

ASSIA DJEBAR

*The woman who
said No in Medina*

Translated from the
French by Dorothy S Blair

It was Muhammad, the prophet and the father of the beloved daughter—

may God's blessing be on him and His mercy protect him! – who was the first, it was he who was the first to say 'No' in Medina. He repeated, 'No' in the presence of everyone. A refusal, at the conclusion of an address from the *minbar*, the pulpit. A rejection, in the presence of all the faithful, in the crowded mosque. His mosque.

The father said 'No', and everyone immediately interpreted this 'No' as 'No' for my daughter's sake.' He did, in fact, enlarge on his motives for this veto.

But he concluded his long address with 'No, that, never!' This 'never' echoed and re-echoed, resounding clearly in the general silence. Before this he had declared, proudly and, how can we put it, unlovingly – could he have displayed, in front of this masculine gathering, the most loving love of all human love? – rather he had blurted out, with a gruffness that disguised his affection, 'My daughter is part of myself! What hurts her, hurts me! What distresses her, distresses me!'

Then he submitted several arguments: logically,

vehemently. And concluded with this 'No', repeating, 'No, that, never!'

All this took place in Medina in the eighth or ninth year AH – some say even in the tenth year, but in the early months – the tenth year after the Hegina Great Emigration... Fourteen centuries have elapsed since then: it seems that no father since, at least in the Islamic community, no father has stood up and pronounced such a passionate argument on behalf of his daughter's peace of mind! No single one, save the Father of the beloved daughter – may God's blessing be on him and His mercy protect him!

These are the facts: Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, wished to take a second wife. This occurred between the year 8 and the year 10 of the Hegira. Ali was not yet thirty; he had been married to Fatima for eight or nine years.

Does not this desire for polygamy detract from the image of Fatima and Ali as an ideal couple? There is no lack of anecdotes about their conjugal quarrels. In most cases, the Prophet acted as mediator and restored peace between them. There is one moving anecdote, related as if in dumb show.

Muhammad went to visit Fatima and Ali. They were quarrelling. They fell silent when he entered. Ali showed his father-in-law to a seat, but the latter preferred to recline on a mat. Fatima came and took her place beside him, on his left. He invited Ali to sit on his right. Muhammad clasped his hands on his belly in an attitude of meditation. Then he took one of Fatima's hands and one of Ali's and held them both together in his own. They remained with joined hands in a mutual silence which gradually brought calm, then peace, then surrender to God [that is to say 'Islam' in the exact sense of the word]. Thus harmony and love were re-established between the two young people.

Muhammad rose to his feet and left his children's house.

The sound (and with it the commentary) was restored: 'O, Messenger of God,' stated someone who chanced to be in the street, 'when you entered there just now your face

seemed full of worry. Now as you leave, your face is radiant!' 'How could I not be happy,' Muhammad replied, 'when I have just re-united the two people who are closest to my heart?'

Other stories of the Prophet's mediation between Fatima and Ali are told, as simply and sympathetically.

One day Muhammad found Ali lying in a ditch, seemingly in the depths of despair... The story goes that Ali had left his house after Fatima had flown into a rage. Muhammad helped Ali to his feet and comforted him. When the young man stood before him, Muhammad dusted him off and addressed him with this curious by-name, 'Arise, O Man of Dust'. He dusted him off gently, like a father. In fact, he had symbolically removed from him all the dust that settles on everyday love, cleansing it of its shabbiness, its pettiness... He restored strength and hope to his son-in-law.

Another incident took place either before or after the day when Ali lay in the ditch. Fatima returned to her father's house and complained about her husband, probably about the hard life which she was leading... Fatima, disillusioned or exhausted (during the first years in Medina, the hardship of the days of abstinence weighed heavily on the couple, wore out Fatima's physical resistance), apparently appealed to her father. He must decide, she must, by turning up thus without warning, have thought.

'You must decide! I can get a divorce and leave Abu Hassan! You must decide whether it would not be better for me simply to return here, to live as your daughter again.'

Muhammad – probably like any father at a time like this – preached patience to his daughter; he spoke to her of the beauty of a genuine couple here on earth, who will be reunited in the next world. So, he sent her back to Ali. He gave her to understand that they were a genuine couple, that they were joined by love, even if some days they were no longer aware of it themselves. And Muhammad concluded, 'Know that, for a woman, nothing is more important than to bring out the love which her husband bears for her, even when he keeps silence! Only a wife can have this power: to encourage her husband to emerge from his silence and show her the love he feels for

her!...Do not lose your trust, my daughter!'

Thus Muhammad apparently consolidated the union of this couple, 'the nearest to his heart'. They loved each other, and, so thought the father and father-in-law, if it happens that in times of stress and fatigue they hold each other in disrespect, then let them love the Prophet, meeting each other in love for him...

However, between the year 8 and the year 10 of Hegira, Ali began to desire a second wife.

He was no longer poor as he had been at the beginning of the Hegira; he had the means to maintain a second household. Did he wish for more children in addition to the ones which Fatima had given him? No doubt he thought that, like his father-in-law, the man he loved most in all the world, he also had the right to a second wife, then a third, then a fourth. Four wives are permitted to every Muslim provided he can maintain them, and what is most important, who is sure of treating them fairly, without any preference... Ali had not forgotten these quite recent precepts of the Book...

So he makes a request for marriage. Whom does he choose? The daughter of his maternal uncle, that is to say from the opposite side of his family from that of his father Abdu Mutallib, and that of the Prophet... Her name is Jawayria: she is sister to Ikrima, the former military commander to the people of Mecca who led the fight against the Muslims of Medina. it is true that after his conversion in the year 8, Ikrima had become an intimate of Ali...Nevertheless, the fact remained that this scarcely nubile young girl was first and foremost the daughter of Abu Jahl. Abu Jahl, 'the enemy of God': such is the name of this rich notable from Mecca, as it is recorded in the history of Islam; the man who led Muhammad's persecutors during the first thirteen years of his preaching, and who, after the Muslims' flight to Medina, continued his hostility to the extent of spearheading the first armed attack at Badr. Abu Jahl had died, killed by the Muslims, at this battle of Badr in the year 2 of the Hegira. Abu Jahl, 'the enemy of God' for fifteen years. Moreover, Ikrima his son, together with Khalid Ibn Walid, had led the people of

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Mecca in their retaliatory attack the following year at Uhad, when the Muslims suffered a terrible defeat and the Prophet himself was wounded... But Ikrima, like Khalid, had become a Muslim!

And the girl? Still a child when her father died. When Ali asked for her hand in marriage she was thirteen or fourteen. She had recently adopted Islam like all her family; like all the families in Mecca when Muhammad made his victorious entry into his native city... This Jawayria was, after all, a little Quraishite of the noble tribe of Mecca who might have remained anonymous. Why visit her father's crimes upon her? Abu Jahl was certainly in Hell. But she, for her part, repeated every day, no doubt sincerely, no doubt fervently, 'There is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet!'

For the time being, she was still in Mecca. She began to dream of a life in Medina. Would she, as co-wife, share the courtyard of her future home with Fatima, the daughter of the Messenger of God? Some member of the family of this virtual-fiancee, someone – not Ikrima, but one of his brothers or his maternal uncles, one of the 'sons of Hisham' – suddenly began to worry about Muhammad's reaction. In Medina, Ali waited for the family's reply; a simple formality, he thought. Then his brother, or this uncle, arrived in Medina and immediately asked for an interview with the Prophet. He apprised him of Ali's request: 'We wish to have your opinion in this matter, O Messenger of God!' the man declared solemnly.

And he waited; he had decided not to visit Ali before obtaining the Prophet's reply.

Muhammad listened to him; and made no reply.

This same man came again, this time accompanied by another male relative, perhaps even two, again to acquaint him with the affair and to wait... Muhammad listened, as if for the first time; and again made no reply.

The rumour suddenly began to circulate among the women of Median. A rumour, originating in Mecca? In Medina? No-one could say.. Was it indiscretion on the part of some maidservant, some slave or confidant that was responsible? In one single day the tiding went the rounds of all

the dwellings in Medina. It even reached Fatima's chamber.

A voice whispered in her ear what all the women of Medina were saying that day.

'O mistress, in such and such a house, in such and such a family, it was said this morning.. Such lies!'

'What lies?'

'So-and-so said that she had heard from so-and-so...' the voice of the little servant hesitates, then eventually adds, as if confessing some misdemeanour, 'that our master Ali is going to marry again... That he has asked for the hand of Abu Jahl's daughter!'

Fatima is about to echo, 'Abu Jahl's daughter,' is about to add bitterly, ironically, 'the daughter of the enemy of God.' But she says nothing. 'Ali wishes to marry again.' This short sentence eats into her like a drop of icy poison.

She hastily covers her head; with the short sentence simmering in her mind, she leaves the house and quickly makes her way to her father's dwelling. Mechanically calculates which of his wives he will be with today. Unhesitatingly Fatima makes her way to Umm Salama's. Umm Salama, who is herself noted for her jealousy!

Fatima remains standing in the doorway with a set face, simply repeating to the Prophet the short sentence, in all its neutrality, 'Ali wants to marry again!'

Then, after a pause, while Umm Salama discreetly slips out of the room holding her little daughter's hand, Fatima, suppressing a sob, adds in the half darkness, 'They say he has asked for the hand of Abu Jahl's daughter!'

What use to add contemptuously, 'The daughter of the enemy of God!' Fatima remains standing, her face contorted by her effort not to weep, not to protest, not to... Does she think, at this moment, 'What can I do? Is this not the natural law of men? Is it not fate? 'Her' fate, as a woman? Must not Ali become one day the temporal leader of the Muslims? Is this not the law of Islam: many wives to assure a plentiful lineage for each leader of the community? A law recently validated by the Qur'an:

'Marry women of your choice Two, or three or four. But

if ye fear that ye shall not Be able to deal justly with them,
Then only one...'

Fatima waited. She gazed at her father, who also stood in silence, with no thought now of preaching patience. Fatima seemed to be thinking, 'Is it really from my young husband that I receive this blow, is it not from you, my father, you, the Messenger of God?'

What could Muhammad have replied to his beloved daughter that day, in the darkened room, in this dialogue far from others' ears, exchanging words sharp as the point of a spear turning over and over in the wound?... Not even Umm Salama, who waited outside and prayed, ever discovered: for Fatima, for the little daughter whose hand she held, for all the women of the Community. 'My jealousy is great, O Messenger of God,' she had once declared. 'My piety is surely as great!'

Letters in Medina then began to move quickly. The next day, some even said the same day, shortly after the siesta, the Prophet was at the mosque, addressing the congregation... Nearly all the Companions were there. Was Ali present? His presence was not noted in particular. No doubt he was not in the front rows of those who knelt in prayer...

He must have arrived amongst the last: his mind elsewhere, somewhat preoccupied, with his usual good intentions and trusting nature. 'The people of Mecca,' he must have thought, just before beginning his prayers, 'would soon be sending their reply... What use is there in worrying?' But Fatima must not hear of the matter before it was confirmed; he would then tell her himself, resolved to confront her anger!

Muhammad presided over the prayers. And then, just as the faithful awaited the signal to disperse, Muhammad with his features set, red-eyed – almost at the moment when Gabriel visited him – spoke from the minbar:

'The sons of Hisham ibn Mughira have come to ask my opinion about the marriage of their daughter to Ali ibn Abu Talib. I forbid it!... I will not permit this marriage, as least as long as Ali has not divorced my daughter! Only then can he marry their daughter! For my daughter is a part of myself. What hurts her, hurts me! What distresses her, distresses me!'

Silence weighed heavily on the congregation a few seconds which seemed an eternity. The Prophet seemed to be stopping for breath; then he resumed, more solemnly:

'O Muslims, I do not forbid you that which God Has permitted! And I do not permit that which God has forbidden to you! No...But that the daughter of the Messenger of God and the daughter of the enemy of God should share the same dwelling-place, that I will never permit!...For I fear, if that were the case, I fear that Fatima might find her faith weakened! I repeat, Muslims, I do not forbid what God has permitted! But, in the name of the Lord, the daughter of the Messenger of God shall not live in the same place with the daughter of the enemy of God, that no, never!...Never'

This last word, or its echo, resounded time and again in the crowded mosque, which soon after began to empty. The Faithful drifted away to their homes in little groups. No conversation. No comments. No-one dared prolong the Prophet's diatribe by a single sentence.

Muhammad returned home, alone.

To whom did Muhammad say 'No' that day, in Medina?

To Ali, his cousin, his son-in-law and adopted son? 'If you wish to take another wife, then you must divorce my daughter!' Thus had he declared to him, before everyone, and before God.

To whom did Muhammad say 'No' that day, in Medina?

To the men of Medina, to all who listened to him, who asked for his advice, who were to model their lives (not only they, but their young sons who were frequently attentive onlookers and would speak of these things later) on His life, hanging on the least of the Messenger's words.

'O Ye Faithful, I do not forbid you what God has permitted! I shall not permit you what God has forbidden!... But...'

To be sure, it is permissible for every believer to have four wives. But meanwhile, he takes the people of Medina to witness this private truth: 'What distresses Fatima, distresses me!'

To whom did Muhammad say 'No' that day in Medina?

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To a part of himself? The father in him, which till then stirred his heart with kindness and hope, addressed the Messenger in himself, to express aloud a mere mortal's spiritual confusion: 'I fear lest Fatima should find her faith weakened!...'

Muhammad was thus the first to utter this 'No', in the presence of all the people of Medina!

Fatima would echo this 'No', magnified, multiplied, two or three years later, not indeed to defend her position as a wife (Ali had immediately renounced his plan to remarry and now that the Messenger of God was dead, she lacked nothing for herself). She was to say 'No' on behalf of everyone, Ali, her children, her family, all those whom the Prophet loved, a 'No' in the very heart of Medina, a 'No' to the Prophet's own city itself!

'See now, the city horizons are shrouded in dust. The sun today is no more than a sphere whose fire is quenched. The light at midday is eclipsed. The earth itself, the Prophet's orphan, quakes with repining and with woe...'

Thus Fatima improvised once more. And women and children, at the break of every day, echoed snatches of her refrain, sharing her search for consolation, as seven days had not yet elapsed since the Messenger's death... But was it consolation that she brought? Was it not rather as if an incandescent part of the dead man were still present, wincing with self-chastisement?

'Muhammad is dead, Islam is not dead!' the first caliph proclaimed shortly afterwards.

'Which Islam is not dead?' Fatima's voice seemed stubbornly to inquire, Fatima who was soon to cease weeping, and to...

It was not yet the second Monday after the death of the Prophet when, one morning after the second prayer, the caliph observed aloud, 'Some of the Faithful have not yet come forward to swear the necessary oath of allegiance!'

A voice behind him called out the names: 'O Vicar, they are Abbas, Zubair and Sa'ad ibn Obaida!'

'Do not those who count themselves members of the family of the Beloved think that four days of mourning are

sufficient?'

'The fifth day has elapsed, and they have not yet come forward!' another added.

But none of them dared utter aloud the name of Abu Hassan – Ali, the Man of Dust', who had not been seen since the internment...

It was Umar who volunteered to go, accompanied by Khalid ibn al Walid, to fetch them all. He was resolved to bring them, willy-nilly, to face Abu Bakr. That morning, they were all together in Fatima's dwelling.

Umar called them in his stentorian voice from outside the house. No-one replied. Umar ordered faggots to be brought to set light to the house, if the need arose.

'In the name of the one to whom the soul of Umar is held in thrall,' Umar cried, 'come out, or else I will burn down the house with all who are within!'

A great crowd gathered around. Some tried to remonstrate with Umar, scandalized at his undue precipitation. 'O Abu Haf, Fatima is there, within!'

'What of it?' he retorted.

Abbas, the uncle, Zubair, the cousin, and Sa'ad eventually emerged and went off to swear the oath of allegiance. Ali, on the other hand, refused. Fatima came to the door of her house and addressed Umar and his followers:

'You left the body of the Prophet in our hands while you were busy settling everything among yourselves alone! You did not listen to what we had to say, and you did not concern yourself with our rights!'

Umar returned to Abu Bakr to report to him what had occurred. When, according to one account, the caliph send another of the Companions instead of Umar, to persuade Ali, the latter did not emerge but raised his voice to cry, 'God is great! The caliph's followers have appropriated for him was is not his to claim...

Once more this was reported to Abu Bakr who, they say, wept. (No matter which version of the Tradition we consult, we find in every one the account of the tears shed by the Vicar. Aicha was to say later, 'My father wept easily!')

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Umar then went with a body of men to knock on Fatima's door. She cried aloud, loud enough to be heard by all in the street outside, 'O my father! O Messenger of God! What have Umar and the son of Quhaifa done to us after your departure?'

And all those present were transfixed by the bitterness of her appeal to the Prophet! Many fled in tears. 'Is it not true,' they asked, 'that a living part of the Prophet invokes the dead Prophet thus?' Nonetheless Umar finally brought Ali to Abu Bakr.

'Swear allegiance! he was told.

'I will not!' Ali replied firmly.

Omar prompted the caliph, saying, 'Does not the law ordain that the head of the man who defers his oath of allegiance shall be cut off?'

Ali smiled, almost gently, a smile of quiet defiance. 'Would you dare kill a servant of God and the brother of his Prophet?'

'A servant, yes,' replied Umar, 'but brother of his Prophet, no!'

Abu Bakr remained silent. He had said nothing from the first, save to greet Ali.

'Will you not decide?' Umar, so ready to treat Ali as a rebel, harried him.

And Abu Bakr finally replied, 'I will force nothing upon Ali, as long as Fatima remains at his side!'

Ali made his way to the Prophet's tomb, to take him as witness, his voice suddenly drowned in emotion: 'O my Brother, see how the people bring me into disrepute! See how they have threatened to kill me!'

Whereupon, concludes the chronicler, Ali did not swear allegiance until after Fatima's death.

But, for the time being, Fatima was very much alive. When she was informed of the constraints put upon Ali, she stood before the caliph's door and cried out, 'So, O Abu Bakr, you are in such haste that you even attack the family and intimates of the Prophet! Allah is my witness!' she added, 'I shall refuse ever at any time to speak to Umar in this world

until I appear before God!’

The second rebuff that she, the Prophet’s daughter, made to his successors remained like a thorn in her flesh for many long years... It was no longer a question of the challenge in Ali’s name, the claim to his right to the leadership. She remained more determined than ever, doggedly at the heart of this controversy, shared with others, ‘the people of the household’. But there was also the question of her rights as a daughter, her share in the inheritance. In this second dispute, she was to struggle alone.

And, although what was at stake seemed more modest (a field, a share in the spoils of war, purely material possessions) than the succession to the leadership of the Faithful, Fatima was, in fact, deprived of her inheritance quite illegally, through specious argument.

From weeping mourner, Fatima first became the rebel, all scornful defiance, haranguing with sorrow and pride, and then the dispossessed... She was refused her share of the inheritance, in the name of the literal interpretation of words Muhammad had spoken in the presence of Abu Bakr:

‘From us, the prophets, ‘Muhammad is said to have stated on day, ‘no-one shall inherit! What has been given to us, was given as a gift!’

And now, the first caliph, out of rigorous adherence to the words of his friend, was to disinherit the Prophet’s own daughter!

It was not a question of a garden, or lands, or possessions in Medina and its surroundings. No! as Fatima understood it, it was a question of something symbolic and much more serious. The ascetic Fatima, who had experienced more days of privations than of abundance in Medina, Fatima who, now that she was orphaned, cared less than ever about material comforts!

‘No,’ Fatima accused the caliph, ‘you maintain you can refuse me my rights as a daughter!’ She might have gone even further. She might have said, ‘The meaning of the Islamic revolution for daughters, for women, was first and foremost to allow them to inherit, to grant them the share that devolves on

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them from their fathers! Muhammad was responsible for introducing this, for the first time in the history of the Arabs! Well, Muhammad is scarcely in his grave and you dare to disinherit his own daughter first of all, the only living daughter of the Prophet himself!

Fatima, thus deprived of her rights, was the first of an endless procession of daughters, whose *de facto* dispossession was often escheated by brothers, uncles, sons even; it was an attempt to gradually stay the course of the intolerable feminist revolution of Islam in this seventh century of the Christian Era!

Fatima came before Abu Bakr, to claim her rights. She remained standing in the chamber crowded with Companions: she deigned not a glance at these men. She of whom Aicha was to say later that she most resembled the beloved Prophet 'in her language', became, in the lyricism which slowly flowed from her, the poetic expression of the remorse they should feel:

'The messenger', Fatima began, 'came amongst your tribes, He who loves that which ye do not love, He who watches over you, He who is full of forgiveness for all true Believers!'

And there was a chorus of wailing from all those present... Fatima waited until the paroxysms had died down, then she reminded them, in a flight of lyricism:

'He fought against the Infidels, opposing their armies! He caused the dawn to emerge from the night, by setting justice firmly on its true foundations! Then all the intimates of Satan vanished! And ye, what were ye then?'

And again all wept as they anticipated the flood of reproaches in her verses... But it was the daughter, as much as the poetess, who challenged them, not sparing them:

'Ye have known, yes! ye have known such a man! So how can ye not agree that he was my father, not yours! Not only was he my father, but my cousin's brother!'

And everyone cried out yet again, repeating the name of 'Abu Hasan', Ali, the first cousin of Muhammad, considered by him a brother, or even a son...

Thus, in the presence of them all, she claimed this

double kinship, first by virtue of her birth, and, secondly, by virtue of her union to the son of Abu Talib... They wished to dispossess her of property of which she was the rightful heir, for had not Muhammad left no living descendants save herself to succeed to his earthly possessions! Besides his widows, Muhammad left no sons and no daughters other than Fatima, no brothers, no sisters, no forebears since he was an only son and early orphaned; he was survived by only one paternal uncle, Abbas, and several aunts, in addition to numerous cousins.

So Fatima, the Prophet's sole blood descendant and heir in direct line, could defy the other Believers, reminding them how they had been raised up in the past and were now benefiting from this, whereas she herself would receive no legacy but the tears shed for the loss of her father:

'What were ye then, without him and before him? Ye stood on the brink of hell's abyss, stripped bare, like vagabonds on the highways who feed on leaves, inhabited by envy and greed, restless, blind, defenceless. What were ye, whom God saved by sending you the Prophet?'

Once more, those present were seized by remorse and lamented aloud, because of the loss of the Loved-One, and the anger of his daughter. And she now turned her back on them; she heard them weeping at her feet; she remained unmoved; she declaimed tirelessly, disillusioned, her hoarse voice powerful in spite of her frail form, resolved, so it would seem, to defy them, day in, day out:

'And it is from you, today, that we endure this hurt? Ye are like to the blade of the knife across our throats, Since ye claim that we have no inheritance! Ye, whom they called *mujahidin*, holy warriors, it is the law of the *jahiliyya*, the days of ignorance, that ye claim to invoke against me!'

At length she turned round and concluded, now victoriously, almost joyously, as if like a consummate actress she were in command of these modulations of tone and sentiments:

'Praise be to God! May Peace be with Him and with his Prophet! Glory to God! We shall meet before Him, at the hour

of the Resurrection!'

After this session of public accusations, Fatima, so the report goes, went to the Mosque at Ansar. There she addressed the faithful who had just finished their prayers, but this time her tone expressed a sort of offended innocence, an immense astonishment, even blank despair:

'Tell me, O Believers, why do you hesitate to bring me succour? What feelings inspire you to stand by with tranquil hearts while I am dispossessed? Have you forgotten the Prophet when he said to you that every person is perpetuated in his children?

'Ah, yes! You have been quick to expunge this truth! You see the Beloved hurt through me, and you do not react!... The earth grows black, the mountains themselves seem to repent and it is the sign of which He spoke!... "Remember!" he warned you before his death, for did he not say to you, "Muhammad is but one Prophet preceded by other Prophets! After his death, be it natural or violent, will you return to the way you were before? Will you change your opinions like you change your clothes?"...'

She was silent for a moment; the mosque remained crowded, as if all the faithful intended to stay on there as long as the daughter of the Messenger continued to harangue them, behaving as if she were in her own home...

She remained motionless, facing them, shrouded in her white veils, her thin, pale face animated:

'So, you listen to my appeal whilst I am addressing you: and you remain here! You hear my voice, and you remain here! Today, you are at ease, you live in affluence, you feel strong! Besides, you consider yourselves God's Chosen!... Are you then the ones who faced the gravest difficulties yesterday? Are you the ones who fought the bloodiest battles? Are you the ones who challenged the fiercest of the Bedouins, and conquered them? Now the wheel of Islam has turned, the milk of Islam flows for you and your families in abundance, the fires of war are extinguished! But I, I see how you recoil after having advanced, how you who were blazing coals have become ashes, how you who were heroes now are craven cowards!'

'I come to you, and all I see after the enthusiasm which formerly inspired you is your lethargy. I come to you, and I see your preference for a quiet life... But, and in spite of grandeur of the surroundings, she seemed to give a savage laugh, 'glory to God, God alone is rich in resources and mercy! God enlightens our hearts! In the name of God himself, be conscious and aware! As for those who have been unjust, they will see how their fates shall be reversed!'

A few days later, Umar came to Abu Bakr and suggested to him, 'O Vicar of the Prophet, should we not go to see Fatima, for we have angered her?'

They went. And they stood before her house and they requested permission to enter. Fatima refused. They went in search of Ali, and when at length they found him they informed him of their wish to speak with Fatima. He showed them inside.

When they came forward and took their seats before her, Fatima turned her back on them and faced the wall. They greeted her. She did not reply. Abu Bakr addressed her first:

'O beloved of the Prophet, know that those who are near to the Prophet are nearer to my heart than those of my own family! Of that God is my witness! That is why you are more dear to me than Aisha, my own daughter. I wished to die the day your father died!'... He paused, his voice strangled with emotion, then with mingled gentleness and sadness, he continued, 'How can I, who feel so much attachment for you, I who, moreover, am conscious more than anyone of your generosity and your nobility, how could I forbid you your rights and deprive you of your inheritance, if I had not myself heard the Messenger of God – may God's peace be with Him! – himself declare, "We, the Prophets, cannot make bequests of that which remains behind us, as this is a give!"'

The silence in the chamber, where the four people present had not stirred from the beginning, was protracted, crystal-clear. Outside, the sound of women chanting could be heard for a brief moment, then faded into the distance.

Fatima now half turned towards the caliph, still not deigning to glance at Umar, and finally replied, 'If I quote you

another Tradition of the Prophet and if you recognize it, will you act as it dictates?'

The two men, Abu Bakr and Umar, replied in unison, 'Yes, of course!'

'Have you never heard the Prophet say, "Seek for Fatima's contentment, for that is my contentment! Fear that which angers Fatima, for that angers me! He who loves Fatima, my daughter, loves me!"'

And the two men, again in perfect unison, replied, 'Yes, we have heard him say this!'

She then replied dully, as if at that very moment all passion, anger, and even her sorrow had evaporated both from her words and from herself, 'I take God and his angels to witness that you have angered me! And you have not given me contentment! And when I meet the Prophet, I shall complain to him of you!'

Abu Bakr sighed and replied quite softly, 'O Fatima, I ask for God's forgiveness and protection from your displeasure!'

He could not continue for he wept. Fatima did not stir. Ali stood up and walked to the end of the room to control his emotion.

Fatima, in the same dull voice, declared slowly, 'I complain of you to God in every one of my prayers!'

Abu Bakr left the chamber, followed by Umar, expressionless. Outside, people surrounded them. They gazed at the caliph, his light-skinned face paler than usual, and saw him in floods of tears.

His emotion did not abate. No-one dared to question him... How long then did this dispute between the Prophet's daughter and the Prophet's successor last, growing daily more intense!

Abu Bakr gazed at the front row of the congregation. Then, in a harsh, rough voice, he complained, 'Every one of you spends the night peacefully in the arms of his wife! But you leave me alone, embarrassed, crushed beneath this burden!...' And that patient, gentle man waved his arm in a gesture of impotence or despair... 'Come now, Muslims, take

back the allegiance which you have given me! The burden is too great. Accept my resignation!'

Consternation and bewilderment gripped the congregation. From the back of the assembly the voice of an old man rose up strongly, 'O successor of God's Messenger, you speak to us in this way, after what you have heard Fatima say!'

There was a chorus of protests. Abu Bakr gradually overcame his discouragement. Umar, stood silently at his side, then accompanied him to his dwelling.

Thus, the beloved daughter said 'No!'

'No' to the first caliph for his literal interpretation of the words of the Prophet. Perhaps, henceforward, instead of calling her 'the beloved daughter', she should be known as 'the disinherited daughter'?

Fatima's categorical, relentless 'No' to Abu Bakr was not in opposition to the man, whose undying attachment to the Prophet she could not forget, but to the caliph, the one who had been designated caliph although not from the ranks of the Prophet's family...

Doubtless she gradually came to realise or confusedly imagine that, not content with diminishing the importance of 'The Members of the Household' by excluding Ali, they had interpreted one of the prophet's Traditions in this way in order to attack her as his daughter!

Yes, she began to feel, as men of power, and henceforth solely inasmuch as men of power, they would have no rest, no peace of mind, as long as she were alive!

Fatima represented doubt, their doubts.

As long as she was alive, she, the sole heir by blood lineage and personality of Muhammad the man, she embodied the constantly open question about the legality of the succession!

There exists another version of the Tradition, which reports the final dialogue thus:

'Abu Bakr continued to protest, with his usual mildness, 'O daughter of the Prophet, it is indeed true that the Prophet is your father! It is indeed true that he is also the

brother of your cousin! But it is not I, it is the Prophet who said, "One cannot inherit that which is given!"

And Fatima again burst out, her sense of reason combined with the passion for justice that consumed her and would remain with her to the end. 'Did not God declare, when speaking of one of his Prophets, "He inherits from me and he inherits from the family of Jacob!"? I know well that the gift of prophecy cannot be inherited, but everything else, other than that, is permitted, and can be transmitted! Tell me why I alone am forbidden my father's inheritance? Did God then say in His Book that all shall inherit from their fathers, "save Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad?" Show me this restriction in the Book: then I shall be convinced!'

And the arguments went on and on. Abu Bakr replied... Eventually, as if to exclude Fatima who was still there, still alive, he turned to Ali, 'This, O Abu Hasan, is between you and me!' As if everything were a matter for men to settle. Everything including the right of daughters to inherit!

Fatima put an end to this discussion by a seemingly haughty resignation. 'If that be the case, I shall try to find patience to endure this bitter situation! Praise be to God, the God of truth!'

Realising that 'their' law would be implacable towards her, she was not resigned, no. She was anxious to appeal to God. She longed to die. And she did die, from this ceaseless, tireless 'No' to the law of Medina.

When some months later she fell ill, from the illness which was to carry her off rapidly, some of the women of Medina came one day to her house.

'How do you feel today, O daughter of the Prophet?' they asked.

'This morning,' Fatima replied, 'I feel that I am at last becoming detached from this your world, and I am about to be rid of all your men! For I have so often witnessed all their wrong-doings, for I have had so many occasions to examine them, that I finally reject them all henceforth! From now on, how burdensome all these men seem to me, these hosts of men of indecision!'

In the last days before her death, many moving accounts show her approaching her last hour in a serenity illuminated by the hope of soon rejoining her father and presenting herself finally before God! She expended her remaining strength in washing herself, assisted by a close friend, and dressing in new garments. Then she declared, almost coquettishly, 'I am ready!'

However, at her death, when the women of the caliph's family – including Aisha, Abu Bakr's daughter – tried to enter the chamber where her body lay awaiting the inhumation, they were barred on the threshold. To Abu Bakr, to whom they complained that they were not able to look for the last time on the Prophet's daughter, the reply was made, 'It was Fatima herself who left her last recommendations: no-one from Medina, save members of her own family, was to enter her death chamber to kneel before her!'

Fatima was buried at night, at the corner of the house of Ukil. Ali carried her body into the burial ground and before the still-open grave improvised the following verses in the presence of the afflicted assembly:

O Messenger of God, accept my salvation and that of thy daughter! She who descends to be near you. She who hastens to join you!

How weak my patience will become, now that you have left me! how unsubstantial will be my days to come! Where shall I find consolation for this double loss?

O Messenger of God, when I lowered you into the ground, as today, I embraced you! I felt your heart beat against my breast!

Now, it is time for her whom you entrusted to me, to return to her source!

Your daughter will report to you how your community has disregarded your law!...

We belong to the fold and to Him do we return!'

He continued a long while on the theme of separation from the loved-one, on the loss of the one, after the loss of the other... He did not weep; no. He let the lyric verses flow freely, in worlds which sought to console... He who up till then had been compared to a lion for his peerless strength in battle, for

ASSIA DJEBAR

*The woman who
said No in Medina*

Translated from the
French by Dorothy S Blair

his truly extraordinary courage, now this eloquence that sprang forth from him that solemn day, was to be his long, solitary and well nigh only battle.

After the death of Fatima, Ali lived another thirty years. He was appointed caliph of the Believers only five years before his death. During those three decades, he took eight wives in all: he had four wives almost constantly, thus enjoying his right to polygamy within the limits and the prescribed forms. At his death, he was survived by three widows.

He had in all fifteen sons, including Hasan and Husain, his sons by Fatima, as well as eighteen daughters, including Zainab and Umm Kalthum, granddaughters to the Prophet.

Translator's note The susurrous alliteration of Assia Djebbar's original title for this work, *Silence sur soie*, (which she qualified as *la fiction de la femme arabe – Récits*) suggested a whispered conspiracy of silence, transmitted down the centuries since the death of Muhammed, about the reality, as opposed to the fiction, of the Arab woman's personality and role. The eventual title and sub-title are less tendentious and more explicit. *Loin de Medine, Filles d'Ishmael* (Far from Medina, Daughters of Ishmael) is a collection of stories, vignettes, visions even, inspired by chronicles of the first two to three centuries of Islam. These all highlight the lives, vicissitudes, personalities of actual and legendary Arab women, heroines of the Hegira – some of whom have long remained anonymous or unsung. The title *Far from Medina* is ambiguous: some die in exile, far from the Prophet's city of refuge; some, like Fatima, the heroine of this extract, defiant, recalcitrant refusing to comply, remain mentally, psychologically remote. This episode is included in Part 1, entitled *Freedom and Defiance* and follows the earlier novels by Djebbar, in particular *L'amour, la fantasia*, and its sequel *Ombre sutable*, in helping to demythify the image of the submissive, Arab woman.