Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 182

Volume 182

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Janet Witalec
PROJECT EDITOR

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CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author's career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author's works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

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Assia Djebar
1936-

(Born Fatima-Zohra Imalayen) Algerian novelist, short story writer, essayist, director, playwright, and poet.

The following entry presents an overview of Djebar's career through 2003.

INTRODUCTION

As Algeria's leading female literary figure, Djebar has earned international attention for her poignant, sophisticated portrayals of female subjugation and French hegemony in Islamic North Africa. Her semi-autobiographical fiction, set against the historical backdrop of Algeria's struggle for independence, focuses on the intricate lives and experiences of ordinary Algerian women who strive to liberate themselves from the oppressive bonds of traditional Muslim family roles and social norms. Her acclaimed "Algerian Quartet"—*L'amour, la fantasia* (1985; *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*), *Ombre sultane* (1987; *A Sister to Scheherazade*), *Vaste est la prison* (1994; *So Vast the Prison*), and *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (1995; *Algerian White*)—is a complex hybrid of autobiography, literary meditation, fictionalized documentary, and revisionary history in which Djebar attempts to reclaim the voice and freedom of Algerian women. Though writing in French, the language of Algeria's colonial government until 1962, Djebar often reflects self-consciously on the problem of language as a tool of ideological conditioning, particularly in matters of female self-identity and sexuality.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born Fatima-Zohra Imalayen in Cherchell, Algeria, a Mediterranean seaport west of Algiers, Djebar was raised in a middle-class family. Her father, a French teacher, ensured that she received a formal education, a privilege not accorded to many Algerian women of the era. Djebar's francophone acculturation at the French schools she attended set her apart from the other women in her family, whose education was either denied or cut short by the imposition of domestic responsibilities. Upon completing high school, Djebar became the first Algerian woman to earn a scholarship to the elite École Normal Supérieure de Serves in Paris. There she studied history and participated in the Algerian students' strike of 1956 during the French-Algerian war. Djebar left her studies to write *La soif* (1957; *The Mischief*), adopting the pen name Djebar (*djebbar* means "intransigent" in Arabic) to protect her family from the potential scandal that erotic elements of her work might cause. After a decade of self-imposed exile in Tunisia and Morocco with her husband, Walid Garn, whom she later divorced, Djebar returned to the newly independent Algeria in 1962. Upon her return, Djebar was criticized by some Algerian scholars for continuing to write in French instead of switching to the official national language of Arabic. In Algeria, Djebar found work with several media outlets and began a long-term teaching career at the University of Algiers, where she taught history, literature, and film. In 1969 she published a volume of poetry, *Poèmes pour l'Algérie heureuse,* and coauthored a play, *Rouge l'aube.* During the 1970s, Djebar abandoned writing to turn her attention to the study of classical Arabic and filmmaking. Her first film, *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1977), won the top prize at the Venice Film Festival. Following a ten-

year hiatus from publishing, Djebar returned to writing with the short story collection *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980; *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*). In addition to teaching at the University of Algiers, Djebar has also served as the director of the Center for French and Francophone Studies at Louisiana State University and as a professor of Francophone Literature and Civilization at New York University. Djebar's work has been recognized with several prestigious awards, including the Prix Maurice Maeterlink in 1995, the Neustadt Prize for Contributions to World Literature in 1996, and the Yourcenar Prize in 1997.

MAJOR WORKS

Djebar's first novel, *La soif,* focuses on the complex relationship between two young Algerian women—Nadia, who is educated and liberated, and Jedla, who is trapped in a childless marriage to an unfaithful husband. The psychological interest of the novel, which evinces strong European influences and emphasizes sensual aspects of the women's lives and friendship, lies in Jedla's tragic demise and Nadia's transformation from an egocentric modern girl to a reflective woman trapped in a loveless, traditional marriage. Djebar's second novel, *Les impatients* (1958), centers upon a young Algerian woman who chafes against her cloistered life and seeks liberation through a clandestine affair with a man whom she discovers is her stepmother's former lover. Exploiting this knowledge to gain her freedom, the heroine is finally liberated, ironically and melodramatically, when her lover and stepmother are murdered in an honor killing. *Les enfants du nouveau monde* (1962) focuses again on the lives of Algerian women, but unlike Djebar's previous novels, is placed within the context of the Algerian war for independence, linking the struggle for national liberation with that of women's liberation. The narrative depicts various women, including the uneducated wife of a traitorous French informant, the educated wife of a guerrilla fighter, an imprisoned teacher, and an adolescent guerilla, all of whom cope with the uncertainty and danger of the Algerian revolution and their desire for self-determination. In *Les alouettes naïves* (1967), Djebar returns to the political struggle for Algerian independence, this time viewed through the lives of two couples. Although both of the couples involved are committed to nationalist goals, Djebar stresses the personal costs of this commitment. *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment,* Djebar's first short story collection, takes its title from an 1832 Delacroix painting that depicts three beautiful Algerian women cloistered in a room, glimpsed beyond a raised curtain. A twentieth-century reinterpretation by Picasso depicted the women nude and sitting in an open setting. Djebar's ten stories, categorized under the divisions "Yesterday" and "Today," express her conviction that conditions for Algerian women have scarcely changed since Delacroix's time. This belief and her stories were based on her own discussions with Algerian women between 1958 and 1978. The tales show the officially unrecognized contributions women made to Algerian liberation and the lack of dialogue between the sexes.

Fantasia, the first installment of Djebar's "Algerian Quartet," is both autobiographical and historical in scope. As in previous works, Djebar focuses on the culturally proscribed roles and personal experiences of Algerian women. The novel's first scene, in which a young girl is being taken to school by her father, comes directly from Djebar's childhood, while other parts of the book incorporate Djebar's historical research on the 1830 conquest of Algeria and the Algerian revolution of 1954-62. In French documents and letters, Djebar offers hints of how women were involved in these events and, to counter patriarchal textual evidence, she presents examples of oral history as told by Arab women. While retracing and reconstructing the history of Algerian women, the shifting, polyphonic narrative represents a sophisticated meditation on language as a tool of conquest and subjugation. In *A Sister to Scheherazade,* the second installment of the "Algerian Quartet," Djebar contrasts the lives of two women, one traditional and one modern, in contemporary Algeria. Despite their different backgrounds, the two women develop a friendship while engaged in ritual bathing and forge an alliance to help the traditional woman escape the confines of an oppressive marriage. The title alludes to the *Arabian Nights* storyteller Scheherazade, whose endless tales save her from execution by a misogynist king. In *So Vast the Prison,* the quartet's third volume, Djebar further explores themes of colonialism and gender dynamics in Algeria. The novel follows the story of a young Arab woman, Isma, through her French schooling, into an abusive marriage which nearly results in her blindness, and finally to her career in filmmaking. Though one of Djebar's most obviously autobiographical works, the fragmented narrative draws broadly upon personal experience, family recollections, and the history of Algeria from the Roman conquest of Carthage to modern French colonialism, creating parallels between the subjugation of Algeria and that of Algerian women. In *Algerian White,* the concluding volume of the quartet, Djebar examines the bloody history of post-liberation Algeria, during which internecine violence claimed the lives of many, including several of Djebar's friends who were murdered by radical Muslim activists. Linking such atrocities with those perpetrated by the French, Djebar laments the destructive cycle of retribution and repression that continues to undermine the development of Algerian nationhood.

In *Loin de Médine: Filles d'Ishmaël* (1991; *Far from Medina*), Djebar reconstructs the lives of seventeen notable women mentioned in medieval Muslim religious

texts. Focusing on the women who surrounded Mohammed, Djebar draws attention to their significant but unacknowledged influence on Islam's founding prophet and the early history of that religion. In *Les nuits de Strasbourg* (1997), Djebar traded her usual Algerian setting for the European city of Strasbourg, located along the contentious border of France and Germany. The novel, which opens during the start of World War II, follows the stories of several intercultural couples—Algerian Jew and German, French and Algerian Muslim, etc.—as they struggle, often unsuccessfully, with their ethnic, generational, and religious differences. Like her fiction, Djebar's major cinematic work, *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua,* deals with the trauma of patriarchal oppression and the historically invisible experiences of Algerian women. The film, which recounts the journey of a woman returning to rural Algeria fifteen years after the Algerian revolution, documents the war experiences and personal histories of the various local women she encounters.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Djebar's literary career began with a flurry of praise from French critics for her debut novel, *La soif,* which some have compared to Françoise Sagan's scandalous 1954 novel *Bonjour tristesse.* However, Algerian scholars have faulted both *La soif* and Djebar's second novel, *Les impatients,* as self-absorbed and bourgeois—Algerian revolutionaries of the period argued that neither work made a contribution to the struggle for national liberation. Unlike her first two novels, *Les enfants du nouveau monde* and *Les alouettes naïves* have received considerable praise from Arabic audiences for their attention to the Algerian battle for independence and the inner personal struggles of both men and women caught up in the political tumult. The stories in *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment,* Djebar's return to writing in 1980, have been warmly received by critics, who commended their vivid use of language and skill in portraying the complexity of women's lives within a postcolonial context. Among the volumes of Djebar's "Algerian Quartet," *Fantasia* and *So Vast the Prison* have received perhaps the most praise and scholarly attention. However, *A Sister to Scheherazade* has been highly regarded for its polyphonic exploration of intergenerational female relationships, and *Algerian White,* considered the most political of Djebar's later works, has earned critical appreciation for its eloquent tone and astute examination of the costs of building a unified nation. Djebar has also received praise for her careful use of language and delicate style in *Far from Medina,* though some have questioned the relevance of repressive religious history to progressive politics. *Les nuits de Strasbourg* has received a mixed reaction from readers, with reviewers faulting the book's lack of narrative focus, but lauding Djebar's deft use of language and strong aesthetic sensibility. Though she is best known for her literary work, Djebar's film *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* has received international acclaim for its skillful evocation of the hardships suffered by Algerian women.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

La soif [*The Mischief*] (novel) 1957
Les impatients (novel) 1958
Les enfants du nouveau monde (novel) 1962
Les alouettes naïves (novel) 1967
Poèmes pour l'Algérie heureuse (poetry) 1969
Rouge l'aube: Pièce en 4 actes et 10 tableaux [with Walid Garn] (play) 1969
La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua [director] (film) 1977
Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement [*Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*] (short stories) 1980; revised edition, 2002
La Zerda et les chants de l'oubli [director] (documentary film) 1982
**L'amour, la fantasia* [*Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*] (novel) 1985
**Ombre sultane* [*A Sister to Scheherazade*] (novel) 1987
Loin de Médine: Filles d'Ishmaël [*Far from Medina*] (novel) 1991
**Vaste est la prison* [*So Vast the Prison*] (novel) 1994
**Le blanc de l'Algérie* [*Algerian White*] (novel) 1995
Les nuits de Strasbourg (novel) 1997
Oran, langue morte (short stories) 1997
Ces voix qui m'assiègent (essays) 1999
La femme sans sépulture (novel) 2002
Filles d'Ishmaël dans le vent et la tempête (play) 2002
La disparition de la langue française (novel) 2003

*These novels comprise the "Algerian Quartet."

CRITICISM

Mildred Mortimer (review date October 1987)

SOURCE: Mortimer, Mildred. Review of *Ombre sultane,* by Assia Djebar. *French Review* 61, no. 1 (October 1987): 145-46.

[*In the following review, Mortimer commends Djebar's presentation of contrasting women in* Ombre sultane.]

On an autumn day in the early 1940's, Assia Djebar's father, a schoolteacher in colonial Algeria, escorted his daughter to school for the first time, thus sending her on a bilingual, bicultural journey that freed her from the female enclosure but also sent her into exile away from the majority of her sisters. Four decades later Djebar was able to study her unique journey with sensitivity and objectivity in ***L'amour, la fantasia*** (1985). In that work she exclaims, "le dehors et le risque au lieu de la prison de mes semblables".

Whereas ***L'amour, la fantasia*** combines Djebar's autobiography with episodes of the French conquest of 1830 and the Algerian Revolution (1954-1962), this novel [***Ombre sultane***] juxtaposes the lives of two women in contemporary Algeria. Although they do not meet until the end of the novel, they share a common experience. Isma, a modern woman who resembles Djebar's earlier emancipated heroines and indeed the writer herself, and Hajila, a traditional woman, cloistered and veiled, have been married to the same man. Indeed, Isma, who left her husband because he could not tolerate her independent spirit, secretly chose Hajila as his second wife. Through Isma's efforts, the two women, victims but not rivals of the same man, establish a sense of solidarity. Significantly, their friendship is sealed at the *hammam,* the Moorish bath, where the two women, whose lives have followed distinctly different paths, perform the traditional ritual of bathing together in the hot vapors. In Djebar's work, the *hammam* is presented as an enclosure that promotes comfort and healing in contrast to the *harem,* the male-dominated prison.

In this novel, Djebar depicts a traditional woman, first passive and submissive, who begins to take control of her life. Hajila does so by secretly leaving the apartment in which she is a prisoner and walking unveiled through the streets of her city. Her exploration, an act of defiance, leads to a break with her husband and eventually a new bond, an alliance with Isma. The appropriation of space traditionally reserved to men in Muslim society is crucial to Hajila's development. Having removed her veil and discovered the city, Hajila cannot renounce her new freedom and move back to her earlier passive role. For Djebar, this conquest of outer space is the first step towards emancipation.

With the possession of space comes the appropriation of language. Hajila's voice expresses her pain and sorrow as she experiences the man's brutality. In counterpoint to Hajila's suffering, Isma recalls memories of her earlier and yet fleeting happiness. The reader notes that the alternating voices of Isma and Hajila are complementary; together they record a story of failed communication within two successive marriages. Isma never excuses her husband nor tries to renew ties with him; her intent is to help the second wife escape. Her final gesture is to give Hajila the keys to her apartment.

Djebar also explores relationships across the generations—between mothers and children. She condemns Hajila's mother for upholding the traditions that enslave and imprison her daughter. By moving Hajila towards sunshine, to the freedom of open spaces, and by forcing Isma to enter the dark recesses of her memory, Djebar has created a work that is lyrical, passionate, and one that conveys a new intimacy among Algerian sisters "en rupture du harem" (10).

Elaine Williams (review date 24-30 June 1988)

SOURCE: Williams, Elaine. "Angel and Demon." *Times Literary Supplement,* no. 4447 (24-30 June 1988): 698.

[*In the following excerpt, Williams compliments Djebar's portrayal of female suffering and rebellion in* A Sister to Scheherazade.]

Both Assia Djebar and Nawal El Saadawi, in seeking to evoke the suffering of women under Islamic rule, have taken a little-known tale from *The Thousand and One Nights,* one which offers a haunting image of sisterhood, and placed it at the heart of their stories. The tale runs as follows: knowing that the Sultan has vowed to kill a virgin every night in his bed as revenge for his wife's infidelity, Scheherazade, the Sultan's new bride, begs her sister, Dinardzade, to accompany her into the nuptial chamber, hiding beneath the bed to wake her before dawn. The idea of sisterhood resonates through both these novels.

In Djebar's ***A Sister to Scheherazade,*** the second in a quartet of novels portraying the life of Maghribi women past and present, the liberated Isma offers an escape route to the timid and pregnant Hajila, the new wife of the husband Isma has rejected. For El Saadawi, the *Nights* tale, told through the character of a grandmother, offers an opportunity to the heroine of *The Fall of the Imam.* Bint Allah, to question the infidelities of the Sultan himself. The grandmother is shocked by such precociousness. Doesn't the girl know that the treachery of men is allowable by divine law, that of women inspired by Satan?

Both novels are intensely lyrical in their portrayal of women as innocent victims under patriarchal regimes, and both take the sea as a central symbol of freedom. For Hajila, slipping the confines of her husband's house and taking her first illicit walk in the streets alone, it is a vision of the far-off sea which sparks serious longings for solitude and independence, away from the daily demands of matrimony. For Bint Allah, who halts in flight at the top of the hill where she was born to feel the sea air on her body and to breathe in its perfume of nostalgia, it represents an act of realization which leads

to death, her ultimate liberation. Water is significant in other ways. In both books the ablutions of the women are seen as expressing a desire to wash away the sins of the man.

The chapters of Djebar's novel alternate between Isma's descriptions of her own life and of Hajila's, between a strong, sensuous creature and one who lives in fear. Isma, who was sent away by her father to boarding school and so escaped at an early age from the constraints imposed on her by society, fell in love, married and loved freely, but in the end chose to leave her husband. (Her ecstasies and discords are poignantly portrayed—Djebar maintains a fine sense of tension and restrained eroticism in some of these passages.) For Hajila, a village girl who becomes the replacement wife for Isma's husband, and whose family regards the marriage as an honour, there is no love and no choices, but only rape and confinement. She swaps the limited boundaries imposed by her village life for the cocooned, luxurious but deadening existence of marriage to a wealthy man who uses her as both governess and whore. The story unfolds as a chart of her daily escapes into the outside streets where she wanders without a veil—her only possible act of rebellion. Djebar's account of her unveiling is compelling. Without the veil Hajila feels part of the world for the first time, and experiences a revelation of sense, sight and touch. The novel is neatly woven together, and saved from sentimentality by the disciplined and rhythmic qualities of Djebar's language.

Mildred Mortimer (review date winter 1989)

SOURCE: Mortimer, Mildred. Review of *Ombre sultane,* by Assia Djebar. *World Literature Today* 63, no. 1 (winter 1989): 156.

[*In the following review, Mortimer praises Djebar's juxtaposition of traditional and modern women in* Ombre sultane.]

Since her debut in 1957 the novelist Assia Djebar has focused on Algeria's independence struggle and has simultaneously become the scribe for Algerian women silenced by colonialism and Islam. Her latest work represents her strongest attack yet against patriarchy.

In ***Ombre sultane*** Djebar juxtaposes the lives of two women, the modern Isma and the traditional Hajila, who share a common experience: both have been married (at different times) to the same man. Isma, who chose Hajila as the second wife for her ex-husband, observes and describes the traditional woman's transformation. Curiosity motivates Hajila to explore her city, discard her veil, and reject passivity. When she defies her husband and claims the right to circulate freely in public spaces, she breaks with him and forms a new bond of friendship with Isma. Significantly, the women meet for the first time at the *hammam* (traditional steam bath), an enclosure depicted here as a refuge from patriarchal domination: "Hammam, seule rémission du harem." Using space metaphorically, Djebar represents Hajila's journey as a variation of Isma's inner quest. Hajila moves into sunlight and open space, whereas Isma enters dark recesses of memory, recalling enclosures of her past—the Moorish patios of her childhood, the bedrooms of her married years—in an attempt to define her own identity.

The two narratives converge in a new dialogue between traditional and emancipated women who discover common bonds. They have experienced failures of communication in marriage and share the desire to move freely in the world. Still, they require places of refuge such as the *hammam,* into which to withdraw at times. Lyric and passionate, ***Ombre sultane*** affirms female bonding as a force against patriarchal oppression. Djebar provides a positive response to a pertinent question: what if Algerian women were to support and protect one another instead of competing for illusory patriarchal favors?

Ivan Hill (review date 13-19 April 1990)

SOURCE: Hill, Ivan. "A Love-Hate Affair." *Times Literary Supplement,* no. 4541 (13-19 April 1990): 404.

[*In the following excerpt, Hill offers a positive assessment of Djebar's blend of history and memoir in* Fantasia.]

It is a platitude among Algerians of a certain age that the relationship between France and Algeria was a love story. Assia Djebar plays on this from a variety of angles in ***Fantasia.*** Fundamentally, there is the question of language. Endearments in her mother tongue of Arabic are full and erotic, but not to be used outside the family except in illicit missives. The curlicues of the script are sensual. French is the language for thought, but its blandishments are devoid of passion. The angular writing is cold. Yet she has chosen to weave together incidents from her childhood and the French invasions of her country in the less intimate language.

In ***Fantasia,*** she treats historical reports by French soldiers, sailors and observers such as Fromentin as being rather like love letters. Alongside them, she places testimonies of women whose homes were burnt in the War of Independence because they were reported to be harbouring freedom fighters. The memories of growing up in an Arabo-Berber village while attending a French-

style school, and the continuing cultural confusion, are used as counterpoints to these eyewitness accounts. Djebar also speculates about the unspoken suggestions that women in rebel villages were raped, and not always without complicity. The result is a complex fabric which is organized in three sections. Each is structured like a musical composition, returning to the same themes and varying them. It is a passionate search for identity but also a cultural and historical exploration of thought and literacy. The style is highly elaborate, and this translation successfully conveys the richness of Djebar's linguistic spree. (This book is the first of a quartet; the second, ***A Sister to Scheherazade,*** an examination of the subjugation of women in contemporary Algeria, was the first to be published in English. However, since the links between the volumes are tangential, the order of reading them does not matter at all.)

Evelyne Accad (review date winter 1992)

SOURCE: Accad, Evelyne. Review of *Loin de Médine: Filles d'Ishmaël,* by Assia Djebar. *World Literature Today* 66, no. 1 (winter 1992): 184-85.

[*In the following review of* Loin de Médine, *Accad commends Djebar's ambition but finds shortcomings in the work's problematic position between paean and revision.*]

Assia Djebar, the most well known Francophone woman writer of North Africa, tells us in a foreword that she has used the designation *novel* for ***Loin de Médine,*** a collection of tales, narratives, visions, scenes, and recollections inspired by her readings of some of the Muslim historians who lived during the first centuries of Islam. Fiction allows freedom in reestablishing and unveiling a hidden space. Through it Djebar gives voice and presence to the many women forgotten by the recorders and transmitters of Islamic tradition.

The undertaking is quite an ambitious one, and Djebar manages it well in her usual careful, sensual, thoughtfully considered language. In a beautiful style, she recreates the lives of women who surrounded the prophet Mohammed and explores the influence they had on his thinking and in the debates of the times. The unofficial, myth-shrouded history of the beginnings of Islam becomes very real and present with its women through Djebar's powerful pen. Here we find Aïcha, the prophet's favorite wife, and Fatima, his proud daughter, both of whom died soon after him; also Sadjah the woman prophet, Selma the healer, and many others who seem to act freely and are not afraid to stand up for what they believe, especially when it pertains to their belief in the prophet. The prophet himself is described as someone soft-spoken and very kind to his women, whom he treats with respect and care and whose advice he takes seriously.

This is certainly a revolutionary outlook and program for women's role in contemporary Arab society, if it would take its tradition seriously as an example to follow. I have no doubt that Djebar intended it this way. Nevertheless, such a tactic raises many problems, not the least of which is to be found in the text itself. The final message is that one ought to leave Medina (hence the title of the novel): "If Aïcha, one day, decided to leave Medina? Ah, far away from Medina, to find again the wind, the breathtaking, incorruptible youth of revolt!" Actually, however, the whole novel is a song to Medina, a glorification of the prophet and of his women. This is the most problematic contradiction one finds throughout the book: if, in order to free oneself, one must leave behind tradition and its enslavement, then how can one look upon it as a beautiful past filled with role models?

The other questions raised by the novel as it inscribes itself in today's contemporary Arabic and North African literature are: what message can today's writers give and should they give one? If, like Rushdie or El Saadawy, they address contemporary issues with clarity, frankness, and irony, are they doomed to ostracism, house arrest, death threats, imprisonment, and persecution? Is there no middle way between these two ventures: glorification and reinterpretation of tradition to show how today's Islam has been twisted, or the vision of a radically transformed Islam? Are Mahfouz's realism and humor one answer to these questions?

Mary Jean Green (essay date May 1993)

SOURCE: Green, Mary Jean. "Dismantling the Colonizing Text: Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* and Assia Djebar's *L'amour, la fantasia.*" *French Review* 66, no. 6 (May 1993): 959-66.

[*In the following excerpt, Green examines Djebar's use of history, autobiography, and narrative disjunction in* L'amour, la fantasia *as a mode of reinterpreting Algerian colonial experience.*]

"La Carence la plus grave subie par le colonisé est d'être placé *hors de l'histoire* et *hors de la cité*" (121). These words of Albert Memmi point to a central effect of colonization and explain why the effort to recover and take possession of their own history has been a major focus of the writers of postcolonial cultures. Quebec writers made the reconstruction of their history a central preoccupation of the nineteenth century, in response to a conquering British presence which termed them, in the words written by Lord Durham in 1839, "a people with no history and no literature."[1] Similarly, the francophone literature that emerged as part of the independence struggles of the French colonies in Africa was preoccupied with the question of locating a cultural past.

Women, too, have participated in this historical project, but their task has not been easy. Even within their own culture, women have been largely excluded from history (that is, *written* history) and political life (that which is susceptible of becoming history). The situation of women is also accurately described by Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé,* and women in colonized groups may be said to experience a double colonization. Since they are, in addition, doubly barred from access to writing, these colonized women seem, as Memmi suggests, condemned to a progressive loss of memory (131).

Women writers throughout the francophone world have nevertheless persisted in their effort to establish contact with their foremothers, but texts are based on other texts, and women's lives have left few written traces. Some women writers have utilized the resources of the oral tradition, moving back through the chain of transmission from grandmother to mother to daughter, in a process that provides new meaning to Virginia Woolf's image of "think[ing] back through our mothers" (79). The Acadian Antonine Maillet and the Antillaise Simone Schwarz-Bart have both demonstrated the power of the oral tradition to give form and content to women's history. But the memory of oral transmission extends only so far, and a modern consciousness demands written records, historical documents whose truth status seems assured. Although the existing historical record has been written almost exclusively by men—and, in colonial cultures, largely by the colonizers—various francophone women writers have attempted to use the available documents as a site in which to seek the buried traces of women's lives.

The texts on which I focus here are *Kamouraska,* by the Quebec writer Anne Hébert, and ***L'amour, la fantasia,*** by the Algerian Assia Djebar. Hébert, writing in her native French, and Djebar, abandoning her maternal tongue for the language of the French colonizer, are positioned very differently at the intersection of race, culture, and language. Yet the strategies they adopt in their historical quest—in their common investigation of doubly colonizing texts—show uncanny resemblances. Both are engaged in exposing the textual practices through which women's voices are buried and women's bodies fragmented, and both seek to restore life and wholeness to the mutilated corpses they have unearthed. . . .

The procedures by which Anne Hébert dissects the text of the colonizer and uses it as a means of hearing a woman's voice and reconstituting a woman's life are similar to those used by Assia Djebar. But Djebar's self-reflexive text foregrounds the process of historical reconstruction. In ***L'amour, la fantasia,*** Djebar interweaves three different histories: the history of the French military conquest of Algeria, begun in 1830; more recent memories of the Algerian struggle for independence; and the story of Djebar's own life. It is in reconstructing the nineteenth-century French conquest that Djebar makes use of her historical training to analyze a series of documents—memoirs, letters and newspaper articles—that offer eyewitness accounts of the French invasion, documents that are, with one exception, written by European men.

Djebar employs various strategies of reading to expose the mechanisms of what is, quite literally, a text of colonization and to undermine its authority. She points up the way in which the European accounts reduce the Algerians, like women, to objects of a dominant gaze. After witnessing a military campaign that includes an *enfumade,* which brought about the death by suffocation of 1500 Algerian men, women, and children who had sought refuge in caves, the two privileged witnesses stress the campaign's exotic appeal, one French observer finding in it "toute la poésie possible" (67). These accounts, of course, participate in what Edward Said has identified as Orientalist discourse, and they paint a colorful picture, not unlike those of Delacroix and Fromentin, to whom Djebar refers in her text. Yet Djebar is also able to find in the accounts of this campaign an inscription of a resisting look. As the French soldiers surround a group of captured women, the sole survivors of their tribe, one of them unyieldingly returns the look of the observer, refusing the objectification contained in his gaze.

Often, however, it is only in Djebar's own text that the reciprocity of the gaze is restored. The historical documents begin by describing the city of Algiers as it appears to the arriving French fleet, but Djebar herself must imagine the residents of the city who gather on the rooftops to return the look. Only in her text does the French army "regarde la ville qui regarde" (15): this reciprocal gaze has never before been written.

In the accounts of the French observers Algerian women appear not only objectified but mutilated and fragmented in a quite literal way. They are shown being chopped to pieces by French bayonets or stabbed and stripped of their jewelry. The testimony to a woman's existence is provided by a severed foot or the hand that is found along a roadway by the artist Eugène Fromentin. Yet Djebar as narrator is capable of turning the tables on the conquerors, like the Algerian woman who has cut out the heart of an invading soldier. In the narrative constructed by Djebar the texts of the colonizers themselves appear only in fragmented citations, interwoven with her own words: the text itself thus creates the possibility of dialogue absent from the historical record.

By constantly disrupting the hegemonic perspective of the colonizing discourse, by literally breaking it apart, Djebar exposes the mechanisms of Orientalism. A short