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Literatures of Memory: Assia Djebar's The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry and Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun

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Abstract: The chronicling and documentation of the past has always been an important activity in creating and organizing the nation's identity where memory is linked to power and thence identity; therefore literature becomes the stage where these intricate relations are played out. The connection between history, memory and power became highlighted with the postmodernist and post colonial questioning of the linearity and singularity of history and truth. However, this memory which is engendered within the territorial conceptions and confines of belonging and attachment to land became uprooted due to the imperial manoeuvrings which dislodged the stability of generational memory, subsequently, leading to a certain disarticulation of the self and the community, grappling with the trauma of sliced consciousness, memories and land. And on the other hand, these trauma and violence based memories brought forth an intensified sort of remembering that became inherent in 'body memory' as well as 'place memory' signifying that colonization becomes more than economic exploitation, bringing in cultural and cartographic distortions in mind and in reality. In this paper I intend to explore the collective cultural memory that continuously jostles with the idea of nation-state amidst civil wars and strifes in post colonial African societies with the focus on Assia Djebar's *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Both the writers bring out the intersections between geography and gender and the construction of the 'other' along with experiences of war and divisive politics, wherein the plight of woman and her identity are all the more threatened. Writing, for them, doesn't become simply expiation but the building up of female 'genealogical' legacies of memory.

Keywords: *Memory, Colonialism, Violence, Narrative*

The times of Plotinus saw memory as ‘empowering’ the soul. Although Plotinus explored the effects of memory on the individual, yet we can link the collective soul of the nation to the memory constructed to politically shoulder a people of a nation. Collective memory, as Maurice Halbwachs tells us, is a socially constructed concept. This construction is also harped upon in the manufacturing of nationalism within the confines of the nation state. Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities* talks of the collective imagining of a sense of belonging to a nation, land and space. This sense of belonging is so powerful and attached that it becomes inherent to the character of the people residing in a nation.

The aftermath of the World Wars and colonialist endeavours had brought in displacement, dislocation, genocide, violence, loss and the redrawing of national boundaries and identities. Memory, an important component of identity, became moulded by maps and cartography. Erasing old thought systems of identification, they carved out new lines and borders, so powerful in conception and existence that they influenced the cognitive capabilities of an individual, a whole community and the world. Colonization often was fraught with exploitation and violence, disfiguring the native’s sense of place and self. Trauma and violence based memories brought forth an intensified sort of remembering that became inherent in ‘body memory’ as well as ‘place memory’ (Edward Casey).

This paper discusses the novels by Assia Djebar and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who have focussed on the ramifications of political and social crisis brought in by man-made violence and attempt to mitigate the questions of identity and control through their texts. Both engage in the interrogation of power in the context of nation and patriarchal norms of gender inequalities as well as emphasize upon the plight of women and their identities in times of war, religious violence and civil strife. This paper further seeks to examine the tenuous relationship between gender and geography because gender “is a primary way of signifying relationships of power”(Scott 1053). The role of state in perpetuating subordination of women, however, has come under scrutiny, post the second wave of feminism (1970s onwards) as women claimed a voice and presence through political participation to bring about legislative and political changes in civil society. Also, in the face of national crisis, war,

military regimes and dictatorial governments, women have come forward as an organised force, claiming their political space and participation in society autonomously. Shirking their devalued role and political contributions, in the face of gender based norms and subordination which restrict them from civic and political engagement, they have learnt to question and be aware of the socio-political realities of countries.

Reconsideration of politicized concepts of place, land, local and global and the transgression of boundaries (public/private realm) through a female perspective is seen in the works of Assia Djebar (1936-2015). Born in 1936, in the city of Cherchell in Algeria, Fatima Zohra Imalhayene had a different upbringing with an access to educational opportunities unusual for any other Algerian girl at that time. She was thus able to transcend the gender divisions of space and liberate herself in her access to knowledge. As an avant-garde Arab feminist writer, she brings to the forefront the predicament of women in an intense patriarchal Islamic (Algerian) context. She adopted the pseudonym Assia (consolation) Djebar (intransigent) in 1957 when she published her novel *La Soif*. In a Muslim, Arab situation, Djebar begins her writing career with apprehensions for representation in any form of the self of a woman is seen as a transgression and against the norms of society. She states, “In Maghrebian society, women do not write. To write is to expose oneself” (Hiddleston 12).

Assia Djebar and Maghrebian memory

Algeria’s noted novelist and film maker, Djebar incorporates the experiences of the ‘other’ and gives importance to the voice of women in her writings. She speaks against the Islamic subjugation of women and patriarchal repressions and attempts to bring in a new hybrid narrative form to her writing by blurring the boundaries between autobiography, history and fiction. As a pioneering Francophone writer, she delves into the complexities of establishing a postcolonial female identity through the narration of collective experiences in an Algeria that is fragmented, plural and ravaged by the traumatic aftermath of French colonial endeavours and the emergence of Islamic fanatics attempting to mould Algerian identity on the basis of oppressive ideals.

Djebar’s *The Tongue’s Blood Does Not Run Dry* (1996) or *Oran, langue morte* reviews the collective understanding of loss, wherein language itself has become splintered with the series of loss and violence

that Algeria is unable to cope with. This collection of stories sees polyphony of oral, Arabic and Berber traditions and voices along with an interaction with French philosophy all through the text. All the stories emphasize upon the brutal portrayals of political violence in Algeria (specifically, Oran) after colonisation. In these stories she positions her female characters in connection with history and depicts their situation during and after the political upheavals of struggles for independence and thereafter. “In Oran, you forget. Forget and forget more. A city that has been washed, a memory bleached. For ten years after its independence- ten years- the heart of the city was left deserted, except for a few offices, the headquarters of two or three state organizations” (Djebar 10).

All the stories juxtapose murders due to the political unrest and oppression that Algeria was undergoing along with the reactions and thoughts of the victim’s kin. Djebar is influenced by Cixous’s idea of ‘écriture féminine’ and tries to employ language to forcefully protest against the colonial and patriarchal repressions of women and the threat of male violence is an impending feature in her texts. However, she realizes that though she can never do away with French as part of her colonial legacy, the language itself can never capture her indigenous memories and traditions.

Algeria had been a French colony from 1830-1962 bearing a brutal legacy of one hundred and thirty years of colonialism more than any other Maghreb country and after the eight year Algerian Revolution (1954-1962), Algeria attained independence in 1962. However the initial optimism and enterprise after the independence faded away and was replaced by a fanatical Arab Islamic group trying to establish orthodox values in Algeria. The decade of 1992-2002 saw the assassination of President Mohamed Boudiaf, one of the famed leaders of modern Algeria and soon common people also became targeted by Islamic fundamentalists and journalists, teachers and intellectuals had to bear the major brunt. All the stories showcase the impact of war on the lives and existence of people and Djebar makes it a point to represent the ‘*non dire*’ –that which societies and cultures see as taboo or unspeakable in her portrayal of women’s condition in Algeria.

The Tongue’s Blood Does Not Run Dry has been divided into two parts; Part one: “Algeria: Between Desire and Death” consists of five stories, and Part two: “Between France and Algeria” consists of two

stories. The first story from Part one: '*Oran, langue morte*' or *Oran, Dead Language* shows the tussle between remembering and oblivion with the city of Oran as the backdrop. The story begins with the death of the narrator's aunt and this recent loss is haunted throughout by the recollection of the loss of her parents thirty years back in 1962 during the horrific attacks of the OAS at the end of the struggle for independence. However, this loss and memory of the loss is never resolved and Oran becomes a city alive in its forgetting, unable to inter its past conflicts and struggles and narrative falls short in taking appropriate measures towards resolution. The writings of Sadaat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) which also emerged from a context of violence, genocide, border formations and partitions show a similar breakdown in narrative style and fragmented, vituperative narration becomes the sole recourse. However, Djébar's writing more than emphasizing upon the prevalent atmosphere of distrust and violence seems to engage in a labyrinthine effort that seeks to reveal the violence that the city has become shrouded in. "In Oran, three days of tears and silence for an assassination, for two assassinations! Then life goes on" (Djébar 12). However, this amnesia that the whole city remains shrouded in is contrasted with the narrator's continual effort to salvage from oblivion the memory of her assassinated parents. For instance, when the narrator's aunt removes the numbered identification plaques from the dead bodies of the parents of the narrator and treasures them to be given to her niece some day, she inadvertently prevents them from passing into oblivion. Later she leaves for Paris and says, " I'm going away forever, I had decided. As a negation of people, of places, of things" (Djébar 14). But is continuously haunted by the memories of her parents and distinguishes her parents' presence there transcending geographical and temporal barriers. The date-February 2nd –becomes etched in her memory forever, beyond the chronological almanac and each time the date returns, it brings back memories of personal loss and trauma. Thus a continuous and repeated sense of trauma always remains without any possibility of overcoming it nor does it provide any meaning to wade out of the aimless violence perpetrated years ago. And all the episodes in the story are intertwined with this singular remembrance, engulfing relationships and temporal progress. Djébar gives us disarranged and muddled occurrences in the story and conveys the cyclical resurgence of bereavement and although these 'flashbacks'

attempt to lend purpose to the event which happened in 1962, there is an understanding that such a comprehension can never be achieved. The loss remains profound and unresolved. Oran, the city of forgetting becomes the site for remembrance and Djébar brings in notions of the local and community into the setting of the story and communicates the effects of continual cyclical violence on place, identity and collective memory. Oran becomes representative of Algeria and remains caught between oblivion and a ceaseless sense of morose and deathly reflection of its innumerable losses. However, in doing so, Djébar is able to leave an imprint regarding the loss that perpetuated and ravaged Algeria but the loss can never be accessed for full comprehension nor can it be resolved and Algeria remains doomed in a state of ceaseless mourning: “The rest, I know the rest. Let me hear nothing more about what’s going on now in the city. Hide the hate from me—the insanity, the victims!...Write Oran, my dead language!” (Djébar 31).

The second story, “Non-return Returns,” a series of episodes sketched together becomes a paean to the mothers and daughters of Algeria, though not entirely in the triumphant sense. As Spivak has observed, Djébar’s engagement with the ‘gendered subaltern’ provides a disturbing picture of the patriarchal violence in explicit and implicit ways wherein women imbibe and appropriate the patriarchal subjugation norms. The story begins with the return of the narrator to the homeland and, without specifically stating so, Djébar through the narration is able to convey to the reader that the narrative voice is female and brings in her tropes of ‘voice’ and ‘gaze’ to confront the patriarchal violence and tyranny. The first episode begins on a liberating note, “. . . two women at large. Nobody would think, “mother and daughter”. The mother, around fifty, is blonde, wearing sunglasses (for ten years, ever since she’s been “officially” going out without a veil, she, the blonde, has known how to do it all—drive, do the shopping, handle bureaucratic affairs, pay the bills)” (Djébar 36). However, the tone of narration soon changes to give way to more horrific incidents of helpless and displacement. The episodes move in an ascending order of perpetration of violence with the last story culminating in the murder of a daughter by her mother for trespassing of the patriarchal norms of feminine behaviour. ““The city of tempests’, they called it once. “Today, the city of murders.” (Djébar 44) states through the alarmed narratorial voice.

The next story “Burning” highlights the female social bonding and sisterhood as evident from Isma’s letters to her dead friend Nawal. By trying to bridge the gap between living and dead, Isma’s addresses offer a stark reminder to the readers about the prevalent violence and loss implicit in the circumstances of her communication with an absent, dead companion. Unable to believe her loss upon the assassination of her friend Nawal, Isma evokes her present circumstances in her narrations to Nawal trying to capture Nawal’s image, thoughts and voice – “ I return to you, Nawal. I need you to be my memory from now on” (Djebar 53). Subsequently the reader is jolted when the text ends with the news of Isma’s assassination and one realizes that the entire text deals with an absence; that of the narrator and the addressee. Isma’s letters become a testimony to the violence. Questions of justice remain unresolved. These brief glimpses of violence that Djebar employs throughout the collection of stories startles as well as conveys the continual loss that Algeria faced. The representations of women are offered through fragmented snippets of personal experiences of loss and violence. After the independence, the increasing instability of Algerian society and the rising Islamicised culture became tyrannical towards the choices and ways of living of women, attempting to decrease their visibility in politics, society and even in life itself. The collective amnesia which has overpowered Algerian beliefs and living is in fact a deliberate amnesia towards the opinions and beliefs of women, overpowering them intellectually and physically. For Djebar, the self can only emerge when one becomes aware of the divide between knowledge of one’s positioning and resists the tyranny of such a determinacy.

By bringing in diverse narrative techniques, Djebar leaves it upon the reader to realize the complexity of formulating a single postcolonial Algeria as well as the tenuousness of women’s positions in contemporary Algeria. Her work showcases an attempt to construct a female genealogy and voice, separate from the traditions and customs employed to shape ‘Her’ in Algeria. The entire collection portray narrative voices struggling against linear time, trying to find a way to mourn one’s loved ones on one hand and on the other resisting the attempts to relegate the victims to oblivion. Djebar brings in links between modern Oran and the mythical tales of *Arabian Nights* in “*The Woman in Pieces*”. This is a deliberate attempt on her part to make her readers realize the cyclical patterns of

torture and subjugation that repeat themselves eerily in the present as well. The story begins with a tale from *The Arabian Nights* where a body of a woman is found in pieces in a trunk at the bottom of the Tigris. The reader is told that she had asked for apples which her husband brought to her which were taken away by a slave. However, the husband believes that she has voluntarily given away those apples to another man and kills her in a jealous rage. Djébar takes this story and makes it an object of study in a class in modern Algeria taught by the lively Atyka. We are told that Atyka intends to retell the story so as to focus more on the woman at the centre of the tale who is comfortably forgotten in the original version. Atyka's retelling becomes an act of resistance against female subordination and patriarchal subjugation, however, the fate of the woman in the centre of the tale gets replicated when Atyka is killed by Islamists fundamentalists in the classroom. Atyka lies dead in the classroom amidst the terror struck students, however, Omar can still hear Atyka's voice narrating the tale before it ultimately ceases and Omar's search for that voice is never fulfilled: "The body of the woman cut into pieces. The body, the head. But the voice?" (Djébar 125).

The longest story in the collection is "Felicie's Body" and underscores a similar outline of amnesia and an incomplete sense of mourning. The first part of the tale depicts the impressions of Armand/Karim and Ourdia/Louise, their experiences regarding their mother as she approaches death. The second part searches for an appropriate commemoration for her eventual loss. Here Felicie becomes symbolic of a land, a nation and a community and the unending quest to relocate in history and home Her/Algeria. The two names of the children denote their dual French/Algerian identity and the story intertwines the present with the distant past: "But you see us divided, each with our two first names, our two countries (which to disown, which to adopt?)" (Djébar 159). Armand/ Karim emerges as the main narratorial voice in this story striving to bridge the gap between himself and his mother and to extend their communication even though his mother's voice remains absent as she stays in coma. Armand/ Karim appropriates as well as ventriloquizes on his silenced mother's behalf. Felicie is of French origin but she was married to an Algerian and spent much of her life in Oran. This duality is percolated into the memories of her children and with her being transported to France for treatment symbolises the dual mourning

that has to be performed due to spatial displacement. Though they ultimately decide to inter her in Algeria to honour her struggles during independence movement, it is never a straight forward resolution, “Felicie, you who were saved yesterday, who will be buried with the next dawn, tell me, Felicie, Algeria” (Djebar 205).

All the stories deal with the feminine experience which remains invisible even in the face of brutal violence and trauma. The silenced woman hardly speaks and Djebar takes upon herself to lend voice to those unheard and unseen asserting their political opinions and resonances. The process of acceptance remains hesitant and unfulfilled as memories of colonial violence and resurgence of Islamic oppression keep up their haunting spectre.

Adichie and Postcolonial memory

Negotiations with the past ravaged by colonial pillage is also explored by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) which deals with the historical destiny of division and plunder which Nigeria had to face due to British colonialism. The novel portrays the trauma of colonialism, ethnic strife, displacement and effects of globalization. She highlights the loss of Igbo culture, economics and political institutions in the wake of colonization and much later, the Biafra secession war of 1966-67. The effect of war gets enacted onto the daily existence of the characters manifesting itself in various ways upon their mental, physical and emotional framework. Her protagonists, the fraternal twins Olanna and Kainene play out their lives in such a setting. They become the prototypes of modern, elite Nigerians who have received their education from England but refuse to be submerged in their own ways in the Western consciousness of overlooking Nigerian problems as something trivial, or pagan. Olanna’s consciousness becomes more aware regarding Nigerian politics due to her fiancé Odenigbo, a lecturer at the University of Nigeria, who holds regular meetings with his colleagues at his house, discussing political affairs and the need to assert the tribal identity of the land: “. . . my point is that the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe. . . I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed *black* to be as different as possible from his *white*. But I was Igbo before the white man came” (Adichie 22).

The novel is a third person narrative, and readers are given three perspectives to analyse the conditions prevalent: The tale is told through the eyes of Olanna, a teacher before war at the Nsukka University; Ugwu, Odenigbo's houseboy; and Richard, the British lover of Kainene. The perspectives that come from each of the above characters are based on their class and situation- Olanna, an upper class, educated woman becomes emotionally crippled and traumatized because of the experiences of war and the horrors that displacement causes. But her education and intellectual resolve helps her to cope with dislocated memories of physical space. Ugwu, a village boy brought up in native traditions and customs who learns the ways of the urban world at Odenigbo's house faces displacement, first voluntarily, when he is sent to work at Odenigbo's house, and later, when he gets forcefully conscripted into the Biafran army. He sees and even performs the brutalities that become inescapable in a war. Thirdly, Richard, who is a British and an outsider in Nigerian politics, through his inclination towards Igbo language and art finds a place for himself in Nigeria. He becomes the mouthpiece reporter, detailing the dislocating events and horrors that the Biafra war brings: "Richard exhaled. It was like somebody sprinkling pepper on his wound: Thousands of Biafrans were dead, and this man wanted to know if there was anything new about one dead white man. Richard would write about this, the rule of Western journalism: One hundred dead black people equal to one dead white person" (Adichie 27).

Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960, but its collective, national and individual identity was deeply affected by colonialism. Adichie in her novel emphasizes on this point and goes on to show how the coup of 1966 led by Igbo officers becomes a retaliation against the Igbos and the discrimination they faced, from which none of the characters in the novel are left untouched. The Igbo massacre which led to the secession of south east Nigeria, is reflected in the story. Olanna sees the massacre at Kano, where her relatives are also murdered and she undergoes that trauma, so much so that for a while she loses the use of her legs. The story sees the establishment of the Biafran republic and the beginning of the Nigerian civil war which displaced many. Throughout the story, the connection between colonialism and ethnic and political conflicts that the new nation is grappling with is brought out. 'Post

colonial' becomes a mere temporal tag but the effects of colonialism still linger on as violence still persists in post independence Nigeria: "This is our world, although the people who drew this map decided to put their own land on top of ours. There is no top or bottom, you see" (Adichie 156). The modern Nigerian state and its borders were mapped out in 1914 when the British colonizers joined the north and south regions to create one state where the colonial policies could be implemented without much problem and thus ending the autonomous rule of the several small states that had existed prior to imperial rule. The creation of Biafra became unsuccessful for a nation that was built upon ethnic lines, and even after gaining independence from the colonizers, Nigeria remained plunged in a civil war and unsteady administration from 1966-1970. A forced displacement from land and belonging was encumbered upon the indigenous people and the travails of that dislocation is highlighted in the novel. For Adichie this dislocation is brought on as a result of the loss of past due to colonialism

The novel points to questions and problems on the creation of a national identity and a pan- Nigerian consciousness with the attainment of independence from the colonizers. By highlighting upon the lives of the twins, Adichie gives us a view of the war from a female perspective as well. Adichie also tells us that despite colonialism and the advent of globalization, old customs and ways of living hitherto termed as 'pagan' exist, but entirely bereft of their contextual meanings to a people in a post colonial, global present. The title of the novel refers to the Biafran flag which stands for rebellion. A rebellion perhaps to lead life in one's own way but which ironically is bound to fail because of its colonial past: "Red was the blood of the siblings massacred in the North, black was for mourning them, green was for the prosperity Biafra would have, and, finally, the half of a yellow sun stood for the glorious future" (Adichie 212).

Both the writers display an estrangement and psychological displacement in their writings emphasizing upon the disconnect between the native and the colonial as well as postcolonial self; it's almost as if they have been forced into a profane space, " the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place" (Bhabha) and subsequent relocation to a different place brings in a 'pain of unbelonging' (Germaine Greer). Both the writers highlight the

postcolonial dilemma and Djébar in particular, seeks to uphold the kinship and community of women in the face of oppression and subjugation. Both the woman writers seek to rehabilitate women's literature and restore the rights of women to her body and identity in history and contemporaneity. Writing, thus, becomes an important tool for intervention and social and ideological change. Doubly 'othered' in the process of colonization, decolonization and the process of nation building, the hitherto silenced women are given a voice by both these writers who attempt to trace female 'genealogical' legacies of memory.

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