

L'Amour, la fantasia: Writing the Self through the Lost Collective

ISIS BUTÔT

*Une intercession s'opère: je me dis que cette touffe
de râles suspendus s'adresse, pourquoi pas, à toutes
les autres femmes que nulle parole n'a atteintes
[...] La lettre que je rangeai m'est devenue première
lettre: pour les attentes anonymes qui m'ont
précédée et que je portais sans le savoir.
(L'Amour 88-89)¹*

¹ "Suddenly these pages
begin to emit a strange
power. They start to act like
a mediator: I tell myself that
this cluster of strangled cries
is addressed – why not? – to
all the other women whom
no word has ever reached.
[...] The letter that I put
away became a first one:
the first expression of what
those anonymous women
who preceded me were
waiting for and of which I
was the unwitting bearer."
All translations of quotes
from *L'Amour, la Fantasia*
are taken from Dorothy S.
Blair's translation of the
novel: *Fantasia: an Algeri-
an Cavalcade* (Heinemann,
1993).

From Autobiography to Fiction

L'Amour, la fantasia is a book written by the Algerian author Assia Djebar (1936). First published in 1985, it is her first *attempt* at autobiography (*Ces voix* 44), and yet it is not easily classified as such because of its very form and structure. From the first page onwards the narrative's perspective changes from third to first person and back again, historical chapters cut the autobiographical narrative in fragments and toward the end evermore 'voices' are introduced, telling their own stories and frustrating the whole notion of autobiography. The reader soon comes to understand the difficulty on the part of the writer in writing (about) herself as a direct consequence of the language she writes in, which is that of the former colonizer of her country: France.

The writer, to whom we will from now on refer as the (first) narrator, characterizes her relationship with the French language in extremely ambiguous terms. On the one hand,

it is the language of her liberation: as an Algerian girl from the Sahel, it is only because her father, against all traditions, made her go to a French school and learn this language that she was 'saved' from the veil that other women had to wear in more than the literal way and that made it possible for her to pursue her studies and escape from the anonymity of her female ancestors. Meanwhile, it is the same father who rages when he discovers that she receives love letters (written in French), only turning that language into an object of desire and fascination for his daughter. As she says: "ainsi, cette langue que m'a donnée le père me devient entremetteuse et mon initiation, dès lors, se place sous un signe double, contradictoire" (*L'Amour* 12) [*thus the language that my father had been at pains for me to learn, serves as a go-between, and from now a double, contradictory sign reigns over my initiation*"] (*Fantasia* 4). This contradiction reaches its climax when, much later, she calls the French language her *langue marâtre*:

Quelle est ma langue mère disparue, qui m'a abandonnée sur le trottoir et s'est enfuie? [...] Sous le poids des tabous que je porte en moi comme héritage, je me retrouve désertée des chants de l'amour arabe. Est-ce d'avoir été expulsée de ce discours amoureux qui me fait trouver aride le français que j'emploie? (*L'Amour* 298)

[Which is my long-lost mother-tongue, that left me standing and disappeared? (...) Burdened by my inherited taboos, I discover I have no memory of Arabic love-songs. Is it because I was cut off from this impassioned speech that I find the French I use so flat and unprofitable?] (*Fantasia* 214)

The narrator discovers that the liberation is also an exclusion, a separation from the collectivity of her female ancestors, their languages and their stories that the French language cannot tell because it is a direct reminder of the violence committed against them during colonization, and because it has only served to silence them through the writing of 'official' history. This part of her past and her own story thus remains unreachable for her and she concludes that although a liberation and an 'unveiling' at first sight, writing in French only means taking on a new veil, occulting what it can never express:

L'autobiographie pratiquée dans la langue adverse se tisse comme fiction. [...] Croyant 'me parcourir', je ne fais que choisir un autre voile. Voulant, à chaque pas, parvenir à la transparence, je m'engloutis davantage dans l'anonymat des aïeules! (*L'Amour* 302)

[Autobiography practised in the enemy's language has the texture of fiction. (...) While I thought I was undertaking a 'journey through myself', I find I am simply choosing another veil. While I intended every step forward to make me more clearly identifiable, I find myself progressively sucked down into the anonymity of those women of old – my ancestors!] (Fantasia 217-217)

It is in this light that I wish to explore the relationship between collective and individual memory as it is represented in this novel. In *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* Maurice Halbwachs states that there is no such thing as individual memory outside what he calls the 'social frameworks,' or collective memory: in the act of remembering individuals always depend on and turn to these social frameworks that inform them about their own memory. Explaining first in a bit more detail what Halbwachs means by collective memory (although I do not have the space here to explain exactly how this collective memory is formed), I intend to analyse the meaning of the structure of the novel. As I hope to show, on the one hand this complicated alternation between autobiographical, historical and even less easily classifiable chapters is a conscious choice on behalf of the author, motivated by a sense of responsibility, but at the same time it is the only possible way for her to write about herself. Drawing attention to the way in which Djébar deals with silences, I will argue that the way in which this 'autobiography' turns into fiction is, paradoxically, a strategy that has to be adopted in order to write the self, and that it is in this, in its own peculiar way, illustrative of what Halbwachs describes.

The Social Frameworks of Memory

Although often criticized, the French philosopher and socialist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), influenced especially by Émile Durkheim, has been of great importance in the development of and the discussion about the concept of collective memory. In *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, first published in 1925, and later in "La mémoire collective" (1950), he argues against the psychological way of treating memory as individual, implying a view of man isolated from his social milieu. He explains that it is *in society* that man acquires memories, remembers them, and recognises and localizes them, since the largest part of remembering is incited by questions from others or from questions that we imagine others could ask; in order to answer them we try to see through their perspective, attaching ourselves to the same group(s). In this we also use other people's memories of the same events to help remember/

2 My translation.
For original quote see
p. 98 of *Les Cadres Sociaux
de la Mémoire*.

construct our own memories, and it is because of this that he postulates the existence of a collective memory and of social frames of memory: "it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection" (OCM 38). The collective memory is produced within groups; he gives special attention to the family, the religious groups and to social classes as sources for its formation.

Wherever we go and whatever we do, we always carry (the memory of) other people's memories within ourselves, memories which participate in the formation of our own experience; participation in a collective memory is thus a condition for the remembrance and construction of individual memory. When we do not remember events even though people around us still testify to them, it is because we do not belong to that same group anymore (LMC 12): "the transformation of the frameworks of memory leads to the disappearance or transformation of memories."² These social frames, just as the events, are formed out of memories, but the difference is that the former are more stable and thus function as a frame of reference as it were, to find and rebuild the latter.

All this means that when we remember we always do so from the perspective of the present; rather than bringing a whole past to the surface of our conscience we select those pieces and events that link directly to our present state as an individual (within a group), just as groups select and remember those events that matter to them as a group. This does not mean that collective memory is the same as history; Halbwachs on the contrary draws a clear distinction between the two. As Jan Assmann explains, Halbwachs seemed

to think that “once living communication crystallized in the forms of objectified culture [...] the group relationship and the contemporary reference are lost and therefore the character of this knowledge as *mémoire collective* disappears as well.” (128) Thus, collective memory is characterized as it were by an organic, ‘living’ relationship with the group; it is formed out of collectively shared representations of the past. Although much can be said and indeed has been said against this, I will show in this paper how this idea of a collective memory and social frames of memory as a condition for individual memory occurs in *L’Amour, la fantasia* by Assia Djebar.

***L’Amour, la fantasia*: Language, History and Autobiography**

Halbwachs states that

[i]n a way, contemplative memory or dreamlike memory help us to escape society. It is one of the rare moments when we succeed in isolating ourselves completely, since our memories, especially the earliest ones, are indeed *our* memories: those who might read them in us as well as we read them ourselves have either vanished or been dispersed. (OCM 49)

This evasion from society however can only take place because one turns to another one: the contemporary frames are substituted for old ones belonging to groups that no longer exist. According to Halbwachs, this change of social frameworks still operates as a sort of liberating evasion, because one can ‘choose’ the frames one turns to. In this sense, contemplative memory which I believe can be said to be at work in autobiographical writing allows one to escape from a society that always imposes itself upon us to one that we choose and leave whenever we want to: “memory gives us the illusion of living in the midst of groups which do not imprison us, which impose themselves on us only so far and so long as we accept them.” (OCM 50)

In *L’Amour, la fantasia*, I believe something is fundamentally different from this because of the author’s choice of the French language for the writing of her autobiography. As mentioned before, this language automatically throws her back to the violence through which it has been imposed on the Algerian territory, and to the countless voices it has silenced in the writing of Algeria’s history. In that sense, it is as though the language ‘imposes’ a certain (frame of) memory, or the memory of a memory upon her: that of all that was destroyed and muted during the colonization, the Algerian perspective on this period. Wanting to write

about herself, her childhood and her own life, she is in a way forced to listen to those memories that ask for recollection.

Although she appears to be more than willing to do so, it turns out to be impossible because the very social frameworks that would allow for the reconstruction of these memories have been destroyed, along with the groups they belong to. So even though according to Halbwachs history is not at all collective memory (and in this case has even less to do with it, since history has not even been written by a successive group of the collective she wishes to give voice to, but by ‘the enemy’), Djébar the historian has no choice but to take on that official history, searching for signs of all the lost stories. She describes her own activity already in the first historical chapter as “tenter de tout réentendre” (*L’Amour* 17) [*an attempt to overhear everything*] (*Fantasia* 8). These chapters are characterized by questions about the Algerian side accompanying the French accounts of *la prise d’Alger* and other rhetorical tactics (like quoting from sources to remind one of the subjectivity of these writings) that emphasize the fact that her attempt is one in which she has to let her imagination flow, because there are practically no accounts of the historical facts written by persons that have witnessed them from the Algerian perspective (she mentions that of 37 accounts of the *prise d’Alger* in July 1830 only three were from the side of the colonized): “Je me demande [...] si le dey Hussein est monté sur la terrasse de sa Casbah, la lunette à la main. Contemple-t-il en personne l’armada étrangère? Juge-t-il cette menace dérisoire?” (*L’Amour* 16) [*I wonder (...) whether the Dey Hussein has gone up on the terrace of his kasbah, telescope in hand. Is he personally watching the foreign armada approach? Does he consider this threat beneath contempt?*] (*Fantasia* 7). Simultaneously this way of rewriting historical events shows the fictional character of any historical narrative; but in this fiction she tries to find a ‘true’ story, as if guessing the form of reality from the shadows in Plato’s cave:

Des lettres de mots français se profilent, allongées ou élargies dans leur étrangeté, contre les parois des cavernes, dans l’aura des flammes d’incendies successifs, tatouant les visages disparus de diaprures rougeoyantes... Et l’inscription du texte étranger se renverse dans le miroir de la souffrance, me proposant son double évanescant en lettres arabes, de droite à gauche redévidées. (*L’Amour* 69)

[*The flickering flames of successive fires form letters of French words, curiously elongated or expanded, against cave walls, tattooing vanished faces with a lurid mottling... And for a moment I glimpse the mirror-image of the foreign inscription,*

reflected in Arabic letters, written from right to left in the mirror of suffering.]
(*Fantasia* 46)

This is one of the explanations for the interference of historical chapters in the autobiographical narrative, and a valid one, but there are more. Assia Djebar herself has said that they also served as a protection in what in beginning an autobiography felt as an undressing in public (*Ces voix* 109): the rewriting of a lost collective memory acts as a security base for the individual. But in my opinion there is more to it. As I have already shown, being on the one hand the only language that would permit her to tell about herself, the French language is simultaneously what separates her from a feminine tradition and from the modes of expression of one of her groups (this is why she comes to speak of the French language as her “Tunic of Nessus,” [*Fantasia* 213]) and from what Halbwachs would call the social frames of memory of that group. She comes to see the French language as her own colonizer:

Après plus d’un siècle d’occupation française [...] un territoire de langue subsiste entre deux peuples, entre deux mémoires; la langue française, corps et voix, s’installe en moi comme un orgueilleux préside, tandis que la langue maternelle, toute en oralité, en hardes dépenaillées, résiste et attaque, entre deux essoufflements. (*L’Amour* 299)

[After more than a century of French occupation (...) a (...) no-man’s-land still exists between the French and the indigenous languages, between two national memories: the French tongue, with its body and voice, has established a proud presidio within me, while the mother-tongue, all oral tradition, all rags and tatters, resists and attacks between two breathing spaces]. (*Fantasia* 215)

The French language has to be resisted and at the same time this is impossible, for it has drawn her away from the ‘mother tongue,’ that although it still seems to exist in her, somewhere and fundamentally belonging to her identity, has become irretrievable. The whole autobiographic enterprise becomes in fact a search for that lost language that will reconnect her to the social frames of the women of her family and her generation – and with that to herself. The fact that she has to write about history is also due to this: the traumatic experience of her entry into what Najiba Regaieg has called *la gueule du loup* (‘the den of wolves’) makes it almost impossible to talk of her childhood memories; the retrieval of a collective past is in this perspective also a way of talking about the self in less direct and therefore less painful terms.

“Les Voix Ensevelies”: Dealing with Silence

The difficulties in writing about herself only increase as the narrator reaches the point where she has to tell of her adolescent and adult life and of love. She discovers that the French language, although creating the circumstances in which she could so openly talk of love, cannot express it, nor truly concern her. She speaks of ‘aphasia of love’: “les mots écrits, les mots appris, faisaient retrait devant moi, dès que tentait de s’exprimer le moindre élan de mon cœur” (*L’Amour* 183) [*“the written words, the words I had learned, retreated before me as soon as the slightest heart-felt emotion sought for expression”*] (*Fantasia* 128). This recalls Halbwachs’ view of aphasia not as a loss of general intellectual abilities, but of social references that attribute meaning to words. The language she writes is not the language of the group she wants to be (or simply is) a part of and therefore becomes meaningless to her. In a strange argumentation she imagines that the words of a love letter that she has received are in fact not addressed to her, but to all those women who have never received a written word. This seems a realisation of some kind that she is not alone, that she carries *in* her all these women who have never had a voice: she carries the collective in herself while at the same time being cut off from it. In the first part of the novel, where she tells of her childhood, the autobiographical chapters carry a title in words and the historical ones only in numbers. This is reversed in the second part and the historical chapters become much longer. In the third part (which is by far the longest) entitled “Les voix ensevelies” [*Voices from the Past*] she has reached the point to speak of her life as a married woman and the structure becomes even more complicated. Chapters are included in which other female narrators are given a voice and a place to tell their stories through her. Again, one can see this on the one hand as a conscious choice from the narrator/writer, motivated by a sense of responsibility to give attention to those who have never been heard (an effort to listen to the silences), and on the other hand as the incapacity of talking purely about herself. In any case, letting these women talk could be seen as an attempt to reconnect with the social frames she has lost contact with because of the French language, and in that sense it would indeed in the end allow her to ‘remember.’ But this turns out to be a dream she cannot bring to realisation, at least not in writing, again because it is still herself who gives voice to memories that belong to a group that has no true connection to the language she employs. If there is a sense of liberation in the oral transmission of their stories from the women to the narrator, this gets lost as soon as she writes them down:

3 Thanks to Holly Haylock for the suggestions and help in translating Regaieg's quotes.

Petite soeur étrange qu'en langue étrangère j'inscris désormais, ou que je voile. La trame de son histoire murmurée, tandis que l'ombre réengloutit son corps et son visage, s'étire comme papillon fiche, poussière d'aile écrasée maculant le doigt. [...] Chérifa! Je désirai recréer ta course [...]. Ta voix s'est prise au piège; mon parler français la déguise sans l'habiller. A peine si je frôle l'ombre de ton pas! (*L'Amour* 201-2)

[Strange little sister, whom henceforth I leave veiled or whose story I now transcribe in a foreign tongue. Her body and face are once more engulfed in shadow as she whispers her story – a butterfly displayed on a pin with the dust from its crushed wing staining one's finger. (...) Cherifa! I wanted to re-create your flight (...). I have captured your voice; disguised it with my French without clothing it. I barely brush the shadow of your footsteps!]
(*Fantasia* 141-142)

This fragment, which occurs after a long chapter in which Chérifa is the narrator, shows that the first narrator is painfully conscious of the fact that in her attempt to fill silences with voices she is in fact reinstalling new silences; in the act of writing them down the voices slip away. She is aware of the dangers of interpreting silences Passerini warns for in her article “Memories between Silence and Oblivion,” (249) but still she continues to inscribe other women in her own autobiography. It is as if exactly through the conscious use of these voices the reader is made more aware of other silences (both on behalf of these unheard women and of the narrator), and their inexpressibility. This is also what happens in her treatment of silences in the historical narratives: since she never really fills them but only makes suggestions and draws possible pictures that are never to be fixed, drawing attention to the fictionality of any such attempt, the silences become more

visible and with this meaningful, even though we do not know exactly what meaning or memory they carry. As Passerini states: “If literature can have social and political reverberations when breaking silence [...] the same may be true in keeping silence.” (247) This makes me think of the role of the mute grandmother in the novel who, in her silence, is most significant for the narrator – this is a silence that is full of force and therefore needs not to be spoken for. Paradoxically the silences are, in other cases, kept by talking about them, and talking about them allows to at least re-imagine social conditions in which remembering will become possible.

Conclusion: Writing the Self through the Lost Collective

The narrator of *L'Amour, la fantasia* at a certain point asks about the individuality of women in her family and of the act of writing about the self: “Comment dire ‘je’, puisque ce serait dédaigner les formules-couvertures qui maintiennent le trajet individuel dans la résignation collective?... Comment entreprendre de regarder son enfance, même si elle se déroule différente?” (*L'Amour* 223) [*“How could she say ‘I’, since that would mean to scorn the blanket-formulae which ensure that each individual journeys through life in a collective resignation?... How can she undertake to analyse her childhood, even if it turns out different?”*] (*Fantasia* 156). As I have tried to show, this is the whole problem of the novel: how to write the self in a collective that has never been said, especially through a language that does not belong to it and that has betrayed it, and in a tradition of the collective rather than the individual. Regaieg has noticed that

“Je” enfant a souvent tendance à vouloir se faire remplacer par un “Nous” qui renvoie par moment à un fondu d’enfants et dans d’autres au groupe de femmes auquel se mêle avec enchantement la narratrice. [...] Même si “Je” continue à exister dans “Nous” [...] le passage [...] implique ici une fuite de la narratrice devant l’affirmation de son individualité.

[There is a tendency to replace the child “I” by a “we” that sometimes refers to a melting pot of children and at other moments to the group of women in which the narrator mingles ecstatically. (...) Although “I” continues to exist in “we” (...) the passage (...) in this case implies the narrator’s flight from the affirmation of her individuality.]³

This is illustrative of the psychological difficulties the narrator has in writing her autobiography, but as we have seen there are moral problems too, and practical ones: she cannot write about an important part of her identity because she is cut off from it by the French language. It is this last point that has concerned me most in this paper. As I have shown, the choice we have in picking a society, or social frames of memory when thinking about the past and the liberation from the pressures of actual society this ensures, according to Halbwachs is not valid for Djébar: by writing about herself in French she is thrown back to a society that imposes itself upon her, but that she cannot express, and at the same time the frames she needs to turn to in order to tell of her life are not available to her because of that same language. A figurative aphasia occurs, an incapacity to write the self because the words lose their meaning, and she can only guess the meaning of silences that need to be recovered in a way for her to do so. History, understood as a chronological time frame with dates of important events, serves simultaneously as a protection and as a guideline for the autobiographical story, but not in the conventional sense: it is not in the historical events themselves but in the silences she localizes in them that she tries to imagine and inscribe a social and collective (feminine) memory that she needs to write the self. As Passerini says: “memory is a women’s voice for this poet who understands that there can be memory within silence,” (248) and that memory cannot be treated without taking into account these silences.

In my opinion, even if the term ‘collective memory’ as explained by Halbwachs might lack specificity and invites much discussion about the functions of memory, the way he describes the processes of remembering as social ones and conditioned by social frames of memory is very important. It is this aspect that I believe *L’Amour, la fantasia* offers an illustration of his theory. Discussing the failed attempt of Djébar in writing an autobiography, Najiba Regaieg says:

L’autobiographie n’était donc qu’une vaine tentative, qu’un pur “exercice” sans solution aucune. [...] Le “silence” de la narratrice fait place au “murmure” des autres femmes, l’écriture-plaie se transforme en paroles de femmes, de toute femme algérienne, l’unique “Je”-origine du roman s’éclipse laissant fuser des voix du passé. “Je” se trouve être un autre. Car la durée de la narratrice se résume dans cette Histoire racontée par les femmes, dans cette Histoire des femmes.

[The autobiography was but a vain attempt, only a pure "exercise" without any solution whatsoever. (...) The "silence" of the narrator makes way for the "whispers" of the other women, the writing-wound is transformed into women's words, the words of each and every Algerian woman, the unique "I", origine of the novel, eclipses and lets voices from the past fuse. "I" turns out to be someone else. For the durée of the narrator is resumed in this History told by women, in this History of the women.]

In a way I agree with Regaieg. The novel cannot be called an autobiography in the traditional sense of the word, and what was to be the story of a woman, of the self, has become a story of *women*. However, I cannot escape from the impression that something essential about the self *has* been said, and that this has only been possible by taking into account the (lost) collective: both its voices and its silences. The question that remains is how much exactly has been said, and how much has been re-veiled, how many (new) silences have been installed and what their functions are. But if language plays an essential part in this subject-formation, then so does that which it can as well as that which it cannot express.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Assman, Jan. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity". *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125- 133.

Djebar, Assia. *L'Amour, la fantasia*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1995.

Djebar, Assia. *Fantasia: An Algerian Calvacade*. Trans. Dorothy S. Blair. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993.

Djebar, Assia. *Ces voix qui m'assiègent. En marge de ma francophonie*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1999.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952.

Halbwachs, Maurice. "La mémoire collective." (LMC) *Les classiques des sciences sociales*. Ed. Audy Lorraine. 2001. 30 Jan. 2008. <http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/Halbwachs_maurice/memoire_collective/memoire_collective.html>.

Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory (OCM)*. Edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

**Marcel, Jean Cristophe
and Laurent Mucchielli.**

"Un fondement du lien social:
la mémoire collective selon
Maurice Halbwachs." *Technologies.
Idéologies. Pratiques. Revue
d'Anthropologie des connaissances.*
13 (2) (1999): 63-88.

Passerini, Luisa. "Memories
between Silence and Oblivion."
*Memory History Nation:
Contested Pasts.* Ed. Katherine
Hodgkin, Susannah Radstone.
New Brunswick: Transaction
Publishers, 2003. 238-254.

Regaieg, Najiba. "L'Amour,
la fantasia d'Assia Djebar: de
l'autobiographie à la fiction." *Limag.*
1999. 27 dec. 2008.
<[http://www.limag.refer.org/
Textes/Iti27/Regaieg.htm](http://www.limag.refer.org/Textes/Iti27/Regaieg.htm)>.

SUMMARY

With L'Amour, la fantasia, the Algerian author Assia Djebar made her first attempt at writing her autobiography, only to realize that the very language she uses – that of the former colonizer – imposes not just personal but also collective memories on her that ask for recollection: in order to write the self, she has to retrieve a collective that seems lost to her. Using Halbwach's theory about social frameworks, this essay seeks to explore the links between personal and collective memory, and how for this author they are intimately linked to each other by language.

Isis Butôt graduated for the BA's French Language and Culture and Portuguese Language and Culture at Universiteit Utrecht in 2007. She is currently working on her thesis for the Research Master Literary Studies: Literature in the Modern Age at the same university.