
comic, Tertullian, the woman-hater. But left pride of place to
Augustine of Thagaste, the Christian convert, bishop of Hippo,
Berber by birth, whom she was to include in the fourth novel of the
projected quaternt in progress. These luminaries belonged by right
to the common patrimony of the West and, she added, should be
reverently taught to all school children.

Thus, celebrated anywhere but in a homeland that never forgave:
France’s President Hollande conveyed his condolences within hours
of February 7, well before Algeria’s Bouteflika did. Nor did Algeria
see fit to give her the national funeral she deserved. No surprise to
those who knew that she had no patience for those aging
“apparatchiks” she had herself known so well in her Tunisian and
Moroccan exiles during the long eight years of the war against the French. Now grown fat on plentiful desert oil, announcing “grands travaux” of Pharaonic pretensions that never came to pass, they let their people starve. Such contempt may have cost her the Nobel Prize, since she would have had to suffer their official presence, as the Oslo protocol required.

The wound ran deep

At the announcement of her passing, Algerians suddenly discovered she was famous, celebrated by young and old all over the world. Back home, neither bookstore nor library had a single work of hers. Mentions of hundreds of graduates theses, hundreds of academic colloquia, as well as tear-stained hommages on social media poured all over the internet, praising “une puissante lumière de la littérature … immense écrivain … prodigieuse éclaireuse” (a powerful literary light … immense writer … prodigious beacon). Not one of her fine novels had ever been suggested high-school reading, nor were either of her two films ever made available. The wound ran deep.

Filmed throughout 1976-77 in the hinterland of the Chenoua mountains that was her mother’s ancestral place, *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* had been produced for the state when Djebar was still a civil servant. It made full use of Algeria’s multiglossic condition, interweaving French, classical Arabic, dialectal Algerian, and mountain Berber. It was anchored by a series of interviews of former female participants in the war against the French who, Djebar often said, because she was her mother’s daughter, trusted her and spoke freely. The regime expected a paean to national heroism, as did the public. Shown only once in downtown Algiers in 1978, it was promptly banned. More painful for the director presenting it, she was heckled by the young people she had hoped to reach. Calling it unpatriotic, they were offended.

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5 A small example of many such outputs, Karim Amellal, “hommages des écrivains amazigh” in chouchou.com, dated 7 February 2015.
by its dreamy oneiric visuals and fluidly looping narratives that made pointed references to pre-colonial internecine wars, as well as deconstructed the first colonial war of the 1830s, Abdel Kader’s resistance and his 1847 surrender: nothing heroic, but the very messy past rubbing against the grain of the socialist paradise. Years later, Djebar still smarted. As the director of the Center for Francophone Studies of Louisiana State University, presiding over a film colloquium honoring Trinh Miên Ha and Yvonne Rainer, whom she had invited, she insisted on the matter of non-linear structure: “un film ne doit pas raconter” (film must not narrate).

Nouba was this wildly experimental journey into a collective memory of pain and grief denied. Many years later, Le Blanc de l’Algérie (Paris: Albin Michel 1995), a threnody to murdered friends, would cover the same ground.

Given the ten “black years” of the brutal civil war of the 1990s, this first film was prescient. Presented as an independent to the 1979 Venice Biennale Film Festival, because Algeria had refused her official sponsorship, she won the prize, Grand Prix de la Critique internationale; a moment of poetic justice. Hereafter banned from filming in her own country, she had to drop the next project. Followed ten years of self-censored silence and exile. If literature has flourished, cinema certainly lost. But whatever the medium, her poetics never shifted. Interviewed on French radio about her last work, Nulle part dans la maison de mon père (Acte Sud, 2007), she insisted that it was decidedly not an autobiography because it did not move along a clear and linear teleological purpose; but, like memory, looped over and over itself. Djebar’s difficult experimental poetics have been consistent to the end.

By the time of her death, Assia Djebar had been writing for nearly sixty years. Written when she was 19 and published weeks before she turned twenty, La Soif (Julliard, 1956) was preceded by a long “historical novel”, some hundred pages she later lost. Trained as a historian, she has taught at universities on three continents, Africa, America, Europe; and earned many an honorary doctoral title: Vienna in Austria (1995); Concordia in Canada (2002). Under her real name, Fatima-Zhora Imalhayêne, she has also obtained a “real” one at the Université Paul Valéry in Montpellier (1999), a doctorate in French Literature and Civilization. Her rather unusual
dissertation consisted in the culling and gathering of her hitherto unpublished or hard to find lectures, a trove that she turned into a reasoned critique of her own poetics. Within months, it was produced as a book jointly published in France and Canada.6

The 1990s were maelstrom years for her country and for herself. Ces Voix qui m’assiègent came out in a white heat of furious writing and multiple professional commitments. Living on and off airplanes, it seemed, she was teaching and directing graduate research while at the helm of the Center for Francophone Studies at Louisiana State University in Baton-Rouge; writing what would become the book of the oratorio or musical drama, Filles d’Ismaël dans le vent et la tempête (unpublished); then seeing to costumes and staging in Europe, as well as finding the music and a musical director in Italy. Defined as musical drama in five acts and 25 tableaux, it was eventually rehearsed in Holland, its première put off because of a threatened fatwa against its Moslem actresses and director, Djebar herself, in Amsterdam. Eventually, brave souls staged it twice with her in Italy in September 2000.

Such dedicated output garnered major international prizes, including the Maurice Maeterlink Prize in Belgium (1991); the Neustadt Prize in the U.S. (1996); the Prix Yourcenar (Boston University, 1997), fitting since Marguerite Yourcenar was the first non-French born woman admitted to the Académie française; the Palmi Prize of Italy (1998); the Peace Prize at the Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany (2002). She was a member of at least two “academies”: the Belgian Académie royale de langue française (1999) and the French Académie française (2006). The world famous Neustadt Prize awarded by the University of Oklahoma’s journal, World Literature Today, to writers of undaunted courage (Ngugi and Maryse Condé were so honored) was generally considered the good luck forerunner to a Nobel. Djebar narrowly missed, coming twice in second place, to Austria’s Elfriede Jelinek in 2004 and Le Clézio in 2008. Whether Algeria’s minister of culture was consulted as protocol required, history does not say.

At memory’s gate
This prodigious corpus (even lackadaisical Wikipedia lists 19 books plus 2 films but forgets the oratorio) has been translated in well over a dozen languages, including Turkish, Russian, Swedish, Bosnian, Slovene and Japanese, except into her own until now. It was a prospect she had simultaneously desired and resisted because she did not want her writing “tampered with.” Her intuitive reluctance increased as she resumed her own studies, plunging with scholar friends into classical Arabic texts for the preparation of Loin de Médine. She knew the varieties of contemporary registers in the Middle-East as well as the intractability of the multi-glossic Algerian dialectals. To tilt her world toward a Tunisian register or a Syrian register, as had once been proposed, worried her. By 2014, her very last, melancholy and overtly autobiographical book was finally distributed in her homeland with her permission. First reprinted in French, then translated under a national aegis, it was an all-too belated honor. For Algerian readers, Nulle part dans la maison de mon père became “Bawabat eddhikrayat”, a phrase that translates somewhat pedestrianly as “aux portes des souvenirs” in French. Or, perhaps more elegantly, in English, “at memory’s gate”.

In response to the spontaneous public sorrow during the national book fair in Algeria, as readers and writers expressed outrage that such a great writer should be so long neglected in her own country, a prize has been created, with a generous award to be distributed at the next convening of the national book fair in November 2015. Under the aegis of Salon national du livre, the Prix Assia Djebar will recognize the best work in French, or Arabic or Amazigh, the language of her forebears. Her simple grave bears two simple white marble markers. Two lines, in two scripts, on one stela: Assia Djebar and Fatma-Zhora Imalhayêne. The second stela is engraved with a line often repeated: “J’écris comme tant d’autres femmes écrivains algériennes avec un

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sentiment d’urgence contre la régression et la mysogynie” (I write as do so many other Algerian women writers, with a feeling of urgency against regression and misogyny).

Two white marble plaques. Without ostentation, said the daughter, engraved as her mother had wanted. Wherever you stand in Cherchell cemetery, you can hear the sea.