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The Work of Assia Djebar: (Re)Imagining Algerian Women’s Embodied Experiences

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Abstract:

Algerian-born author and filmmaker Assia Djebar writes in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985) that all Algerian women “big and little, have at [their] command four languages” (*Fantasia* 180) that they communicate with: French, Arabic, Lyco-Berber, and “the fourth language, for all females, young or old, cloistered or half-emancipated, remains that of the body” (180). This thesis will examine both how and what Djebar communicates with the language of the female body in *Fantasia* and in *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (1980) in order to better understand the way that Djebar depicts Algerian women in the face of their marginalization in a conservative, patriarchal society.

By drawing on critical movement theory and within the theoretical framework of Second Wave French feminist Hélène Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa,” I will argue that Djebar subversively contests women’s repression in Algerian society by reappropriating the female-exclusive spaces of the harem and the hammam. Ultimately, these spaces allow Algerian women to simultaneously affirm their bodies and their agencies in ways that are not permitted to them in the rest of Algeria. Djebar thus allows these individuals an opportunity to corporeally (re)present and (re)imagine their subjectivities as Algerian women as central experiences in both the history and the culture of Algeria, thereby liberating them from the marginalization of the colonial French and postcolonial Algerian patriarchies.
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“The human body is the most powerfully expressive medium there is. It is quite possible to hide behind words, or to mask facial expression. It is conceivable that one can dissimulate and deceive with paints, clay, stone, print, sounds. But the body reveals. Movement and gesture are the oldest languages known to man. They are still the most revealing. When you move you stand revealed for what you are” (Doris Humphrey qtd. in Limón 100, emphasis added).

Given her status as a modern dance pioneer, it seems obvious that Doris Humphrey would claim that the body is the most significant aesthetic medium; this statement is no more shocking than painters claiming that paint is the most important medium or than writers claiming that language, especially written language, is the ultimate means of expression. Yet when writing about writing in Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade (a clear opportunity to advocate for the primacy of words in her craft), Algerian-born novelist and filmmaker Assia Djebar seems to conflate writing with her physical embodiment. She explains:

“When the hand writes, slow positioning of the arm, carefully bending forward or learning to one side, crouching, swaying to and fro, as in an act of love. When reading, the eyes take their time, delight in caressing the curves, while the calligraphy suggests the rhythm of the scansion… it [writing] suggests, by the song that smoulders in its heart, the dance floor for rejoicing and the hair-shirt for the ascetic” (Fantasia 180 and 181).

Djebar’s description of the process of writing and reading, in fact, calls to mind the terminology one would use when describing a dance. In this passage, she highlights the embodied act of writing with her initial array of verbal phrases – “slow positioning of the arm, carefully bending forward or leaning to one side, crouching, swaying to and fro,” which all connote strong or sustained movements, as if writing were Djebar’s way to dance her ideas out on the page. Writing “suggests,” for Djebar, the “dance floor for rejoicing and the hair-shirt for the ascetic,” demonstrating that this author defines her relationship to writing through physical metaphors of both the kinesthetic pleasures of the dance floor and the material discomfort of a hair-shirt; Djebar implicates writing itself as her own embodied act.
In fact, in this description, Djebar exemplifies critics Robert and Michèle Root-Bernstein’s concept of body thinking, a body-conscious way to express one’s ideas. Body thinking, as far as this concept relates to the Root-Bernsteins, is one’s proprioceptive means to embody a problem or produce something with one’s own body. Figuratively, just as “fingers ‘itch’ to play; music ‘flows’ from the hands; ‘ideas ‘flow’ from the pen” (Eliot Dole Hutchingson qtd. in Root-Bernstein 164), one’s body constantly sends and receives kinesthetic information that corporeally signifies something within the context of stimulus. In calling attention to her body’s physical sensations when writing, Djebar emphasizes the corporeal body thinking that she participates in when writing as an Algerian woman. By accentuating her own process of body thinking when writing, Djebar inscribes her own body into Fantasia, thus highlighting its importance in the creation of her literary works.

In this same text, Djebar’s states that writing “looks in the mirror of its scrolls and curlicues and sees itself as woman, not the reflection of a voice” (Fantasia 181); this author’s association between writing and women complements Second Wave French Feminist Hélène Cixous’s theories concerning writing and the body. Cixous, (also an Algerian-born writer), reiterates throughout “The Laugh of the Medusa” the relationship between women’s bodies and the act of writing. She argues, on the one hand, women must recover the representation of their bodies through writing – “by writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her” (Alphonso 261), “write your self. Your body must be heard” (262). On the other hand, Cixous’s also presents the corollary to be true; women substantiate their writing with their feminine bodies – “it’s with her body that she vitally supports the ‘logic’ of her speech” (263). Djebar’s statement, that when writing “looks in the mirror of its scrolls and

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1 Proprioception is the self-conscious, internal sense of one’s own body.
curlicues and sees itself as a woman," seems, then, to textually (re)present Cixous’s feminist critique. This author’s mirror figuratively presents two facets of the same reality: the physical reality (the body) and an abstracted version of that reality (the body-in-text) – just as a mirror produces an abstracted image of objects that exist in the phenomenal world. Djebar, like Cixous, states that writing is woman’s body, but also that a woman’s body is her own writing. Ultimately, then, in the context of Djebar’s entire oeuvre, one must interpret this author’s writing as a feminine extension of her own embodied subjectivity.

Moreover, this female author’s text does not only (re)present her body, Djebar explicitly states that her body-text possesses a subversive power: “When I write and read… my body travels far in subversive space, in spite of the neighbours and suspicious matrons; it would not need much for it to take wing and fly away!” (Fantasia 184); Djebar finds, in a sense, her own kind of liberation through her writing. This passage, in fact, calls to mind Cixous’s analysis of women and the concept of voler, which further emphasizes Djebar’s subversive embodied writing. Cixous writes:

flying is woman’s gesture… What woman hasn’t flown/stolen? Who hasn’t felt, dreamt, performed the gesture that jams society? … Who hasn’t inscribed with her body the differential, punctured the system of couples and oppositions? (Alphonso 269).

This universal “woman’s gesture,” “voler,” intimately characterizes Djebar’s work and her depiction of the liberating subsversiveness of the female body. In French, “voler” has polysemic significance, meaning both “to fly” and “to steal.” Cixous argues that women constantly subvert societal restrictions through writing and through their bodies by appropriating patriarchal semiologies in order to produce a unique, emancipatory feminine semiology (269). According to Cixous, women “steal” in order “to fly” and in flying, steal; women reappropriate their own freedom from the patriarchy to liberate themselves, and by liberating themselves, subvert the
system that has sought to oppress them in society. She states that it is “with her [the female] body” (269) that women can destroy the mutually exclusive systems that characterize the patriarchy’s oppressive control of women. Consequently, when Djebar states that through writing, her body could “fly away” into subversive space, this author illustrates, then, that her writing allows her to physically, in a sense, escape the reality that seeks to repress her.

Assia Djebar does not merely inscribe her own body into her text; in fact, she writes that all Algerian women “big and little, have at [their] command four languages” (Fantasia 180) that they communicate with: French, Arabic, Lyco-Berber, and “the fourth language, for all females, young or old, cloistered or half-emancipated, remains that of the body” (180). Throughout her many works, Djebar writes with this feminine language of the body in order to portray complex Muslim women characters and the ways that they relate to the greater community in postcolonial Algeria. In order to attempt to understand Djebar’s vol–her reappropriation of the importance of female bodies, as well her flight from patriarchal control of them – this thesis will offer various interpretations of the languages of female bodies in two of her works: Women of Algiers in Their Apartment (1980) and Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade (1985). Fantasia demonstrates the importance of the female body from the beginning of the French colonization of Algeria in 1830 to the latter half of the twentieth century. Women of Algiers exposes the role that women’s bodies play during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) and in its aftermath. As Humphrey might say, these works reveal the embodiment of Algerian women with respect to these historical events. As such, this thesis will explore the significance of the female body in these novels in order to better understand how female corporeality impacts one’s readings of Djebar’s depiction of Algerian women across time. I will argue that Djebar uses women’s bodies to simultaneously acknowledge the history of women’s subjugation under the patriarchy and to
symbolically emancipate women from it. Ultimately, by reappropriating both the female body and its marginality in female-exclusive spaces in her works, Djebar (re)imagines the roles that these women play in Algeria, using the feminine body to liberate women from the confines and the margins of Algerian society.

Methodologically speaking, I will combine critical movement theory with a literary analysis of these texts in order to better illustrate the subversiveness of feminine bodies as signifying media in Djebar’s works. These two fields mutually inform one another and impact Djebar’s depictions of the conditions under which Muslim women live in postcolonial Algeria. Given dance scholar Deidre Sklar’s assertion that all “movement knowledge is a kind of cultural knowledge” (Sklar 30, emphasis original), the way that Djebar depicts the bodies of women characters in her works textually embodies the different kinds of historical, social, economic, and experiential realities of Algerian women. Sklar argues that “one has to look beyond movement to get at its meaning” (Sklar 31, emphasis original), which further bridges the supposed ideological disconnect between these two fields of study. In these two premises, Sklar states that not only do movements embody the cultural knowledge of the people who perform them, but one must treat movement like any other symbolic system of representation; one must read Djebar’s moving, female bodies just like any other literary symbol in her works to better understand how Djebar portrays Algerian female subjectivity.

In addition, I will examine Djebar’s works with literary criticism from Hélène Cixous of the Second Wave of French Feminism in order to further ground my research in the field of literary studies. Djebar was the first Algerian woman to be accepted into the école normale

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2 In France, beginning in 1968 and in conjunction with the MLF (Mouvement de libération des femmes, Women’s Liberation Movement), Second Wave French Feminism used “the disciplines of literary theory and psychology to explore language as an instrument for radical change”
supérieure de Sèvres – an elite, French higher-education institution akin to the American ivy leagues – in 1955 (“Assia Djebar”). As such, it is conceivable to assert that Djebar was at least familiar with and at most profoundly influenced by this feminist movement and its writers, with whom Djebar wrote at the same time. Indeed, one can interpret Djebar’s works as a fictional exemplification of these feminist critiques, which solicits a comparison of her literature and these theories. As I have briefly alluded to above and as we will see below, Cixous explains patriarchy-subverting writing and language as intrinsically connected to women’s bodies. This feminist critique brings together the corporeal aspects of women’s bodies in Djebar’s literature with a linguistic, literary rebellion against patriarchal culture. Cixous’s arguments thus offer a literary framework for interpreting Djebar’s female-liberating discourse via their shared interests in the potential and the symbolism of women’s bodies.

As another point of clarification, when using the term “patriarchy” in this thesis, I refer to the primarily governmental and religious de-privileging of women and women’s experience in Algerian society. Despite the fact that the Algerian nationalist group, the Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front), advocated for the equality of women during the Algerian War of Independence (Salhi 27), after the war, the newly elected Algerian government experienced a wave of conservatism. This conservatism culminated in 1984 with “The Algerian Family Code,” which persists still today, determining “women to be minors under the law, and defines them as existing only in so far as they are daughters, mothers, or wives” (27). By not recognizing the full citizenship of women and defining them solely based on their relationship to men, Algeria marginalizes women and disproportionately centralizes the experience of men, thus

(“French Literature”). Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigay, and Hélène Cixous are some of the authors of this movement who all theorize, to some degree, about the relationships between language, writing, and the female body.
making its government a patriarchy.

Likewise, in the context of religion, 99% of the nation identifies as Sunni Muslim (“Algeria”) overwhelmingly making this branch of Islam the state religion. In the Qur’an, surah II, verse 223 reads “Your women are a tithe for you (to cultivate) so go to your tithe as ye will” (Faulkner 847). The word “tithe,” in this sense, equates a woman’s body with fertile land for men to cultivate, reifying Muslim women as sexualized chattel for men to use at will and denying them any sort of autonomy. Surah II, verse 228 states that “… men have a degree over [women] (in responsibility and authority)” (“Surat Al-Baqarah”), thereby explicitly emphasizing the agency of men at the expense of the agency of women. In citing these passages, I do not mean to say that Islam is an inherently, female-oppressive religion. Only the extreme right-wing conservative religious patriarchs exploit the Qur’an in this way to control women. Despite this fact, literally in Islam’s religious texts, women must submit to men and certain Muslim patriarchs use these religious texts to validate an Algerian patriarchy that devalues women and the experience of womanhood.

Ultimately, the Law, as defined by these patriarchal institutions of religion and government, explicitly decrees that men and women are not equal. In this thesis, I will use the general term “patriarchy” as an acting force, writing statements like “the patriarchy marginalizes women.” These patriarchal institutions in and of themselves are not able to enact physical change as ideological systems of control. However, given that the overwhelming majority of Algerian citizens participate in these institutions, these structures of thought influence the way that most every Algerian interacts with one another. In saying that the “patriarchy” does something, I am encompassing any of the political or governmental leaders, fathers, uncles, cousins, religious leaders, etc. who identify with these patriarchal institutions and by extension, seek to exert
control over women and their bodies in Algeria. Again, not all Muslim men seek to control and restrict women’s bodies. When using the words, “patriarchy” or “patriarchs,” I merely refer to the conservatively minded individuals and institutions who do.

Finally, before beginning the body of my analysis, it is important to note that when using the term “female-exclusive space,” I refer to two indoor locales, the harem and the hammam, in which female bodies are expected to remain cloistered within Algerian society. Culturally, in Algeria, “women [are] considered dangerous to the social order because men [are] thought to be vulnerable to female charms” (Jonas 114). In order to preserve the modesty of Algerian women and the social order of the entire nation, traditionally, conservative Islamic societies “keep their women hidden from the eyes of any man who is not a member of the extended family” through the use of “the various types of garments that conceal the entire body, and, more drastically, the secluded women’s quarters known as the harem” (114).

The word “harem” refers to both “a usually secluded house or part of a house allotted to women in a Muslim household” and simultaneously to “the wives, concubines, female relatives, and servants occupying a harem” (“Harem”). In English, this word denotes both the female-exclusive space within a home and the women who inhabit it, intimately associating and conflating Muslim women with the imaginary architecture of this space. In this thesis, I will only reference the word “harem” as the physical location within Muslim dwellings to distinguish these Algerian women from the ideological ambiguity of their surroundings.

The harem exemplifies the marginal and gender-performative roles that both Western and patriarchal cultures have assigned to Muslim, Algerian women. Edward Saïd’s generalizes that “the idea of [Oriental] representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined” (63). Though Saïd understands the harem based solely through the
tension between the West and the East, given the associative nature of binary oppositions, for the purpose of this thesis, one can also interpret Saïd’s notions of the harem through the binary opposition of male/female. Microcosmically, the harem becomes, then, the all-female theatre on which one defines one’s entire understanding of Algerian women. On this stage, as Saïd writes:

“women are … the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing… the male conception of [this] world… tends to be static, frozen, fixed eternally” (Saïd 207 and 208).

For a pictorial representation of one’s connotative sense of the imaginary space of the harem, such as the West and the Algerian patriarchy emblematically paints it consider Eugène Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Algers dans leur appartement* (1834) [Figure 1]. Djebar, for her part, characterizes one’s normal conception of the harem, as represented in this painting, in much the same way as Saïd: she sees Delacroix’s male gaze as sexualizing and exoticizing these absent-looking women within the suffocatingly immobile, excluded prison of the harem (*Women of Algiers* 134-137). In the pages that follow, I will examine how Djebar reappropriates this traditional imagery of the harem and of the bodies that occupy it from a place of complacent female sexuality to an emancipatory space for women.

**Delacroix, Picasso, and Djebar: (Re)Presenting The Women of Algiers**

At the end of *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, Djebar concludes her collection of short stories with a critical essay titled “Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound,” which reiterates many of her novel’s themes under the guise of an art critique of Eugène Delacroix and Pablo Picasso in their respective works also titled *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*.³ Djebar argues that

³ Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger dans leurs appartement* (Figure 1), his reprisal of this theme in another canvas of the same name in 1849 (Figure 2), and Picasso’s series of paintings and
Delacroix’s “forbidden gaze” from inside the harem estranges the Algerian women from their own bodies and from the viewers of these paintings (Women of Algiers 138). By extension, Djebar asserts that women are similarly forbidden the right to gaze in Algerian society and their bodies and voices are cut off from any means to represent themselves (139). She reads Delacroix painting as a snapshot of Algerian women’s repressive reality. Then, commenting on Picasso’s series of reinterpretations, Djebar sees a “way out” for these Algerian women – by reaffirming their own agency through dance, through “these women’s rebirth to their own bodies” (150), these women escape the representational marginality of the harem.

Given that Djebar presents her readers with a textual critique about paintings that depict Algerian women’s bodies, this essay superimposes at least two different sensory perceptions for readers when imagining these women’s bodies: the visual experience of painter/viewer and of author/reader, as well as the kinesthetic experience of the Algerian women. Djebar mediates and transmutes the different experiences of the media of the bodies, paintings, and her own text, which complicates the way that readers “view” these paintings. In fact, Djebar resituates the entire visual experience of these paintings, which both the French and Algerian patriarchies dominate, within the kinesthetic, embodied experience of the Algerian women. By honing in on the embodied experience of these women in the harem, Djebar attempts to liberate Algerian women from the male gaze, using her text to inspire readers to shift from a male-focused perspective. Ultimately, Djebar centralizes the kinesthetic subjectivity of these women, thereby affirming women’s embodiment in a patriarchal society that only considers them objects of its gaze.

In Delacroix’s two versions of Women of Algiers (Appendixes 1 and 2), three women lithographs also titled Femmes d’Alger, which date from 1954-1955. For the sake of brevity, I only include the last version in Picasso’s series, “Version O” (Figure 3).
recline around a hookah, on top of ornate rugs and cushions. The stillness and quiet suggested by the tableau of these women’s bodies evoke a kind of stifling pressure as if one were in the deserted stacks of a library or in a tomb. In contrast to the reclining and curved forms of the seated women, the walls of the room seem to press in, rigidly erect, phallic. The black slave can only pull back the curtain to reveal this prison-like space, giving the viewer a voyeuristic peek into the lives of these women as they remain seated, cut off from the fabric of reality.

Delacroix portrays the Algerian women in his paintings in immobile, reclining poses in a realistic painting, pictorially highlighting their apparent lack of agency. He paints these women as he would paint a still life, representationally treating their bodies as objects that must surrender themselves to his gaze. The realism of his paintings seeks to encapsulate these women’s identities; in a sense, the three-dimensional, lived-experiences of these women are painted over by this painter’s two-dimensional portrayal of them. These realistic paintings, which seek to illustrate and capture reality, not only deny these women the right to exist outside of the way that Delacroix depicts them, but also disallow these women the right to define themselves. Delacroix’s realism tries to essentialize these individuals’ experiences into a uniform, recognizable whole that *dick-tates* the “reality” of these women, thereby perpetrating the representational violence of the patriarchy.

For her part, Djebar traces the story of Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers* (Appendix 1) back to the Frenchman’s very first peek inside the female-exclusive space of the Algerian harem, establishing the primacy of the male gaze in these paintings and situating the reader within it. Upon entering the harem, Djebar reports that Delacroix “was intoxicated as if by the spectacle before his eyes” (*Women of Algiers* 134) – even before beginning his paintings, Delacroix, as an Orientalist, sees the Algerian women’s bodies as objects paraded in front of his eyes. In turn,
Djebar forces the reader of her own text to perpetuate the objectification of Algerian women’s bodies by first introducing these characters to the reader through the “spectacle” of these women in Delacroix’s eyes. Even before describing the actual painting, she demonstrates that all readings of Delacroix’s paintings are initially and implicitly based in Delacroix’s objectifying male gaze, which reproduces and reinforces the patriarchal oppression of women. In fact, according to Djebar, Delacroix “plac[es] us [the reader] in the position of onlookers in front of these women” (137); by looking through Delacroix’s vision of these women, the reader, then, becomes the same gaze-driven voyeur as the Orientalist himself.

As for the Algerian women themselves in these versions, Djebar indicates that they acquiesce to being objectified by Delacroix’s male gaze, submitting to the dominance of the patriarchy. As critic John Erickson elucidates,

“The sole gaze [in traditional Maghrebian society] permissible emanates from the male, whereas the woman’s gaze is strictly legislated by religious belief. The Prophet [Muhammad] called her gaze ‘the zîna of the eye [zîna ul-ayani].’ Zîna ul-ayani often translated as ‘the capital sin of the eye,’ literally means illicit sexual intercourse” (306).

One can understand the depicted women’s “distant” and “faraway eyes” (Women of Algiers 137) (Appendixes 1 and 2) as these women yielding to not only the Islamic patriarchy’s indictment of the female gaze, but also to the French painter’s objectification of their bodies. As Djebar states, these women must “remain absent to themselves, to their bodies, to their sensuality, to their happiness” (Women of Algiers 137), illustrating the consequences of the male gaze for women and their double repression under both the French and the Algerian patriarchies. Indeed, Djebar writes that “the whole meaning” of these paintings “is played out in the relationship these three [principle female characters] have with their bodies” (135), which identifies the representation of the female body as the most important signifier in these two works. In these paintings, given these women’s apparent absence and lack of embodiment affronted with Delacroix’s gaze,
Djebar reads Algerian women’s total objectification and exile from their own bodies due to the masculine intrusion in this feminine space.

While Delacroix’s depiction of these women emphasize the “realistic” immobility and objectification of these women, Picasso’s depiction of them (Appendix 3) calls attention to their abstracted power of movement. Three female forms perspectively dance throughout the canvas’s foreground, middleground, and background, demonstrating their range of motion. They are liberatingly nude, unashamedly bearing breasts and buttocks to the viewer as they continue the dance of their existence. Even the walls seem to be able to move, with lines of different colored paint streaking through skewed quadrilaterals. Viewers still gaze at the women, but now their eyes seem to dance with them across the painting.

Whereas the figures in Delacroix’s paintings appear to exist as coherent, stationary women-objects, Picasso’s figures seem to dance and to fragment themselves. This abstracted mobility of the characters in Picasso’s painting rejects the immobilizing male gaze of the painter, pictorially presenting Algerian women’s bodies as subjects that cannot be encompassed as an image. Many of the women in Picasso’s paintings do not sit down and wait for the painter to define them on his canvas (Appendix 3); on the contrary, they seem to dance throughout the room, simultaneously challenging the primacy of the male gaze and embodying their own agency. As opposed to Delacroix’s realism, Picasso’s abstracted, cubist-inspired painting calls attention to the multi-faceted subjectivities of these women. This style suggests that just as the characters on the canvas are comprised of many different colors and shapes, so too are the portrayed Algerian women comprised of components that the painting cannot totalize, thus humanizing these individuals. Whereas one can forget that a realist painting does not portray an authentic reality, it is much more difficult to mistake a cubist painting as the “real” world.
Instead of trying to stand in for the reality of these women with a “faithful” and “objective” image of their subjectivities as Delacroix’s realism purports to do, Picasso’s cubism does not impose a usurping reality of these women’s experiences, which allows these Algerian women to exist in lives outside of the canvas. Ultimately, then, the fragmentation of these women on Picasso’s canvas simultaneously alludes to their own, human complexity as well as to the limited power of the painter’s vision. In fact, on Picasso’s canvas, it appears as if the women use their bodies to determine how they are represented, thereby challenging the domination of the patriarchy.

As opposed to the “spectacle” vision reflected in Delacroix’s eyes, when describing Picasso’s paintings (Appendix 3), Djebar emphasizes the kinesthetic experience of the depicted Algerian women, especially in the representations of their dances and their nakedness. For Djebar, the movement and the nudity of these characters demonstrate not only their agency, but also “these women’s rebirth to their own bodies” (Women of Algiers 151), which allows Algerian women to escape from patriarchal repression through the affirmation of their own embodied subjectivities.

Whereas Djebar specifically defines visual aspects of Delacroix’s versions of Women of Algiers for the readers – “three women, two of whom are seated in front of a hookah. The third one, in the foreground, leans her elbow on some cushions” (135), etc. – she does not base her “reading” of Picasso on many of its specific elements as far as they relate to the sense of sight. Instead, she describes Picasso’s series of paintings as a “glorious liberation of space, the bodies awakening in dance, in a flowing outward, the movement freely offered” (149), describing these paintings based on the motion of the women instead of on the vision that the painter may see of them. With Delacroix’s paintings, Djebar’s reader may easily imagine what the bodies of the
Algerian women visually look like much like one can visualize objects in a still life. However, only given Djebars description of Picasso’s versions, one must imagine the painting from the perspective of the women. While one does not have a clear picture of what the painting might look like from a visual perspective, given the words “dance,” “flowing outward,” and “movement,” one does gain a kind of kinesthetic sense of the women’s activity in the scene. In Djebars text, the viewer must, therefore, imagine Picassos painting from the perspective of these women; they must imagine the agency of the women’s movement, instead of on how these women may appear as an image or an object. By describing these paintings based on their motion, Djebars shifts the reading of these works from an objective view of these women from under the male-gaze to the subjective perspective of these women’s corporeal experience of dance. The conversion from visual to kinesthetic readings of these different paintings draws attention to these women’s embodied subjectivity, which breaks away from the patriarchal objectification of women and their bodies.

Moreover, instead of concealing their bodies with clothing, these women expose their nudity to the painter. In turn, Djebar reappropriates the nudity of these women as a kind of embodied gaze that meets the male gaze of the reader-voyeur, thereby attributing women’s bodies with agency that seeks to match male subjectivities with female subjectivities. As critics such as Emer O’Beirne notes, “the women’s pneumatic nakedness or their exposed breasts, buttocks, or genitals might define them as objects of desire” (47), which hypothetically reinforces the patriarchal objectification of women’s bodies. However, Djebar reimagines the signifying capacity of women’s bodies in Picassos works as something more than just objects of a male desire; instead of defining a woman’s body based on a male perspective of what her nakedness may embody, Djebar positively defines a woman based on what it means to and for
women. Despite the cultural injunction of looking at the female body and the *zîna ul-ayani* (the illicit, sexualized female gaze) of Algerian women, Djebar remarks that Picasso figuratively exposes “the other eyes of the [female] body (breasts, sex, navel)” (*Women of Algiers* 139) to the public in his paintings. These female characters’ eyes-that-are-breasts, eye-that-is-sex, and eye-that-is-navel open, then, “as if all of a sudden the whole body were to begin to look around” (139). Through the naked feminine body’s gaze, nude women become “threats to [men’s] exclusive right to stare, to that male prerogative” (139), which inverts the power dynamic between the male and female gaze; Djebar reappropriates woman’s nudity as a form of gaze that stares out into the world and embodies her own kinesthetic agency. The characters in Picasso’s paintings, then, meet the male gaze of the painter with a six-eyed, full-bodied female gaze, which representationally becomes the embodiment of women’s agency. Ultimately, this returning of the naked woman’s gaze highlights the subjectivity of women’s bodies and challenges the monolithic control of the Algerian patriarchy.

Overall, in her analysis of Delacroix and Picasso’s paintings, Djebar resituates the male gaze of the painter to the embodied subjectivity of the Algerian women. Instead of attempting to totalize these women’s experience in an immobilizing, hyper-defined, “realistically” representational domination of their bodies, Djebar shows that these women’s bodies can speak for themselves in Picasso’s paintings. Through the representation of their dances, Djebar shows, Algerian women defy the gaze of the patriarchy, exhibit their own agency, and embody their own multi-faceted subjectivities. Indeed, this shift – from the male gaze to the female body – characterizes the way that Djebar liberates women in her own works, *Women of Algiers* and *Fantasia*. Just as one’s perspective changes from the visual privileging of male subjectivities to the kinesthetic embodiment of female subjectivities in these paintings, so does Djebar’s works
centralize women by writing with, about, and for women’s bodies.

**From the *Harim* to the *Haram*: (Re)Appropriating the Theatre of the Harem**

As critic Michèle Bacholle notes, “though Picasso’s paintings do present liberation to the harem women, they nonetheless remain part of a masculine pictorial discourse” (22). However, Djebar’s works, with their interest in women’s embodied subjectivities, “proceeds one step further toward freedom” (22) for women by demonstrating the liberating double subjectivity of the Algerian female body. Djebar shows women to be doubly subjects in that they use their own bodies (as acting subjects) to define the ways that they are represented (as the subject of their own discourse). One of the ways that Djebar illustrates this double subjectivity of Algerian women is through her reappropriation of the female-exclusive space of the harem. In fact, this author simultaneously evokes the two Arabic words that derive the word “harem” – she takes the concept of the harem, as an exclusionary space of the *harim*, “something forbidden” and transforms it into a liberating space of the *haram*, a “sanctuary” (“Harem”) for women. By subverting the patriarchal perspective of a women’s space as a “forbidden” place, Djebar resituates the cultural imagination of the harem to a liberating, female perspective where women’s bodies are significant, in both meanings of the word. Indeed, Djebar illustrates that in and through the meaning of their bodies as portrayed in the harem, Algerian women challenge patriarchal hierarchies, which affirms women’s agency in the face of conservative masculine ideologies.

For one, in “The Onlookers,” a chapter from *Fantasia*, Djebar deconstructs the binary opposition hierarchies of male over female, outside over inside, and begins to repurpose this domestic space from the *harim* to the *haram*. Instead of defining the value of these identities as
far as they relate to the patriarchy and the patriarchal control over women, Djebar subversively privileges identities that reveal the exposed, female body. In “The Onlookers,” a group of women-voyeuses still wearing the *haïk*, gazes at an all-female wedding celebration and its unveiled dancers. Djebar atypically shows that these external, anonymous, androgynous women are disadvantaged with respect to the denuded, dancing female subjectivities within the domestic space. Ultimately, the author gives agency to the women within the harem, thus inverting Algerian patriarchal structures and using women’s bodies to turn the *harim* to the *haram*.

The entrance of the title characters in “The Onlookers” reestablishes an outside, masculine presence in the otherwise insular, feminine world of the harem, which reinforces that this female-exclusive space still exists under the influence of the patriarchal culture. The onlookers shatter the illusion of female autonomy from within the harem by resituating this female space from a masculine perspective; while an outside presence still has the right to peek inside the harem, the women within the harem still must remain objects of an outside gaze. The fact that women covered in traditional clothing now reimpose the presence of the patriarchy doubly reminds the female guests within the harem of their marginal status. These onlookers simultaneously present the interior women with a figure of the repressed female and figures that implicitly support a reifying male gaze. Despite not having to protect their modesty in the company of women, “because they are excluded” from the wedding celebration, the onlookers do not remove their *haïks* (204), embodying on a microcosmic level the macrocosmic situation of all Algerian women. Even in a completely feminine space, being excluded from the party necessitates the wearing of the veil for these onlookers, which calls to mind the exclusion of women in Algerian society, in general, and the imposition of the veil. The unveiled guests who

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4 A full-bodied garment that only leaves one eye uncovered.
regard the veiled onlookers, therefore, see a kind of reflection of their own rejected, feminine body that results from their systematic exclusion in the greater community.

Furthermore, “these ‘voyeuses’ hide their faces completely except for one eye, so that they remain anonymous in the festivities” (204), which reinforces the generality of their status as a repressed female body. The guests at the wedding know that each woman under the haïk is a distinct woman. Yet, underneath this traditional garb, the guests cannot distinguish one voyeuse from another; through their anonymity, the guests can merely generalize these outside women as voyeuses or onlookers, universalizing the experiences of individual women into the broad category of a repressed female. The onlookers further metaphorically embody repressed femininity in the form of the “curious little triangle” that these women hold with their fingers out of the fabric of their haïks which expose their eyes. As critic Lawrence Huughe analyzes, Djebar’s emphasis of this triangular shape may allude to Algerian women’s “‘eye-that-is-sex’” (Huughe 874), their vaginas; these women, then, are not only anonymous members of a repressed group with respect to the guests at the wedding, these onlookers are symbolically reduced to their feminine biology. This synecdoche of a woman’s vagina standing in for her entire identity represents the patriarchal marginalization of women, where a woman supposedly only contributes to society by bearing and raising (male) children. The guests in this celebration see, then, the onlookers as they themselves are seen as women through the eyes of patriarchal society. Just as the guests microcosmically see the onlookers as anonymous and interchangeable vaginas, so does the rest of society see all of women in the macrocosm of Algeria, thus incarnating women’s second-class citizenship under the patriarchy.

Besides (re)presenting the repressed feminine identity, the onlookers also reiterate the presence of the oppressive masculine identity in society, which further destroys the illusion of
female-power that the guests experience in the harem. In addition to opening the door to the
outside reality of the patriarchy, Djebar states that

“This uninvited guests are allowed into the party as spies! The tiny free eye, shrouded in
white, darts from right to left, inspects the ladies’ jewels, studies the way another dances,
takes a good look at the bride decked out in all her finery, examining the Louis d’or and
pearls given as wedding gifts” (204).

For one, these veiled women act as “spies,” presumably policing the mores of the general
(masculine) community, which reinforces the patriarchy even within the female space of the
harem. The movement of these women’s eyes travels linearly from “right to left,” the same
direction as one reads in Arabic. By following the same proprioceptic movement as the reading
of text, Djebar suggests that the onlookers metaphorically read these women’s bodies into the
same cultural system of Standard Arabic. In an interview, Djebar reflects on the Algerian
postcolonial efforts of universally

“impos[ing] a version of classical Arabic upon the land, an ‘Arabization from above’ that
has become for [Djebar] the linguistic equivalent of war. Official Arabic is an
authoritarian language that is simultaneously a language of men” (Women of Algiers
176).

For Djebar, Standard Arabic represents a top-down governmental approach that privileges
monolingual masculine identities by excluding different Algerian regional oral dialects. As
critic Nada Elia notes, “the women whose voices [Djebar] examines, being illiterate, do not
write” (Elia 15) and can only communicate through regional dialects of Arabic; by extension,
then, not only does Standard Arabic symbolize a patriarchal language for Djebar, it is a language
that actively seeks to mute women’s sole means of communication, their various spoken dialects.
Consequently, through the description of the right to left movement of the eye, the onlookers
silence both women’s spoken and corporeal languages by reading their bodies into the system of
written Standard Arabic, the language endorsed by the Algerian patriarchy.
Furthermore, Djebar’s description of the onlooker’s gaze superimposes things of financial worth (“jewels… finery… Louis d’or and pearls”) on to the female body, thereby assigning women’s bodies to a monetary value in the economic system. Under the onlooker’s gaze, like under the male gaze, the female body becomes just another merchandise to be appraised. The onlooker’s gaze in this wedding celebration, therefore, serves to literally and figuratively remind the non-veiled women of their continued domination by men in this community and, by extension, of their prison-like existence within the harem and within Algerian society. The entrance of the onlookers ultimately enforces the hierarchical gender relations of Algeria upon this harem – by gazing at the veiled women, the guests see avatars of their own repression and, simultaneously, by becoming objects of these voyeuse’s gaze, the female guests experience their own reification and marginality in Algerian society.

Despite the intrusive presence of the onlookers, Djebar’s wedding guests privilege inside and exposed feminine identities by simultaneously excluding the repressed feminine and oppressive masculine identities that the voyeuses embody. In fact, through this newly created female-centric hierarchy of bodies, Djebar reappropriates the female-exclusive space of the harem in order to assert women’s agency. Spatially, the hostess of the celebration keeps the onlookers in the “vestibule” (204), separating these groups of women as either internal (in the midst of the celebration) or external (in the house’s antechamber looking into the celebration). Spatially, the harem symbolizes women’s marginalization in society because it keeps women out of the public (masculine) sphere in a confined, internal space. One conventionally aligns the notions of “external” with “liberating” and “internal” with “imprisonment.” However, by excluding these onlookers who call to mind both women’s place in the patriarchy and the men who enforce it, Djebar privileges the internal, feminine space of the harem. The external
identities look inside the harem, perhaps wishing they were a part of the festivities, whereas the women inside the harem continue to celebrate, which inverts the female guest’s spatial status as a marginalized identity.

Moreover, the onlookers only serve to passively observe the unveiled women in the wedding celebration, which upsets the normal gendered conception of the activity of external and the passivity of internal identities. Through their dancing and movements, the exposed women, in the heart of the harem, are the focus of both these internal and external identities. Significantly, the guests at the celebration are unveiled, whereas the onlookers wear the *haïk*; in this moment in the text, bodies that are recognizably feminine become the center of attention of the external onlookers, whose androgyny and masculinized gaze reinforce the patriarchy within the harem. Instead of covering their femininity in a veil, the women inside the harem affirm their sex and take command of their sensual agency in front of a representationally masculine presence, thus overturning the conventional gendered conception of internal/external agency.

Djebbar suggests that the distinction between the onlookers and the guests is:

“As if they [the wedding guests] were finding a way of forgetting their imprisonment, getting their own back on the men who kept them in the background: the males – fathers, sons, husband – were shut out once and for all by the women themselves, who in their own domain, began to impose the veil on others” (205).

The harem becomes these women’s “domain,” their seat of power, from which they determine which bodies are significant and which identities are privileged. Thus Djebbar illustrates that this female-exclusive space of the harem allows women a kind of power that they are not allowed in the rest of the conservative Algerian society.

As critic Victoria Best notices, these “women still inhabit an enclosed space, but the boundaries [as defined by this space] are not policed by male interdiction” (Best 877); instead of this harem instilling a sense of the *harim*, the forbidden, for these female guests, it can begin to
act as a *haram*, a sanctuary where the interior women at last have the agency that the patriarchy does not permit them. According to Best, “the way we conceive in concrete and material [terms]” is also “the way we conceive in ideological terms” (877) which means that Djebar’s concrete, spatial inversion of the feminine and masculine subjectivities relates to an ideological shift in terms of gender relations in Algeria. Just as these women take hold of their spatial agency from inside the harem, so does Djebar allow these women to imagine taking hold of their ideological agency from the clutches of the patriarchy. Instead of being a prison-like space, in the harem, as this chapter’s narrator expresses, “the streets are far away; men do not exist. Paradise will last forever” (*Fantasia* 204). The women inside the harem distance themselves from the streets and the men who walk them freely by creating an alternative female-emancipatory reality. The narrator further experiences the harem as a “paradise,” meaning that this female-exclusive space evokes a kind of spiritual sanctuary from the patriarchal reality of the rest of Algeria. Ultimately, then, with the entrance of the onlookers, Djebar unconventionally illustrates that the exposed, internal women at the celebration use the harem to reverse their marginality under the patriarchy. This author reappropriates this harem as a female-exclusive *haram* that empowers and liberates women and their exposed bodies, thereby challenging the spatial and ideological domination of the Algerian patriarchy.

In another chapter titled “The Trance,” Djebar shows that the harem not only permits women to invert the domination caused by the patriarchy, it allows women to escape it altogether. This chapter, in which a female narrator (presumably Djebar) remembers the ritualization of dances her maternal grandmother regularly organized and performed within the confines of her home, emphasizes the importance and power of both intra-female and inter-female relations that the harem makes possible. Djebar indicates that the connections with one’s
own feminine body and with other feminine bodies supplants the primacy of the patriarchy by offering women agency only made possible in the female-exclusive sanctuary of the harem.

On an individual level, the narrator’s grandmother’s dance allows this individual to rise above the reality of Algerian society through a trance, thus escaping from the patriarchal limitations on her body. These liberating movements constitute a “slow dance” during which

“the matriarch sway[s] her body from side to side; her hair [comes] undone, and every now and then she [gives] a hoarse grunt… Finally [comes] the crisis: [the narrator’s] grandmother, oblivious to everything, jerk[s] spasmodically to and fro till she [goes] into a trance” (*Fantasia* 144).

Through this matriarch’s movements, through her body, she symbolically transcends the patriarchal reality that oppresses her. While dancing, the grandmother’s “hair [comes] undone,” which marks the beginning of her body’s casting off of patriarchal impositions. Despite the patriarchal expectation of concealing one’s feminine body, the grandmother’s exposed hair embodies the grandmother’s refusal to adhere to this patriarchal ideology through the affirmation of her feminine identity. This character then completes her dance by ending in a trance, thereby accessing an alternate state of being that escapes the physical, temporal, and even ontological restrictions that patriarchal reality imposes on her. Instead of continuing in the lucid, quotidian state of self-awareness that she experiences on a daily basis, this grandmother’s trance permits her to become “oblivious to everything,” to cease to exist consciously in the same relation to patriarchal society, thus phenomenologically liberating her from the Algerian patriarchy’s limitations on her body.

Furthermore, while dancing, Djebar notes that “when [the grandmother danced], she indubitably became queen of the city (145), explicitly connecting this woman’s body with a subversion of the patriarchy. As the “queen of the city,” the narrator’s grandmother figuratively commands a political and cultural power that she does not possess in her everyday life. By
becoming a queen, this character rejects the patriarchy, given that a queen epitomizes an autonomous matriarchal monarch, a feminine individual second to no one. The phrasing of Djebbar’s narrator, moreover, sets up a logical consequence between the grandmother’s body and her patriarchy-contesting identity as a queen: this character “indubitably [becomes] queen of the city” “when” (emphasis, mine) she dances. Although outside of the harem, the patriarchy forces women to detach themselves from their bodies, the seclusion of the harem allows this narrator’s grandmother to gain a kind of regal agency through the affirmation of her own body in dance. Djebbar illustrates that in this sense, the harem acts as a female-exclusive queendom that centralizes Algerian women’s subjectivities instead of marginalizing them from the rest of society. Furthermore, the other women within the harem recognize the grandmother’s embodied feminine agency; they call out “O my lady… O my queen!” (144) during the dance, thus validating the agency of the grandmother within the insular society of the harem. Ultimately, Djebbar reappropriates the exclusion of the harem as a kind of female queendom for Djebbar’s grandmother, to gain and perform her own feminine agency through her body for both herself and for the other women of the harem, which liberates her from the oppression of the patriarchy.

In addition to this personal renaissance of the female body’s agency enacted in the theatre of the harem, Djebbar’s grandmother’s dance literally gives other women power by assigning them roles in her productions. Pragmatically women’s bodies fill all of the important performance, technical, and spectator roles in these productions, thereby giving these women an authority that they do not experience under the masculine reality of the patriarchy. The grandmother, in addition to being “the consummate actress” (144), is the production’s producer; she is the one who “summon[s] the musicians from the city” (143) at her own volition. The
chikhats, or female musicians, provide the musical aspect of this performance.\(^5\) Other women in the house act as technicians, affecting the scenery of the composition by tending braziers of incense and by catching the grandmother when she falls into her trance (144). Furthermore, Djebar’s grandmother only performs in front of women, indicating that she intends her performance solely for a female audience;\(^6\) the narrator’s grandmother’s performance is produced by women, with women, and for women, literally assigning women agency that the patriarchy does not allow them in the rest of society. Women and the concept of womenhood, then, “becomes the object of all gazes and transgresses the prohibition on visibility” (Huughe 869) by exposing women’s bodies to be subjects both on and off the stage. Djebar depicts the harem as a female-exclusive reality where women’s bodies perform in authoritative roles that are not and cannot be assigned to them in the larger Algerian community, thus using the harem as a site of the female body’s emancipation from the patriarchy.

Besides exhibiting the communal and interpersonal empowerment of women through dance, the narrator’s grandmother’s dance symbolically acts as a kind of intergenerational escape from the patriarchal domination of women in Algeria. Specifically, the narrator of this chapter synesthetically sees, in her grandmother’s movements, the lineage of her female ancestors, which marks a departure from the everyday experience of reality similar to the grandmother’s trance. This departure simultaneously invokes Djebar’s family history of oppressed women and demonstrates the patriarchy-subverting continuation of Algerian women through their bodies.

During Djebar’s grandmother’s trance “all the voices of the past, imprisoned in her

\(^5\) Interestingly, in addition to signifying a female musician, in Arabic, the word “chikhat” is the feminine version of “sheikh,” an honorific title for a chief or head of household (Blair vii and viv), which emphasizes the authority of these female musicians.

\(^6\) The grandmother may perform for herself in her own production of her agency as a woman, for the other women in the house, or for some combination of the two. In any case, the audience is completely composed of feminine subjectivities.
present existence, [are] now set free and leap] far away from her” (145), illustrating that this narrator experiences her grandmother’s dance as a emancipatory conjuring up of the past. Given the exclusively female subjectivities in the harem and the fact that the woman dancing is the mother of the narrator, it is probable that “the voices of the past” refer to the maternal voices of this family’s past. The grandmother’s body serves, therefore, as the gateway between the women of this family’s past, their present (in the present agency of the grandmother through her movements), and their future, embodied by the narrator as a young, female spectator. Yet instead of perpetuating the female oppression across generations, the grandmother’s dance liberates them from the patriarchy. Symbolically, the voices that were “imprisoned in [the grandmother’s] present existence” are emancipated through her dance (145). In the grandmother’s “present existence” under the patriarchy, deceased women are forgotten, due to their “unremarkable” domestic role at home prescribed by the patriarchy. The invocation of these women through the narrator’s grandmother’s dance frees, then, the deceased women from their forgotten non-existence under the weight of the patriarchy.

Moreover, the grandmother’s body representationally frees these women from patriarchal oppression through synesthesia by defying a systematic, rational experience of the world that characterizes masculine existence. The epithet, “voices of the past,” appeals to the narrator’s sense of hearing. However, these voices “leapt far away” from the grandmother’s trance induced movements, thereby appealing to the narrator’s sense of sight. The mixing of the narrator’s perception of sight and sound indicates that this character encounters her ancestors synesthetically through her grandmother’s body. The poetic mixing of multiple sensations that the narrator experiences due to her grandmother’s trance subverts the masculine understanding of both language and experience as uniform, coherent entities. Ultimately, through synesthesia,
Djebbar destabilizes the structure of language just like the narrator’s grandmother’s trance physically destabilizes the epistemological structure of reality that the patriarchy endorses.

This use of synesthesia, in turn, calls to mind French feminist Hélène Cixous’s theory that “women write with their body” (Cixous 47). Djebbar problematizes the supposed cerebral (ergo masculine) practice of writing reality detached from one’s body in this scene by appealing to the simultaneous sensations of the narrator’s body. Through the medium of her own body, the narrator’s grandmother writes herself into the history of the harem and of Fantasia. Similarly, just as the grandmother expresses her ideas with her body through dance, so does the narrator receive the grandmother’s dance-ideas with the different senses of her own body. The narrator expresses, then, her own embodied feminine reading by synesthetically understanding the grandmother’s dance. Moreover, Djebbar’s writing invokes synesthesia for the reader through the different senses the narrator experiences – both the imagined kinesthetic movements of the dance, as well as the visual experience of reading the text – thus calling attention to the reader’s own embodiment. Taken as a whole, the authors of these various ideas (the grandmother, the narrator, Djebbar herself) as well as their narratees (the female audience, the narrator, the actual reader) all utilize synesthesia as a more feminine, embodied discourse to make sense of what they perceive. Synesthesia becomes, then, Djebbar’s means to destabilize the patriarchy within the narrative as well as in the reading of the text, privileging, instead, feminine, embodied subjectivities.

As for the narrator, who embodies future feminine subjectivities through her role as spectator, the narrator says that “[she] felt [she] was following the dancer into some realm of frenzy” (145). This sentiment represents the narrator’s own acceptance of the pluralistic tradition of women in her grandmother’s dance and consequently, its continuation. Not only does the
narrator reiterate the frenetic aspect of this patriarchy-defying invocation of women, but she
figuratively follows her grandmother into it – the narrator’s grandmother’s dance indoctrinates
the granddaughter into an alternate feminine reality from the everyday experience of women’s
oppression in Algeria. By following her grandmother (and by extension, the family’s lineage of
women) into this realm of synesthetic frenzy, Djebar suggests, therefore, that through her
grandmother’s movements, the narrator viscerally escapes the confines of the Algerian
patriarchy. In turn, by representing this dance in her literature, Djebar personally continues this
feminine legacy as the narrator learned it from the grandmother by recalling the transhistorical
lineage of one’s female ancestors and perhaps inspiring other women to do the same.

In both “The Onlookers” and “The Trance” it is important to note that these subversions
of the patriarchy only can take place due to the female-exclusive space of the harem. On the one
hand, the harem physically marginalizes the importance of women in society by excluding
women’s bodies from the public eye. Yet, on the other hand, Djebar’s female protagonists use
their separation from the rest of society to establish their own female-centric hierarchies and
epistemologies that contest the primacy of the patriarchy. Ultimately, Djebar transforms the
harem-as-prison, the harim, into a feminine sanctuary, the haram, where women have the agency
to use their bodies to construct their own reality. This reappropriation of the harem thus
emancipates these Algerian women and their bodies from their patriarchal repression in
conservative Algerian society.

Women of Algiers and the Hammam:
(Re)Contextualizing Algerian Women’s Bodies in African Commonalities of Dance

In English, the hammam, or Turkish bath, denotes “a bath in which a person passes
through a series of rooms that are increasingly hot and then has a massage and takes a cold
shower” (“Turkish bath”). In conservative Algerian culture, this place connotes the only locale outside of the harem that the patriarchy permits women to visit. As critic Victoria Best writes, “at the time Djebar was writing [Women of Algiers], Algeria adhered strictly to Islamic custom, and women were… allowed out only once a week, often at night, to visit the baths” (874). The hammam is gender segregated and acts as the sole semi-public space for women to socialize with each other outside of the harem.

Unlike the harem, the hammam exists simultaneously as both a public and private space; while it encloses and segregates women from masculine society, this public bath still brings together women in the region to form an insular group. In fact, as Huughe states, the hammam may constitute for Algerian women “the ideal meeting-place, sheltered from the male gaze, in which women can at last speak and talk to one another without the veil” (868). In the hammam, Djebar textually unveils the importance of Algerian women’s bodies by highlighting the relationships between each of these females with their own bodies as well as with the bodies of the other bathers in this community. In the initial eponymous short story of Women of Algiers, Djebar emphasizes two major characteristics of this female-exclusive space that allow women to connect with each other and escape their marginality in Algeria: the nakedness of this community of women and the way that these individuals embody Africanist commonalities of dance. These features of the hammam allow Djebar to imagine and to illustrate a new, more central role for women in this society, which exists distinctly and simultaneously within the greater context of Algeria.

Throughout “Women of Algiers,” and especially in the section that takes place in the hammam, Djebar devotes special attention to the interaction between nude women’s bodies, thereby affirming the language and importance of women’s bodies in a society that stigmatizes
them. Djebbar does not spend much time describing the outward appearance of many characters in *Women of Algiers*. However, in the *hammam*, Djebbar carefully notes Anne’s “heavy breasts, which sometimes weighed her down,” her friend Baya’s “plump, white skin,” (*Women of Algiers* 29), the masseuse’s “long, pendulous breasts” (30), her “wrinkled belly full of spots” (31), and even shows other women shaving their pubic areas (31). Critic Pamela Hoffer argues that, in this respect, Djebbar “exaggerate[es]” the “unveiled, naked bodies in the *hammam*” (21) in order to represent in her own work the same kind of denuded female-liberation that Djebbar sees in Picasso’s *Women of Algiers*. Yet, Djebbar’s depiction of women’s nakedness in the *hammam* goes further than Picasso does in his paintings. Picasso depicts each woman in a distinct, somewhat isolated area of the painting (Appendix 3), whereas “there is a dynamic interaction between bodies in [Djebbar’s] *hammam* – massaging, pouring water on each other” (Hoffer 22), grooming each other’s hair, and other forms of social, physical contact. While Picasso and Djebbar both expose the nakedness of women as individuals in female-exclusive spaces, Djebbar emphasizes the interaction of the community of nude female bodies – the *comm-nudity* – as a whole, thereby surpassing Picasso’s sensual-corporeal renaissance of individual bodies. Through this feminine *comm-nudity* made possible in this female-exclusive space, Djebbar allows these Algerian women to reappropriate the significance of their own bodies. By showing their own female bodies and by being shown other bodies without the stigma of the male gaze, these bathers begin a dialogue that privileges embodied, female subjectivities. Djebbar uses this affirmed, embodied discourse of the *comm-nudity* to centralize women and their experience in Algeria and to liberate these women from their repression under the Algerian patriarchy.

In the *hammam*, Djebbar figuratively opens the aforementioned body-eyes of these Algerian women, the “breasts, sex, navel” (*Women of Algiers* 139) in their *comm-nudity* to a kind
of shared feminine experience that embodies female subjectivity. By representing a whole group of naked women in the *hammam*, Djebbar shows these women assume not only an embodied feminine gaze, as previously discussed in Picasso’s paintings, but also what Sklar defines as an “empathic kinesthetic perception” (32) of the naked female body. For Sklar, “empathic kinesthetic perception” means that instead of just watching or thinking about a certain kind of movement or embodied state-of-being, one *participates* in that same movement or embodied state-of-being. Consequently, instead of just gazing at naked female bodies, Djebbar’s women in the *hammam* actually share in the experience of being naked, thus leveling any power imbalance of gazer/object of gaze. Sklar notes that “whereas visual perception implies an ‘object’ to be perceived from a distance with the eyes alone, empathic kinesthetic perception implies a bridging between subjectivities” (32). According to Sklar, gaze theory always necessitates a power dynamic of gazer/object of gaze. Simply by also being naked, the bathers in the *hammam* share in the subjectivity of one another as embodied Algerian females. These women do not only see each other as mirror images of each other’s gaze; with their own bodies, these women all kinesthetically experience the sensation of being a material Algerian woman through the “empathic kinesthetic perception” of this *comm-nudity*, thereby centralizing the experience of women’s body in Algerian society.

Moreover, in an interview, Djebbar herself states that the only solution that she can see for women

“in countries like [hers]… is that there are two women, that both of them speak, and that one tells what she sees in the other. The solution is found in women’s relations. [She] announce[s] that in [her] texts, [she is] trying to concretize that in their construction, with their multiple mirrors” (Mortimer 205, translation mine).

Djebbar’s statement echoes a similar idea in the section that immediately follows the scene in the *hammam*. Sarah recounts:
“I see no other way out for us [women] except through an encounter like this: a woman speaking in front of another one who’s watching; does the one who’s speaking tell the story of the other one with the devouring eyes, with the black memories, or is she describing her own dark night […]? She who watches, is it by means of listening, of listening and remembering that she ends up seeing herself, with her own eyes, unveiled at last…” (Women of Algiers 47).

In these solutions, through their interaction, Algerian women reciprocally transcribe one another’s experience. These women are doubly subjects – not only do they show their agency by defining, and in a sense, shaping one another’s experience as an Algerian woman, they are both the subjects of each other’s discourses. Even as a listener or a viewer, which are traditionally considered passive roles in a dialogue, each Algerian woman “ends up seeing herself, with her own eyes, unveiled at last,” as if in a mirror, thereby illustrating the self-inscription and active participation of the viewer/listener women. Sarah’s solution to women’s repression directly follows the scene in the hammam, which obliges the reader to reevaluate the importance of the bather’s comm-nudity. In the hammam, not only do these bathers literally see themselves “unveiled” as embodied women through the mirror-like experience of their naked bodies, with their “empathic kinesthetic perception” of being naked, all of the women in the hammam are doubly subjects of their own, feminine discourse. By virtue of the comm-nudity, Djebar demonstrates and theatricalizes the embodied subjectivity of these Algerian women in the hammam, thus liberating women from the repressive discourse of the patriarchy.

With respect to the specific physical exchanges themselves, though Djebar does not explicitly detail the precise movements of the bathers, one can easily imagine the defining movement of the hammam to be a smoothing, open-palmed contact between bodies. Djebar alludes to this kind of movement throughout the women’s journey through each of the different rooms in the hammam, which suggests that this movement permeates the entire experience in this bathhouse. In fact, one may argue that that this gesture, a smoothing open-palmed
movement, may even corporeally exemplify these women’s experiences in the *hammam.* Consequently, one can frame these women’s experience of the *hammam* within dance ethnographer Alan Lomax’s system of choreometrics. In light of Lomax’s *Palm Play,* one can better understand the intrafemale healing that occurs in the skin-to-skin contact between women in the *hammam.*

Lomax’s system of choreometrics explains this open-palmed contact between bathers as these women’s corporeal means to heal and support each other together through *comm-nudity.* Through choreometrics, Lomax treats dance like one would treat any other cultural artifact by situating it within the cultural matrixes of a group of people. Cultures around the world, he argues, embed dance within their historical, geographic, economic, gender, governmental, and other institutional systems. Dance, then, kinesthetically embodies the way that cultures understand their worlds. In his video, *Palm Play,* Lomax identifies an open palm as one of the primary ways that dancers around the globe use the palms in dance. This usage of the palm suggests a “comforting, healing,” traditionally feminine smoothing gesture that is most prevalent in cultures where women assume important roles in ceremonies or produce most of a society’s food (Lomax). With this kind of palm play in mind, one can then read Djebar’s *hammam* as a locale that elicits this kind of female-empowering gesture, thereby building and strengthening the Algerian women’s *comm-nudity.*

In the steam room, “Baya translate[s] for Anne, while she was rubbing her breasts with her hands” (30). In the second part of this phrase, it is ambiguous exactly to whom the pronoun “she” and the subsequent possessive pronouns refer to. Arguably, the most likely reading is that it is Anne who rubs her own breasts with her hands. However, Baya is the subject of the preceding part of the sentence, which means that it is equally possible that while Baya translates
for the French woman, the former also rubs the latter’s breasts in a massaging movement, thus establishing the two women’s *comm-nudity*. In either case, the phrase “rubbing her breasts with her hands” most easily calls to mind an open-palmed, unmediated, skin-on-skin movement of the flesh of the palm on the breasts. The reader most likely imagines this same, open-palmed massaging movement on top of the marble slab with the masseuse’s “shoulders and knotted arms sliding down on the neck and further down to the breasts of the bather” (30). In the final room, Djebar notes Anne’s embarrassment “when a child, perched in the arms of a woman next to [the French woman], suddenly began to caress her naked chest” (33). Again, Djebar does not outright explain that this child caresses Anne’s chest with an open palm. Even so, the female-female touching happening throughout the different rooms in the *hammam* – the steam room, the massaging area, and the last room of the bathhouse – is easily imagined as an open-palmed movement: massage, stroke, or caress. Djebar reiterates throughout this scene that this open-palmed, smoothing gesture best characterizes the interactions of the women’s *comm-nudity* in the *hammam*, thereby attributing it with the healing and comforting physicality of women’s bodies.

This type of palm play is largely uncharacteristic in Algeria, whose dances and cultural movements predominantly represent the “restraint and alienation of a stratified society” (Lomax). The Algerian patriarchy, with its male-dominated governmental, economic, and religious institutions, more typically permits a kind of palm play that Lomax terms “in-turning” (Lomax), hand gestures that briefly reveal the dancer’s palm outward toward the audience and then turn them back towards the dancer’s body hidden from view. In Algeria, as evidenced by the traditional concealment of women’s bodies (and by extension, their hands), “the palm with its nurturing, sharing, erotic messages is sparingly presented” (Lomax), thus culturally incarnating the policing of the female body. This cultural norm of strictly regulating how much dancers can
expose their palms in dance or in other daily activities reflects the ways that the Algerian patriarchy strictly limits the exposure of women and their bodies.

Djebar’s insistence on the women’s open palm play within this space further shows that she distinguishes the hammam from the rest of Algeria. In fact, these women use the “comforting, healing … nurturing, sharing” power of a smoothing, open palm on each other in their own comm-nudity. Not only have these women created a sub-culture that centralizes the experience of women in society, but this open-palm play also indicates that these bathers are physically, mutually supportive of one another, in general. Ultimately, then, through both the double subjectivity of womanhood and the healing and comforting gestures of the open palm in this scene, Djebar shows that these Algerian women use the hammam to build their own comm-nudity.

In addition to stressing the comm-nudity of these bathers, Djebar’s works textually embody many of the commonalities that dance critics Kariamu Asante and Robert Farris Thompson identify as aspects of an Africanist aesthetic of movement and art. As an Algerian writer, Djebar implicitly writes within many of the cultural structures of Algeria as an African nation. According to Elia, in addition to acting as an Algerian griot – a storyteller that uses poetry, music, and dance to entertain and to maintain the oral history of societies in parts of West Africa – Djebar uses many African musical themes in her works, such as polyphony, polysemy, and the production of community (Elia 8). “Rooted in the Africana cultural heritage,” Elia argues, Djebar’s works decentralize phallogocentric discourses, such as colonialism and the Islamic patriarchy, and provide women with “empowerment, liberation, and self-determination” (9). Elia, however, primarily focuses on the orality of Djebar’s oeuvre – Djebar’s poetic and musical language. In doing so, this critic, like many others, neglects the impact of Djebar’s
African cultural heritage on the semiology of the body in this author’s “trances, dances, and vociferations” (Fantasia 180). As dance critic Jacqui Malone notes, “most European conceptions of art,” such as Elia’s in this example, “separate music from dance and both music and dance from the social situations that produced them” (Malone 10). “Most traditional African conceptions, on the other hand, couple music with one or more other art forms, including dance” (10), which necessitates a more holistic, body-conscious approach to looking at Djebar’s representations of these art forms within her works. Djebar does not only write within African musical traditions, as Elia argues; this author simultaneously writes with culturally embodied African traditions of dance in mind.

One African artistic commonality that Djebar elucidates in the hammam is the polyrhythm of women’s movements – the interlaying of many different rhythms within the same song or dance. Her attention to the rhythms of women in this section warrants an interpretation of these daily activities as a kind of dance inside this bathhouse that represents the female experience of living in Algeria. Djebar shows that in the hammam, these characters (re)create their experience as Algerian women in this nation, using their individual body’s rhythms to demonstrate both their personal embodiment and their connection to the rhythms of the larger female group through dance. Through the different and complementary rhythms of this dance, Djebar indicates, then, that these women symbolically challenge their repression in this society by forming a community within the hammam that privileges both individual and group-wide female subjectivity with women’s bodies.

Anne, the French woman, makes explicit the causal relationship between the rhythms of the bathers and dance in this scene by observing the different women’s motions and remembering “the same rhythmic movement of shoulders” in a memory of a dance she
participated in earlier that year (35). Like most of Djebar’s readers (given that this work was originally written in French), Anne is foreign to this scene. Djebar juxtaposes the rhythmic movements of the *hammam* and Anne’s western experience of dance in order to draw parallels between dance and the otherwise unfamiliar experience of a Turkish bathhouse to Western readers. When Djebar notes that the masseuse works “rhythmically” and that “the two women on the marble slab high above the other bathers became entwined in a panting rhythm” (*Women of Algiers* 30), this author invites the reader to experience these rhythms as one would in a dance.

These two different sets of rhythms complement each other and respectively demonstrate the agency of all of the women in the *hammam*. Conventionally, these two groups – the massager and the massaged – represent the two possibilities of agency in Algeria: either one’s body is an acting subject or a passive object. Either one has the agency to manipulate bodies, such as the patriarchs who shut away their women relatives, or one’s body is the object of those manipulations, as in the case of the women in the harem. Yet, while one would expect the individuals being massaged to be passive in comparison with the masseuse’s activity, Djebar deconstructs this binary opposition. By placing the women receiving the massage “high above the other bathers” and having them vocalize in a “panting rhythm” Djebar sets the scene as if these women were on a stage for the other bathers to view and to hear. Instead of existing as objects in the *hammam*, these women turn into actors who affirm their corporeality and vocalize their pleasure during the massage. Both the masseuse and the receivers of the massages become subjects through their own rhythms and these women thus distinguish themselves as individuals in the female-exclusive space of the *hammam*.

Furthermore, as Asante states about African polyrhythm in dance and in music, while these women assert their individuality through their different rhythms, “they remain dynamically
related” (Asante 146) to each other within the structure of the group. Hoffer echoes Asante’s understanding of polyrhythm when discussing the *hammam* in Djebar’s works, noting that “there is a dynamic interaction between bodies in the *hammam* – massaging, pouring water on each other” (Hoffer 22), (perhaps unintentionally) recognizing the importance of this African dance aesthetic in the feminine intercorporeal experience in the *hammam*. Though the massager and the massaged participate in the rhythms of the massage differently, they both contribute their polyrhythms to the overarching experience of the massage and, by extension, to the experience of the *hammam* as a whole. Ultimately, through their different rhythmic movements, these bathers simultaneously act as individuals and contribute to the polyrhythm of the entire group in the *hammam*.

As an institution, the *hammam* culturally exemplifies the polyrhythms of women’s bodies in Algerian communities. As previously noted, “at the time Djebar was writing [*Women of Algiers*], Algeria adhered strictly to Islamic custom, and women were… allowed out only once a week, often at night, to visit the baths” (Best 874). In terms of rhythm, then, Algerian women experience the *hammam* on a weekly basis. In a later work, *Ombre Sultane* (A Sister to *Scheherazade*, in English) Djebar goes so far as to name it “the weekly bath” (*Ombre* 163, translation mine), thus defining the excursion to the bath solely based on the rhythmic-temporal implications on women’s lives. In addition to the weekly rhythm of the bath, the *hammam* is the site of *ghusl*, an ablution of the entire body (Bouguarche 211). In Islam, Muslims must perform *ghusl* after “sexual intercourse, seminal emission, menstruation, or childbirth” (“*ghusl*”), which mark many of major the corporeal events in a human’s life. Furthermore, given the periodicity of menstrual cycles, women are enjoined to further rhythmically experience the *hammam* on a monthly basis and may have even more rhythms of visiting the *hammam* depending on their
sexual and reproductive practices. Therefore, as well as setting this scene in a place where Muslims and their bodies are directly related to each other in Islamic culture, Djebar implicitly interlays the polyrhythms of the different times Algerian women are expected to visit the *hammam*.

This scene, taken as whole, shows a dancing community of individuals that “complement and mediate” (Asante 146) the entire feminine-group dynamic through the multi-layering of individual and institutional rhythms. This female community in the *hammam* doubly liberates women from the isolated anonymity of exterior, masculine space and serves to affirm the corporeality of women in this insular community and Algerian society at large. The bathers in the *hammam* simultaneously attain their subjectivities as individuals through their unique rhythms (whether it is the rhythms of their menstruations or the rhythms of their breath in a massage) and participate in a group collective of other women. The *hammam* becomes, then, a female-emancipatory space that insists on the subjectivity and corporeality of women, as opposed to the denial of women’s bodies under the Algerian patriarchy.

**Djebar and Epic Memory:**
(Re)Telling Algerian Women’s History With and Through the Female Body

Throughout *Women of Algiers, Fantasia*, and indeed, most of her works, Djebar invokes another Africanist artistic commonality: epic memory. According to Asante, in Africanist art forms, epic memory is

> “a memory retrieved that delivers to the viewer the pathos, feeling, and experience without telling the literal story… It unearths the emotional feeling realm without limiting the artists or the audience. It is nonspecific, pertaining only to the illusion of the experience and not the actuality of it” (Asante 149).

For Asante, one example of epic memory is African American choreographer Dianne McIntyre’s
ability to relate the emotional experience of The Great Migration of African Americans away from the South in the 20th century in her piece *Up North* without having to literally reenact it (149). With respect to epic memory in Africanist art, the greater import of the work may transcend the actual text of the piece in its conscious or unconscious connectivity to one’s historical, “epic” community. In Djebar’s own work, this author uses epic memory to refute women’s marginality in Algerian society by (re)telling the intergenerational memory and experience of Algerian women despite the patriarchy’s attempt to efface it.

In *Women of Algiers’s* “Nostalgia of the Horde,” a grandmother tells her female grandchildren about her experiences growing up and embeds within her personal story the experiences of the grandchildren’s paternal great-grandmother’s experiences. In doing so, Djebar traces these characters’ female lineage back four generations. Djebar herself states in an interview that she wrote this short story to show that “woman’s memory spans centuries” (Zimra 170). Djebar remembers her own grandmother who

“would talk of an obscure, forgotten old woman she used to know who used to talk of the old days. This is precisely how Algerian women ‘relay’ the past: they tell the (his)story [in the polyvalent French sense – simultaneously “history” and “story”] of colonialization, but tell it otherwise” (171).

This Algerian author assumes her role in this female-centric epic memory by (re)telling the tales of her female ancestors for future audiences. This kind of epic memory ensures, then, the past-present-future of women; just as Djebar and her Algerian grandmother tell (predominantly) women about their female ancestors to future generations, so will future generations tell of what is now the present. Djebar implies that this female epic memory resists patriarchal culture by ensuring the transmission of female-centric memories that explain the importance of women across time. Furthermore, by telling the history of Algeria “otherwise,” that is to say from the perspective of women, Djebar uses the epic memory of Algerian women to affirm the
importance of women in the history of this nation. Djebar not only gives voice to the unacknowledged females that came before her (bringing up the “pathos, feeling, and experience” of all Algerian women in this imagined short story), but she uses these fictional voices to reexamine the supposedly marginal experience of women in Algeria, thus centralizing women and their experience.

The melding of genres in Fantasia exemplifies the importance of epic memory in Djebar’s works through the polyphony of its form. In this work Djebar interweaves chapters of history, women’s testimonies, and semi-autobiography together, blurring the distinctions between these genres. Textually, Djebar gives equal space to primary documents by historical, predominantly masculine figures such as Eugène Fromentin, Aimable Pélissier, and Saint-Arnaud as she does to the testimonies of women affected by the Algerian War of Independence in the sections titled “Voice.” This intentional polyphony of historical and anecdotal voices, which span more than a century of human history, creates a kind of cacophony that levels the privilege of the masculine voice of history over the oral history of women. Djebar’s superimposition of history and woman testimony treats the women’s narratives as the history of Algeria, thereby centralizing the stories of women in the history that generally ignores them. Likewise, in Djebar’s own words, the polyphonic structure of Fantasia “permitted [her] to interlace [her] own voice with the voices of other women. That gave [her] the courage to talk about [her]self intimately” (Mortimer 203, translation mine). As an Algerian woman, Djebar believes that she was most able to find her autobiographical voice in the midst of the voices of the other Algerian women in the community. Ultimately, then, in Fantasia, Djebar treats the epic, collective memory of women to redefine both history and self, demonstrating the importance of this Africanist aesthetic in the structure of Djebar’s work.
Given the significance of epic memory throughout Djebar’s oeuvre, when reading the hammam scene in “Women of Algiers,” one must interpret these specific women’s bodies as Djebar’s medium to express the epic memory of Algerian women. Djebar does not explicitly reference the ancestry of women in the hammam. Instead in the spirit of the “nonspecific” Africanist commonality of epic memory, the women’s bodies in the hammam do deliver “the pathos, feeling, and experience [of Algerian women] without telling the literal story” (Asante 149). Without having to overtly tell the reader about the impact of the Algerian women’s history in the bathhouse, the bathers nevertheless invoke a kind of female legacy through the medium of their female bodies, which evoke and resonate with the feelings and the experiences, the epic memory, of the women ancestors that came before them.

As a traditional female-exclusive space, the hammam implicitly recalls the timeless history of the women who have used it. Djebar notes both that this particular hammam seems “ancient” and that it is in a state of disrepair (29). In light of the fact that the most probable reason this place needs repairs is its age, Djebar emphasizes that hammam is old and is an artifact from the past. Additionally, in this scene, Algerian women are currently still using this hammam, indicating that this bathhouse is rooted in the present as well as the past. Given the cultural significance of this building, it is very likely that the hammam will continue to survive in the future, which means that Djebar’s hammam seems to exist atemporally. Its only feature that changes in time, as well as its only source of continuity, is the women who populate it. This ageless quality of the hammam reflects the timeless quality of women’s epic memory; Djebar uses the fact that Algerian women bathe, have bathed, and likely will always bathe in the hammam to represent the past-present-future of women through the communal, intergenerational sharing of their feelings and experiences. Just as the hammam shelters the physical bodies of
women across time, the epic memory of Algerian women ensures the continuation of women’s history past, present, and future through the (re)invocation of their feelings and experiences. Epic memory gives women the same kind of double-subjectivity that they experience in the nakedness of the *comm-nudity* – as we have previously seen in the reciprocal empathic perception of the two women interacting together while naked. Through these reciprocally shared feelings and experiences, Algerian women are both the storytellers and the protagonists of their own stories. By extension, Djebar shows that this double subjectivity stops women from having to efface themselves in patriarchal culture by centralizing women and the female experience in Algeria, which illustrates that through epic memory, these women are able to resist the domination of the Algerian patriarchy.

In a last point of consideration about women’s invocation of feelings and experiences of other women in the *hammam*, Djebar features three women in particular in this section: the injured water-carrier and torture-victims, Leila and Sarah. Each of these women’s bodies literally and figuratively bear scars from their struggles living in the patriarchal culture of Algeria; the injured water-carrier’s hands, Sarah’s burn scar, and Leila’s barrenness testify to each woman’s respective brokenness in the midst of an unsympathetic masculine society. However, Djebar demonstrates that each of these women reconciles, in a sense, their own injured bodies and find mutual support through the community of other women, thus starting on their own paths to recovery. By extension, for Djebar, these women’s initial steps toward recovery symbolically illustrate the importance of affirming the female body under the Algerian patriarchy so that Algerian women can begin to rehabilitate into new, female-centric communities.

In the ambulance on the way to the hand surgeon, on the one hand, (pun intended), Djebar associates the water-carrier’s traumatized hand with the patriarchal ideal of women’s
bodies. In fact, the right hand, “turbaned in white, larger by far than a baker’s board” (Women of Algiers 37), uses the concealment, associations with food, and immobility of this injured right hand to subtly link this individual’s physical pain with the female gender norms as prescribed by the patriarchy. Djebar conceals the hand (and by extension, this woman’s body) with a white cloth, thereby respecting the patriarchal expectations for women to veil their bodies in public. Yet, Djebar describes this hand-veil as a turban, which traditionally is an article of clothing worn by men. This “turbaned” right hand, therefore, renders this character’s hand masculine while it simultaneously denies it its embodied femininity.

With respect to Islam, Djebar’s description of this hand also connotes eating and the nourishment of food. Djebar states that the right hand is bigger than a “baker’s board,” implicitly comparing the hand with the nourishment that bakers produce off of their boards. Moreover, in the Hadith, which constitutes arguably the most important religious text in Islam besides the Qur’an, Muhammad the Prophet is reported to have said that: “When any of you eats, he should eat with his right hand, and when he drinks, he should drink with his right hand” (‘Umar). The water-carrier’s right hand, therefore, connotes the hand that provides nourishment to her body and plays upon the patriarchal expectation that the ideal woman is an individual who nourishes, epitomized by the figure of a mother.

Lastly, this character’s swollen hand also embodies the immobility of the Algerian patriarchy’s ideal woman. The building up and blockage of the body’s fluids cause the swelling in this woman’s injured hand. One can then interpret the hand’s swolleness as a symbol of Muslim women’s immobility, as if this character’s swollen hand were restraining the fluids inside of it like a harem. Ultimately, this patriarchal ideal woman, as symbolized by the water-
carrier’s right hand, is figuratively (and perhaps literally) broken. Though Djebar does not explicitly describe the hand’s exact trauma, it nevertheless causes this woman an extreme amount of physical and spiritual pain. This pain, by extension, reflects the trauma of being subjugated to the masculine ideal of being a woman in conservative and patriarchal Algeria.

In contrast, “the [water-carrier’s] other [hand is] dwarfed by veins, wrinkles colored by old henna, the palm that massages… the flesh of bathers…” (Women of Algiers 37), thereby representing Djebar’s own ideal of womanhood through the affirmation of women’s natural, physical bodies and the communities of women. Instead of concealing women’s bodies, Djebar exposes this character’s left hand, showing its “veins” and “wrinkles,” which metaphorically insists on women’s authentic embodiment. The water-carrier’s “turbaned” right hand only shows the concealed form of her hand, hiding its uniqueness and imperfections just as the veil conceals a woman’s natural body. Effectively, the Algerian patriarchy gives primacy to the Bakhtinian ideal of the classical body, a body that dance critic Janet Wolff mentions has “no orifices and engages in no base bodily functions. It is like a classical statue” (84). By turbaning the left hand, the patriarchy reduces women’s bodies to a purely aesthetic value of an object, separating the “base” processes of the body from the patriarchal ideal of feminine beauty. This water-carrier’s left hand, however, affirms her “grotesque body,” a body that embraces its appetites, as well as its sexuality, infirmity, and age. Instead of reducing the left hand to a flawless, uniform image, Djebar’s masseuse’s left hand shows its wrinkles and veins, affirming the woman’s age and her own embodiment. With this left hand, Djebar thus representationally liberates women from the objectification of the patriarchy; just as the masseuse’s left hand reveals her age and the natural effects of time on her body, so does Djebar imagine that women should be able to reveal their entire bodies. This author symbolically breaks from the patriarchal ideal of the objectified
classical body of women in favor of women’s authentic, “grotesque” embodiment, thereby
demonstrating a more “natural” subjectivity of women.

Furthermore, as opposed to the immobility of the fluids inside the swollen right hand,
Djebar exhibits the veins and the henna of this woman’s left hand, emphasizing the circulation
and connectivity of women’s bodies. Symbolically, given henna’s longevity in Arabian cultures,
the water-carrier’s henna-stained hand reinforces the continuation of women’s traditions.
Marilyn Cvitanic explains that in Arab countries, “for over five thousand years… generations of
women” have been using henna as a “symbol of good luck, health and sensuality” (Cvitanic).
This female, intergenerational use of henna connects women with over five thousand years of
feminine cultural history that symbolically benefits women with “good luck, health, and
sensuality.” Similarly, from a physical standpoint, the water-carrier’s veins, as her body’s
pathways for blood cells, ensure the continual movement of her body’s cells and the interrelation
of the body’s entire circulatory system. Consequently, one can interpret the prevalence of the
veins in this character’s left hand as the mobility of women and their integration into the larger
national system of Algeria. Whereas the patriarchal ideal of women swells and isolates women
from society and from other women, through the veins and the henna, the masseuse’s left hand
gives women the right to circulate and culturally connect with each other.

Djebar also highlights the fact that while the right palm is “turbaned in white,” it is “the
other [left] palm that massages… the flesh of the bathers” (Women of Algiers 37), which
reemphasizes the beneficial physicality of women’s community through the symbolism of this
left hand. She reestablishes that this open palm – which, as previously discussed in Lomax’s
Palm Play, incarnates an inclusive, healing, characteristically feminine use of the hand –
connects the masseuse to the flesh of other female bathers. Through the masseuse’s hand, Djebar
reiterates that this character symbolically supports other Algerian women and simultaneously integrates herself into the female community. By referencing the masseuse’s occupation in the left hand, Djebar further uses this woman’s body to incarnate this character’s livelihood and economic independence from the patriarchy. In her massages, this masseuse uses her body, especially her hands, to massage other women and, by extension, to earn her own living. As a woman who ran away from her husband and isolated herself from her family (42), this woman’s occupation as a masseuse became her only means to survive in society. This character solely depends on women (both on the proprietress of the *hammam* and on her female clients) for her own economic stability, as opposed to depending on her husband or the male members of her family. Consequently, by aligning the left hand with her occupation as a masseuse, Djebar illustrates a female-centric means of living, thus economically breaking away from the patriarchy. Just as Lomax notes that cultures whose women play important roles in ritual and/or in a society’s food production symbolically expose women’s palms in movement, Djebar reveals this woman’s left hand to demonstrate and affirm her independence from masculine control. As opposed to the right hand, the masseuse’s left hand illustrates, then, this woman’s affirmation of her physical body and her codependence on the community of women.

Lastly, when the masseuse learns after her operation that, thanks to her female hand surgeon, her right hand “would heal” (47), Djebar utilizes the corporeal healing of the masseuse’s hand to represent this woman’s ideological shift from the broken patriarchal model (the traumatized right hand) to the model of women’s embodied and interdependent community in Algeria (the healthy left hand). Ultimately, the recovery of the water-carrier’s hands symbolizes a more female-centric Algerian future, showing that women and their bodies can restore other women’s physical and psychological wholeness out of the trauma caused by the
Another character Djebar features in “Women of Algiers” is Sarah, whom internalizes her trauma with silence. Sarah, “the silent one” (45), arguably is more reserved than any of the other characters, representing her own submission to the patriarchy. For one, Sarah’s silence is passed down from her mother. This character’s mother, as Faulkner notes, “was very quiet and feared repudiation, perhaps because she had no sons” (Faulkner 11). Sarah’s most vivid memory of her mother, in fact, is the mother’s silent, daily washing of her husband’s feet as soon as he returned home, which represents “to Sarah, a sign of her [mother’s] subservience” (11). Given that this character’s mother acts as her female role model, Sarah learns by example to silently serve the men around her, demonstrating the inheritance of Algerian women’s submission to the patriarchy. Furthermore, Sarah chooses not to/cannot talk about her experiences of torture after the war, showing that she internalizes her pain in accordance with Algerian patriarchal culture. In Algeria, according to Djebar, the “only really guilty woman, the only one who you could despise without impunity, the one you treated with manifest contempt, was ‘the woman who raised her voice’” (Fantasia 203), the woman who put herself “beyond the pale” by “rail[ing] against her fate instead of keeping her protests within four walls, instead of sublimating her grievances…” (203). Etymologically, given that one defines the word “Muslim” as “one who submits [to Allah]” (“Muslim”) and that Islam is the religion of “submission [to Allah]” (“Islam”), raising one’s voice against the injustice of the patriarchy or a patriarchal figure in Algeria defies this nation’s entire cultural system.

Consequently, Sarah’s inherited and coerced silence exacerbates her post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after being tortured in the Algerian War of Independence, meaning that the Algerian patriarchy scars Sarah psychologically and emotionally. Sarah displays detachment,
introversion, and helplessness with respect to herself and her future, three markers of
“Avoidance,” a type of PTSD (“Post traumatic stress disorder”). Sarah notes: “when others talk
to me, their words aren’t connected…. They float around before they reach me! … Is it the same
when I talk, if I talk? My voice doesn’t reach them. It stays inside.” (Women of Algiers 7),
demonstrating Sarah’s disconnect from the outside world. Intrapersonally, Sarah does not feel
like she can be affected by other people’s attempt to communicate to her because of their
seemingly disconnected words, representing Sarah’s own detachment from other people. The
fact that her “voice doesn’t reach them” further signifies Sarah’s own perceived sense of
helplessness and muteness in the face of the unsympathetic patriarchy. She perceives that her
voice “stays inside” her body along with “[her] own prison” she “carr[ies]… around inside of
her” (48), her PTSD. Ultimately, then, due to the stigma of raising one’s voice against
submission, Sarah must internalize both her experiences of torture and one of the only ways that
she can come to terms with the pain of those experiences, her voice, thus scarring her
emotionally and psychologically.

In the face of this painful silence, the nudity of the hammam lays bare this ex-guérrière’s
(woman-soldier) burn scar, exposing both Sarah’s role in the Algerian War of Independence and
the trauma she still endures because of it. As Hoffer notes, Sarah’s “body as her text speaks for
her in silence, bearing witness to torture she endured in the colonizer’s prison” (Hoffer 23). One
can, then, read Sarah’s physical scar on her body as her means to materially affirm her
experiences during the war in the absence of her voice; Sarah does not have to speak orally
because her body already testifies to her torture. In this regard, Hoffer argues that

“it is evident that Sarah’s imprisonment and tortured body have combined to create her
own language. There is no longer a dichotomy between body and subject, for the body of
the woman is transformed as the subject of her own discourse, as the subject of desire,
not as passive object under patriarchal rule” (25).
The “dichotomy between body and subject” that Hoffer addresses alludes to the marginalization of women’s bodies in patriarchal culture. By using women’s bodies as objects of torture, the French patriarchy displaced Algerian female bodies from their own subjectivity. Thereafter, the Algerian patriarchy “forbid [women] to speak of their war tortures, [and allowed the women to] only carry them as memories” (23), denying Sarah and other Algerian women the right to affirm their tortures as aspects of their own subjectivities. Djebar’s attention to Sarah’s burn scar in the female-exclusive space in the hammam (re)tells Sarah’s injured body as the undeniable evidence of her past and present pain. This character’s scarred body finally grants her the double subjectivity of her wartime experience as both the subject of her own story and as the individual who tells it.

In this sense, Sarah embodies Hélène Cixous’s quasi-manifesto in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” liberating women from patriarchal control by “writing” with and about one’s body. Sarah’s body

“vitaly supports the ‘logic’ of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body… [with her own body] she draws her story into history” (Cixous 881 and 880).

This ex-guerrière’s body irrefutably (re)tells the story of this woman’s subjectivity in the history of Algeria, despite everything that the patriarchy has done to efface it. By writing about and with Sarah’s body – by using it as this woman’s own embodied, idiosyncratic language – Djebar thus doubly reappropriates this woman’s subjectivity and liberates Sarah from the prison of her own silence.

Moreover, Sarah affirms and exercises her body’s language with and for Leila. In fact, Sarah’s embodied language breaks away from Algerian patriarchal systems of oppressive isolation and represents the mutual encouragement of embodied Algerian women. Immediately
after the scene in the *hammam*, Sarah visits Leila who painfully relives the memories of her own experiences in the war and the following patriarchal incarceration of women. In response to Leila’s apparent pain, Sarah “und[oes] her blouse, face wet with tears. She uncover[s] the blue scar that started above one of her breasts and stretched down to her abdomen. She approache[s] the bed, embrace[s] Leila” (*Women of Algiers* 45). This “purely sensual rush” (45) stands in for the verbal consolation that Sarah can offer her wounded compatriot; instead of using any sort of verbal language, Sarah’s body simultaneously affirms her own experiences and supports Leila in her pain. For one, Sarah presents her own tortured body to Leila in an effort to normalize women’s embodied subjectivity. Whereas the patriarchy attempts to conceal women’s bodies, especially bodies that attest to the violence of Algeria’s recent colonial past, Sarah exposes it to Leila. By exposing her scar to Leila, Sarah confirms the torture of women, which symbolically affirms the other woman’s own experiences. Moreover, Sarah embraces her companion with her scarred body, using it to comfort Leila. This response not only corporeally affirms Sarah’s embodied subjectivity, but it also uses the language of her tortured body to help alleviate Leila’s pain. This protagonist’s body’s language simultaneously expresses her own subjectivity and allows her to engage with and support other women. Ultimately, Sarah reappropriates the language of her body from the patriarchy’s oppression and uses it to affirm the communal experience of Algerian women, thereby liberatingly giving these women an embodied “voice” in a society that seeks to silence them.

Lastly, as for the torture victim Leila, tautologically speaking, her barrenness fundamentally indicates an inability to reproduce. Symbolically, one may interpret her sterility as a break from one aspect of her womanhood as well as from the epic lineage of women. In Algerian culture, where Islamic practitioners place so much primacy in a woman’s ability to bear
(male) children, many husbands choose to repudiate their barren wives (Faulkner 10). Leila’s barrenness signifies, then, her uselessness in the eyes of the patriarchy after the war. In turn, Leila internalizes the stigma of being barren in Algeria, which causes perhaps more psychological harm to her than her inability to reproduce. She remarks that “[she has] dried up. [She is] the shadow of [her] former self” (Women of Algiers 45), suggesting that Leila believes that her barrenness reduces her to a mere remnant of her femininity. In fact, this ex-guerrière’s status as a “shadow of [her] former self,” both psychologically and physically, lands her in an isolation ward in a mental hospital; the so-called liberating governmental shift from French to Algerian control does nothing for Leila but transform her incarcerating patriarchal institution from a prison to a mental hospital.

Leila’s barrenness figuratively embodies her inability to (re)produce her body’s subjectivity due to the French and the newly established Algerian patriarchies; these patriarchies continuously objectify women’s bodies, denying Leila any means to (re)present herself as a subject. Leila’s perception of herself, her body, and her agency become then, sterile, reflecting her material body’s barrenness. Lamenting about her experiences after the war, Leila notes that

“In the streets they [presumably men] were taking pictures of your [the “fire-carriers,” women fighters who concealed and exploded bombs in French neighborhoods] unclothed bodies, your avenging arms in front of the tanks…. We suffered the pain of your legs torn apart by the rapist soldiers. And it is thus that the sanctioned poets evoked you in lyrical divans. Your turned up eyes… no, worse… Your bodies, used only in parts, bit by little bit” (44).

For one, the colonial patriarchy physically treats women’s material bodies as objects during the war through the rape and torture Algerian women. With no control over their material bodies, these women prisoners have no means to exert their own agency and their bodies then become non-producing objects.

Additionally, the Algerian patriarchy representationally reifies women’s bodies by taking
eroticized, voyeuristic pictures of the fire-carrier’s “unclothed bodies” and by evoking women’s bodies in the “sanctioned” poets’ divans. Just as the French patriarchy controlled women’s physical bodies, the Algerian patriarchy controls the way women’s bodies are represented after the war, thereby ensuring that women cannot generate their own perceptions of themselves. As Elia notes, these Algerian women, “being illiterate, do not write” (15), which limits the means these individuals can represent themselves. Different estimates of the illiteracy rate in the newly post-colonial Maghreb range from 85 to 95 percent (15). The rate of women’s illiteracy in Algeria may even be higher, given that women’s marginalized governmental and religious status likely compounds women’s illiteracy in this nation. Consequently, the phrase, “sanctioned poets,” can be glossed as a euphemism for male poets. After imagining the women’s pain due to the colonizer’s rape, Leila states that “it is thus that the sanctioned poets evoked [the fire-carriers] in their divans” (emphasis added). As previously discussed, women’s bodies were treated as objects as prisoners to the French; by saying that “it is thus” how the male poets portray women, Leila observes that the Algerian poets continue to objectify women by only depicting them as objects of rape in their poems.

Furthermore, Djebar draws on two different meanings of the word “divan,” in order to portray the representational violence that these male, Algerian poets perpetrate on these ex-women-soldiers; in addition to meaning “a collection of poems in Persian or Arabic” (“Divan”), a divan is also “a large couch… often designed for use as a bed” (“Divan”). These fire-carriers are not only imagined exclusively by male poets in a way that reifies them, but these women are also subtly sexualized in the couch-bed-poems of the sanctioned poets of the patriarchy. These male poets and photographers represent, then, women in effectively the same way that the French use Algerian women’s bodies in their paintings and in the torture chambers of their
prisons. Just as the Algerian patriarchy merely imprisons Leila’s body in a different institution, it continues to ensure that Leila does not and cannot figuratively produce her own embodied subjectivity in a representation of herself. Ultimately, this character’s barrenness embodies the fact that Algerian women’s “bodies are used only in parts, bit by little bit,” reiterating the fact that these women cannot (re)produce their own embodied subjectivities due to the physical and representational violence that the patriarchy perpetrates against them.

However, using the association between Leila and the painter who liberates her from the mental hospital, Djebar reimagines the relationship between Algerian women’s bodies and a male painter’s gaze. Unlike Delacroix, “Women of Algiers”s painter accepts and even defends Leila’s embodied subjectivity, which allows this character to at last (re)produce her agency through her body. After entering the mental hospital, the painter finds Leila, whom he calls “the great Leila, the heroine,” “[opens] everything up, shove[s] everyone out of [his] way, and [takes] her with [him] right then and there” (21). Not only does this man recognize this ex-guerrière as “the great Leila, the heroine,” repeating the definitive article “the” to emphasize her individuality and her definitive authority, but he immediately frees her from the confines of the mental hospital. Whereas Delacroix penetrates the harem in order to retrieve and market the *image* of Algerian women, this painter literally opens the doors to the outside world for Leila and retrieves her material body from the confines of the mental hospital “right then and there.” When later describing how Leila has come to reside in his house, the painter remarks, moreover, “I have decided to marry her!... I am the only male around here who refuses to lock a woman up on any account…. As long as she’s with me, she can count on being able to take off safely” (21). This painter’s resolve to allow Leila the liberty to leave at her own volition suggests that he founds his prospective marriage with Leila on her own body’s rights. By allowing Leila the choice to exert
control over her own body, this painter symbolically (re)produces Leila’s corporeal agency, thereby rectifying Leila’s figurative barrenness in patriarchal Algeria. Our exploration of Algerian women’s bodies, thus, has come full-circle: whereas Delacroix’s women became objectified through the painter’s gaze, Djebar’s painter’s gaze humanizes Leila and restores her embodied subjectivity.

Overall, Djebar depicts the *hammam* as a female-exclusive space that highlights the interactions between women’s bodies. These women’s exposed bodies metonymically reveal the physical and figurative scars that they bear from the Algerian patriarchy, as seen with the water-carrier, Sarah, and Leila. However, as in the harem, Djebar’s *hammam* emphasizes the significance of the traditions, history, and culture of Algerian women in the lives of its female characters, as seen in the *hammam*’s polyrhythms and epic memory. This space allows women a chance to corporeally empathize with one another and develop a community that not only celebrates, but doubly subjectifies the female experience. In fact, Djebar’s *hammam* reappropriates its marginal status in Algerian society by building a women’s *comm-nudity* – a society that affirms female embodiment and uses it to demonstrate women’s agency. By centralizing on women’s bodies as subjects, Djebar’s *hammam* thus uses women’s bodies to free Algerian women from their own marginalization, thus distinguishing this space from the rest of patriarchal Algeria.

**Djebar and the Qalam: (Re)Writing Algerian Women’s Extramural Experience**

Outside of these female-exclusive spaces, Djebar demonstrates the violence perpetrated against women by both the French and Algerian patriarchies through the dismembered bodies of dead women. These bodies confirm, in a sense, the patriarchal mythos of the harem and the
*hammam* as a protective sanctuary-space where women are not subjected to the mutilations of the male gaze. Yet, this author does not intend these women’s bodies to be didactic warnings to other women; they do not mean to scare women into submitting to patriarchal marginalization. In fact, Djebar (re)presents the bodies of women outside of these female-exclusive spaces in order to reappropriate women’s subjectivities through embodiment in another way. Just as the women within these female-exclusive spaces affirm their bodies to centralize Algerian female experiences, so does Djebar exemplify women’s double subjectivity outside of these spaces through the medium of the female body. Whereas the French and Algerian patriarchies largely ignore the presence of women outside of the harem or reduce their bodies to minor “details” (*Fantasia* 55) in the context of Algeria as a whole, Djebar comments on and (re)writes the bodies of women-prisoners and women-corpses into the history of Algeria within her own women-empowering perspective. In doing so, Djebar centralizes Algerian women’s embodied double subjectivity and emancipates these women from their symbolic marginalization in Algeria’s cultural and historical discourses.

One type of female body that Djebar portrays outside of the representational confines of the harem is the women-prisoner. Instead of representing the lack of agency that these women suffer as a result of their incarcerated status, Djebar emphasizes these women’s corporeal acts of defiance and their resolve in the face of adversity, figuratively reappropriating their own captivity. Djebar’s depiction of these women humanizes these individuals and attributes to them their own subjectivities, thereby subverting the patriarchal objectification of these women.

As previously alluded to with torture-victims Sarah and Leila, the French colonizers’ women-prisoners were literally and representationally reified. Materially, many of these Algerians became little more than objects to strip naked, rape, and/or to subject to torture at the
discretion of the French patriarchy. Djebar further demonstrates the representational violence perpetrated on Algerian women by both the French and the Algerian patriarchies through the exclusively male primary documents that Djebar cites from the beginnings of Algeria’s colonization in *Fantasia*. Djebar chooses to perpetuate an exclusively-masculine account of the origins of Algeria’s colonization because the historical documents that survive to this day – the letters, diary entries, and various other kinds of correspondences – were written solely by French men. As previously discussed, the Algerian patriarchy similarly delegitimizes women’s out-of-harem experiences by also endorsing a solely masculine perspective when writing Algeria’s history. Ultimately, the monolithic, masculine discourses of both the French and the Algerian patriarchies repressed and omitted the Algerian women’s accounts of their own experiences, their own opportunity to represent themselves; these patriarchies literally and representationally held these women’s means to identify themselves prisoner.

Djebar, on the other hand, (re)writes history from the women-prisoners’ points of view, humanizing these individuals and doubly emphasizing their own subjectivities as women. This author translates actual conversations she had with Algerian women who tell of their first-hand accounts of their wartime experiences in the sections titled “Voice.” History, as these women tell it, focuses on the activity of Algerian women during the Algerian War of Independence. Instead of relating the patriarchy’s version of the war through generals, soldiers, or *maquisards* (guerrilla fighters); these women tell of their own female bodies’ struggles and contributions to the war efforts, which range from covertly protecting their compatriots, to participating in battle, to their own perspective on their incarceration and/or torture. Whereas these women-prisoners are represented as objects from a patriarchal perspective, Djebar identifies these individuals as acting subjects during the Algerian War of Independence, thereby contesting their marginalization in
Algeria’s history. These accounts reveal, then, (feminine) bodies to be in places where these patriarchies do not recognize them, outside of the confines of domestic space, which affirms women’s embodied agency during the war.

Additionally, these chapters of “Voice”’s, representationally give space to the voices of actual Algerian women in first-hand accounts of their wartime experiences. In Mortimer’s interview with Djebar, this author says:

“[one] will find in these women’s stories kinds of popular phrases that I [insert] in a sought-after, first degree translation… I wanted a sobriety of style when calling up suffering. When I listened to the women from my region, I remarked that the more women had suffered, the more than they spoke of that suffering concisely, which at its limit was almost curt. For me the voice of these women is the desired opposition to the official style” (Mortimer 201 and 202, translation mine).

Instead of the misogynistic, historical voice of the French patriarchs and instead of what Djebar calls the “pompous” (202) style of the Algerian patriarchy (which usurped women’s voices in a generalizing, national discourse), Djebar seeks to represents Algerian women as they themselves represent their own experiences. In faithfully portraying the terse, unembellished style of these Algerian women and their popular phrasing with a very literal translation from oral Arabic into written French, Djebar allows these women a means to represent themselves and to transcribe themselves into their own history. As with the other women in Fantasia and Women of Algiers, Djebar shows, then, that even these women-prisoners affirm the double subjectivity of their bodies and their voices, liberating, in a sense, these women from the representational prison of the patriarchy.

The other kind of exterior feminine bodies Fantasia exposes are women’s corpses. Whereas the patriarchy textually writes off these female corpses as merely anecdotal or insignificant, Djebar (re)writes these deceased bodies into the larger struggle of the national Algerian identity and the future role that women will play in it; she shows that Algerian women’s
bodies, even deceased bodies, are significant in both senses of the word, thereby reappropriating, in yet another way, the subjectivity of women’s embodiment in Algerian history and culture.

Djebar draws from Captain Pierre Bosquet’s epistolary account of the aftermath of a battle in Algeria’s Oran region in October 1840, (re)writing the representation of female bodies after they have died. Djebar notes that women’s bodies under the French patriarchy, such as in Bosquet’s “description of a woman’s foot that had been hacked off to appropriate the anklet of gold or silver” (*Fantasia* 55), become “a blot on the rest” of the dominating discourse; in Bosquet’s letters, Djebar elucidates, “the description of the corpses of the… women… become, in spite of the author, scrofulous excrescences on his elegant prose style” (55). According to Djebar, Bosquet represents these women’s bodies, as “blots” – isolated incidents or unintended mars – or as “scrofulous excrescences” – a blemishing, unwanted, cancer-like growth – on the otherwise “spotless” patriarchal discourse; under the gaze of the French patriarchy, women’s bodies do not contribute aesthetically or thematically to the overall narrative of this battle. In fact, with respect to the French patriarchy, women’s bodies do nothing but disfigure the unity of this discourse.

Djebar, however, (re)writes this patriarchal discourse solely from the perspective of these women’s bodies. For the Frenchman, the corpses of these women are mere “blots” on his patriarchal discourse; for Djebar, as “[Bosquet] inserts these words [about the women’s corpses], they prevent the ink of the whole letter from drying: because of the obscenity of the torn flesh that he could not suppress in his description” (56). Instead of only acting as a marring, isolated incident within the patriarch’s prose, Djebar imagines that the description of these women’s bodies permeates “the whole letter” and prevents it “from drying,” which highlights the importance of women’s bodies in Djebar’s version of Bosquet’s historical account. These female
bodies, Djebar illustrates, are omnipresent in this moment in Algerian history and force Bosquet’s readers to witness the insuppressible “obscenity of the[ir] torn flesh.” As critic Salah Moukhlis argues, “what has been, therefore, intended as a casual detail [women’s bodies] is capitalized on Djebar, re/positioned and re/presented as a focal point in her own discourse” (Moukhlis 120). Djebar refuses to represent these corpses as blot-like details in the patriarchal discourse; ultimately she (re)writes these female bodies as an irrepressible, omnipresent element of this account of the battle, and in doing so, asserts women’s role in Algerian history.

In another example, towards the beginning of Fantasia, Djebar draws upon Baron Barchou de Penhoën’s account of the carnage after the French’s first invasion of Algeria, (re)writing it from the female-empowering perspective of women. Fantasia’s narrator “recollect[s] one brief electrifying episode from Baron Barchou’s description of his experiences” (Fantasia 18):

“Arab tribes are always accompanied by great numbers of women who had shown the greatest zeal in mutilating their victims. One of these women lay dead beside the corpse of a French soldier whose heart she had torn out! Another had been fleeing with a child in her arms when a shot wounded her; she seized a stone and crushed the infant’s head, to prevent it falling alive into our hands…” (Fantasia 18).

For Barchou, these women’s bodies and their deaths serve to merely exemplify and support his point that Algerian women accompanied men into war. Under his pen, these two women’s bodies are mere objects within the framework of the French patriarchal discourse. He writes that “one of these women lay dead” (emphasis added), thereby highlighting this body’s inactivity. The other body “had been fleeing,” which suggests its unsuccessful attempt to act, in direct comparison with the “shot,” which successfully completes its action over “her,” the direct object of this sentence. These women’s bodies are not only details within his discourse, they are objects without any agency.
In the face of Barchou’s attempt to use these female bodies as anecdotal examples of women in war, Djebar’s constructs a narrative around these two corpses, thus reappropriating the semiology of female corporeality in Algerian history. For one, this author’s rendering of this account itself is female-centric given that out of the entire discourse, the narrator only chooses to recollect Barchou’s experiences in so far as far as they relate to women. In a feminist reversal, this selection implies that these women’s bodies, as marginal as they are to Barchou’s patriarchal discourse, become more important than the rest of the Frenchman’s experiences within this author’s narrative. Djebar writes

“thus these two Algerian women – the one in whom rigor mortis was already setting in, still holding in her bloody hands the heart of a dead Frenchman; the second, in a fit of desperate courage, splitting open the brain of her child… before dying with her mind at peace – these two heroines enter into recent history” (18).

Whereas Barchou objectifies these women’s bodies with his language, Djebar stresses their activity – the one woman’s body is “still holding in her bloody hands…”, the other body smashes her child’s head in order to “[die] with her mind at peace.” According to Djebar, it is “thus,” with this account of these bodies’ activity and their resolution in death, that “these two heroines enter into recent history”; in a sense, then, this author (re)writes these female’s bodies a place in Algerian history by emphasizing the different subjectivities of these women. As critic Jarrod Hayes notes,

“In addition to reading [Barchou’s patriarchal] version of history, [in this example Djebar] also reads the historian. She steals his account from the camp of the colonizer to use it in the service of anticolonialism. She ventures into enemy territory like a spy to unveil hidden history and ‘design for herself a past’” (Hayes 186).

By reimagining the ways that these women are depicted in history, by reconstructing the narrative told about their female bodies even in death, Djebar simultaneously subverts the French patriarchal discourse and (re)writes the subjectivity of women’s corporeality in Algeria.
The last chapter in *Fantasia* concludes with an out-of-harem female corpse that the narrator allows to represent itself by symbolically giving it the *qalam*, the “pen” in Arabic (Moukhlis 125); with this giving of the *qalam*, Djebar liberates women’s bodies and their representations from the repressive patriarchal discourse with the author’s own, female-empowering, body-conscious discourse. At the end of *Fantasia*, Djebar cites Eugène Fromentin when he “describes one sinister detail” (226) as he travels through Algeria in June of 1853 after a conflict between the French and the guerilla fighters: he “picks up out of the dust the severed hand of an anonymous Algerian woman. He throws it down again in his path” (226). Fromentin, as a French painter and writer, acts as a French Orientalist that seeks to representationally control the Algerian people through his patriarchal representations of them. When he takes up this severed hand “– the hand of an unknown woman he was never able to draw” (226) – “he throws it down again in his path,” signifying his rejection and dismissal of women’s bodies. Fromentin, like Delacroix, merely depicts women’s bodies with respect to their representational “value” in France, only showing paintings and writings of Algeria that the French people are interested in viewing as the colonial power. This French patriarch casts the hand away from him, symbolically rejecting it and repressing the reality of women’s bodies in his colonial discourse. Moreover, he throws the hand “*in his path*” (emphasis, mine), which suggests that Fromentin will tread on/through this discarded body part. As critic Danielle Marx-Scouras notes, this severed hand “symbolizes Algeria, mutilated by a history written by the hand of others (French historians, writers, artists) [and] also represents women amputated in their desire to write or express themselves” (Marx-Scouras 181). Not only does Fromentin cast out a fragment of a female body that would, perhaps, be distasteful to the French as a colonial power (thereby editing out a part of the history of Algeria), but he further attempts to completely erase and discredit this Algerian
woman’s body by stepping on and through it as he proceeds on his journey. Fromentin, as a French patriarch, metaphorically grinds the importance of Algerian women’s bodies into the dust of history.

Djebbar’s narrator, however, does not allow this hand to be trod into a historical, representational oblivion; in fact, the narrator picks up this hand, “hand of mutilation and of memory, and attempt[s] to bring it the qalam” (226), thus endeavoring to use a part of this woman’s body to (re)write the reality of Algerian women from a female perspective. For one, the narrator states that this hand is a “hand of mutilation and of memory,” which embodies women’s representational condition in Algeria under the patriarchy. This “hand of mutilation,” as discussed above, corporeally demonstrates that women are cut off from history and from any means to represent themselves. Simultaneously, though, Djebbar adds that this hand is also a hand of memory, recalling the epigraph at the beginning of Djebbar’s film, Zerda, ou les chants de l’oubli, “Mémoire est corps de femme” (Zerda). By connecting memory and women’s bodies, Djebbar reiterates the embodiment of women’s epic memory in Algeria, and the preservation of women through a kind of feminine, corporeal, shared history. This severed hand, then, simultaneously represents the separation from the national body of Algeria, as well as the experiential connection of women in society and across time through memory and their bodies.

By bringing this hand of mutilation and of memory the qalam, the pen, Djebbar symbolically reappropriates patriarchal power and, at last, allows women to use their embodied epic memory to (re)write themselves into history. As Moukhlis remarks, the prophet Muhammad says the word, “qalam,” in the first verse he recites, marking “the beginning of the Islamic tradition” (125). This pen, then, according to Moukhlis, is

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8 Zerda, or Songs from the Oblivion/the Forgotten. “Memory is woman’s body” (translation, mine).
“a clear phallic symbol, [and] stands for the power that was appropriated by patriarchal society. It refers to the foundation of an epistemology that has kept women cloistered and ostracized from public life and from the outside world” (125).

The narrator brings this pen to the woman’s severed hand, which undermines the historical religious, representational, and ideological marginalization of women in Algeria. One can assume that this woman’s hand will (re)write its own place into Algeria, drawing upon its feminine, embodied memory to transcribe women’s place into this patriarchal society. Djebar’s uses this woman’s material, severed hand as a seemingly non-important, objectified body part that the patriarchy has cast away to actually record the importance of Algerian women in history. Ultimately, one can read this last scene as emblematic of Djebar’s entire project: just as the narrator brings the qalam to a woman’s hand, thereby reappropriating Algerian women’s history with this woman’s body, so does Djebar use the semiology of Algerian women’s bodies to representationally affirm both female agency and women’s subjectivities in the face of their repression in patriarchal society.

**Le Vol de Djebar: (Re)Reading Djebar’s Portrayal of Algerian Women and Their Bodies**

This thesis has sought to consider Djebar’s representations of women’s bodies in female-exclusive spaces in order to show that this author subversively affirms Algerian women’s agency and subjectivities through their bodies. As Best notes:

> “Domestic space in Algeria is precisely where culture and history meet, where the historical fallout of war and revolution engages in battle with cultural tradition and the religious and ideological significance of women” (Best 875).

Djebar shows that these female exclusive spaces bring together the Muslim women in Algerian society to engage with their culture, their history, and each other simultaneously as individuals and as a community of women. These Algerian women textually embody the ways that they
affirm their own subjectivities and subvert the patriarchy; whether it is through their shared Africanist, aesthetic traditions (such as polyrhythm, epic memory, and repetition), through the (re)telling of their own stories with their own voices and bodies, or simply through the shared, kinesthetic pleasure of movement and dance, Djebar emphasizes that through embodiment, these women become powerful, feminine subjects even in the face of their marginalization in Algeria’s patriarchal culture.

We can, then, read Djebar’s portrayal of women throughout both *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* and *Fantasia*, in general, as a vol, a robbing of the patriarchy and a flight from it, echoing Cixous’s feminist critique in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Throughout her entire oeuvre, Djebar uses women’s bodies to both steal and fly from the patriarchy. This author portrays a feminine agency in bodies and in places that conservative and patriarchal Algerian society deems as marginal, thus destabilizing one’s (patriarchal) conception of the role of Algerian women in their society. In a similar spirit, by taking a leaf out of the page of dance ethnography and by (re)reading the semiology of women’s bodies and their dances in this literature, we can uniquely interpret Djebar’s representation of women in light of the importance of their physical body. This physical-conscious analysis allows us to better understand the importance and subversiveness of Djebar’s work, as a whole. In fact, by examining how Djebar reappropriates, re-steals, the significance of women’s bodies from patriarchal society, we will be better equipped to (re)imagine Djebar’s flight from it.

That said, as an overwhelmingly Anglophone-American audience, why does women’s embodiment in Assia Djebar’s work even matter in the first place? After all, not only does Djebar’s work literally deal with people half the world away, but if it is written in French, presumably for a French and Algerian audience, what role can or should we play as, at best, a
third-party observer of this situation?

In short, I hope that by calling attention to the semiology of the body throughout Djebar’s works, this study will raise one’s awareness of the multi-layered significance of the body of ourselves and our own peoples in America. In *Women of Algiers* and *Fantasia*, as we have seen, the body holds a very important symbolic significance with respect to political and gender relations in postcolonial Algeria; though it may appear otherwise, Djebar’s close-attention to the body demonstrates a facet of the rule and not the exception. *All* bodies and *all* movement are polyvalent signifiers of identity that embody how we understand ourselves and our world as human beings. Consider, for example, the culturally acceptable ways that women may sit in public as opposed to the ways that men may sit, subtly corporeally reaffirming or challenging American gender norms; consider the issue of accessibility for differently-abled bodies and how these individuals may or may not be able to even enter the same buildings as other individuals can, incarnating the question of ablism in America; consider, even, the twerk as a culturally-infused movement and its implications on an African American body as opposed to on Miley Cyrus’s white body at the Video Music Awards in 2013, embodying the complex matrices of race and movement in America; *etc. ad infinitum*. It is my hope that this in-depth examination of the body in Djebar’s literature as a corporeal signifier of structures of power in Algeria may make one more conscious of the power structures that our own bodies inhabit and (re)present on a daily basis.

In conclusion, I wish to at last address Djebar’s work with respect to the embodiment of an individual whom I have largely overlooked throughout this thesis: the reader. From a personal standpoint, I would like to acknowledge that my own physical body problematically shares more commonalities with a repressive patriarchal body than it does with the embodiment of Algerian
women. I, like the French colonizers and Orientalists, textually gaze at Djebar and at Algerian women, reading their bodies within a hermeneutic structure that I do not and cannot experientially access as a white, Western, non-Muslim man. However, I am by no means the only reader with a potentially problematic embodiment. Due to the complex nature of human bodies and our subjectivities, the overwhelming majority of Djebar’s readers, in fact, experience the world within bodies that may problematically read the Algerian women in Djebar’s works. Though a reader may be a woman, for example, she may or may not inhabit a body that can experience what it is like to be a person of color; a reader of color may or may not inhabit a body that can experience what is like to be a woman; a female reader of color may or may not inhabit a body that can experience what it is like to be in the socio-economic class that these rural Algerian women live in; etc. Even in the act of reading this thesis or these works, I would argue that the reader’s body cannot claim to know the experiences of these women given that the majority of these Algerian women do not and cannot read or write, thus distinguishing the bodies of Djebar’s readers from the bodies of these Algerian women. How can, how should, the reader mitigate, then, one’s “outsider” body and its various subjectivities with the different feminine bodies and subjectivities that Djebar represents in her text?

I believe that just as Djebar shows that the women in these female-exclusive spaces gain a certain kind of power in affirming their own bodies, so do readers gain a kind of power in coming to terms with their own privileged bodies. In turn, with this power, readers can choose to affirm and accept peoples other than themselves; they can acknowledge and respect their differences with oppressed subjectivities; and most importantly, readers can use their own privileges to help support and recognize the humanity of marginalized people. At a public forum titled “Arts for Social Justice,” Ananya Chatterjea, a professor and choreographer of dance,
stated that for individuals who seek to read the arts in a potentially repressive body, “guilt is the most useless emotion.” Instead, Chatterjea explained, privileged individuals must “support [an oppressed] space from the outside.” In the Overture to Women of Algiers, Djebar seems to echo the figurative-spatial distancing of a privileged subject: “Don’t claim to ‘speak for’ or, worse, to ‘speak on,’ barely speaking next to, and if possible very close to” (2, italics original) these women. I cannot change the fact that I am a white, non-Muslim, male reader, but if I were to let my male-privilege silence my own voice, I would become complicit in the erasure of these Algerian women. I cannot and do not seek to “speak for” or “speak on” these individuals and can only at best speak “very close to” the experience of these marginalized subjectivities. Yet, by using my male privilege to advocate for the agency of these Algerian women, I add another voice to call out against the marginalization of these people. I may not be an Algerian woman, but my hope is that by writing about Algerian women, I can support these subjectivities “from the outside.” Another panelist at “Arts for Social Justice,” Beth Osnes, a theatre professor, remarked that it takes a “full commitment by all of a community” to be able to make any sort of lasting change in social justice. Algerian women, even with the embodied double subjectivities of these female-exclusive spaces, do not have the power to overthrow an oppressive patriarchy by themselves. Rather, if any kind of change is possible for these women, Djebar shows that members from both within and outside these subjectivities must (re)read and (re)imagine Algerian women’s embodied experience in order to work towards a more inclusive, greater community.
Figure 1: Women of Algiers in Their Apartment
(Delacroix 1834).

Figure 2: Women of Algiers in Their Apartment
(Delacroix 1849).

Figure 3: Women of Alger, Version “O” (Picasso 1955).
Works Cited


Delacroix, Eugène. *Femmes d’Algers dans leur appartement*. 1834. Oil on canvas. Le Louvre,
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