

**The Female Body in the Postcolonial Literature: A
Comparative Study of Assia Djébar's *Women of Algiers in
their Apartment* and *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* of Oksana
Zabuzhko**

الجسد الأنثوي في أدب ما بعد الاستعمار: دراسة مقارنة بين روايتي: نساء الجزائر
في شقتهن لآسيا جبار، و العمل الميداني في الجنس الأوكراني لأوكسانا زابوجكو

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Abstract :

This article deals with the issue of writing the female body by two famous postcolonial feminist female writers; the Algerian Assia Djébar in her text *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* and the Ukrainian Oksana Zabuzhko in her *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*. Depending on a comparative study as well as a discourse analysis of both targeted texts, it is certainly concluded that the postcolonial woman suffered from a lot of pressure by both the colonizer and the colonized man, the fact which made her body at stake. Thanks to both Djébar and Zabuzhko, their females could finally manage to break their way out of their bodies.

Keywords: feminism, postcoloniality, discourse analysis, gender studies, female body.

ملخص البحث

يتطرق هذا المقال الى معالجة اشكالية الجسد الانثوي في المرحلة ما بعد الاستعمارية والتعبير عنه من طرف كلا من الروائيتين اسيا جبار في كتابها نساء الجزائر في شقتهن وكذا العمل الميداني في الجنس الاوكراني لاوكسانا زابوجكو. بالاعتماد على الدراسة المقارنتية وكذا تحليل الخطاب لكلا النصين، نستخلص بان المرأة في مرحلة ما بعد الاستعمار واجهت ضغوطات عديدة من طرف

المستعمر والمستعمر على حد سواء، الامر الذي دفع بجسدها ان يكون في الرهان. بفضل الروائيتين اسيا جبار و اوكسانا زابوچكو استطاعت نساؤهن كسر قيود معضلة الجسد. الكلمات الدالة: الأنتوية، ما بعد الاستعمارية، تحليل الخطاب، الدراسات الجنسانية، الجسد الأنتوي.



1. Introduction

The study of women has always been a major concern throughout history. It is the women's essential role they have played almost in all the conflicts of humankind whether directly as being active agents or indirectly as passive ones; in either ways women had participated in shaping the history of themselves as well as their nations. Women in the Pre-Islamic era were objectified and treated as devilish creatures at best they were treated as private properties. They seldom took part in making their own decisions, and were forced to get married. Their money and properties belonged to their husbands, sons or fathers.

Postcolonial situations in both Algeria and Ukraine were shaped by different historical backgrounds. Yet, one can notice that there are many similarities between the themes of Assia Djebar and Oksana Zabuzhko. One of these themes that both authors dealt with is the question of inscribing women into history and granting them the role of active agents and not passive ones.

Women's passiveness did not seem to stop in one spot, so that it can be diagnosed and then exterminated; rather it was vicious and seemed to get even more complicated. Djebar in her novel *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* demonstrates how the Algerian woman's passiveness was further triggered by the concept of the *Harem*. To many critics, the *Harem* is viewed as some detention facility where women are kept locked in. In a more mild definition of the *Harem*, in her book *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* Fatima Mernissi defines the *Harem* as very close in spelling with the word '*Haram*' in Arabic which stands for 'forbidden' and which is the opposite of the Arabic word '*Halal*' which means 'permissible.' (46)

Moreover, in her novel *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* Zabuzhko takes the risk of invoking the themes of the body and sexuality. Zabuzhko can be considered as the only female voice who has dealt with the issues of the body and sex in Ukraine. No one before her dared to deal with such themes which were considered as to provoke the public audience. Zabuzhko depicts the sexual relationship between her heroine (Oksana) and her boyfriend (Mykola) as full of pain and traumatic. Zabuzhko put her characters in such difficult dilemma-like situations where they would experience the utmost of pain and confusion, all this to embody the horrible suffering practiced on Ukrainian women.

Assia Djebar and Zabuzhko regardless of their different postcolonial situations, agreed upon the universal atrocities committed against these women, they were in many ways not resisted by males and females as well. Therefore, the questions which should be asked here are, to what extent did Djebar and Zabuzhko succeed in demonstrating the traumatic effects their women had experienced? To what extent was the postcolonial woman passive? Was she declared passive by force or did she embrace her passiveness naturally?

2. Prisoners of the Colonized

Since the very first day of the French conquest of Algeria, France had systematically tried to win the Algerian woman and mold her in the European model. When that did not work out much, the French did all their best to turn the lives of Algerian women into the utmost of the suffering. The Algerian history is full of stories of great women who refused to succumb to the French European temptations and who in return had received all kinds of pain and torture.

Like most of the countries of the former Soviet Union, Ukrainian women could not escape the horrid oppression which was exercised upon them on a regular basis. Being it an adjacent country, Ukraine was the most affected country in the whole Soviet bloc by the persecution as well as injustices systematically practiced against them.

The colonial ideology was marked by the gendered narrative. Before invading a certain nation, the colonizer first has

to feminize the country often making it look like a naked woman in doing so, the colonizer would often rely on artists like painters and story tellers. Right after France ventured to invade Algeria militarily in 1830, French painters like Delacroix went to portray Algeria in the conventional oriental image. The colonizer turned his artists into weapons and invested it to gather all the support in the French colonial propaganda. The same exact strategy was adopted by the Russians when invading Ukraine in 1922, being it Russia's other Ukraine had to be made into a slut waiting to be raped.

In racializing the other, the colonizer constituted a belief that the European masculinity was far more superior to that of the male colonized. In doing so, the racialization of the women was to follow. Racialized women were made to be the other to themselves by alienating them from their bodies; these women were regarded as animals more than humans, and if it happened that they reached the level of a subhuman they would never become women in the same way European ladies were. In her book *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, Madina Tlostanova argues that "even if they [colonized women] became the bad copies/caricatures of the White ladies in colonial societies, they could never reach the status of the White lady or her privilege." (43)

The colonizer went too far in objectifying the women of the colonized lands. The colonizer made sure that these women had provided the cheapest labor as well as being at the core of the sex trade; colonialism was feeding off the bodies of these women. Despite the alleged claim of the colonizer in invading Algeria for the sake of civilizing it and freeing its women, the truth remains that France has demonstrated a whole new level of exploitation to the Algerian woman. In the end, the Algerian woman was as equally ill-treated as the Algerian man; the French colonizer did not make any distinction when it came to the methods of torturing the Algerians, rather the Algerian woman was often considered to be far more dangerous than the man due to the grave role she played in fighting the colonizer. The French colonizer understood

the gravity of the situation when dealing with the Algerian woman, that is why all eyes were on her.

The colonized woman has always been made to be a passive individual by the colonizer, yet now and then she would remind the colonizer that any attempt to feminize and exploit her land would end in a lethal, destructive way. Those women's first reaction to the deliberate atrocities practiced against them was to denounce and fight back. Not hesitating, these women immediately gave up their femininity and luxury life and chose to fight and die for their countries.

3. Women's Forgotten Identity

Women's contributions in shaping the history of their nations did not earn them the right to shape their own identities; as a result both their contributions together with their identities were forgotten and not glorified in the history books. Postcolonial women had engaged in the wars to free their nations, yet another war was to be waged. While the colonizer's excuse for invading the weaker nations was based on the pretext that the colonized women were often ill-treated by their own male country mates, the colonizer had already engaged in exploiting both the colonized women and their feminized country, and the crimes of rape and murder to these women are recorded to be by the dozens. Very often the colonizer had tried to erase the colonized women's true identity; the Algerian woman was portrayed as an oriental odalisque¹ of the brothel, whereas the Ukrainian woman was portrayed as a sexual body ready to be raped any time the colonizer wanted to.

The issues of identity for Algerian and Ukrainian women did not seem to end soon, and inscribing these women into history as active agents and not passive ones was nothing but the start of

¹ **Odalisque:** The word "odalisque" is French in form and originates from the Turkish *odalık*, meaning "chambermaid." An *odalık* was not a concubine of the *Harem*, but a maid, although it was possible that she could become one. Very often, Odaliques artistically were eroticized and depicted as naked slaves.

the trials which were to follow, and the traces of these issues can still be traced in both Algeria and Ukraine. Women's struggle with the nationalistic identity had become tense more than ever. Even when postcolonial women partly reassumed their natural roles as active agents in rebuilding their nations, their written discourse, mainly literary seemed to have not reached ears the way it was expected.

During the war against colonialism the nationalist discourse granted women the agency where they played an active role in bringing colonial rule to an end. While, by the time these nations had regained their independence these women were deprived of their newly free identity preventing them from rebuilding their nations. The national identity of women was now facing an even worse danger than the colonizer, which is the strict patriarchal system that continued the tradition of suffocating women. Thus, these women found themselves at the crossroad of choosing whether to accept their new identity which was limited and framed according to the patriarchal doctrine, or fight to regain their identity which they had not easily earned.

When women were rarely allowed to take part in nationalist campaigns, this could only have happened within the restrictions of the newly imposed patriarchal system, that is to say that women had to act within certain limits; postcolonial women's most important role was to look after the husband and children. Postcolonial women lived in a system which was based on the concept of separation; men's main role was to go to war and practice politics, whereas women bore children and took care of their husbands.

The postcolonial Algerian woman did not always feel that living within the boundaries of patriarchal dominance was not necessarily a bad thing. Rather Algerian women most of the time had believed that to bear children and take care of their houses were their true innate role for centuries. These principles were embraced by both men and women of the national struggle as long as the colonizer was their common enemy; the objective which unified both men and women was the continuous effort to get rid of the damage to their lands which caused by the colonizer.

However, in many times postcolonial women rejected any type of dominance which was enforced upon them during and after colonial rule. Thus, postcolonial women would eventually have to fight the patriarchal system the same way as they fought the colonizer. Very often it was the men of the previously colonized nations who undermined the importance of their female country mates. These men usually went to believe that postcolonial females were less nationalistic, and if one takes this into consideration then how can one explain that this world still exists? The answer to this question is that when men went to fight those wars which minimized their numbers by the millions, it was the women who replaced them in their factories making sure that the industrial revolution did not fail. In Algeria and Ukraine, it was women who kept the fire of nationalism burning in the younger generations. These 'less-nationalistic' women whose job was restricted only on raising children, it was them who made sure the flame of national patriotism alive. Without women the reproduction of a once-lost world would be equal to impossible.

Were it not for the Algerian woman, the revolution (1954-1962) would not succeed the way it did. When the French, as usual broke their promise to grant independence to the Algerian people if they would in return help the French win against the Germans in the Second World War, in May 08th 1945, thousands of Algerian men and women rallied in the streets of Algeria demanding the French to fulfill their promise, they were carrying thousands of hand-made flags of Algeria. In the eve of May 08th 1945 it was the hundreds of Algerian women who spent the whole night stitching the newly designed flags of Algeria. The French could not possibly believe the number of the flags being carried, and then the possibility of a non-French Algeria was clear in the horizon, consequently the French massacred forty-five and so Algerian armless men and women. Thus, to those who regard the Algerian woman as 'less-nationalistic,' one should remember who designed the flag of Algeria; the symbol of the national identity. The flag of Algeria in itself was designed by a woman; she was

the wife of Messali Hadj²; Émilie Busquant who designed the Algerian flag in its current form. Messali's wife was a French woman who vigorously supported the Algerian nation cause.

Finally, one can safely state that the issue of women and their nationalistic contributions in the historical struggle of both Algeria and Ukraine has been questionable by many, especially regarding their contributions in terms of written discourse during and after colonial times. Postcolonial women's major dismay is them being treated as objects or as annexation at best.

4. Natural Property of the Oppressor

After fighting the colonizer and gaining their freedom, postcolonial women found themselves on the verge of another fight. This time the challenge of women was against the patriarchal severe values. Postcolonial women had to choose whether to give in to their male country mates and live in a confined space of the men's choice, or to fight another fight to regain their newly-freed-and-now-lost identity.

In Ukraine, the daily oppressions and injustices by the Russians was a quite a common thing. What was uncommon is that Ukrainian men recreated the same injustices against their women. In *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* Zabuzhko describes those Ukrainian men and who they have become as a result the oppression they had experienced by the Soviets. Through the tongue of her heroine Oksana, Zabuzhko states:

We were raised by men fucked from all ends every which way...later we ourselves screwed the same kind of [Ukrainian] guys, and...we accepted them and loved them as they were, because not to accept them was to go over to the...other side...our only choice, therefore, was and still remains between nonexistence and an existence that slowly kills you (Zabuzhko 57).

²**Ahmed Ben Messali Hadj** (1898-1974) Algerian nationalist politician dedicated to the independence of his homeland from French colonial rule. He is often called the "father" of Algerian nationalism.

Thus, Zabuzhko believes that those Ukrainian men who had been abused by the Soviets for a long time, ashamed by their own disgrace they abused their own women. A close reading of the text of Zabuzhko allows the reader to finally understand the horrible practice of the Soviet regime against Ukrainian people; women were made to be submissive and men to be weak and abusive. In her novel Zabuzhko illustrates the extreme violence of the Ukrainian man against his woman. In the relationship between her two leading characters, Mykola (painter) and his girlfriend Oksana, the latter is exposed to a horrible ill-treatment when her boyfriend forces her to perform oral sex with him, when she refuses he tries to burn her legs with a lighters.

Zabuzhko successfully managed to draw a sketch of the horrible ill-treatments Ukrainian men showed to their women, inferring that there was no equality between the different genders. Zabuzhko further infers that these violent acts against Ukrainian women by their own men do not seem to end any sooner, even after the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991.

The theme of women's suffering is also a central one in Djebbar's *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*. The Algerian woman had had her equal share of the abuse and suffering. After she was turned into a private object by the colonizer, the ill-treatment would come this time from the Algerian man to torture his own female country mate. Many Algerian women were deprived of their Islamic-given right to inherit. In addition, they were not gendered and persecuted by men only, sometimes they would be ill-treated by their own gender; being their mothers, sisters, aunts, and even mothers-in-law. Many mothers abused their daughters thinking by doing so they were preparing them to become future successful housewives.

Moreover, the Algerian man; being the father, the brother, the uncle and even the son did not expect the woman to be perfect; to them the woman had to be ideal. The Algerian woman had to be very patient, she had to be smart; her husband did not have to talk her over everything, one signal from him should do. She had to be fertile, and if it happened that there were no children yet, then she should be blamed, not the man. She had to

give birth to male babies, and when happened to succeed in that then all the credit would be given to the husband; for he is the father of men.

Being oriental in his treatment to the woman, the Algerian man can be said to have been a victim himself to the ill-treatment he had received from the French colonizer. The truth of the matter is that the Algerian man was always a romantic man in his own way. The Algerian woman was often the chosen subject of his songs. In Rabah Driassa's³ song *Nejma Katbia* (lit. Polar Star) the singer resembles his country Algeria with a very beautiful woman whom in turn is symbolized by the North Star whose light never fades away.

In addition, the oriental treatment of the Algerian man towards his woman can be explained in the context of obsession; in reality the Algerian man has always been obsessed with his woman, that is why one finds that this man is often overprotective when it comes to his woman. He became too obsessed with his woman until this obsession turned to become rigid and violent. It is true that this obsession was harmful more than it was peaceful, yet one can notice that the Algerian man had his own way in showing his love to his woman. Not to justify his ill-treatment to his woman, but considering the harsh conditions imposed by the French colonizer, the Algerian man's oriental behavior can be interpreted as overprotective.

Finally, the reader's attention must be drawn to a slight difference to be made here between the Algerian and Ukrainian women. The two women have been the victims of a harsh, sometimes abusive ill-treatment by the males of their own

³ **Rabah Driassa:** An Algerian painter, composer and especially Algerian performer of popular music, *hawzi* and *sahraoui* born in Blida (Algerian province) in 1934. He was famous around the years 1960 to 1980 with many songs which remain masterpieces in the domain, such as *Yahya wlad bladi*, *Hizia*, *Nejma Katbia*, *El Goumri*, *El Aouama* and many others who marked Algerian music in the 1960s and 1980s.

countries, yet one can notice that in their reaction Ukrainian women were far more passive.

5. Women's Body between Victim and Executioner

The postcolonial female body was caught in the middle of the crossfire for both Algerian and Ukrainian women. In Algeria the French colonizer had always fantasies of the Algerian woman. When dreaming, the European would often see the Algerian woman as an obedient "doe." In his book *A Dying Colonialism* Frantz Fanon demonstrates how the European orientalist male colonizer views the Algerian woman as a passive body which needs to be conquered. He contends, "With an Algerian woman, there is no progressive conquest, no mutual revelation. Straight off, with the maximum of violence, there is possession, rape, near-murder... In the dream, the woman-victim screams, struggles like a doe, and as she weakens and faints, is penetrated, martyred, ripped apart. (46)

This sadistic, violent character of the French colonizer does not only reflect the "sick" fantasies had of the Algerian woman, but also pictures the horrible sufferings and daily atrocities the Algerian woman had to withstand for a long period of time. Fanon continues to reveal the painful experiences the Algerian woman had to endure; she was in the middle of the fight. Regardless of her sex, the Algerian woman was arrested, tortured, raped and shot down; she is considered to be the true example of the violent acts of the French occupier and his lack of humanity. (66)

Traditionally, women were prohibited to discover their bodies in any way. While the mind was considered as a power attributed to men, the body was related with femininity and thus was attributed to women. This equation of mind and body and its respective association to masculinity and femininity is considered very much identical to the relationship between colonizer and colonized.

As an active female agent who played a big role in freeing and rebuilding her country, the postcolonial woman had to give up everything to first be considered as a woman. Second, the female body had to be used properly against the occupier. When

the Algerian revolution emerged in 1954, the Algerian woman immediately gave up her veil and dressed in a European manner. In doing so, the Algerian woman successfully managed to conduct dangerous operations against the French occupier; leading several bombings, bringing information to the *Mujahidin*⁴, all operations which would cripple the colonizer.

Regarding the violent nature of the trials the Algerian woman has gone through, starting with the French long colonial ruling and ending with the ten bloody years of the 1990s, the female body had to have a voice of its own. In her article "The Laugh of the Medusa" Hélène Cixous emphasizes that only if a woman allows herself to rediscover her body which has long been confiscated from her; she will be able to impose her presence in her society. Cixous believes that only by writing her body, the colonized woman will regain her body which has been confiscated from her (880).

The concept of Cixous is quite simple, instead of remaining passive the colonized woman must write about her body experiences, only then she will be able to leave a mark in this world. There is no way to be recognized if the colonized woman does not account her physical contributions. By writing her body the colonized woman will eventually have her voice heard.

The colonial gendered discourse which has made the colonized woman to be passive is the main reason that the postcolonial woman is now the other of herself. According to both Djebbar and Zabuzhko writing the body is as relevant as writing history itself; the female body cannot in any way be separated from history. Postcolonial feminist discourse blames the colonized women for being gendered and otherized because they did not write their bodies. Through a vivid literary discourse Djebbar successfully manages to show the diverse Algerian culture Algerian women possessed during and after the French colonial rule. Djebbar brilliantly does so only by writing the physical experiences of Algerian women.

⁴ *Mujahidin*: Algerian men and women who fought bravely in the war of independence where they regained their freedom.

The gendered discourse of Algeria depicted in the painting of Eugène Delacroix⁵ holding the same title as Djébar's *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* portrays Algeria as a naked woman waiting to be raped. In fact not only Algeria was eroticized, the whole continent of Africa was resembled as a female body ready for exploitation.

Ukrainian women have had their good share of the suffering and the pain. The horrible experiences these women had endured are beyond words. The Ukrainian woman had and for long suffered from what is called the Gulag concentration camps. After the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, Lenin (the leader of the revolution) had ordered that those who were considered as less useful to be sent to the Gulag camps up in Siberia. These concentration camps attest to the horrid atrocities which were systematically practiced against many people of the Soviet Union, mainly Ukrainians. The Gulag is considered as organized purging out of those who were considered as less-Russian.

Therefore the colonized woman both Algerian and Ukrainian had lived under male domination. Despite their long fight, first against the colonizer and second against their own patriarchal societies, both Algerian and Ukrainian women are still fighting the good fight for their physical contributions to be recognized.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, both Assia Djébar and Oksana Zabuzhko have successfully managed to write the physical sufferings of both Algerian and Ukrainian women, as well as their body contributions and which are missed out in the history books. Despite the differences of the Algerian and Ukrainian people, the two authors have succeeded in bringing the women of the two nations under the same umbrella of exploitation and suffering.

However, in depicting their women and mainly their leading characters, Djébar and Zabuzhko had incorporated different styles

⁵ **Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix** (26 April 1798 – 13 August 1863) was a French Romantic artist regarded from the outset of his career as the leader of the French Romantic school.

and techniques. Djébar on the one hand portrayed the Algerian woman in her *Harem*, and demonstrated that it could be positive the same way it is considered negative. Djébar explained that the veil, even though viewed by the European colonizer as a means that restrains the woman, it was also a means for the Algerian woman to impose her presence clinging to her true identity. On the other hand, Zabuzhko had adopted a very harsh language in describing the events which happened to her characters, demonstrating how the Ukrainian women were suffering. In the meantime, Zabuzhko left a gap in the testimonies of those Ukrainian women who had been to the Gulag before; many of the women who survived the Gulag were not able to give their live testimonies due to the horrible memories they had of that place.

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