Of Females and Goddesses: Reinterpreting the Past in Assia Djebar’s *Loin de médine* and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*

A comparative approach to Assia Djebar's *Loin de médine* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, reveals that the sacred constitutes a common thematic thread that binds their work. Recurrent references to Islamic history and the Prophet Mohammad's life abound in *Loin de médine*. Similarly, one cannot miss the allusions to the birth of Islam, divine revelation and the battle between good and evil in *The Satanic Verses*. In line with the conference's focus that pivots around 'Histoires', this paper intends to show that Djebar's and Rushdie's writing shares common ground as they both endeavour to reassess the silences in history and to recuperate the voice of female agency. By way of examining the commonalities between Rushdie’s and Djebar’s work, this paper considers the interplay between the reinvention of the past and the intellectual Islamic notion of creative *ijtihad*. Listening to the voice of silence and re-evaluating official historical accounts becomes part of the intellectual endeavour that lies at the heart of the concept of *ijtihad*.

Djebar in *Loin de médine* takes us into a journey in the depths of a 'mémoire feminine' that defies the monolithic and male-centered historical accounts. Djebar not only digs into the silences of the Islamic official accounts of history but she also excavates female figures of dissent, apostasy and rebellion. In the 'Avant-Propos' to *Loin de médine*, Djebar sets the tone for her creative endeavour which revolves around the idea of *ijtihad*. Djebar speaks of her 'volonté' which she defines as the 'effort intellectuel pour la recherche de la vérité venant de djihad, cette lutte intérieure, recommandée à tout croyant' (1991: 6). The search for truth that Djebar alludes to
involves, in Djebars terms, 'la lecture de quelques historiens des deux ou trois premiers siécles de l'Islam (Ibn Hisham, Ibn Saad, Tabari)' (5). The rereading of the historical accounts is not an end in itself as Djebar unveils the mechanisms of the silencing of women's active participation in the political and religious social spheres. Ibn Hisham, Ibn Saad and Tabari are referred to as 'Transmetteurs certes scrupuleux, amis naturellement portés, par d'habitude déjà, à occulter toute présence féminine' (5).

The primary purpose of Djebars rereading of the chronicles by male Islamic historians is to excavate the silenced voices of women. This personal re-interpretation of Islamic history could be understood as a form of intellectual ijtihad. Ijtihad, is an Arabic word that stems from the noun johd, thus conveying the meaning of endeavour, effort and energy. From an Islamic judicial point of view, the concept of ijtihad is quite often understood as opposed to taqlid which denotes imitation, and acceptance of theological laws. Montgomery Watt in Islamic Philosophy and Theology identifies ijtihad as the 'giving of independent decision' and 'the person qualified to do so was a mujtahid' (2008: 170). The concept of ijtihad is therefore synonymous with 'personal research', individual 'interpretations' and 'opinions'. Mernissi calls ijtihad 'private initiative' (1993: 19) and Taraq Ramadan tells us that 'ijtihad includes all the instruments used to form judgements through human reasoning and personal effort' (2006: p. 11).

George Lang shows in his article 'Jihad, Ijtihad, and other Dialogical Wars in La Mère du Printemps, Le Harem Politique, and Loin de Médine' that both Mernissi and Djebar deploy ijtihad with a view to debunking the biased male interpretations of the hadith. Lang maintains that:

1 Each of these authors struggles in different ways, to revise and reverse misogynistic traditions of interpretation of the early years of Islam that have been subverted by the

---

patriarchy to its own ends. Both avail themselves of the tool of *ijtihad*, long denied not only women but all believers who are not accredited mujtahid (1996: 20).

While Djebar finds herself, as a female writer from a Muslim and Berber background, grappling with the silence imposed by the male centred and orthodox interpretations of the Islamic history, she embarks on a 'creative' and 'personal' journey where she continuously proposes her fresh views on religious tradition and history. When dealing with the sacred space of the *Hadith*, the Prophet Muhammad’s tradition, Djebar provides a female vision and revision. In a sense, Djebar could be said to perform a creative *ijtihad* as she tries to reconstruct history. To borrow Danielle Marx-Scouras' terms, it could be pointed out that Djebar in *Loin de médine* attempts to recuperate the traces of 'muffled' female voices. In *Ces voix qui m’assiègent*, Djebar raises the issue of silence from within patriarchal historical accounts, citing the example of Ibn Saad and Tabari amongst other male Muslim historians. Djebar openly underscores the difficulty of listening to the gaps in history and to excavating a female/feminine voice:

> Ecouter le son, le rythme, le chatoiement des images de l’autre langage, celles des chroniques de Ibn Saad et de Tabari, puis tirer, je dirais grâce aux “trous” du récit premier (surgis autant de difficultés que me présentait cette langage, qu’égalemement de l’ambigüité, par moment, du texte d’origine), tirer donc cette mémoire féminine, lambeau après lambeau, muscle après muscle, peut-être aussi souffrance après souffrance (1999: 53).

In order to counter the voicelessness of 'cette mémoire féminine', Djebar inscribes within the female stories of *Loin de Medine*, 'multiples voix' (1991: 313) and 'parole plurielle' (337). Djebar’s

---

women in the first years of Islamic revelation and following the death of the Prophet Mohammed appear to be active participants in the religious and political spheres which were mostly dominated by male power.

In *Loin de médine*, we witness the influential voice of women that irrefutably permeate the religious, political and even scientific arena. Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter, is resolute to express her views on women’s inheritance rights and Esma, Abu Bakr’s wife, is reputed for her scientific knowledge and is known as ‘le guérisseuse’ (1991: 257). Djebar’s revival of the memory of female agency within an Islamic historical context is coterminous with Leila Ahmed’s contention that women played a key role in the Islamic religious and political life. As Ahmed writes:

Broadly speaking, the evidence on women in early Muslim society suggests that they characteristically participated in and were expected to participate in the activities that preoccupied their community; those included religion as well as war. Women of the First Muslim community attended mosque, took part in religious services on feast days, and listened to Muhammad’s discourses. Nor were they passive, docile followers but were active interlocutors in the domain of faith as they were in other matters. Thus the hadith narratives show women acting and speaking out of a sense that they were entitled to participate in the life of religious thought and practice, to comment forthrightly on any topic, even the Quran, and to do so in the expectation of having their views heard (1992: 72).

This could be true of Djebar’s *Loin de médine*, where, in matters of politics and religion, women stand out as outspoken individuals freed from the silence of the established male historical accounts. Djebar in a revealing passage in *Loin de médine* illustrates how the voices of women were heard and acted upon by the Prophet Mohammad:
The voices of women in the passage above echo another instance in *Loin de médine*, where Djebar renders the story of Barira who names herself 'la libérée' (1991: 283). The story of Barira provides an example of a female slave who was given the choice by the Prophet Mohammed to decide on her right for liberty. Indeed, the voice of Barira relates to us the discussion she had with the Prophet himself (284). Barira is noted for her speaking out as she affirms to the Prophet her wish to be freed from both slavery and marriage: 'Libre! Je désire, ô Messager de Dieu, je désire être libérée de tous les liens, de tous!' (285).

Djebar’s act of unearthing female voices implies the need to revisit Islamic history, tradition and established male accounts. In 'The Politics of Feminism in Islam' Anouar Majid admits that both Orientalist and Islamic orthodox discourses have eclipsed female influence. In Majid’s view there is a pressing need to conduct a ‘recovery of a long-obfuscated egalitarian Islam together with an effort to reconceptualize a progressive Islam for the future’ in order to ‘go beyond a negative critique of homogenized Islamic cultures and rethink a possible indigenous path to women’s emancipation’ (1998: 322). In *Loin de médine*, Djebar retells the story of the prophet Muhammad from a purely female perspective. The reader discovers the significance of Fatima’s questioning of the inheritance law upon the denial of her right to inherit her father. Fatima or 'la desheritée' (1991: 92) also disputes Abu Bakr’s succession of Muhammad as though ‘tout était
affaire d'hommes. Tout, y compris le droit d'héritage des filles!' (93). While Fatima’s emancipatory ideas are rarely found in the Islamic male narratives, Fatima directly addresses the faithful who had just finished their prayers: 'Ainsi, vous écoutez mon appel tandis que je m’adresse a vous: et vous restez la! Ma voix vous l’entendez' (89).

In her introduction to *The Journey Back: Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Mernissi calls for a rereading of the Islamic heritage, an undertaking which she admits could be fraught with risks (1991: 9). Because the return to the past, or 'the act of recollecting' as Mernissi puts it (9), digs into the silences of history, remembering inevitably gives rise to the entanglement between the political power and religious discourse (10). Mernissi therefore begs the question: 'But can one ever "simply" read a text in which politics and the sacred are joined and mingled to the point of becoming indistinguishable from each other?' (10). What is at stake here is the historical manipulations of the Islamic past and the influence of those in power on the process of the writing of history.

As in Rushdie’s work, reclaiming the past emphasizes the way in which history is manipulated by those who determine what should be remembered or forgotten from the page of history. The similarity between Djebar’s *Loin de médine* and Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* lies in their creative return to the past. Djebar's 'personal' endeavour to listen to the silence of female 'histoires' matches Rushdie's attempt to revive the memory of three female goddesses who used to be venerated in the era preceding Islam, known as Jahiliya. The title of Rushdie’s novel alludes to what is known in Arabic as the 'gharaniq', which could be translated instead as 'birds'. Daniel Pipes explains that the phrase 'the satanic verses' is found in 'orientalist tradition' (2003: 115). In Rushdie's novel, the story of the satanic verses refer to the moment when the Prophet Mohammad received a revelation, admonishing him to concede to the authority of the three female deities: Al-Lat, Al-Uzza and Al-Manat. The satanic verses revive the controversial memory about the three goddesses and condemn the act of 'orthodox interpreters who will try and unwrite their story'
We might say that the creative process of rethinking the sacred in *The Satanic Verses* displays the reinscription of a sceptical point of view that questions the established foundations of a monologic religious discourse. Rushdie incites his readers to delve into the realm of 'devil talk' in order to 'ask forbidden questions: antiques' (2006: 92).

Rushdie’s recovering of the memory of female goddesses entails a rekindling of the era of Jahiliya. From an Islamic orthodox perspective, Mernissi explains that the period predating Islam, known as Jahilia is often analogous with a 'chaotic pagan world before Islam' (1993: 87). Along these lines, Ringrose argues that Muslim historians have a 'tendency to cut off the pre-Islamic age, and to view the birth of Islam as the starting point of history' (2006: 252). Seen in this light, Rushdie’s strategic rewriting of the story of female goddesses could be said to counteract the male centered Islamic discourse that seeks to obfuscate the era when 'gods swarmed in the Arabian heavens and had their place in large numbers in the temples' (Mernissi1993: 86). When the memory of the female goddesses of the Jahilia is lost in the pages of oblivion, 'the feminine would be doubly stamped with the sign of invisibility' (Mernissi 1993: 86). While Rushdie’s reinscription of the story of the female goddesses is deemed to be blasphemous, one should instead interpret it as a call for a dialogic and plural understanding of the Islamic history and collective memory. In general terms, official and established Islamic accounts are premised on a dichotomous positioning of the Jahiliya against the rise of Islam.

Rushdie’s fictional 'return to the jahilia' emerges as a possible answer to Mernissi’s call for a re-evaluation of the Islamic collective memory:

How can the new be distinguished from the old if the old is banned from sight, if the *jahiliyya* is a black hole, existential darkness? And how, please tell me, can the masculine be distinguished if the feminine is banned from sight, if femaleness is a black hole, a silent gap, an absent face?
Can it be that the *jahiliyya*, that *hijab* of ignorance, is only an amulet against what is too difficult for us to accept, the raw, naked violence in the city that is linked in the inadequately buried past to a femaleness still more unbearable to contemplate — that of the goddesses who reigned in the Ka'ba? (1993: 114).

Indeed, Rushdie cynically warns us against the damaging impact of forgetting and the manipulation of the past by those who yield power, those who 'write to tell lies' (385). Mernissi explains that Manat, symbolised human destiny and she was worshipped through the ritual of pilgrimage. Al-Lat was synonymous with military power and warfare and al-'Uzza 'represents most strongly the warrior dimension of the divine, linking the reign of the feminine in the collective memory with the age of darkness' (1993: 118). Baal, Rushdie's satirist, poetically reminds us that escaping the past is but 'One full of fear/An idea that runs away’ (126). When Gibreel struggles to deny the existence of the three Goddesses, their 'revenge seems tireless' (126). It is as though there is no escape from:

all three: Uzza of the radiant visage, goddess of beauty and love; dark, obscure Manat, her face averted, her purposes mysterious, sifting sands before her fingers — she’s in charge of destiny — she’s Fate; and lastly the highest of the three, the mother-goddess, whom the Greeks called Lato. Ilat, they call her here, or, more frequently, Al-Lat. *The goddess*. Even her name makes her Allah’s opposite and equal. Lat the omnipotent (Rushdie 2006: 199-100,).

The three female deities revered for their resplendent beauty, omnipotence and might are dismissed from if not demonised in the male-centred and monotheist accounts of Islamic history.

Rushdie therefore undertakes what Brinda Mehta describes in *Rituals of Memory* as the 'revival of the suppressed ancestral voices' (2007:182). Examining the significance of the female
voice in Arab women’s writing, Mehta explains that 'the suppression of the ancestral female voices has placed women within alien patriarchal realities in which the absence of a counter voice of protest or condemnation has justified this victimization' (2007: 182). Hence, the allusion in The Satanic Verses to Al-Lat; who symbolises an unsettling countervoice of female divinity; posits the goddess in opposition to a monotheist understanding of 'one one one' (Rushdie 2006:103). Rushdie’s act of reviving the female deities echoes Luce Irigaray's feminist reading practice. Ringrose indicates how Irigaray's attention is drawn towards the 'repression of the feminine' (2006: 161). 'Irigaray', Ringrose writes, 'believes that the very construction of the patriarchal symbolic order hinges on this "murder" of the maternal-feminine' (2006: 162). Ringrose compares the feminist 'project' of Irigaray to a 'criminal pathologist' who seeks to uncover 'the underlying maternal-feminine' (161). To borrow Ringrose' words, Rushdie could also been seen as a 'criminal pathologist' who tries to retrieve the suppressed story of the female deities. Ringrose argues that Irigaray 'exposes the perpetrators of the crime (masculine systems of thought), denounces their repressive methods, attempts to perform a miracle in bringing the maternal-feminine back to the symbolic' (161-162). The symbolic order stands for the 'masculine imaginary' which in order to exist it totally effaces the 'maternal-feminine'. Ringrose notes that the masculine symbolic order is premised on the absence of the feminine. In the light of Irigaray's feminist approach, Ringrose remarks that 'woman comes to be equated with the absent image, with that which is beyond representation, but also with the forbidden image, with that which is censored or repressed'(163).

The excavation of the deities’ ‘histoires’ in The Satanic Verses brings to the fore the issue of the prophet's authority. Daniel Brown in Rethinking Tradition in Modern Thought explains that 'In the Muslim context, the early modernists were the first to reopen the question of Prophetic infallibility in the modern period' (1996: 64). The 'doctrine of ###isma', Brown writes, implies that 'All prophets, according to this doctrine, are to some degree ma###sum### that is, protected by God from making mistakes or falling into sin' (1996: 60). It is indeed the belief in the 'infallibility' of the
prophet's sayings and deeds which legitimises the authority of Muhammad as a prophet of Islam. In
the passage below, Brown explains how

The doctrine of ‘isma was an important guarantee of the integrity of the Qur’an itself. If
prophets are liable to err or sin, then how can we know for sure that they have accurately
passed on the revelation that have they have received from God? Theologians agreed almost
unanimously on the most basic form of the doctrine: prophets must be considered immune
from error in all matters related to the divine message (61).

Preceding the modern Islamic debates on 'Prophetic authority', "Prophetic infallibility provided the
essential foundation for the authority of Prophetic tradition, known as sunna. To the extent that the
words or actions of Muhammad were protected from error they must accurately reflect God's will"
(Brown, 1996 p. 61). Despite the fact that the sunna was predicated on the notion of isma or
'Prophetic infallibility', modern Islamic scholars sought to challenge this idea. In Brown’s words,
'The problem with infallibility is that it leaves so little room for improvement, or change of any
kind. There is a certain inflexibility built in the idea' (1996: 63). Modern Islamic thought has been
marked by a departure from the categorical doctrine of isma that has dominated the classical
theological interpretations of prophetic authority. Brown argues that 'where pre-modern Muslim
piety envisions Muhammad as a cosmic figure, larger than life and invested with super human
qualities, modern treatments of Muhammad bring the Prophet back down to earth' (65). In modern
Islamic thought, a greater emphasis has been placed on the “humanization of Muhammad” and on
the 'tendency to demythologize Muhammad’s life' (Brown 1996: 65).

Brown’s examination of the 'nature of prophetic authority' aptly fits Rushdie’s depiction of
the prophet Muhammad. In his fictional novel The Satanic Verses, Rushdie refers to the prophet as
Mahound. We are presented with a prophet uncertain of his sayings and deeds. Mahound cries for
help (Rushdie 2006: 109), and is filled with remorse and 'anguish' (2006: 111). Gibreel, the archangel, witnesses a prophet prone to all forms of human frailties. Mahound is 'tired' when he reaches the site of revelation (2006: 110). In Gibreel’s words, 'Mahound’s anguish is awful' (111). Rushdie’s daring portrayal of the prophet in human terms already a dangerous challenge posed to orthodox interpretations. However, to borrow Brown’s words, Rushdie’s ‘humanization’ of the prophet ties in with the modern debates on prophetic authority.

The implications of reevaluating the prophetic authority are quite significant in relation to the reinterpreting the sunna. It is important to note, as Brown says, that 'Bringing Muhammad down to earth, and casting him as a fallible human being, offers modern interpreters of his legacy flexibility. An infallible Prophet leaves little room for improvement, but the legacy of a human and fallible Prophet, a Prophet more like us, is much easier to mold' (1996: 65-66). In this respect, rethinking the possibility of a human prophet and of the human nature of his sayings and deeds would entail the possibility of rethinking the sunna. Nevertheless, such a prospect of a more flexible understanding of the prophet’s legacy is deemed to be threatening by orthodox Muslims. According to Brown 'conservative writers have maintained a rigorous polemical campaign in defense of the orthodox theory of Prophetic authority. For defenders of orthodoxy the Prophet’s example is clearly more than paradigmatic; for them Muhammad’s behavior is exemplary in every respect and in every detail' (1996: 73). To echo Brown’s words, one can say that Rushdie’s depiction of the Prophet reflects the 'tension between principles of stability and of flexibility, between the authority of the past and the exigencies of the present' (1996: 75). When the world of fiction teases the polemics over religion and representation, those who wield power will seek to protect the very religious foundations of their political integrity. Because Rushdie’s novel asks questions about prophetic authority, his novel implicitly questions the intransigence of what Brown calls 'the defenders of orthodoxy' (73).

As such, Brown associates prophetic infallibility with a an absolute rejection of the
possibility of human mistake, which in itself refers to the infallibility of the divine revelation. However, Rushdie’s novel undermines such a belief in prophetic authority and presents us instead with a Mahound crying for help (2006: 109), filled with 'anguish' (111), and caught 'in the grip of his misery' (125). In depicting the fragile and human side of Mahound, Rushdie seems to subscribe to the modern interpretation of the prophetic authority which, according to Brown, deemphasize the idea that the prophetic persona reflects a 'cosmic figure, larger than life and invested with super human qualities' (1996: 65). What transpires is that Rushdie attempts to undermine the authority of the 'defenders of orthodoxy' who continue to 'uphold the specificity, the indivisibility, and the universality of Prophetic authority' (1996: 73).

In the Chapter entitled 'Return to Jahilia', Rushdie’s satirist character Baal, is charged of blasphemy. When dragged to the death sentence, Baal defiantly shouts 'We are the people you cannot forget' (2006: 392). Through the study of Djebar’s creative reinterpretation of the Islamic accounts and her focus on female 'transmetteuses', and through Rushdie’s reformulation of prophetic authority; we are presented with untold stories, and long forgotten 'histoires'. In the writing of Djebar and Rushdie we encounter an unrelenting battle with the silence prescribed by the orthodox interpretations of the sacred in the Islamic collective memory and manipulations of history. From the silence of the pages of history springs forth a plethora of voices that both enter in dialogue with and deviate from the stringent monologism of 'one' voice. What transpires is that Djebar and Rusdhie are forging their space amongst the few controversial intellectuals that 'you cannot forget'.

Bibliography


