

Assia Djebar: The Tireless Walker of Memory

Interview with Nathalie Colleville

Nathalie Colleville: Nowhere in the House of My Father is your most personal novel to date. What motivated your writing after sixteen novels?

Assia Djebar: The veritable depths of a well of forgetfulness suddenly filled the memory of a day of grave crisis for me, seventeen years old, in Algiers, a day in autumn 1953. Let us say an act of insanity. It hit me: the repressed one, after so many decades, on this day... I had the temptation to relive those instants - an hour, or less, or more, I no longer know, what is important is that I could suddenly feel this violence in me (in me and against me, or against... a pseudo fiancé suddenly become the unknown...) So, not only to relive it, but to understand its resurgence, it was necessary for me to climb far back, revisit childhood - its pleasures, its dreams, its curiosities, its secret - a childhood in ordig schools with its passion for books, bodily drunkenness in the basketball stadium, first whispers in dormitories with French girlfriends, the closest girl who you push to small transgressions, in brief a drive, a constant motion of the body and spirit, of eleven to fifteen or sixteen years, - there include also summer, the parties - and their dances - in the ceremonious but closed world of the inhabitants of the old city - in scaffold of Roman ruins and Andalusian past.

I hesitated for a year. What struck me: my own repression of this day's crisis, after so many decades. I had no desire to give the impression that I would throw in an autobiography, two or three volumes, why not? Especially since my election to the Académie française, almost as unexpected for me than for others, coming, I didn't want to suggest that I was suddenly important enough to undertake an autobiography, in other words, a tribute ... No!

NC: How did you face the resurgence of the past?

AD: I resisted this unknown and painful part of myself that I gradually discover. I wanted to relive "this hole", or this fall or this madness ... The memory itself proclaimed: no image. It was thus necessary to have a meticulous patience, tiny, imperceptible small steps ... long before, the first childhood, its happiness, its outbursts, the family nest: father in the middle, mother through the eyes of father, his quiet love for her, his attentions... Starting it all, from further away, in the happiness of those years (by sheer luck for me, of course), but to get where? At this day in childhood, at an intense pain, uncontrollable, unbearable that, unmistakably, made me drift ... Suddenly, the pure evil, a long silent cry. The unbearable intensity of the pain, like a whip across the body, the suddenness also of this wild misfortune: so I have to return to the beginning - happy childhood, dreamy and bookish adolescence - in order to get to... this hole. From the autumn of 2006 to the next summer, I lived, nearly every day (in several cafés in the Village, in New York, then in bars if possible with terraces within the vicinity of my house in Paris) I lived, pen in hand, far, very far, decades away, observing from time to time the crowd around me, to anchor myself. No, this is not an autobiography, that is to say prolonged station before a mirror, preferably full length. Finally, it's necessary to love yourself in order to set down your own life, piece by piece, month after month: believing in order to keep it. Me I had a day of remembering myself when the memories seemed infinite. Me: the unknown

NC: Memory, its flow, its absences and its fantasies, seems to guide your hand in writing this story. But you do not necessarily follow a chronological thread. What could be the nature of this thread? You speak of a trajectory "delivered by breaks"

AD: In some of my earlier books (So Vast the Prison, Algerian White, etc..) memory was often the first impulse to write, or rather the sudden urgent need to record the spontaneous testimony of someone close ... Because a sudden fear seized me of seeing this shard of life, this moment of real life - with its grace, or the hollow of despair in an anonymous story, yes, sometimes fear grips me that these fragile moments of life will fade away. It seems that I write against erasure. Most often, in this flow of a past life, of desperate or brilliant experience, illuminating, a spark, shy at first, then hardened obstinacy makes me say: "this must be fixed, this should not plunge into the night, into oblivion or colorless indifference! This need to inscribe: at least it doesn't matter if it's me who takes the pen, or some other suddenly arising to whom I

could pass the lightning glimpse (pain, rebellion, or short joy) ... The important point is that when and as I write, I begin to perceive where this spark is (sometimes in a detail, from which surges emotion, sometimes in a scene or in a character lit by impulse that strengthens a powerful emotion...)

NC: It's not only your memories that you hear. Your books are also the memories of others.

AD: Yes, to write, the ear keen, the senses sharp, it would not only come from my personal memory, but also even from strangers, on the street, a remark, a broken voice, a short laugh, I receive them by pure chance, me, listener of things tossed in the air; I suddenly believe that I am the only one to fleetingly feel a moment of pure life, of life-bubbles in the air, random words, but also, it's the life to seize, its ephemeral flash! In the night, this instant suddenly makes me legacy of memory at the point of dissolving, unless precisely by chance, my writing just touches the source ... Perhaps that way the writing - I said, "listener" - is no longer work alone, developing fantasies and unfulfilled imagination. All this is not always clear, but the emotion was there: in my life - that is to say, my wanderings - or in a scene experienced by some other person who speaks to me, ties it, and rescues it from oblivion ... So I hastily note imperceptible detail, I think back, I write the next day but in the dark, I suddenly feel there was a small miracle in the "saying" that needs recording. Then I am sure even if I lose myself, almost forgetting the person who acted in spite of herself, the transition has taken place - a small, tiny miracle of sensitivity, authenticity, suffering or rapid joy, silent ... Alas, there is the silence which gradually and indifferently engulfs everything in oblivion ... Thus, in my girlhood or adolescence, I lived through entire summers with female prisoners, locked up, not rebelling, apparently submissive. Or suddenly, they speak, they're ironic in the flash of harsh suffering, choking ... Girl or pre-teen, I was there, in a corner. Seated. Sometimes in the heart of a hammam. Through the mists of the hottest room, I was also fascinated by women said to be "low life" - who were rejected by the bourgeoisie.

NC: The autobiographical form seems to reconcile Algerian roots and French language. This "unitary possible path" was this in your mind when writing "Nowhere in the House of My Father?"

AD: I'm not so sure. Especially because the underlying goal of this book was not to "reconcile" ... It's not that simple. I essentially searched, in reliving, to understand, to understand myself and thus try to revive, in approaching step by step the most tragic day. Reliving, so many decades later; now with clear vision after solitude and a naïveté that created walls. (Certainly connected with the atmosphere of this middle-class bourgeois in - my case, my father didn't see in the instruction from which I benefited - the first in the family- nothing but the "positive"). Writing this book, I had hoped initially for an easy start, but contrary to that - suddenly aware of this, decades-long, self-hiding, self-destructive impulse, I measured how self-effacement of this teenage mini-drama somehow fixed so long the external course of my life.

NC: In "The Woman Unburied", you designate yourself under several names: the foreigner, listener, collector, visitor, guest ... What word would best suit your posture in this story?

AD: Yes, I have finally, almost in spite of myself, discerned where this permanent drive came from, in my journey as a writer, from placing myself at the spot, so close to a finished novel. Inventor and teller of fictions or successive stories? No, not really ... Eyes closed (or, why not planted in back of the head), past intimate knots, there was space outside! And walking in the anonymous Mediterranean crowd. I immersed myself there in an endless drunkenness, me, the tireless walker in the cities of the Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia, the Moroccan medina), so I fed my dreams, my escapes and without doubt, in this wandering, provides continuity of the succession of my books.

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