Translating Women in Assia Djebar’s Far From Madina

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Many female writers, who have found themselves in what Minh-Ha describes as the “triple bind” (Minh-Ha, 1989: 6), being colonised once by the coloniser and then by the patriarchal system, have chosen the coloniser’s language as a vehicle to reclaim both their cultural and gendered identity. Works of Francophone Maghrebian female writers such as the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi, the Tunisian Emna Belhaj Yahia and the Algerian Assia Djebar illustrate how French, once the language of the coloniser, has become a tool of empowerment in their struggle for gender equality in Islamic societies. For instance, in her novel *Chronique frontalière* (1991), Yahia presents French as “la langue de libération” that allows the heroine of her novel to access the “real life”, the “hidden truth” and the “refused rights”. She writes:

> Chaque mot appris était une victoire, une conquête et une découverte, celle d'un monde ignoré... Si elle a mis tant d'ardeur, tant d'obstination à découvrir les détours de cette langue, tant rêvé de posséder ses arcanes, c'est que par son biais elle croyait pouvoir accéder à la vraie vie, aux vérités cachées, aux droits refusés (Belhaj, 1991: 14).

In a similar way, when Djebar chose to write *Loin de Médine* in French, her aim was to access the “real life”, the “hidden truth” and the “refused rights”. This search for the “truth” was prompted by the events in Algeria in the late 1980’s, when Muslim fundamentalists were demanding a return to “true Islamic values” as a way out of the difficult crisis the country was experiencing. Muslim extremists intended to restore social, economic and political stability by implementing strict patriarchal Islamic rules, which included depriving Algerian women of their freedoms and preventing them from any participation in public life. Djebar’s response to their demands was contained in *Loin de Médine* where she provides a re-vision of Islamic history, narrated, transmitted and written by men and a subversion of that history voiced by Muslim women. In this semi-fictional novel women figure as historical subjects who, far from being passive actors in a culture dominated by men, are active participants and agents in the creation of their own
religious and cultural memory. *Loin de Médine* was written in order to free Muslim women from a patriarchal past, offering them a “herstory” from a woman’s perspective as well as new modes of self-discovery and self-re-assertion. As Djebar states, *Loin de Médine* « est un livre qui répond. C’est une œuvre écrite pour mettre en cause la version “officielle” de l’histoire pour qui la femme doit être enveloppée, ni vue ni connue, et reléguée à la maison » (Hiddleston, 2006: 108).

The English translation of this highly political novel was published in 1994. At first reading, Dorothy Saint Blair’s translation looks surprisingly similar and faithful to the original. On the textual level, for instance, there are no major liberties taken with the structure or the language of the text, as indicated by the literal translation of the title *Far from Madina*. On the paratextual level, the translator remains invisible; there is no translator’s foreword, preface or introduction. In fact, the translator is only mentioned in small print on the second page of the book. However, a closer reading of *Far From Madina* reveals interesting rearrangements and abridgements, particularly when it comes to translating key female characters in the novel.

Based on a comparative analysis between the original French text and its English translation, this article aims to discuss how Djebar’s reconstruction of Muslim women’s femininity is transferred to Anglo-American readers. The paper focuses on analysing the translator’s strategies with regard to how and when to transfer feminine gender to the target text and argues that these strategies project a pattern that consciously attempts to deviate from the innovative and subversive images created by Djebar’s feminine language on the one hand, and to impose preconceived and fixed assumptions about Muslim women on the other. The paper also demonstrates how the images of key subversive female figures are redefined in order to fit within what Hans Robert Jauss calls the readers’ “horizon of expectations” (Selden and Widdowson, 1993: 52-55) and to conform to “orientalist assumptions and conventions” which according to Mohja Kahf depict the Muslim woman in three main images: “a victim”, “an escapee”, and “a pawn of male power” (Kahf, 2000: 148).

In *Loin de Médine*, Djebar retraces the lives of seventeen Muslim women; I restrict myself, however, to studying the translation of two key female characters, namely the rawiyate and the Yemenite Queen. The rawiyate or female transmitters of Islamic religious accounts, represent the source and the site of Muslim women’s collective memory. They hold the key to Djebar’s reconstruction of Islamic “herstory”. The Yemenite Queen, on the other hand, is emblematic of Muslim women’s diverse and multiple identities. Her multifaceted, contradictory and shifting personalities transcend all perceptions of the subdued, subjugated and singular Muslim woman. But can translation maintain the subversive, innovative and discursive images of the original text when it is guided by preconceived and established perceptions about the translated feminine subject?

### The rawiyate in translation

The events in *Loin de Médine* start in the period shortly before and after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. In the opening scene, Djebar describes the Prophet of Islam on his death bed surrounded by the women of his house. When he dies, while men debate the succession for three days, the same women patiently remain near his body. From this opening scene, Djebar prepares the reader for a different image of the Prophet of Islam: he is not a religious leader, nor an army commander, but a “woman’s man” (Spivak, 1995: 114).
Indeed, in this novel, the Prophet has no brothers, no living sons and no living father; instead he has nine wives, a concubine and a beloved daughter. Surrounded by women, the Prophet seems to owe much of his survival and success to them; it is a woman who warned and protected him from his fiercest enemies (Djebar, 1991: 12), it is a woman who tended to his injuries and it is a woman who saved his life in the battlefield (ibid.: 218, 272). Having lived so closely to the Prophet of Islam, most of these women had stories, memories and feminine experiences of “true Islam”, all of which have been suppressed, but brought to life by the *rawiyate*.  

To fully understand the religious, feminist and political significance of the *rawiyate* figures in Djebar’s novel it is necessary to highlight the important role narrators of the Prophet’s life play in Islamic societies past and present. It is first worth pointing out that the foundations of Islam are based on three main texts: the Quran, the Hadith and the Sunnah. While the first text is believed by Muslims to be the direct word of God, the latter two texts consist of statements attributed to the Prophet Mohammed (Hadith) and various narratives about his life (Sunnah), orally narrated, then collected centuries after his death. Individuals who participated in the collection and transmission of these historical accounts are highly respected in Islamic tradition. In Arabic, they are referred to as *rawi* for a male narrator (plural *rowate*) and *rawiya* for a female narrator (plural *rawiyate*). What is most significant is that the Hadith and Sunnah, transmitted by the rowate and rawiyate, play a crucial role in the reconstruction of Islamic history or *tarikh*, in the interpretation of the Quran or *tafsir*, and in the implementation of religious laws or *sharia*.  

In recent years however, Islamic feminists such as Fatima Mernissi have started questioning the reliability of such historical accounts. For instance, in her 1991 book, *Woman and Islam: a Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Mernissi points out the gaps and the blanks in the official version of Islamic history and reveals the contradictions, inconsistencies and male bias in most of the Hadith and Sunnah related to women. She convincingly argues that Islamic memory has for centuries been prone to what Montgomery Watt calls “tendential shaping” whereby historical facts are manipulated, distorted and reshaped in order to serve patriarchal ideologies (Watt, 1979: 13). In another book, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (1993), Mernissi pays tribute to some exceptional Muslim women, whose voices were suppressed by the dominant male voice. She writes about remarkable Muslim women, such as Aisha the youngest wife of the Prophet. A similar theme resonates in Djebar’s novel. But the Algerian feminist seems to go a step further by resuscitating forgotten Muslim women of the past and giving them actual voices to narrate their own experiences of Islam. Indeed, in *Loin de Médine* the rawiyate replace the male rowate and become the only voice of Islamic memory.  

There are three main rawiyate in the novel. They belong to different tribes, social classes and age groups. The first rawiya is Um Fadl. She had a close relationship with the Prophet and his wives. Before she died, she passed her knowledge to her son who was one of the closest servants of the Prophet and later became one of the most respected transmitters of Hadith and Sunnah. The second rawiya is Habiba, the only fictional and totally imaginary character in the novel. She has no husband, no sons, and keeps silent about a father who remained a pagan. Deliberately freed from any close male relatives, Habiba was able to roam, visit and enter every house in Madina collecting stories and witnessing events at first hand. The third rawiya is Umm Salem. She was the first woman to welcome the Prophet to Yathrib. She witnessed the birth of the first migrant Muslim community and
watched events unfold as the Prophet faced his first religious, social and political challenges away from Mecca.

The events narrated by the *rawiyate* are mainly concerned with issues related to women’s position in Islam. They for instance tell the stories of women who were free to go to the mosque, to speak and question the Prophet directly; to move unveiled, to write poetry and even to sing in public. It is thus revealing that these stories are immediately put in sharp contrast with the narratives transmitted by Muslim male *rowate*, such as Al-Tabari, and promoted by Muslim extremists seeking to deprive Muslim women of their freedoms. It is also revealing that each *rawiya* has a unique and independent feminine voice. Their uniqueness and individuality are meant to create a diversity of perspectives reflected in the diversity of terms Djebar uses to name each *rawiya*. Indeed, throughout the novel, Djebar first employs a multiplicity of feminine synonyms such as “transmettrice”, “conteuse”, “chroniqueuse”, “diseuse” and “transmetteuse” to highlight the *rawiyate*’s feminine role and to consolidate the chain of female narrators. Secondly, when she describes the *rawiyate* as “mémoire des Musulmanes”, “chroniqueuse des orphelines” and “mémoire des Croyantes”, the author explicitly excludes any masculine interference and creates a “matriarchal utopia” where Muslim women speak and exist in the absence of men.

In the English translation, however, the chain of female transmitters appears to be broken. This is due to two main reasons: first, key feminine terms emphasizing and establishing the *rawiyate* as female narrators are completely overlooked. In the English text, feminine terms are either translated without indication of the feminine gender in the target text (example 1), or translated in the masculine generic plural form (example 2), or translated as a verb (example 3).

1. *La conteuse, la chroniqueuse inconnue* (110)
The storyteller, the unknown chronicler (97)

2. *Est-ce qu’à une ancienne esclave, on demande autre chose que de mêler sa voix aux autres voix de transmetteuses ?* (251)
Does one ask anything of a former slave than that she join her voice to those of other transmitters? (226)

3. *Qu’elle chante encore, lui dirai-je, même si elle veut devenir transmettrice des jours de la gloire passée* (126)
I must tell her she must sing again, even if she wishes only to hand on the story of days of past glory (109)

Secondly, the clear distinction between women’s and men’s separate worlds, memories and experiences is blurred as the feminine gender in key words is not transferred to the target text as it is the case in examples 4 and 5.

4. *Oum Fadl se sent peu à peu comme une première mémoire pour les Musulmanes* (56)
Umm Fadl feels she is like an original memory for the Muslims (45)

5. *Par ce silence si riche qu’une nouvelle rawiya apparaît à elle-même, puis à la mémoire des Croyantes* (98)
By this precious silence, that a new *rawiya* is revealed to herself, and thus the memory of the Believers (85)

As is shown in the above examples and mentioned in the introduction, the translated English text looks surprisingly “faithful” to the original. If we compare the French and the English text in example 6 for instance:
6. Je pleure, répondis-je, en pensant à toutes celles qui ne l'ont jamais écoutée, elle, la chroniqueuse des orphelines! (92)
I'm weeping, I replied, to think of all those who have not heard her, the chronicler of orphans! (80)

We can clearly observe how close the translation is to the original text in terms of structure and word order. The only moment when the translator deviates from the original text, is when she has to translate the gender of key feminine words, in this case *celles*, *chroniqueuse* and *orphelines*. In the English text none of these feminine words, intended to depict and create an exclusive feminine chain of narrators, is rendered in its discursive feminine form, which inevitably has implications on the significance and the image of each *rawiya*. Indeed, while Djebar’s use of feminine terms works to articulate the *rawiyate*’s individual feminine voices and to re-inscribe their experiences into a new understanding of Islamic “herstory”, the absence of gender specification as well as the lack of feminine visibility in the English translation has redefined their feminine image and their role.

The changes brought to the *rawiyate* during the transfer from Djebar’s resistant text to the English translation could be summed up in two main points. First, in the French text the *rawiyate* replace the *rowate* appropriating the role of transmission and becoming the dominant voices of Islamic memory. The recurrent feminine expressions “transmetteuse”, “conteuse” and “chroniqueuse” serve as a constant reminder of the *rawiya*’s status as independent female narrators, which in itself represent an attempt to feminise, appropriate and reclaim the tradition of transmission for Muslim women. In the English text, however, none of Djebar’s key feminine words is presented as feminine. As *transmetteuse* becomes simply *transmitter*, and *chroniqueuse* becomes *chronicler*, the *rawiyate*’s feminine voices fade and the reclaimed narrative role is de-feminised.

Secondly, in the French text the *rawiyate*’s memories are created in Djebar’s “matriarchal utopia”. The phrases *mémoire des Musulmanes, chroniqueuse des orphelines* and *mémoire des Croyantes* underline the fact that each *rawiya* only speaks and represents her feminine gender. In the English text, however, the *rawiyate* are presented as the memory for both men and women, as conveyed by the expressions *memory of believers* and *memory of Muslims*. As empowering as it may seem, the new status attributed to the *rawiyate* diminishes, and diffuses the impact of their feminine voices. Indeed, this male incursion into female “herstory” making breaks the chain of women narrators, undermines the feminine perspective and underwrites Djebar’s attempt to regain Muslim women’s suppressed memory.

Interestingly, the feminine gender overlooked in the above discussed key feminine words is adequately reflected in other feminine terms, as is the case in examples 7, 8 and 9.

7. Et ce danger, la musulmane repentie l’a détourné une nouvelle fois (25)
And the repentant Muslim queen has averted this danger a second time (15)
8. Non, il n’y a pas de Judith arabe! Ce serait supposer chez cette Yéménite une pureté définitive, une pulsion de fatalité, un éclat de tragédie (27)
No, there is not Arab Judith! This would to be to presume, in this Yemenite woman, unequivocal purity, a fatal impulse, a spark of tragedy (17)
9. Chaque Bédouine se dresse libre, ressuscitant le héros mort au combat (36)
Every free Bedouin woman rises up, resuscitating the hero who died in combat (26)
The translator compensates for the absence of an equivalent English feminine word for *Musulmane, Yéménite* and *Bédouine* by inserting the feminine terms *queen* and *woman*, thus making it clearer to the reader that these images concern a female character. But, how can we explain the translator’s decision not to use the same strategy in the previously discussed examples? In other words, why is the feminine gender maintained in some feminine terms and overlooked in others? Why is the word *Musulmane*, for instance, translated as *Muslim* in one context and as *Muslim woman* in another?

A closer look at the words where the feminine gender was maintained reveals the following: first, the English translation *repentant Muslim queen* promotes the idea of the obedient, submissive and victimised Muslim woman; secondly the expressions *Bedouin women* and *Yeminite woman* revive images of the exoticised and oriental Muslim woman. Both feminised images fit perfectly within the Anglo-American readers’ orientalist assumptions about Muslim women. As we have seen, Mohja Kahf sums up these orientalist conventions in three main stereotypes: the first depicts the Muslim woman as “a victim of gender oppression”, the second portrays her “as an escapee of her intrinsically oppressive culture”, and the third represents her as “the pawn of Arab male power” (Kahf, 2000: 148). Interestingly, translated books confirming such stereotypes have proven to be particularly popular among Anglo-American readers. Indeed, el-Saadawi’s non-fictional and fictional works such as *The Hidden Face of Eve* and *Woman at Point Zero* in which she denounces Muslim women’s oppression and inferior status in Islamic societies were successfully received when respectively published in 1980 and 1983. Hanan al-Shaykh’s novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh* published in 1992 was equally successful. Set in a desert Muslim country and depicting Muslim women wearing *abyaya*, deprived of their freedom and silenced by a patriarchal system, the novel was a commercial success and was voted one of the best 50 books by *Publishers’ Weekly*. Its publisher, Doubleday, organised a guide to go with it and arranged a 22-city American book tour for Hanan al-Shaykh (Amireh, 1996: 10).

The popularity of such novels among Anglo-American readers gives an indication of the context and the market for which *Far from Madina* was intended. As pointed out by Mohja Kahf in her article “Packaging Huda” (2000), the translation, publication and marketing of books about Muslim women occur within a specific reception environment which is shaped by established orientalist assumptions. She argues that most of these books are manipulated in order to meet the target readers’ expectations. To substantiate her argument, Kahf gives the example of the translation of an Arabic novel by Huda Sha’rawi, literally meaning “My Memoirs”, but replaced with the more provocatively loaded title *Harem Years*. The same occurs in the translation of a French book by Juliette Minces, originally titled *La Femme dans le monde arabe*, rendered into English as *The House of Obedience: Women in Arab Society*. In *Far from Madina*, however, the title remained fairly neutral, which does not reflect the extent to which images of key female characters have been manipulated to keep orientalist and exoticised images of the Muslim woman alive on one hand, and to suppress subversive and resistant images on the other.

The translator’s attempt to impose specific images explains why she had no difficulties in maintaining the feminine gender in expressions confirming preconceived assumptions about Muslim woman, while constantly obscuring the same feminine gender in expressions conveying subversive representations. Indeed, one of the reasons why key feminine words such as *transmetteuse, chroniqueuse, diseuse* and *conteuse* were translated into the masculine form, is that the images they convey do not conform to Anglo-
American readers’ expectations. The idea of the rawiya as an independent and dominant feminine voice contradicts the image of the silent, obedient and victimised Muslim woman. It also contradicts the perception that Muslim women are “escapees” of their culture and the assumption that they cannot be freed from “male power”.

22 Finally, in order to conform to established perceptions about the Muslim woman, the translator has deliberately obscured the feminine gender in key feminine words. The rawiyate in the English text are never portrayed as independent female narrators, their feminine role never assumes its intended feminist discursive meaning, and their memories are rarely separated from those of men. As a result, much of the rawiyate’s feminist, political and religious significance has been lost. Similar losses seem to occur with the subversive female figure, the Yemenite Queen.

The Yemenite Queen: challenging stereotypes

23 In Loin de Médine, Djebar not only challenges the official version of Islamic history, she also defies the stereotypes of the veiled Muslim woman by recreating the lives of free, defiant and rebellious female figures. The first chapter “Liberty and Defiance”, a revalorization of women and an acknowledgement of their status as historical subjects, tells the stories of some exceptional Muslim women who challenged social, political and religious authorities to assert their feminine identities. They are indeed the “women of substance” who lived unveiled and free to think, “to move about with long flowing hair” (Zimra, 1993: 121). Among these remarkable women we discover the character of the Yemenite Queen, one of the most challenging characters in the novel. Her personal story is marked by the war she wages against male treachery and injustice. The Yemenite Queen is a devout and sincere Muslim who is forced and deceived into marriage with a man named Aswad, the killer of her husband and invader of her town. At first she feels admiration for him but when she realizes he is an impostor she agrees to devise a plan to kill him to take revenge for herself, her husband and her Muslim community. Djebar describes the crucial moment of the queen’s transformation from an admirer into a potential killer as follows:

10. L’admiratrice se mue en vengeresse (22)
Admiration changes into vengeance (11)

The feminine French nouns admirable and vengeresse depict the double or multiple personalities of the Yemenite Queen. The sharp contrast between the two roles she plays, “admirer” on one hand and “avengeress” on the other, underscores the queen’s ability to self-transform, to react and act against male power and injustice. When she evolves from one opposite state to another, the Yemenite Queen demonstrates a great deal of courage, determination and ingenuity, thus revealing a complete contrasting image to the perceptions of the singular, passive and powerless Muslim woman.

24 In the English translation, however, the feminine gender marking in key words is again overlooked; admirable is translated as admiration and vengeresse as vengeance. What is most significant in this rendition is that the active subject the Yemenite Queen has been completely left out and replaced by a wider concept of admiration and vengeance. As a result, the queen’s multiple and shifting personalities are not reflected in the translation; her ability to transform herself, to decide and to act is effaced and the crucial moment of her personal evolution from an object to a subject status in the events is overshadowed.
The same occurs again when Djebar describes the intensity of the queen’s conflicting emotions.

11. Comme si une telle amoureuse devenait dangereuse pour tous (22)
As if such a woman’s passion were a danger to all (12)

25 The ambiguity of the Yemenite Queen’s position in this sequence of events and the contradictory forces at work in her inner-self underscore again her unpredictable actions and reactions to her discovery of Aswad’s real identity, which makes it impossible to assign her a fixed, a specific or a definite personality. In the English text, the multi-faced image of the Yemenite Queen remains un-translated. The active subject *amoureuse* is replaced by woman’s passion and *dangereuse* is rendered as *danger*. As a result the range of subversive meanings made possible in the French text is considerably reduced in the English version. Indeed, in the translation we read that it is a woman’s passion that could be a danger to all, not the queen herself. The Yemenite Queen is once again denied her subject status in the events. Her feminine presence, power and autonomy clearly emphasized in the French text, are noticeably undermined.

26 Further in the events, Djebar recreates the circumstances in which the heroine is able to convince the brutal Aswad to sleep in the only unprotected and vulnerable chamber in the castle, where he is eventually killed. She writes:

12. Si la séduction dont elle avait paré Aswad venait de ces râles, de cette sauvagerie en sursauts et en bruits ? (25)
What if the attraction which Aswad had first held for her had its origin in these groans, these noisy animals’ fits and jerks? (15)

27 Whereas the French term *séduction* suggests that the Yemenite is able to exercise influence over Aswad, the English term *attraction* diminishes and diffuses the impact of her feminine role. In this sequence the expression *séduction* could be representative of the queen’s valuable contribution in defeating the brutal Aswad. In the English translation, however, the change from *séduction* to *attraction* gives the queen a passive role. As a result, her deliberate attempt to lure Aswad, a crucial empowering element in the story, is under-emphasized in the translation. Instead the heroine is depicted as a desired object for Aswad rather than the planner, the leader and the major actor.

28 It is significant that in none of the examples discussed above does the Yemenite Queen figure as the active subject in translation; her active role is systematically underplayed. Ironically this is exactly what happened to her story in the official version of Islamic history. Al-Tabari’s account of the events underlines two main reasons for Aswad’s downfall, both of which deny the queen’s role as a major actor. Indeed, according to Al-Tabari it is not the queen’s meticulous planning which drives the outcome, but Aswad’s drunken stupor on the night he was killed, combined with the malediction of the Prophet, as pointed out by Djebar:

La chronique préfère insister sur l’ivresse de l’homme, sur son péché d’avoir été maudit par le Prophète en personne. Comme si les voies qu’emprunte la comploteuse si assurée n’étaient que provisoires. (Djebar, 1991: 20-21)

29 Similarly, the English translation seems to focus on Aswad’s weaknesses for beautiful women rather than on the queen’s active role in seducing and leading him to the trap she set up for him. Thus it is revealing that in the official version of Islamic history as well as in the English translation the Yemenite Queen is present in the events, but she has no
major or active role in the outcome. This is an interesting reinterpretation of the queen’s role, one which is significant in suggesting that the Yemenite Queen, as a Muslim woman, was unable to act, to decide and to actively bring a change in a crucial moment of Islamic history. Instead of being “l’âme de la machination” (Djebar, 1991: 22), the queen is presented as a passive participant whose actions are not dictated by her own will, but by the circumstances.

The final examples illustrate again the translator’s choice to overlook the feminine gender in words meant to create subversive images of the Muslim woman, while maintaining the same feminine gender in words conforming to Anglo-American readers’ assumptions. In the following example for instance, Djebar uses the feminine gender marking to build a contrast between the male and female characters:

13. Le païen et sa meurtrière, la musulmane vengeresse et l’époux qu’elle a, à sa manière, anesthésié. (23)
The pagan and his murderer, the avenging Muslim and the husband whom she has in her own way anesthetized. (12-13)

In the French text, the word order begins with a masculine noun le païen followed by a feminine noun meurtrière. After the comma, the feminine noun la musulmane is placed before the masculine l’époux. The change from masculine and feminine to feminine and masculine could be read as an attempt by the author to challenge the status quo by giving the Muslim woman more power and control. Indeed, in the first part of the sentence, Djebar places the masculine noun before the feminine in order to project the patriarchal system, where Muslim men hold the dominant position, but in the second part of the sentence, Djebar reverses the power balance by placing the feminine noun first, thus giving the Muslim woman the dominant position. Furthermore, the word order in this example creates an image of the two main characters facing each other. This face-to-face leads to two different perspectives: from Aswad’s perspective, we see only a female killer, but from the queen’s perspective, we see a husband losing control, which again places the Muslim woman in a position of power.

In the English translation, however, the French feminine noun meurtrière is replaced by the masculine term murderer and la Musulmane vengeresse is rendered as avenging Muslim. The absence of feminine nouns in the translation undermines Djebar’s attempt to reverse the power balance and overshadows the contrast she builds between the male and female perspective. As the masculine nouns the pagan and his murderer and the avenging Muslim and the husband dominate the English text, the feminine presence and power given to the heroine in the French text become less visible in the target text. Moreover, the subversive image envisaged by Djebar could have easily been transferred into the English text if the feminine term meurtrière had been translated as murderess and musulmane as Muslim woman. The alternative translation would be:

The pagan and his murderess, the avenging Muslim woman and the husband whom she has in her own way anesthetized.

The feminine terms murderess and avenging Muslim woman are crucial in maintaining the contrast intended by Djebar, but most importantly they play a major role in building and conveying the image of the fearless, active and powerful Yemenite Queen. The translator’s choice not to translate the feminine gender in this context is a clear attempt to de-emphasise the power gained by the Muslim woman. The same occurs in another
example, where Djebar uses the French feminine term *la comploteuse* to present the heroine as the major planner of the murder plan:

14. Comme si les voies qu'emprunte la comploteuse si assurée n'étaient que provisoires. (22)
As if the course taken by the conspirator—so sure of herself—was merely contingent (12)

34 While the feminine term *conspiratress* conveys better the subversive feminine image intended by Djebar, the translator opts for the masculine term *conspirator*, which does not reflect nor stress the queen’s ability to think, to devise and to act as a Muslim woman. However, when the Yemenite Queen assumes a less challenging role, the feminine gender is adequately maintained:

15. La Yéménite n’a pas à venger tout un peuple ; elle n’a qu’à sauver, elle, et peut-être même pas, seulement se réconcilier avec elle-même, petite aventurière perdue dans la fresque guerrière. (26)
The Yemenite does not have to avenge an entire nation; she has only to save herself, and perhaps not even that, only to make her peace with herself, a little adventuress lost in the fresco of war. (16)

35 In contrast with previous empowering descriptions such as *meurtrière* or *comploteuse*, the term *aventurière* reveals a different side of the Yemenite Queen. In this sequence she is presented as a victim of the circumstances surrounding her. To stress the queen’s vulnerability, the translator maintains the feminine gender and uses the feminine term *adventuress* to create an image of the vulnerable, uncertain and less confident Muslim woman. The same occurs again when Djebar’s depiction of the queen conforms to Anglo-American readers’ assumptions:

16. Est-ce dans l’amour, les caresses et l’émoi du plaisir partagé – partagé pour la dernière fois – que la femme se fait tentatrice ? (22)
Is it in the act of love, the caresses and ecstasies of shared pleasure—shared for the last time—that the woman acts the temptress? (12)
17. Victime ou séductrice : l’interrogation, sur ce point se situe hors parole prophétique (20)
Victim or seductress: the question on this issue remains outside the words of the Prophet (12)

36 The feminine words *tentatrice* and *séductrice* reveal once more a different side of the Yemenite Queen. They expose the seductive side of the heroine. Most importantly, the images conveyed here correspond to preconceived assumptions about Muslim women. Indeed, as pointed out by Zayzafoun, a Muslim woman is believed to “possess the power of seduction or *fitna*”, which is why she “must constantly be supervised, her sexuality controlled through the institutions of segregations and seclusion” (Zayzafoon, 2005: 72). In the English text, the feminine gender is maintained in both words *temptress* and *seductress* in order to emphasise and highlight such stereotypical images.

37 Finally, while the French text depicts the Yemenite Queen in multiple ways, refusing to reduce her to one simple, definite or stable image, the English text seems to superimpose the translator’s own assumptions upon the particular images and representations with which the author was grappling. In doing so, the translation has reduced and erased all traces of feminine resistance, power and ingenuity constructed in the French text. Moreover, the lack of feminine nouns in the English text projects the same pattern
encountered in the translation of the rawiyate figures, which aims to evade subversive images of the Muslim woman, while reviving exoticised and orientalist perceptions.

Conclusion

Djebar’s Loin de Médine was written to answer particular circumstances and to challenge certain established notions about Muslim women. What is most innovative in her text is how she uses French as “la langue de libération”, first to feminise, appropriate and reclaim the narrative role for women and secondly to free them from stereotypical images of submission and passivity. As Djebar admits, French was a “decided plus” that allowed her to address sensitive issues, which could have been too transgressive, if written in the sacred Arabic language. Like other Francophone female writers of the Maghreb, Djebar acknowledges the advantages of writing in the language of the former coloniser:

When I use the French language I have the freedom to talk about it all, I have the freedom to depict anyone and anything... I am immediately inside the truth, my own truth (Zimra, 1993: 129).

Djebar’s “truth” is to reveal from an exclusive feminine perspective how Muslim women lived in the time of the Prophet. She recreates the time when these women were free to move, to think, to question and to defend their own rights. Contrary to the narratives transmitted by male historians, Muslim women, such as the rawiyate and the Yemenite Queen, were independent, autonomous and active historical subjects. They had the possibilities and capabilities to exercise power and to influence the course of Islamic history.

In translation, however, the women who experienced freedom in Loin de Médine find themselves trapped in a different form of oppression. Their search for the truth, for the refused rights is once again denied in the process of translation. Having apparently approached her translation of Loin de Médine with preconceived assumptions about the translated feminine subject, the translator found herself compelled to screen out images that did not conform to Anglo-American readers’ horizon of expectations. She, therefore, obscures the significances of the rawiyate as narrators of Muslim women’s “herstory” and undermines the Yemenite Queen’s independence, self-determination and her ability to resist and challenge male injustice.

Knowing the discursive significance of the feminine gender marking in Djebar’s text, the translator has chosen not to translate gender in key feminine expressions. As a result, Djebar’s attempts to destabilize accepted notions about Muslim women are overshadowed and much of the text’s specificity is lost, not only literally and historically but also politically. These losses in meaning underline the extent to which the translator’s perception of the translated subject is influential in this question of translating gender.
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ANNEXES

More examples from the French and the English Texts

1. Feminine gender is maintained in the English text:

Et si Nawar, « la fleur » attendait toujours Gabriel, là-bas bédouine cernée dans une ville de Syrie ? (33)

And what if Nawar, “the flower”, were still waiting for Gabriel, a Bedouin woman trapped in some distant Syrian city? (23)

Derrière Fatima, Habiba, la paysanne, ne songeait pas à changer sa coiffure, à donner à sa mise un air de semblance citadine (92)

Behind Fatima, Habiba, the peasant woman, would stand, not even thinking to go alter her style, to give her appearance the semblance of a townswoman (81)

Quelle Musulmane de cette ville ou d’ailleurs perpétuera cette éloquence enflammée, qui nous brûlait, qui nous tenait en émoi ? (92)

What Muslim woman of Madina or elsewhere will preserve for posterity that passionate eloquence which inflamed us, which would not let us rest? (81)

Après une heure de détente forcée, elle reprit son air serein d’aristocrate mecquoise (136)

After forcing herself to rest for one hour, she once more looks the calm well-born Meccan woman (119)

Oum Hakim se savait musulmane d’emprunt, en quelque sorte. Non pas honteuse, non pas hypocrite, simplement « musulmane » (« soumise », comme ils spécifient parfois) (143)

Umm Hakim realized she was in some respects, a sham Muslim. Not ashamed, not a hypocrite, simply “a Muslim woman” (“submissive”, as they sometimes specified) (126)

Ne sommes-nous pas, nous, Musulmanes à Médine, préservées par notre foi, par notre faiblesse aussi, de ces divisions ? (291)

Are we not all, we Muslim women, protected by our faith, by our weakness also, from these divisions? (265)

2. Feminine gender is not maintained:

La femme rebelle, abritée dans sa litière et installée au cœur même du danger, excite ses hommes de la voix (38)

The rebel, sheltered in her litter, in the very heart of the danger, urges on her men (28)

Elle s’installe à Médine, première des Migrantes, accompagnée de son frère Abdallah (51)
She settles in Madina, the first of the Migrants, accompanied by her brother Abdallah (41).

La conteuse hésita, elle prononça quelques mots incompréhensibles que l’homme étendu tenta de percevoir en vain (110).

The storyteller hesitated; she uttered some incomprehensible words that the reclining man tried in vain to catch (97).

Je le joindrai ! Répète-t-elle, les traits durcis, mais le pas égal, presque mécanique. Avec un rythme tenace de coureuse de fond (136).

I will reach him! She repeats with set face, but regular, almost mechanical steps. With the persistent rhythm of a long distance runner (119).

Exposées donc, il fallait qu’elles s’exposent, avec la même audace, leur même fureur allègre, cette fois en Musulmanes (143).

So, they would expose themselves; they had to expose themselves, with the same daring, the same furious elation, but this time as Muslims (126).

En effet, le guide désirait repartir le jour même, tandis que l’on conduisait la jeune fugueuse – « une Musulmane désirant vivre parmi des Musulmanes ! » répétait-on autour d’elle – à la demeure de son frère (162).

In fact, the guide wished to depart that same day, while the young runaway—a Muslim wishing to live with Muslims!—they repeated around her—was taken to her brother’s home (144).

Mais c’est Esma, transmettrice qui évoqua ses paroles plus tard (223).

But it was Asma, the remembrancer, who recalled his words later (201).

NOTES

1. In the same year another Algerian female author, Anissa Boumediene, wrote a novel titled La Fin du monde. Published only in Algeria in 1991, the book also goes back to the origins of Islam in order to redefine Muslim women’s role in Islamic societies.

2. In an interview with Sophie Bonnet in Les Inrockuptibles October, 1995, p. 59-60, Djebar explains how she came to the decision to write Loin de Médine. She declares that confronted with the threatening events in Algeria and the riots of 1988-1989: “j’ai alors pris la décision d’écrire Loin de Médine. Avec L’Amour, la fantasia j’avais acquis un savoir-faire entre l’Histoire et le roman. Je me suis donc dit qu’il fallait que j’utilise cet acquis pour raconter les premiers temps de l’Islam du point de vue des femmes ; j’ai senti que les intégristes allaient revenir en force et monopoliser la mémoire islamique.”

3. Loin de Médine was translated by Dorothy Saint Blair, who has also translated a number of Francophone male and female writers such as the Lebanese Francophone writer Amin Malouf, the French author and Egyptologist Christian Jacq and the Francophone Algerian author Leila Sebbar. The publisher is Quartet books which has published a wide range of translated fiction and non-fiction from Arabic and European languages.

4. In Loin de Médine, Djebar uses a variety of feminine nouns to create different images of the Muslim woman. Indeed the novel contains over 200 different feminine nouns, adjectives and past participles describing the women of Madina.
5. The term “orientalist assumptions” is used here to denote the set of preconceived perceptions about Muslim women. These perceptions are similar to those contained in exotic orientalist texts like *The Arabian Nights*, where Muslim women live in harems, wear veils and remain confined to their homes. According to Mohja Kahf such stereotypical images developed in the West around the 17th century and reached their peak in the 18th and 19th centuries, when Western representations of the submissive, passive and silent Muslim woman became established (Kahf, 1999).

6. Some of the most prominent influential and often quoted sources include figures such as Al-Bukhari (810-870 AD), Al-Tabari (838-870 AD) and Al-Zamakhshari (1073-1144 AD).

7. The Prophet’s immigration to Yathrib (now Madina) was a key event in Islamic history. In fact the Islamic calendar, Hijra, starts on this day.

8. Such “matriarchal utopia” where women speak and exist in the absence of men can also be found in the works of Jovette Marchessault, and Monique Wittig, who emphasise the experiences and voices of women in their works by creating a link or a chain between women's experiences, voices and memories from different historical periods (Cauville and Zupancic, 1997: 177-189).


10. This particular image, where women, originally the active subjects, are depicted as passive agents, serves also as reminder of the essay produced by Juliette Minces on women in Algeria in which she denied Muslim women any selfhood or ability to think and act for themselves. Minces presented women’s participation in the Algerian war as the result of men’s will and manipulation, rather than women’s self-decision (Minces, 1980).

RÉSUMÉS

Dans *Loin de Médine* (1991), où Djebar défie les stéréotypes et les idées reçues sur la femme musulmane, les marqueurs de genre féminin jouent un rôle central dans la reconstruction d’une nouvelle identité féminine musulmane. Cet article analyse des extraits de la version anglaise *Far from Madina* (1994), et révèle deux approches différentes dans la traduction du genre féminin vers la langue anglaise. Une première approche consiste à masquer le genre féminin dans des expressions visant à dévoiler le courage, l’indépendance et l’ingéniosité des personnages féminins. Tandis que la deuxième approche consiste à mettre en évidence le genre féminin des expressions visant à confirmer des perceptions préconçues au sujet de la femme musulmane, perceptions qui font d’elle un être non seulement opprimé, mais aussi une victime passive du pouvoir masculin.

In *Loin de Médine* (1991), where Djebar challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about the Muslim woman, the feminine gender markers play a crucial role in rebuilding a new feminine identity for Muslim women. This paper analyses excerpts from the English version, *Far from Madina* (1994) and reveals two different approaches to the translation of the French feminine gender into English. While the first approach aims to evade the feminine gender in words revealing the courage, independence and ingenuity of the female characters, the second approach seeks to highlight the feminine gender in words confirming preconceived assumptions about Muslim women, assumptions that present her not only as an oppressed feminine subject, but also as a passive victim of male power.
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