

Cosmopoetics and Politics: Were Those “Unacknowledged Legislators of the World” Actually Women?

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I begin with Virginia Woolf’s “As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.”¹ In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf theorizes that “we think back through our [literary] mothers, if we are women.”² Mary Wollstonecraft, in her eighteenth-century *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, advocates for a woman’s right to education and asks for the education of both sexes.³ Today, I see Wollstonecraft’s inheritors in Assia Djebar and Mahasweta Devi, women who are educating all of us while calling for political awareness and action. I use the term “Cosmopoetics” to define generally the nature of their aesthetics and to suggest specifically “how [their] contemporary narratives [which are worldwide rather than provincial in scope] determine and change readers’ ‘comprehensions of cultural differences.’”⁴

I claim “Legislators of the World” from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s nineteenth-century “The Defense of Poetry” to emphasize both the social conscience of Devi and Djebar and the political potential in their writing. The phrase “Legislators of the World” implies a much larger domain than simply that of the male poet, which is suggested in Shelley’s unfortunate use of the masculine pronoun throughout his “Defense.” And his “poets” as legislators are actually those makers, poetry derives from the Greek verb *poiein* to make, who work to creatively and imaginatively transform the world.⁵ Although the word “poetess” was ascribed to nineteenth-century women writers, these poetesses, as Isobel Armstrong laments, were hamstrung by “duty” which forced them to uphold traditional patriarchal lines concerning what was expected in their verse.⁶

These two contemporary “Legislators of the World,” Djebar and Devi, are neither Shelley’s Romantic Platonists nor Victorian poetesses; they are two postcolonial fiction writers who are also film-makers, teachers, journalists, and political activists. They carefully avoid the potential minefields in Non-West representation: colonization agendas, hegemony, essentialist epistemologies, or what Shameem Black identifies as stereotyping, idealizations, and imaginative restraint, and what Gayatri Spivak denounces as the information retrieval approach to “Third World” literature.⁷ And as they navigate these minefields, they take up questions of how to inhabit the world, and how to open a space for being and thinking.

In 1985 Assia Djebar published *L’Amour, la fantasia*, or *Fantasia An Algerian Cavalcade*. Her complex historical and autobiographical trajectories testify to her commitment to an authentic depiction of the difficulties of writing and thinking with different languages, in

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, Inc.).

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, Inc.), p. 76.

³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* ((New York: W.W. Norton, Inc.).

⁴ Shameem Black, *Imagining the Lives of Others: Transcultural Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium* (Manuscript).

⁵ P. B. Shelley, “The Defense of Poetry,” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2* (New York: McGraw-Hill), p. 474.

⁶ Isobel Armstrong, “Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics,” *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), p. 735.

⁷ Gayatri Spivak, From “A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,” *The Feminist Philosophy Reader* (New York: McGraw-Hill), p. 900.

different cultures, at different times. She provides a map of Northern Algeria showing principle places and tribes mentioned in her text, a glossary of Arabic and Turkish words, and an historical chronology from 29 April 1827 to 1968. She supplements these reference materials with literary quotes and personal experiences drawn from archived French documents. She explores linguistic nuance, culls from musical terminology, and renders her own story powerfully and poetically while concomitantly preserving the peasant vernacular in her transcriptions of the oral testimonies of other Algerian women. In her representations, she often stands between what Julia Kristeva calls “trans-European temporality and archaic, mythological memory.”⁸

Dorothy S. Blair’s English translation preserves the poetic in Djébar’s prose and pays exacting attention to Djébar’s specificity. Djébar’s novel begins with the nineteenth-century French artist Eugène Fromentin and a quote from his text, “*A Year in the Sahel*: “A heart-rending cry arose—I can hear it still as I write to you—then the air was rent with screams, then pandemonium broke loose....”⁹ She later entwines his story with hers and links the “cry” to *Fantasia*’s themes of love and war. She ends with an incident from Fromentin’s travels in Algeria where he picks something out of the dirt only to throw it back again; it is the hand of a woman that had been chopped off for its jewelry, a common practice during the war. He was never able to draw that woman,¹⁰ Djébar says. She, however, seizes “this hand of mutilation and memory” and describes how in traveling to the four corners of her native land she has discovered that the wounds have still not healed and the funeral lamentations continue to go on. She recalls the story of Fromentin’s friendship with an Algerian woman who, as a result of their friendship, was struck and killed by the horse of a rejected lover during a “*Fantasia*,” “a set of virtuoso movements on horseback, executed at a gallop, accompanied by loud cries and culminating in rifle shots, associated with ceremonial occasions and military triumphs.”¹¹ Djébar links this incident to the larger plight of Algerian women who invariably encounter the traditional matriarch, the mare’s hoof that will strike down “any woman who dares stand up freely, [and] will trample all life that comes out into the sunlight to dance!”¹²

Djébar’s own story dovetails with Fromentin’s as “Part One” of the novel opens and she takes her father’s hand on her way to her first day at the French school, a moment she later identifies as the beginning of her own separation from Algerian culture. But even before her autobiography begins with “Part One,” “The Capture of the City or Love Letters,” she inserts a quote from Barchou de Penhoën, 1835, Expedition to Africa: “Our sentinels were gaining in experience: They were learning to distinguish the footsteps and voices of the Arabs from the sounds made by the wild beasts that prowled around the camp in the dark.”¹³

History of the war and love letters are already intricately connected with her own childhood as she continues in “Part One” with memories of her father’s writing a letter to her mother, a revolutionary gesture; cloistered Muslim girls clandestinely writing to male pen-pals in other parts of the world, subversive acts; and a French woman’s showing affection to her fiancé in public, a scandal. Interspersed throughout her memoirs are scenes from the French invasion of Algiers, scenes depicting the forced entry of a mother country as rape.

⁸ Julia Kristeva, “From Women’s Time,” *Feminist Literary Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company), p. 462.

⁹ Assia Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (Portsmouth: Heinemann).

¹⁰ Assia Djébar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (Portsmouth: Heinemann), p. 226.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Introduction.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

In “Part Two,” “The cries of the *Fantasia*,” Djebbar focuses on the War of Colonization from the capture of Algiers in 1830 to the War of Independence of 1954-62. To write this material, she examines personal letters, official records, and journal accounts, then renders graphic descriptions of ‘fumigations’ of rebel tribes in the Dahra Caves where thousands were exterminated and even reports had to be falsified to avoid outraging the French public. Stories of the peasant women’s resistance, subterfuge and suffering are intermingled with these atrocities.

Djebbar presents the brutal details of the War of Colonization while continuing her own story about the dangers of writing in the colonizer’s language, about her devastating relationships with French men and French culture, and about her recent struggles to survive as an Algerian woman currently living in France. Her bitter personal war as an exile from both cultures parallels the uncanny and horrific moments of the 1830 invasion of Algiers. There is guilt in using the French language and a longing for her Arabic script. There are cultural and identity confusions. There are despair, suicidal thoughts, and a suicide attempt. Autobiography and history begin to converge as she disrupts narrative continuity. The writing story and love story coalesce as she contemplates her own desire, silence and lack. Her novel’s temporal interruptions and textual aporias dislodge traditional narrative patterns and deny readers both anticipated structures and conventional space-time presentations. In this way, Djebbar allows for new ways of thinking about being in the world by allowing readers to be simultaneously not only in the presence of both archived history and private memory but also—to be there with the lived experiences of cultural difference.

In “Part Three,” where her most complex experiments with fiction occur, Djebbar once again changes her format by becoming a chronicler of the Algerian women’s stories and representing their remembrances without reconfiguring their words. She titles this section “Voices” and concentrates on maintaining the orality of their testimonies while retaining the actual details, the physical objects, a button or a small silver spoon, for instance, that hold traces of their memories. As the women recount their stories in their own voices, Djebbar continues to tell her own story, and as she listens to their voices, she finds her own voice in relation to their memories, memorials, and present conditions. The novel’s antiphony is even more pronounced in this section as conflicts are waged between writing and speech, past and present, and personal and national experience. It is as if Djebbar’s experience of trying to find her own identity in the war between her Arabo-Berber origins and her Franco-European education represents the complex historical reality of the Algerian Woman.

But it is in the “Finale,” “*Tzarl-rit*,” where the most compelling section appears—in the story of a French woman, Pauline Rolland, one of ten French women transported to Algiers in 1852 for their part in the 1848 Revolution. In the introduction to her English translation of Djebbar’s novel, Blair comments that “Without inventing incident, the author calls on her rich imagination and exceptional descriptive powers to conjure up the atmosphere, the colour, the tumult of these historical events, as well as the presence and psychology of the authentic historical characters.”¹⁴ Pauline Rolland, exiled from France, writes from Algeria, “I have seen women treated as beasts of burden, and others odalisques in a rich man’s harem. I have slept at the side of the former on the bare ground, and beside the latter amid gold and silk....”¹⁵ Djebbar says she has met Pauline on the terrain of her, Rolland’s, writing.

Djebbar’s novel is a text about the act of writing, about the musicality of the French she loves and the colonizing language she hates, and the Arabic she loves, the sensuality of writing

¹⁴ Assia Djebbar, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (Portsmouth: Heinemann), Introduction.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

it, and the pain of its loss. It is about differences and difficulties, the double entendre in “fantasia,” the ceremonial movements on horseback and the musical term for improvisation or fancy. It is about sound and writing, *ses cris* (cry) and *s’écrit* (writing). It is about body language and body posture while writing. It is about letters written with different scripts and letters written illicitly, dangerously, or letters written home by French soldiers, now archived, confessing their love for the very country they are colonizing. If the feminist agenda is ultimately about love, and if love and global peace are to prevail, then Djébar teaches us that in writing we must, above all, legislate with specific and accurate representations and an understanding of difference.

Gayatri Spivak writes in her translator’s preface to Mahasweta Devi’s *Imaginary Maps*: I take *Différance* as my beginning.... I want to use the risky word ‘deconstruction’ again, to keep at bay the easy rewards of inspirational prose.... Where both the ‘US’ and ‘India’ are interested in claiming sometimes the place of the ‘same’ (or self, or knower) and sometimes the ‘other’, it is the following deconstructive formula that I find myself acting out: The same, precisely, is difference... as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other. Thus one could compare Indian tribal, not in order to see oppositions erased but to see what indicates that each of the terms *must* appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same....¹⁶

Spivak aligns Devi’s writing generally with “woman writers cognizant of the aporias or ethico-historical dilemmas in women’s decolonization” and specifically with Djébar’s work.¹⁷ Spivak remarks that it is in this spirit that Assia Djébar of Algeria claims that the ancestress of the Algerian... women freedom-fighters is Pauline Rolland, the French revolutionary of 1848 whom France banished to Anaba.¹⁸

Devi’s *Imaginary Maps* begins with “The Author In Conversation.” Spivak takes this opportunity to identify and clarify some of the difficult historical, social and political background surrounding Devi’s stories. For purposes of authenticity, Spivak’s interview with Devi, as Spivak herself describes it, is a transcription of a taped conversation only slightly edited where Devi reveals her long-standing political engagement with India’s problems, and what she sees as both parallel courses taken between the government and the tribals and inner strife between the tribes themselves. During the interview, Devi says that she wants to represent “The Palamu,” one of the poorest places in India and an area she herself has covered on foot, in order to speak of the bonded slavery, the savagery and violence, and “the bloody exploitation of women” as a mirror of tribal India.¹⁹

There are no explanations given by Devi in her stories; however, Spivak offers insightful comments in both her introductory dialogue with Devi and her “Afterword” to Devi’s text. I include many of Spivak’s remarks here because they are helpful in negotiating the complexities in Devi’s fiction. Devi herself depicts tribal cultures with careful attention and precise accuracy, intertwining the effects of industrial projects and issues of social justice with personal anecdotes and ancient myths. “The Hunt,” the first of three stories in *Imaginary Maps*, focuses on Mary

¹⁶ Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (New York: Routledge), p. xxiv.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

Oraon who is the illegitimate daughter of a tribal mother and whose father was a white man. The story fuses tribal myth and the festival of “The Hunt” with a modern day human hunt that is reenacted by Mary in the name of tribal justice. Mary has a fiancé, but she is pursued relentlessly by a contractor of some power who doggedly ignores her refusals. Mary performs the ceremonial hunt by ritualistically slaying the man, and after the “big kill,” Mary returns to her fiancé. The story ends: “The spring festival fires are scattered in the distance. Mary is not afraid, she fears no animal as she walks, watching the *railway line* in the dark, by starlight. Today all the mundane blood-conditioned fears of the wild quadruped are gone because she has killed the biggest beast.”²⁰ Spivak suggests that Devi chooses a character that is not a full member of tribal society and shows her judging the mainstream exploiter before the act of rape can take place.²¹

Devi’s second story, “Douloti the Bountiful,” examines the bonded labor system, specifically a financial transaction where parents sell one child into bondage in order to be able to feed their other children. The ultimate tragedy is that once the child is sold there is never enough money to buy the child out of bondage. Devi writes graphically of Douloti’s experiences after Douloti the child is delivered into sexual slavery. Douloti is dead at twenty-six: “Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies *bonded labor* spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on the fifteenth of August, Douloti has left no room for all the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India.”²² Spivak adds that this is also a story about “gender division in resistance and gendering as the foundation of post-colonial exploitation.”²³

Devi, in her third and final story, “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha,” focuses on tribal myth. Puran, not unlike Devi herself who is an interventionist journalist, enters the setting of a primitive tribe to investigate the myth of the pterodactyl only to learn that he can understand nothing about his experiences after months of living with the tribe. Only holders of the ancient civilization can understand the nature of the pterodactyl. What is apparent throughout the story, however, is that modern progress is far more barbaric. In the end, the pterodactyl dies, is buried by the boy Bikhia its guardian and priest, and Puran witnesses the burial. For the modern Indian the pterodactyl is an empirical impossibility, but for the tribal it is the ancestral soul.²⁴ Puran, stepping onto the bus, leaves Pirtha knowing only that the first step is “love,” which is another word for ethical responsibility. “Devi stages the workings of the post-colonial state with minute knowledge, anger, and loving despair,”²⁵ Spivak concludes.

To navigate the story is to go in and out of time and always return to that impenetrable look in the tribal’s eyes, an untranslatable look that ends any access to cultural understanding. The myth of the pterodactyl only substantiates Spivak’s claim that we cannot understand the subaltern. As subalterns these Indian tribals are merely spectators in the twenty-first century, just as “Assia Djebar has written that women remained largely spectators as Algeria moved toward Independence.”²⁶ And as Spivak reminds us, the women’s story is implicit in

²⁰ Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (New York: Routledge), p. 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

²⁴ Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (New York: Routledge), p. 204.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

“Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha” in the irony of the government’s family- planning posters that appear, an initiative that Spivak says “is cruelly unmindful of the robbing of the men and women of Pirtha of the dignity of their reproductive responsibility.”²⁷

Devi links the fate of these tribals to marginalized people all over the globe, and Spivak in her “Afterword” emphasizes the political urgency in Devi’s writing. Spivak catalogues the economic factors and connects them to global factors, while pointing to the themes of “ecological loss,” “complicity of local developers,” and “forces of global capital.”²⁸ She also examines how these very themes serve as links between the three stories. She warns against “romanticization” of tribals and explains why “reason” no longer suffices. Her central point is that these stories are a call for awareness, ethical responsibility and political action.

In 1795 Immanuel Kant wrote a treatise on “Perpetual Peace”; it is admirably avant-garde for the eighteenth century, and it is receiving considerable attention today. But Kant’s plan is founded on the Enlightenment model of progress and applies solely to a European federation of states, and as such it is only a partial perspective. An additional perspective and the difference, I believe, is available in many women’s resistance to some of Kant’s philosophy, Kant’s totalizing mind in general and more specifically Kantian aesthetics, particularly the conclusions Kant draws from the experience of the dynamical sublime that leads to *sensus communis*, conclusions he details in the “Analytic of the Sublime,” from the “Second Book” of his *Critique of Judgement*. It is in their understanding of the dynamical sublime and in their use of sublime metaphors where Devi and Djebbar transform consciousness by allowing readers to participate imaginatively in the experiences of their characters, and it is this encounter with sublime space that subtends their call for political action. If these Non-West women legislators legislating for *Différance* are attended to, and if their “other “part of a larger vision with different imaginary maps, fantasias and sublime metaphors is present and accounted for in the legislative process, then we will be on the way to both thinking and being in a world and “worlding a world” with a difference, where perpetual rather than interrupted peace prevails. Perhaps then we can stand with Virginia Woolf and say our country is the whole world.

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²⁷ Ibid., p. 201.

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