

**SPARKLE OF
THE OUTSIDE**

Corina Copp

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‘Something of my undergrowth must come from my Algerian impossibilities. The undergrowth is what invades the mind when one can’t be otherwise except on the side of the other side, one has no other side but the other side.’

– Hélène Cixous, *So Close*

The *nouba*: a traditional form of urban music in the Maghreb, a unit of measure Assia Djebar uses to pace her first film, *La nouba des femmes de Mont-Chenoua* (*The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, 1977). For this titan of North African literature – a novelist, critic, feminist, professor, and filmmaker – the *nouba* was also in its Arabic linguistic definition a *turning*, a moment where a turn (to speak) arrives. The *nouba* sounds to *give turn* to the collective voice of women in Mount Chenoua, a rurality not far from the Roman ruins of Cherchell, Algeria, where Djebar was born in 1936, pre-pen-name, as Fatima-Zohra Imalayen. This musical form is not an empty signifier, but transversal in its pickup of every twoness: appearance and elision, inside and outside, fictional protagonist Lila and real-life subject, she who is finally given a turn to speak to she who is ‘looking and listening for broken memory.’

Add a ‘b’ to the author’s adopted surname and you have *djebbar*, one out of 99 names for Allah. Rather, a ‘b’ has been taken away: ‘I like the idea of this letter, silently hiding between two languages and cultures.’¹ It’s a dilating choice, by which I mean that ‘Djebar’ both stages and responds to the swing of language itself – its violences and erasures, its shadows and irrepressible coherences – never monolingual, never exclusively colonial (French) yet never rid of coloniality (Arabic). Djebar and the misspelled *djebbar* both seem to ask, ‘What else is missing, or has moved?’

I reframe the question to give some space to the African and Muslim women Djebar called her sisters: ‘What, or who else is irruptive, here, when?’ In *La nouba*, the answer can be found in the serene recording of the sounds of women, dappled as they are in any long or short stretch of sunlight. Sarah Maldoror’s portrait of Djebar, commissioned for the television magazine *Mosaïque*, finds the author-director recalling that, ‘The details of a sunny day on the Mediterranean seem more intense when you’re less used to them, perceiving them for the first time.’

The outside comes into focus through the outsider. Still, why must Lila, our guide, be a standout, coral-knit-wearing intellectual from the city, whose home this is not? My students discuss this tension. ‘I can’t connect to the working-class women or their communities because I’m asked to take this bourgeois woman seriously, even while she sits above others, as if a teacher, stands tall over others, is beautiful, is watched as she walks, distinct from the villagers, establishes hierarchy!’ Another student says, ‘But I was compelled by her, I wanted to watch her, I liked her outfits: that styling must be purposeful.’ OK. What is she *doing*? Listening, walking, decentering ‘him.’ Yes. We are resolving an identity crisis, an identification crisis. We decide (do we?) that we can’t fault the director for using filmmaking as a place, a return, where she might work out her own.

Made in 1977–79, contemporaneously with radical, antiwar filmmaking like Jocelyne Saab’s *The Beirut Trilogy* (1976–1982), under the budgetary thumb of an Algerian TV commission that would eventually deny her further funding, and in discourse with women’s liberation and decolonial movements, Djebar’s *La nouba* is not flung from the future.

Neither is it reducible to an archival object. From the start, we are told that our protagonist is a plausible daughter of Zoulikha Oudai, an Algerian mother, intelligence operative, and resistance organizer for the FLN who was captured, tortured, and executed by French forces in 1957, when she was in her forties. It dawns on me gradually that our guide, her feet on the same soil 20 years later, is audibly guided. The film’s voiceover is anchored by her mother’s tongue; it is a reconstructed history. The women of Mount Chenoua become family, sister, aunt, speaking to Lila directly of Zoulikha, empire’s perceived threat. Then, in Zoulikha’s own voice, they tell of her capture after her escape to the mountains. ‘All this arsenal for one woman?’

There is no such thing as a peaceful loss of identity, even for an artist who labors between warring languages and who can render, cinematically, the sounds of a peaceful coexistence following a national liberation movement. In *La nouba*, Djebar sought a conversational Arabic (this was her first work in the language), a national tongue to be preserved in opposition to the increasingly *nationalist* character of Arabic in letters. ‘I needed to express myself in the language that hardened back to the language of my mother. I decided that I would capture sound, capture raw language.’² What happened in Algeria over the course of the revolution, as Pierre Bourdieu wrote in January 1961, would ‘completely [demolish] social realities ... crushing and scattering traditional communities such as the village, the clan or the family,’³ and would force people to speak as one emergent voice. It was a matter of identifying with the truth that colonialism had put them on ‘one side,’ to recall Hélène Cixous, whose own Algerian childhood and reckoning with exile gave form to her feeling that ‘one has no other side but the other side.’ On which side, then, are the women of Mount Chenoua, fifteen years after independence? Are they together on this other side, bound by rural life, ‘peasantry’? A tension between classes was not what generated political struggle in Algeria under its French colonial rule, nor its violent 1990s, at least not in the terms one would use to describe a class struggle under European capitalism. It’s not to say that a working-class could not be identified in the city of Cherchell, but to mistake ‘the female culture that remains’ that Djebar celebrates for a class that could produce enough economic power to transform its social structure is to give these women – former guerillas and mothers of former guerillas, singers in sacred caves – a formation that does not square, even in counterpoint to a cosmopolitanism one might ascribe to Djebar or to her fictional Lila. For Djebar’s obsession with her country’s revolution cannot be unlinked from her desire to play relay with the women who fought multiple enemies, who felt damned, who saw death as she did not, to mount a recording device near the mouth of those whose power had since been neutralized, unsung – and to produce some kind of intergenerational freedom with them as they are brought above ground, veiled and unveiled. The feminist intercession is that genealogy.

Endnotes

1. Clarisse Zimra, Afterword, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, by Assia Djebar; as quoted in Anjuli I. Gunaratne and Jill M. Jarvis, ‘Introduction: Inheriting Assia Djebar,’ *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 2016; 131(1): 118–19.
2. Ziad Bentahar, ‘A voice with an elusive sound: aphasia, diglossia, and arabophone Algeria’ in Assia Djebar’s *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 21:3, 412.
3. Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Révolution dans la révolution,’ *Esprit* (January 1961), quoted by Jacques Rancière, ‘The Cause of the Other,’ *Parallax*, 4:2, 26.