

**“Can I [...] claim to revive these stifled voices?”: Writing, Researching and  
Performing Postcolonial Womanhood in Assia Djébar’s *Fantasia: An  
Algerian Cavalcade* and *So Vast the Prison***

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**Abstract:**

This article approaches Algerian author Assia Djébar’s novels *Fantasia* and *So Vast the Prison* in translation and from a Muslim feminist perspective. More specifically, this article examines how Assia Djébar narrativizes the processes of empowerment and disempowerment amongst Muslim women in Algeria under the oppression of two authorities: the French empire and everyday patriarchal structures. *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* is a multi-layered novel that charts the colonial violence between France and Algeria simultaneously with the struggles of the Algerian Muslim women. It explores not only the personal histories of those who fought against France during the occupation, but also the private lives of the women who contributed to the nationalist effort. I ask how Djébar approaches the challenge of trying to provide silenced women with a voice after experiencing war-time sexual violence, whilst being aware of the linguistic restrictions which are upon her. In the second half of this article, I discuss *So Vast the Prison*, exploring how Assia Djébar represents the complex politics of ‘the Gaze’ between men and women in Algeria. I focus on how her female characters are able to appropriate the male gaze and critique sexual politics not only through language but through the movements of the body and visual media. In these two texts Djébar frames women as crucial to the development of the nation but resistant to homogenizing assumptions about the ‘postcolonial Muslim woman’ as voiceless, representative of national interests, and excluded from historical discourse. Ultimately, I argue that Djébar’s work encourages the recognition of women’s agency in national and historical discourse, and challenges limited understandings of the role of Muslim women in Algeria. By doing this, I argue, Djébar becomes an important voice in the broader project of dehomogenizing Muslim women in the Western imagination.

1 In “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Hélène Cixous challenges the normalisation of writing as a masculine activity. She argues that “woman must write herself; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (875), thereby aligning the act of writing with specifically female agency. Female guilt caused by masturbation, Cixous argues, is comparable to the guilt felt during the act of writing (876–7), and yet this guilt must be overcome for the sake of resisting traditions of patriarchal control. Through the act of writing, women can push back against a silent, symbolic presence and instead become active and in control of their own existence. Cixous, being a Jewish child living in Algeria during the French occupation, spent her childhood between and amongst different languages and cultures (Penrod 137). The complexity of her

cultural, linguistic, and national identity, whilst challenging, allowed Cixous to embrace her status as exile and embark on acts of creative production, such as writing (Penrod 138).

2       Renowned Algerian-born francophone author Assia Djébar, although moving from the colonial periphery of Cherchell in Algeria to global metropolises such as Paris and later New York, similarly interrogates the relationship between women, patriarchal structures, and the act of writing. However, her experience of exile, whilst allowing her a productive career as an author, does not fully translate into her writing. Rather, she spent her literary career focusing on the lives of ordinary women in Algeria, albeit in the language of Algeria's colonial occupiers. Djébar, who passed away in February 2015, was a Professor of Francophone Literature at New York University and had an impressive collection of literary prizes. In 2005, she was the first Algerian woman to be elected to the Académie Française, a prestigious cultural institution (De Medeiros 25). Throughout her career, her primary literary concern has been the "treatment of women in Islamic culture", and she explores this through interrogating colonialism, women's agency, and women's place (or absence) in recorded history (De Medeiros 25).

3       Feminism and women's rights are both passionately supported and fiercely contested in the Arab world, and this situation is worth contextualising when discussing Djébar's work. The rise of Arab feminism occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (Golley 529). The arrival of European colonialism from this point onwards was significant in changing not only the "political map" of the Middle East but also the "socioeconomic structure" of the region (Golley 521). Specifically, women's movements began to take off alongside anti-colonial and national liberation movements. Women in Algeria found, however, that their contribution to national liberation efforts did not afford them the augmented rights they were expecting in a post-colonial setting (Golley 533).

4       Algeria has had a contentious relationship with women's rights, particularly in the period after its hard-fought and notoriously violent fight for independence from France. In Nadia Hijab's discussion of Arab women's rights, she highlights the irony that although Algerian independence was gained in 1962, women were pushed backward into the home even though they had played a prominent role in the revolution. At the time of independence, "women immediately received full civil rights like the right to vote and to be elected, but personal rights remained a grey, uncharted area" (Hijab 26). To the horror of many women, the Family Laws of 1981 stipulated that women would become legal minors who needed their

husband's permission to work and travel, and who had no equal rights to proclaim a divorce (Hijab 27).

5 Arab feminism has been criticised for supposedly being a Western import that negated anti-colonial work. It has been argued, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley explains, that feminism is simply a Western concept, and “an alien import to the Arab world” rather than a home-grown movement (521). Feminisms, I would argue, are not limited to the Western world, and are created and produced in a multitude of contexts. Indeed, Margot Badran argues that “feminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms” (243). In other words, Arab feminism is a particular type of feminism that pushes back against both orientalist discourses stemming from European colonialism and patriarchal attitudes developed through conservative interpretations of Islam.

6 The Islamic Revival that has swept the Muslim world since the 1970s has also had a significant impact on the role of women. “Islamic Revival” refers “not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies” (Mahmood 3). The adoption of veiling, in the form of *hijab* or *burka* for example, became more commonplace during this rise of political Islam, and many older Muslim women felt uncomfortable about what they saw as a reversal of “the golden age of Arab feminism” (Hatem 98). Prominent Arab feminists, such as author Nawal El Saadawi and writer and sociologist Fatema Mernissi, are just two examples of middle-class, educated Arab women who have been condemned for their criticism of veil-wearing “Muslim feminists” (Hatem 98). Islamic or Muslim feminism, in contrast with Arab feminism, is a women's movement that focuses on reforming a religion. Whilst it is often associated with the Middle East, it can also be found in Europe and North America (Zimmerman 149). Islamic feminism argues that patriarchal attitudes are not inherent to Islam, but are due to male interpretation. Their goal is, therefore, both emancipation from conservative, male-focused Islam, and from Western feminists that call for liberation from the veil, and other symbolic moves that suggest abandonment of Islam for the sake of feminism (Zimmerman 149).

7 Women such as Saadawi and Mernissi have been criticised for mimicking Western attitudes towards Muslim women (Hatem 99), and pushing a “crude belief that religiosity and rationality are antithetical to each other” (Hatem 99). Similarly, Haideh Moghissi (a professor of sociology and women's studies), argue that, firstly, Islamic feminism is simply not critical

enough of oppressive Sharia practices (11), and secondly, that the term itself homogenizes Muslim women and relegates critical thinking to “the domain of Western scholars” (11). For Moghissi, women in the Middle East should be understood as having multiple, including secular, identities, rather than being consigned to a religious one (84). However, this criticism, particularly the focus on Sharia practices, has been seen as a misinterpretation of Islam. Indeed, Miriam Cooke argues that those who believe Islamic feminism as a concept is an oxymoron are conflating Islamism and Islamic practices, resulting in a juxtaposition of feminism and Islam as “two mutually exclusive rigid ideologies” (59).

8       Djebar cannot neatly be categorised as either an Arab feminist or a Muslim feminist, and the categories themselves, whilst respectively secular and religious, do have a degree of overlap. Djebar identifies as a Muslim, but her feminist criticism is less toward the intricacies of the Qur’an and more concerned with women’s everyday social, economic, political and personal experiences. As I go on to discuss in depth, Djebar is highly critical of conservative – and sometimes even violent – attitudes and actions towards women. Yet she does not simply condemn Islamic teachings, or laud European notions of liberation, for example. Her approach is nuanced, and she instead exposes a trio of complex oppressions: male-interpretations of the Qur’an that relegate women to being second-class citizens; Algerian and Arab conservatism and traditionalism that restricts women’s freedom; and orientalisating attitudes from colonial powers that strip women of their agency and individualism.

9       In the first half of this paper I discuss Djebar’s *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (translated from the 1985 French original *L’amour, la fantasia*). *Fantasia* is a multi-layered novel that charts the colonial violence between France and Algeria alongside the changing role of women in Algerian society. Not only an exploration into the personal histories of those who fought against France during the occupation, it delves into the private lives of the women who contributed to the nationalist effort. Djebar specifically focuses on women’s experiences, drawing connections between female guilt caused by self-expression and the physical reality of the restricted female body. Similar to the exposure of one’s body, expressing the ‘self’ through writing is shown to induce feelings of shame and indecency. Indeed, *Fantasia* tackles the difficulties in trying to provide silenced women with a voice after experiencing sexual violence or suffering under quotidian patriarchal oppressions, whilst being aware of the moral, cultural and linguistic challenges that she faces as a French-speaking Algerian woman. I therefore consider how Djebar employs a distinct style and structure throughout *Fantasia* in

order to explore the relationship between colonial history, the female body, and the subversive act of writing.

10     *So Vast the Prison* (1995), which I discuss in the second half of this paper, is structurally unusual as it changes form throughout. The first section resembles an interior monologue of the married narrator about her forbidden love for a young man; the second takes on the form of tales or fables from the narrator's historical research that she undergoes in an attempt to distract herself from her romantic obsession; and the final section is a chronology of the life of the narrator. In this section I explore how Assia Djébar represents the complex politics of "the gaze", specifically how her female characters are able to reappropriate the male gaze in several ways. I examine who enforces everyday sexual politics, how they are shown to be enforced, and how these restrictions are overcome not necessarily linguistically, or by gaining a 'voice', but through other mediums such as the body (dance, song, stories) or through visual media (filming).

### ***Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade***

11     While *Fantasia* is Assia Djébar's first attempt at autobiography, as Isis Butôt explains, the structure and form complicate this assertion: "[f]rom the first page onwards the narrative's perspective changes from third to first person and back again, historical chapters cut the autobiographical narrative in fragments and toward the end evermore 'voices' are introduced, telling their own stories and frustrating the whole notion of autobiography" (76). I will refer, therefore, to the primary 'voice' as 'the narrator'. In an early scene, the narrator describes her summer holidays in a small village in the Sahel region of North Africa. Her daily life is described as contained and controlled as she moves from one monitored family space to another: "[m]y stay there, shut up with these three sisters, is my 'visit to the country'" (*Fantasia* 9). British geographer Gillian Rose claims that "the everyday is the arena through which patriarchy is (re)created – and contested" (17). In terms of women's role in the home, it is clear that "everyday routines ... are never unimportant, because the seemingly banal and trivial events of the everyday are bound into the power structures which limit and confine women" (Rose 17). For the narrator, women's everyday experiences at home are associated with confinement and sedentariness, represented in the figure of a senile old woman who spends her time lamenting "some past persecution" (*Fantasia* 9). As a child, the narrator and her cousins are unable to understand "the magical formulas, the passages from the Quran, that

the grown-ups recite aloud to exorcize these outbursts” (*Fantasia* 9). And yet later, when the narrator is an adult, this frightful world of superstition becomes a comforting world of Muslim femininity. The narrator, however, feels excluded from this intimate world of other women, finding that her Western education and middle-class pursuit of writing distinguishes her from the women and girls of her rural childhood. Indeed, Mildred Mortimer explains that on the one hand, the ability to learn and write can be a “liberating force” for women, but on the other and it “serves to alienate” the individual from collective, feminine environments (304). By stepping outside of the domestic role that the narrator sees many of her fellow Algerian women occupy, she gains a critical understanding of women’s oppressions, and a voice to speak out against them, but loses a sense of communal, intimate womanhood. When the narrator discovers that her seemingly cloistered female cousins are writing letters to their Arab lovers, she describes the knowledge as “heavy and weighty” (*Fantasia* 11). Indeed, the act of writing a letter goes beyond an act of flirtation, and instead signals a transgression of their cloistered environments not physically but through writing. Within the gendered framework of the Algerian home, female authorship is therefore portrayed as an act of cultural and social subversion.

12 Although Djébar, to an extent, concedes Cixous’ argument that empowerment can be gained through writing, Djébar’s self-proclaimed position within Arab and Muslim feminisms (Cooke 64) complicates this relationship, as I show throughout my discussion of *Fantasia* and *So Vast The Prison*. Cixous argues that women have been kept in the “dark” (875) and must resist this cloistering in order to “return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display” (880). Cixous’ nod to Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny highlights the distanced position of the female body to the woman who owns it, and the understanding of the body as strange, different, and shameful. This exposure of the female body and mind is, for Djébar, problematic due to the perpetuation of the male gaze. When the narrator receives a love-letter, she feels pity for “those women who never received a letter: no word taut with desire ... [t]heir only path to freedom was by intoning their obsessional chants” (*Fantasia* 60), lamenting the lack of literacy education for the Muslim women of Algeria. However, when a man steals the letter and reads it, the narrator explains that she feels physically exposed. The permanency of the written word discloses not just thoughts but the female body itself: “the peeping-tom’s eyes have upset me. This man’s fascination with the other man’s unguarded words, which speak so

frankly of my body, make him a thief in my eyes” (*Fantasia* 60). Evidently, Djébar struggles with, on the one hand, championing the cause of female literacy, and on the other hand, observing Islamic notions of female purity and respectability.

13 In discussing autobiography and the search for identity, Leigh Gilmore and Jane Moody argue that authors often write autobiographies because they feel that their identity is unjustly excluded from “dominant forms of truth-telling” (19) which are traditionally appropriated by the “overrepresented Western white male” (17). Djébar is evidently attempting to insert female narratives into a primarily male discourse. However, Gilmore and Moody further argue that the purpose of autobiography is also for the reader to identify with the author and therefore to “naturalize ideology”, or to “stabilize ‘truth’ as if all these simply pointed to the ‘real condition of existence’” (23). Whilst Djébar does attempt to stabilise the “truth” of the Algerian war, she in turn destabilises her own identity. From a Lacanian perspective, it is evident that in an attempt to create an identification with her fellow Algerian women, she instead creates a misrecognition, or *le méconnaissance* (Lacan 441). For example, in “III” (Part Two), the narrator demands bodily authority by consummating her marriage in a flat in Paris away from the traditional domestic and religious environment of “peeping women” (*Fantasia* 108). However, instead of feeling that she has asserted her identity as an independent, modern woman, she has a crisis of recognition in which she feels as if her body is no longer her own. As she walks through the flat after having slept with her new husband, she is “avoiding the mirrors, a wounded gazelle” (*Fantasia* 107). By appropriating her body on her own terms, and rejecting the traditions and rituals expected of her fellow women on their wedding night, she finds that her own understanding of her identity is thrown into confusion, and she suffers from cultural and gendered guilt.

14 Karina Eileraas claims that Djébar “reflects on the impossibility of claiming an authentic or stable identity within the context of colonization” (17). Indeed, while the narrator feels guilty for moving from the traditional Algerian domestic sphere to a colonial-inspired flat in Paris, she similarly appears to struggle with expressing herself through autobiography. The structure of *Fantasia* reflects this crisis of representation. Whilst the autobiographical chapters in Part I begin with titles such as “A Little Arab Girl’s First Day at School”, “Three Cloistered Girls”, “The French Policeman’s Daughter”, and “My Father Writes to My Mother”, she becomes unable to introduce these passages with the “engendering matrix of textual selfhood: the autobiographical *I*” (Gilmore and Moody 63). The historical chapters, in

contrast, are simply introduced with roman numerals. However, in Part Two, the chapter titling is switched so that the historical chapters have titles and the autobiographical ones are introduced with roman numerals. I would argue that this reversal of representation shows Djébar's increased confidence in representing the women of the Algerian war, but in turn suggests a sense of failure in her ability to write about the narrator's more personal experiences of Algeria.

15 Writing is shown as a means of transgressing the confines of womanhood, of enabling women to enter the masculine domain of *écriture* and depart from the traditionally female domain of *kalaam*, or orality (Ghaussy 458). However, writing is also shown to be a risky endeavour that allows the exposure not just of a woman's mind but also of her body. Indeed, Anne Donadey argues that the French language is too "direct" and "coarse" to express the emotions of a woman of Muslim origin, and notes Djébar's understanding of words as "vessels of an entire cultural baggage" (32). In "My Father Write to My Mother" (*Fantasia* 35–38), for example, a postcard sent from the narrator's father to her mother in French and her utterance of his first name are described as a "harem conversations" (*Fantasia* 36). Family and friends understand this direct correspondence between a man and a woman, regardless of their married status, as a significant subversion of Islamic tradition. Traditionally, the narrator explains, written discourse must travel through male lines, such as through a son, to protect the name of the woman from the "masculine eyes" (*Fantasia* 37) of the postman. In the Muslim Algerian community that Djébar presents, it is evident that there is a close and significant connection between the act of writing and the female body. Opportunities for men imbue a sense of permanency that accompanies the act of writing and recording, and yet the women must live in a state of temporality, remaining in the ever-changing sphere of orality and domesticity. This has wider implications than everyday interactions, for accurate historical record relies on permanency, and therefore women are dismissed from recorded history. Djébar's frustration here is directed both against French hegemony and Islamic cultural tradition, two systems that she approaches as having damaging effects on women's lives.

16 These restrictions on women's lives are demonstrated not only through writing but also through physical space. In "The French Policeman's Daughter", the ways in which the young French women conduct themselves in public spaces in comparison to the Algerian girls is telling. A young French woman named Marie-Louise is heard calling her fiancé "Darling



Pilou” (*Fantasia* 27), much to the embarrassment of the Algerian girls. In order to introduce him, he must walk up and down the street in a rather farcical scene in which the Algerian girls “catch a glimpse of him through the cracks of the shutters” (26). By using this literal divide between the public sphere and the private, Djébar creates a microcosm that is representative of the cultural divide present in French-occupied Algeria. However, an Algerian way of life and a French way of life are not entirely separable. Because the narrator and the other French girls mature under French colonialism, they find themselves moving between an identification with a ‘modern’ French way of living, and a loyalty to the matriarchal structures of the home. Frenchness, specifically the language, proves unable to really translate the Algerian experience. The narrator states that: “this ‘Darling Pilou’ left me with one deep-rooted complex: the French language could offer me all its inexhaustible treasures, but not a single one of its terms of endearment would be destined for my use” (*Fantasia* 27). Whilst the French language is portrayed as supposedly liberating, allowing women to express a metropolitan, sexualised identity, it is unable to translate the emotions of the narrator. Instead, she finds it strange and almost crude, and the colonial hegemony in which the language functions ultimately produces another level of silence. The freedom that French colonialism promised, ironically, proves restricting for Djébar.

17 Djébar draws connections between everyday, gendered domesticity and movements of resistance by placing the respective chapters side by side, yet she also creates a telling distance by not allowing these separate narratives to intersect. Her historical chapters relay her research into the documentation and narrativisation of the French occupation of Algeria and the revolution of 1954–62. Although Algerian women played a significant role in the Algerian War, this facet of their lives was overshadowed by their traditionally accepted role in the home, and so the part they played was largely disregarded in official records and diminished in written history about the revolution (Green 959). This public participation resulted in minimal change in regards to women’s advancement more generally (Cox 74–5), partly because of their refusal to comprehend the French as liberators of their veiled state, and partly because of the gradual rise of conservative Islamism in Algerian society (Cox 75; 71). Rather than being viewed as autonomous and committed figures in the revolution, Algerian women came to represent the comforts of domestic life and a nationalistic “haven of values” that resisted French influence (Cherifati-Merabtine 42). Evidently, writing takes on a double significance in *Fantasia*. Whilst it is a liberating exercise that can offer agency to women

confined to domestic spaces, it can also function as another mechanism of confinement and sequestering when used by colonial or patriarchal powers to render absent in the imagination the role of women in historical movements.

18 This concept of silence and disempowerment is what connects Djébar's seemingly disparate chapters of the autobiographical and the historical. The very masculine Algerian nationalism that succeeded the war of independence, whilst different from French hegemony, contributed to a popular discourse that restricted the independence of Algerian women by portraying them as symbolic of an authentic and unchanging national identity (Cox 71). Indeed, when Djébar imaginatively recreates the fall of Algiers in the early 1800s, she describes a girl named Badra whose beauty "attested to their city's past splendour" (*Fantasia* 84). For the French soldiers who capture her and murder her father, she is a symbol of a possessed and subdued Algeria, showing the lack of female agency within both Algerian and French colonial discourse. In the present-day narrative, women's silence is perpetuated and reinforced through historiography. Djébar narrates her research into women's role in the revolution, but finds that she cannot revive the voices of the women who fought, such as Cherifa: "The words that I thought to put in your mouth are shrouded in the same mourning garb as those of Bosquet or Saint-Arnaud" (*Fantasia* 142). General Pierre François Joseph Bosquet and Marshal Armand-Jacques Leroy de Saint-Arnaud are two examples of a number of French men who chronicled the revolution. Throughout the texts, the historical chapters, which were aided by the historical texts authored by French men, adopt a different tone to the autobiographical chapters. The tone is noticeably distant, and this is reflected in the way in which Djébar uses the terminology of the theatre, the stage, and of performance. In the chapter entitled "I", Djébar opens her historical narrative by describing how the city of Algiers "made her first appearance", how the French fleet continued their "stately ballet" until noon, and asks "who are to be the performers? On which side shall we find the audience?" (*Fantasia* 6). Indeed, throughout the text Djébar describes the men who fight in battle as actors, and the battles themselves as types of dances or theatrical scenes. It is evident, however, that Djébar is doing this to reflect the style in which the Algerian revolution was narrated by French historians and military men. Her chapters are littered with snippets from French colonialists, such as Lucien-François de Montagnac: "This little fray offered a charming spectacle. Clouds of horsemen, light as birds, criss-crossing, flitting in every direction, and from time to time the majestic voice of the cannon rising above the shouts of

triumph and the rifle-shots – all this combined to present a delightful panorama and an exhilarating scene” (*Fantasia* 54). This poetic, idyllic scene, which resembles a performance or a painting, in fact describes the battle that led to the brutal murder of Cherifa’s brother. By describing the battle in such a way, the brutality of French colonial violence is shrouded in the imagery and discourse of a heroic and rather enjoyable conquest. The everyday brutalities of war, including the sexual violence against women, are omitted in favour of a distancing technique that depicts a broader scene of French authority and masculine gallantry, thereby reinforcing the supposed benefits and superiority of colonial rule. In contrast, Djébar sets these scenes alongside intense and intimately personal portrayals of Algerian men and women, focusing on the individual and therefore refusing to allow colonial discourse to predominate.

19 During the Algerian occupation, Colonel Pélissier famously caused the asphyxiation of hundreds of people of the Ouled Riah tribe by igniting a fire at the entrance of a cave where they were hiding in June 1845 (Welch 237). In *Fantasia*, Pélissier is introduced as if waiting to go on stage, and indeed his actions are being watched and recorded by many:

For Colonel Pélissier the approaching dawn makes a solemn backdrop, befitting the overture to a drama. The curtain is about to go up on the tragic action; Fate has decreed that he, as the leader, must make the first entrance on the stage set out before them in this austere chalk landscape. (67)

Similarly to the cloistered girls at the beginning of the novel, Pélissier comes to realise how significant the act of writing is. After smoking out hundreds of Algerians from their hideout in the caves, killing almost all of them, Pélissier writes a report so realistic that it causes chaos in Paris. Lieutenant-Colonel Canrobert writes: “Pélissier made only one mistake: as he had a talent for writing, and was aware of this, he gave in his report an eloquent and realistic – much too realistic – description of the Arabs’ suffering” (*Fantasia* 75). Ironically, Canrobert concludes that the “only” mistake Pélissier made was not hiding the gruesome details in poetic language. Djébar, however, expresses her gratitude to Pélissier, for his honesty allowed her to “weave a pattern of French words” (*Fantasia* 78) around the events and to attempt to appropriate Algerian history for herself, for the women who fought, and for the Algerians. However, Djébar suggests that she has failed at her task: “[w]hile I intended every step forward to make me more clearly identifiable, I find myself progressively sucked down into the anonymity of those women of old – my ancestors!” (*Fantasia* 217). The French language that her father “lovingly bestowed” (*Fantasia* 217) on her has drawn her closer to creating a

female narrative whilst simultaneously pushing her further away from a feminine history of orality. It is indeed the French language that speaks for modern Algerian history, both men's and women's.

20 The silencing of women is a concern that Djébar consistently critiques and reflects upon throughout *Fantasia*. Whilst I have discussed in depth how the text explores women's writing, it is also evident that how women speak amongst themselves and articulate their own experiences is influenced by patriarchal traditions and French colonialism. Djébar's research into the role of women in the Algerian revolution is not simply material for the text, but is text in itself. The processes of researching, writing, and speaking about women's experiences is therefore brought to the forefront of the narrative through a littering of self-reflexive passages. For example, Djébar narrates a time when she was talking to a group of Algerian women about their experiences during the revolution (*Fantasia* 201–2) and explains that she felt unable to articulate certain traumatic instances, resulting in a secondary silence perpetuated by the author/researcher. Even when in an entirely female environment, she realises that rape “will not be mentioned, will be respected” (*Fantasia* 202). The concept of rape has been connected to the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised by Frantz Fanon: “every veil that fell, every body that became liberated from the traditional embrace of the *haïk* ... was a negative expression of the fact that Algeria was beginning to deny herself and was accepting the rape of the colonizer” (42). This violent connection between the nation and the female body, and the masculine coloniser, betrays the heavy weight placed upon Algerian women as both physically vulnerable and as symbolic. The women in *Fantasia*, instead of using the word rape and talking outwardly about their experience of sexual violence, use the term ‘damage’, suggesting a reluctance to discuss a specifically female experience and implying that women's bodies were accepted as collateral and unavoidable loss during the revolution. Djébar therefore finds that language cannot adequately represent the female body, and in a self-reflexive style she asks:

Can I, twenty years later, claim to revive these stifled voices? And speak for them? Shall I not at best find dried-up streams? What ghosts will be conjured up when in this absence of expressions of love (love received, ‘love’ imposed), I see the reflection of my own barrenness, my own aphasia. (*Fantasia* 202)

Evidently, silence becomes both a coping mechanism and something that is imposed upon women. It also transcends time, leaving history books without a record of women's military

and political contributions in Algeria and leaving Djébar, who is actively attempting to revive the female experience twenty years later, unable to speak.

21 Elleke Boehmer's model for postcolonial women's texts claims that many female postcolonial writers "retrieve suppressed oral traditions, half-forgotten histories, unrecorded private languages, moments of understated or unrecognised women's resistance" (228). Indeed, throughout *Fantasia* there is a sense of archaeological excavation in which Djébar attempts to revive voices that have been suppressed by both French colonialism and Algerian patriarchy. *Fantasia's* commitment to a self-reflexive narrative means that the text not only exposes the struggles of Algerian women, or the nation more generally, but of the author/researcher/archaeologist. Indeed, through her research and attempt at representation, Djébar experiences a crisis of her own identity. Ultimately, she finds that the post-colonial landscape of Algeria is home to a complex amalgamation of national tradition, Islamic teachings, and French influence. Within this is the even more tenuous position of women, buoyed by their effort in the revolution but perpetually silenced in both the domestic and private sphere, and within historiography. Discerning and representing a genuine female experience through these layers of silence, therefore, proves an almost impossible task.

### ***So Vast the Prison***

22 In the second half of this article, I move on to discuss Djébar's *So Vast the Prison* while keeping in mind Djébar's core concern of womanhood and agency. Whilst *Fantasia* focuses on the significance and limitations of writing for the Algerian woman, *So Vast the Prison* reconsiders the possibilities of women's creative production by focusing on mediums such as dance and filmmaking. Similarly to in *Fantasia*, *So Vast the Prison* offers a narrative that struggles with the concept of representation. As Stacey Weber-Fève notes: "in all of [Djébar's] work, she is 'speaking nearby' the indigenous women of her Algerian communities ... she may not speak 'for' the subjects in her literary or cinematic discourses since 'speaking for' reinstates colonizing cultural practices" (3). Indeed, Djébar attempts to capture the multitude of forms of female expression, yet maintains her own political stance that proves critical toward structures, institutions and traditions that oppress women. In this way, Djébar's discussion of womanhood in *So Vast* complements that of *Fantasia*. However, a more critical eye is turned towards women in *So Vast*, particularly regarding how oppressive traditions can be perpetuated by women just as much as men. Indeed, many critics argue that Djébar's aim

in this text is to reclaim control of the male gaze, to reappropriate or to reverse it (Hiddleston 99; Drissi 3; Faulkner 86), and whilst this is true, Djébar does not suggest that reversing the male gaze will equal an end to women's oppression. Djébar's concern in *So Vast* is less with the act of writing than with the movements and meanings of the female body. By striving to make the body "visible", Djébar sheds light on a kind of "gendered cultural trauma" (Faulkner 79) inherited from Algerian and Islamic cultural practices and manifested through the female body.

23 Ketu Katrak claims that acts of female resistance stem from an "internalized exile" (2) where the individual feels disconnected from the body and is therefore unable to claim control over it. By reacting to patriarchal domination, these women are therefore attempting to "transcend exile" (Katrak 2). She uses an example from Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga's 1988 novel *Nervous Conditions* to emphasise this point: whilst Lucia, one of two female protagonists, confronts and resists patriarchal authority, Nyasha focuses this lack of agency inwards, eventually developing bulimia (Katrak 3). *So Vast* is similarly concerned with the process of transcending internalised exile, shown through destructive practices such as the narrator admitting to her husband her love for another man. Yet more significantly it exemplifies the narrator's powerful acts of self-expression such as dancing, historical research, and filmmaking. Much of the critical attention to *So Vast* has understandably focused on concepts of freedom and agency, but I add to this discussion by offering an analysis of how the novel draws on the act and concept of dancing. As in *Fantasia*, the female body is of continual concern, negotiation, and appropriation, and I suggest that in *So Vast* Djébar continues this line of enquiry by showing how dance offers women a chance to govern their own politicised bodies.

24 Throughout *So Vast*, dance is shown to be significant for Algerian women as well as for the narrator personally. The narrator explains that dance formed a substantial part of her childhood: "[s]o often during my childhood I saw the terrifying grandmother abandoned to her rages and her magical dances. Then, afterward, when she would reemerge from them, she was as much in cool control of herself as she was of her entire household" (*So Vast* 311). These dances, described as both passionate and strange, are a way for the grandmother to gain a degree of psychological release from her own kind of domestic prison to which she must return. These dances could be examples of *zar* ceremonies, women's dances that "derive from folk religion with its characteristic blend which combines popular Islam and traditional

African religion” (Hurreiz 151). These dances allow women to become “possessed”, to be “completely absorbed by the collective animation of the women” and of “the power of their community” (Kramer 114). This spiritual power is needed because of the reality of their “isolation and impotence in a world dominated by men” (Kramer 114). The politics of the bare female body is explored through the narrator’s childhood memory of a cousin’s wedding. During a dress fitting she asks for her arms, shoulders and back to be left “completely bare” (*So Vast* 284), a risky request that is, however, accepted by her liberal-minded mother. The dress fitter is astonished, but her mother retorts: “for a wedding, just among women [...] why should she not have a low-cut dress?” (*So Vast* 284), signifying a de-politicised and liberated female space. However, the dressmaker regards it as inappropriate for the exact reason that the mother finds it appropriate: “because among women!” (284), showing that notions of shame and modesty about the female body are perpetuated and maintained by both men and women.

25 In *Fantasia*, the narrator finds herself continuously feeling guilty for not being veiled and cloistered as a child. As she matures, she once again feels guilty, but this time for not being able to communicate in Berber with her fellow Algerian women. In *So Vast*, the narrator similarly experiences a sense of disconnect from Algerian tradition. She expresses how she is “riding astride the rhythm and discovering the new pleasure of [her] body” (285) but is aware that this corporeal freedom distinguishes her from other women. She feels uncomfortable with this sense of freedom, claiming that she is forgetting herself, that she cannot help but move “despite the spectators and their eyes” and is “disregarding the kinswomen” (*So Vast* 285). Specifically, she is dancing so vivaciously “in this most ancient of homes where long ago the grandmother made her entrance as a young bride” (*So Vast* 285), creating a binary contrast between lone sensuality and the tradition of marriage, and initiating a sense of guilt. This guilt is not only from direct encounters with the observing women around her, but from a kind of cultural, inherited tradition of modesty and ritual.

26 Djébar’s dance scenes reflect Fritz W. Kramer’s description of the *zar* in that they both suggest a need to gain power through dance: “[a] few others are dancing as well, mature women. Gradually, in spite of themselves, they are dancing their grief and their need to get out, to fling themselves into the distance, into the beating sun” (*So Vast* 285). Although these dances can only be performed around women, Djébar does not suggest that they are simply a connecting factor between women. Indeed, she resists a simplistic feminist discourse that

suggests “a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their [women’s] oppression” (Mohanty 262). Rather, this exposure of the female body results in criticism amongst the women, with one commenting that “[s]he goes out, she reads, she goes to the cities like that, naked, her father, bizarre, lets her” (*So Vast* 285). Dance, rather than mobilising women, brings to the forefront the differences between them and forges divisions between how women understand tradition and modernity. A dance scene within the childhood narrative is imbued with snippets of gossip from the women. For example, one says that the narrator “dances, but too vigorously, her manner is too lively” (*So Vast* 286), and another: “if her father put her back in her place ... really, if he made her wear the veil ... I would not hesitate to ask for her in marriage for my eldest son!” (*So Vast* 286). The narrator’s moment of freedom is impinged upon by the judgmental voices of women, rather than men, contributing to the extended motif of imprisonment that runs throughout the novel whilst also asserting that patriarchal forms of control are perpetuated by both men and women. Indeed, Djébar “unsettles the very category of femininity ... contesting the validity of any specific notion of feminine experience” (Hiddleston 91). Through these dance scenes in particular, Djébar illustrates the varied and multiplicitous voices of Algerian women.

27      Following custom, a woman in the party dances “in the manner traditional to the town she came from” whilst her body was “burdened with jewels, belt, tunics embroidered with gold, stiff and sparkling *moiré*” (*So Vast* 61). The music becomes “frenzied” in an “ancestral refrain” (*So Vast* 61). Although Hurreiz describes the *zar* ceremony as a “dramatic performance aimed at releasing psychological tensions” (153), the narrator does not feel connected to the women: “[t]he important thing was to distance myself as much as possible from the collective frenzy of those women, my relatives – I felt I could not accept for myself the almost funereal joy of their bodies, verging on a fettered despair” (*So Vast* 61). The sombre atmosphere no longer appeals to the narrator, resulting in her employing “Western dance steps” (*So Vast* 62) whilst her “arms alone became lianas, drawing arabesques, in the half-light only my bare arms moving now like serpents and now like calligraphy” (*So Vast* 63), employing rich natural imagery of plants and animals as well as artistic imagery of design and writing, a stark contrast to the “ceremonious” dancing of the relatives. Her dancing separates her from the other women because it is, for her, an act of individualism that she narrates with heavy use of the first-person pronoun: “I dance on. I dance. I feel I have been dancing ever since” (*So Vast* 60). This independence allows her to consciously and defiantly



exchange looks with a young man whom she nicknames “the Beloved” (*So Vast* 64). She thinks: “I was keenly, consciously, happily aware of myself ... as being truly ‘visible’ for this almost adolescent young man with the wounded gaze. Visible for him alone? My visibility for him made me visible to myself” (*So Vast* 64). Her appropriation, rather than abandonment, of ancestral tradition allows her to remain in a feminine space but with a new independence. Although, in *So Vast*, Djébar “seeks connections between women of different epochs and laments on their common plight” (Hiddleston 94), she also shows how these genealogical connections through time are not immutable, and that while female spaces exist, they are not necessarily ones of freedom.

28 The influence of the narrator’s cultural heritage is evoked in the second major dance scene. The elation that the narrator experiences while dancing is quickly shattered when a fight between her husband and the young man erupts. The young man flees from the cabaret, leaving the narrator thinking: “[w]hat shame! *How could I ever have been attracted that way to someone whose back I am seeing now? Because he is running away, is it possible? Because he is leaving, he is afraid, can this be true?*” (*So Vast* 104, italics in original). Her horror at his cowardice, she explains, is informed by the lessons that her grandmother passed down to her: “[a] man is someone whose back one does not see! ... whose back the enemy never sees!” (*So Vast* 106). She adheres to this inherited and rather traditional approach to masculinity, losing her means through which she transcends “exile”, or asserts her agency as a woman, by having a relationship with a man other than her husband. However, not only is her husband the “enemy” (*So Vast* 14), but so is her grandmother: “I was no longer seeking liberation from the husband with his melodramatic mask, but trying to get away from the virile grandmother, away, at least, from this bitter, virile woman” (*So Vast* 108). It is this ancestral figure of female tradition that enforces a perspective of masculinity that influences the narrator years later, disempowering her. The unorthodox space in which she asserts her independence is thwarted by the ubiquitous presence of ancestral influence. Indeed, Hiddleston argues that “while solidarity is important to Djébar, the sharing she evokes consists in the transfer of resonances across history rather than in the establishment of a unified identity” (96). Indeed, it is evident that Djébar exemplifies the significance of women’s values and teachings throughout generations in order to highlight the clashes in values and beliefs that occur within Algerian Muslim communities. By doing this, she thwarts any concept of a unified female identity and instead shows how female identity is

heterogeneous and mutable. The dance scenes are framed by women's voices, or as the narrator expresses, a culture of "women speaking among women" (*So Vast* 109). In *Fantasia*, Djebbar uses historiography to critically frame the text around male voices, specifically French men chronicling the Algerian revolution from a colonial perspective. *So Vast*, however, takes the concept of *écriture* as portrayed in *Fantasia* and replaces it with *kalaam*, exhibiting the influence and importance of women's oral discourse. Djebbar, therefore, is showing the impact of women's ancestral voices as opposed to men's, yet also suggests that this influence can be a way to enforce patriarchal traditions.

29 In her essay entitled "Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound", Djebbar discusses Eugene Delacroix's painting "The Women of Algiers (In Their Apartment)", describing it as "a stolen glance" (137) into the private, forbidden sphere of women, an "intoxicated gaze: a fugitive moment of evanescent revelation" (134). Delacroix's gaze is risky and inappropriate, but the women remain steeped in domesticity and tradition. They are being looked upon by a man, with the permission of another man, and have no power of their own to control the gaze. Over a century later, Djebbar is overturning this binary and appropriating the gaze for women through her directing of the 1977 film *The Nouba Of The Women Of Mount Chenoua* (translated from the French *La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua*), *nouba* roughly translating as "party". This appropriation through film, suggests Djebbar, is significant for all women. Towards the end of the text she says, reflecting on her role as a director:

I was gripped by an emotion. As if all the women of all the harems had whispered 'action' with me. Their complicity excites me. Only what their eyes see matters to me from now on. Resting on these images that I assemble with the help of their invisible presence over my shoulder. This gaze, I claim it as mine. I see it as 'ours'. (*So Vast* 178–179)

The act of filming allows Djebbar to figuratively and literally take control of the 'gaze', and by doing this she is able to reverse the role of the Algerian woman from the watched to the watcher, and from the powerless to the powerful. It is not an individualist pursuit for Djebbar, but a collective, deeply feminist one.

30 A reader of *So Vast* is watching the action play out through two cultural mediums; the words on the page are watching the lens of the camera, which is watching the scene. Because of this, every frame that Djebbar captures is imbued with political and social significance and is meaningfully reflected upon from a feminist standpoint. For example, Djebbar films a man in a wheelchair watching his wife sleep in the house, unable to enter because of the steps. She

describes this as “the gaze of the paralyzed man ... the dance of impotent desire” (*So Vast* 178). In this scene, the reader is watching Djebbar watch the man watch the woman, constructing layers and therefore raising more questions about representation and gender. By choosing this scene in particular, she reverses the traditional gender binary that she critiques throughout her work of the trapped, immobile woman and instead focuses the camera on the impotent man. Later, she films a girl named Ferial, a bright and confident child from Chenoua. She is able to capture her youth, femininity and wildness in a way that “resembles a dance” (*So Vast* 282) as Ferial leaps about, guiding the camera rather than being directed by it. The camera, *So Vast* shows, allows women to appropriate the gaze and move away from the paradigm enforced by Delacroix. Specifically, it allows her, and Muslim Algerian women more generally, to reconfigure and reframe the way in which we look at women’s bodies.

31 Djebbar employs the idea of dance in *So Vast* in two different ways. In a literal sense, she narrates scenes of dance in which the politics of the female body are brought to the forefront of the readers’ attention. Women’s ability to move their bodies in public, and the way in which this movement is received, is influenced and regulated by the way in which Muslim Algerian culture understands women’s bodies. Although the text employs dance scenes that resemble *zar* ceremonies, and shows them as a way for women to gain psychological relief from a male-dominated environment, Djebbar shows us that these dances are sources of disparity as well as communal comfort amongst women.

32 The narrator develops throughout the text, from her narrative that is framed by the voices of other women, to the filmic narrative in which she is sole creator and manipulator. Indeed, in a figurative sense, Djebbar embarks on directing films in order to frame other kinds of ‘dances’, of the wild young girl and the impotent man for example. She does this in order to, firstly, encourage readers and viewers to challenge preconceptions about the role of men and women, and secondly, to imbue beauty into everyday encounters and movement. For Djebbar, writing and filming allow her to create and represent women as more than symbols or property.

## Conclusion

33 In this paper, I have argued that Assia Djebbar draws connections between the female body, self-expression, and the politics of postcolonial Algeria in order to critique how we understand, research and write the role of women. In *Fantasia*, Djebbar creates a semi-

autobiographical text that, through the voice of a narrator/writer/researcher, charts her experience of womanhood in modern Algeria. On the one hand, the narrator wishes to be liberated from Algerian Islamic traditions of modesty, but on the other, she finds that the public intimacy evident in French culture and the poetic French language is simply unable to represent her experiences as an Algerian Muslim woman. Instead, Djébar takes on a more significant project than simply choosing between two supposedly opposing sides. She uses her mastery of the French language, and her position as a successful, global author, to return to her Algerian roots and bring forth the experiences, often traumatic, of the Muslim women of her childhood. An outright challenge to the narratives put forth through French historiography, *Fantasia* accepts that it cannot speak for women but must instead allow a space to open up where their voices can, finally, be heard.

34 In *So Vast the Prison*, Djébar recommences her project of bringing forth a woman's perspective, but moves from interrogating the act of writing to a more intimate discussion of the female body. Dance, in particular, is shown as a medium through which women can express themselves, yet the cultural and moral significance haunts the entirety of the text. Dance is shown to be a wild and feminine act, bonding women in a shared feeling of liberation and camaraderie. Yet as in *Fantasia*, women's experiences are never shown to be homogenous. Bodily expression, even amongst women, is often received as inappropriate and sexualised, damaging their reputation as well-behaved wives or potential daughters-in-law. Once again, Djébar creates a narrator caught in the liminal space between a sense of community and a desire for self-determination. Regardless, both texts celebrate and embolden the voices of the ancestral and the modern Muslim Algerian woman.

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