Hearing the Wound: Testimony and Trauma in Assia Djebar’s La Femme sans Sepulture (The Woman without a Grave)

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Abstract

Traumatic legacies, when unaddressed, continue to haunt the psyches and cultural collectives not only of survivors, but also of subsequent generations. As these legacies are transmitted across multiple generations, they inevitably return and disrupt human bonds. Testimony, in its curative capacity, allows recovery from the traumatic event. In the Algerian context, however, because the historic accounts of war have undermined the trauma that women experienced, by simply excluding them from any public discourse, the possibility of testimony for the victimized women was thwarted, and with it the ability of working through their trauma and recovering. In La Femme sans Sépulture (2002), Assia Djebar, the Algerian female writer, is concerned with this lingering wound of war and how to break history’s great silence over its devastating effects on women’s lives. Through the fictional world it created, her story offers a plethora of testimonies, released from bodily or psychic wounds, all female and trans-generational, concerning the female traumatic experiences of violence and death. The heroine Zoulikha, killed but never found or entombed, parades the story as a ghost that is conjured up by a number of female characters who, in their need to resurrect her, give voice to their missing testimonies that have been for so long muted or muffled. This paper will investigate the extent to which storytelling can ensure working through trauma and promote trans-generational psychic healing.

Keywords: trauma, testimony, female storytelling, memory, Algerian war of independence
“The subject, in loss, becomes an archive of loss, a site where the memory of loss and trauma is maintained in a kind of crypt.”

Introduction

In *La Femme sans Sépulture*, Assia Djebar places the marginalized woman, whose role during the Algerian war of independence (1954 – 1962) was undermined, at the center of her text by creating a feminine genealogy that implies crafting a counter-memory model to stand against the oblivion of her role and the lack of valorization of her contribution to liberation in the official historical versions. In a story woven by intermittent female voices that revives the French colonial past in Algeria and reconstructs the story of the heroine, Zoulikha, killed during the liberation struggle of 1954 to 1962, but never found or entombed, the generic boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, the imagined and the real fuse, as the reader embarks on a testimonial journey to expose Zoulikha’s, and with her all Algerian women’s traumatic memories of war. A central concern of this narrative is to investigate the relation between time and memory, between trauma and testimony, between loss and the consequences of survival. Testimonies of individual female survivors foreground the difficulty of resolution or working through traumatic events; yet, they are used as evidence to construct a history that otherwise, for lack of evidence, would not exist. Thus, the novel redeems the lack of a grave. It is a narrative that stands as a trace of history, or against history.

Zoulikha has already made her appearance in Djebar’s artistic world in her movie *La Nouba des Femmes des Mont Chenoua* (1977), where she incarnates the role of the fugitive mujahida (resistant) who fought colonialism and was caught, tortured and killed by French army forces. The keen interest in this heroic figure, the desire to evoke her again, was interpreted as a desire “to promote haunting as a mode of historical reinscription” or as a need to reconnect with the colonial past and its traumatic legacy, an attempt to act out in order to work through this unresolved trauma of violence and loss. The logic of trauma, then, can be a plausible way of reading *La Femme sans Sepulture*, an endeavour that was undertaken by many of Djebar’s scholars, namely Anne Donadey, Mildred Mortimer, Carine Bourget, Mireille Calle-Gruber, and Clarisse Zimra to name just a few, producing a plethora of texts that grapple with issues of collective and personal traumas. Most of these scholars discussed trauma in relation to hauntology or engaged with the relevance of memory in the process of a collective or individual recovery. My paper establishes a further inquiry into the ontology of postcolonial trauma, using the three key tropes of memory, trauma and testimony as critical fulcrum to the work.

The book is a tightly controlled montage – in a cinematographic fashion – of stories, different in their focus but similar in their purpose, making it possible to place the past and the present in constant relation to one another, offering the necessary space to reflect on the hybrid nature of the text where the fictional, the testimonial, the autobiographic and the historiographical intertwine. It is very hard to delineate the boundary between the authorial and the narrative voice as the autobiographic and the fictive fuse. The narrative technique of polyphony that emphasizes the dialogicity of voices traces the wealth of stories and the rich female heritage. The essay puts forth the claim that the historical cultural lacuna inherent in Algerian literary history becomes radically apparent when viewed in relation to the far more
authentic voices of female witnessing. Therefore, three aspects will be studied in this paper, memory, trauma and testimony to demonstrate how La Femme sans Sépulture evolves as a significant mode of post-war trauma narrative and to attempt to answer the following question: Can narrative—discourse open to shaping, displacement, distortion—ever offer itself as a viable space where trauma—and the memory of trauma—is (in the words of LaCapra) acted out/ worked through?

**Memory**

La Femme pays tribute to the memory of a woman named Zoulikha who fought colonialism and died without commemoration or even burial. Djebar claims that the names, the dates, the places and the contours of the heroine’s life are true and can be verified by the archives. But in the same breath she notes her recourse to fiction and the power of imagination. All the events are “rapportés avec un souci de fidélité historique”, the writer says in the opening page of the book, yet she precisely that “j’ai utilisé de ma liberté Romanesque, justement pour que la vérité de Zoulikha soit éclairée davantage”.

In many ways, Djebar’s work seems to chime with the ideas of Paul Ricoeur. The past is gone, but its traces remain. Ricoeur postulates that the trace is a material connecteur [connector] with the past, linking the living to the dead, to their deeds, thoughts and sufferings. He contends that the historian is able to trace the trace – in its “caractère chosique” – and represent it within a linguistic structure that yokes history and the tropes of fiction, within a text that provides the reader with an imaginary reconstruction of what was once real. Djebar’s work seems, in some ways, to validate the Ricoeurian position, based on the writer’s tracking of the trace, of the archive where the trace is entrusted. As a true historian, an academic training that Djebar had – she reconstructs in language the event of loss that left in its wake a physical trace or mark of its passage, more precisely a wound, a trauma. As such, we start to apprehend “le monde qui, aujourd’hui, manque, si on peut le dire, autour de la relique” [the world, now gone, which surrounded the relic, so to speak].

For Djebar, the past – in the guise of Zoulikha’s story of heroism – needs to be unearthed and reconstructed, and this is understandable, given that Algeria’s past is beset by uncertainty, trauma, loss and victimization. Zoulikha’s absent presence is evident as she “flotte inexorablement, comme un oiseau aux larges ailes transparentes et diaprées, dans la mémoire de chaque femme d’ici.” Djebar and Ricoeur meet since Djebar seems to consider that writing on traces of the past –if it has not to become an archive –has to remain irrigated by oral transmission, the word and voices.

**Memory is a strange type of inheritance; on the one hand, there is the “public house” of memory, or the archive which Derrida argues has an ideological configuration, in the sense that the separation of that which is to be remembered from that which is not worthy of
preservation – which is to be rejected as junk – is a political process. On the other, there is a type of memory structure that is not so much based on fact as reliant upon a sense of sentiment or on an elaborate combination of fantasy, fact, narrative, defiance, possibility and reassurance. And it is this type of memory that Djebar explores and uses through the testamentary structure of her narrative to disassociate, invert and displace nationalist war narratives; in so doing, she offers a revised and fabricated memory in the form of anecdotal narrative about Zoulikha. Culdico cott argues that “Memory cannot be entirely truthful; it can only, at best, be warped by time, emotion, desire, repetition and by the frailty of fact. The memory literally is a false one, yet psychologically and culturally, a fabled truth.” Djebar proposes that this “truth”, its denial or lack of it, explains the traumatization not only of individuals, but of the whole country.

Trauma

We should note that Djebar is clear about the fact that the narrative of La Femme is organized on a linear historical continuum. That is, the novel is divided into twelve chapters, structured around the passing of forward-moving time. Thus, at one level, the novel is telling a story of the present times – of a film-maker and interviewer who collects stories about Zoulikha to use them for her movie and who eventually returns back to her exilic home. But what is also clear is that this forward-moving structure is placed in constant dialogue with the archival economy of the novel. The testimonial voices and the pursuit of truth disrupt the logic of time, past and history. Fragmentation whether symbolic – memory fragmented and incoherent – or structural – the disconcerting sense of timelessness that breaks narration, closely relates to traumatic experience. La Femme testifies to the writer’s interest in the twinned economies of trauma and memory.

Trauma is engraved in memory; that is, it can be perceived as being only a memory of trauma, a trace, rather than a current state of being. The trauma of Hania, the eldest daughter of Zoulikha, is caused not only by the loss of the maternal figure, but also by the inability to keep a trace, translated in the absence of a sepulcher, which announces for her the impossibility of maintaining memory and therefore the impossibility of mourning. “Vous qui arrivez si longtemps après,” she tells the narrator, “Où trouver le corps de ma mère,” alluding to the impossibility of mourning. Paul Ricoeur discusses the notion of entombment; for him, “the grave remains because the gesture of burying remains; its path is the very path of mourning that transforms the physical absence of the lost object into an inner presence. The sepulcher as the material place thus becomes the enduring mark of mourning, the memory-aid of the act of sepulcher.” However, “When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of absence,” says LaCapra, “one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.” Mourning is the “normal” way to deal with trauma and loss, with what Freud beautifully terms the “economics of pain.” That the past—loss and trauma—continually works its way into the present moment is an unhealthy emotional situation to which Freud refers as melancholia. Hania is taken regularly by bouts of melancholy that accentuate “certains jours précis du mois;” she is weakened physically and emotionally and thinks only of her mother, “queter sans fin sa mere, ou plutot, se dit-elle,
c’est la mere en la fille, par les pores de celle-ci, oui, qui sue et s’exhale.”  

Hania’s subjectivity can be read as a wounded space – “la place blessée” – or a space of the wound. The significance of the word “wound” lays in its echoing of the original meaning of trauma, “a physical wound” and reflects the traumatized space that is imperceptibly patent in its relation to loss and death. Hania’s physical wound that initiates with the shocking event of loss is a persistent “hémoragie sonore” and the end of her menstruation cycle and loss of the ability to bear children; her moral wound is a perpetual melancholic state that continuously plays out the fantasy of burial that haunts her from the outset of the narrative. “Plusieurs fois je vis, dans un rêve, sa sépulture: illuminé, isolé, un monument superbe, et je pleurais sans fin devant ce mausolée.”  

Ricœur suggests, in this regards, that the work of memory and mourning is an “exercise in telling otherwise, and also in letting others tell their own history, especially the founding events which are the ground of a collective memory.”

To speak out about the trauma is to “break through the silence” that inundates it; a silence that is socially as well as psychologically resolved by the urgency to speak. To talk about a “traumatic event” is slightly misleading inasmuch as trauma is not defined by the nature of the event per se, but is more likely to be located in its damaging and delayed after effects. Mina, Zoulikha’s youngest daughter, “qui a grandi les dents serrées, les yeux secs, engloutie seulement dans ses livres,” finds it difficult to translate her feelings and recollections into words. Her lack of articulation displaces the horizons that constitute her identity “du présent passé…Il y’a dix ans, germa en elle cette parole ininterrompue qui la vide, qui, parfois, la barbouille, mais en dedans…;” this has the effect of making her suffering tangible and is characteristic of the trauma she suffers. “Jamais je n’ai pu pleurer,” says Mina, “un nœud me reste là,” and through talking out her trauma “je m’entendais enfin donner réalité à ce manque.” She is constantly filtering, organizing, blending, associating and constructing her own recollection; she is living in two temporalities, two states of being; she is in the present moment struggling with her everyday existence – her inability to forge a successful love relationship, her desire to pierce the secret of her mother’s disappearance; yet, her memories take her back to the past, a past she divulges in her own testimony of a child in quest for her mother hidden in the mountains, and in other women’s testimonies that relate her mother’s struggle, resistance strategies and acts of heroism. As such, “nos souvenirs, à propos de Zoulikha, ne peuvent que tanger, que nous rendre soudain presque schizophrènes, comme si nous n’étions pas si sûres qu’elle, la dame sans sépulture, veuille s’exprimer à travers nous !” Temporal and spatial disruptions, delay or, more precisely, belatedness that are the essence of testimony offer a position from which to step aside from the logics of time and space and ultimately offer themselves as spaces where trauma is articulated. “Zoulikha nous demeurerà cachée, mais prête à revenir.” The daughters provide the example of post-traumatized subjectivities, lacking a core, fractured, and in whose hearts “reste une morsure.”

Grief endemically private, paradoxically enough, needs a witness; trauma needs a witness if it is to work out, if it is to be worked through. Dori Laub focuses less on the survivors themselves and more on the hearer of testimony. This hearer is “a participant and co-owner” of the truth, an indispensible “party to the creation of knowledge de novo.” It is necessary to articulate the traumatic experience to a listener or witness, “so as to reassert the veracity of the past and to build anew its linkage to, and assimilation into, present-day life.” This “listener” “ne demande rien. Elle écoute.” Listening to other – as well as others’ narratives might open up new ways of understanding trauma and posit various modes of
responding to its legacy. The novel, thus, begins with the daughters’ anxiety about the problem of transmissibility. “chacune éprouve le besoin de s’alléger….Parler de Zoulikha, faire qu’elle se mueve, ombre écorchée puis dépliée….O langes du souvenir!”33 This task of transmission is all the more significant because of the erasure – forced or deliberate – of all written or material traces of the mother’s past. “Dans ma ville, les gens vivent, presque tous, la cire dans les oreilles: pour ne pas entendre la vibration qui persiste du feu d’hier. Pour couler plus aisément dans leur tranquille petite vie, ayant choisi l’amnésie.”34 Zoulikha’s daughters remind the narrator of her belatedness and urge her to inaugurate the healing process by eventually listening to them, “si je parle d’elle, je me soulage,”35 says Hania.

As for the “listener” – “l’écouteuse”36 – her involvement in the collective memory of her community remains ambiguous: she is “‘la visiteuse’, ‘l’invitée’, ‘l’étrangère’ ou, par moments, ‘l’étrangère pas tellement étrangère’.”37 The lack of certitude over the narrator’s identity and sense of belonging weighs heavily on her consciousness. To this hybrid position adds her belatedness that triggers an economy of guilt; there from, comes her need to cope with her personal trauma through listening, bearing witness and, as Judith Herman puts it,“shar[ing] the burden of pain.”38 “Mon écriture, avec ces seuls mots de l’écoute, a glissé de mes doigts, différé, en retard, enchainée si longtemps.”39 “Je reviens dans ma ville… vingt ans plus tard… je reviens si tard et je me décide à dérouler enfin le récit.”40

If it is a central tenet of trauma theory that an understanding of the initial event as event evades comprehension (in this case Zoulikha’s death and disappearance) and that trauma proper must be understood as a doubly inflected temporal event—cause and effect/past and present—, one way of reading La Femme is precisely as the expression of the disruptive (after) effects of great shock. Trauma, as Freud and others note, disrupts the linearity of experience by compelling the victim back into the scene of trauma repeatedly. This “return back” occurs through memory and concretizes in the recurrent need to return to Zoulikha’s story. The logic of the testimony thus is predicated on a continual lived relation to trauma. All the women involved with testimony are victims of trauma, in the sense that their lives derive meaning only with constant reference to the past and the initial moment of loss. This explains why when Dame Lionne, Zoulikha’s best friend, “s’engloutissait vingt ans en arrière… la cloche… j’entends encore à mes oreilles.”41 “Vingt ans plus tard, tout revit, le tranchant du temps, et la peine, et son impatience…”42 Zohra, the sister in law, also “aimerait comprendre pourquoi, si souvent, je suis dans cet état, près de quinze ans plus tard !… J’en suis habitée.”43 As Freud and others suggest, there is a delay at work in the economy of trauma, a delay effect, which, in the case of these protagonists does not occur through flashbacks and dreams but through a deliberate testimonial agency, the desire to speak, that places the victims back in the event of trauma.

Testimony

Post-Independence Algeria can provide a testing ground for Paul Ricoeur’s notion of modern memory that is sick with “an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere.”44 Thus, its public memory is concomitantly capable of total blackouts, at times, and of scrupulous engagement with history and past at others. Remembering all too clearly the history of suffering, or forgetting all too quickly the violences perpetuated in the name of a community, are “symbolic wounds” in the collective psyche.45 The cyclical nature of the
testimonies provided by women, in the form of “private memory”, aim at mending this “wound”, for when the past has been traumatic, threatening to disappear from conscious memory, especially within a society that urges its people to forget and distorts existing memory, traumatic memory still exists in the unconscious. The literary works that Djebar has produced are mostly concerned with redeeming a sense of historical justice concerning what Algeria has undergone, through foregrounding the role of private memory. Testimony is the vehicle through which history is remade. Weine remarks that “Each survivor, in his or her own humble way, has an opportunity to rewrite history and his or her own self. Those who receive the testimony, like those who read the novel, can partake in this process of historical emergence.”

Ricoeur characterizes testimony as “the first subcategory of the trace,” which Djebar investigates in the context of collective culture and historical memory, in relation to resistance to colonialism and women’s role in it. The book bears kernels of testimony that transmit a powerful message from women. L’la Lbiya, Zohra Oudai – actual witnesses of Zoulikha’s involvement in the war and at times her agents and accomplices – and Zoulikha herself are the ones whose testimonies will correct and reconstruct the traditional historic readings of the war and the role of women in it. The inaccessibility of the past (the story of Zoulikha lying dormant for twenty years), and its return, in the form of intrusive memories, are two major symptoms of trauma that seriously affected the life of its survivors. The only viable mode of working through these experiences involves the reinscription of the past with new meanings through the therapeutic re-enactment that testimony allows. For indeed, “L’histoire, contée la première fois, c’est pour la curiosité, les autres fois, c’est pour… la delivrance !” On the importance of testimony, Laub argues:

[S]urvivors who do not tell their story become victims of distorted memory . . . The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events.

All the women who testified to the trauma of war, are what Boutler dubs “archives”, for “as archive ventrilocated by history, the subject begins to offer itself as a site to be heard, to be read, to be interpreted. And as such, as speaking archive, the subject offers itself to the reader—the reader who becomes now a kind of tomb raider—to be analyzed, more precisely, psychoanalyzed.” Dame lionne “enjambe les temps, elle est mémoire pure,” while Zohra Oudai “Replongée dans le passé pour le revivre… elle est devenue conteuse presque joyeuse, en tout cas impétueuse, comme si le ‘temps de la lutte ouverte’ subsistait; une incandescence invisible.” Women’s testimonies take a variety of forms, becoming memory’s mirror; they are engulfed in an aura of contrivance. Artifice and a carnivalized consciousness are delivered by the constant presence of a domestic setting and the oral performance, gestural and other of women. Series of grotesque, caricatured and disheveled shuffled movements orchestrate the female verbal testimonies. Wild, wayward, errant, delicate and elaborate, memory is willed on by a repetition compulsion that is performative in nature, yet consolatory. L’la Lbiya, always seated on her sheep’s skin, with her idiomatic expressions, her tea and cakes, her implorations of God, tells the story of Zoulikha’s resistance activities, the role of women in the war and the violence of colonialism. “Memory evolves, accumulates and erodes,” says Culdicott; “it is organic and unfixed.” In hearing anew the story of Zoulikha, the narrator enacts and encodes
the work of mourning and commemoration. These stories (that of Zoulikha’s interrogatories by Costa, her flee to the mountains, her torture), and their fictional arabesques, draw upon the narrative possibilities offered by the female narrators. With each act of transmission, with each telling of the story, a new knowledge is gained; a piece in the mosaic is glued. “Testimony is more than production. It is also reception, gathering, interpretation, rearticulation, and communication.”55 As such, with every testimony come knowledge and empowerment and a redeeming sense of wholeness and integrity. “Ce qu’elle m’apprend, l’aie de ma mère,” mina confesses “je commence à le saisir… ces souvenirs me sont une pelote de laine emmêlée dans la paume.”56

“The power of testimony as an agent for change comes from its dialogic properties. When dialogism is forgotten, then testimonies’ potential for helpfulness diminishes,” notes Weine. 57 Polyphony and dialogism create ever more complex webs of voices, memories, emotions, and experiences that constantly nourish the testimony and enrich it. “Dialogic work,” postulates Weine, “assists in clarifying how the testimony cannot be said to be only a product of the survivor, who of course speaks it, but also of the receiver with whom words, memories, and stories are exchanged. A receiver stimulates and structures what is said (or not) and then documented (or not) and then transmitted (or not).”58 In one instance, the interviewer asks Mina “toi qui sait tout sur l’odyssée de ta mère, j’ai besoin, à partir du dernier récit de Dame Lionne, de faire défiler les péripéties… Peux-tu m’aider?”59 As such, individual recollections acquire a collective dimension, and the nomadic memory of Zoulikha is weaved through these various intermittent voices. The receiver is also the one who has the ethical responsibility of making sense of it all:

Une histoire dans l’histoire, et ainsi de suite, se dit l’invitée. N’est ce pas une stratégie inconsciente pour, au bout de la chaine, nous retrouver, nous qui écoutons, qui voyons précisément le fil de la narration se nouer, puis se dénouer, se tourner et se retourner… n’est ce pas pour, à la fin, nous découvrir… libérées ? De quoi sinon de l’ombre même du passé muet, immobile, une falaise au-dessus de notre tête… Une façon de ruser avec cette mémoire… La mémoire de Césarée, déploïée en mosaïque : couleurs palies, mais présence ineffacée, même si nous la ressortons brisée, émiettée, de chacune de nos ruines. 60

In one single narrative account, the narrative voice can shift from “I” to “she” and even “you”. About Mina, the narrator says:

Puis [Mina] se met à parler ou, plutôt, se prépare à s’écouter parler… Elle voudrait se couler dans le corps d’une parole fluide, pourquoi faire l’effort de se souvenir, pourquoi ?… le souvenir de ma mère, je le porte comme un cercle fermé sur lui-même, moi au centre enveloppée de moire ou de taffetas raidi, me mirant parfois et parfois moi, m’obscurcissant à mon tour.

Comprendra-t-elle, cette amie, que l’on ne peut se souvenir tout contre une bouche d’ombre…Je ne réveille pas les morts, je les porte vivants… 61

First, the “she” is Mina, the interviewed, then the point of view shifts to the first person narrator “My mother, I” without the use of inverted commas, then back to the “she” that this time refers to the interviewer, the friend. This interplay in narrative voices is in tune with the polyphonic nature of the narrative but also translates the fragmented subjectivity in the process of acting out its trauma.
Female testimonies occur in places where women’s own history is made, in their own private, domestic spaces, for “To engage history, the testimony must be prepared to enter into the social spaces where history is made and where it is retold, shared, and interpreted. This implies that the spaces of production, but also transmission and response, should be spaces that are equally conducive to the social, historical, and political as well as to the personal.” Zohra Oudai and Dame Lionne testify in their private, domestic spaces; “au milieu de son four à pain” for Zohra and “assise sur le même matelas… d’il y’a vingt ans” for Dame Lionne, sites where their private memories are constructed and their own histories are made. These women are keepers of the trace, to which Ricoeur sometimes refers to as a “psychical” or “affective” trace, as “the passive persistence of first impressions: an event has struck us, touched us, affected us,” “Nos souvenirs, comme cette pierre… sont inéffacables!… Seule l’amertume dans nos coeurs… qui demeure,” says Zohra who wonders “pourquoi, si souvent, je suis dans cet état, près de quinze ans plus tard !… J’en suis habitée.”

Djebar provides testimonies that are meant to be personal, truthful and ethical – redressing the injustices of the past. While they are used instrumentally – with the purpose of extracting information, they are more than that; they are stories on their own right. Testimony is not only what is received from the women but also what Djebar produces in the form of the book itself. It could not be the author/ narrator’s testimony in the sense of being a survivor, but it could be her testimony in the sense that she was there, the confident, the listener who shared in the experience of the telling. The testimony is certainly the mutual creation of the narrator/ interviewer and the multitude of women interviewed. They needed each other in order to complete the testimonies, to make them whole and public. When Mina reproached the narrator for her delay, the latter answers “I am here; late probably, but here! Let’s work!” The descriptions of different constellations of oral testimony allow the narrator to become a witness on her own right. There is no one reason for telling, nor one way of telling or listening, nor one type of story. Testimony offered them relief by exteriorizing and thereby partially rationalizing their memories.

Zoulikha’s testimonial voice is that of a specter, a Lazarus come back from the dead. She is relegated four chapters in the novel, in the form of monologues. It is as if the act of testifying itself facilitated her absence from a life where she is already absent: the testimony doubles or completes her absence. It seems important, if not mandatory, that Zoulikha is testifying at some margin of distance – temporal and spatial – from the event of her capture, in the safer and calmer situations afforded by her death; truth-telling finally becomes possible, after twenty years of strained family and public silence. Her accounts on her torture serve to highlight her heroism. They bear more courage and resilience than devastation and distress. They are the records of crucial life struggles, not just passive victimhood. “At a collective level, torture testimony is also a people and its culture and history speaking: perhaps speaking out of pride and out of joy in the spirit of resistance and persistence.” Zoulikha talks of her torture and its effects on her body as:

aurait le même effet que Presque vingt ans de nuits d’amour avec trios époux successif… Torture ou volupté, ainsi réduite soudain à rien, un corps – peau jetée en dépouille, à même le sol gras –, la mémoire des derniers instants malaxe tout monstrueusement : torture ou volupté, mon corps – peut-être parce que corps de femme et ayant enfanté tant de fois – se met à ouvrir ses plaies, ses issues, à déverser son flux, en somme il s’exhale, s’émette, se vide sans pour autant s’épouser !… Mon corps leur faisait peur. Normal qu’ils s’y acharment, qu’ils tentent de le morceler.
She recalls the ordeal of torture in a sensual way, celebrating the potential of her body in indulging love and cruelty, laying emphasis on the redeeming power the experience of motherhood entails. As such, she is subverting the stereotypical images of women weakened by the biological construction of their bodies.

As Mina has no public acknowledgement of her mother’s story, nor a site of commemoration, it is other women who supply the tales which fire her imagination. And imagination is to become the crucial factor in her search for identity. Yet, her difficulty to testify creates a stumbling narrative reflecting her trauma. So the issue to investigate now is the role of testimony in exposing the silenced traumatic memories and its contribution to healing and catharsis.

It is then the absence of the mother that continues to figure in the rest of the novel as the most sorely felt event of all, shadowing her whole existence and underlying all the other losses Mina has to face as young woman. Her mother is transformed into a phantom, responsible for what Abraham calls a “transgenerational haunting”, for “What haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.” Mina is certainly one of the most resilient characters in the novel, and in her refusal to discuss certain events she develops a survival strategy “qu’elle ne me parle pas aujourd’hui ... de ma mère! Se dit-elle, puis un refus intérieur l’emplit. Je ne veux plus trembler, ni souffrir!”

Djebar’s ethical responsibility towards her female “sisters” has implied a great deal of hard work that covers how testimony is spoken, received, documented, interpreted, retransmitted, and understood. The different testimony spaces are meant to engage with one another, speaking to one another to make the narrative mosaic whole and complete. The narrator manages to counter Zoulikha’s daughters’ repression of personal trauma by reconstructing, with the aid of other women, the final years of their mother’s life together.

Conclusion

Nora contends: “Archivez, archivez, il en restera toujours quelque chose!” While Ricoeur at times cites Nora approvingly, hinting at what is lost in the archive, he is more cautious in his appraisal of the negativity of the archive: “every plea in favor of the archive will remain in suspense, to the degree that we do not know, and perhaps never will know, whether the passage from oral to written testimony, to the document in the archive, is, as regards its utility or its inconvenience for living memory, a remedy or a poison, a pharmakon.” This idea is alluded to at the end of the novel where the narrator gets skeptical about the whole endeavour of testimony:

Césarée de Maurétanie [...] je la vois désormais, elle “ma capitale des douleurs”, dans un espace totalement inversé... Les pierres seules sont sa mémoire à vif, tandis que des ruines s’effondrent sans fin dans la tête de ses habitants. Pourquoi le constater après avoir repartcu la vie – “la passion” – de Zoulkha?

Djebar suggests that resuscitating the memory of Zoulkha is inscribed for the limited benefit of her family and the interviewer herself: “La foule, à Alger, et presque pareillement à Césarée, est emportée dans le fleuve morne du temps. Elle te signifie [...] Oublie avec nous! Fais comme si...” My argument here, however, must be that if the testimonial project remains a failure, it is an enormously productive one; at least it has brought to light the forgotten (his)stories of women whose polyphonic and dialogic testimony narratives not only subvert the official univocal version of the Algerian history but inspire women to set
themselves free from the colonial, nationalist and patriarchal ideologies of submission and inferiority. Ricoeur suggests that writing plays the role of a burial rite, “the scriptural equivalent of the social ritual of entombment, of the act of the sepulcher.” 77 By making a place for the dead, the novel establishes a place for the living:

l’image de Zoulïkha, certes, disparait à demi de la mosaique. Mais sa voix subsiste, en souffle vivace: elle n’est pas magie, mais vérité nue, d’un éclat aussi pur que tel et tel marbre de déesse, ressorti hors des ruines, ou qui y reste enfoui. 78

For me, the ultimate suggestion here is that, if Djebar’s optimism came through in her belief in the role of testimony in changing history, her pessimism came through in her concerns about the ability of testimony to work through trauma. Algeria’s destiny in the 1990s seems woven into a larger fabric of trauma that involves terrorism and civil war violence, “des milliers d’innocents sont portés disparus, à leur tour, parfois sans sepulture. A l’image de Zoulïkha dont Hania a cherché, dans la foret, la tombe, tant de victimes effacées dans l’ombre, la confusion, l’épouvante.” 79 “Dans chaque cité … surgissent d’autres Zoulïkha. Dans chaque lieu où se sont entremêles peur et attente, audace et, hélas, crime sauvage dans l’ombre, une figure de tragédie… illumine notre espace vide.” 80 Algeria engulfed in more violence and chaos, obliterating any sense of mourning: It is in this sense that La Femme, as a narrative about mourning, becomes a narrative in mourning; it is here, too, that the narrative discourse of testimony stands incapable of bringing salvation or a working through of trauma.
Notes


3See Jane Hiddleston, _Out of Algeria_. (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2006).


6Ricoeur, 269.

7Ricoeur,167.

8Djebar, _La Femme_, 95.

9 Ibid., 141


12Djebar, 63.


14Dominick LaCapra “Trauma, Absence, Loss”. _Critical Inquiry_, Vol. 25, No. 4. (Summer, 1999), 698.

15Ibid., 93.

16Ibid., 51


18Djebar, 64.

19Ibid., 64.


21Djebar, 65.

22Djebar, 61.


24Ibid., 61.

25Djebar,64.

26 Ibid., 103.

27 Ibid., 94.

28Ibid., 53.

29 Ibid., 51.


31Laub, 62.
32 Djebar, 95.
33 Djebar, 95.
34 Djebar, 236.
35 Djebar, 51,
36 Ibid., 102.
37 Djebar, 235.
39 Djebar, 242
40 Ibid., 238-239
41 Ibid., 34
42 Ibid.,36.
43 Ibid., 93
44 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, xv.
45 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 79.

47 Ricoeur, 170.
48 Ibid., (171).
49 Laub, 68, 64.
50 Butler, 7.
51 Djebar, 167
52 Ibid., 81
53 Culdicott, 144.
54 Stef en Weine, 93.
55 Ibid., 31
56 Steven Weine, 94.
57 Steven Weine, 93.
58 Djebar, 165.
59 Ibid., 142.
60 Djebar, 202-3.
61 Steven Weine, 149-150.
62 Djebar, 138
63 Djebar, 27.
64 Ricoeur, 427.
65 Djebar, 80.
66 Ibid., 93.
67 Ibid., 14.
68 Steven Weine, 19.
69 Djebar, 218- 219.
71 Djebar, 27.

73 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, 168.
74 Djebar, 237.
75 Djebar, 241.
76 Ricoeur, 365.
77 Ibid., 242.
79 Ibid., 242.
References


