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Derleme Makale/ Review Article

NARRATING THE DECOLONIZED SELF: ASSIA DJEBAR'S *FANTASIA*

SÖMÜRGE SONRASI BENLİĞİ ANLATMAK: ASSIA DJEBAR'IN FANTAZYA'SI

Hülya YILDIZ BAĞÇE*

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ÖZ: Bu çalışma, Cezayirli feminist yazar ve film yönetmeni Assia Djebar'ın *Fantazya* (1985) adlı otobiyografik/tarihsel anlatısı üzerine yapılan postkolonyal bir okumadır. *Fantazya*'da, Djebar farklı türden metinleri biraraya getirir: Fransa'nın Cezayir sömürgesine dair "resmi" kayıtlarını alarak, farklı katmanlardan oluşan anlatılarla yeniden yazar. Bu anlamda metin üç anlatı düzeyi içerir: Cezayir'in 1830'daki yenilgisine dair Fransız askerleri ve gazetecileri tarafından tutulan kronikler; 1950-1960 arasındaki bağımsızlık savaşına katılan Cezayirli kadınların deneyimlerini geriye dönük olarak anlattıkları sözel tarih kayıtları; ve yazarın kendisinin sömürge altındaki Cezayir'de büyüme deneyimi. Bu çok katmanlı metinde, Djebar hem Cezayirli kadınların Fransız sömürgesine karşı verdikleri bağımsızlık savaşındaki hem de ulus-devlet sürecindeki rolünü temsil etmeyi amaçlar. Ne sömürge dönemi resmi Fransız kayıtları ne de bağımsızlık sonrası ulusalcı retorik kadınların bu süreçteki rolünü hakkıyla teslim etse de, Djebar'ın kişisel anlatısı ve kadınların sözlü anlatıları, sömürgeci ve ulusçu anlatımların *kontrapuanik* bir şekilde okunmasına olanak sağlar. Bu makale, *Fantazya*'nın bir yandan sömürgeci şiddete diğer yandan da sömürge karşıtı mücadelenin kadınları sessizleştirme sürecine vurgu yaparak, hem resmi sömürgeci paradigmaları hem de bağımsızlık hareketine katılan Cezayirli kadınlara dair patriyarkal okumaları sorguladığını iddia eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Assia Djebar, Fantazya, postkolonyal anlatılar, ulus-devlet ve kadın, Cezayir Bağımsızlık Hareketi, Sözel Tarih*

ABSTRACT: This study presents a postcolonial reading of Algerian feminist writer and film director Assia Djebar's autobiographical/historical narrative *Fantasia An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985). In *Fantasia*, Djebar juxtaposes different kinds of texts with each other: she takes the "official" records of the French colonial conquest of Algeria, which is itself a rewriting of a historical fact, and she rewrites it by complicating that narrative by layers of voices. The text includes three narrative layers: chronicles of the Algerian defeat of 1830 recorded by French soldiers and journalists; oral accounts of rural Algerian women who retrospectively narrate their participation in the independence struggle during 1950s and 1960s; and the author's own experience growing up in colonial Algeria. In this multi-layered text, Djebar aims to represent a vignette of colonial Algeria, women's involvement in the independence war against the French colonial power, and women's role in the nation-building stage afterwards. While the official accounts of the French colonial occupation of Algeria and the nationalist rhetoric afterwards do not fully acknowledge the essential role of women, Djebar's personal narrative and the oral histories of women allow the reader to make a contrapuntal reading of the colonial and nationalist histories. This study makes the

* Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi, huyildiz@metu.edu.tr

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argument that by emphasizing the various levels of resistance to colonial violence and silencing in anticolonial nationalist struggle, *Fantasia* challenges both the colonial official paradigms of the Algerian independence movement and the patriarchal understandings of the Algerian women who participated in the independence movement.

Key Words: *Assia Djebar, Fantasia, postcolonial narratives, nation-state and women, Algerian Independence Movement, Oral History*

1. INTRODUCTION

Assia Djebar is an Algerian feminist writer and film director, whose work has been recognized by several respectable international literary organizations. To cite only the most prominent examples, she was awarded the reputable Neustadt International prize in Literature in 1996, and the African Association's Fonlon-Nichols prize in 1997. Her autobiography in fiction, *L'amour, la fantasia* was first published in French in 1985 and then translated into English titled as *Fantasia An Algerian Cavalcade* in 1989.[1]

It is the first volume of a literary quartet that also includes *Ombre Sultane* (1987), *Vaste est la Prison* (1995), and *Le Blanc de l`Algérie* (1996). Born in 1936, Djebar experienced French colonization of Algeria first-hand as Algeria won its independence from France in 1962. She also actively participated in the Algerian war of independence by working for the revolutionary paper *El-Mujahid* during the liberation struggle. *Fantasia*, which can be defined as an autobiographical/historical narrative, covers the periods of the French colonial occupation of Algeria during 1830-1845, the Algerian Revolution of 1954-1962, and the post-independece period. As an autobiography in fiction, *Fantasia* fictionalizes not only Djebar's personal story but also the story of her community. It textualizes some of the most significant issues in Francophone North African Literature: decolonization, alienation, and identity. My aim in this paper is to explore the various ways in which *Fantasia* foregrounds the heterogeneity of women's voices within a colonization and decolonization context. By emphasizing the various levels of resistance to colonial violence and silencing in anticolonial nationalist struggle, *Fantasia* challenges both the colonial official paradigms of the Algerian independence movement and the patriarchal understandings of the Algerian women who participated in the independence movement.

2. DISCUSSION

In *Fantasia*, Djebar juxtaposes different kinds of texts with each other: she takes the "official" records of the French colonial conquest of Algeria, which is itself a rewriting of a historical fact, and she rewrites it by complicating that narrative by layers of voices. The text includes three narrative layers: chronicles of the Algerian defeat of 1830 recorded by French soldiers and journalists; oral

[1] Hereinafter referred to as *Fantasia*.

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accounts of rural Algerian women who retrospectively narrate their participation in the independence struggle during 1950s and 1960s; and the author's own experience growing up in colonial Algeria. In this multi-layered text, Djebar aims to represent a vignette of colonial Algeria, women's involvement in the independence war against the French colonial power, and women's role in the nation-building stage afterwards. While the official accounts of the French colonial occupation of Algeria and the nationalist rhetoric afterwards do not fully acknowledge the essential role of women, Djebar's personal narrative and the oral histories of women allow the reader to make a contrapuntal reading of the colonial and nationalist histories.[2]

In postcolonial studies, the identification between woman and the nation-state has been problematized especially when women are merely seen as allegories of the nation. Questioning the monolithic nationalist representations of women, the burdened relationship between women and nationalism has been critically explored in feminist postcolonial scholarship since the 1980s (for instance, see Jayawardena 1986; Yuval-Davis and Anthias ,1989; Parker *et al*. 1992; and Moghadam, 1994). One of the essential works studying the vexed relationship between gender and nationalism, *Woman-Nation-State* (1989) succinctly summarizes the ways in which women function for the rhetoric of the nation as follows:

1. as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
2. as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;
3. as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
4. as signifiers of ethnic/national differences—as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses;
5. as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles(Yuval-Davis and Anthias,1989: 7)

Another important study that challenges the conditions and possibility of speech and representation of the marginalized groups, including women, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous article "Can the Subaltern Speak" urges all feminist writing to critically engage with the following essential questions: Who can speak and for whom? Who listens? How does one represent the self and others? Taking its lead from these epistemological questions about the problematics of

[2] For the concept of contrapuntal reading, see Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. According to Said, a "contrapuntal reading" "must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded" (*Culture and Imperialism* 66-67).

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representation and the complicated relationship between nation, gender, and narration, in this study, I would like to explore how Assia Djebar addresses this crucial issue of representation in *Fantasia*. In the article, I make the argument that Djebar struggles to find a narrative voice that resists silence, opening a narrative possibility for representing postcolonial women's resistance.

Djebar is aware of the symbolic relationship between two kinds of "conquests": conquest of a country and possession of a woman's body. The language she uses also reflects this (see 1993: 15-19; 128). The colonial domination over Algeria is visualized with references to domination of the French power over an orientalised and exoticized female body. Early accounts of Algiers before its fall describe it as "a vista of crenelated roofs and pastel hues, [that] makes her first appearance in the role of 'Oriental Woman', motionless, mysterious" (1993: 6). After its conquest by the French, the condition of the city is portrayed again with similar terms of patriarchal vocabulary of "penetration": "This alien world, which they penetrate as they would a woman, this world sent up a cry that did not cease for two score years or more after the capture of the *Impregnable City*" (1993: 57). In the letters of French soldiers and journalists, Algeria is spoken of "as a woman whom it is impossible to tame" **(**1993: 57). Djebar's text is a response to this colonial patriarchal gaze that controls Algeria and the Algerian women.[3] Djebar's comments on the French documents put the reliability of them into question. Furthermore, writing about the experiences of the colonized produces a counter-hegemonic narrative subverting the colonial representations of this experience. Refusing to be a prisoner of colonial history, Djebar commits herself to the project of producing an alternative history both for herself and other Algerian women.

In order to highlight the counter-hegemonic and polyphonic nature of *Fantasia*, one needs to, first, acknowledge its complicated composition. The text has a tripartite structure. Three levels of discourse in *Fantasia* corresponds to three major parts in the text: the French colonial discourse, Algerian women's oral testimonies, and Djebar's autobiography and commentaries. Then, each part is subdivided into sections titled "movements," highlighting the musical motif of fantasia. The part composing the French colonial discourse on the Algerian women is based on eyewitness accounts written by French officers, artists, and journalists in the nineteenth century, which, as a whole, provide Djebar the perspective of the colonizer. The part that includes the Algerian women's voices are placed under the title of "Voices from the Past," including Algerian women's collective history.

[3] For the theoretical background on Oriental discourses on the colonized body and the French colonial gaze on the Algerian women, see Said, *Orientalism* and Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*.

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This section is divided into "five movements," which records the oral testimonies of Algerian women. Composed as a polyphonic text, *Fantasia*, therefore, is made up of fragmented narratives, in which Djebar draws attention to the crack opened between the voices of Algerian women and Djebar's French in representing them. Djebar deconstructs the colonial archive by both reimagining the moment of its writing and inclusion of the oral narratives of women warriors in the Independence War.

In *Fantasia*, Djebar makes use of some of the data she gathered during her oral history project in the mid 1970s. The project involved recording the collective memory of the Algerian women who had participated in the independence struggle in Djebar`s native region of Cherchell. On its own, the project is significant as an acknowledgement of the active contribution of rural Algerian women to the independence struggle. The renowned scholar of Arab women's writing, Miriam Cooke makes the following point with reference to the effects of the Algerian War on women:

Literary evidence affirms that during the Revolution the Algerian women were not conscious of their opportunities. … Consequently, it is not so surprising that they made no attempt to inscribe into the war text experiences that may have been transformative. When they had written, they had done so with little awareness of what military participation had meant. … The Algerian Revolution came too soon in the history of modern Arab women's discursive activism to serve as a catalyst for the inscription of feminist issues into the nationalist agenda. … The difference between the Algerian and the Lebanese women who participated in their two wars was that the Algerian women did not have a feminist context, for example, no indigenous, independent feminist organization, within which to situate their struggle (1993: 185-186).

Djebar's work can be seen as a response to this silence of Algerian women and their involvement in the War of Independence. It is an effort of digging the archives, memories, and traumas of the past both to reclaim it for Algerian women and rewrite the colonial and patriarchal nationalist accounts of this history from a gendered subaltern position.

In the context of *Fantasia,* Djebar's project of recovering the Algerian women's voices takes on additional significance. First, it allows Djebar to juxtapose autobiography and oral history (personal memories, letters, oral narratives, testimonies of the rural Algerian women) with the official history (French colonial military reports, military officer memoirs, military correspondences etc.). Second, it allows Djebar to juxtapose her own autobiographical voice to those of the Algerian rural women who took part in the revolution, thereby calling attention to the contingencies between the personal and

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the collective. Djebar emphasizes how her story is intermingled with those of the rural women: "Can I, twenty years later, claim to revive these stifled voices? And speak for them? Shall I not at best find dried-up streams? What ghosts will be conjured up when in this absence of expressions of love (love received, `love` imposed), I see the reflection of my own barrenness, my own aphasia" (*Fantasia* 202). Therefore, the act of writing *Fantasia* can be seen as a way of dealing with this personal and collective "aphasia." Indeed, interweaving autobiographical fragments with historical accounts of the French occupation and oral history of the Algerian revolution allows Djebar to contextualize her life story within the framework of the Algerian national history. Central to Djebar's concerns about the epistemology of representing the subaltern women are the wound of split identity created by the several layers of colonial experiences and the burden of using the colonizer's language. Throughout *Fantasia*, she tackles with the burning question of how to write an autobiography, which also considers the subaltern, in the colonizer's language?

3. PROBLEMATICS OF USING THE COLONIZER'S LANGUAGE

It is significant to ask the question of why a postcolonial writer uses the colonizer's language, but, perhaps, at least equally, if not more, important to ask is the question of what happens to the colonizer's language when it is used by the postcolonial writer?[4] Djebar's fundamental interest in the problem of language is its role for the subject formation. Writing in her own voice is also a struggle of language for Djebar as an Algerian Berber woman writing in French. Arabic is Djebar's mother tongue, but she calls French both her "father tongue" (it was her school-teacher father who introduced her to French) and also her "step-mother tongue" (1993: 214) since she has a love-hate relationship with it. In *Fantasia*, Djebar describes the struggle between Arabic and French on her body as follows:

> The French tongue, with its body and voice, has established a proud presidio within me, while the mother-tongue, all oral tradition, all rags and tatters, resists and attacks between two breathing spaces. With the rhythm of the rebato spurring me on, I am both the besieged foreigner and the native swagger- ing off to die, in the illusory effervescence of the spoken and written word (1993: 215).

Therefore, Djebar starts with problematizing her own encounter with her complicated identity constituting of her Arab and Berber origins and her French education. As Donadey points out, Djebar "deterritorializes the French language

[4] For two important views on the use of the colonizer's language by the postcolonial author, see Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* and Chinua Achebe's "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation."

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through the lexical and syntactic presence of Arabic," in producing a sophisticated style of French that "takes on a slightly foreign ring for native French readers, as Djebar pushes it to its limits" (1993: 34).

Djebar's ambivalent relationship with the French language also becomes an effective tool in deconstructing the hegemony of the colonizer's language by way of appropriating it for her own use. On the one hand, French is the language of the occupier, oppressor, and enemy. On the other hand, French is also the language of her formal education and one that she associates with some of her freedoms. Writing her text in French has an emancipating aspect for Djebar, but at the same time, it distances her from the voices of her childhood, her childhood memories and her historical roots, which are associated with her mother tongue, Arabic. She expresses the pain and anxiety of this as follows: "My oral tradition has gradually been overlaid and is in danger of vanishing: at the age of eleven or twelve I was abruptly ejected from this theatre of feminine confidences—was I thereby spared from having to silence my humbled pride? In writing of my childhood memories I am taken back to those bodies bereft of voices. To attempt an autobiography using French words alone is to lend oneself to the vivisector's scalpel, revealing what lies beneath the skin. The flesh fakes off and with it, seemingly, the last shreds of the unwritten language of my childhood. Wounds are reopened, veins weep, one's own blood flows and that of others, which has never dried" (1993: 156).

As a major thread in *Fantasia*, Djebar`s personal war with French, the language of the oppressor, also mirrors the collective struggle against the colonial power dominating Algeria. Djebar seems to believe that her fluency in the colonizer's language and her Western type of education, which ensures her participation in the public space and freedom of not veiling, has also distanced her from the traditional women's world. Therefore, she approaches the colonizer's language with distance and ambivalence. She writes, "This language was formerly used to entomb my people; when I write it today I feel like the messenger of old, who bore a sealed missive which might sentence him to death or to the dungeon" (*Fantasia* 215). But because she gives importance to oral tradition and her connection to subaltern women who can express themselves only within that tradition as they are illiterate, she had to find another strategy to include their voices, too. Her writing strategy to deal with this problem is interweaving her personal story, memories with official histories, and oral histories of Algerian women who participated in the independence war. She situates herself as a writer who must come to terms with the history of Algeria and with herself as a postcolonial Arab female subject writing in French about Arab women who do not speak French and cannot speak for themselves. In order to deal with this, Djebar searches ways of removing herself from the authorial position by allowing herself

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to write with other writing-speaking subjects. As she famously declares in her "Overture" to *Women of Algiers*, she aims to find a writing style where she does not "*claim to 'speak for' or, worse, to 'speak on,' barely speaking next to, and if possible, very close to: these are the first of solidarities to be taken on by the few Arabic women who obtain or acquire freedom of movement, of body and mind*" (2, italics in the original). One of the ways she finds in order to "hear" the voices that cannot be or is not heard before is listening to the "voices" of the body: both that of individual bodies, including her own, and those of the "collective voices" of the Algerian women. In *Fantasia*, Djebar refers to "four languages" used by Algerian women: "French for secret missives; Arabic for our stifled aspirations towards God; Lybico-Berber which takes us back to the most ancient of our mother idols. The fourth language, for all females, young or old, cloistered or half-emancipated, remains that of the body" (180). Thus, as pointed out here, even though silenced by the colonial and patriarchal discourse, Algerian women's bodies turn into another form of language and expression.[5] Their bodies become "the fourth language," through which the resistance finds its voice.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon, one of the founding critics of French colonialism in Algeria, writes about the significance of freeing history from the colonizer's perspective. As he argues, in order to defy the denials of any worthy native culture before the European colonization, "the native intellectual who takes up arms to defend his nation's legitimacy and who wants to bring proofs to bear out that legitimacy, who is willing to strip himself naked to study the history of his body, is obliged to dissect the heart of his people" (211). In line with a similar spirit with Fanon, Djebar contests the colonialist mentality of Algerian women's silence and passivity and creatively looks for ways of uncovering the historical and epistemological injustices against the Algerian women in the accounts of the War of Independence as well as their role and agency in the struggle.

Djebar employs oral narratives to subvert the legitimacy of the official history. It seems that she prefers oral history as a narrative discourse because it foregrounds the process of mediation and highlights the personality and specificity of its own interpretation. By contrast, official histories try to conceal any trace of an authorial consciousness that perceives and interprets the events. To avoid this, she continually interrupts her narration of past events by drawing attention to the social environment of the documents she is making use of, i.e., the biographical information of their authors, the language they were written in, etc. The first two sections of *Fantasia* alternate between autobiographical events and historical

[5] For a reading of the novel from the perspective of *écriture feminine*, see Ghaussy, S.

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chapters narrating the French invasion of Algiers. The events she narrates in the autobiographical bits of *Fantasia* not only emphasize her identity as a female Algerian descended from a Berber tribe subjugated by the French invasion but also draw parallels between the period under investigation, i.e., 19th century, and the time period she is writing. The third and the final chapters of the book are composed of the oral testimonies of rural Algerian women who participated in the final war of independence between 1954-1962. Djebar comments in *Fantasia* that only one of the thirty-seven accounts of the 1830 siege of Algiers was written by a woman. The multitude of women voices she cites in the text is a response to that silence. Therefore, *Fantasia* not only brings the autobiographical and collective experiences together but also functions as a meeting place for two different phases in the Algerian history. Djebar rewrites the moments in the national history of Algiers from a feminist point of view, one that speaks with and for all other Algerian women.

Djebar subverts the official history and its narrative techniques via another kind of writing that foregrounds the way in which the writing process inherently influences the historiography process. She does this by carefully searching for the traces of lost narratives and by emphasizing the essential interconnectedness of different historical moments in a manner that refuses to impose a determinate narratological order on the moments it describes. In this respect, it is also significant that *Fantasia* deploys a broader perspective that reduces the domination of the autobiographical "I" in order to express the collective voices of the Algerian women. This interest in collective histories and identities problematizes the very idea of autobiography and challenges the autobiographical genre's insistence on the existence and continuity of a transcendent "I". Indeed, *Fantasia*'s many "voices" recount the experiences of women as individual agents and not merely as members of the subjugated community.

Approximately half of the narrative space in *Fantasia* is devoted to collective voices from the past: "Before I catch the sound of my own voice I can hear the death-rattles, the moans of those immured in the Dahra mountains and the prisoners on the Island of Sainte Marguerite; they provide my orchestral accompaniment. They summon me, encouraging my faltering steps, so that at the given signal my solitary song takes off" (1993: 217). Djebar challenges the accountability of the official history of the Algerian War by including a collection of narratives by women who experienced the War; thus it includes multiple voices and genres. Lending an ear to the hidden voices of the Algerian past, Djebar writes the following:

> *[Their] war is mute, undocumented, leaving no leisure for writing. The women's shrill ululation improvises for the fighting men a threnody of war*

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> *in some alien idiom: our chroniclers are haunted by the distant sound of half-human cries, cacophony of keening, ear-splitting hieroglyphs of a wild, collective voice* (1992: 56).

The chapters placed under the title of "Voice" include testimonies of Algerian peasant women during the War of Independence. To record the oral testimonies of Algerian women who participated in the Independence War, Djebar "travelled into the mountains that had been the scene of guerrilla warfare, recorded the women's stories, and reproduces them here [in *Fantasia*] in their own words, with their sobriety of tone, staccato, laconic expression and popular turns of phrase, which I have made no attempt to 'polish' in the English version." (Dorothy S. Blair, English translator of the work, Introduction, n.p.). As Blair also points out, the differences in linguistic style of the oral testimonies and that of Djebar's own use of the French languages designate a "dialogue between recent and more distant past; between personal and national experience; between writing and orality; between the conflicting claims of the author's 'father and mother tongues'" (Blair, Introduction, n.p.). In the section titled "Voice," Cherifa, one of the women who took part in the liberation war between 1954to 1962, narrates her experience of the period in the first person as an elderly woman now. She witnessed the murder of her brother by the French, and then was taken captive by them and spent years in prison. This section is followed by the section titled "Clamour," narrated in the third-person. This then is followed by the voice of the implied author Djebar, commenting on her encounter with Cherifa and the meaning of her "capturing of Cherifa's voice" (142): "Cherifa! I wanted to re-create your flight: there, in the isolated field, the tree appears before you when you are scared of the jackals. Next you are drives through the villages, surrounded by guards, taken to the prison camp where every year more prisoners arrive . . . I have captured your voice; disguised it with my French without clothing it. It barely brush the shadow of your footsteps!" (142). As seen here, consisting of alternative writing strategies, Djebar's text is reflective of its own discursive process. Absenting the authorial subject and mingling the authorial voice with those of the subaltern Algerian women correspond to Djebar's effort of recovering and representing the lost voices of the Algerian Independence War responsibly and ethically.

4. CONCLUSION

Fantasia interweaves two histories. The personal history of the writer-narrator and the collective history of Algeria since its occupation by the French in 1830 that covers both the independence war and the recollections of the war after the independence, narrated in multiple perspectives and "voices." By doing so, *Fantasia* problematizes writing itself. In many ways, *Fantasia* is a rewriting of colonial and patriarchal history to underline the role of women both during the

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French occupation of Algeria and the Algerian Revolution. Djebar incorporates layers of history and a multiplicity of genres creating a palimpsest text of multiple perspectives and sources. In order to highlight an alternative subjective positioning for Algerian women playing an integral role in Algeria's nation-building in the wake of their independence, the text not only considers the links between personal and collective history but also explores historiographical techniques for subverting the legacy of the colonial invasion. Especially, in the sections titled "Voices from the Past," Djebar struggles with a significant epistemological and ethical question: how does one speak on behalf of others without being unfaithful to their voices and without rendering them voiceless? Narrating the decolonized identity as a wound, exposed by the historically hegemonic subject positions and languages, Djebar finds creative ways of giving voice to Algerian women, who are mostly illiterate or do not speak French, while at the same pointing to their being forgotten in the nationalist stories of decolonized Algeria.

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