Sisterhood and Rivalry in-between the Shadow and the Sultana: A Problematic of Representation in *Ombre sultane*

Anjali Prabhu

[T]he movement animating my characters—the people of my genealogy as well as their shadows who, in a sense, are looking at me, challenging me, expecting me to pull them, to make them enter, in spite of myself, in spite of themselves, into the house of this foreign language—this movement becomes my principal thrust, the central core of my novelistic form.

—Assia Djebar, "Anamnesis" 188

his paper examines the narrative tactics in Assia Djebar's *Ombre sultane*, a novel that primarily involves the representation of one woman by another. Isma, who recounts the story in her role as narrator, creates herself and her husband's second wife, Hajila, through discourse. In analyzing the narration, this study examines the intersections of forces of desire and power in the quest for representation in this novel. It engages other prominent readings of Djebar's text to subsequently return to the larger context of representation and its implications within colonial/postcolonial contexts. The suggestions of ironic narration converge with Georg Lukács's proposal of irony being indicative of "the pitiful failure of the intention to adapt to a world which is a stranger to ideals, to abandon the unreal ideality of the soul for the sake of achieving mastery over reality" (86).

While "otherness" is at the very center of the analyses accomplished here, this study does not, at the outset, posit difference based on class, gender, race, or some incommensurable cultural difference. It has to do, initially, with the very fundamental necessity of constructing an "other" in the process of creating a text. However, this constructed "other" is shown to be axiomatic to the narrative tactics of the narrator, Isma. The process of "splitting," proposed by Julia Kristeva, of the writer into "subject of enunciation" and "subject of utterance," becomes essential to the creation of this specific narrative. In the particular case of Djebar's text, this doubling process that puts forth the narrative occurs twice, as we shall see: first a "metamorphosis," to use Kristeva's term, of author into narrator (Isma) and then of Isma-narrator into the characters of her story (Isma and Hajila). The "narration (beyond the signifier / signified relationship) [is] a dialogue between the subject of narration (S) and the addressee (A) the other" (Kristeva 74). The writer must lose his or her worldliness, as it were, in the process of writing: "The subject of narration (S) is drawn in, and therefore reduced to a code, to a nonperson, to an anonymity (as writer, subject of enunciation) mediated by a third person, the he / she [here I] character, the subject of utterance" (74). The writer is the "possibility of permutation from S to A [...]. He [sic] becomes anonymity, an

absence, a blank space, thus permitting the structure to exist as such" (74). This zero point is where "the other" (the he / she—here I), the first addressee, so to speak, is created. For Kristeva, it is "the addressee, the other, exteriority (whose object is the subject of narration and who is at the same time represented and representing) who transforms the subject into an author" (75). As mentioned, this process occurs twice: first in the creation of Isma, and subsequently in Isma's creating Hajila as addressee (literally with the use of tu 'you'), and it is this addressee who transforms her into the creator of the discourse. This "dialogue," as it were, is the focus of the analyses that follow.

Bakhtin understands the dialogism that is intrinsic to the "word" itself in the following manner:

On all its various routes towards the object, in all its directions, the word encounters an alien word and cannot help encountering it in a living, tension-filled interaction. [...] [I]t is precisely this internal dialogism of the word [...] that cannot be isolated as an independent act, separate from the word's ability to form a concept [koncipirovanie] of its object - it is precisely this internal dialogism that has such enormous power to shape style. (279; emphasis added)

"[The word] encounters an alien word not only in the object itself: every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates." (280)

Ombre sultane performs the tension-filled interaction of the word in its signifying act, encountering alien words, between French and Arabic, but also (of most interest here) between S and A. My reading is a study of the style, as it is shaped through an engagement with the dialogism inherent in language, as well as the anticipation of a response in its creation, which registers and engenders desire and power. While drawing on such general theoretical work on narrative, this study, in its commitment to the specific "dialogism" of Djebar's text, also calls attention to moments when the sustained applicability of the theory is questioned.

I propose to study how authoritarian narration is concealed by the narrator through tactics that suggest equilibrium in the representation of the two women. Such tactics include interruptions of omniscient narration with recourse to telling only what is plausibly knowable and presentations of seemingly similar portraits of the two women represented. At the same time, various textual indications reveal a conscious or unconscious privileging of Isma that is accompanied by, and accomplished through, exclusions in Hajila's portrait, confirming, in Lukács's terms, the "pitiful failure" to grant Hajila agency in Isma's discourse. This agency of the represented subject might arguably be the ideal to which this narrative strives—or to which we want it to strive, as I will suggest in evoking other critical commentaries on this text and Djebar's work—by, for example, moving away from third person narration to use the second person. Various readers of Djebar have referred to the theme of sisterhood in her

work. Ombre sultane problematizes this theme in ways that are consequential for theorizing solidarity between women, and between powerful and subaltern positions. In order to attend to this important aspect, it is essential to evaluate the processes of narration and structure along with the story itself. My contention is that the former have been neglected in critical work to date. In several instances, irony is, as Lukács proposes, indicative of this failure of the "intention" to abandon its idealism—here, regarding the agency of the represented subject. My interest in this concept of irony derives from the idealism of sisterhood versus the reality of rivalry between women that becomes the very problematic of this text. In working between the French text and its English translation, I show how the narrative tactics are so effective due to our habits of reception, mostly through an implicit, and perhaps unconscious, trust in the narrator's discourse, that they create a "blind spot" that is registered in the translation.

Laurence Huughe characterizes the language Djebar explores in an earlier text, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, as "nothing less than the specific language of the Algerian woman. The language of modesty, it protects Djebar and her characters from the gaze of voyeurs, be they Algerians, Orientalists, or colonialists" (872). Yet, it is precisely the trope of the "voyeur" that Djebar takes up in *Ombre sultane*, almost as a challenge to her previous work, casting in this role, not the Algerian male, nor the Orientalist, nor even the colonialist; rather, it is the Algerian woman, Isma, who becomes a voyeur (or "voyeuse"), seeing and recording Hajila (and herself) without being seen by Hajila.³

The proposed reading proceeds from an identification of a certain semblance of objectivity that the narrator, Isma, creates. Although the narration is in the first person for the most part, there are instances of third-person narration that almost suggest a different, omniscient, if not neutral, narrator:

L'une d'elles Isma a choisi l'autre pour la précipiter dans le lit conjugual. Elle s'est voulue marieuse de son propre mari; elle a cru, par naïveté, se libérer ainsi [...]. Dans le clair-obscur sa voix s'élève [...]. (9)

One of these women, Isma, singled out the other to fling her into the marital bed. She had decided to act as matchmaker to her own husband; thinking naïvely to free herself [...]. Her voice rises up in the play of light and dark [...]. (1; trans. modified]⁴

One would be tempted to conclude that the narrator of the above lines is someone other than Isma, without the "je" [I] of the preceding line: "Le récit que j esquisse cerne un duo étrange [. . .] bien que [. . .] elles se soient retrouvées épouses du même homme [. . .]" (9)/"The story I sketch out includes a strange duo (trans. modified⁵) [. . .] although [. . .] they are both wives of the same man . . ." (1; emphasis added)]. Moreover, the narrating "je" [I] requires the use of "elle" [she] to designate herself as character in the narrative. The splitting process described earlier, which involves the metamorphosis from the zero point, occurs twice: first in the

creation of the narrator and then a second time in the metamorphosis of this narrator into an acting "I" and an observed "you." These processes allow the narrative voice to rise up, albeit in a "clair-obscur" [play of light and dark]. This antithesis recalls the title "Ombre sultane" and anticipates the various dialectically positioned pairs such as "rivale soeur" [rival sister] to be examined shortly, and on which the aesthetic of this text most precariously rests.

Even though the "je" [I] is a part of "elles" [they] in the last quotation, there is an attempt by the "je" to separate itself from the plural. Such "impersonalization," through its relationship to "objectivity" can be read as an attempt to endow the beginning of the discourse with a certain authority. Also, it posits from the opening of this text, the forthcoming difficulty of forging a "we." The reader, as constructed by the narration in the dialogue between S and A, seems to require the truth to have a semblance of objectivity. The narrative tactics to be examined reinforce this position of the reader. Only, the position of A is ambiguous: the reader is constantly displaced and disturbed by the "tu" [you] to whom the narrator addresses her text. This "you" is Hajila, the second wife, who is herself a character within the discourse created by Isma. All instances of the "I" of Isma as she recounts the events of her story must also be seen as a character, since, as Bakhtin amusingly notes, "I as teller (or writer) of [an] event am already outside the time and space in which the event occurred. It is just as impossible to forge an identity between myself, my own 'I,' and that 'I' that is the subject of my stories as it is to lift myself up by my own hair" (256)! Yet, in Hajila's story rendered in the present tense, Isma is able to disrupt this distinction because the telling of the event and the event itself supposedly coincide: Isma gives us Hajila's story as she observes/imagines her.

A second instance of this type of "objective" narration presents itself in the ninth chapter, after Hajila, the second wife of the narrator's husband, has been raped by him (66-67/57-58). Once this incident has been related, there is a flash-back to Hajila's childhood. The story is recounted in the same fashion with the narrator addressing Hajila. There is a sudden change in the signifier from "tu" [you] to "elle" [she] referring to Hajila, although this only occurs in one paragraph: "Hajila, encore engourdie par le sommeil, à l'aube, entendait confusément le conciliabule des parents: dans son ensommeillement, elle tentait de toutes ses forces de reconnaître la voix paternelle [. . .]. Elle perçut un jour clairement que la mère énumérait [...]" (70) / "Sometimes Hajila, still only half-awake, would hear the vague murmur of her parents carrying on discussions at dawn: she would strain her ears to make out her father's voice [...]. One day she clearly heard her mother listing [...]" (61). Here, there seems to be an effort to dissociate the child Hajila, who will subsequently lose her father (elle), from Hajila, the raped woman (tu). In effect, the narrator brings about a certain distancing of Hajila, the child, from the text, and a simultaneous appropriation of Hajila, the adult and second wife. It is the latter who, as a character within Isma's discourse, is of consequence to her own (narrating) existence. Her concern with Hajila is as the second wife of her husband: her knowledge of this entity—and we shall see how this is problematized by the narration—gives her propriety over the image she creates in the text. Evidently, there are sections in the narration where the narrator does not play an active part as a character. The "I," however, is always implied even, or especially when, Isma's presence is ostensibly not central to the text.

Here, as in the first instance, narrating the past accounts for the change from the first or second person ("I" or "you") to the third person ("she") to designate, both the narrator, and the second wife. It is, therefore, the narrative present that sanctions "I" and "you." Yet, later in the narrative, in the chapters involving her past (where she recounts her life with the husband), Isma uses "I" rather than the "she" as was previously established in the text. This violation of her own code (of using "I" to designate her narrating persona, but "she" for herself as character in scenes from the past) is a flagrant signal of the investment the "I" has in the narration. The only (theoretical or even grammatical) possibility for a "we"and this is rarely actualized—is the one that is constructed in the present of the intradiegetic moment. That is, there can be no "we" when the characters are referred to in the third person ("she" or "they"); it is only when the "I" and "you" occur that this "we" can become real or even implied. Therefore, a "we" that excludes Hajila's past (by the use of "she") but that would include Isma's (by the use of "I") is to be questioned and becomes significant in the rivalry engendered through Isma's narration. The representation of Isma's past with the husband merging with Hajila's present will be discussed further in my critique of the blurring of the identities of these two women being presented, in scholarship on Djebar, as a means to reach women's collectivity. This primacy, as I read it, of the act of narrating to the story or narrative is a cue to read as much into the former as the latter. 8 It is clear from my reading that any allusion to the "collective," suggested by other readers of Djebar, must necessarily account for this important aspect of the narration in this text through which it can be enabled or disabled. This feature of the (act of) narration has been neglected in previous readings of Ombre sultane.

Apart from these moments, the narration is in the first-person form, with Isma addressing her discourse directly to Hajila, both being characters in the discourse. The complexity of the discourse stems from the role of the narrator: Hajila is presented to the reader in a discourse addressed to her (tu/you) by Isma (je/I), where the former is created through the eyes of the latter. There is an element of voyeurism involved, as Isma seems to be observing Hajila (in reality or in her imagination) without being seen herself. In spite of the obvious control that Isma has over the character and presentation of Hajila, there are several attempts at being the neutral/realist narrator, who only presents what is plausibly "knowable" to her. For example, she is informed by her daughter, Meriem, that Hajila is pregnant: "La femme de mon père, maman, elle commence à avoir un gros ventre!" (79)/ "My father's new wife is beginning to get a big tummy, Maman!" (70).

Another instance of such camouflaging of the omniscience of the narrator occurs at the end of the novel, when Isma is following Hajila in the

street: "A l'heure du déjeuner, tu ne penses même plus à rentrer. Tu as dû oublier la mère" (167) / "Although it is lunchtime, you don't even think of returning home. You must have forgotten your mother" (157; emphasis added). In this case there is a combination of the omniscient narrator, who knows the character's thoughts ("you don't even think . . ."), with one who is plausible in what can be known to her ("You must have forgotten . . ."). The latter can be read as an effort to render the discourse less arbitrary, and thus more authoritative (plausible or believable) in its claim to be true. 9 In what can be called a more "generous" reading, these instances signal an ironic consciousness by the "omniscient" narrator, not only of what cannot be plausibly known to her, but also of the consequences of her omniscience to the character's subjectivity. Or, to return to Lukács's idea of irony evoked at the beginning of this piece, if representation is a form of mastery, the (narrating) "intention" here does not abandon its idealism that posits the possibility of some equal, fair, or true representation.

It is impossible to ignore the effect that the constant addressing of the second wife as "you" in the narration has on the reader who "becomes" or at least assumes that "you" for the reading experience. 10 These appeals to be believed, as I read them following Foucault's "will to truth," thus become appeals to Hajila and also to the reader, who stands in for Hajila during the reading process. 11 The catapulting of the reader into the text by a device that is, in the first instance, structural/grammatical nevertheless has strong implications for one's psychical engagement with this text: it places the reader in the position of accomplice by the process of validating each instance of the narrator's "I" through one's metamorphosis into "you." Simultaneously, however, the constant repetition of this "you" and its mise-en-scène (in the representation of Hajila) in the text rudely dislodges the reader's personal "I" and prevents it from comfortably taking its place (through metamorphosis into the textual "you"). Yet at the same time, there is also a forced sustenance of the "I" by the addressee, be it structural by the textual "you," Hajila (who is also unaware of this sustenance), or psychical by the implicit "you" of the reading entity. The engagement of this reading "you" with Isma's discourse is manipulated in complex ways.

Îsma, as a wily narrator, manipulates her own image and that of the second wife by means of exclusions. Hajila's body experiences an absence of presence in the discourse. Her physical presence is often reduced to that of a part of her body, dissociated from the rest, through the use of synecdoche in the representation. For example, in the first chapter, Hajila enters the text as a hand that is "inerte" (16) / "motionless" (8), or they are "mains de ménagère active" (15) / "hands of a busy housewife" (7) that lose themselves in menial tasks while the husband gets ready to leave for work. Her hands are at times separated from her thought, making them seem like those of a marionette, being controlled by an exterior force: "Main sur le robinet de cuivre: 'ta' main. Front sur un bras nu tendu: 'ton' front, 'ton' bras" (16) / "A hand is poised on the brass tap: 'your' hand. A brow rests against a bare outstretched arm: 'your' brow, 'your' arm" (8). There can be no mistaking the proximity to painting in this portrait.

Djebar draws on an amazing array of techniques to bring painting into her text: specific paintings in the most apparent manner as in *Femmes d'Alger* and *L'amour, la fantasia*, but also narrative portraits that are literally painted before the reader's eyes. Here she performatively shows how these two means of representation can be complicit. The collusion which she exploits is the common violence both narrative and painting share through the "othering" process that occurs in the fixing of the image and that cannot properly register this other's desires, due to the final opacity the other presents. Therefore, the constant violence that Isma's discourse inflicts upon Hajila's subjectivity is inscribed in the incomplete, fragmented, and static images, which, in the final analysis, record this eventual opacity and, thus perhaps paradoxically, vindicate Hajila's autonomy.

The representation of Hajila through portraits of her hand merely

suggests the presence of the rest of her being:

Ta main droite tire alors l'étoffe [...]. (40)

Your right hand wrenches the cloth away (31; trans. modified 12)

[T]es mains se serrent l'une sur l'autre [...]. (42)

[Y]our hands clasp each other tightly together [. . .]. (33; trans. modified)

[T] es mains se serrent pour mieux ajuster le triangle [...]. (42-43)

[Y] our hands tightly clutch the woollen cloth to adjust the tiny triangle [...]. (34; trans. modified)

The cloth is, of course, metonymous with her body, and the appearance of just her hands through synecdoche accomplishes the same effect of exclusion. This kind of description is extended to contain the very spirit of the character in question. Her mental presence is reduced to the hands which "speak" for her: "[T]es mains s'attardent sur le bouquet de coriandre et de menthe fraîche" (63) / "Your hands linger over the bunch of coriander and fresh mint" (54; trans. modified) or "Tes mains tremblantes plongent dans la mousse [...]" (65) / "Your trembling hands plunge into the soapsuds [...]" (56; trans. modified¹³), communicating her state of mind. Dorothy Blair's authoritative translation illustrates, as shown through the modifications suggested above, the power of the narrating entity that I shall term culturally validated (here through the literary conventions of the narrator). That is, the English translation does not perform the denial of the "you" as agent (i.e., as subject of action/verb), even at the level of grammar. The conventions of narration serve to camouflage forces of desire and power inherent in the narrative act: I read the translation as being revelatory of a certain trust in the narrator or a belief in a particular role of the narrator—in the possibility of a narrator who "just tells us what happened."14 These representations through metonymy, when read as interruptions of the largely omniscient narration, hint at the impossibility of attaining any whole picture of the other. The translation, in fact,

grants Hajila more agency textually than her narrator permits. Here specifically, metonymy works to deny Hajila's subjectivity, or, to invoke the "generous" reading suggested earlier, records Isma's impossible enterprise of accessing and conveying that subjectivity. These fragmented representations can thus be indicative of the narrator's ironic consciousness of the impossibility of her task.

In analyzing the narrative of this text, one might see the exclusions of Hajila's sensuality by the narrator as a function of the desiring subject. Isma's narrative tactics involving exclusions can be read as an imposition of the veil on the character of Hajila in the accomplishment of Isma's own desire (of a "desirable" self-representation). In the following pages, I isolate compelling examples of such exclusions from the text. First, it is necessary to note the profusion of seductive images of the body of the narrator:

Dans l'enlacement, chacun de *nous* prend son temps [...] chaque partie de mon corps se meut autonome, un sein devient coupe renversée, le ventre plage fuyante, les épaules se creusent sous l'oreiller, et les jambes ah! les jambes *vous* font des rêves de scaphandrier. (45)

We exchange slow caresses [...] every part of my body seems to move independently, a breast becomes an upturned goblet, belly a receding shore, shoulders dig into the pillow, and my legs—ah, my legs!—become a diver's dream (37; emphasis added)

It is not only Hajila who is deprived of any sort of seductiveness, but the husband himself, evidently present in these scenes, is not granted a presence comparable to that of the narrator. He is lost in a kind of anonymity through a representation that is not far from being androgynous:

De nouveau enveloppés sur la couche, *nous* attendons, sonores, tels des coquillages. Allégement des formes: ivoire du cou, opalescence de l'épaule, un genou soudain s'amollit, un coin de pommette devient pulpe, [...] les mains liées se meuvent comme sans articulation, les ongles s'éteignent, fuchsias pâlis. (31)

We lie waiting once again, reverberating to every sound, like shells that echo the murmurs of the sea. Our bodies seem weightless; a neck is ivory, a shoulder opalescent, a knee grows suddenly soft, a cheekbone loses its sharpness, reduced to pulp, [...] linked hands move bonelessly, fuschia nails blanch and disappear. (22; emphasis added)

The merging of the two bodies here justifies the *nous* (we) in the above two quotations, absent for the most part from scenes with the husband and in the text in general. This possibility of a "we" between Isma and the husband stands in stark contrast to the violence of the interaction of the husband and Hajila. The forging of the "we" between the male character and the female character/narrator becomes illustrative of the strongest temptation of the latter. Also, the startling appearance of *vous* (formal, or plural, "you"—boldfaced) in the previous quotation as opposed to the

habitual tu does not mark the English translation. The French reads: "et les jambes ah! les jambes vous font des rêves de scaphandrier" (45), which is rendered: "and my legs—ah, my legs!—become a diver's dream" (37). In the French version, there is a sudden appeal to a reader other than the ostensible receiver, Hajila, who is the addressee ("you") in the entire text. That is, contrary to what I described earlier regarding the impossibility for the reader to take the place of the "you" (tu) in the text due to the miseen-scène of Hajila, here, the reader is allowed to inscribe his/her personal reading "I" onto this "you" (vous). One might speculate, then, whether there is at this point a corresponding entry of the "author" into the text, whether the "zero" or "blank space" posited by Kristeva (where the author becomes the subject of enunciation to generate a subject of utterance) is violated. I would like to argue that it is at instances such as this that the "author" as agency is inscribed in the text and is the most significant and signifying, and that such "interferences" in the narration can productively be articulated in proposals concerning authorial intention.

More immediately, accounting for this vous here would require a closer look at the translation. Do the legs of the narrator/character become a "diver's dream" in the sense that they are like the legs a diver would dream of having? Or are they, rather, legs that would give "you" (vous-the "real" reader-dreams of a diver because they recall the grace/strength of the legs "you" would expect a diver to have? The difference is subtle. Yet, the consequences for the evoked reader are not insignificant. With the communion between Isma and the husband being consummated in the narrative, there is also a oneness established between some part of the narrating force and the reader. It is a moment at which the most audacious eroticism of the text is accomplished—but ever so fleetingly-through an entry of the reader that is grammatically sanctioned by the text of the discourse: this is an extraordinary moment at which the "you" of the reader, invited into the text, can properly assume, or at least theorize, an "I" of the author. Additionally, with Isma's use of the pronoun vous to designate men in general in her society, vous assumes a heterosexual male perspective of a female diver's legs, thus placing the reader in the uncomfortable position of subscribing to stereotypes generated from this position—and this complicity is especially strong if the image of the diver's legs was easily identified in the reading, regardless of the identities the reader might assert or to which the reader might be sympathetic. 15

Despite other instances where patriarchy is criticized in this text, heterosexual validation and the temptation of its possibility (in other words, to be loved by the enemy) underlie much of the force of Isma's desire in the narrative act. Isma's relentless pursuit of a desirable self generates, along with images of herself, a receiving or reading position from which she can be desired. In this way, the reader's complicity with the husband in this "consumption" of a desirable (image of) Isma suggests another unpalatable "we" with which the reader must contend. Isma herself is unmistakably present and remarkably imprinted in the scenes between herself and the man:

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{J]'entends les voix [...], je me sépare de l'aimé. [...] J'enfouis ma tête sous son épaule, je me perds [...]. Mon corps s'allonge ou se ploie, mes yeux restent ouverts.

Je m'appuie à la cloison [...]. Je m'accroupis au chevet de l'homme, frôle de mes seins le visage aux pupilles luisantes. (33)

[I] can hear the sounds [...]. I move away from my beloved. [...] I bury my head against his shoulder, [I] am carried away [...]. My body stretches and flexes, my eyes remain open.

I lean against the partition [...]. I crouch at the head of the bed, brushing the man's gleaming pupils with my breasts. (22; emphasis added)

Endowing herself with this sort of ideal sensuality, including elaborate descriptions of her own body, the narrator renders eloquent the absences of the same in the case of the second wife. Her agency in the sexual act is doubled in her agency in the narrative act. The heightened awareness of her body can only be accomplished, as it were, in this telling: it can only be truly inscribed in this narrative; and it only gains its significance through the contrast written against the image of the other woman.

Simultaneously, however, there is an attempt to assure the reader, or Hajila, as one might choose to see it, of equilibrium in the representation of the two women. Once again, I read this as an exemplification of the "will to the truth" and an attempt to *convince* the receiver of the text of a certain neutrality or objectivity of the narrative voice in the tradition of the realist novel. The receiver, then, through a will to truth "tends to exert a sort of pressure and something like a power of constraint" (Foucault 55) on Isma's discourse. In Bakhtinian terms, the word is directed toward "an answer" that it anticipates. At the same time, as in the case of the representation through metonymy, for the generous reading, this would be an ironic (or at least self-conscious) rendering of omniscient narration. There are descriptions of the two women that indicate equilibrium by virtue of similar presentations: there is a physical description, and both are accorded onlookers who admire their beauty. The first is a description of Isma:

[U]n chauffeur de taxi, à Paris—pourquoi pas à Paris!—sifflotte de me trouver belle, le café brûle ma gorge quand je rêve assise aux terrasses des brasseries [...]. (19)

[A] taxi-driver, in Paris—why not in Paris!—whistles admiringly at me, coffee scalds my throat as I sit dreaming on the terrace of a brasserie [...]. (11)

This is preceded by the following details:

[J]'ai l'impression de danser au moindre nouvement, sur mes mollets battent les pans d'une jupe couleur cuivre, blanche parfois, ou d'un bleu pâle comme les prunelles de l'homme qui m'attend; [...] tantôt jambes nues [...], je me sais mince, jaillissante hors la ceinture de cuir [...], la nuque gracile, je tourne la tête d'un coup, je surprends ses yeux lents sur mon profil non fardé [...], mon

corps qui navigue, tant et tant de fois il m'arrive de flotter dans le faisceau des regards alentour. (19)

[M]y slightest movement becomes a dance, my skirts—copper-coloured, white, pale blue, like the eyes of the man who is waiting for me [...]; sometimes, when legs go bare and skirts barely cover the knees, [...] I know that my figure is trim, I am conscious of my narrow waist emphasized by my leather belt, [...] suddenly turn my slender neck and catch his eyes slowly studying my profile, innocent of make-up, [...] my body sailing along—time and time again, I find myself floating in a sea of eyes, all staring at me. (11)

Hajila does not experience the debatable liberty associated with Paris, the Western dress suggested by the leather belt, and the exposed legs:

[T]u faisais le drapé comme les citadines de souche, d'un premier geste ample puis dans la phase suivante avec un lent mouvement des épaules, de la nuque, sous le contrôle d'une main sûre. Il est vrai, tu portais maintenant des talons hauts [...]; ta démarche [...] empruntait une sorte de grâce glissée. Ta taille s'inclinait [...] tu te savais admirée [...] par les voisines qui épiaient. (24-25).

[Y]ou draped yourself now in the veil in two stages, as if you'd been a town dweller all your life, first casually flinging it round you, then, holding it firmly with one hand, adjusting it with a slow movement of your head and shoulders. It it true you were now wearing high heels [...] you slid your feel along the ground in a graceful manner. You bent forward slightly from the waist [...] you could feel the admiring eyes of all the women in the street, peering at you from their half-closed doors. (16)

It is interesting to note that Isma is admired by men, while her counterpart is being viewed by the female neighbors. 16 Further, when Hajila arrives at the waiting car, there is no description of the husband's looking at her. In Isma's passage there are indications that she knows she is beautiful to him: there is a suggestion that the description is through the eyes of the waiting man, or at least, the way Isma imagines herself to be seen as is suggested by "je me sais . . . " 'I am conscious of ' The man waiting to meet Hajila (her husband) does not notice her beauty, or if he does, we are not informed of it. Once again, Isma's "collaboration" (establishing a "we" in a way) with the man—here in her sanctioning his gaze to validate her desirability—is a significant obstacle to the sisterhood theme. The image of Isma, object of male desire, is constantly reinforced, while the question of Hajila's desirability from the heterosexual male perspective is constantly elided. Inasmuch as the manipulative nature of the above two representations is evident, it can also be read as an indication of the ironic consciousness of the narrator. I have referred to the latter by suggesting a more generous possibility in lieu of the violence of omniscient narration that erases the subjectivity of Hajila, in instances of either

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breaks in omniscient narration or in extremely stylized representations arising from fragmentation.

Hajila's image is presented as being static or petrified. For example, she is a "dame assise: nature morte" (17) / "seated woman: still life" (trans. modified). This static image is reiterated later when Hajila is said to be like "une photographie d'album. Sur papier glacé" (41-42) / "a posed photograph mounted in an album. On glossy paper" (33). It is also significant that each of these static images of Hajila is respectively juxtaposed with an extremely sensuous portrayal of Isma (19/45) discussed earlier. The oscillation between images of Isma and Hajila and the repetition of scenes that suggest equilibrium in their representation end up tipping the scales in favor of the narrator, Isma. Here, to evoke the central metaphor, Isma is the sultana while Hajila remains her shadow.

In another instance of manipulative juxtaposition Isma informs the husband that she intends for Mériem to live with her (78/69). Subsequently she continues: "L'homme s'était remis à boire [...]" (80) / "The man had started drinking again [...]" (71). Although the narrator does not make the link between these two events (the child's leaving and the husband's beginning to drink), the reader is bound to do so. Having thus suggested the importance of the connection with Isma that Mériem provides, it is reiterated in the pathetic scene of the drunken husband calling out for his first wife (84/74). She is therefore irreplaceable and holds him in her control, consequently reinscribing the rivalry between the two women. Hajila is, as a result, relegated to the status of an inadequate replacement: once again the shadow. In a feminist reading Mildred Mortimer explains that one of the questions that Djebar's text poses is: "Qu'est-ce qui se passe si les femmes s'unissent pour supprimer cette rivalité?" 'What happens if women unite to eliminate this rivalry?' ("Parole et écriture" 19). 18 She continues that in this novel, rivalry does not exist because the women/wives succeed each other in their revolt against the traditional couple, dominated by the male (19). The very sharp rivalry, nevertheless, arises precisely parallel to, or at least simultaneously with, male domination. Several of the narrative tactics produce a seductive and desirable representation of Isma, who vies for a presence (in the present tense and in a personal "there-ness" through inscribing her "I") in the discourse. The logic of the narrative ostensibly accords this presence to Hajila, whose story constitutes the present of the discourse. Isma's tactics are revelatory of the tension between the desiring "I" and the representation she creates. If, at the level of plot, there is no rivalry due to the departure of Isma before Hajila's arrival, the competition is reinstated in, and even constitutive of, the narrative act. The narrator's violation, examined earlier, of her code by the use of "I" to designate herself in scenes from the past with the husband and her rendering of these scenes in the present tense, while relegating Hajila's past to the past tense and using "she" to designate the second wife in these scenes, are also indicative of this rivalry.

Marie Ascarza-Wégimont places Isma and Hajila in similar positions. She states that "the two wives [...] are defying the authority of their polygamous husband" (55). While both might indeed defy the husband's

authority, the differential means for doing so are not discussed, nor is the difference in their positions significantly raised. Rafika Merini's view of Djebar's work also stresses solidarity and does not adequately note the rivalry; her book, a "socio-literary study" (6) on Djebar and Leïla Sebbar published in 1999, does not treat *Ombre sultane*. She therefore remarks: "Neither Sebbar nor Djébar appear concerned with the indigenous female evil eye directed at another female although as [Malek] Chebel notes the evil eye can also be associated with a female rival. Djébar and Sebbar prefer to stress solidarity among women in their choice of women characters. Their references to the mythical Sheherazade who would not have succeeded without her sister's help, and who volunteers to be the next bride in order to save all her other 'sisters' comprise the most prominent example" (119). From my study, the references to Scheherezade, so crucial to the construction of *Ombre sultane* both thematically and structurally, by no means exclude an inscription of sharp rivalry in the same text.

In a reading with which I do not entirely disagree, Mortimer focuses on women joining their forces against patriarchal domination—Isma protects Hajila, as Dinarzade protects Sheherazade, the former in each case the protective shadow of the latter: "En veillant sur Hajila, Isma suit Dinarzade, ombre de la sultane" 'Watching over Hajila, Isma follows Dinarzade, shadow of the sultana' ("Parole et écriture" 19). First, even though Isma sets out by claiming for herself the space of the shadow— "toi au soleil désormais exposée, moi tentée de m'enfoncer dans la nuit" (10) / "you [...] were [...] to be exposed henceforth to the sunlight. while I am tempted to plunge back into the night" (2), she narratively assumes the role of Scheherazade, the endless weaver of narrative, rather than that of the silent protector, Dinarzade. Of course, the blurring of the identities of the two women that occurs throughout this text would support Mortimer's position. However, even this blurring, as we shall see, needs to be put into perspective, given the manipulative narration. Another point, though, is that this study of the narration resists the separation of the shadow from the sultana ("ombre de la sultane"), 19 as it splits too neatly this impossible, yet inseparable, couple. Mortimer will also evoke their inseparability in a different way.

The privileging of Isma's sensuality over Hajila's locks itself into the Scheherezade-Dinarzade duo evoked by the text through citations from the *Thousand and One Nights*. Sheherazade will be killed by the king if she falls asleep, so, her accomplice sister Dinarzade, hiding under the bed, is her protector who will awaken her. Sheherazade depends on Dinarzade's presence for her very life. The parallel, as I would like to see it for a moment, is that Isma cannot be an "I"—she can literally not exist—without the "you" of her sister/rival, Hajila. They are sisters, these two pairs, because they are locked in a sorority created, in a way, in tandem with the patriarchal force that remains a threat to their very existence; they are rivals in that the creation of narrative (and the larger act of representation), as a solitary act, allows only one "I." The functioning of this desiring "I" in and for discourse or representation proves to be so preponderant as to retroactively inscribe rivalry at the level of story; past

images of Isma are brought to compete with present images of Hajila. The various moments of irony can be read as the "intention" not being willing to abandon the "idealism" of sorority, while the act of representation in which it engages reveals the sharp "reality" of the rivalry (see the quotation

from Lukács in the first paragraph of this piece).

Although Djebar by no means simplifies the role of the "I"—her earlier work L'amour, la fantasia experiments beautifully with the creation of a plurality of narrating entities—her idea of violence in textuality, discussed toward the end of this piece, reads directly into this struggle to write oneself into history. Much has been written about women's solidarity and the creation of a collective—a female collective—in Djebar's work (for example, Donadey, especially 101-02; Erickson 54 and 63; Huughe, especially 873-74; Mortimer, "Reappropriating"; and Merini 15 and 119). While this is indubitably Djebar's concern, nevertheless I think she grapples here, in the first instance, with a fundamental otherness that has to do with the act of representation in language: this requires a "splitting" (referred to earlier) for the creation of narrative. Also, the subsequent (if one can, for argument, imagine these as consecutive events) seizure of the word includes a realization of its dialogism in the Bakhtinian sense.

Narrative becomes all about appropriating words to reinstate the "I." The consequences of forging a "we" under these circumstances (specifically the necessary splitting and the inevitable dialogism) become highly problematic, as this text shows. Yet, it is not a defeatist position that is adopted—far from it. All this complexity is dredged up, drawn in, and made to become the very structure of the text. This has been made evident by my engagement with the English translation and the illustrations of how time and again what I showed as inadequacies were not inaccuracies in meaning at all, but rather "innocent readings" that glossed over basic sentence structure. At this level, structure is generated through the desire and power implicated in the narrative act and revealed through the blind spot (that becomes apparent in the comparative reading) created by narrative authority, despite the latter's discursively articulated precariousness.

While Ombre sultane accomplishes a constant flux in the relation between Isma and Hajila, between two Algerian women, between sisters and rivals, it is also about the violence of written narrative, of the wrenching away from plurality and indeterminacy, and the violent capture that ensues in the structural fixing of meaning (however provisional or even dialogic) in enunciated language. Mortimer notes the lack of equilibrium between the women by referring to the fact that the narrator, Isma, controls the narration "en tant qu'écrivain public" 'as a public writer' since she is bilingual while Hajila only speaks Arabic. Mortimer reads the inequality more in the narrative (facts), although she alludes to consequences for the narration and, here, allows the acknowledgment of the rivalry between them:

Tout le long de ce texte, le lecteur discerne un déséquilibre. Isma, la narratrice de deux récits (le sien et celui de Hajila), a une vue d'ensemble, en parlant deux langues, elle a accès à la parole et à

l'écriture. Elle a tous les moyens pour avoir le contrôle du récit. Hajila ne les a pas et ne les aura jamais. A mon avis, ce déséquilibre reflète aussi les rapports de pouvoir qui existent dans le mariage polygame musulman où la première femme tient une position privilégiée par rapport aux autres épouses.

Throughout the text, the reader discerns a lack of equilibrium. Isma, the narrator of two stories (hers and Hajila's), has a perspective of the whole, speaking two languages; she has access to speech and writing. She has every means to control the story. Hajila does not and never will. In my view, this disparity also reflects the power relations that exist in Muslim polygamous marriages where the first wife has a privileged position compared to the other wives. ("Paroles et écriture" 18)

This text, as argued in my analysis of the narrative, calls specific attention to the distinction and association between two events: "the event that is narrated in the work and the event of the narration itself (we ourselves participate in the latter, as listeners or readers)" (Bakhtin 255). I am in agreement with the fact that Isma has a perspective of the whole, as well as access to both speech and writing as facts within the story that give her greater control of it. Adlai Murdoch has noted in this context that "in situating 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, Djebar's narrative will inevitably problematize its own discourse to the point where its own tenuous coherence threatens to dissolve" (78). 30

Yet, while Hajila does not and never will control the story, as Mortimer indicates, her image becomes the force that drives Isma's narrative, for Isma cries out: "Et je cherche, je cherche comment me présenter à toi puisque, aux yeux des autres, tu es—ou peut-être est-ce moi qui suis—la coépouse imposée, la femme danger" (149) / "And I hunt for a way to introduce myself to you, since in other people's eyes you are—or perhaps it is I who am—the co-wife, the interloper, the woman who spells danger" (139; italics in original). And more consequently: "Oui, si Schéhérazade renaissante mourait à chaque point du jour, justement parce qu'une seconde femme, une troisième, une quatrième ne se postait pas dans son ombre, dans sa voix, dans sa nuit?" (153) / "Yes, what if Sheherazade were to be continually reborn, only to die again at every dawn, just because a second woman, a third, a fourth, did not take up her post in her shadow, in her voice, in her night?" (143; italics in original). The impossible union and constant ambiguity in the distinctness of the two female identities in the first quotation, and, in the second, the impossibility of one woman's existence without the other's eclipsed presence —"in her shadow, in her voice, in her night"—become haunting tropes inscribed in the aesthetic of this text and belie any selfassured reference to women's collectivity. They also reveal themselves to be at the very root of the fragility, which, characteristic of Djebar's prose—as confirms Murdoch's reference to its "tenuous coherence" in the context of L'amour, la fantasia—writes itself into this text.

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I would like to return for a moment to the issue of the blurring of the identities of the two women. It is clear that Isma's narration strives toward this. Yet, the fact remains that the clear distinction cannot be overcome: this goes back not only to the differences in representation realized in the narration, but also, quite simply, to the story. Isma, in her past with the husband enjoyed a friendship, intimate and sexual relations, as well as choice, while Hajila was first deceived into this marriage by a scheme between Isma and Touma, Hajila's mother. Isma's presentation of Hajila's rape by the husband and the continued silence of the text (perhaps its inability—and not just at the level of "story") to describe any fulfilling sexual experience for Hajila presents a monumental textual invalidation of this blurring. In fact, similar to the use of metonymy and synecdoche in Hajila's representation, the husband's call for the "cendrier" 'ashtray' is used to designate the sexual act between them (see for example 25/17, 29/20, 48-49/40).

The struggle between Isma and Hajila is the struggle around the narrative instance and, consequently, about identity: my word fixes you/me; my sentences structure you/me; I cannot write me without (writing) you; I cannot create me without (creating) you. The desiring "I" in its struggle to be/become must constantly battle with the "you" must constantly push the limits of its "I" against the backdrop of the "you." Noting the return of the invader's gaze by the Algerian woman accomplished in Djebar's work, Huughe records that Djebar's fiction illustrates how "Algerian women counter the Orientalist gaze" (873). In Ombre sultane, however, it is the Algerian woman who gazes at her sister. The possessing, representing, and potentially violent gaze comes, this time, from the Algerian woman herself, and it is directed toward herself and her more proximate other. Omniscient narration that is potentially violating of the character's subjectivity reveals gaps that attenuate this violence: portraits whose narration uncovers the lack of equilibrium as well as instances of the narrator only telling what can plausibly be known to her. While on the one hand these can be read as the constraint of the addressee in the "dialogue," on the other, they can present gaps that suggest a narrative distance (what I have linked to ironic narration in the Lukácsian sense), gaps which, in a more optimistic stance toward representation, can alert the addressee to the power instantiated in the narrative act. The fragmentation and dissociation in the portraits of Hajila, of one Algerian woman by another, inscribe "otherness" within the Algerian nation itself, and within the context of sorority and women's collective agency. The difficulty and ambiguity of the task of reaching a less powerful other, to speak in the name of, or even to name this other become the language of this text as made evident, for example, in my discussions of the English translation, especially with regard to the latter's granting a "you" to Hajila when the French text did not. The functioning of the desire of the narrating entity alongside its idealistic intention and the dialogism of language in the act of narration all become constraints which are not evaded, but rather put to work in the very creation of discourse in a narrative of unremitting antagonism. I have suggested that it is perhaps easy to gloss over this antagonism if the narrative struggles are not adequately recognized in this text due to the "blind spot" that the narrative process can create. These struggles are, however, personified in the characters of Isma and Hajila in *Sister to Scheherazade*.

The English translation of the title is not able to convey this battle, this interlocking of the two entities. The French *Ombre sultane*, where each of the two words is a noun, yet where the second looks like an adjective, with the "e" ending that would grammatically justify the feminine gender of the first noun *ombre*, pairs the two in an impossible, yet unbreakable, union. "Shadow sultana"— not "shadow of the sultana" (ombre de la sultane) nor "sultana of the shadow" (sultane de l'ombre); not "shadowy sultana" (sultane "ombreuse"), nor "sultanic shadow" (ombre sultanesque), nor even "shadow and sultana" (ombre et sultane). This choice of words—where the fit is tragic in its grammatical "impossibility," of a noun-noun pair, where the rude bringing together is calculated in its sonorant appropriateness (with the "e" ending mentioned above), and where the juxtaposition needs no validation or justification because it is, where all that matters is this dialectic—recalls, not unlike the title of the first text of the quartet, the colonial contact with the other.

Sister to Scheherezade engages, most evidently, with the question of women's voices and their relationships within the Algerian nation, and thus moves away from the issue of colonial contact, which is at the heart of much of Djebar's writing. Yet, while theme persists here allegorically, it is not an allegory consisting of symbols where one thing stands for or signifies another and where a process of interpretation then reveals this correspondence. Instead, it is at the level of affect that an ingenious narrative process (where the reader and author cannot remain purely fictional or even theoretical), in the unrelenting pursuit of its raison d'être, becomes the struggle for selfhood, which can be seen as the most basic struggle in colonial/postcolonial relationships of radical opposition.

Yet, the idea of allowing the struggle between Isma and Hajila to allegorically suggest the French-Algerian relationship must be postulated with much caution, for the distinction is consequential materially, historically, and theoretically. That is, the symbols in the allegory are already signifying as Algerian women in a situation of polygyny and cannot be taken as empty signifiers, or even neutral ones, upon which we could then transpose the colonizer and colonized, respectively. Isma's omniscient narration turns out to be, without a doubt, a dominating discourse, much like colonial discourses, and bears the traits of the struggle to sustain this dominance as an authoritarian narrator and as the dominant, or at least more desirable, character. This preoccupation in the dialogue of the text provokes rivalry in the narrative act, as has been seen. However, it is the simultaneous articulation of the more idealistic intention of sorority that, first, disallows a sustained (allegorical) signification leading to (through comparison) colonialist discourse and, second, proves to have a marked effect on style or narration. Instances of irony and what I have construed as irony in suggesting the possibility of a "generous" reading permit us to identify entry points from which to rectify the violence of narrative: these are entry points from which one might interrogate the possibility for solidarity between dominant and subaltern positions, even as we understand better the temptations of its narration.

On a different level, the struggle between Isma and Hajila for a presence and agency in the discourse is doubled in the reading process, with the reader being forced into a bid for agency: struggling with the role in which the texts posits this position (you = Hajila = reader?), and discovering legitimate textual spaces to articulate it-most notably as challenger of the narrator's authority. The startling emergence of the "real" author in the text, or at least of a legitimate space for her, disputes therewith any potentiality for a comfortable distance of the reader as a "reading entity" and recuperates the flesh-and-blood reader, forcing him/her to configure him/herself in relation to the interpretive act. I refer back to the moment I suggested as constituting the most "outrageous eroticism" of the text: when the writer as "anonymity, an absence, a blank space [that] permit[s] the structure to exist as such" (Kristeva 74, cited earlier) is dislodged, thus exploding the structure, not allowing it to exist as such by also precluding, from the opposite side, as it were, the reader to exist as an anonymity, an absence, a blank space that the reading process would engender. The allegorical function, then, instead of leading to a different realm, points back to the dialogic act of writing/reading or representation/interpretation by implicating the specific reading and reader of this text and thus constituting this reader, in all his/her particularity, as the fulcrum that will articulate with the exterior, through the other interpretive and representational acts that this same reader must perform in daily life. In other words, the reading process of this fragmented text succeeds in establishing a continuity of the actual reader's interpretive act in the text with his/her interpretive and representational acts outside of it by its open demand for an actual (self-)representation/realization of this reader within the text.

The desire for friendship and solidarity in Isma's discourse along with what becomes the conflicting desire to be desired herself, makes the power dialectic between the two women central to the creation of this narrative. Her discourse inverses the important question Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak posed in her seminal essay of the same title: "Can the subaltern speak?" Îsma's entire discourse addressed to Hajila begs the question "Can the powerful speak (to/for/with the subaltern) ...?" even as it posits a very different dialectical pair of the powerful and subaltern. 21 Mortimer, alert to this complexity of Djebar's text, after her study of the intimate scene of the two women at the hammam ("Paroles et écriture" 19-20), returns to the early question that the text asks: "Laquelle des deux, ombre, devient sultane, laquelle, sultane des aubes, se dissipe en ombre d'avant midi?" (9) / "Which of the two is the shadow who will become the sultan's bride? Which one is to be the bride at dawn, only to dissolve into a shadow before noon?" (1). Mortimer then provides a provisional reply: "Je crois qu'elle souhaite nous dire que les deux portraits de femme ne forment qu'un seul." / "I believe she wishes to tell us that the two female portraits together make up a single one" (20). I would agree with Mortimer insofar as that it is *Isma* who would have us believe this.²² The evocation of the Arabic word *derra*, which is discussed by, among others, Mortimer ("Paroles et écritures" 19), and means both the wounded and the one who wounds (as in the second wife), is the type of play that Isma evokes to blur the material differences between the two women. As has been shown, despite these efforts, the clear distinction between the two women and their histories that is textually articulated and that I have discussed remains the bedrock to which we must cling, despite Isma's seductive (narrative) persuasiveness, if we are to learn the (Djebar's?) lesson on the problematic of representation that this text allows us to theorize.

My study of the narration prompts me to answer the question Mortimer evokes in a slightly different manner: I propose that the two portraits signal the impossibility of one woman to paint her portrait without imposing it upon/against that of another; this impossibility that the title evokes, as I have investigated, highlights the impracticable task of two dialectically opposed entities to coexist harmoniously, partaking equally in a narrative act. Forces of desire enabled by power that Mortimer notes, but also constrained and authorized by structures of convention and reception, are telling in this act. The various juxtapositions at the level of content (different types of images of each woman; events that the narrator would have us link in the accomplishment of her image) also become the most basic structure at the level of the narrative itself (chapters of Hajila and Isma juxtaposed; citations and narrative alternately presented; and italics and regular font in order to achieve the disjunction that the text performs), and at a more core level of grammatical structure that I have identified in my contentions with the translation. This type of necessary but unsustainable contact or relation becomes the aesthetic or method of the text, and marks the problematic registered in the difficulty of translation. I recall here just one example of the translation: that of "dame assise: nature morte" being rendered as "still life with seated woman," which, clearly, does not account for the constant blurring of already unequivocal positioning (or meaning) that the juxtapositions actualize. Explicating the persistent tautness that characterizes this text is impossible without resorting to metaphor: it is as though Djebar succeeds in sustaining, through the course of this narrative, the moment of tension that occurs when two magnets are brought within each other's fields but before each of their repelling similar poles ultimately rejects the presence of the other. The imminent disruption of its continuity felt in the arrangement of the content, the form of the actual text, as well as in the "impossible" grammar accentuates the fragility of all that enables the presence of the two women in the narrative.

There is an eagerness to hail Djebar as a feminist writer who effectively questions various masculinist discourses within and beyond nationalist ones through themes of sisterhood, women's autobiography, and collectivity. *Ombre sultane*, which has received far less critical attention than, say, the first text of the quartet, presents a difficult and perhaps uncomfortable reality that problematizes the plural collective. After her most brilliant work in narrative (*L'amour, la fantasia*), where, as Murdoch has shown, she "writes woman as object of desire into woman as desiring subject" (75), Dejbar comes back with a text where this desiring subject is thoroughly

scrutinized through a powerful experimentation in what exactly the rep-

resentation of women by women might entail.

Rita Faulkner has illustrated how Djebar's work questions Frantz Fanon's analysis of the propelling of women onto the public scene in the Algerian nationalist struggle and his belief that this would automatically lead to women's liberation from patriarchal forces. Drawing appropriately from Djebar's own method, Faulkner provides an excellent juxtaposition of Fanon and Djebar, to indicate how "[w]hereas in 1959 [...] the danger is perceived as the woman's being seen by the colonizer and Algerian men are virtually unaware of the veiled woman, [Djebar] [...] reveal[s] a different perception in 1979" (850). Her analysis shows how the "claiming of a space and a language in which to speak is a second revolution undermining male patriarchal hegemony" (852).²⁴

Ombre sultane relentlessly pursues this process of the claiming of space and language by women to question any simple answer that women's voices can provide: Isma's discourse is essentially violent and violating of Hajila's subjectivity. Katherine Gracki notes the violence that autobiographical writing entails for Djebar, "since it amounts to submitting oneself to the vivisector's scalpel" (837). The violence to which I refer here is more intrinsic to the fact of any narrative and hence representational act. The specificity of the potential violence in the representation of women by women is what I see as the axis of Ombre sultane. Gracki notes how Isma's life implicates Djebar's own story (in this text and in Isma's reappearance in Vaste est la prison). I further suggest the substantiation of an autobiographical interpretation through a structural configuration of this biography in a text where structure and content constantly call attention to their relation.

I believe that the failure of the translation has been the failure to replicate the dialectical relationship between Isma and Hajila, which characterizes the French text and is especially evident at the level of sentence structure. Such a judgment is obviously based in a desire for the translation to allow, to the greatest extent possible, a replication of specific readings of the "original" text—a desire that can perhaps itself be questioned. For the purposes of this paper, however, I preserve this idea of literary translation.

If "everything that becomes an image in the literary work [...] is a created thing and not a force that itself creates" (Bakhtin 256), Djebar's work in this complex narrative sets about erasing that clear distinction, because the created Isma (whatever her resemblance to or difference from the "real" author) becomes the creator of the text. In Bakhtin's terms, then, Isma becomes an impossible entity: a created and creating image. ²⁵ Yet to study Isma as a created rather than creating thing, that is, as a manipulated subject to read the author's intervention, requires an identification of such entry points as the *vous*, or appropriate instances of irony one might attribute to the author, if any autonomy is to be granted to the literary text at all.

All the analyses showing Djebar to be a feminist and interested in the "plural" or "collective" are undeniably true and well founded. In fact, these

readings clearly arise from a textual inscription of the connection of the authorial consciousness, that is, a conceptual linking of the speaking/writing/representing subject, to the desires—confirmed, possible, and probable—of a community with which there are affective as well as material bonds. Gracki notes, in following an analysis by Hafid Gafaiti, that in Djebar's autobiographical writing, she "weds" her destiny to that of Algeria (837). The relationships within the text of its "discrete components into an organic whole" occur through "relationships which create cohesion between the abstract components [...], and the ultimate unifying principle therefore has to be the ethic of the creative subjectivity, an ethic which the content reveals" (Lukács 84). In an attempt to transcend this ethic, in order for the author to write from the zero point that Kristeva described, then, and also because it cannot completely occur, "a new ethical self-correction is required in order to achieve the 'tact' which will create a proper balance" (Lukács 84). "Tact," from this point of view, to hide the obvious ethic of the authorial intention, becomes authoritarian narration by Isma. A second level of tact is then necessitated to combat the violence of authoritarian omniscient narration. My study of the narrative is revelatory of this "ethical self-correction" as I have evinced numerous attempts at "tact" (ostensible equilibrium in descriptions, reassurances of the realist narrator) which I have linked to a certain "will to truth."

For Lukács, the "interaction of these two ethical complexes, their duality as to form and their unity in being given form, is the content of irony, which is the normative mentality of the novel" (84). More prosaically, then, Djebar's normative mentality that one might term "engagement" against structures that are oppressive to women is inscribed in this text first, paradoxically, through authoritarian narration that is then attenuated through narrative tactics, some of which are recorded as irony. The normativity in Djebar's novel escapes becoming a direct and banal critique of domination because the narrative, in fact, does the opposite through its own recourse to authoritarian narration. It presents ethics, in Spivak's terms, as "the experience of the impossible" (Translator's preface xxv). However, despite the fact that *Ombre sultane* questions facile allusions to women's collectivity, its careful reading

"only sharpens the sense of the crucial and continuing need for collective political struggle. For a collective struggle supplemented by the impossibility of full ethical engagement—not in the rationalist sense of 'doing the right thing,' but in this more familiar sense of the impossibility of 'love' in the one-on-one way for each human being—the future is always around the corner, there is no victory, but only victories that are also warnings. (Spivak, Translator's preface xxy; emphasis added)

Djebar's text demonstrates the egalitarian representation of women by women to be necessary but simultaneously impossible, or at the very least, problematic. My suggestions of ironic narration in the analyses can be linked to the following idea of Lukács:

[W] hilst irony depicts reality as victorious, it reveals not only that reality is as nothing in face of its defeated opponent, not only that the victory of reality can never be a final one, that it will always, again and again, be challenged by new rebellions of the idea, but also that reality owes its advantage not so much to its own strength, which is too crude and directionless to maintain the advantage, as to the inner (although necessary) problematic of the soul weighed down by its ideals. (86; emphasis added)

It is in this sense that I suggested that when contradiction is registered in this text, it is far from a defeatist position, while, as the above two quotations suggest (see the emphases), any victories (either of reality or of ethically engaged intentions) are always forward-looking to more effective solidarity. Similarly, in discourses that seek connections between powerful and comparatively subaltern positions, despite the speaker's position of greater power, the ideal of solidarity, as long as it is not lost, will constantly make space for new rebellions that challenge the reality of domination. Therefore, it is also in this sense that one must urgently recognize, and make epistemological space for, instances of the "problematic of the soul," if its ideals are to be enabled.

Ironically, perhaps, in this text that is the least overtly concerned with colonialism per se, in this narrative about Algerian women, Djebar provides a subtle rendering of the struggle for selfhood, which is at the very core of our understanding of colonial/postcolonial experiences. The text simultaneously reevaluates discourses of otherness and the presumption that the other must be far-removed, situationally opposite, and oppositionally situated from the self. It provides a space for the consideration of the desiring "I" within narrative in a way, I think, not hitherto accomplished. Clearly, this text shows how "discourse [...] is in fact one of the places where sexuality [...] exercise[s] in a privileged way some of [its] most formidable powers" (Foucault 52) as well as that discourse is not just "that which manifests (or hides) desire—it is also the object of desire" (Foucault 52). Isma's inscription of her (sexual) self and Hajila through the narrative act plays out the struggle for/in discourse and representation. Her narrative invites—indeed demands, as I have suggested in configuring the reader as a fulcrum between the text and the outside world—the generalization of the study of the power dialectic accomplished through its reading, to every instance of narrative—but only through an attentive deliberation of itself.

Djebar's use of language transforms it into a site for and object of struggle. Inscribing otherness in the very instantiation of her novelistic language reveals itself to be the substructure of Djebar's writing (see the epigraph to this article): from the overall architecture of the work, its organization, down to the grammatical structure of sentences. Her engagement with language is as a "living, socio-ideological concrete thing," which, "as heteroglot opinion, [...] for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other" (Bakhtin 293). This remarkable novel is written at that borderline, by painstakingly inscribing, and

disconcertingly revealing, in and through language, the desire(s) underlying and manifest in all narrative, which must necessarily oscillate between a self and (an)other. The particular stakes of selfhood and otherness in every narrative instance shape the terms (readable in form) of the self-other dialogue in discourse. This study calls for a more careful attention to desire (specific desires) in its tendency to exert power in exchanges based on friendship and solidarity, whose discourse—even when directed by ideal intentions—employs channels that most often, in fact, prove to be initiated, sustained, or at least enabled by such desire and power.

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NOTES

- 1. In this paper, I have not engaged with the complexity of the terms *colonial* and *postcolonial*; my interest in them has been, rather, the radical opposition between colonizer and colonized, ex-colonizer and ex-colonized, or dominant and subaltern positions, all of which are necessary for the functioning of colonial or imperial discourses, and dominating discourses in general. For a more nuanced consideration of a postcolonial discourse that, while positing such radical opposition, subverts the incommensurable quality of these different spaces, see my forthcoming paper on Driss Chraïbi.
- 2. Clearly, my engagement is with the "early" Kristeva in this paper, and not her conceptions of otherness as exemplified in, for example, Lettre à Harlem Désir or Etrangers à nous-mêmes.
- 3. John Erickson notes Djebar's view of French being a "veil" to herself, and which, he suggests, like the veil of the narrator in L'amour, la fantasia, permits her to become a "subject-voyeuse instead of an object of the male voyeur" (46-47). In this text, then, the French language in which she represents Hajila allows her to execute the representations she undertakes from behind the veil

- (Hajila does not speak French). Rafika Merini sees the work of Djebar and Leïla Sebbar as "symbolically denounc[ing] the victimization of women by voyeurism and reductionism by subverting voyeurism and re-writing it, and/or co-opting it to further their own ends. [She defines] the above strategies as reverse voyeurism" (117). The reverse voyeurism studied is therefore directed back primarily against what she sees as the voyeurism of Maghrebian culture as the female characters "subvert traditional concepts of femininity" (see 6).
- 4. All translations are from Dorothy Blair. Modifications made by me and which eventually become significant to my study are indicated. In this case, I have chosen to render "sa voix s'élève" with the more literal "her voice rises up" as opposed to Blair's "her voice can be heard." This latter translation, I find, emphasizes the role of the listeners rather than the voice of Isma, which, as we shall see, takes on a force of its own in this narrative.
- 5. Blair's translation reads: "The scenario of my story features a strange duet [...]." This does not render the forcefulness and agency of the narrating "I," which is of central interest to this piece.
- 6. "[J] ust as the author divides himself [sic] up into the narrator of the story and the commentator on the events in the story, the reader is also stylized to a certain degree, being given attributes which he [sic] may either accept or reject" (Iser 114).
- 7. I will return to instances of "we" later in this piece. The term *intradiegetic* is from Gérard Genette.
- 8. I have employed the term *narrative* loosely to indicate what Genette terms *récit* and *discours*, and *narration* to point to the act of telling—to be sure, both implicate the text in its dynamic interaction with a reader (see Genette, "Introduction" 72).
- 9. Interestingly, Laurence Huughe notes a similar tactic of the narrator's interventions in the middle of the characters' thoughts in her reading of Djebar's *Enfants du nouveau monde*. She reads this position of authority as keeping "the narrator at a distance from her characters" (868).
- 10. If the reader more readily "assumes" the "I" of the narrator, the complicity might be different, but no less significant. The reader would then become a voyeur with Isma and participate in this game of veiling/unveiling. Here, I maintain the reader's position as "you" (especially given the realist narrator's direct appeals to the reader in the French tradition), and it is this position I exploit in my reading. It is true, though, that in those cases, the reader is routinely addressed by the formal *vous* rather than *tu*. Later in this paper, I will discuss an interesting moment when the text posits the reader as *vous*.
- 11. Foucault explains the will to truth in the context of specific historical junctures. It is "a will to know which [is] imposed on the knowing subject, and in some ways prior to all experience, a certain position, a certain gaze and a certain function [...]" (55). It is thus supported and institutionally sanctioned by "pedagogy [...] and the system of books, publishing, libraries [...]" (55). Here, the will to truth is embodied in the reading entity (Hajila and/or the reader) that requires a narrator who can be believed, and that is reassured through mechanisms that are conventional to the literary (and perhaps wider narrative) space.
- 12. Blair's translation reads: "Then, with your right hand, you wrench the cloth away [...] (emphasis added). The French version, by making the hand itself the subject of the sentences excludes the agency of the "you" in its entirety.

- 13. The last four translations are also modified for the same reason as explained in the previous note.
- 14. I do not mean to suggest that the so-called realist narrator does not manipulate narration. Rather, realist narration posits the possibility of some kind of neutral space from which an unbiased narration *can* occur, whether it indeed does or does not.
- 15. The positing of the husband himself as the vous here is disallowed by the text because there are examples of Isma's direct address to the husband using tu. For example: "Montre-moi un homme vraiment nu sur cette terre, alors je te quitterai pour cet homme!" (95) / "Show me one really naked man on this earth, and I will leave you for that man!" (86). Also: "Tu m'as eue nue" (96) "You have had me naked" (86) or "J'ai toujours fait l'amour avec toi toute nue, âme et corps!" (96) / "I always made love to you with my body and soul stripped naked!" (86). Here, Isma recounts the conversations she had had with the husband. The use of vous to indicate men of her society in general and which renders the reader complicitous with this oppressive position occurs in the same context: "J'avais ricané bien plus tard: 'Les hommes sont-ils jamais nus? Hélas! peurs de la tribu, angoisses que les mères frustrées vous transmettent, obsessions d'un ailleurs informulé, tout vous est lien, bandelettes et carcan!..." (95) / "Much later I was to jeer at him: 'Are men even really naked? You are never free of fetters, you are bound fast by fears of the tribe, swathed in all the anxieties handed down to you by frustrated mothers, shackled by all your obsessions with some ill-defined elsewhere! . . . " (86). Also: "J'avais ironisé: 'Plus vous vous emmaillotez, et plus vous prétendez nous étouffer!" (96) / "And I added ironically: 'The more you men swaddle yourselves, the more you think we women will be stifled!" (86-87). The nous and vous, nicely rendered here by Blair, clarify the use of *vous* as a corollary of the general collective female *nous*. This renders even more significant the startling vous in the quotation in question, because here Isma is not evoking it as the corollary of a general idea of women, but rather in the context of a very individualized, sensuous, and desirable portrait of herself.
- 16. Here there can be no doubt as to the value accorded, through the narrative, to heterosexual attraction; the entire text circles around the issue of the competition of the two women (mostly unbeknownst to Hajila, the second wife) for the privileged position vis-à-vis the husband.
- 17. Blair's translation reads: "still life with seated woman" (9). Once again, the association of the two images through the term *with* vitiates the force of simple juxtaposition. Also, the reversal of the order disables the idea of the portrait of the woman actually *being* the still life, as suggested by the colon.
- 18. All translations of Mortimer's article are mine.
- 19. Evidently, in Mortimer's quotation, "ombre de la sultane" would translate to "shadow of the sultana."
- 20. While the future "will" in this sentence from Murdoch points to the development of Djebar's narrative in L'amour, la fantasia, and which he subsequently examines, Ombre sultane, published after L'amour, la fantasia, actually "speaks" from that impossible point that Murdoch so perceptively recognizes. This "tenuous coherence" is inscribed in the impossible grammar I have pointed to, in large part by working between Djebar's French text and Blair's translation of the same.

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- 21. For an important, recent reconsideration of Spivak's essay, see Shetty and Bellamy. The narrative positions of Isma and Hajila suggest that this novel (in a different context) acquiesces with Spivak's position that "no scene of speaking' can arise for the subaltern woman; no discursive space can emerge from which she could formulate an 'utterance'" (Shetty and Bellamy 25). While my evoking Spivak's question here does not do justice to her entire piece, and, as Shetty and Bellamy show, if the continued relevance of Spivak's piece to today's work in postcolonial studies should consider the importance it places on a return to the archive, Djebar's work on the subaltern woman is informed by a brilliant recourse to the archive, much less so in this text, of course, than in *L'amour, la fantasia*. The sense in which Shetty and Bellamy, after Spivak, revive the archive involves not just the actual historical documents, but rather these documents as a law or source of power that allows or disallows other statements that shape reality.
- 22. "Djebar" is the subject of the previous sentence in Mortimer's paragraph: "Djebar propose un dénouement qui invite le lecteur à retourner à la question posée dans les premières pages du récit [...]" 'Djebar proposes a conclusion that invites the reader to return to the question posed in the initial pages of the story [...].'
- 23. Katherine Gracki does problematize the sorority theme in this text. In her analysis, where she indicates a "feminist awakening" in Isma, she correctly writes: "D "espite this positive ending [when Isma gives Hajila the key to the apartment in a symbolic gesture of solidarity and sorority] Isma's initial complicity with the seraglio structure must be explored [...]" (839). She goes on to question Isma's participation in Hajila's situation and evokes the term derra, which means the new bride or rival of the first wife and also wound. Again, while agreeing with these points, I think that they inadequately account for the complexity of the relationship without the accompanying oppositional and ambiguous structuring process the text accomplishes.
- 24. At this point, Faulkner cites from Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement. This is the 1979 text. The 1959 text refers to Fanon's Algeria Unveiled.
- 25. I should provide the quotation from Bakhtin at greater length, for his position is not one that puts forward a static image that the author creates in the text: It goes without saying that the listener or reader may create for himself an image of the author [...] this enables him to make use of autobiographical and biographical material, to study the appropriate era in which the author lived and worked as well as other material about him. But in so doing he (the listener or reader) is merely creating an artistic and historical image of the author that may be, to a greater or lesser extent, truthful and profound [...]. (257)
- 26. J. M. Bernstein argues that Lukács's theory of the tact of the novelist in giving form to experience posits *all* ordering as being accomplished through ironic means. For him, this over-generalization in Lukács can be traced to the latter's uncritical conflation of irony and form in his borrowing from Friedrich Schlegel (see Bernstein, esp. 189-93).

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