

Defiant History and Agency in Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*

by

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Abstract

Algerian novelist, translator and filmmaker Assia Djebar (1936-2015) reconstructs Algerian history in *Fantasia* and engages with traumas of being a colonial subject who is dispossessed of land, culture, and past. The critics, who have placed *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* within the traditions of postcolonial autobiography and feminine writing, have usually ignored the novel's anticolonial engagement with history and its construction of female agency as an aspect of the historical opposition between the oppressor and the oppressed. In my paper, I argue that Djebar's confrontation with colonialism takes place on the historical ground and projects the struggle of a people that rise against oppression.

Key words: history, agency, colonization, postcolonial theory, anticolonial.

The established criticism on Assia Djebar's *Fantasia an Algerian Cavalcade* (the original French title is *L'Amour L'Fantasia*) regards the novel as an empowering narrative that contributes to Algerian women's historical visibility. A fresh and stimulating 'postcolonial' undertaking, *Fantasia* is praised for foregrounding *l'écriture féminine*, rewriting history, and 'unveiling' the Algerian women. Its representations of colonial Algeria and decolonization delivered through "*metissagē*" have been cheered by many postcolonial and feminist critics as resistant and subversive. *Fantasia* indeed simultaneously grapples with the colonial past, foregrounds Algerian women's perspectives of colonialism and decolonization. Its most remarkable ingenuity lies, nevertheless, in its anticolonial and defiant take on history. My aim, in this paper, is to dispute the postcolonial views that mire *Fantasia*'s dialectical portrayal of the colonizer/colonized struggle in an uncertain, ambivalent, ahistorical discursivity. I, therefore, argue that *Fantasia* undermines the central tenets of the postcolonial discourse that displace historical opposition and struggle with discontinuity, dispersion, discursivity, and vagueness. As opposed to the postcolonial discourse that fixes the formerly colonized peoples as ahistorical subjects outside social and political action, Djebar's novel magnifies the resonances of collective action and agency in the long history of Algeria's anticolonial struggle.

Postcolonial Autobiography and *L'écriture féminine*

Assia Djebar's writing has been located within the traditions of postcolonial autobiographical writing and *l'écriture féminine* by a variety of critics who have written extensively about Maghrebian women's literature. H. Adlai Murdoch (1993), Patricia Geesey (1996), Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman (2003), Soheila Ghaussy (1994), Mildred Mortimer (1997), Winifred Woodhull (1993), and Anne Donadey (1993, 1996, 2000) are some of the leading critics who have pointed out *Fantasia's* rising to the feminist challenge posed by the Western feminism. They all agree that Djebar's portrayal of Algerian women in *Fantasia* dramatically resists repressive and fixating Western and patriarchal discourses, yet do not treat the historical conditions that shape resistance portrayed in detail in the book. Emphasizing the autobiographical elements and discursive narrative strategies, these critics laud the ways in which Djebar employs feminine writing that foregrounds the ambivalences of Maghrebian women's identity. A case in point is H. Adlai Murdoch who points out postcolonial women writers' urge for overcoming the alienating effects of the colonial oppression. Murdoch suggests that autobiography provides a flexible medium for these writers who work through the ambivalences of their identity in the colonizer's language. Autobiographical genre helps these 'marginalized' authors construct an authentically female and resistant voice:

What interests me in the case of minority and marginalized literatures, is the process whereby the trajectory of the experience of exile and subjection tend to lead to the elaboration of discursive codes of resistance as a means toward the construction of a culturally specific paradigm. (72)

According to Murdoch, the foremost merit of postcolonial Maghrebian women's writing is consisted in its implication of ambivalence, decentralization, fragmentation, and incompleteness. She observes that, in postcolonial autobiographical writing, the process of configuring an ambiguous and resistant postcolonial identity is never complete and this incompleteness leads to the production of, in Lacanian terms, a "self-perpetuating web of fragmentation, lack, and demand" (72). The postcolonial construction of feminine self in autobiographical writing thus features a non-historical, non-linear, non-dialectical, irregular, and ambiguous subjectivity governed by the Lacanian lack. Yet, how such construction of subjectivity is subversive is not clear. Soheila Ghaussy also emphasizes Djebar's construction of a resistant feminine discourse in *Fantasia*. Arguing for *l'écriture féminine*, Ghaussy emphasizes that Djebar sees language as an extension of the female body and its drives. Jennifer Bernhardt Steadman describes *Fantasia* as a remarkable portrayal of "what was formerly silenced and absent from representation, the participation of Algerian women in resistance struggles against the French colonization of Algeria" (173).

Steadman acknowledges the novel's feminist intervention in the exclusionary and othering discourses of history and culture. Anne Donadey similarly indicates Djébar's recovery of the silenced and repressed female voices in *Fantasia*. She argues that it is common among the women writers of the formerly colonized countries to adopt 'a strategy of anamnesis'--described by Lionnet as "resisting amnesia" (qtd in Donadey 112). The strategy of anamnesis, according to Donadey, "is especially embraced by women writers, for whom self-portraiture is transformed into a piecing together of a collective history" (112). Yet, the question of agency and historical conditions of its emergence in Djébar's reconstruction of history is left unanswered in Donadey's study. Patricia Geesey also defines *Fantasia* as a "collective autobiography" and argues that the autobiographical form allows Djébar to "renew her ties to the female collective and situate her discourse *within* the circle of Algerian women" (153). This, according to Geesey, results in a "polyphonic text in which Djébar has transcribed the oral narratives of several women from the Chenoua region of her maternal ancestors " (153). Winifred Woodhull points out the use of orality in *Fantasia* and its crosscultural implications: "Djébar mixes the oral and the written in such a way that she imposes Arabic rhythms on the prosaic structure of the Western writing and creates a sonorous narrative" (79-80). What her critics generally agree is that, first, Djébar's writing is exclusively feminine and secondly, her use of *l'écriture féminine*--mixing of genres and the oral and the written, non-linearity, juxtaposition of diverse discourses, fragmentariness, et cetera--creates a discursive and subversive female identity. John Erickson's following comments sum up this idea:

Djébar replaces the traditional Western narrative, marked by the logos of cause and effect continuity, spatial consistency, and chronological coherence, with discontinuous narrative that superimposes and mixes discourses from widely separate times and places in a discursive *métissage* made cohesive by a collective identity, a narrative whose structure utilizes, as its principal discursive tactic, fragmentation and displacement. (54)

According to Erickson, Djébar's "*métissage*" is cohered by 'a collective identity.' His emphases on narrative decentralization, fragmentation, and ambivalence on the one hand and the need for coherence and collective identity on the other encapsulate the paradox that underlies postcolonial criticism. While collective identity is supposed to unify what is decentered and discontinuous, a shifting, fragmented, ahistorical discursivity is seen as a mark of a subversive postcolonial stance.

Discursive Subjectivity vs. Agency with a Historical Foothold

The contradictions of postcolonial criticism are present in the commentaries on *Fantasia's* constructions of identity and subjectivity. The claim that narrative disorder, decenteredness, and discursivity of the novel allow the author to represent the colonized as a resistant subject leads to confusion about the meaning of agency. It becomes legitimate to ask how a discursive, fluid, and ambivalent stance enables 'resistant' subjectivity and agency. Miriam Cooke, who has written extensively on Maghrebien women's works, emphasizes the importance of recognizing women's agency and points to the Maghrebien women writers' undertaking of rewriting history from women's perspectives: "They are discovering women's presence in the histories that glossed over them. They are reading in the gaps of historiography and the distortions of hermeneutics the conditions of possibility for women's agency and activism" (65). Djébar's *Fantasia* emphasizes women's agency, yet it also shows how their agency makes sense as part of the nation's anticolonial struggle. In other words, the novel does not try to overwrite Algerian history, but portrays women's historical role as freedom fighters by incorporating their testimonies of the colonial oppression and the Algerian War of Independence. Postcolonial criticism generally ignores the fact that the novel reconstructs, to a great extent, the colonial invasion of Algeria and the Algerian struggle against domination. It is for this reason that its depictions of the historical and political contexts of the French invasion and colonization are obscured in the postcolonial accounts. Postcolonial critics are similarly confused about the questions concerning the novel's construction of women's agency. This is largely because this criticism bases itself on vague and inadequate notions of agency and generally alienates agency from its historical and political context, promoting an ahistorical stance. That is to say, postcolonial theory for the most part assumes an ahistorical, culturally determined, fluid, decentered, and ambivalent agency outside social and political struggles. Such construction of subjectivity in general, female subjectivity and agency in particular obviously causes the concept to become obscured and diluted. Although postcolonialists foreground formerly colonized women's plight under colonial and patriarchal oppression, they fail to account for their historical role in anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggles. Djébar's deploying modernist narrative strategies in *Fantasia* has been perceived as promoting a decentered and ambivalent subjectivity/agency. Her evocation of the past as a tribute to her ancestresses and incorporation of the testimonies of widows, destitute mothers, wives, and sisters are noted as a discursive strategy rather than representation of the colonial oppression as a historical, social, and political reality. *Fantasia* is thus claimed to project a decentered, discontinuous, and dispersed historical discourse and finally, is transfigured as a posthistorical text that undermines the view of history as a continuous and evolving struggle. Reducing *Fantasia* that reconstructs history as the opposition between the colonizer and colonized to a discursive ambivalence is, however, unjustified.

Postcolonial Theory and ‘New’ History

Although postcolonial theory examines the struggles between the colonizer and the colonized, postcolonialists, with the exception of few, refuse seeing the colonizer/colonized dialectic as a driving force that has shaped history. Focusing on the micro-histories, postcolonial theorists repudiate such dialectical approach to historical transformation on the grounds that it is totalizing, teleological, and Eurocentric. Instead, they seek to replace it with fragmented, decentered, discontinuous, local, and isolated historical models. Their insistence on decenteredness, discontinuity, and discursivity nevertheless impedes our understanding Western imperialism and colonization and its systematic world-wide exploitation. If we acknowledge the Western imperial domination of the world and the anticolonial movements, then we must come up with equally powerful and comprehensive terms to explain such historical phenomena. These terms can be found in the view of history as continuum and progress. We cannot give up causality, continuity, and the ideas of change and progress, if we want to explain the material conditions that underlie the Western imperial expansion and the way it has transformed the world. The postmodern and postcolonial opponents of the idea of history as a continuous progress unjustly locate it within the framework of ‘narrow’ Hegelianism. After François Lyotard, postmodern thinkers have sought to discredit such view, labeling it as a Eurocentric, totalizing, and teleological ‘meta-narrative’. Michel Foucault, who claimed that in various fields of history “attention has been turned... away from vast unities like ‘periods’ or ‘centuries’ to the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity” (2), promoted a ‘new’ history free from causality, coherence, continuity, change, generalizations, and laws in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*:

The old questions of the traditional analysis (What link should be made between disparate events? How can a causal succession be established between them? What continuity or overall significance do they possess? Is it possible to define a totality or must one be content with reconstituting connexions?) are now being replaced by questions of another type: which strata should be isolated from others? What criteria of periodization should be adopted for each of them? What system of relations (hierarchy, dominance, stratification, univocal determination, circular causality) may be established between them? What series of series may be established? (2)

Not only did Foucault oppose the view of history as a continuity made up of causal relations, but also contested the concept of knowledge based on laws derived from the causal analysis of the material relations governing history. His ‘new’ epistemology discredits causality, laws, and generalizations on the grounds that they impose totalizing and homogeneous constructions of reality:

Such a project is linked to two or three hypotheses; - it is supposed that between all the events of a well-defined spatio-temporal area, between all the phenomena of which traces have been found, it must be possible to establish a system of homogeneous relations: a network of causality that makes it possible to derive each of them, relations of analogy that show how they symbolise one another, or how they all express one and the same central core; it is also supposed that one and the same form of historicity operates upon economic structures, social institutions and customs, the inertia of mental attitudes, technological practice, political behaviour, and subjects them all to the same type of transformation; lastly, it is supposed that history itself may be articulated into great units - stages or phases - which contain within themselves their own principle of cohesion. These are the postulates that are challenged by the new history when it speaks of series, divisions, limits, differences of level, shifts, chronological specificities, particular forms of rehandling, possible types of relation. (22)

Foucault thus advocated an epistemology of decentered, differentiated, isolated, dispersed, and particularized judgments. Foucauldian new history--and epistemology--has had a large impact on the field of postcolonial studies. Adopting Foucauldian anti-historicism and anti-humanism, postcolonial theorists have isolated anticolonial struggles from their historical, social, and political contexts. Ever since the colonizer/colonized opposition was isolated from its historical context, however, the meaning of subjective and collective agency has been blurred and diluted.

The Subaltern Group

An example of Foucauldian postmodern construction of subjectivity and agency can be found in the Subaltern Group formed in India in 1980s. Its studies reflect ahistorical and apolitical representations of the Indian peasants. One of the adherents of this group, Gyan Prakash, is interested in the question how the Third World writes its history (8) [a detailed disputation of Gyan Prakash's approach to history can be found in Arif Dirlik]. His answer is founded upon the assumptions of the Subaltern Studies group, which, as Arif Dirlik has pointed out, "provides, although it does not exhaust, the major themes in postcolonial discourse" (333). Articulated by Prakash, these assumptions suggest that postcolonial theory operates with new knowledges outside the privileged Western notions of Reason and Progress (Prakash 8). Although, for example, Marxism offers an effective critique of colonialism, since it uses the universalized discourse of the economic modes of production, it reinstates the elitist Eurocentric perspective (8). According to Prakash, postcolonial rewriting of history must, therefore, repudiate the Marxist perspective in order to allow postcolonial thought to purge itself of the elitist discourses (8). What Prakash suggests here is similar to François Lyotard's postmodern rejection of 'the meta-narratives' of the West. Postcolonial theorists label Marxism, feminism, and all -isms as 'the meta-narratives' of the West, that is, as the mouthpiece of the Western global domination and seek ways to defy them.

They, therefore, foreground the othered and excluded figure of the subaltern--who has been created and rendered passive and silent by the Western domination (Prakash 9). Postcolonial rewriting of history thus involves uncovering the subaltern deeds and acts rather than adopting "the deadly weapon of cause and effect" (Prakash 9). Understanding the subaltern requires--as exemplified in the work of one of the scholars of the Subaltern Studies Group, Ranajit Guha-- a study of "the peasant's insurgent consciousness, rumors, mythic visions, religiosity, and bonds of community" (Prakash 9). Guha views agency from an anthropological angle which, in fact, obscures its historical, political, and social significations, mystifying it as a mental attribute. Without a historical analysis of the material causes and conditions that make imperialist dominance possible and a clear view of the oppressor/oppressed opposition, it is impossible to posit a systematic, consistent, and elaborate theory of agency. History evolves through struggles of the oppressed. Isolating the oppressor/oppressed opposition from its material causes and effects means denying agency. Postcolonial interpretations of history that fail to locate agency within a context of anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist struggle against bondage and exploitation cannot come up with a sound definition. This is why most postmodernist and postcolonialist discourse on history disintegrates into an incoherent muddle.

Algeria's Anticolonial Struggle

Djebar says, "I am forced to acknowledge a curious fact: the date of my birth is *eighteen hundred and forty-two*, the year when General Saint-Arnaud arrives to burn down the *zaouia* of the Beni Menacer, the tribe from which I am descended" (217). In *Fantasia*, she projects some of the most harrowing images of the colonial oppression that convey the oppressor/oppressed antagonism at its highest point. In contrast with the culturalist or new historicist approach, *Fantasia* presents the colonizer/colonized conflict as a historical process that emerged as a result of the French imperialist aggression from a dialectical perspective. About the colonial invasion of Africa, Frederick Cooper notes that "recognition of the much greater power of the Europeans in the colonial encounter does not negate the importance of African agency in determining the shape the encounter took" (17). The novel similarly foregrounds the importance of the agency of the oppressed in shaping the encounter with the oppressor. Djebar "re-read[s] the chronicles of these first encounters and note[s] contrasting styles" (15) in order to accurately reflect the assailants' and the defenders' psychology and viewpoints. The opening sections of Djebar's novel thus focus on the French invasion of the city of Algiers. After depicting the life of bondage under the rule of the colonizer, the novel proceeds to describe the national struggle for liberation that leads to the Algerian War of Independence. Djebar relies on the original documents and testimonies by the French officers, artists, and writers of the time to present an accurate picture of the colonial invasion of Algeria. The novel chronicles the battle that commence with the appearance of the French fleet on 13 June 1830 in the bay of Algiers and end with the capture of the capital city on 4 July 1830: "Half past five in the morning.

The immense flotilla of frigates, brigs and schooners, bedecked with multicolored pennons, streams endlessly, three by three, into the entrance to the bay.” (6). The opening sections of *Fantasia* are devoted to a moment by moment reconstruction of the fierce battle with the enemy. Djébar’s description of The Battle of Staouéli challenges the hegemonic views that underestimate historical struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor. Epic struggles are undertaken by Bedouins and Turks for the defense of the city of Algiers: “In this hand-to-hand struggle, Turks in their flaming red and Bedouins shrouded in white fight off their assailants with a display of ferocity, accompanied by jubilant cries of defiance that culminate in a crescendo of blood-curdling shrieks” (15). She refers to, the commander in charge, Aga Ibrahim’s “overweening confidence” (16), who is aware of inefficiency of his military equipment, yet, trusts his men’s willingness to fight and die for their honor.

The perspectives of the oppressed are intersected with the eye-witness accounts of the colonizers. One of them is Baron de Barchou de Penhoen who “describes the battle stage by stage” (17). The incompatibility between Baron’s views and the Algerians’ suggest how each camp differs in their understanding of bondage and enslavement. For Baron, it is crazy to go such extremes when one fights against a superior power. Before quoting his episode of the battle, Djébar describes the way his mood is affected by the battleground: “he seems to be transfixed with revulsion by the terrible poetry of the scene before his eyes” (18). The oppressor is not expected to understand that surrender is not an option for the oppressed:

‘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; the soldiers finished her off with their bayonets’ (18).

Fantasia’s dialectical strategy is to expose what Aimé Césaire describes in his *Discourse on Colonialism* as the colonizers’ “collective hypocrisy that cleverly misrepresents problems” and “legitimizes the hateful solutions” (10). Baron’s take on the scene reflects such hypocrisy. He makes a point of the ‘barbaric’ acts committed by the victim while turning a blind eye to the French barbarism. The colonizers count on their superior military power, yet the Arabs and Turks that defend the city together are ready to die before they surrender. The French commanders are so sure of their victory that they bring “four painters, five draughtsmen and about a dozen engravers on board” (8) to document each stage of the attack: “The war artist Major Longlois will pause to draw dead Turks, their faces still bearing the imprint of their frenzied valour. Some of them are grasping a dagger in their right hands which they have plunged into their own breasts” (17). The acts of suicide shock the invader for he cannot comprehend that how come the oppressed prefers to die rather than surrender.

The war is dragged on for days and weeks. “On 28 June... the Algerian offensive proves more and more effectual: a battalion of the 4th Light Horse is well nigh wiped out in a series of murderous encounters” (30). Barchou notes the daily casualties of the French, which is around two hundred fifty (30). The French, however, manage to breach the defense. They set about digging trenches and bombarding of Algiers from the sea continues. “At three o’clock on the morning of 4 July, the last act begins. At Borj Hassan, an elite garrison of two thousand men – eight hundred Turks and one thousand two hundred *Kulughlis*ⁱ – holds out for five hours against the fire from the French batteries” (30). The collapse of Borj Hassan--Fort Emperor--, a Turkish fortification that dates back to the sixteenth century, under the French fire determines the result. Although the lesser forts, “Fort Bab Azoun and ‘Fort des Anglais’ continue to hold out” (31), no hope is left for Algiers as the city is left without protection. “It is now ten o’clock on the morning of 4 July. Borj Hassan explodes... Two hours later an emissary of Dey Hussein slips into the invaders’ camp to present the preliminary plans for the surrender” (31). Djébar cites three French chroniclers of the war. One of them, J.T. Merle, “a witness located in the rear action” (28) is amazed at the Arab combatants’ skill to disappear with their casualties. Although the Arabs kill and mutilate the French soldiers, they never let theirs be captured, dead or alive: “He describes in detail... the manner in which every Arab skillfully handles a wooden device, to convey a wounded friend, or drag the bodies of... their dead” (32). Despite all efforts for defending the city, the battle is lost due to “the superiority of the Western artillery” (17), which is a key factor that Aga Ibrahim disdains.

Djébar describes the plunder that the French sets about, right after they have the city officials sign the documents that contain the capitulations:

The City, not so much ‘captured’ as declared an ‘Open City’. The Capital is sold: the price – its legendary treasure. The gold of Algiers, shipped by the crateful to France, where a new king inaugurates his reign by accepting the Republican flag and acquiring the Barbary ingots.

Algiers, stripped of its past and its pride, Algiers, named after the foremost of its two islands - ‘El-Djezair’. Barbarossa had freed these islands from the grip of Spain and made them a hideout for the corsairs who had scour the Mediterranean for three centuries or more... (39).

Algiers is robbed of its treasures, honor, and pride. All that is left is despair. The notes of Mufti Hajj Ahmed Effendi, who wrote his recollections of a final resistance organized by the citizens, show the extent of despair: “the women rushed out in our path, hurling their children at our feet, and crying, ‘It will be well if you are victorious, but if you are not, the Infidels will come to dishonor us! Go then, but before you leave, put us to the sword!’” (42).

Some two thousand and five hundred soldiers refuse to surrender and declare a desire to fight under the leadership of Bey Ahmed (43). Despite efforts for organizing resistance, the citizens gather to leave Algiers: “Thousands of refugees clog the road to Constantine in the exodus” (43). They prefer displacement and exile to bondage. The persecution by the French, which starts immediately after the conquest, proves them right. As opposed to the despair of the conquered, the French colonialists’ writings suggest a jubilant and proud mood. They regard the invasion of Algiers as a spectacle, a play or an opera. They see their victims as less than human, as objects that can be tortured, raped, and put to death. Djébar quotes Captain Montagnac describing a battle scene: ““This little fray offered a charming spectacle. Clouds of horsemen, light as birds, criss-crossing, flitting in every direction...” (54). Every encounter increases the colonizers’ appetite for a spectacle of violence and monstrosity. The rest of Montagnac’s account, quoted by Césaire, exposes the monstrous acts committed by the French: ““In order to banish the thoughts that sometimes besiege me, I have some heads cut off, not the heads of artichokes, but the heads of men”” (18). The colonizers unleash an unprecedented brutality as they advance inland. The chapter, “Women, Children, Oxen Dying in Caves,” --based on the first hand accounts of El-Kantara massacre-- presents the incident from the oppressors’ viewpoint. The French are set out to destroy an entire tribe trapped in the caves on Mount Nacmaria. The Ouled Riah tribesmen flee to the caves that are “situated in a promontory between two valleys, at an altitude of over 1,200 feet” (66). Colonel Pelissier orders his troops a thorough search in El-Kantara plain. After locating the caves, the French cut woods and pile them up in the entrances. A French soldier describes “the muffled groans of men, women, children, beasts, and the cracking of burnt rocks as they crumbled and continual gunfire! (71). Djébar cites a Spanish officer of the French army: ““words cannot describe the violence of the blaze at the summit of El-Kantara, the flames rose to a height of more than two hundred feet and dense columns of smoke billowed up in front of the entrance to the cave”” (69). He describes the scene as “an appalling sight” (72), giving the details of the French monstrosities: ““All the corpses are naked, in attitudes which indicated convulsions they must have experienced before they expired. Blood was flowing from their mouths; but the most horrifying sight was that of infants at the breast, lying amid the remains of dead sheep, sacks of beans, etc”” (72). Djébar’s incorporation of these first hand witness accounts belies the colonizers’ claim of bringing civilization to the uncivilized parts of the world.

Fantasia shows that implementing an imperial order in Maghreb requires more than a superior military power. The colonizers’ “itch to put pen to paper” (44) evinces the efforts for organizing a network that promotes French imperialism. The arrogance of those who participated in the rape of Algeria can be discerned in the manner the colonizers write their recollections of the invasion. Djébar asks “what is the significance behind the urge of so many fighting men to relive in print this month of July 1830? Did their writings savor the seducer’s triumph, the rapist’s intoxication?” (45). The French join a race for publishing their memoirs of the invasion because “the publication of these documents ensures the continuing reputation of their authors as they describe the ballet of the conquest of our territory” (51).

Yet, most importantly, their works give guidance to the venturers and businessmen who are up for the capitalist exploitation of Algeria. *Fantasia* suggests that the ultimate aim of the colonial writing is to make Algeria a prey for the French capitalists and investors. In order to gather the information that the capitalists need, the French turn Algeria into an object and subject of study: “Hordes of interpreters, geographers, ethnographers, linguists, botanists, diverse scholars, and professional scribblers will swoop down on this new prey” (45). Djebbar suggests that handing the Algerian land over to the capitalists venturers and merchants completes the rape:

This conquest is no longer seen as the discovery of a strange new world, not even as a new crusade by a West aspiring to relive its past as if it were an opera. The invasion has become an enterprise of rapine: after the army come the merchants and soon their employees are hard at work; their machinery for liquidation and execution is already in place. (45)

Aimé Césaire defines colonization as a huge machine of exploitation: “Between the colonizer and the colonized there is room only for forced labor” (21). Once they set the imperial machine in motion, the French get busy with promoting it: “By 1835 or thereabouts, nineteen army officers, with four or five from the navy, have contributed to this literary output” (44). J.T. Merle celebrates the installation of the printing press: “Gutenberg’s infernal machine, this formidable arm of civilization, was set up on African soil in a few hours. Universal cries of ‘Long live France! Long live the King!’ greeted accounts of our landing and first victories, as soon as they were distributed” (33). The outburst of excitement among the French military men, artists, and diplomats shows how the printing press becomes an effective instrument of subjugating Algeria. This further indicates the way the Western civilization puts all of its capabilities in the service of a robbery of grand scale.

Women and the Algerian War of Independence

Fantasia provides first hand accounts of the national war of independence ⁱⁱ and women’s leading roles in it. Marnia Lazreg indicates that “women were active participants in the war, foreshadowing a general change in relations between Algerian women and men” (755). The novel foregrounds scenes from the Algerian women’s revolt against enslavement and bondage and their involvement in the nation’s anticolonial struggle. Cherifa’s testimony, which the narrator describes as “torch-words” that “light up my women-companions, my accomplices” (142), reveals her heroic struggle against the oppressor. The fifteen-year-old Cherifa defies the French soldiers not giving up the dead body of her beloved brother. All she wants to do is to wash his face and see if he is still alive.

Djebar explores Women's agency through wresting their voice from anonymity. Homi K. Bhabha asks "how historical agency is enacted in the slenderness of narrative; how we historicize the event of the dehistoricized" (198). The answer lies in Djebar's reconstruction of women's testimonies in *Fantasia*. Sahraoui Zohra's account implies Djebar's antecedents' heroic resistance:

The second time the soldiers burnt my house down, the fire spread and the roof collapsed ... I went back into the fire, thinking, 'Even if I only save one mattress, I'll have that to sleep on!' So I got one mattress out; the fire caught one corner. I plunged it into the wadi and put the fire out. The soldiers laughed at me, saying "Are you keeping that one for the *fellaheen*? They came back and set fire to the place again. They even took the clothes off our backs ... They took our clothes and left us like that, naked as the day we were born! (159)

Sahraoui, who lost her sons in the war, tells how she was harassed by the French who wracked her house. As she tries to save a mattress from the fire, they insult and humiliate her. These accounts demonstrate the manner in which the war encloses women and their acts in the nation's anticolonial struggle. "As soon as war broke out, Algerian women joined in the struggle. There were 10,949 fighting women, 3.1% of all those taking part in active combat" (Djamila Amrane *et al*). Djamila Amrane points out that Algerian women were not mere supporters but actual fighters. John Erickson points out the way Djebar renders the opposing viewpoints of the colonizers and fighting women: "Djebar's juxtaposition of the written accounts of the European colonizers with the oral accounts of the Algerian women projects these oppositions onto a larger screen: that of relations of power obtaining, past and present, between France and the Maghreb" (43). One of these women is Jennet; a nurse who falls captive to the French during the war. Her first hand account of imprisonment and torture represents the oppressor/oppressed opposition in all its intensity. The French soldiers drag away her husband and she does not know where they take him. She sits in the doorway, thinking "of her husband rotting in some jail or other" (152). Incorporating these witness accounts and recollections into her narrative, Djebar creates an anticolonial discourse based on the dialectical tensions Erickson has referred to.

Autobiography and Algerian History

Fantasia reconstructs subjectivity and agency as part of the historical dialectics resolved through the nation's emancipation. Djebar emphasizes the fact that, for the oppressed, who is dispossessed of land, of culture and history, subjective expression emerges as a vital need --"On the territory of dispossession, I would that I could sing" (142)-- and includes a search for the past, antecedents, and one's heritage. Djebar, therefore, feels the necessity for revisiting the past, though she is concerned that the burden of the past may be too heavy.

The chapter entitled as *Soliloquy* presents a brief meta-fictional moment of her concerns: “My fiction is this attempt at autobiography, weighed down under the oppressive burden of my heritage. Shall I sink beneath the weight” (218). Her notion of autobiography is deeply historical. For Djébar, writing an autobiography necessarily inheres rewriting the conflict-ridden history of her country. In her attempt of writing autobiography she indicates her acknowledgement of the fact that subjectivity and agency do not emerge in a vacuum, that historical conditions shape our subjectivity and turn us into agents. By referring to the female ancestors, she challenges the concept of insular subject and identifies herself as part of a wider collectivity: “While I thought I was undertaking a ‘journey through myself,’ I find I am simply choosing another veil. While I intended every step forward to make me more clearly identifiable, I find myself progressively sucked down into anonymity of those women of old – my ancestors!” (217). Just like her conception of history, her conception of autobiography is also dialectical; the anonymity of her antecedents constitutes the dialectics of her autobiography. The fact that their words and deeds are historically unacknowledged must be overcome if she is to reconstruct her subjectivity as part of this collectivity. And that is the primary goal of this autobiography.

Djébar’s injection of dialectics into her autobiography continues with the historical dilemma of the colonizer’s language and culture. She admits that writing in the colonizer’s language gives her pain:

To attempt an autobiography using French words alone is to lend myself to the vivisector’s scalpel, revealing what lies beneath the skin. The flesh flakes off and with it, seemingly, the last shreds of the unwritten language of my childhood. Wounds are reopened, veins deep, one’s own blood flows and that of others, which has never dried. (156)

French will never stop being an unproblematic medium for her as it reminds her of the violence and pain inflicted upon her antecedents: “I know that every language is a dark depository for piled-up corpses, refuse, sewage, but faced with the language of the former conqueror, which offers me its ornaments, its jewels, its flowers, I find they are the flowers of death-chrysanthemums on tombs” (181). Writing in French is like “unveiling” (156). She describes the act of expressing herself in French as “stripping oneself naked” (157). As Ngũgi wa Thiong’o argues, the colonizers’ suppression of the mother tongue is a great “humiliation” (33) for the colonized. While the imposition of the colonizer’s language is humiliating for the oppressed, Djébar also acknowledges that French culture and language has helped her develop ideas of individual freedom and free expression; of resisting religious and patriarchal oppression. Djébar’s dilemmas about writing in French can be discerned in the following: “by laying myself bare in this language I start a fire which may consume me. For attempting an autobiography in the former enemy’s language...” (215). She describes herself as “voiceless” and “cut off from [her] mother’s words” (5).

Yet, she also admits that using French has helped her protect her privacy: “the French I used from the beginning is for me, in fact, a veil. A way of dissimulating oneself because I constantly had the feeling, in my relations with the outer world, that people did not perceive my image” (213). Bill Ashcroft *et al* argues that limited access to one’s mother tongue justifies appropriation of the colonizer’s language: “seizing the language of the center and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place” (38). In *Fantasia*, Djébar’s appropriation of French can be regarded as part of the colonizer/colonized dialectic; it shows her intention of bereaving it of its familiar contexts of power and authority. Hers is a resistant act of defamiliarizing the French language from its resonances of subjugation: “Words of accusation, legal procedure, violence - that is the oral source of the colonized people’s French” (215). The language of the oppressor never ceases to be a source of contradiction as it represents dispossession of history, culture, land, and home, yet the oppressed can appropriate it and use it for exposing the oppressor. In the following, she exposes the conflicts between the dominant French culture and language and her native culture:

a similar no-man’s-land still exists between the French and the indigenous languages, between two national memories: the French tongue, with its body and voice, has established a proud *presidio* in me, while the mother-tongue, all oral tradition, all rags and tatters, resists and attacks between two breathing spaces. In time to the rhythm of the *rebato*, I am alternately the besieged foreigner and the native swaggering off to die, so there is seemingly endless strife between the spoken and written word. (215)

The oral culture of the colonized tries to survive in the tough competition with the colonizer’s written culture. In fact, a large part of the Algerian culture is oral; for this reason, she cherishes orality because it is the heritage of her mother, relatives, Algerian sisters, and female ancestors: “My oral tradition has gradually been overlaid and is in danger of vanishing” (156). Miriam Cooke argues that “Djébar writes this mother tongue so as to resist the urge of history to silence women and the language they spoke and still speak” (33). Her insistence on familiarizing herself with “the rich vocabulary of love of [her] mother tongue” (33) is due to a desire to recover her native heritage cannibalized by the colonizer. As most women are illiterate in rural Algeria, they express themselves orally, inventing creative ways to use language: “In former times, my ancestors, women like myself, spending their evenings sitting on the terraces open to the sky, amused themselves with riddles or proverbs or adding line to line to complete a love quatrain” (62). She appreciates resistant orality of Algerian women who put language in the service of emotions, love, and bodily pleasures. She points out the rich Arabic lexicon of love. Since women are forbidden to talk or write about love in public, they do it in seclusion and use figurative language, which gives their discourse a poetic quality.

Written culture that came with the colonizer has helped Djébar create a space where she can deal with the oppressor/oppressed conflict: “writing has brought me to the cries of the women silently rebelling in my youth, to my true origins” (204). Only through reinscribing Algerian women’s orality in the space of writing, that is, using the written/oral dialectic, she can constitute a resistant concept of agency. She seeks ways to inject love and nurture in this concept of agency: “And now I to seek out the rich vocabulary of love of my mother tongue – milk of which I had been previously deprived. In contrast to the segregation I inherited, words expressing love-in-the-present become for me like one token swallow heralding summer” (62). Words expressing love are resistant words. One of Djébar’s opening autobiographical notes suggests that the written word will become the little Arab girl’s ticket to freedom (3). Djébar’s recognition of the liberating role of the French culture can be seen as a token of negotiation. Her autobiography in French, in fact, implies the historical resolution of the oppressor/oppressed conflict. At the beginning, she is confused due to her simultaneous exposition to Islamic and Western cultures at home and at school. She attends the French school in her village in the morning and the Quranic school in the afternoon. Her exposure to both cultures which oppose and exclude one another causes her to experience a “dichotomy of location” (184). She calls the French language as ‘the tunic of Nessus’: “The language of the Others, in which I was enveloped from childhood, the gift of my father lovingly bestowed on me, that language has adhered to me ever since like the tunic of Nessus” (217). The imposition of the colonizer’s culture and language implies a complicity between the native patriarchy and colonizing power. Her reference to the poisonous robe that killed Heracles in Greek mythology implies that the French language has shifted her identity, her subjectivity irrevocably. Yet, what is done cannot be undone. She must, therefore, come to terms with reality and she achieves the resolution through writing her autobiography.

Djébar acknowledges that writing becomes an empowering tool for Algerian women repressed by Islamic patriarchy. In fact, literacy does not only emancipate Algerian women, but men, as well. She recalls the time when young generation of Arabic men and women begin to use the French language in order to express their romantic feelings. They practice skills of literacy that they develop at French schools by expressing their emotions in the letters they write to one another. Literacy in French, therefore, represents a general transformation of the Algerian society. It helps them question repressive aspects of their culture and traditions. In the chapter, “Love-letters,” Djébar recalls her father sending her mother postcards written in French, full of expressions of love. Her father, however, destroys the letters Djébar receives from her lover. She says that she reverts to corresponding with him in French in order to keep her privacy intact. In *Fantasia*, Algerian youth resorts to the colonizer’s language to create themselves a space for free expression. She relates her recollections of her encounters with the Western culture through reading Paul Bourget, Colette, and Agatha Christie as a teenager. As she devours their books, she discovers emancipatory possibilities that help her question women’s sequestration and confinement in the Algerian society.

In *Fantasia*, literacy helps women claim a space for themselves outside patriarchal authority and control. Their correspondances with men in French help them avoid the elders' vigilance. Djébar considers this as a rebellious act. Writing means freedom from repression; it means rebelling against feudal/patriarchal/Islamic traditions, and claiming a right to feel and desire: "to write *confronting* love. Shedding light on one's body to help lift the taboo, to lift the veil" (62).

A strong desire to lift the veil underlies *Fantasia*. On the first day of school, Djébar says that she has to wear the veil. In the traditional Arabic society, gender discrimination is demarcated at the level of clothing and the veil is used to preserve female chastity. Through cultural interaction with the French, she starts questioning the Islamic impositions on women including the veil. In the chapter, "Three Cloistered Girls," Djébar compares and contrasts the two cultures in terms of individual freedoms. The confinement of the Algerian women is portrayed as opposed to the freedom of the French women. Djébar is intrigued by the French policeman's daughter, Marie-Louise, who represents Parisian style and airs. Marie-Louise does not speak Arabic and her excuse for not speaking Arabic is her lack of "gift for languages" (22). The village girls resent the colonizer's excuse, yet cannot help being fascinated by her. They marvel at the intimacy of Marie-Louise and her fiancé and the way they express their love for one another openly. The words, "'Darling Pilou,'" (27) Marie-Louise uses when addressing her fiancé in public is considered inappropriate in Islamic culture. The girls in the village secretly make fun of Marie-Louise, despising her "ostentatious demonstrations of affection" (27). Yet, they also resent the fact that they lack the freedom she has: "'Darling Pilou'; words followed by bursts of sarcastic laughter; what can I say of the damage done to me in the course of time by this expression" (27). On the one hand, the colonizer's display of intimacy seems outrageous because intimacy is private and not for the eyes and ears of others in the Arabic culture; on the other hand, cultural taboos are unbearably constraining. Djébar tells how she resents the formal and prudent way of addressing her father: "When the adolescent girl addresses her father, her language is coated with prudishness... Is that why she cannot express any passion on paper?" (62). Marie-Louise has the freedom to address her fiancé with affectionate words in public whereas the same privilege is denied to the Arabic girls. This makes Djébar resent the way taboos repress and cripple her impulses and desires as a woman. One of the central notes of her autobiography can be found in the following meditation on breaking the taboos, restraints, and boundaries:

Despite the turmoil of my adolescent dreams, this 'darling Pilou' left me with one deep-rooted complex: the French language could offer me all its inexhaustible treasures, but not a single one of its terms of endearment would be destined for my use ... One day, because all my spontaneous impulses as a woman would be stifled by this autistic state, one day the pressure would suddenly give and a reaction would set in. (27)

The passage, a strong implication of her revolt, is also significant for indicating the way conflict, reaction, and revolt lay in the basis of agency. It implies that agency emerges out of conflict; it is the direct result of too much pressure.

Part history, part autobiography, *Fantasia* presents us with the conflicts between the oppressor and the oppressed that span a period over one century. Providing a historical perspective of the colonization of Algeria, the novel exposes the French imperial aggression as driven by capitalist avarice and a will to loot. Its dialectical representation of the conflict extends to the National War of Independence which is mostly reflected through Algerian women's testimonies. As we read through these women's accounts of oppression, we also find out about the author's conflicts of subjectivity and agency both as a colonial subject and as a woman in a repressive society. Djébar's determination to work out these conflicts by wresting women's voices from anonymity and claiming them agency informs *Fantasia*, which further exposes her notion of agency as being part of the historical struggle waged by the oppressed against the oppressor.

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