

In the Father's House: Language and Violence in the Work of Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar

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Abstract

This essay examines autobiographical writing by two women who grew up in colonial Algeria; it considers how the relationship between fathers and daughters is marked by linguistic conflict. For each of these writers, language is not a simple tool, but instead a problematic inheritance that shapes her world and her relationship with her father. Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar, who were children in colonial Algeria of the late 1940s and early 1950s, examine their relationships to Arabic and French in terms of their relationships with their families and in particular with their schoolteacher fathers. The fathers, who benefitted from French colonial education, fail to understand the different risks inherent for their daughters in transgressing conservative community and linguistic boundaries. Each writer, even as she acknowledges the benefits of the colonizer's language, also describes the language as a scene of violent trauma for which she holds her father responsible. With language and paternal love so tightly entwined, this essay argues that even in highly politicized colonial contexts, the national value of a language can only be understood if the familial and personal value of the language is also taken into account.

Keywords: women's writing, language, family, postcolonial writing, fathers and daughters, education.

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Babanın Evinde: Assia Djebar'ın ve Leïla Sebbar'ın Yazılarında Dil ve Şiddet

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Öz

Bu makale, kolonyal Cezayir'de büyüyen iki kadının otobiyografik yazılarını inceliyor ve babalar ve kızları arasındaki ilişkilerin nasıl dilsel çatışmalardan etkilendiğini irdeliyor. Her iki yazar için de dil sade bir araç değil, aksine babalarıyla olan ilişkilerini ve dünyalarını şekillendiren problemleri bir mirastır. Assia Djebar ve Leïla Sebbar 1940larda ve 1950lerde Cezayir'de daha çocukken, aileleriyle ve özellikle öğretmen olan babalarıyla olan ilişkilerinin etkisinde, Arapçayla ve Fransızcayla olan ilişkilerini inceliyorlar. Kolonyal bir eğitimden geçmiş olan babaları, kızlarının tutucu bir topluma karşı geldiklerinde ve dilsel sınırları zorladıklarında göğüslemek zorunda oldukları riskleri anlayamıyorlar. Her iki yazar da, kolonyal dilin avantajlarını kabul etmelerine rağmen, babalarını sorumlu tuttıkları dil miraslarını travmatik bir alan olarak tanımlıyorlar. Dil ve baba sevgisi birbiri ile o kadar iç içe geçmiş ki, burada anlatılan gibi oldukça siyasallaşmış kolonyal bir bağlamda bile, dilin ulusal değeri ancak ailevi ve kişisel değeri de dikkate alarak anlaşılabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kadın otobiyografik yazılar, dil, aile, post-kolonyal eserler, babalar ve kızları, eğitim.

Introduction

For many writers from francophone North Africa language is not a simple tool, but inevitably intertwines ideas of community belonging and family with the individual's use of language, whether French, Arabic or Berber. In the context of colonial Algeria with little left of traditional Arabic educational institutions, a writer's use of French was perhaps unavoidable but nonetheless suggested complicity with the colonizing culture. Writers Assia Djébar and Leïla Sebbar, who were both children in colonial Algeria of the late 1940s and early 1950s, write about their relationships to Arabic and French in terms of their relationships to their families and in particular to their school teacher fathers. For each writer, the language she uses becomes a scene of violence and trauma, for which she holds her father responsible. This essay will examine each writer's ambivalent desire both to put her father on trial for this trauma and also to find him innocent. Most interestingly, language is the terrain on which this accounting takes place; for each writer, language is not simply a tool to express violence, but actually inflicts violence on the writers' autobiographical selves.

Assia Djébar and Leïla Sebbar

Assia Djébar, born in 1936, whose parents were both Arabic-speaking Algerians¹, describes the gift of French from her father as a gift of love, but one that unexpectedly causes great pain. Leïla Sebbar, born in 1941, the daughter of an Algerian father and a French mother, speaks of the loss of never having learned Arabic, her father tongue, and thus of her confrontation as a stranger with a language that might be viewed as her rightful inheritance. Despite significant differences in the work of the two writers, both describe access to a particular language as something that affects them physically and that harms their family relations. This personal harm takes place in the context of the real physical violence of colonial Algeria. Accordingly, it is difficult to consider the individual writer's relationship to a given language, and through it, the relationship with her father, without also considering the political and historical violence in which that relationship takes place. Indeed, in nearly all of her work, Djébar interweaves individual stories, including her own, with histories of Algeria, from its invasion by the first French colonizers in the nineteenth century to the war of Independence and the civil war of the 1990s. Sebbar's approach to the history of the country in which she grew up is more oblique, but the violence she experienced is certainly related to the conflict created by the colonial context and her own mixed heritage. For both writers, the presence of history is always mediated through the discussion of language and family.

Nearly all of Djébar's writing is concerned in one way or another with the position of women within Algerian society and the importance of education (which is nearly always a French education) to their ability to act and move freely within that society. Two of her works, however, focus on the role of her father and the French language in making possible her own individual freedom. The first, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985, translated as *Fantasia*, an Algerian

Cavalcade, 1992), has been described as “[the] pivotal text for understanding the entirety of [her] work]” (Donadey, 2008: 1)², according to the introduction to a special issue of *L’Esprit Créateur* devoted solely to this novel. The second, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* [Nowhere in the house of my father] (2007)³, published more than twenty years later returns to this specific connection between family and language. Although other works take up these issues from time to time, it is these two that deal with them in a sustained manner and will thus be the focus of this discussion of Djébar’s writing. These works are also significant because of the position they occupy relative to Djébar’s other work. She initially wrote four novels in the 1950s and 60s and then largely abandoned writing for a decade, while she produced two films. *Fantasia*, an Algerian Cavalcade was the first work she published after this hiatus and the first of her books to deal openly with autobiographical themes. *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* takes up many of the issues raised in the earlier work, but with an even greater focus on the autobiographical and less emphasis on the historical and political.

In *Fantasia*, an Algerian Cavalcade, a significant thread of Djébar’s narrative concerns how her father ensured that she would learn French and the conflict it caused her. Although the narrator acknowledges the opportunities provided by her French education, among which she emphasizes the freedom to leave the home unveiled⁴, she also laments what she sees as a separation from the non-French speaking women of her family, especially her mother. She describes French as her “stepmother” tongue and asks, “Which is my long-lost mother tongue, that left me standing and disappeared?... Mother-tongue, either idealized or unloved, neglected and left to fairground barkers and jailers!” (Djébar, 1992: 214). In this analogy between language and her mother, or stepmother, the narrator expresses her ambivalent feelings through a language of guilt and betrayal. She suggests that her mother (and mother tongue) has abandoned her (“left me standing”) but also that her father is responsible for having abandoned (“neglected”) the mother and her language to take on a new wife (and language), the “stepmother.” By leaving the mother at home, and according to the logic of the text, leaving the mother herself, the father renews each day his relation with another language, and by association, another woman. By learning this second language, the daughter becomes complicit with the father, as her text makes it appear that she must choose between languages and thus between parents. She charges herself with betraying her mother: “[I]sn’t it my ‘duty’ to stay behind with my peers in the gynaeceum?” (Djébar, 1992: 213). But she values too highly the freedom accorded her by her French education to do anything but continually reaffirm the symbolic abandonment of her mother.

The narrator of Djébar’s novel writes that it was a French education that allowed her father to pull himself out of poverty, an undeniable benefit. When he takes her to school and exposes her to the culture and education available only by crossing the masculine-marked space outside the home, she describes the experience as akin to being given away to another man and another home as

though she were “forced into a ‘marriage’ too young” (Djébar, 1992: 213). Djébar also describes her French education as being delivered over to an enemy camp, thus marking both her and her father with the sign of a possible treason. In this complex novel, which intertwines autobiographical episodes, graphic written accounts of colonial violence, and the oral stories of veterans of the Independence War, Djébar’s description of learning French as being turned over to the enemy camp reinforces the image of language not only as a scene of war, but also as a scene of family conflict and of rupture between father and daughter and a scene of sexual danger. The education that takes the daughter away from the women of her family and their traditional roles but brings her closer to her father will also take her away from him and his traditional protection. Once outside the walls of the gynaeceum and free to move about, she can also move away from her father’s authority. In Djébar’s subsequent writing, this will be a constant source of conflict in their relation. Anna Rocca, in an article on the father-daughter relationship sees this conflict embodied in the different roles Djébar’s father takes on: “père-juste” (just father) who liberates her from the harem, and “père-loi” (father-law) or “père-interdit” (father-prohibition) who embodies the law that seeks to regulate women’s bodies - and women’s words.

A fitting metaphor for this conflictual relationship is to be found in an image Djébar herself chooses: the tunic of Nessus, which is also the title of one of the chapters of *Fantasia*, an Algerian Cavalcade. According to the ancient myth, the centaur Nessus tries to abduct Hercules’s bride Deianeira. As the centaur flees with her, Hercules shoots an arrow and kills him. As he dies, Nessus tells Deianeira that if she takes some of his blood and puts it on a garment, whoever wears that garment will fall in love with her. Years later, when Hercules falls in love with another woman, Deianeira gives him the gift of a cloak with the centaur’s blood on it. Unbeknownst to Deianeira, however, the blood is poisoned, and when Hercules puts on the cloak, it adheres to his skin and causes him unbearable pain until he dies. For Djébar, French is a gift like the cloak. Given in love, it nonetheless causes enormous pain and cannot be removed. As much as it is a metaphor for cultural pain, it is also important that the love story between Hercules and Deianeira is transformed into the relationship between father and daughter, with many of the sexual overtones intact⁵. The father’s gesture could be expected to draw the daughter closer, but in light of jealous Deianeira’s gift, it must also be seen as an attempt to eliminate any other suitors. As Rocca notes, it is precisely the father’s involvement with language that keeps French from being a language in which Djébar can express her love for another man.

Djébar frequently writes of the companionship with her father. In *Fantasia* her narrator says, “[I]t was understood among my female cousins that I was privileged to be my father’s ‘favourite’” (Djébar, 1992: 214). She pursues this idea in *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*. From a very young age, he treats her as “almost a confidante” (Djébar, 2007: 74). He calls on her, for example, never to mention in front of her mother the death of her infant brother, in order

to protect her mother from being reminded of this old grief. Thus the roles of mother and daughter are reversed, with the young child put in the position of the mother who must protect her child-mother. She takes on a similar role when she accompanies or “guides” (Djebar, 2007: 15) her veiled mother across the city to the baths each week or to visit relatives. She feels “encumbered by an ambiguous responsibility that is too much for [her]” (Djebar, 2007: 16). The text suggests that her father assigns her this role, particularly that of *confidante*, because of their shared language, a language that allows her father to express himself without the emotional involvement of Arabic. It is only in French that her father can begin to speak of the loss of his infant son: “[T]o me alone, for the moment, you can speak in French, you let yourself go—oh, a little... To speak to me in Arabic, this Arabic that makes you stutter when your emotions oppress you, would have been in vain” (Djebar, 2007: 74). In Djebar’s case, her mother’s seclusion from public life and her lack of knowledge of French effectively leave Djebar in the position of public companion to her father⁶.

This image of the father elevating the daughter to the position of surrogate mother is familiar to readers of European literature, particularly of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most often occasioned by the literal loss of the mother, the daughter comes to occupy an ambiguous position that incorporates elements of wife, mother and daughter, where she may maintain the father’s household and look after younger siblings⁷. In this change of status, the daughter’s intellectual companionship with the father may be significant, as in Djebar’s relationship with her father, but even more crucially, the daughter must remain single, in other words, without any sexual identity. In nineteenth century novels, conflict with the father arises when a suitor proposes marriage. In Djebar’s narrative, a fiancé does appear and Djebar’s father does, in fact, miss her wedding, which due to the Independence War takes place in Paris. Even if it had taken place in Algeria, she doubts that he would have come. “[W]ould he even have faced my fiancé, whom he felt [...] was robbing him of his eldest daughter” (Djebar, 1992: 105). Her father also destroys the first letter she ever receives from a boy, in spite of the very proper and conventional, even intellectual, content of the letter. The sources of earlier conflicts with her father, however, suggest that more than the risk of a potential suitor, conflict arises out of moments when Djebar’s physical identity as female comes to the fore.

As can be seen in Djebar’s reflections on being given over to French, as an unwilling bride, it is in the intersection between language and sexuality that her relationship with her father becomes the most difficult. She tells, for example, how at the age of four or five, she was learning to ride a bicycle in the courtyard in front of their house with a slightly older boy, the son of her father’s French colleague. Her father returning home sees this, summons her inside and pronounces that he does not want his daughter riding a bike and showing her legs. Djebar’s memory fixes on his words in Arabic, “her legs.” Struck by the violence of his words, she writes that she has retained nothing but those two words, “vibrating like a steel arrow” (Djebar, 2007: 49). As with many narrations

of trauma, she returns to the scene many times, each time with slight variation, as though in the retelling, she might eventually come to understand it⁸. She describes the physical effect of his words on her body.

I remember this wound that he inflicted (perhaps, in fact, the only wound my father ever inflicted on me) as if he had tattooed me, even now as I write, more than a half-century later. [...] [It was] as though this uneasiness, this scratch, this verbal obscenity was going to paralyze me forever (Djébar, 2007: 51).

And indeed, as she recounts, she did not ride a bicycle again for years, even after her father's death. Djébar suggests, however, that more than the baring of her legs, her father was punishing her friendship with the French boy, even though, as Djébar notes, the boy and his widowed schoolteacher mother were close family friends, the only family of any of her father's colleagues ever invited to their home. Yet she seems to support the idea of the young boy's potential threat, as she describes his "warm and friendly voice, perhaps already loving" (Djébar, 2007: 56). In *L'amour, la fantasia* and *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, Djébar presents her father as the one who allowed her the freedom to circulate in the masculine space outside the home. Striking in this scene of the bicycle is the way that her father's words are described as taking away precisely that freedom of movement and reducing her to as a collection of body parts that must be hidden away. "I was offended that he had thus demarcated my person, taken from me something that did not belong to him" (Djébar, 2007: 51). His words punish her unwitting transgression of gender boundaries in such a way that she feels the physical effects on her body as a "scratch," a "wound" and a "tattoo."

Djébar describes two other episodes that contain echoes of this same anxiety about the exposure of her body. That these two scenes occur in the same chapter of *L'Amour, la fantasia* adds to their importance, as each draws attention to the other. The first mentioned only in passing describes the narrator's fear as an adolescent that her father might visit her at her French boarding school on a day when she had to wear shorts for a school sports activity: "How can I tell him that it's compulsory for me to wear shorts, in other words, I have to show my legs?" (Djébar, 1992: 179). While this fear and the scene of the bicycle might suggest that it is her exposure to a male gaze that scandalizes her father, other parts of her narrative suggest that the risk comes from her body crossing cultural lines. In a school sports activity, she is the only one who has "cousins who do not show their ankles or their arms, who do not even expose their faces" (Djébar, 1992: 179). As Connell argues in her essay on education and movement in Djébar's work, the young girl is caught "within a context of colonial as well as patriarchal rule" (2013: 296). However much her father opens the way for her to colonial education, her physical movement creates conflicts with his role as patriarch.

In another example, the short skirt required by the French school is obviously out of place for the Koranic lessons she attends after school. As she grew older,

she notes that it became increasingly difficult to sit cross-legged on the floor and keep her legs concealed under the skirt. Had she been dressed in the traditional loose pantaloons, she suggests her Koranic lessons might have continued longer. The juxtaposition of “these two different apprenticeships, undertaken simultaneously” (Djebar, 1992: 184) will be more than intellectual projects, but will involve her body in the acquisition of each language. Her father’s intervention would seem to be an attempt to interrupt that connection between body and language.

For Djebar, the break with Arabic is a break with her mother and the obligation to assume the same roles as her mother and other female relatives. By following her father, she has betrayed the women of her family, but she is in turn betrayed by her father. The father who braved tradition in order to enroll his daughter in a French school seems to turn against his daughter when she accepts the help of another male figure, even if it is only a child. If she has forsaken her role as a proper woman in her father’s family, he proves his ambivalence about allowing her a completely masculine freedom. A French education for her father had meant greater financial security and respect within the community, making him a better protector and provider for his family, thus reinforcing, rather than violating gender norms. As Djebar’s narrative shows, the conflict with her father that comes of contact with other male figures illustrates that a French education carries far different risks for a daughter.

For Sebbar, whose mother is French, it is not the acquisition of a language outside the family that separates her from an idealized time of oneness and belonging, as is the case for Djebar, but rather an exclusion from a very present language and family heritage. Whereas Djebar, knowing both French and Arabic, might choose one over the other, with all of the costs and benefits of that choice, Sebbar presents herself as only ever having had one language, literally her mother tongue French. The importance of language for Sebbar is evident in the titles of the two longer autobiographical works she has published: the extended 2003 essay, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* [I don’t speak the language of my father] (2003), and *Arabic, Like a Secret Song*⁹ (2015), a collection of essays, all but two of which were first published from 1998-2006 and subsequently brought together in the 2007 collection.

As is the case for Djebar, language is also a site of betrayal for Sebbar, a betrayal that leaves her “orphaned” and unprotected, as her father fails to transmit the family linguistic inheritance, represented by the small wooden slate her father used to practice writing in his childhood Koran lessons, “This precious board was passed from father to son, but my father’s oldest son won’t inherit it” (Sebbar, 2015: 44). Of course, Sebbar’s own language makes it clear that as a girl such inheritance was not intended for her in any case. In both France and Algeria of the 1940s and 1950s, the elder brother would be the most important heir of any family legacy, but apart from this reference to the slate, Sebbar’s text describes her sisters and brother as equally dispossessed. As her father fails to transmit his Arabic legacy to his children, he neglects not only a linguistic and cultural past, but also limits their links to a familial past and

present. Sebbar mentions several times how he never told his children “his people’s legends, or about Djha the sly little man who mocks the powerful and the despotic” (Sebbar, 2015: 44)¹⁰, but she also notes the lack of family stories and histories, especially concerning her parents’ life as a couple because “the story of the family saga [...] this story has no memory. No narrative, no legend, no mythology that breathes life into the young minds of the children born of these silent crossings” (Sebbar, 2015: 56). Her father refuses to tell the family’s past, and her lack of Arabic makes it impossible for her to ask her other paternal relatives since they speak only Arabic.

Sebbar’s experience of Arabic is twofold. Excluded from what she perceives as the reassuringly familiar and largely feminine language of her father’s mother and sisters, she is terrorized by the Arabic of the male-dominated streets, filled with violence and misunderstanding. With little or no knowledge of her father tongue, she can only focus on tone: she expresses a clear antipathy for this masculine language of the streets, sexualized and violent, the “language of sex” (Sebbar, 2003: 42), as she terms it. She shows this most dramatically as she describes the insults yelled at her and her sisters as they walked to school each day as children.

The walls could not stop the harmful echo of the insults poured out by the boys, the language they screamed, its harsh sound, was violent, obscene... Could these boys in the street have been my father’s sons with another wife? The cousin his mother might have chosen for him? (Sebbar, 2003: 31)

As noted above, Djebar writes of her father’s betrayal in linguistic terms as she describes how he abandons Arabic for French, which symbolically becomes his new wife and Djebar’s stepmother. Sebbar’s father, on the other hand, literally takes a French wife over the Algerian one that Sebbar imagines his mother might have chosen for him, thus effectively imagining her own non-existence. As significant as the harm of the insults shouted in the street, Sebbar is just as distressed by her father’s possible connection to the boys, which would make meaningless her distinction between feminized language of the family and masculinized language of the streets. She wonders whether he might have had sons like these boys had he not married a French woman, or if he himself might even have once been one of these boys, speaking their language: “As a child, did my father speak this brutal language? Did he used to yell in front of the French girls’ school?” (Sebbar, 2003: 106). Sebbar’s relationship to her father and her trust in him is shaped by the language she thinks he speaks. As if to reassure herself, she recalls what she has heard about his hours of classes at both the Koranic school and the French school and how he would arrive out of breath as he ran from one school to the other. Sebbar thus suggests that he had little time to shout at passing girls. A generation later, thinking of him as her father, she has to imagine that he was also ignorant of what his daughters faced on the way to school: “My father did not know, no, he did not know, otherwise, how could he have tolerated the words of his language, deadly, hurled as if from

a slingshot” (Sebbar, 2003: 37-38). Sebbar thus absolves him of guilt for the transgressions she had imagined him committing.

Sebbar’s narrative provides the possibility of exculpating her father by drawing a distinction between the Arabic spoken within the family and the Arabic of the streets. Given the gendered division of space in colonial Algeria, this might at first seem a distinction between feminine and masculine uses of the language. As she describes her father speaking Arabic with his female relatives, however, it becomes clear that the division is not one of gender but rather one of belonging versus exclusion: “My father’s language in his mother’s house is not the language of the boys who watch us, my sisters and me, on the way to school” (Sebbar, 2003: 106). Similarly, when Sebbar and her family are stopped at a checkpoint by independence forces during the Algerian war, she underscores a link between national community and language: if her father is able to speak the family language, the militants will know him as one of them. As she watches him from the car, she is relieved that his voice has taken on the tones, not of the street, but of his students’ mothers: “My father’s speech is not rough any more, its harshness has disappeared, I hear familiar sounds, almost those of the women in my father’s office when they come to see him about their sons” (Sebbar, 2003: 117). In order to pass the checkpoint, Sebbar’s father speaks the private, peaceful language of the family (and not solely of women), precisely the language to which Sebbar has no access. Language is thus marked as sign of belonging not only to one’s genealogical family but also to the aspiring national family—and therefore a means of avoiding violence. Sebbar’s father in this instance thus proves himself part of the community and not a traitor, as long as his French wife and French-speaking children remain silent. As non-Arabic speakers, neither Sebbar nor her mother would be able to claim the same community solidarity through language. Her parents’ decision to leave Algeria for France years after Algerian independence may well have been influenced by a growing gap between her father’s national family and the individual one of his own home.

Language is clearly a marker of belonging to a family and a community, but it can also mark one’s betrayal of a community. According to a young man in her narrative, Sebbar’s father “teaches the enemy’s language to our people’s boys, he’s an agent of colonialism, worse than the French teachers, he’s a traitor” (Sebbar, 2003: 53). About her siblings and herself, Sebbar speculates that her father sees them as outsiders rather than as his own children. “[H]e had to consider that we, his children, were foreigners, the daughters and son of the foreign woman [...] Enclosed in the citadel of the French language,” and cut off from “his people” (Sebbar, 2003: 31). Sebbar’s narrative holds her father accountable for his children’s separation from his family, as they are “born of his disloyal body, he broke the lineage, his children born in the language of their mother” (Sebbar, 2003: 20-21). One could very well substitute the word “country” for “language” in this sentence. Sebbar often refers to French as a physical space. One sees this, in particular, in her description of their home, which she speaks of as her “mother’s house”, “the French woman’s house,” and

as “little France,” thus marking the physical space of the home as a linguistic and national space.

Sebbar’s narrator experiences her exclusion from her father’s language as exclusion from family and community. But however violent her confrontation with her father’s language, what seems even more significant is her father’s silence and his inaction that allows Sebbar to be silenced:

[M]y father will never have known that the silence of his language in the Frenchwoman’s house turned into hellish words just outside the door, or that his daughters would be suffocated, dazed by the repeated violence of the Arabic word, the word of sex... I say, I write, “his daughters,” I should have written instead: me, suffocated, dazed... I have already noted our silence about this daily scene in the street, furious, where the inside of my body reels, and that of my sisters? I’ll never know, I know the deceit of silence, that mimics forgetfulness with such constancy... and the repeated denial that makes one doubt her own memory (Sebbar, 2003: 42).

The abusive language leaves a physical imprint (her body “reels” as though hit), but her family’s silence and apparent forgetting bring that violence into the domestic space of the family. In fact, the personal violence directed at her and her sisters -and the subsequent silence- is akin to the larger colonial setting in which relations between the colonizer and the colonized were often defined by violence (whether physical or cultural), a violence which for many years was largely ignored and silenced by the French¹¹. Years later, Sebbar will try to break this silence surrounding her own experiences by letting her father read what she has written of the insults, in other words by bringing the outside violence into the private space of the family: “A long time later, a very long time later, when my father in exile in my mother’s country and in the language he loves, he read what I wrote about how his language insulted us. He says nothing” (Sebbar, 2015: 46). That the bulk of this autobiographical work was published after the death of her father in 1997 suggests that she could overcome this enforced silence only after his death.

Sebbar’s writing suggests that she blames her father for his silences. The narrative leaves little doubt that silence about what she experienced in the streets, as well as the silence of the language itself in her home, was harmful; yet it also shows that his silence carried a cost for him, as well. Reminiscent of Djébar’s discussion of the poisoned gift of French she received from her father, Sebbar suggests that her father’s silencing of Arabic was also a gift, not to her but to his wife, “like so many sacred gifts of love to the foreign woman” (Sebbar, 2015: 62). As for his children, “My father gave his children to his wife, to France, to the language of love, which he welcomed like the model teacher” (Sebbar, 2015: 65). Sebbar dedicates her collection of essays, *Arabic as a Sacred Song*, to “all children separated from the language of their fathers and mothers” (Sebbar, 2015: 3). Her essays show that her father, too, is one of these children separated from the language of his parents. As in the case of Djébar’s father, a French education was a means of economic advancement for a boy from a poor

family. While he may thus have embraced this linguistic separation, unlike his children who have it imposed on them, Sebbar's later writing, particularly that which mentions her parents leaving Algeria and retiring in France, shows particular sensitivity to the difficulties of even a semi-voluntary exile¹². Whether the constraints are economic or political and however much Sebbar's father may embrace French, it is not without costs to him.

While Sebbar feels cut off from her paternal relatives, she also suggests that her father is cut off from the family he helped found. She portrays her father almost as a guest in the family home, a "well-loved foreigner" (Sebbar, 2003: 125), but nonetheless a foreigner. She writes that "exile is transmitted" (Sebbar, 2015: 54), and indeed this seems to be her father's legacy to her. For if she is excluded from the community of her father, she also feels excluded from that of the French, as she reflects on the reactions of her classmates: "My full name shows that I'm my father's daughter [...]. The young girls demand that I offer clear proof that I'm not my father's daughter. I stay silent" (Sebbar, 2015: 47). In this case, it is Sebbar who chooses silence. Told that she cannot be the daughter of both her mother and father, she writes, "I prefer to be an orphan" (Sebbar, 2015: 55). That Sebbar herself chooses silence when faced with untenable alternatives for speech suggests further sympathy with her father.

Both Djebbar's and Sebbar's emphasis on the family and on the use of a national language recall common national discourses of the family, in which the family is a thinly veiled allegory for the nation, in which men are the military defenders of the nation, while women are called on in their role as mothers as the first educators of their children, instilling them with national values and patriotism¹³. The largely sex-segregated society of colonial Algeria meant that women had little contact with the colonizer. While men might adopt the language and dress of the colonizer and even attend their schools, women were held to be protected from these corrupting influences and thus ideally situated to transmit traditional culture. Djebbar and Sebbar disrupt this usual narrative in three ways: they emphasize their fathers (rather than their mothers) as cultural transmitters, they show their fathers transmitting the "wrong" culture, and they blame their fathers for failing in their traditional role as protectors.

Neither Djebbar nor Sebbar can live in her father's house. Djebbar has no clear role there, having given up both the traditional role of the gynaeceum and the de-sexualized role of her father's confidante and companion. In Sebbar's case, her father has no house he can properly call his own. Property and culture are often closely tied to each other. As Sebbar writes, "this scenery is impoverished, for no language, no voices live there" (Sebbar, 2015: 61). Both fathers choose not to pass on the familial past of Arabic language and culture, but rather their chosen culture and language of French. One thinks here of the distinction Edward Said makes in *The World, the Text and the Critic* between filiation (associations determined by blood) and affiliation (associations made by choice). Both Djebbar's and Sebbar's fathers could be said to choose French as a language of affiliation, a language they come to value and pass on to their daughters and that becomes a filiative inheritance. Just as the father's affiliation is one

dictated by colonial violence, so the daughters' acquisition of the language through their fathers (filiation) is also marked by symbolic violence, but in this latter a violence located within domestic and familial relationships.

Not surprisingly, therefore, freely chosen affiliations¹⁴, however, may be less secure than genealogical filiation. Catherine Bourget presents a detailed analysis of filiation and affiliation in Sebbar's autobiographical writing from 1978 to 2003 by focusing on the connections in syntax among the titles of Sebbar's essays. She concludes that "the author seems to have come to terms with her language heritage" (2006: 133). While on the whole Bourget's analysis is quite convincing, I would argue that the tension between filiation and affiliation continues in Sebbar's autobiographical writing, as evidenced in her essay published in the same year as Bourget's, entitled "Entendre l'arabe comme un chant sacré" (Hearing Arabic as a Sacred Song, later included as the final chapter of her collection of essays, *Arabic, as a Sacred Song*). In Djébar's case, much of the tension in the relationship with her father can be seen as a tension between these two modes of belonging.

The fathers seem to have misunderstood the different risks for women who transgress community and linguistic borders, and the different emotional costs of having that "outside" language interwoven with family relationships. That each father places his daughter in this more difficult position seems to call up an equally strong need of support and protection. When that is absent or withdrawn, the daughter blames the father for her suffering. If the fathers place obligations on the daughters, the daughters in turn expect loyalty and support from the father, thus the particular pain and trauma of a father who in Djébar's case, withdraws that support (however temporarily), and in Sebbar's case, of a father who answers his daughter's queries with silence.

In an article examining how parents are judged or not judged in life writing, John D. Barbour discusses "how difficult it is to separate moral judgment from psychological needs of attachment, autonomy, and testy ongoing relationships with parents that must influence any life writing about parent-child bonds" (2004: 89). About the examples he considers, he concludes that the writers "display an integration of moral discernment and psychological understanding" (2004: 89). I would argue that Djébar and Sebbar show this same combination of discernment and understanding. On the one hand, both writers are clear in testifying to the trauma experienced as a result of their fathers' actions or inactions, in particular, their feelings of betrayal. Yet, they are also careful to examine the contexts and circumstances within which their fathers made their choices – and to acknowledge where it is not possible to understand the context completely. Most striking is the way that the father's linguistic choices are so closely tied up with the fathers' love – for a wife, for a culture, for a daughter.

Notes

- ¹ It is important to remember that the complex linguistic situation in Algeria involves more than just Arabic and French. Arabic itself includes both formal written Arabic and spoken dialects, but many Algerians, including Djebbar, also share a Berber linguistic heritage, one that Djebbar often refers to in her writing. Geys (2008) provides a detailed discussion Djebbar's relationship with tamazight (Berber), arguing that Djebbar's writing is "haunted" by this language that she herself did not speak.
- ² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
- ³ Although this work has not yet been translated in its entirety, the same issue of *L'Esprit Créateur* includes a translation of the epilogue. See Djebbar 2008.
- ⁴ Numerous critics have commented on the importance of freedom of movement for Djebbar's heroines. See, for example, Mortimer 1988.
- ⁵ For a fuller treatment of the idea of language as a gift, see Schneider 1998.
- ⁶ As Djebbar tells the story, her mother will eventually learn French and travel in France, but at this early point in Djebbar's life, the mother is still excluded.
- ⁷ Mary Poovey, in her work on women's writing of this time period, argues that conflicts in the daughter's roles are apparent because it was a "period of particular conflict in the expectations generated for women" (57). Poovey argues that the central conflict in the women's fiction she examines is when a young woman must choose between her father and a proposed husband.
- ⁸ Cathy Caruth describes trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (208).
- ⁹ Originally published in 2007 as *L'arabe comme un chant secret*.
- ¹⁰ Djha, known by various names throughout North Africa and the Middle East, is a satirical folk hero.
- ¹¹ Indicative of this silence, it was only in 1999 that the French parliament finally voted to refer to the Algerian war as a war, rather than by the euphemism, "events in Algeria." See Stora 2006 for a brief discussion of French memory of the Algerian War and the events leading to the change in nomenclature. Stora's much fuller treatment of the history of the war and its memory can be found in Stora 1991.
- ¹² She has written, for example, that her novel *Silence on the Shores* (2000, originally published as *Le silence des rives*, 1993) was inspired by her father's death in France far from the land of his birth. The protagonist of the novel is in many details starkly different from Sebbar's father (poorly educated, in an unhappy marriage, with unfulfilled artistic ambitions), but like Sebbar's father, he has chosen to remain in France.
- ¹³ Woodhull takes this a step further in talking about postcolonial Algeria, arguing that women are relegated to the private sphere not only to pass on traditional values, "but as symbols that successfully contain the conflicts of the new historical situation" (11, emphasis in the original). She argues that it is women's continued exclusion from public life that demonstrates Algeria's difference from the former colonizer.
- ¹⁴ Of course, economic and political conditions make it difficult to talk of "free" choice, but unlike their daughters, it was not a language imposed on them within the home, but one that remained firmly associated with space outside of the home and family.

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