

## Disseminating Shahrazad in Postcolonial Algeria

Anna Cavness

*But when it was midnight Shahrazad awoke and signaled to her sister Dunyazad who sat up and said, "Allah upon thee, O my sister, recite to us some new story, delightful and delectable, wherewith to while away the waking hours of our latter night!" (Burton 26)*

In the frame narrative that establishes the *mise en scène* for the tales of *Alf Layla wa Layla* or *1001 Nights*, Shahrazad's infamous ploy to prolong her life by entrancing the sultan with her narrative powers creates a triangulated relationship between speech, death, and desire that has generated infinite possibilities for artistic production and critique. Shahrazad's unique agency has historically rendered her the queen of narrators and a symbol of storytelling itself; however, feminist critics are cautious in unequivocally naming her a symbol for feminism, for her discourse is produced under threat of death to restabilize a regime in crisis.<sup>1</sup> As the story goes, after discovering his wife in the arms of another man, indeed a palace slave, the sultan Shahrayar is driven to murderous rage. He vows to take a new wife every night, and to murder her as dawn approaches in vengeance against female treachery. Yet when Shahrazad is brought to be Shahrayar's bride she manages to stave off this fate by entrancing the sultan with her storytelling powers.

Given that Shahrayar's ruse succeeds in restoring order to a kingdom in crisis, *Alf Layla wa Layla's* finale (although disputed based on its multiple textual incarnations) can be read to indicate patriarchal order's triumphant and sovereign reinstallation. Malti-Douglas notes that although Shahrazad controls the relationship between desire and text, her "extraordinary role is also a temporary one: necessitated by a crisis, it comes to an end with the end of that crisis... The nights are like dreams that end with the rise of the literary sun of vision, reality, and male preeminence" (Malti-Douglas 28).<sup>2</sup> To adopt Shahrazad as a feminist

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<sup>1</sup> My references to the three protagonists of the frame narrative, Shahrazād, Dunyazād, her sister, and Shahrayār, the sultan, follow the Encyclopedia of Islam style of transliteration, although I do not use diacritical markings in the body of the paper. All other spellings are those of the individual texts that cite *Alf Layla wa Layla*.

<sup>2</sup> Malti-Douglas examines two possible endings to *Alf Layla wa Layla*. A shorter version ends with Shahrayar granting clemency to Shahrazad, and a longer ending describes an elaborate wedding ceremony in which Shahrazad and Dunyazad are married to Shahrayar and his brother respectively. During the ceremony the women parade in an array of costumes-including men's clothing- and in the end each king attires with his

heroine risks carrying the double-edged burden articulated within her figure as one who is at once condemned to speak, and who risks death by speaking. In considering her ambivalent status as a feminist heroine, criticism has also evacuated her figure from any feminist position by rendering her a "guardian of place." Shahrazad holds off death "not to save her head, but to guard speech...she does not represent women, but all desiring beings" (Bencheikh 36).<sup>3</sup> In these readings Shahrazad comes to embody speech itself, holding guard over an ancient cultural imaginary.

These debates over Shahrazad's status as a symbol for feminism take on renewed significance in the context of postcolonial Algeria, where a number of contemporary authors including Assia Djebar in *Ombre Sultane*, and "Femme en Morceaux" from the collection *Oran, Langue Morte*, Mourad Djebel in *Les Cinq et Une Nuits de Shahrazède*, Rachid Boudjedra in *1001 Années de la Nostalgie*, and Leila Sebbar's "Shahrazad trilogy": *Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts, Les carnets de Shérazade*, and *Le fou de Shérazade*, have turned to the twilight zone between death and desire imagined in *Alf Layla wa Layla*'s frame narrative. Is Shahrazad claimed as a symbol for feminism in these works? If so, what kind of feminism might she represent? Following Gauch's study of rewritings of *Alf Layla wa Layla* in the Maghrebian context, is Shahrazad's "distinguishing attribute" that of "liberating" in that the enduring power of her narrative voice suggests a potential site of social transformation (Gauch xviii)? Regardless of which of the many versions of *Alf Layla wa Layla* we consider, to take up Shahrazad's figure is to evoke an injunction to narrate under the threat of death. This paper will argue that Shahrazad's figure is repeatedly instantiated by writers in the context of postcolonial Algeria because of the very ambiguity that underwrites her narrative power. Yet what precisely does the frame narrative offer that resonates in the Algerian postcolonial context? What can we make of the colonial and orientalist legacies underpinning the transmission and translation of *Alf Layla wa Layla* within a postcolonial literary scene? Finally, what is at stake for debates on feminism in postcolonial Algeria in the move to rewrite Shahrazad and her collection of tales?

Among the literary texts that have taken up Shahrazad's figure in the context of postcolonial Algeria, I will turn to the work of Assia Djebar and Mourad Djebel to examine a number of intriguing parallels that link their rewritings of Shahrazad. Djebar's novel *Ombre Sultane*, and her short story "Femme en Morceaux," and Djebel's novel *Les Cinq et Une Nuits de Shahrazède*, instantiate the frame narrative of *Alf Layla wa Layla* to

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assigned female and the kings agree to share their rule of the kingdom. In Malti-Douglas' reading the longer version reveals the implicit connotation of the shorter ending, namely that patriarchy (and sovereign power) is upheld through a return to heterosexual normativity. In the longer version Shahrayar has Shahrazad's stories committed to writing in order to signal a definitive yoking of her narrative agency under patriarchal rule. See also Sallis for an analysis of variations in the frame narrative's translation.

<sup>3</sup> All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

critique a terrain of overlap between a gendered history of colonial conquest and nationalist rule. Their reinscriptions of Shahrazad examine how the symbolic and physical figure of woman functions within this history as an allegory for cultural production, for example as a guardian of tradition and embodiment of authentic cultural identity. Shahrazad represents a unique figure for examining this problematic in that her narrative power is derived from a moment of political crisis, and thus opens up a site for interrogating how gender is established as a synecdoche for cultural preservation. As Gana and Härting note, this relationship is accentuated in the context of ethnic and nationalist projects where “woman is both disembodied and instrumentalized through metaphor and representation, linking practical and symbolic modes of rule” (Gana and Härting 7). Where cultural life is placed under a state of siege, women’s bodies often establish a battleground for collective community survival.

Frantz Fanon parodies the allegorical positing of a feminine figure to represent cultural identity in the context of colonial Algeria by taking on the voice of a colonial administrator, and caricaturing how the colonial project targets women as a medium for social change: “If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight” (Fanon 37-38). Under the auspices of French colonization “unveiling” as a metaphor for a strategic penetration of cultural space was often couched in the name of liberating repressed indigenous women. Indeed, in 1958 the French government orchestrated a group of women to “spontaneously” unveil in the streets of Algiers. The incident was reproduced as an English language documentary for distribution in the United States entitled *The Falling Veil*, and was meant to glorify France’s success in bringing “independence” to Algerian women (Shepard 187). Malek Alloula’s photographic essay *The Colonial Harem* suggests another subtext to the focus on unveiling within the Algerian colonial archive. Here, the fetishized representations of an indigenous feminine other in colonial postcards depicting nude or semi-nude ‘odalisques’ and ‘mauresques’ (women of Maghrebian descent) represent a fantasy of access to what in reality remains a space largely inaccessible to the colonizer. Indeed, against such fantasies of access, Fanon locates a feminine domestic space as a final outpost of resistance against colonial rule. In his analysis, the Algerian woman under colonial rule takes on a unique revolutionary agency in maintaining the social structure constituted by home and family against the cultural transformations of the colonial encounter (Fanon 64-66).

The encoding of women’s bodies as a physical and symbolic matrix for cultural identity continues to resonate in Algerian postcolonial contexts. As Slymovics notes, the use of women’s bodies to elaborate cultural codes, and to provide a method of articulating an ideological arrangement of space, can be traced from the advent of colonial conquest

through the rise of Islamist groups such as the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) and GIA (Armed Islamic Group) in the 1990s. Charrad and Lazreg argue that in spite of women's participation in anti-colonial resistance, the struggle for decolonization placed national liberation as a first priority and relegated concerns for women's equality to a secondary concern for the sake of establishing a unified nation. While women's participation as moudjahidates (female resistance fighters) in the anti-colonial guerilla war spearheaded by the FLN (National Liberation Front) led many to believe that significant reforms in women's status would be enacted under national rule, reforms were ultimately sidelined for political interests requiring the support of social conservatives. Maintaining women's "traditional role" provided a crucial means to gain political legitimacy, for example in the imposition of a family code in 1984 that dramatically curbed women's freedoms (Charrad 197-200). The appearance of the FIS/GIA on the political scene in the 1990s resulted in further violent crackdowns and targeting of women deemed to have committed moral infractions. As Lazreg notes, in the "recolonization" of Algeria by Islamism women's bodies once again establish a critical battleground for laying claim to cultural identity (Lazreg 156).

Enter Shahrazad, who arrives on a scene of violent political upheaval to restore a regime in crisis. Shahrayar's destructive drive is sublimated with the aid of Shahrazad's narrative arts, but if she should fail to continue enthraling the sultan with her powers of speech his violent revenge against all the women in his kingdom will continue- beginning with Shahrazad herself. Within the space of the frame narrative, Shahrazad's success in averting this fate is assured through narrative production, as well as with the birth of three children by the grand finale of *Alf Layla wa Layla*. Indeed at the end of *The Nights*, Shahrazad presents the children to the sultan in asking for his clemency: therefore both (re)productive acts provide a medium for restoring a political order. While Shahrazad's role might be read as simply a narrative ruse to create the possibility for storytelling, we cannot ignore how her deliberate reinscription in postcolonial literary texts might draw on the political implications suggested by the frame narrative.

Mourad Djebel's novel *Les Cinq et Une Nuits de Shahrazède (The Five and One Nights of Shahrazède)* rewrites the frame narrative of *Alf Layla wa Layla* in the context of the Algerian civil war in the 1990s. Djebel's narrative primarily takes place over the course of six nights, during which Djebel's modern day Shahrazède narrates a series of tales to her despairing lover, (named of course after the sultan in *Alf Layla wa Layla*, Shahrayar). While these scenes take place in the novel's past, the present is narrated from the perspective of Shahrazède's daughter, who attempts to reconstruct the events of the six nights shared between Shahrazède and Shahrayar through conversations with Shahrayar, his notebooks, and a series of letters written by Shahrazède. Unlike the Shahrazad of *Alf Layla wa Layla*, in Djebel's account Shahrazède's storytelling fails to preserve her own life: indeed, the text's intricate

layering of narrative threads coalesce around her suicide. Although *Les Cinq et Une Nuits* establishes its scene of crisis in the postcolonial period, the stories Djebel's Shahrazède narrates over the course of the six nights link the colonial past to the near present by tracing a feminine figure who provides the locus of symbolic articulation for colonial conquest, nationalist redemption, and a reclaiming of space within a new moral order. Weaving this critique through a rewriting of the frame narrative enables Djebel to consider how the figure of woman will be historically inscribed within the literary text. Will she remain an allegory for the nation/guardian of tradition and cultural identity and, if not, how can a critique of this allegory be formulated?

Shahrazède's storytelling is framed to mimic the tales from *Alf Layla wa Layla* in her division of interlinking tales over a series of nights. In the frame narrative it is Shahrazad's sister, Dunyazad, who calls upon her sister to enthrall her listeners with another tale. However, in Djebel's narrative, this interplay between storyteller and audience is evoked to emphasize Shahrazède's participation within a collective oral tradition whose stories resist canonization within a master narrative. Each night is opened with a variation of the call and response between the storyteller and a listening audience: "What is only ours, that comes to us from the greatest depths of being, that is not a feeling of fragility, triviality, and emptiness? Said the storyteller in the tradition. Poetry, responded those present" (Djebel 113). In recasting the exchange between Dunyazad and Shahrazad, Djebel subtly alters the frame narrative with the presence of multiple primary storytellers- an addition that unworks Sharharzad's iconic status. What is at stake in this move?

The interplay between Dunyazad and Shahrazad is mirrored in the role played by Shahrazède's daughter in *Les Cinq et Une Nuits*. Her voice enters the narrative infrequently, but she consistently reminds the reader of her presence within her mother's story as a spy or interloper within the scenes between Shahrazède and Shahrayar:

In front of my spying eyes flirting with the limits of shamelessness, transposed with my full free will from my present into this, for me, fictional space of their real and past intimacy...When this shadow approaches them that I alone am able to feel, I want to intervene, to obstruct it, but I can't. As my presence is only fictional I can't change the course of events. I can only intervene in the flowing of time, channelling it, slowing its hertzian sequences, by calling on words (Djebel 234-235).<sup>4</sup>

The daughter's repeated references to the fictionality of her presence as she enters into the spaces of memory inhabited by Shahrazède and

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<sup>4</sup> Devant mes yeux d'espionne flirtant avec les limites de l'impudeur, transposée de mon plein gré à partir de mon présent dans cet espace pour moi fictionnel de leur intimité réelle et passée...Alors quand cette ombre, que je suis, seule, en capacité de sentir, s'approche d'eux, je veux intervenir, l'en empêcher, hélas je ne le peux, ma présence n'étant que fictionnelle elle ne me permet pas de changer le cours des événements, à peine puis-je intervenir sur l'écoulement du temps, l'étirer, ralentir ses séquences hertiennes, en faisant appel aux mots.

Shahrayar cannot but call to mind the role of Dunyazad, also an interloper and shadow of Shahrazad at her post beneath the Sultan's bed. Just as Dunyazad is at once a character within the frame narrative, and a participant within the storytelling process, Shahrazède's daughter does not simply describe herself as recounting her mother's story. She rather claims a presence within the story itself. If she admits a certain powerlessness to alter the past, she simultaneously affirms a capacity to adjust its representation through her own narrative arts. I briefly sketched how the figure of woman in the Algerian (post)colonial archive has been historically cathected to occupy a distinct position in cultural production as bearer rather than maker of meaning. In contrast, Djebel's emphasis on the daughter's insertion into the narrative scene of Shahrazad and Shahrayar calls attention to the literary text's transgressive capacity to inscribe Algerian women into the historical record. Displaced from the canonical texts of "national history," the story of women's participation in the struggle for independence achieved its initial articulations in literary texts critically revisiting the construction of that narrative. In this sense, Djebel rewrites the alliance between Dunyazad and Shahrazad as a foundational narrative for a counter-archive established in postcolonial Algerian literature.

In the stories that fill the course of the six nights, Shahrazède uses the space of the oral, poetic imaginary evoked by *Alf Layla wa Layla* to offer a subtle recasting of colonial history that traces a distinct lineage of cultural memory embodied in an enigmatic manuscript. The manuscript, as well as the stories of its bearers, is relayed by generations of female storytellers from the pre-colonial period into the present in a journey that concludes with Shahrazède, and finally her daughter—the present day inheritors of the storytelling chain—in a narrative that consists of tales tracking the journeys of the travellers and adventurers who have carried the manuscript as well as those who have carried the accounts of their exploits. One such account culminates in Shahrazède's description of a landscape (at once physical and symbolic) that she describes as "l'imaginaire de l'Odalisque" (the imaginary of the Odalisque). The story, which tells of a chance meeting between a woman, known only as "the odalisque," and an "officer-painter" traces the odalisque's evolution as a symbolic matrix for a feminized orient within orientalism's literary and iconographic archive—literally grafting a detailed historical chronology into the fictional narrative. Before the character of the Odalisque herself enters the text, the reader is presented with an archaeology of her cultural production in a gesture that enables Djebel to tease out how the allegorical fabrication of a feminine figure subtends an ideology of imperial conquest.

Djebel locates his insistence on tracing the complex lineage of female storytellers responsible for the transmission of the tales once recorded in an enigmatic manuscript within a history of erasure defined by political attempts to reshape national memory in the postcolonial period. History has become a machine of mythmaking for political power in which those seeking legitimacy for rule turn to a mythological recasting of historical

narrative. The poetic register Shahrazède evokes in the stories recounted over the six nights indicates the presence of an archive pushed to history's margins, and in which the voices of Shahrazède and her daughter are linked to the chain of female storytellers responsible for transmitting an alternative historical narrative (Djebel 50).

Djebel's rewriting of *Alf Layla wa Layla*, itself a diffuse narrative spiral of stories within stories and disseminating voices, aligns against what he describes as the totalizing moral order of fundamentalist repression that leads to Shahrayar's near suicide and Shahrazède's ultimate suicide. While *Alf Layla wa Layla* in this sense appears to offer Djebel a framework for political critique, ultimately the novel can only push the frame narrative so far in its attempt to critique how gender serves as a synecdoche for cultural identity. Djebel deploys Shahrazède's figure to reveal an impasse in her potential reinscription as a symbol for feminine agency, rather than as a means of unworking or recoding the double bind in which her narrative takes shape out of her displacement from the text. The final sequence of the novel, recounted in Shahrayar's notebook as Shahrazède's funeral hymn, aligns Shahrazède with a series of tragic feminine literary and historical figures including Virginia Woolf, Jocaste, Dido, Cleopatra, Mami Watta, Tanit, and Salammbô to suggest that this modern version of Shahrazad herself has come to occupy a place within an iconic line of literary/historical heroines immortalized as monstrous goddesses, or remembered for acts of resistance premised on self-annihilation. Djebel's alignment of Shahrazad with these figures indicates the uneasy site she occupies where, as Spivak describes, to critique how the "discourse of man" operates in the "metaphor of woman" does not appear to suggest a possibility for historical change (Spivak, "Displacement" 169). Djebel's rewriting of the frame narrative from *Alf Layla wa Layla* works to reveal a critical impasse, but its final intervention rests with the elaboration of the metonymical field articulated through Shahrazad's figure. How might another rewriting of the frame narrative confront this problem, and suggest an alternative approach to its reinscription?

Djebar's short story "Femme en Morceaux" ("The Woman in Pieces") from the collection *Oran, Langue Morte* (published in English as *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry*) also takes up Shahrazad and the frame narrative of *Alf Layla wa Layla* in the story of an Algerian schoolteacher, Atyka. Like *Les Cinq et Une Nuits*, Djebar's text is set in the context of the Algerian civil war, in which hundreds of women and girls were subject to gender-based violence. In Djebar's story, Atyka is brutally murdered for teaching what extremists who storm her classroom denounce as the scandalous literature of *Alf Layla wa Layla*.

"La Femme en Morceaux" offers a revised version of a story drawn from *Alf Layla wa Layla* entitled "The Tale of Three Apples." In the original story a woman falls ill and tells her husband that she craves only an apple. He travels for days, and finally succeeds in finding a tree with an unplucked harvest that he presents to his wife. When one of the apples

later appears in the hands of a slave, the husband wrongly suspects his wife of treachery, and cuts her to pieces. The tale is significant in that it offers one of the many examples in *Alf Layla wa Layla* of a story within a story when Shahrazad is paired with another narrator. In the original tale the Sultan's vizir must himself become a storyteller to save the life of his slave, who has been charged with stealing the coveted apple. In Atyka's analysis of the text for her students she describes Shahrazad's political cunning in likening her narrative power to that of the vizir, thereby claiming a place for herself as a "sultana of the dawn". But in a brutal twist of Djebbar's narrative, Atyka herself is at once Shahrazad and "a woman in pieces" when her classroom is stormed by a group of armed men claiming to enforce moral order. Atyka is shot, and her head is brutally severed by one of her attackers.

Djebbar's retelling of the story, mediated through readings in Atyka's classroom, elaborates on "The Tale of the Three Apples" by developing a fuller portrait of the woman in pieces before her death. Rewritten as "The Woman in Pieces" the tale imagines the wife's past happiness and love for her husband, and describes how that love has now dissipated into a melancholic despair with the thought of giving birth to a fourth child. Attempting to draw a fuller portrait of a figure at once central to and hastily sketched over in the story, Atyka describes a need to pause over the woman in pieces and consider her quick dismissal in the text; "We will definitely have to come back," Atyka tells herself dreamily, "to the body of the woman in pieces, which has been lost so quickly among the tale's episodes and colours" ("The Woman in Pieces" 121). Atyka admits her desire to "turn the tale upside down" in order to consider the narrative of the woman in pieces herself, and reinscribe her displaced figure back into the text.

If Shahrazad likens herself to the vizir, subtly aligning her narrative power with political agency, what are we to make of the role of the woman in pieces, both within "The Tale of the Three Apples" and Djebbar's retelling? Murdered by her husband for allegedly betraying him with a slave, the tale offers an example of feminine betrayal that would resonate quite closely with Shahrayar. In the tale of the three apples, the woman is proved innocent when the slave confesses to having received the apple from a child—hence a possible planting of a seed of doubt in Shahrayar's unequivocal condemnation of the female sex. But, more significantly, we are presented with a double for Shahrazad, for like the woman in pieces she too is innocent of the crime for which Shahrayar would like to hold her accountable.

In Djebbar's retelling, the "overturned" version of the tale also exposes the narrative double bind of a Shahrazad who is at once narrator par excellence and "feminist-in-decolonization," where within the francophone text the inscription of a feminine subject into the historical record can only occur in the language of the colonizer (Spivak, "Acting Bits/Identity Talk" 771). Djebbar recasts Shahrazad's ambiguous narrative agency in her description of Atyka's gruesome death: although Atyka is

shot to death, and her head is cut off, her disembodied voice continues to narrate. The phenomenon is witnessed by one student who remains in the classroom, and questions how Atyka's voice can possibly continue to resonate: "The body, the head. But the voice? Where has Atyka's voice taken refuge?" ("The Woman in Pieces" 125). Critics such as Mildred Mortimer have focused on Atyka's narration as a triumphant affirmation of the "power of the word" in claiming a space for women's voices within the public sphere (65). But what are we to make of the gruesome image of the voice of the severed head that continues to narrate? The woman in pieces is as capacious in her storytelling as Shahrazad herself, and as she is already Shahrazad's counterpart the implication is that this violence is fundamentally embedded within the narrative act.

Djebar's rewriting of Shahrazad in "The Woman in Pieces" examines a gendered history of violence in which language marks a vector of cultural dispossession. Given the colonial legacy that underwrites the production of the francophone text, there can be no easy claim to the liberating power of voice. In her meditation on the role of autobiography in Djebar's work, Gayatri Spivak describes "Identity as a wound, exposed by the historically hegemonic languages," in which writing in French renders autobiography a site of identity's fragmentation ("Acting Bits" 770).<sup>5</sup> Djebar's rewriting of the frame narrative extends this formulation to equate the allegorical positing of woman as a medium for cultural production with symbolic and physical annihilation.

Let us now turn to a final version of Shahrazad, also from Assia Djebar, to consider how the frame narrative might be reinscribed as a site for feminism in postcolonial Algeria. The English title of Assia Djebar's novel *Ombre Sultane, A Sister to Scheherazade*, does not fully convey the troubled specter of political agency evoked in the French formulation of the "shadow sultana." This is not the shadow of the sultan Shahrayar, to whom Shahrazad narrates to stave off death, but rather a doubled, feminine sultana referencing the alliance formed between Shahrazad and Dunyazad in deflecting the sultan's murderous drive.<sup>6</sup> In *Ombre Sultane*, Djebar links the sisterly alliance of *Alf Layla wa Layla*, and the triangulation of desire it implies, to tell the story of two women bound together in polygamy. Isma, the "first wife," chooses another woman as a second wife, Hajila, to divert her husband's attention towards another

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<sup>5</sup> See Mildred Mortimer for a reading of how Djebar maps a course of feminist emancipation and individual empowerment through a reclaiming of voice and vision that aligns a feminist subject position with an affirmation of identity. Jane Hiddleston's *Assia Djebar Out of Algeria* offers a departure from this trend in emphasizing a constant tension in Djebar's negotiations with identity.

<sup>6</sup> Djebar's use of the noun's feminine form in the novel's title is an important detail. Khanna translates the title to infer that it is the sultan's ominous shadow looming over the two women and argues that Djebar reinscribes the frame narrative to propose a critique of nationalist and masculinist ideologies (229). In contrast, my focus on the "shadow sultana" interrogates specific possibilities for female agency in the postcolonial context.

object of desire. Anjali Prabhu reads this relationship to reveal *Ombre Sultane*'s "difficult and perhaps uncomfortable reality that problematizes the plural collective," and indicates a need to revisit criticism's eagerness to "hail Djébar as a feminist writer who effectively questions masculinist discourses within and beyond nationalist ones through themes of sisterhood, women's autobiography, and collectivity" (Prabhu 87). However, what is often misread in Djébar's writing as a celebration of feminist emancipation or a refusal of the possibility for feminist agency does not attend to how Djébar calls into question the normative frameworks through which a feminist subject might be read. Prabhu, for example, analyzes struggles over narrative voice between the characters of Isma, the first person narrator, and Hajila, chosen by Isma to become her husband's second wife and brought into the text in the form of a "tutoiement," to represent Djébar's hesitation to unproblematically affirm a politically and socially engaged collective feminine plural. Within Prabhu's reading, "Isma's omniscient narration turns out to be, without a doubt, a dominating discourse, much like colonial discourses, and bears the traits of the struggle to sustain this dominance as an authoritarian narrator and as the dominant, or at least more desirable, character" (Prabhu 85). But does the relationship between Isma and Hajila in Djébar's text map so easily onto the dialectical framing proposed in Prabhu's allegorical reading? How do interpretations of Djébar's writing as "allegorical" (allegory of the nation, allegory of the Algerian woman, allegory of the Arab woman, etc.) fail to attend to Djébar's critique of these same forms of identity, and the exclusive borders of intelligibility they fortify?<sup>7</sup>

Rather than providing an allegory for colonial power relations or a dismissal of a feminist project, the narrative relationship between Isma and Hajila suggests an ambiguous alliance that does not clearly transform either woman into a victor or victim. Hajila's first-person voice does not appear in the text, but rather hovers between an iteration of "tu," you, and "tuer," to kill, as she is referenced by Isma: yet it is Hajila's form that takes on presence just as Isma's figure disperses:

Here am I speaking to you again, Hajila. As if, in truth, I were causing you to exist. A phantom whom my voice has brought to life. A phantom-sister? Do we find sisters only in prisons- the prisons that each woman erects around herself, the fortresses of ecstasy?

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<sup>7</sup> Hafid Gafaiti's "The Blood of Writing: Assia Djébar's Unveiling of Women and History" translates the historical intricacies of Djébar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* into a quest for global women's history in a discussion that uncritically adopts the rhetoric of colonialism and nationalism in citing women's bodies as guardians of identity. Indeed, his analysis describes a project of recuperation that will be literally embodied in Djébar herself: "Djébar seems ready to carry in her body the heritage of a nation" (Gafaiti 818). That Djébar's oeuvre is deeply invested in a critique of the allegorical position of "woman" clearly passes unnoticed in his analysis. Indeed, Gafaiti's unintentionally ironic choice of "unveiling" as a trope to describe Djébar's historical critique places his discourse on all too familiar ground.

The more my words outstrip me, the more my present existence dissolves, and your figure intrudes. (*A Sister to Scheherazade* 82)<sup>8</sup>

The relationship between Isma and Hajila does not appear to fall into a clear dialectic between victim and oppressor, but rather suggests that Djébar is using the narrative tension between the two women to reveal a threshold for feminist agency. In other words, how might the relationship between Isma and Hajila interrogate how western models of feminism are co-opted as a legitimating strategy for colonial and neocolonial projects? Hajila's secret forays into the city, in which she escapes from her cloistered apartment to take off her veil and walk "naked" through the city streets, are all told from Isma's perspective. This narrative strategy creates a sense of distance in which Hajila's movements from public to private space and her unveiling/veiling are established as sites of projection for Isma's reading of Hajila's orientation to space, and places the reader as an uncanny observer of Isma watching Hajila. From this decentered perspective, we might ask how a discourse of liberation in colonial and neocolonial contexts calls for a different interpretative strategy that can attend to how Djébar calls into question a feminist project based on a rhetoric of emancipation.

*Ombre Sultane's* doubled narrative voice needs to be more closely examined in relation to Djébar's description of the hammam, for example. For it is here that an allegorical reading of Djébar's text reaches an interpretative limit within the breathing contours of a space that disrupts a secure ground of representation. The hammam establishes a structural analog to the doubled narrative voice of Isma and Hajila in its composition through a series of imbricated oppositions.<sup>9</sup>

*Hammam*, refuge where time stands still. The very concept of enclosure and thus of imprisonment, dissolves or disintegrates. Seated between two doors, between two extremes of temperature, my skin exposed by turns to the sting of icy water and scalding steam, suddenly I was aware of nothing but voices finding relief in sighs, purified of the triteness and dissonance of words. I let the sounds alone pervade me, sounds which also seemed to be washed clean. (*A Sister to Scheherazade* 152)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> C'est toujours moi qui te parle, Hajila. Comme si, en vérité, je te créais. Une ombre que ma voix lève. Une ombre sœur ? Les sœurs n'existent-elles que dans les prisons- celles que chacune élève autour d'elle, forteresses de l'extase. Plus les mots me devançant, plus mon présent se disperse ; et ta forme s'impose (*Ombre Sultane* 124).

<sup>9</sup> See also Peter Hitchcock's analysis of Djébar's *Blanc de l'Algérie* for another example of postcolonial critique that collapses Djébar's work with writing the nation. According to Hitchcock, "the space of writing Nation that is Assia Djébar's feminist intervention" is an act she performs in a state of emergency, namely the imminent implosion of Algeria as a postcolony; "Djébar does not answer blood with blood, but elaborates instead the texture of the crisis that would otherwise leave her and the living and the dead of Algeria a blank space in a global imaginary" (92, 117). Hitchcock's assessment from *Blanc d'Algérie* that Algeria literally risks imploding into oblivion suggests that he has carried his own allegory to a hysteric conclusion.

<sup>10</sup> Hammam, refuge du temps immobilisé. L'idée même d'aire close, et donc de prison, se dissout ou s'émiette. Assise entre deux portes, entre deux atmosphères aux températures opposées, la peau livrée à la double et successive morsure de l'eau glacée et de vapeur

Djebar's description of the hammam in this passage constructs a feminine space premised on undermining a signifying order. At once enclosed and emitting, immobilized and dissolving, the hammam takes shape in aporia, its walls and bodies breathing through and dissolving their own contours. The body's experience in the hammam, already suspended between two atmospheres and opposing physical sensations is also mediated by voice: it is not the enunciation of signifying words that are heard by the bather, but rather "washed sounds," words emptied of their signifying content to become material entities, and paradoxically full to the point of impregnating the listener. While the hammam has been historically treated as a paradigmatic site of feminine enclosure in orientalist and colonial imaginaries, Djebar crafts it as a series of oppositions that dissolve into catachresis. Her recomposition of its symbolic architecture works not simply to "reclaim" the hammam against its proliferating representation as a site of indigenous feminine alterity. Djebar's sketch of the hammam's breathing contours evokes a crisis in representation, strategically located here within a paradigmatic site of feminine representation, and indicates that Djebar is mining available frameworks for political and social intelligibility.

An image in *Ombre Sultane* that aligns a series of feminine figures offers a topographical mapping of this problematic: "The second wife stands on the threshold, devouring the space: and now the first one can put in the veil, or go into hiding... At the end of the long night, the odalisque is in flight" (*A Sister* 159). Within this topography the "first" wife, who can now veil or conceal herself, and the "second" wife, who can now "swallow space," are juxtaposed against the fleeting figure of the odalisque, paradigmatic symbol at once of colonial violence (sketched by Djebel in his "l'imaginaire de l'odalisque") and the gendering of nationalism in the sense of invasion conjured by her exposed figure. The image conjures a sense of transition by the movements of the feminine figures: the juxtaposition of the odalisque's flight with the two wives, who at once devour space and reorder it by the veil's mark of feminine difference, suggest the possibility for a critical remapping of social space.

That Djebar envisions this remapping via the institution of polygamy is not without note. Khanna argues that the dates marked by Djebar at the end of *Ombre Sultane*—"Paris-Winter 1981-1982; Winter 1983-1984; Spring 1985 and 1986"—provide a key spatio-temporal marker for reading Djebar's text, as the year 1984 witnessed the passing of the controversial Family Code that imposed dramatic restrictions on women's rights and access to public space (Khanna 233). Among the directives in the Family Code that ensured patrilineal male authority, such as the husband's privilege of repudiation (with women able to request divorce

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brûlante, je ne percevais soudain que les voix allégées des soupirs, filtrées de la banalité des propos et de leur discordance. Je m'imprégnais seulement des sons, eux-mêmes comme lavés (*Ombre Sultane* 217).

only in particular situations), the legality of polygamy was also retained. While Lazreg notes that less than 2% of men actually engage in the practice of polygamy, its institutionalization remains nonetheless “a monument to the failure of the Algerian state to build a just and egalitarian society” (*The Eloquence of Silence* 187). Djebbar’s grafting of Isma and Hajila’s polygamous alliance onto the ruse of Shahrazad and Dunyazad works through an extreme case, but also one that is symptomatic of state restrictions on women’s rights. As Charrad notes, Family Law, which includes the statute on polygamy “in effect contains within itself a blueprint for the social order” (Charrad 6). Although the circuit between Isma and Hajila and Shahrazad and Dunyazad does not unequivocally map the characters onto one another, they do share an important similarity in that each female pair appropriates the institution of polygamy against its upholding of patriarchal authority.

In the case of Shahrazad and Dunyazad the law itself offers a proscription that the sisters deploy to deflect the sultan’s murderous drive by enabling the storytelling saga to unfold; “for the polygamist, any female blood relation of his wife is taboo, at least in that wife’s lifetime” (*A Sister* 95). For Isma and Hajila, the first and second wife, their alliance suggests a possible recoding of space. The figure is only briefly sketched, and follows the novel’s charting of the radical harm inflicted on Hajila, but it establishes a possible alliance and grounds for struggle. Isma’s gift of a key to Hajila, passed to her while they are both at the hammam at the end of the novel, indicates a potential site of opening that is not equivalent with a narrative of redemption or liberation. In this recoding, although it makes use of a profane text to claim a possible rewriting of sacred space, Djebbar’s reinscription of polygamy gestures to a project of *ijtihad*, or interpretation, claimed by scholars of Islamic feminism who seek to reread the Qur’an and its interpretations to advance an ethical, gender egalitarian form of Islam.<sup>11</sup> Djebbar’s rewriting of polygamy reveals a transgressive register that, while recognizing a possible perpetuation of patriarchy, also suggests a cautious vision of the transformative possibilities evoked by a project of *ijtihad*.

At the end of *Ombre Sultane*, Djebbar briefly evokes western mythology’s founding narratives in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, suggesting a double frame narrative to *Alf Layla wa Layla* itself and linking the tales to a political project that awaits realization. Evoking the effort of Orpheus to reach Eurydice, who “at least sought her, loved her” Djebbar suggests that the power of that recuperative gesture has been eclipsed within a “congealed present” in which such hope is uncertain. Questioning upon what grounds a future can be envisioned, Djebbar’s

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<sup>11</sup> Islamic feminist scholars engaged in a practice of *ijtihad*, or rereading of the Qur’an, have historically contextualized the question of polygamy to suggest it arose in the interest of protecting female orphans during wartime. Polygamy was subsequently institutionalized by a tradition of Qur’anic interpretation that privileged a patriarchal view of Islam. See, for example, Asma Barlas.

narrative ends on a note of uncertainty: “O, my sister, I who thought to wake you, I’m afraid. I fear lest we find we will ourselves in chains again, in ‘this West in the Orient’, this corner of the earth where day dawned so slowly for us that twilight is already closing in around us everywhere” (*A Sister to Scheherazade* 160).

Djebar’s geographical paradox of “an occident in the orient” might reference the “orient” of *Alf Layla wa Layla* itself in its origins from India and Persia- a cartography that would locate Djebar’s critical reinscription of *Alf Layla wa Layla*’s frame narrative within the postcolonial francophone text. At the same time, Djebar’s admission of a potential failure in this act could also be said to signal the canonization of *Alf Layla wa Layla* itself within a western imaginary. In this reading, Shahrazad’s circumscription to an “occident in the orient” aligns her figure with strategies of resistance premised on Euro-American feminist movements. Here her figure does not promise a new dawn, but rather an encroaching twilight. Yet an “occident” of the “orient” could also refer to Algeria’s position in the Maghreb itself, Maghreb meaning “west” in Arabic and “sunset.” Here the geographic coordinates of the “occident in the orient” operate as a metaphor for Algeria’s location in relationship to the near and far east, as well as a symbolic point of orientation for women’s social movements. Women leaders in Palestine have cited the participation of Algerian women in the war for independence as at once a heroic and cautionary tale in that women in Algeria were not able to capitalize on their role in obtaining independence to achieve greater gender equality (Cooke 155-116). The urgency of Djebar’s message suggests that if a viable path is to be found out of a postcolonial twilight, its visionaries must consider the historical struggles of women in Algeria.

The final pages of Mourad Djebel’s *Les Cinq et Une Nuits* also contain a fragment of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in a poem by Adonis, transcribed into the text in French and Arabic. The fated destiny of Orpheus and Eurydice evoked in the poetic fragment contrasts sharply with the final words of Shahrazède’s daughter, who confesses an ability to radically alter her mother’s narrative if she should desire to do so. Her role in assembling her mother’s story and transcribing it into text evokes a sense of deep responsibility in that it draws upon the predominant role played by Maghrebian literature in reinscribing feminine agency into the historical record.

If we read that inscription simply to consider how the figure of woman represents an allegory for the nation and an embodiment of cultural production, we remain under Shahrayar’s knife. It is only in excavating this space of representation, by tracing a genealogy of a feminine figure mobilized within colonial and nationalist discourse, that we can reconfigure the social blueprint through which her figure is mapped. Such a critical gesture offers a preliminary move beyond the twilight ominously heralded by Djebar. But is Djebar perhaps too quick to romanticize its encroachment within a melancholy of the present? That is a question for another night.

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