

The Quest for Body and Voice in Assia Djebar's *So Vast the Prison*

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### Recommended Citation

Rodríguez Drissi, Susannah. "The Quest for Body and Voice in Assia Djebar's *So Vast the Prison*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 7.3 (2005): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1271>>

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**CLCWeb Volume 7 Issue 3 (September 2005) Article 5**  
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol7/iss3/5>>

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**Contents of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 7.3(2005)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol7/iss3/>>

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**Abstract:** Using Northrop Frye's definition of the quest novel and Joseph Campbell's writings, Susannah Rodríguez Drissi explores in her paper, "The Quest for Body and Voice in Assia Djebar's *So Vast the Prison*," the motif of the journey as Djebar adapts it to her female characters. Rodríguez Drissi proposes that in previous studies concerning the hero -- such as in James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* or in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* -- women are relegated to a secondary role. Recently, however, it has become evident that the study of the woman as "heroine" is necessary to a better understanding of not only of women's literature but of literature as a whole. Drawing on the example of Assia Djebar's work who dedicates her entire literary work to the reinstatement of the female voice in Algeria and whose narrators are always women, Rodríguez Drissi argues for the relevance of the study of the heroine in the study of culture and literature.

**Susannah RODRÍGUEZ DRISSI**

### **The Quest for Body and Voice in Assia Djébar's *So Vast the Prison***

In this study, I explore the concept of the hero, that is, more appropriately put, the concept of the heroine in the work of Algerian-French novelist and filmmaker Assia Djébar. In my opinion, Djébar's work is not only significant for the Algerian, French-language, and Arabic-language literatures but also for world literature and women's writing in general. Indeed, I suggest the potential of the Nobel Prize in Literature for Djébar, who lists among her recent achievements the election to the Académie Française in 2005, the first North African to join the prestigious 40-member French academy of letters.

In the past, studies concerning the hero, such as James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Otto Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, or Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, to name just a few, have been dedicated to the study of male protagonists. In Campbell's study, for example, he describes the woman as part of mother nature or as symbolic of mother nature itself, as cosmic goddess or evil goddess, but never as a central figure. As a result, the woman in such studies has been relegated to a secondary role, becoming a facilitator of the journey and its recompense, not its main subject. In *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*, Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope contend that "our understanding of the basic spiritual and psychological archetype of human life has been limited. The hero is almost always assumed to be white, as well as upper class. The journey of the upper class white male, a socially, politically and economically powerful subgroup of the human race, is identified as the generic type for the normal human condition; and other members of society -- racial minorities, the poor, and women -- are seen as secondary characters important only as aids or rewards in his journey" (4). I propose that this is no longer the case in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende, Julia Álvarez, Clarice Lispector, Cristina Peri Rossi, Assia Djébar, and many others, the journey of the woman as hero/ine has taken center stage. Thus, the study of the "heroine" becomes necessary, if not inevitable. The fact that Assia Djébar dedicates her entire literary work to the reinstatement of the female voice in Algeria and that her narrators are always women, make my proposal of the investigation of the heroine in literature relevant. In addition, the motif of the journey, which, as we mentioned earlier, is related typically to the quest of the hero, seems to be always present in her narrative, specifically in the novel in question. In the beginning of *So Vast the Prison* (*Vaste est la prison*, trans. Betsy Wing), the narrator confesses: "Writing about the past, my feet wrapped up in a prayer rug which was not even a jute or horsehair mat tossed down somewhere on the dust of a dawn road or at the foot of a crumbling dune under the immense sky at sunset. The silence of writing, the desert wind turning its inexorable millstone, while my hand races and the father's language (the language now, moreover, transformed into a father tongue) slowly but surely undoes the wrapping cloths from a dead love; and so many voices spatter into a lingering vertiginous mourning, way behind me the faint murmur of ancestors, the ululations of lament from veiled shadows floating along the horizon -- while my hand races on" (*So Vast the Prison* 11-12). According to Juan Eduardo Cirlot, heroes are always travelers, owing to their constant unconformity and desire to bring about change (*Dictionary* 25). If we consider that a journey is more than a displacement through a physical space and that it also constitutes a desire or quest for change; or, as in this case, a journey to the past or a journey through the landscape of language -- as the earlier passage reveals -- then Djébar's *So Vast the Prison* may belong categorically to the genre of the quest novel (on this, see also Kelly).

Djébar's novel may be understood as a quest for the deliverance and embodiment of the female voice. The quest novel, a twentieth-century version of the epic -- according to Northrop Frye -- situates the motif of the journey as its underlying structure. According to Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, the basic structure of the quest consists of the *agon* or conflict, the *pathos* or death-struggle, the *sparagmos* or disappearance of the hero, and the *anagnorisis* or discovery (187). The first part of *Vaste est la prison* consists of such a structure, and corresponds to what Frye denomi-

nates "the central unifying myth" (192). While this structure is evident in the first part, "What is Erased in the Heart," the entire novel may also be understood to be, to use Campbell's terms, a journey of separation, initiation, and return -- as the love triangle of Part One suggests. The hero faces the dragon and, generally, he triumphs (Frye 189). In the novel at hand, the protagonist not only faces the gaze, but, in an act of defiance and self-affirmation, reverses the gaze. It is not the purpose of this analysis, however, to provide a detailed definition of Frye's terms as they may or may not be found in the Djebar's novel. Instead, in this study I attempt to clarify the narrator's quest as it is developed within the narrative. While Frye's concepts will be useful in this endeavor, through the strict adherence to his structures I would run the risk of imposing limitations on a work that explicitly challenges them. Although keeping Frye in mind, I believe that the more general definitions and studies by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* provide the necessary foundation for the analysis of the work in question.

The novel is divided into four parts: "Part One: What is Erased in the Heart," "Part Two: Erased in Stone," "Part Three: A Silent Desire," and "Part Four: The Blood of Writing." The beginning of the novel, "The Silence of Writing," which serves as a preamble or introduction to the sections that follow, may be seen as a journey in itself. In fact, as mentioned earlier, each Part is comprised of a journey. Together, each journey constitutes a necessary step into the next, and the next, and so on. In "The Silence of Writing," the protagonist/narrator believes to have found her lost connection to the maternal line. The *hammam*, or public baths, becomes a womb to which she returns, a kind of sacred place, a symbolic transcription of what Kristeva in *Desire in Language* calls the *chora*, or semiotic condition. The world of the *hammam* offers a refuge from patriarchy and provides an alternative to the word of the Father, in this first case, the colonial language, French. For the narrator, Arabic, the maternal tongue, means the possibility of a renewed connection with the Other, of whom she herself is a part. While the paternal tongue is the vehicle through which the narrator may speak what is unspeakable or secret, what is *haram*, the impossibility of communicating the hitherto silenced voices of the Algerian women in a foreign tongue represents an even greater betrayal. According to Belinda Jack, "The central paradox which Djebar experiences as a writer and which is dramatized in the written text, concerns the language ('tongue') in which she writes. French has liberated her from the oppression which she associates with Arabic languages and cultures while at the same time severing a tie, an umbilical cord, binding her to previous generations of Algerian women" (*Francophone Literatures* 181). For Djebar, the imagery which expresses much of this is exclusively concerned with women's experience: "I search the loving plethora of my mother's native tongue, as that milk from which I had been separated, sometime in the past" (all subsequent translations are mine unless noted otherwise) / "je recherche, comme un lait dont on m'aurait autrefois écartée, la pléthore amoureuse de la langue de ma mère" (*L'Amour, la fantasia* 92). Later in the same text, Djebar writes: "After more than a century of French occupation -- which recently came to an end, bit by bit, through carnage -- a territory of language survives between two people, between two memories; the French language, body and voice, settles itself inside me like a prideful prison, while the maternal language, in its full orality, in rags, resists and attacks, between two breathless sighs ... I am, at once, a besieged stranger and native, she who goes to her death out of bravado, illusory effervescence of the spoken and written word" (299-300; my translation).

*L'Amour, la fantasia* is the first of what Djebar calls a *Quatour algérien* and *Vaste est la prison* (*So Vast the Prison*) is the third. However, the connection between the two novels is clear and may be found in the word *préside*. Like *L'Amour, Vaste est la prison* is a novel that is, at the onset, linguistically concerned, as the introduction, "The Silence of Writing" betrays. *Préside*, a word that is etymologically linked to the word prison, appears in the same sentence as "body" and "voice." Here, the body not only means the language's written form, but the ability of that language to liberate the body from imprisonment. For the traditional Algerian woman, the voice has been severed from the body, there is no body, the body is invisible, lost underneath the veil. It is the quest of Djebar and of her narrator, Isma, to "embody" their voice. But she must first re-establish her connection with the world of women, with the maternal language. However, as the narrator soon discovers, patriarchy constitutes a series of layers, of veils, that must be lifted. The veils exist within

-- in the patriarchal society of Algeria -- and without -- as the legacy of colonialism, to which the French language belongs. The narrator confesses: "This word, *e'dou*, I first heard in this way, in the damp of the vestibule from which women arrived almost naked and left enveloped head to toe. The word enemy, uttered in that most warmth, entered me, strange missile, like an arrow of silence piercing the depths of my then too tender heart. In truth the simple term, bitter in its Arab flesh, bored endlessly into the depths of my soul, and thus into the source of my writing.... Suddenly one language, one tongue, struck the other inside me. The voice of a woman who could have been my maternal aunt came to shake the tree of my hidden hope. My silent quest for light and shade was thrown off balance, as if I had been exiled from the nurturing shore, orphaned" (*So Vast the Prison* 14-15). In order to embark on the journey, the author must first separate herself from the mother, or the maternal space, here symbolized by the *hammam*. In the novel, the word and concept *e'dou* ("enemy") is the call to adventure, but also heralds the entrance to the world of the Father or paternal law. As Campbell explains: "Freud suggested that all moments of anxiety reproduce the painful feelings of the first separation from the mother -- tightening of the breath, congestion of the blood, etc., of the crisis of birth. Conversely, all moments of separation and new birth produce anxiety" (52) and as Part One of *Vaste est la prison* suggests, the narrator/protagonist must be first reconciled to the maternal language, for it, too, constitutes a prison. Mildred Mortimer asserts: "Djebar distinguishes between comforting haven, conducive to female bonding, and threatening confinement, where woman is victim. Rather than substitute an inner for an outer journey ... Djebar emphasizes the importance of the outer journey, but redefines the term. She views the journey not as a voyage to the unknown -- Marlow's trip up the Congo River -- but as the experience of circulating freely in public space" (147-48). Further, the word *e'dou* is also associated with French colonial rule. For the narrator, "the enemy / *e'dou*" had, until now, referred only to the French. The association between this word and Algerian patriarchy comes as a painful surprise. Through the woman in the *hammam*, the maternal language "had shown [her] her teeth, inscribing within [her] a deadly bitterness" (15). The *hammam*, which until now had seemed a place of female liberation, a place of bonding and sisterhood, suddenly becomes a prison, a place of confinement, and an extension of the home: "Where was I to find," she asks, "the thick undergrowth within from now on, how was I to open a narrow corridor into the warmth, black tenderness, whose glowing secrets and gleaming words piled thick and deep?" (14). As we read in Part One "What is Erased in the Heart," the narrator will consequently struggle to free herself or step out from the paternal space, in this case, the home. As the introduction comes to an end, the narrator asks: "Would I not have to beg, plunged into the darkness of the lost language and its hardened heart that I had found at the *hammam* that day?" (14-15). As suggested by the associations of *e'dou*, French rule in Algeria was only the last in a series of colonizations and for Algerian women, independence from the French did not guarantee personal or collective liberation. "Colonization," in various disguises, was still present in the *hammam*, in the confining and thick-robed walls of the home, in the stillness and invisibility of the female body.

*E'dou* is very much present in the private sphere, as the narrator discovers. Isma, a married woman, is ambivalent about what the world may offer beyond silence, beyond seclusion and the anonymity it represents. However, the fear of permanent imprisonment and the need for self-affirmation drive her to an illicit relationship with a young man. The Beloved, as she calls him, offers the possibility of a new relationship with the maternal language. Love, or the expression of love, which belongs to the private sphere, is expressed in French, but felt in Arabic. However, this "Arabic," this maternal language imbued with emotion, is not spoken but exposed through the body where the body becomes the voice. Having captured the Beloved's gaze through a kind of spasmodic dance, Isma declares: "So there I was, a spectator, and I thought I was perhaps ready to set out. For the first time also, probably for the first time in my life, I felt I was 'visible,' not the way I felt during my adolescence, nor after I was twenty, when I would smile at some compliment, some flattery from a man, either a friend or a stranger, thinking then, 'It's my semblance, my ghost you are seeing, not myself, not really me ... I myself am in disguise, I wear a veil, you cannot see me'" (50). Isma comes to the conclusion, however, that this mirror, this male gaze that renders her visible is responsible for her concept of self. In other words, Isma is not yet an auto-

mous subject, but an object of her lover's gaze. According to a Bakhtinian interpretation of the situation I utilize here, Isma must appropriate the other's perception of her in order to consummate her perception of herself as a subject; but not to consummate or finalize the meaning of the subject. The other's gaze finalizes her, yet she must remain unfinalized, if she is to continue to take part in the endless dialogue between herself and the outside world (see Bakhtin in Morris 73-81). On this same subject of the "gaze," Kristeva suggests that "Before recognizing itself as identical in a mirror and, consequently, as signifying, this body is dependent *vis-à-vis* the mother. At the same time instinctual and maternal, semiotic processes prepare the future speaker for entrance into meaning and signification (the symbolic). But the symbolic (i.e., language as nomination, sign, and syntax) constitutes itself only by breaking with this anteriority, which is retrieved as 'signifier,' 'primary processes,' displacement and condensation, metaphor and metonymy, rhetorical figures -- but which always remains subordinate -- subjacent to the principal function of naming-predicating. Language as symbolic function constitutes itself at the cost of repressing instinctual drive and continuous relation to the mother. On the contrary, the unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language (for whom the word is never uniquely sign) maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed instinctual, maternal element" (*Desire in Language* 136).

As discussed earlier, the narrator in the introduction to *So Vaste the prison* is dependent upon the mother for her own identity. When the word *e'edou* is pronounced, the seemingly unified self which created (or attempted to create) its identity from the mother, or maternal image, is no longer a possibility. The narrator must then enter the paternal world. However, rather than to abandon herself completely to patriarchal structures, Isma reconfigures the limitations of Islamic patriarchy and the Arabic language itself by establishing a new relationship with the maternal body and the maternal language. This reconfiguration is made possible, first through the "femmipulation" of the Beloved's identity; and, second, through the confession of her illicit affair and assertion of her own voice. Thus the Beloved is not just a male figure, which would constitute an imminent danger, but, as she imagines him, he is also a childhood friend, a cousin, and later, a very close relative: "This time I gazed unabashedly at my formerly beloved. Suddenly, then I was aware -- unless rather, it was only after I left him that I understood this -- that seeing him thus grown into a vigorous and seductive man my heart was filling with love that was really maternal! And that man, who was neither foreign to me nor someone inside me, as if I had suddenly given birth to him, almost an adult ... became my closest relative, he moved into the primary vacancy laid waste around me by the women of the tribe, from the days of my childhood and before I reached nubility, while I took the first shaky step of my freedom. Him, the one closest to me; my Beloved" (118-19). In the second case, Isma challenges the law of the husband, and is thus able to journey freely between the personal and public sphere. In an encounter with her husband, Isma says, "If there is music I like and the band is not too loud, I am going to dance! I'll dance as I please! ... 'Too bad,' I announced, confronting the look of impotent annoyance he shot in my direction, 'too bad if the others think that because I'm the 'wife of the director,' I shouldn't make a spectacle of myself or dance. 'As for you,' I went on to add, 'now you know the despair and fire that I keep buried and silent within me! If the music pleases me, how can I not seek to give my body, at least, some relief?'" (102-03). The Beloved, then, becomes a mediator between the maternal condition and paternal law, wherein the voice of the body is always privileged over the written word, as the dance scenes suggest: "I must have danced more than an hour without stopping ... The rest of the audience was enveloped in a half-light. There were one or two other dancers, and also a couple who joined me in monopolizing the dance floor lit by a dim red light, one of the four musicians would make a conspiratorial sign to me and set off again with a new beat that he seemed able to guess in advance would be the rhythm of my body" (59). And later: "Without analyzing it, I think that the important thing was the challenge my engulfed body made by expecting to improvise the movements. The important thing was to distance myself as much as possible from the collective frenzy of those women, my relatives -- I felt I could not accept for myself the almost funereal joy of their bodies, verging on a fettered despair" (61). As we discover, the female voice finds its purest state in the "lost alphabet" of Part Two, as such represents a permanent resistance against patriarchy and all of its derivations. Djebar herself confesses: "I think, moreover,

that my native language, that of all of the Maghreb -- meaning, the Berber language -- that of Antinéa, who was queen of the Touaregs at a time when matriarchy was the rule, that of Jugurtha, who carried the spirit of resistance against Roman imperialism; this language that I cannot forget, whose sound is always present but that, nevertheless, I do not speak, is the very structure through which, in spite of me and in me, I say 'no': as a woman and, above all, it seems to me, in my lasting effort as a writer. It is a language, I would say, that cannot be diminished" (2).

This "irreducibility" is at the core of the oral tradition, of the female voice, which constantly resists signification -- or possession, in other words. As Campbell might contend, the maternal, here represented by orality, must be repressed or abandoned in order to enter into paternal law; however, it is Djebar's quest to unite body and voice -- that is, to re-establish the maternal voice within paternal structures. The first journey out of the hammam has allowed for a second journey, a journey that takes the narrator from the private to the public spaces. In Part Two "What is Erased in Stone," another journey begins: a journey to the historical past. Each journey constitutes a death and a re-birth. According to Campbell, "[o]nly birth can conquer death -- the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be -- if we are to experience long survival -- a continuous 'recurrence of birth' (palingenesia) to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death" (16-17). In much the same way as the Beloved becomes the mediator between the law of the father and the maternal world, between private and public space, so will Berber mediate between the paternal language (French) and the maternal language (Arabic). Through a historical account that takes us to the discovery of a mysterious engraving at Dougga, in the seventeenth and again in the nineteenth century, Djebar reveals a language that has successfully resisted, not only the French colonial gaze, but, as Priscilla Ringrose contends, "the patriarchal tendency of the Arabic language," and "the decades of foreign invaders, Carthaginians, Romanians, Arabs" (710). It is in this language -- which is finally discovered to be an ancient Libyan writing, the origin of *tifinagh* -- that Djebar discovers at home, wherein she may shed her orphanhood. Exiled from the maternal and paternal language, Djebar finds in this lost alphabet the rhythms and sounds of the maternal body. Djebar's quest is not a search for an *écriture féminine*, but for a language of which women are the sole proprietors. In her interview with Lisa Gauvin, Djebar explains: "In Touareg society, it is the women who preserve writing. It is a matriarchal society, in other words, women are at the center; and it is through women that nobility is passed down. We become 'amenokal' through the female line" (76).

Speaking of Polybe, the ancient historian, Djebar tells us: "Polybe of Megalopolis, the man deported from the Peloponnesus sixteen years ago, his spirit now full of the flames of Carthage, full of the delirium of proud souls struck down and the thousands of trampled bodies, as well as images of despair and flight, prepares to write about the destruction; destruction is his point of departure. ... In the destruction his writing sets itself at the very center of a strange triangle, in a neutral zone that he discovers, though he did not expect it or seek it out" (*So Vast the Prison* 161-62). Does this lost language represent a "coming home" for the narrator/hero? The answer is yes and no. Although, like Polybe, Djebar has discovered a "neutral zone," a truly maternal language, she is once again exiled from it: not only is Djebar the orphan of a language she does not speak, but the Berber language, spoken and sung in the Atlas mountains, survives mostly in its oral form -- it is, thus, irreducible, surviving in the voices of women, in the throbbing of the land itself. What may not be written down, does not survive -- it is, as the title of this section suggests, erased in stone. This "erasure" may, in fact, remind us of Frye's sparagmos or disappearance of the hero. It is interesting to note that the narrator, as we have come to know her, has disappeared from the text. Her personal voice is sacrificed to the historical account, and later, as we will see, to the voices of other women. Once the historical section concludes, legend begins. The reader is introduced to Tin Hinam, the ancestor of the noble Tuaregs of Hoggar, whose remains were found by a French-American archeological team in 1925. This section may be interpreted as a dream, as the writer's effort to create a legend wherein women are heroes and seek their own liberation; or as the transcription of a legend that has, until now, survived in oral form. In either case, the importance of Tin Hinam rests in her imagined legacy: an archaic alphabet, which, according to the narrator, she confided to her friends just before she died. "Our most secret writing," she calls it, "as ancient as

Etruscan or the writing of the runes, but unlike these a writing still noisy with the sounds and breath of today, is indeed the legacy of a woman in the deepest desert. Tin Hinan buried in the belly of Africa" (*So Vast the Prison* 167): the alphabet survives, if only in the author's imagination. The antidote against erasure, against oblivion, seems to entail, like Tin Hinan's gesture, the passing down of language to others, the preservation of the voice, the silenced voice, through the act of writing. Having entered into the swollen belly of history, the narrator is thus ready to embark on a third journey.

Part Three: "A Silent Desire" may be interpreted as a metaphorical journey of the narrator into the temporal-spatial spaces filled with the voices and ululations of women of yesterday and today. However, each of the seven movements that comprise this section represents an individual journey and a transgression of patriarchal structures. The journey is that of the individual (the narrator), and of the collective (the narrator who unites her voice to that of other women). Alternating between the fictional and the autobiographical, this section also chronicles the author's cinematic quest. As the protagonist of the film states: "This gaze, I claim it as mine. I see it as 'ours'" (179). In a final attempt to release the body, to establish the body as voice, Djebar, the true heroine of this text of autobiographical fiction, appropriates the female gaze and, in so doing, lifts the veil of silence, of invisibility "for all of us," she confesses, "from the world of the shadow women, reversing the process: We are the ones finally who are looking, who are beginning" (179). The body thus emerges as voice, and the voice is, consequently, written down, "embodied" in the text. Interestingly enough, Part Three begins with the retelling of "The Captive and Zoraidé" from Don Quixote, Cervantes's monumental quest novel. Zoraidé, an unknown woman "who boldly dares to initiate the dialogue from enclosed and gilded prison" (172), is seen as a woman who appropriates the act of writing as a step toward liberation. As the narrator tells us, "this note of alarm was sent by a woman who was perhaps not necessarily the most beautiful nor the wealthiest nor the sole heir of her father, no, but certainly she was a woman who was locked away" (171). Later, the narrator confesses: "Zoraidé's story ... is indeed a metaphor for Algerian women writing today, among them myself" (173). Much like the narrator, Zoraidé exchanges the imprisonment of the paternal law, for the vast imprisonment of exile. In other words, unlike the traditional hero, the heroine/narrator of *So Vast the Prison* does not return: her state is that of an eternal orphanhood. The return is only possible as a demarcation point that begins yet another journey, another unveiling.

This impossible return, which also constitutes the final embodiment of the female voice, is best found in the final section of the novel, in "Part Four: The Blood of Writing": "But before vanishing she testifies -- a few brief words; this woman for whom another woman spontaneously gave her life -- testifies that Yasmina, to the end, thumbed her nose at her murderers, insulted and defied them with her last breath. The only thing that cut short her angry voice and impotent pride was the death rattle, beneath the knife! This voice, the voice of Yasmina -- Jasmine Flower -- I shall hear in all four corners of the earth.... Yasmina, whose mutilated body was found the next day in a ditch. Yasmina, who every day of her last year carried the kalam in her hand. 'I cannot live outside of Algeria, no!' she had decided. Algeria -- blood" (355). In such light, Djebar's use of the foundational epic journey of the heroine proves to be more than a playful game with patriarchal structures. Instead, it is a conscious femmipulation of tradition, history, and gender roles, wherein the writer, as well as the narrator, regains her voice, lifts the veil, and stares back with resolve. As the title of the novel reveals, although there is indeed room to "play," the inclusion of patriarchal structures in narrative discourse is inevitable: the female voice may only be heard through the paternal filter; history must be revised and reclaimed through the colonizer's records; and the writer/film-maker has no choice but to accept her complicity in such a space, in order to refute its structures -- as soon as one veil is dropped, another quickly takes its place.

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