

Seeds of Change: Assia Djebar's *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*/ *Children of the New World*: a novel of the Algerian War

Robert Mortimer
Université de Haverford, USA

Résumé:

Examining Djebar's third novel, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*, (*Children of the New World: A Novel of the Algerian War*), her first to depict the Algerian Revolution, I argue that it not only reveals the political, feminist, and aesthetic elements that define her later work, but is a well-crafted text that is politically correct in its anti-colonial stance, subversive in its feminist objectives; it expresses Djebar's belief that Algerian independence alone will not liberate women. The novelist discerns a significant gender gap regarding the goals of liberation: Algerian men struggle against French colonialism, women seek agency within their family and society and political independence from France. In my analysis, I ground the text historically (Amrane-Minne), and apply anti-colonial and feminist theory (Fanon; Mernissi).

Assia Djebar published four novels, a play, and a collection of poetry before achieving international recognition in the 1980s with her collection of short stories, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980) and her novel, *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985).¹ Yet numerous critics make no mention of her earlier writings in their study of her work.² As Clarisse Zimra notes in her afterward to *Children of the New World*, (the English translation of *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*), the lack of critical recognition accorded Djebar's pre-1980 texts has given readers an incomplete picture of her oeuvre.³ It is fitting to return to Djebar's early texts, examining them for thematic and stylistic elements that will add to, if not complete, the picture.

Djebar's third novel, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*, (*Children of the New World: A Novel of the Algerian War*) is her first to treat events of the Algerian Revolution. A fresco of Algeria in the throes of

war, it is overtly anti-colonial and feminist, supportive of Algeria's struggle for independence from France, and critical of the oppressive nature of indigenous patriarchy. Exploring the process of decolonization in Algeria, the writer discerns a significant gender gap between Algerian men and women: men struggle to throw off the yoke of French colonialism; women, the captives of a colonial structure and an indigenous patriarchy, seek agency within their family and society as well as political independence from the colonial power. The narrative structure of the novel marks the beginning of the fragmented, multiple voiced narrative for which the novelist has come to be known.

In this essay, I argue that the novel not only provides scholars with "germinating seeds," political, feminist, and aesthetic elements that will define her later work, but merits greater attention in the classroom as a well-crafted, thoughtful text that is politically correct in its anti-colonial stance, yet subversive in its feminist objectives; it expresses the writer's belief that Algerian independence alone will not liberate women.

Written in 1960 as the Algerian War raged, and published in 1962, the year the war for independence came to an end, the novel is constructed as a *témoignage*, a realistic chronicle of one day's events in Blida, a small city southwest of Algiers. The date is May 24, 1956, two years into the independence struggle. As the story unfolds, twenty characters appear, men and women connected to one another by family ties. Charting the intricate meshing of their lives, the novel offers readers a panoramic view of a community awakening to the psychological demands of revolution, yet unable to predict its eventual outcome.

My pedagogical approach is to situate the text historically, bringing anti-colonial and feminist theory into the discussion. I introduce the novel by focusing on the opening chapter. It gives readers a panoramic view of the war witnessed by women, cloistered in their homes:

Il arrive aux femmes qui, dans la fraîcheur de leur chambre, ne bougent pas, de se tendre un instant, les yeux grands ouverts, le regard fixe, avec une palpitation enfantine, et d'imaginer leur mari debout

contre un mur, au soleil de midi, secoué sans doute d'une peur qu'il doit s'efforcer de ne point révéler, mais que l'épouse retrouve en lui, le soir lorsque tout est fini, que la montagne reprend sa nudité orgueilleuse,... (16).

In the coolness of their room, the women sometimes don't move; they grow tense momentarily, eyes wide, staring into space, hearts pounding like those of the children as each imagines her husband up against a wall in the sun at high noon, no doubt shaking with a fear that he must make every effort to conceal. But the wife recognizes it at night, when everything is over, when the mountain once again assumes its arrogant nakedness,... (3)

Significantly, Djebbar illustrates the gap between male and female experiences in spatial terms: women witness the devastation sheltered within their homes as men face danger directly in streets patrolled by the French army. She reinforces the sense of women's immobility by depicting them huddled in their rooms as they watch "la montagne dans les feux de la lutte,"(13) "the mountain under fire"(3). As descriptive passages transmit the immediate effect of the war upon the population, they reveal the reasons for women's inability to act. A rigid patriarchal society that cloisters women, requiring their submission, and promoting passivity in the formative years, prevents their emotional and political maturity. The war, however, is a catalyst for change.

Rather than situate all her female characters within confined space, defining Algerian women as immobile individuals, Djebbar broadens the social spectrum as the text progresses to include "modern" as well as "traditional" women, all of whom are forced to meet new challenges. Although the latter remain in closed interiors, the former have access to the city. However, boundaries between closed and open spaces are often porous; women who become militants, in cities or in the countryside, may later find themselves confined to another form of enclosure, to life behind prison walls when captured by the French military.

Readers find that as the war gains intensity, with arrests, torture, some individuals and families fleeing the war zone, others joining the resistance, women are forced to adopt new strategies for survival. For

example, when men leave home to join the resistance, are imprisoned, or killed, women assume greater authority within their families: «...il se trouve toujours une femme, jeune, vieille, peu importe, qui prend la direction du chœur. (14)“... there is always one woman--young, old, it makes no difference-- , who conducts the choir.”(2).

To present a cross section of Algerian women, Djébar introduces the following characters: Salima, an imprisoned militant; Hassiba, a militant about to join the revolutionaries in the countryside; Suzanne, a French intellectual who espouses the anti-colonial cause; Touma, a prostitute; Amna, an Algerian police officer's wife; Cherifa, a militant's wife; Lila, a university student whose husband has joined the underground. Introducing multiple characters of different backgrounds, Djébar depicts women who choose to participate in the revolution (Salima, Hassiba), and others who are thrust into new, sometimes dangerous situations (Amna, Cherifa, Lila). Whether by choice or circumstance, all are swept up by the winds of political change, and required to react to them. In this regard, Amna, when challenged by her husband to denounce her neighbor, lies to him, (never having deceived him before), then warns the militant's wife of his imminent arrest. Cherifa immediately sets out across town to warn her husband and urge him to flee:

Elle a oublié le danger lui-même; peut-être n'est-ce pas lui, en vérité qui l'a poussée, mais un désir sournois de savoir soudain si elle ne peut être vouée qu'à l'attente dans sa chambre, à la patience et à l'amour. Ainsi, elle a traversé la ville entière, cette présence pour elle aux yeux multiples, hostiles et au terme de cette marche, elle a découvert qu'elle n'est pas seulement une proie pour la curiosité des mâles—une forme qui passe, mystère du voile que le premier regard sollicite, faiblesse fascinante qu'on finit par haïr et sur laquelle on crache—non, elle a existé.» (201-2)

She'd forgotten the danger itself. In truth, it's perhaps not that which drove her, but rather a gnawing desire to suddenly know whether she could really spend her life waiting in her room, in patience and love. That's why she crossed the entire town, bared her presence to so many hostile eyes, and at the end of her trek discovered that she was not only a prey for the curiosity of men—a passing shape,

the mystery of the veil accosted by the first glance, a fascinating weakness that ends up being hated and spat upon—no, she now knows that she has existed.” (143)

Class discussion of this passage focuses on Cherifa’s growing sense of self. Students find that she not only meets the challenge of venturing into public space alone, but understands the transformative effect of participating in the political struggle: «...toutes ces sensations violentes qui ont alimenté sa volonté de plus en plus tendue et qui, de plus en plus, la découvraient à elle-même, l’ont introduite dans un état second.»(201) “All the violent emotions that had fed her increasingly strained willpower and that had revealed her temperament, pushed her beyond herself.” (143)

Examining the interplay between a veiled woman in the streets of Blida and the hostile eyes of her countrymen, students become aware that Djebbar alerts her readers to traditional male resistance to women’s freedom of movement in public space. In this vein, the city street becomes a metaphor for women’s possibilities and limitations. Cherifa gains a new sense of self-worth by venturing into public space, but Touma dies in the street, murdered by a brother committed to cleansing the shame that her “loose” behavior has cast upon her family. Since FLN revolutionaries have made this “honor killing” a requirement for the young man to join their cell, the implementation of an archaic code, as Evelyne Accad aptly notes, represents a disquieting omen for women’s rights in postcolonial Algeria (807). The critic reiterates the novelist’s concern that women’s rights remain in jeopardy. Algerian women, Djebbar warns, face an indigenous patriarchal structure so deeply rooted it may not change with independence; women must be prepared to continue the struggle.

Broadening the social spectrum of Algerian women by introducing Lila, a young woman whose education and worldliness contrast vividly with Cherifa’s life experiences, Djebbar exposes their similarities as well as their differences. Lila, like Cherifa, confronts a dangerous political situation not of her making. Once her husband joins the underground, she chooses to live alone. When she provides refuge for her young cousin, a rebel on the run, she is arrested for harboring a fugitive. She intends to resist her interrogators in prison, confronting

her challenge as courageously as Cherifa met hers. Each woman faces a different test; both mature politically. Yet, Djébar is careful to show their evolution in realistic terms; they awaken to political action in measured steps. Lila chooses not to follow her husband into the *maquis*. Cherifa, upon learning from her husband that women are actively engaged in the rebellion, does not ask to join him either; she will wait patiently for his return, but with a greater sense of self.

Significantly, the parallel but distinct journeys of Cherifa and Lila toward self-knowledge and political engagement foreshadow the eventual bonding between Hajila, the “traditional” woman and Isma, the “modern” woman in Djébar’s later novel, *Ombre Sultane (A Sister to Scheherazade)*. In that text, Isma, a well-educated professional Algerian woman who had married and then left the man of her choice, helps Hajila, a woman trapped by poverty and illiteracy, break free from an unsatisfactory arranged marriage to the same man, which Isma herself had helped broker earlier. Watching Hajila defy overt oppression, Isma recalls her own struggle against patriarchal domination that was admittedly more subtle and indirect. Drawing upon a childhood episode, the memory of her father’s anger at her inadvertent display of bare legs on a fairground swing, Isma comes to understand that she and Hajila share common ground. Thus, Hajila’s revolt supports Isma’s quest for self-understanding.

Reminding her readers that Scheherazade, storyteller of the *Arabian Nights*, needs the help of her sister, Dinarzade, to succeed in telling tales so inventive the Sultan spares her life, Djébar reconfigures the legendary complicity between sisters in the relationship between Isma, the largely autobiographical self, and Hajila, the primarily fictional self. In this regard, if Lila prefigures Isma, Djébar’s semi-autobiographical protagonist of *L’amour, la fantasia* and *Ombre Sultane*, the relationship between Isma and her father depicted in *L’amour, la fantasia* (further elaborated in *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*), begins here as the narrator describes an Algerian father proudly walking his daughter to school: “Lila se souvient de son père qui lui portait son cartable et la conduisait, main dans la main, à l’école primaire,...”(182). [”Lila

remembers that her father used to carry her book bag and, her hand in his, take her to elementary school,...” (129)].⁴

Although some characters, relationships, and events depicted in this novel recur in later texts, others do not. For example, the friendship between Lila and her cousin Bachir, remains unique. Lila, having experienced love for her husband, Ali, as a stifling emotion-- «le faisceau de liens que l'emprisonnait à Ali» (251) “the cluster of links that enslaved her to Ali” (183)--comes to value her friendship with her cousin as a sentiment as profound as romantic love. After his death, she recalls with nostalgia their last night in her apartment, talking until dawn: «Parler avec transparence, avec palpitation, au cœur de la nuit, quelles belles heures cela faisait! elle y pensa ensuite, bien plus tard» (251). “Speaking honestly, with passion, in the deep of the night—those were beautiful hours she realized, later on, much later” (182)... Their relationship, however, is destroyed by war: Bachir is assassinated, Lila imprisoned. We debate the following question in class: Is Djebbar telling readers that true friendship between a man and a woman can rarely, if ever, survive?

Examining the novel's structure and narrative strategies, Djebbar's readers finds a structure far more complex than the linear first person narrative of the first two novels, *La Soif* and *Les Impatients*, and narrative strategies she had not implemented in her previous works. Djebbar has explained that the multiplicity of characters, use of flashback, and unity of time and place were new to her.⁵ By depicting multiple female characters with different viewpoints, she introduces a gendered perspective that offers a nuanced interpretation of Algerian women's capabilities and limitations, and most importantly, eschews any reductive analysis. In this vein, Gordon Bigelow suggests that the analysis of gender systems that emerges in the novel leads to a more complex analysis of colonial Algeria's cultural practices and historical transformation than either Frantz Fanon or Pierre Bourdieu provide in their theoretical writings (Bigelow, 14). Although they, like Djebbar, represent the anti-colonial struggle as a process that destabilizes the foundations of identity and community, the novelist, he argues, understands most fully the strong claim of imbedded cultural norms upon Algerian

society, particularly those related to gender. Thus, if the tone of the novel is optimistic, conveying the belief that the colonized will win the war, this optimism remains nuanced, particularly in the realm of women's rights.

The most important stylistic innovation, however, is Djébar's use of fragmentation, a narrative device she further develops in *L'amour, la fantasia*. She dwells on each character briefly, moving between chapters entitled with different characters' names. As characters articulate their inner thoughts, their reflections form a succession of incomplete fragments. Jane Hiddleston notes in this regard that the novel offers a collective vision of modern Algerian women whose voices are neither definitive nor fully evolved (Hiddleston, 40). I suggest to my students that Djébar chooses a narrative strategy that conveys the sense of a revolution in the making. In 1956, Algeria is in the throes of a revolution; men and women caught up in the conflict have not yet fully assimilated an experience that will presumably lead them to greater political and emotional maturity. Hence, the fragmented form captures the drama of one moment in history, one day's events reflecting a volatile, rapidly changing political struggle.

As we probe the effect of the novelist's choice of the fresco, I ask the class to consider whether the text that resists the obvious stereotype of the courageous male combatant vs. the timid female observer nevertheless creates stereotypes through fragmentation, perhaps by sketching each character too briefly. This question leads some students to voice the opinion that Djébar avoids stereotypes by portraying her characters in varying stages of psychological awakening. They note, for example, that Cherifa's personal transformation begins when she leaves her first husband, an act of rebellion and self-affirmation that predates by several years her decision to cross town to warn her second husband of his imminent arrest.

As noted earlier, I approach the text by situating it historically. To ground Djébar's fictional world in the reality that subtends it, I reference Danièle Djamila Amrane-Minne's work on Algerian women's active participation in the liberation struggle. The Algerian historian's study combines personal testimony with archival research:

documentation from the Algerian ministry's files on the combatants, the Algerian press of the period, and her collection of eighty-eight interviews with Algerian women combatants.⁶ In the theoretical realm, Frantz Fanon's essay, "L'Algérie se dévoile, ("Algeria Unveiled"), in *L'an V de la révolution algérienne (A Dying Colonialism)*, provides a provocative introduction to a discussion of women's empowerment. In his analysis of the changing significance of Algerian women's veiling practices during this period, Fanon asserts that the revolutionary experience will radically transform individuals engaged in it. Although Djébar depicts Cherifa's journey as such a transformational experience, she cautions against the exaggerated optimism Fanon expresses. In this regard, Fatima Mernissi's analysis of the division between the public universe of the *umma*, the realm of men, and the domestic universe of women, helps students grasp the complexity of the struggle for women's rights in a society divided by gender. The Moroccan sociologist explains that spatial rules are so fundamental to the Muslim social order they cannot be easily dismantled.

To bring the immediacy of the Algerian War into the classroom and further illustrate the emergence of women in public space, I often show *The Battle of Algiers* in conjunction with this text. As students compare the representation of Algerian men and women in Djébar's novel with Gillo Pontecorvo's film, they recognize women's important contribution to the war effort. Text and film combine to destroy the stereotype of war as an exclusively masculine activity, and Algerian women as bystanders to their nation's history.

Before concluding our analysis of the work, I pose a question that may be formulated as an essay topic. Does this anti-colonial novel speak to today's readers, and if so, why? The answer, students find, lies in its focus on emerging female empowerment as women move into new situations, and enter new spaces. Having followed Djébar's characters through difficult emotional transitions in trying times, they now view Algerian women's struggle against patriarchal domination with greater clarity and compassion, thereby rejecting the stereotype of the forever subjugated and submissive Muslim woman. Djébar's novel is clearly relevant to students, particularly young women, seeking their way in today's world. Given this positive feedback, I

urge colleagues to teach this text, which, by skillfully articulating women's varied perspectives on one of the most crucial anti-colonial wars of our times, confirmed Assia Djebar as a leading Algerian writer.

Notes:

1- These include: *La Soif* (Paris: Julliard, 1957); *Les Impatients* (Paris: Julliard, 1958); *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (Paris: Julliard, 1962); *Les Alouettes naïves* (Paris: Julliard, 1969), *Rouge l'aube* (Algiers: SNED, 1969); *Poèmes pour l'Algérie heureuse* (Algiers: SNED, 1969).

2- Anna Rocca, Soheila Kian, and Nicholas Harrison are among these critics.

3- Zimra, "Afterward," 203. For studies of the text, see Accad, Mohammedi-Tabti, and Bigelow.

4- Djebar stated in an interview with Wadi Bouzar, "La position de Lila, à côté et en même temps dedans et témoin, c'est un peu moi" [Lila's position, on the periphery and at the same time within and a witness, that's somewhat me" (160)].

5- Interview with Mildred Mortimer, *Research in African Literatures* 19.2 (Summer 1988):198.

6- Amrane-Minne's historical studies have not been translated into English. For classes in English, I suggest her article, "Women and Politics in Algeria from the War of Independence to our Day," *Research in African Literatures* 30.3 (1999): 62-77.