



Assia Djebar

“

Writing in a foreign language ... has brought me to the cries of the women silently rebelling in my youth, to my own true origins.

”

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1936
- * Algerian poet, novelist, playwright, and filmmaker
- * First North African member of the French Academy

Biography

Assia Djebar is one of Algeria’s most beloved writers and has long been hailed as “one of the most important figures in North African literature.” In a career that spans over half a century, Djebar has used her words in the form of poetry, plays, novels, and short stories to convey her experiences growing up in a war-torn country and living as a woman in a world that can at times be unkind. Djebar has also produced two films with the goal of extending her voice to those who cannot read. In Nada Elia’s *Trances, Dances and Vociferations*, Djebar’s works are compared to the work of such respected authors as Toni Morrison, Michelle Cliff, and Paule Marshall; all are authors who share a feminist, African or Afro-diasporic view of the world.

Assia Djebar was born Fatima-Zohra Imalayen on August 4, 1936, to Tahar Imalhayène and Bahia Sahraoui. She was raised in the small seaport town of Cherchell, in the Province of Aïn Defla on the coast of Algeria. Djebar’s father was an educator, teaching the French language at Mouzaïaville dans la Mitidja, a primary school that she attended. Later, Djebar would attend a Quranic private school where she was one of only two girls, an experience instilling in her a sense of deep religious faith as well as an unusual level of assertiveness. She then went on to study at Collège de Blida (high school) in Algeria’s nearby capital city of Algiers, where she was the only Muslim in her class, an experience that enhanced her strength and unshakeable faith.

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In 1954, Djebar's father gave his blessing, allowing her to move to Paris to study at the Lycée Fénélon (college) where she first studied history, despite a desire to study Arab literature. This educational experience inspired feelings of Algerian nationalism. During this period, Djebar also began fine-tuning her skills as a writer and became the first Algerian woman in history to be accepted into the prestigious École Normale Supérieure (Higher Teacher Training School).

At the age of twenty, Djebar joined the Algerian student strikes in support of Algeria's struggle for independence from France, a cause that became infinitely more personal to her when her brother was held in a French prison, and French soldiers ransacked her mother's home.

Her first novel, *La Soif* (*The Mischief*, a title which translates literally as *The Thirst*), is the story of a young woman, half Algerian, half French, living a frivolous and selfish life in what was modern-day Algeria; the novel was published in 1957. *La Soif* was quickly translated into English in the United States where, significantly, it was published in paperback form, which contributed to its surprising success.

The content of the novel was controversial. To spare herself the wrath she anticipated from her educational institution, and to spare her family any embarrassment, Djebar took on a pen name. While riding in a cab with her fiancé, she asked that he go through the traditional ninety-nine ritual modes of address in order to help her find a name with meaning. She settled on the name, "Djebbar," a phrase meaning giving praise to Allah. The name change, however, was not complete without a translation into French; in her haste, however, Djebar made a spelling error which would result in a different meaning entirely. Thus, the woman who would have been Djebbar became Djebar, a word meaning one who heals.

Djebar continued to participate in student strikes through 1958. That same year, at the age of 22, Djebar married fellow resistance member Ahmed Ould-Rouïs. Together, they moved to Switzerland and then to Tunisia, where she worked as an investigative journalist, drawing light to the plight of refugees from the 1958 bombing of the town of Sakiet-Sidi-Youssef. Her experiences of this period became the subject of her fourth book, *Les Alouettes naïves* (*The Naïve Larks*), in 1967.



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In the same year as this book's original publication, Algeria finally gained its independence from France. Despite her happiness for the success of the Algerian people, Djebar was criticized by some for continuing to write in French, rather than in Arabic, the national language. Later, Djebar commented on such criticism by saying, "I had just turned 40. It's at that point that I finally felt myself fully a writer of French language, while remaining deeply Algerian."

In 1962, Djebar accepted a professorial position at the University of Algiers and became the only Algerian teaching in the history department. In 1966, she moved back to Paris and adopted a daughter she named Djilila. Djebar spent much of the next decade focusing on her family life.

In 1974, she returned to Algiers to teach French literature and cinema for the French department at the University of Algiers. It is in this period that Djebar began considering the important role film plays in society. Following a divorce from Ahmed Ould-Rouïs in October of 1975, Djebar began work on her first film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (*The Song of the Women of Mount Chenoua*), which was released in 1976. The film, about a woman returning to Algeria after 15 years of absence and about the differences between her life and those of the people who never left, is told in the traditional style of the "Nouba," a song with five movements. *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* was well received and, in 1979, Djebar was awarded the Grand Prix de la Critique Internationale at the Venice Film Festival.

In 1981, Djebar married fellow poet Malek Alloula, to whom she remains married today. In the early 1980's, she also began work on her second film, *La Zerda ou les chants de l'oubli* (*Zerda or the Forgotten Songs*). This film was as well received as her first film and, in 1983, the film was awarded the title of Best Historical Film at the Berlin Festival.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Djebar published more than ten novels in addition to her films. Her writing tends to focus on the struggles of the Algerian people and offers a focused view of Muslim women. In a number of works, Djebar analyzes the role of women throughout Muslim history. She also attempts to draw attention to the unrest in Algeria and to the impact that decades of war has had on the people.



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1985's *L'Amour, la fantasia* (*Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*), a novel about the women of Algeria and the roles they are able to create for themselves in society, is called by one reviewer "arguably her best." Djebar structures the telling of this story into movements, creating an artfully musical story, in a vein similar to her film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*: "Musicality, orality, and the written word blend in this highly original work to portray the author's fragmented sense of self, and the final product is rendered in a beautiful prose." The reader can hear Djebar's voice, disguised as one of her characters, when she says, "From the very first day that a little girl leaves her home to learn the ABCs, the neighbors adopt that knowing look of those (who) in ten or fifteen years will be able to say, 'I told you so!'"

In the 1991 novel, *Far From Madina*, Djebar examines the lives of women in the time of the prophet Mohammed. The novel, a collection of stories, is a retelling of the Qur'an in which religious values and traditions are reexamined. The stories seek to reveal that women are erased through the telling of history. In this novel, Djebar seeks to reinsert the role of the female and to empower women by acknowledging them as a source of strength: "Fatima emerged from the shadows, one arm raised, a thin, naked arm; and her hand was seen to be filled with earth; fine, red earth, earth from the floor of the bedchamber, soil from the grave." Women are connected to the earth, as givers of life, as essential elements in a greater equation.

Djebar's 1995 novel *Vaste est la prison* (*So Vast the Prison*) addresses topics familiar for the author; these include "the hardships faced by women, the oppressions of colonialism and the redemptive power of language and writing" (*New York Times*, 2000). Another reviewer highlights the fact that in this piece, Djebar's writing "becomes weapon and refuge for the oppressed." While her work has on occasion been criticized for stylistic choices (i.e., one reviewer calling her prose "overwrought"), her reviews have remained as consistently glowing as they were upon the release of her first novel, *La Soif*, written nearly fifty years ago.

In recent years, Djebar's voice and the bluntness with which she writes have earned her recognition worldwide. She has won a Neustadt International Prize for Contribution to World Literature (University of Oklahoma, 1996), a Prix Marguerite Yourcenar (France, 1997), a Peace Prize from the German Book Trade (2000), and was named the first North African member of The French Academy in 2005. Though nominations are supposed to be kept secret, it is also known that Djebar has been consistently nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature over the past few years.



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Assia Djebar currently holds the position of Silver Chair Professor of French and Francophone Studies at New York University and continues to write today. Now in her seventies, Djebar inspires a new generation of writers to a greater global awareness; she shows no signs of slowing down.

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