



Postcolonial Subjectivity in “*Down Second Avenue*” and “*Women of Algeirs in Their Apartment*”

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**ABSTRACT**

The present research paper examines the concept of postcolonial subjectivity in two significant novels written by two different authors from different cultural backgrounds: *Down Second Avenue* by Ezekiel Mphahlele in South Africa and *Women of Algeirs in Their Apartment* by Assia Djebar in Algeria. The paper aims at the representation of the above mentioned concept through both the content and form of the chosen literary writings. It is hypothesized in this study that both authors have the intention to reconstruct the identity and history of their society. The basic findings this study arrives at are that both of the prominent authors failed in their trying of reforming their society because of the obstacles like racism and culture. Both of the novels have a dramatic conclusion in representation postcolonial subjectivity.

**Key Words:** Postcolonial Subjectivity, Apartheid, identity, racism, oppression, patriarchy

## **1-0 Introduction**

It seems that in the mid-twentieth century, the term ‘postcolonial subjectivity’ was a very popular subject to write about. It is important to give a clear definition of both the terms ‘postcolonial subjectivity’ and ‘subjectivity’ in order to make the purpose of this essay more understandable. (Harting, 2005) states that “postcolonial subjectivity comes from imperialism and colonialism and continues the idea that the west is superior to the rest of the world”. This clarifies that indigenous people are alienated and looked at as inferiors. (Ascroft et al, 1998) mentions that “‘Subjectivity’ refers to the individual, the self, the human being and the faculty of being subjective (animate) rather than objective (inanimate)”. This essay analyzes the postcolonial subjectivity in autobiographical novels *Down Second Avenue* by Ezekiel Mphahlele in South Africa and *Women of Algeria in Their Apartment* by Assia Djebar in Algeria.

Mphahlele writes *Down Second Avenue* in apartheid time. (Clark and Worger, 2014) write, “apartheid was an official policy of racial segregation formerly practiced in South Africa He paints a vivid picture of the injustices of apartheid system towards blacks by whites. On the other hand, Djebar writes her novel after a silent decade in order to show the consciousness of women oppression throughout Algerian history. Unfortunately, because of the brutal treatment towards women in the French colonizer time and the Algerian patriarchal time, Djebar tries to write the history of Algeria through Algerian women language and reconstruct it. The aim of this essay is to compare and contrast both of the abovementioned novels from the perspectives of content and form.

## **2-0 Down Second Avenue by Ezekiel Mphahlele**

### **2-1 Mphahlele Biography**

Ezekiel Mphahlele is a Black South African educationist and novelist was born in (1919) and died in (2008). He started by writing his novel at hometown and completed in exile in Nigeria in (1959). Mphahlele illustrates the living condition of his nation through his own life.

### **2-2 Postcolonial Subjectivity in the Content of *Down Second Avenue***

Importantly, the genre of both novels is autobiography. (Lejeune, 1989) defines it as a prose narrative written by a person about his own life, reflecting upon his story and self. This shows that autobiography is the search for identity. Mphahlele presents ‘postcolonial subjectivity’ through the content of his novel by referring to its opening sentence: “I have never known why we – my brother, sister and I – were taken to the country when I was five” (Mphahlele, 11). The usefulness of this opening sentence is that Mphahlele is unconscious and looks at himself as a dominant subject. (Thuynsma, 2011: 222) points out that “[i]t is a period of fear and loss, of bewilderment, displacement,

and alienation.” (Rafapa, 2005) adds that it increases Mphahlele’s understanding of blacks’ life during apartheid in his early life. This clarifies that the alienation of blacks and their harsh treatment result from apartheid.

Crucially, he feels his consciousness for the first time when he says: “For the first time in my life, when I was at St. Peter’s, awareness was creeping into my mind...Slowly I realized how I hated the white man outside the walls of St. Peter’s” (Mphahlele, 126). His speech is very crucial because it depicts the racial differences in Africa. (Raditlhalo, 1964: 140) refers to this distinction as “[t]he relationship at St Peter’s is harmonious and outside is a racial tensions and discordance relationship.” Then Mphahlele notices this difference not only outside schools, but also inside the schools and in education sphere when he talks about his experience at Adams College where students will be expelled if anything they say disagree with the college thought and losing his career as a teacher. Hence, he describes education in Africa as a tool of oppression through which blacks become inferior to the whites. Most of the characters, especially his mother thinks the purpose of education is more economic rather than learning.

When Mphahlele is taken to the slum by his mother, he states that: “I never dreamed that I should go back to the city...we found on Pietersburg station after travelling many miles of dusty road” (Mphahlale, 23-4). Here, he does not only present that it would be his last time to see his paternal family and he will join his maternal one, but he also tend to show that he could have one tribal identity. Thus, (Raditlhalo, 1964) comments on the above mentioned quote by saying that blacks can only have one identity because of the policy at that time. In addition, (Caliban, 2000: 40) points out that the differences in life experiences of South Africans who live in urban and rural areas appear to be indicators of a new collective identity. (Thuynsma, 2011) also adds that Mphahlele demonstrates that contradictions between rural and urban feelings are the cause of uncertainty in the African personality. It sounds apparent that identity is a problematic issue for African black people because of their social differences between rural and urban lives. Mphahlele highlights the hardship of blacks’ life in urban areas by referring to the word ‘kaffir’ and not allowing going to the zoo.

### **2-3 Gender in *Down Second Avenue***

Moreover, gender is greatly affected by apartheid system when Mphahlele writes: “Don't talk to me like that! Didn't your mother teach you never to answer back to your husband and lord?”(Mphahlele, 25). He also writes: “Men and boys of the village met here to talk important things and trifles, away from women and girls ... communal responsibility, social living and so on” (Ibid, 15). These two speeches imply that treating woman badly and using them for men’s services as dominant subjects are common features in black families. (Gantt, 2009: 18) states that “men control the household and Mphahlele describes this control as oppressive.” This suggests that black families have patriarchal values. Furthermore, he does not only illuminate the difference between black and white women, but he also shows black women’s awareness of this difference.

## **2-4 Religion in *Down Second Avenue***

Mphahlele states that religion has been used as a means to exploit blacks during apartheid era and he says: “To us the Church has become a symbol of the dishonesty of the West” (Mphahlele, 221). (Gantt, 2009: 29) believes that “religion becomes the epitome of colonialism and Apartheid.” This shows that because of religion whites are superiors and blacks are inferiors in the system of apartheid.

## **2-5 Postcolonial Subjectivity in the Form of *Down Second Avenue***

In terms of form Mphahlele divides *Down Second Avenue* in twenty three chapters and uses simple English in a strong narrative poetic style. He uses African imagery, idioms and mother tongue to show the authenticity of African flavor and its surroundings. Using his experience and a first person point of view, Mphahlele tells a story of a nation within the struggles of apartheid. He presents it as a theatre to confirm the black identity. He tells the story in a chronological order and referring to past and present tenses to show a strong relationship between past and present among Africans. The use of interludes is necessary because Maphahlele wants to reconstruct his life and the life of other characters and this affects him emotionally. Therefore, he needs a short pause mentally and spiritually. (Thuynsma, 2011), states that every break is important, as the story has affected him significantly. He concludes his autobiographical novel by using epilogue to show the importance of religion by the Africans and its exploitation of blacks.

## **3-0 *Women of Algeries in Their Apartment* by Assia Djébar**

### **3-1 Djébar Biography**

Assia Djébar is a famous Algerian novelist and poet was born in 1936. She writes her literary work regarding these difficulties that face Algerian women and their freedom. After ten years of silence, Djébar writes a collection of short stories and autobiographical novel *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* in (1980). Djébar concentrates on the past and the Algerian women issues such as women’s long term silence and their oppression in her society. (Gafaiti, 1996: 813) states that Djébar tends to “rewrite the history of Algeria from the feminine point of view.” According to (Solomon, 2009: 57), “[t]he novel represents the social, political, and cultural changes that take place in liberated Algeria when the region shifts into a postcolonial nation-state.”

### **3-2 Postcolonial Subjectivity in the Content of *Women of Algeries in Their Apartment***

Unlike Mphahlele, Djébar presents postcolonial subjectivity in terms of content through the autobiographies of the characters in her novel to show the history of Algeria. When Djébar writes: “For

Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything... the voice that's searching in the opened tombs (Djebar, 50). This implies the awareness of Algerian women of the strengths of their voices and how they can change the history of their community. (Lutsyshyna, 2006: 29) states that "the women of Algeria stand for Algeria itself." Additionally, Djebar wants to show women's silence when she writes: "Liberated words...making a furrow in the ambulance as it tears along. Words in electrified harmony with the ululations of the harem, words transparent with vapors, with echoes" (Djebar, 37). Here, Djebar utilizes Fatima's event as a way to set the women's voices free. As (Solomon, 2009: 61) claims that "Djebar's novel represents a transformative history grounded in the voices of various Algerian women." This implies that new history and socio-political of Algeria can be produced through the differences in life experiences of characters and their voices.

### **3-3 Culture in *Women of Algeries in Their Apartment***

Djebar also refers to the Algerian culture after their subjugation by French colonizer. She writes that: "What words had uncovered in time of war is now being concealed again underneath a thick covering of taboo subjects, and, in that way, the meaning of a revelation is reversed" (Djebar, 150-151). It can be seen that she wants to describe how women are confined by wearing veils and living in a place like harem where they lack of independence. (Lutsyshyna, 2006: 45) points out that "the veil subjugates women, takes away their voices, and makes them invisible." Therefore Djebar describes it as a problematic issue for women. It also represents that Algeria is a patriarchal society.

### **3-4 Gender in *Women of Algeries in Their Apartment***

Similar to Mphahlele, Djebar in her novel also focuses on women as repression subjects. She refers to the history of Algerian women during colonial times as a double oppression as gendered and colonized women. This phenomenon has been repeated in postcolonial period as well. Djebar begins with the scene of torture: "a young women's head, blindfolded, neck thrown backward, hair pulled back" (Djebar, 5). As agreed by (Gaifati, 1996) after some years of freedom, women return to their previous situation in which they were treated as oppression subjects. This suggests that women are subjugated during colonial and postcolonial times and Algiers independence did not bring liberation for them.

### **3-5 Postcolonial Subjectivity in the Form of *Women of Algeries in Their Apartment***

The form of Djebar's novel differs from Mphahlele's form. Djebar writes it in the form of seven short stories and divides it into three parts named 'Today', 'Yesterday' and 'Postface'. In contrast to Mphahlele, She narrates these stories in the form of dialogue between female characters and between past and present times. (Boersma,2010: 5) writes about Djebar's style of writing: "Djebar's writing are about documentation, testimonies, conversations, poetic imagination and the autobiographical aspect." The first part 'Today' focuses on women's talking about their situation. 'Yesterday' illustrates the connection of women's experience between past and present. 'Postface' differs from the other

previous ones because it is written in essayistic style and it brings the stories that are told previously together. Djebbar takes its title from Delacroix painting which shows three beautiful Algerian women. Djebbar tends to restore Algerian women conversation throughout her collection of short story and she states that their condition have changed rarely since Delacroix period. Unlike Mphahlele, She narrates their stories in a fragmented style which reflect the fragmentation of subjectivity as well.

#### **4-0 Conclusion**

To conclude, this essay has compared and contrasted the literary works of two authors, Ezikel Mphahlele and Assia Djebbar. While both novels have different content, they are similar because they adopt the idea of postcolonial subjectivity; therefore they present it differently. Mphahlele presents postcolonial subjectivity in his own life and experience. On the contrary, Djebbar uses the difference experiences of characters of her novel in its presentation. Mphahlele deals with the representations of blacks in South Africa during apartheid era, whilst Djebbar focuses on the depiction of women in Algeria's history. In opposition to Mphahlele, Djebbar's novel is supported by Delacroix's authentic painting. Although both authors have the intention to reconstruct their identity and history, it looks their attemptation is failed because of the mentioned obstacles like racism and culture. Hence, both of the novels have a dramatic conclusion in representation postcolonial subjectivity.

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