

2015

Re-presenting Muslim women: The difficulties of (un)veiling the Muslim woman in Muslim women's autobiographies

Molli Shomer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.emich.edu/honors>

Recommended Citation

Shomer, Molli, "Re-presenting Muslim women: The difficulties of (un)veiling the Muslim woman in Muslim women's autobiographies" (2015). *Senior Honors Theses & Projects*. 434.
<https://commons.emich.edu/honors/434>

This Open Access Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Theses & Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.

Re-presenting Muslim women: The difficulties of (un)veiling the Muslim woman in Muslim women's autobiographies

Abstract

Women, traditionally cloistered in private places, are invisible to the outside world. Yet, writing, which can take form even from within the private sphere, can be a means of resisting silence, rendering one's story visible and demanding entrance into public view. From private places, women have written to free themselves of the constraints of womanhood, and to make their messages heard amongst deafening patriarchal discourse. While writing can be a means of resistance, a mode of speaking back against one's oppressor and impacting change, it can inadvertently reproduce the oppression it seeks to speak back against. Autobiographical writing invites the reader into the author's world of oppression. In granting readers access to experience the author's oppression, to step into it and fight against it alongside the author, autobiographical resistance writing opens up a space which is particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Oppression described in the narrative is easily co-opted by the readership' and used as a weapon to reinscribe varied forms of oppression on the author.

In post 9~11 America, as readers are bombarded with images of veiled, silenced, oppressed Muslim women by the media, Muslim women's narratives have garnered particular interest amongst Western readers, promising them a peak behind the veil, a glance into the life of the Other. Using Helen Cixous' model of feminine writing, I contend that Assia Djebar's *The Tongues Blood Does Not Run Dry* reaches toward an effective iteration of Muslim women's autobiographical resistance writing whereas Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* reproduces Orientalist sentiments.

Degree Type

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department

English Language and Literature

First Advisor

Elisabeth Daumer

Keywords

Muslim women, Orientalism, Post-colonial, Transnational, Feminism, Djebar

RE-PRESENTING MUSLIM WOMEN: THE DIFFICULTIES OF (UN)VEILING THE
MUSLIMWOMAN IN MUSLIM WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

By

Molli Shomer

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Language, Literature and Writing and Women's and Gender Studies

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date April, 16 2015

Elisabeth Danner Elisabeth Danner
Supervising Instructor (Print Name and have signed)

Elisabeth Danner Elisabeth Danner
Honors Advisor (Print Name and have signed)

JACQUELINE GOODMAN Jacqueline Goodman
Department Head (Print Name and have signed)

Rebecca Sipe Rebecca Sipe
Honors Director (Print Name and have signed)

**Re-Presenting Muslim Women: The Difficulties of (Un)veiling the Muslimwoman in
Muslim Women's Autobiographies**

Molli Shomer

Honors Thesis

April 2015

Table of Contents:

Introduction: The Dilemmas of the Female Author	3
The Difficulties of Muslim Women's Writing	4
Muslim Women's Autobiographies	8
Assia Djebar's <i>The Tongue's Blood Does not Run Dry</i>: Re-presenting Muslim Women in "Feminine Writing"	13
Fatima Mernissi's <i>Dreams of Trespass Tales of a Harem Girlhood</i>: Asserting Orientalist Sentiments	28
Conclusion: Untidied Endings	37

I want to speak in my voice!

I want to speak in my real voice!

-Muriel Rukeyser

Thank you, Dr. Däumer, for helping me to find my voice and encouraging me to use it.

Introduction: The Dilemma of the Female Author

The norms and values that regulated women's physical concealment applied equally to their literary expression.

- Farzaneh Milani, "The Perils of Writing," 46

Women, traditionally cloistered in private places, are made invisible to the outside world. Yet, writing, which can take form even from within the private sphere, can be a means of resisting silence, rendering one's story visible and demanding entrance into public view. From private places, women have written to free themselves of the constraints of womanhood, and to make their messages heard amongst deafening patriarchal discourse. While writing can be a means of resistance, a mode of speaking back against one's oppressor and impacting change, it can inadvertently reproduce the oppression it seeks to speak back against. Autobiographical writing invites the reader into the author's world of oppression. In granting readers access to experience the author's oppression, to step into it and fight against it alongside the author, autobiographical resistance writing opens up a space which is particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Oppression described in the narrative is easily co-opted by the readership and used as a weapon to reinscribe varied forms of oppression on the author.

In post 9-11 America, as readers are bombarded with images of veiled, silenced, oppressed Muslim women by the media, Muslim women's narratives have garnered particular interest amongst Western readers, promising them a peek behind the veil, a glance into the life of the Other. Using Helen Cixous' model of feminine writing, I contend that Assia Djébar's *The Tongues Blood Does Not Run Dry* reaches toward an effective iteration of Muslim women's autobiographical resistance writing whereas Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* reproduces Orientalist sentiments.

The Difficulty of Representing Muslim Women in Writing

While the impacts of resistance writing are far reaching, Muslim women write from a particularly vulnerable place—the East. In his revolutionary book, *Orientalism*, Said explicated the plight of the “East”—a compounded result of years of justification for colonization and the West’s need to maintain the veil of superiority. According to Said the West’s polemic depictions of the Oriental Other “create[s] a battlefield that separates” the East from the West and it is through this polarized separation that the “Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western” (46-47). Not only does the West rely on the barbarity of the East to justify its militant presence in the East, it also needs the East to be barbaric in order to define itself relationally, as the negative opposite.

In 2014, as the West’s military presence in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria increases daily, the justifications for war are verbalized in everyday Western discourse, “*they* need saving,” “*they* are barbaric—*they* behead us!,” “*they* are so backward, *their* women are oppressed.” For each statement made to justify the West’s violent presence in the East the West constructs itself relationally, in opposition. If *they* need saving, *we* are saved. If *they* are barbaric *we* are civilized. If *they* are backward, *we* are progressive. If *their* women are oppressed, *ours* are free. Consequently, texts which enter the public sphere echo these sentiments, “what a dominant culture permits” to be made visible is always “in the interest of maintaining its own equilibrium” (Chow, 35). Western culture depends on representations of the East as Other to maintain its own stability.

As a result of the West’s reliance on binarized models of West and East, the space that Muslim women occupy in the Western imaginary is made especially problematic. Women are already in a susceptible position; conceptions of gender construct man as the standard or ideal for

humanity, thereby rendering woman as deviant or defective. The dominant conceptualization of gender in society positions women as “the Other” or “the Second Sex,” in relation to men (Beauvoir). Additionally, as French-Algerian feminist, Hélène Cixous explains, woman is “given images that don’t belong to her, and she forces herself... to resemble them,” she becomes not what she is, but what she is expected to be, an essentialized, reduced model of “woman” (47). Muslim women are made doubly vulnerable—twice Othered, once as women and once as Muslim. Not only are Muslim women defective men, made to become what men “need,” they are inadequate Westerners, expected to fashion themselves according to Western demands. Even more, all Muslim women are conflated into a singular Muslimwoman one who becomes representative of Eastern savagery in need of saving by the West. Feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty describes the production of the “average third-world woman” who “leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being third-world (read: tradition bound, victimized)...this is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, having control over their own bodies and sexualities (65). Once reduced to an essentialized model of Muslimwoman, individual Muslim women’s voices are silenced, their histories erased, their modes of resistance ignored. They are molded to fit the West’s understanding of the veiled-haremed-silenced-oppressed-victimized Other. Their veiled bodies become the location of violent political discourse; their veils signify the backwardness on which the West depends.

Thus, authors writing about Muslim women are caught in a double bind: if they write of oppressed Muslim women they feed the Western imaginary of the Muslimwoman and if they write of resistant Muslim women, their writing is rendered non-existent. Any individual deviation from the Muslimwoman mold is made invisible by Western editors who will not publish books that fail

to depict the Muslimwoman, the mainstreamed peer review process privileges depictions of the Muslimwoman and Western readers purchase books which stabilize the Muslimwoman image, texts which “document the villainous acts of [Muslim] men and the victimization of [Muslim] women” (Lazreg, 89). These “authentic” stories of the Muslimwoman act as a “museum of horrors,” feeding the Western imaginary and disappearing “non-authentic” Muslim women. As a result individual histories of Muslim women? become erased: “there is no distinction of the specific practices within the family which constitutes them,” thus Muslim women remain stagnant beings, existing only in their role as Muslimwoman, “they exist as it were, outside history” (Mohanty, 70).

Muslim women writers as well as Western writers may, in good faith, attempt to push back against the essentialized, ahistorical Muslimwoman model to shed light on “different histories and different concerns of various women, acknowledg[ing] them rather than smooth[ing] them over” (Arvin, Tuck and Morrill, 21). They may attempt to highlight Muslim women’s histories, which tell stories that veer from the West’s traditional Muslimwoman. For instance, the West imagines the veil to be a static symbol of oppression, but individual Muslim women tell a wildly different history of the veil. Muslim women from Turkey have been barred from wearing the veil in an attempt to Westernize the Turkish population and many Turkish Muslim women have fought to wear the veil as a sign of resisting the rhetoric of cultural imperialism. In a similar fashion, some Egyptian university students cling to the veil as a sign of resisting female objectification and commodification—highlighting the importance of their intellect over their physique. In a similar fashion, Afghani women have been obligatorily veiled, but have found modes of agency-driven resistance from behind the veil, which afforded them mobility, “anonymity and disguise” within an Otherwise male dominated space (Whitlock, 50). The intended goal of oppression resulting

from obligatory veiling was reimagined by some Afghan women who used the veil to transport “messages, weapons, and banned publications ...beneath its folds during the Taliban regime” (Whitlock, 50). Accounting for the different histories destabilizes symbols of the Muslimwoman’s oppression and opens a space for individual Muslim women to be heard.

But such good faith attempts at uncovering deviations from the Muslimwoman model inevitably end up in a re-silencing of Muslim women. Through the act of opening up a space for Muslim women to speak, the privileged writer rescues the Muslim women, canonizes their stories as worthy of being heard and speaks for them “by ‘resurrecting’ the victimized voice/self of the native with our reading,” but in doing so “we step far too quickly into the Otherwise silent and invisible place of the native and turn ourselves into living agents/witnesses for her” (Chow, 38). Not only are non-traditional Muslim women’s histories obscured from popular discourses because they are not “authentic” enough for representation, when destabilizing truths are made visible, such visibility is accomplished at the hands of Westerners.

An additional problem resulting from writing about Muslim women is that it appears that once the Muslimwoman has spoken for the collective, seemingly representing the whole, no other accounts should be paid notice, for the most “authentic” account has already been heard. But, while the Muslimwoman’s issues—veiling, haremism, silencing, oppressing—have entered the dominant discourse it is always through the filter of the colonizer’s framework, the texts the West has allowed publishing, the stories that bolster the Muslimwoman image. These mainstreamed issues thus take center stage and other, possibly more pertinent issues that do not fit in the Western imaginary are ignored. Rey Chow, author of *Writing Diaspora*, critiques the illusion that Muslim women’s voices have been accounted for, even if they have only been heard *through* the colonizer: “the colonist’s text itself already contains a native voice—ambivalently... but what kind of an

argument is it to say that the subaltern” or Muslimwoman’s “‘voice’ can be found in the ambivalence of the imperialist’s speech” (35). For Chow, it is not enough that the Muslimwoman speaks through the colonizer; instead, Muslim women need a space to speak for themselves. An alternative method of representing Muslim women must be achieved in order to open up a space for individual Muslim women’s stories to be heard.

Muslim Women’s Autobiographies

Autobiographies written by Muslim women, who speak on their own behalves rather than through another and which account for individual histories that may defy the normative depictions of the Muslimwoman, could function as an alternative to Western depictions of Muslimwomanhood. Autobiographies face a slew of problematic concerns, however; their message can be easily co-opted as propaganda, they make visible, images of Muslim women which can be uncritically consumed, and they may leave the reader feeling like a savior of brown women. Yet, while autobiographies confront complications of their own, some Muslim women’s autobiographies have successfully functioned as resistance writing, challenging both Eastern and Western oppressors.

The autobiographical narratives which enter the Western market are granted entry only if they propagate the Western justifications for war. The Western public’s reliance on the Muslim Other, deserving of conquering must be supported by the text, as Whitlock explains: “history and politics elicit and shape the marketing of subaltern narratives,” only the “historically accurate” stories are available for consumption (17). Muslim women who write of their oppression at the hands of “brown men” justify the war affirming that “brown women [are] saved by white men from brown men” (Spivak, 120). Testimonial accounts of oppression are “soft weapons,” whose

messages can be “co-opted as propaganda” (Whitlock, 17). In times of war, in post 9-11 America, with ISIS threatening the lives of Westerners in the Middle East (and according to media accounts, on Western soil), “testimony is carefully managed, the soft edges of propaganda swerve toward hard lines of censorship” (Whitlock, 17). And so, Muslim women writers are charged both with the responsibility to manage the image that is constructed of them by the West and to fight the Islamist regimes that silence women’s voices.¹

Autobiographies written by Muslim women are consumed by the Western public as an “authentic” depiction of living as a Muslim woman. The message gleaned from the autobiographical narrative is heralded as the “real Muslim experience” because it is written by a “real Muslim woman.” As Gillian Whitlock explains, “life narrative is one of the most seductive forms for the projection and naturalization of the exotic and an offering of authentic Others” (Whitlock, 54). The West’s creation of an “average third-world woman”—the Muslimwoman—is thus enforced by Muslim women’s autobiographies, “individuals from the Middle East appear on the feminist stage as representatives of the millions of women in their own societies” (Lazreg, 89). Shirin Neshat, female Iranian artist, describes this responsibility, “an artist such as myself finds herself also in the position of being the voice, the speaker of my people.” Not only do individual authors stand in as representatives for Muslim women, they “must speak on the behalf of many” (Whitlock, 50). As a result of the silencing of Muslim women—both by Western oppressors and Islamic fundamentalism—the autobiographical narratives which do appear before a Western audience are charged with the task of speaking for many. Therefore, the Muslim woman testifying

¹ Shirin Neshat explicates the balance required of all Iranian artists during her TED talk in which she asserts that “art is our weapon” against the Western constructions of the Muslimwoman as Other and the Islamist silencing of Muslim women’s voices.

on behalf of Muslim women is expected to honestly inform the public of Muslim women's struggles without feeding the Western imaginary.

Yet, even if the writing is not overtly complicit in the Western construction of the Muslim Other, the Muslim writer's narrative can be forced to fit into the Western mold of Muslimwoman. Readers faced with cognitive dissonance when they read accounts of "unauthentic" Muslim women, do not seek to uncover individual accounts of a Muslim woman's powerlessness, instead they seek to "find a variety of cases of 'powerless' groups of [Muslim] women to prove the general point that [Muslim] women as a group are 'powerless'" (Mohanty, 66). Instead of seeing the autobiographical account of one Muslim woman's powerlessness (or perhaps, powerfulness), her story is categorized as one which represents Muslim women's oppression merely by virtue of the fact that it is written by a Muslim woman.

Muslim women's autobiographies provide a space for Western consumers to both identify with the Other and pronounce herself different, feeding Said's "battlefront of separates" (46). The reader identifies with the author as she inhabits the first person narrative typical of autobiographical writing, she becomes the woman writing, imagines herself as having experienced her pain, knowing her oppression and capable of speaking in her stead. She is the Muslimwoman. Marnia Lazreg, Algerian feminist scholar states that reading Muslim women's writing about Muslim women is "an imaginative way of reducing the differential divide" between the Western reader and the autobiographical Muslim writer, "but it does not fill it"; again, the Western reader steps into the divide, embodies the Other, ultimately becomes her. Once pulled into the rhythm of the reading, embodying the role of the oppressed Muslim woman, the reader can become complicit in the oppression. She is not aroused to resist the oppressor, the writing does not serve as a call to action, rather she experiences the oppression alongside the oppressed. She passively consumes the

oppression, which is made palatable for Western consumption, translated into the language of the West. But at the same time as the reader becomes the oppressed Muslim woman she also constructs her own image in opposition; as Chow explains, “our own identity is measured in terms of the degrees to which we resemble her/she resembles us” (33). Much like the image of the Muslim woman which bolsters the Western invasion of Eastern spaces, the autobiographical narrative “sustains the discursive self-representation of Western women as secular, liberated, and individual agents” (Whitlock, 49). At the same time, the autobiographical Muslim writer creates a space for the reader to become the Muslim woman and become complicit in her oppression and define herself relationally, in opposition to the Muslim woman.

The tension which results from both becoming and objecting to becoming the Muslim woman opens a space for Western consumers to imagine that they have experienced Muslim womanhood, while recognizing that they are in fact privileged Westerners. It is from this position that they can save the Muslim woman, rescue her from her plight. Book clubs, White Feminist groups, “Dining for Women” groups and do-gooder-women-saviors everywhere devour the Muslim woman’s memoir for it is “highly valued... for the status it confers on the consumer as enlightened, sympathetic, and politically correct individual,” one who has the power to save (Whitlock, 15). But, the Muslim woman is often approached as a “‘pet project’ in the same way certain political issues become trendy at certain times” (Alvin, Tuck, Morrill, 19). The reader/savior “want[s] to ‘pioneer,’ to ‘penetrate’ the frontier of sexism... they want to spread their brand of feminism based on their own history to Other cultures where there are different histories” (Hunter, 81). As a result, Muslim women’s histories are erased by the “white savior’s” reading of

autobiographical texts and ultimately, the author's *narration*² risks being lost in the reader's experience with the story.

Additionally, autobiographies written by Muslim women are in a perilous position in that they suffer from untranslatability as they enter the Western world. Muslim women's autobiographies highlight the "essential untranslatability from the subaltern discourse to imperialist discourse" (Chow, 35). For the Western imaginary not only relies on the symbols of Islam as static signifiers of oppression to support the "war on terror," even when Muslim writing is read critically, and the shifting meaning of the symbols are accounted for; the mere act of "border crossing" results in unavoidable decontextualization and recontextualization of the symbols in the text. Uma Narayan, Indian feminist scholar considers the effects of "border crossing" on third-world women's narration. She explains that unfamiliar cultural practices in third-world countries fall victim to "metonymic blurring," and for Muslim women, this means a hijab becomes a veil, a veil an act of oppressive concealment, an act of oppressive concealment enforced by Islam, Islam then becomes a religion which oppresses and conceals women, and suddenly all veiled Muslim women are silenced. Mohanty described metonymic blurring in terms of Islam, "by taking a certain form of Islam as *the* Islam, [we] attribute a singularity to it... women (meaning all women), regardless of their differing positions within societies, come to be affected or not affected by Islam" (71). Not only does metonymic blurring depends on and reproduce the Muslimwoman model, it provides a means for Western consumers to define themselves.

Even when Western readers encounter images of Muslim women that appear "unauthentic," i.e., images that do not support the metonymic blurring as, for instance, Muslim

² Assia Djebar, female Algerian resistance writer explains, "narration must not tell the story but interrupt it: which is to say, suspend it, surprise it at all costs" (Zimra, 108).

women who find agency in the veil, they tend to demand a “correct,” more “authentic” version. Western readers shape the autobiographical accounts of a Muslim woman to meet the projection of the metonymic blurring. They “exchange the defiled image for something more noble,” more Muslim (Chow, 30). Thus, it appears that Muslim women’s autobiographical narratives cannot escape the image of the Muslimwoman which defines them as “archetypal victims” and “freezes them into ‘objects-who-defend-themselves’” (Mohanty, 67). The goal of using writing as a platform for resistance must be reimagined by Muslim women, a hybrid discourse must be created, a space where Muslim women can step outside of the Western imaginary without falling back simply on silence.³

Assia Djebar’s *The Tongue’s Blood Does Not Run Dry*: Re-presenting Muslim Women In “Feminine Writing”

“In Maghrebian society, women do not write.
To write is to expose oneself”
–Assia Djebar, 2005

Assia Djebar’s *The Tongues Blood Does Not Run Dry* is a collection of short stories which chronicle women’s experiences during the Algerian revolution of the 1990s. In the collection, Djebar uses elements of fiction and non-fiction, autobiographical as well as biographical accounts to recount women’s roles in the conflict. “Woman in Pieces,” the last story in the book’s first

³ Chow, like Gayatri Spivak assumes that the only way for the subaltern’s message to be heard is through “the native’s silence,” because the effects of border crossing misconstrue the subaltern’s message, do not provide a language outside the oppressors’ in which to speak and ultimately impedes the subaltern’s message. Spivak gives an account of a young Hindu woman who needed a means of expressing her message of pain and struggle. To ensure that her “silent gesture” not be misinterpreted as “a case of illicit pregnancy,” she committed suicide during her menstrual cycle. For Chow and Spivak the only way for the subaltern to speak, here, was through projecting a silent space. But surely, Muslim women autobiographies have the potential to open up the silent space without complete descent into silence.

section "Algeria: Between Desire and Death" illuminates many of the literary strategies Djébar employs throughout her text to circumvent uncritical consumption of the women's resistance narratives by Western readers. As a Muslim woman writing about Muslim women's oppression, Djébar inhabits a particularly delicate space, one where she wishes to unveil women's stories of resistance without re-veiling the women she represents. Reading Djébar through H  l  ne Cixous's model of "feminine writing," I contend that she is able to disturb the Western reader's consumption of the Muslim women in her text. Using various depictions of Muslim women, frame narrative techniques, and the presentation of irreconcilable tensions in the story, Dj  bar effectively refuses complicity in the Western imaginary's construction of the Muslimwoman and is thus successful in writing Muslim women's stories without reinscribing their oppression.

"Woman in Pieces" takes place in 1994 Algeria and tells the story of a young Algerian teacher of French, Atyka, who faces a number of such irreconcilable tensions: the demands of Islamic fundamentalists seeking to Islamicize Algeria; her attraction toward Westernization resulting from Algeria's history of French colonization and her simultaneous commitment to restoring "authentic" Algeria, the home of her parents. She instructs her high school students in French using the famous Arabian Nights narrative of Scheherazade. In Arabic folk tradition, Scheherazade is a feminine heroine who saves her own life and the lives of many other women by way of manipulating narration. King Schahriar, the ruler of the kingdom sets out on a murderous rampage after finding his wife in bed with a servant. First, he decapitates his wife and her lover and realizing that his anger is not abated, he thirsts for blood to give him comfort. Each night the King marries a maiden, consummates the marriage and the next morning, he beheads her. The pattern continues until there are two maidens remaining in his kingdom, the vizier's two daughters: Scheherazade and Duniyazad. Scheherazade offers to marry the king in her sister's stead and enters his chambers,

knowingly chancing death. As night falls, Scheherazade's plot unfolds. She begins telling the king a captivating tale, but just as the story reaches its climax, Scheherazade pauses and promises the king she will continue the next night. For one-thousand nights she continues this method of storytelling, until the thousand and first night when she brings their three sons before him and he realizes he must spare her life. Atyka narrates Scheherazade's story of "The Three Apples" and like the mythological female heroine, she retells the tale to her students in sections, ending each class at a climactic point in the tale. On the final day of storytelling, as Scheherazade's story comes to a close, Islamic fundamentalists charge into Atyka's classroom and decapitate her unveiled head. Even after her head is excised from her neck, the mutilated skull continues to speak, to a lone male student, Omar, completing the tale of Scheherazade as blood pools around her wound.

The diverse depictions of Muslim womanhood in "Woman in Pieces" impede the reader's attempt to co-opt their oppression as proof of monolithic Muslimwomanhood in need of saving as justification for war on the East. Because the Muslimwoman model is dismantled, she cannot be used to justify colonization, and it cannot be said, that *all* Muslim women are in need of saving from Muslim culture, for singular Muslimwomanhood does not exist in Djébar's text. Similarly, the collage of Muslim women's experiences prevent Djébar's readers from using her characters as singular models of "authentic" Muslimwomen, rejecting the Western belief that once a Muslimwoman has spoken, all Muslim women's voices are accounted for. Additionally, readers are thrust between fictional and non-fictional elements of the text and by virtue of the pairing of oppositional genres are led to question the text as an "authentic" account of Muslimwomanhood, unsure which accounts are real and which are imagined.

In her essay, "Castration or Decapitation," Hélène Cixous explains that effective feminine writing—one which maintains the power to change—resists closure, resulting in a gaping fissure,

a silence, which the reader must actively fill; for as the reader consumes the story, they are “thrust... into the void” (Cixous, 53). Djébar’s disjointed images of Muslim women force the reader to confront the lack of closure, the “unpredictability” of the images and inhabit the cavernous space of “the void,” they must endure an uncomfortable read as they are unable to simply rely on the cultural imaginary’s Muslimwoman (Cixous, 53). As a result, “Woman in Pieces” refuses to contribute to the reinscription of Muslim women’s oppression, a typical consequence of Muslim women writers’ autobiographical stories.

In Djébar’s story, there are several integral female characters: Atyka the French teacher, Scheherazade the mythological female heroine, the young wife in “The Three Apples” and the veiled female student in Atyka’s classroom. Each of these varying representations of Muslim women function to destabilize the Muslimwoman model and resist contributing to the Western imaginary’s conflated version of monolithic Muslimwomanhood, what fellow Algerian feminist, Marnia Lazreg asserts as “the dilemma of Third World women writing about Third World women” (Lazreg, 89).

Atyka’s character maintains agency throughout the narrative and resists silencing. She teaches French, “a language she has *chosen*” refusing her father’s condemnation and ignoring his “surprise” that she rejected Arabic, which she was “so good in” (my emphasis, Djébar, 99). Similarly, she rejects the Islamist decree that women must veil in public, thus resisting subservience to male ideals of sequestered femininity. She refuses to hide “her long hair—her long, red, flamboyant hair,” a decision which marks her as subversive (Djébar, 123). Djébar’s depiction of Atyka challenges what H  l  ne Cixous calls the “classic opposition, dualist, hierarchical” where “man/woman automatically means great/small, superior/inferior” (Cixous, 44). Inhabiting the public sphere instead of remaining in the domestic sphere—characteristically

belonging to Algerian women—⁴, Atyka's refusal to veil becomes even more defiant. As an unveiled woman traversing male dominated spaces, she marks herself as a subversive, refusing to engage in the "classic opposition" which names her "inferior." Additionally, her unorthodox teaching methods—teaching what her murderers call "obscene stories"—point to the ways that she is able to resist silencing within Algeria's stifling male dominated discourse. Mildred Mortimer explains that Atyka's "pedagogical tool" of storytelling assures that her "political struggle will find its place in the public forum," thus her storytelling proves a powerful tool against silencing (Mortimer, 64). The moment Atyka's efforts ignores "the bounds of censorship, the gaze, the masculine command," her teaching becomes a political mechanism of change, informing the future generation of resisters. Atyka's character stands in to dismantle the Western notion that all Muslim women are veiled, unknowable, silenced and void of agency (Cixous, 53).

Djebar sets up the young wife in Scheherazade's fiction "The Three Apples" as a foil to Atyka; she remains unnamed and embodies the role of the veiled-silenced-haremed-oppressed-Other. As Mortimer explains, "The Three Apples" functions as a critique of the "political and religious intolerance and the vestiges of patriarchy" in contemporary Algeria (Mortimer, 65). The young wife's lack of agency and eternal silencing feed the Muslimwoman model and shed light on the oppressiveness of Islamic culture. She is relentlessly burdened by motherhood and silently dreams of releasing herself from the burdens of her "milking, demanding" children (Djebar, 101). Like the West's Muslimwoman model, she is oppressed by motherhood. She "hopes that [she] is not pregnant again," lest her lack of control over her sexuality and her body worsen (Djebar, 105-106). While she does maintain the ability to choose *when* she has sex with her husband, "'not now!' she

⁴ Fatima Mernissi explains that Algerian Muslim women were expected to remain in private places and men dominated public places or as Jane Hiddleston describes, "it is men... who make the decisions and engage in public life, while women occupy the domestic sphere" (93).

protested,” sex itself is framed as an act of “surrender,” succumbing to her husband’s desire (Djebar, 102-103). Like the “authentic” Muslimwoman, her body is eroticized, functioning only to feed men’s desires. While she is charged with the power to send her husband to a faraway land to procure her an apple, “he travels” because he expects sexual repayment from his wife, “his desire nearly drove him to thief” (Djebar, 106). Djebar seals this Muslim woman as an essentialized Muslimwoman who lacks agency and voice. The moment her husband beheads her, “a brutal murder occurs because he does not allow his wife to speak... does not give her the opportunity to explain that the words that condemn her as an unfaithful wife are lies” (Mortimer, 65). He decapitates her and “mutilates her body in a blind rage,” assuming that the black man’s account of being handed the apple by his “attentive lover,” the young wife, was true. Read in conjunction with Atyka’s character, the young wife is constructed by Djebar as a manifestation of the “authentic” silenced, agencyless Muslimwoman, an alternative to the depiction of Atyka, the agentic, hence “unauthentic” Muslimwoman. Read together, with one’s story weaving in and out of the other’s, the reader stands between two polarized accounts of Muslim womanhood.

If these two women were the only two in Djebar’s narrative, the reader might disregard Atyka as anomalous and the nameless young wife as “authentic,” but Djebar presents the reader with two additional characters. Scheherazade, another fundamental character in the text, is able to thwart King Schahiar’s murderous plot, ultimately not only saving her own life, but also her sister’s and all of the kingdom’s maiden’s lives through self-reliance and personal innovation. Her imaginative stories function as weapons against her destruction and although she must marry the King and yield to his sexual dominion in order to be successful, she finds a space of resistance from within the framework of male domination. On the thousandth and first night, “Scheherazade rose and kissed the ground at the sovereign’s feet and told him, ‘I set forth my wish that you be generous

and let me live”); her mask of subservience allows her to live, she smiles to herself defiantly, from beneath the veil of subservience (Djebar, 124). Postcolonial scholar Anna Cavness points out, “feminist critics are cautious [of] unequivocally naming [Scheherazade] a symbol of feminism,” because her power is gleaned under the threat of beheading; had she not been subject to the King’s murderous plot, she would not have had the opportunity for resistance (1). Therefore, her defiance was produced by and relied on patriarchal discourse, not simply imagined in opposition to that discourse. Her character, therefore, stands in less as a “solution” to Muslim women’s oppression—which would constitute a tidy ending—but more as a “problem.” Even the “feminist heroine”⁵ of Muslim women cannot produce her own resistance. This problematic conclusion further complicates the reader’s experience with the text and unsettles notions of “knowing” the Muslimwomen’s experience.

Similarly, one of Atyka’s female student, a “teenage girl in a white chador with scalloped edges.” is depicted as an “unauthentic” Muslimwoman by Western standards. She is a contemporary version of Scheherazade, one who works within the framework of patriarchy, wearing a veil, but demanding women’s equality. She functions as a medium between Atyka’s complete refusal of Islamic rule and the young wife’s silenced role of oppressed Muslim Other (Djebar, 116). She exclaims that “Islam promotes equality,” and instead of rejecting the Koranic decree of veiling, she embraces it and is able to resist the Islamic fundamentalist script of subjugated femininity from behind it, asserting that “the Islamic equality... is without limits” and includes women! (Djebar, 116). The young veiled student proves that Muslim women can survive and thrive as autonomous and powerful beings without rejecting Islam, as she exclaims, “aren’t

⁵ Fatima Mernissi states in her memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, “In our part of the world, Scheherazade is perceived as a courageous heroine and is one of our rare female mythological figures... a strategist and a powerful thinker who uses her psychological knowledge of human beings to get them to walk faster and leap higher” (1994, 15).

there several Muslim states led by women prime ministers?" (Djebar, 116). Still, as Atyka is murdered by Islamic fundamentalists, the veiled student is forced by the murderers to hide beneath her desk and in her obedience becomes complicit in the murder. Therefore, like Scheherazade, the young veiled woman's resistance is contingent upon her willingness to feign humble servility, hiding beneath the desk, "yessing" the patriarchy as she imagines a future of women's equality in Islam.

While the depiction of the nameless young wife feeds the Western imaginary, the contrast between Atyka and the young wife, as well as Scheherazade's defiance masked as subservience and the student's veiled stance that Islam purports women's equality, present the reader with varying and conflicting modes of Muslim women's existence across temporal and geographic divides. Djebar's narrative does not allow her readers to comfortably consume a narrative that all Muslim women are identical molds of the "singular third-world woman." Instead she proves that there is no fixed experience of monolithic Muslimwomanhood and her text, in this way "can't be predicted... isn't knowable and is therefore very disturbing" (Cixous, 53). In this way "Woman in Pieces" solves Chow's quandary of how to represent the "right" image of the Other without ignoring the "defiled image" as she presents both, without privileging one manifestation of Muslim womanhood over the Other (Chow, 30). The murders of each of the women in the story reveal silences, empty spaces to be filled by the reader. Djebar murders both the Muslimwoman image and the image of the "unauthentic"/Westernized Muslim woman and leaves a gaping hole, a blaring silence. The silences interrupt the story and demand the reader's participation and critical reading of the narrative.

Additionally, Djebar's characters illustrate how Muslim women's resistance is attained by way of conforming. The melding of resisting oppression by way of the oppressor's rule destabilizes the

Western notion that Muslim women must “throw off their veils” and become Western in order to become liberated. Yet, at the same time, the characterizations of the women in “Women in Pieces” suggest that transgressive resisters, like Atyka, cannot survive in Islam. Thus, while Djébar successfully pushes back against the West’s Muslimwoman model, with varying depictions of Muslim women, she nearly falls into the script of “metonymic blurring” (Narayan, 71). She appears to place the blame of all Muslim women’s oppression on Islam and thus intimates that the only means of resisting oppression is by way of wholly rejecting Islamic culture. One message underlying her text reads, “all Muslim women are threatened by decapitation by Muslim men,” what follows is that “decapitation is a Muslim ritual,” and decapitation becomes a product of Muslim culture, thus all Muslim women are threatened by Muslim culture for “Muslim women are beheaded every day in Muslim countries.”⁶ Atyka and the young wife are both subject to the rule of Islamic regimes, and are decapitated as a result of their rejection of Islamic doctrine (assumed adultery in the young wife’s case and refusal to veil in Atyka’s case). Alternatively, Scheherazade’s character, who is also subject to an oppressive Muslim ruler threatening to behead her, works within the oppressive structure to rescue herself, and finds agency from behind the veil. Similarly, Atyka’s veiled student declares herself empowered by Islam. But ultimately, Scheherazade is forced into obedience, she must beg the King for his mercy just as the student must hide under her desk and bear witness to Atyka’s decapitation, unable to be the bearer of Atyka’s story into the public sphere (instead, it is Omar, the male student whom Djébar charges with the responsibility of carrying on Atyka’s message of resistance). Therefore, Djébar seems to privilege the representation of Islam as oppressive and ostensibly buys into the notion that the only means of becoming *truly* liberated women is through the rejection of Islam.

⁶ See Uma Narayan’s *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism*, pages 104-108.

However, Djébar's juxtaposition of "Muslim cultures propensity for decapitation" alongside a muddled depiction of the veil, opens up a space for the singular representation of Islam to be contested. The veil has come to stand in as the symbol of Muslim women's oppression. Thus, while Islam may be presented as a decapitating oppressor, the veil is characterized as a sign of progressiveness and comfort. Borrowing from the Western script, where the veil represents Islam, reclaiming the veil as a sign of progressiveness and comfort reframes Islam as progressive and comforting. It follows, that Djébar represents Muslim culture both as a decapitating culture and a comforting culture. Again, her oppositional representations of Muslim culture function as a transgressive means of feminine writing, "by posing plurality against unity, multitudes of meanings against single, fixed meanings; diffuseness against instrumentality; openness against closure" (Kuhn, 37). Muslim culture does not retain a singular function, rather is represented in dichotomous ways, resulting in a lacuna, demanding to be mended.

In Djébar's story, the veil is presented as a shifting signifier, rather than a stagnant, fixed symbol of oppression. In effect, Djébar destabilizes Western conceptions of Muslim womanhood demanding the Western reader reject hegemony's depictions of the veiled Muslim woman. Cixous claims that allowing fixed meanings of symbols necessitates that "one of the terms of the couple is destroyed in favor of the Other" (45). The veil is portrayed as both alternatives allowed by the dichotomous "couple," oppressive, silencing and concealing as well as liberatory, as a symbol which gives way to voice and allows mobility. In presenting both representations, it destroys the possibility that either can exist; as a result of the multiplicity of meanings that Djébar attributes to the veil, she resists favoring one over the rejecting the Western script. The result is a "feminine writing," a "political" writing that disrupts the reading of the tales. In the story, veils appear several times. Djébar describes her own writing as a "breakdown of structures, a confrontation of

opposites,” seemingly paying homage to her Algerian sister, H el ene Cixous’s regimen for feminine writing (Lazarus, 87). First, the veil appears as a shroud, a “barely soiled... white linen” covering which protects the pieces of the mutilated young wife’s body (Djebar, 97). This same image is repeated at the end of the story, in reference to Atyka’s “body and head,” which are wrapped in “two linen veils. Slightly soiled. Slightly bloodied. White veils” (Djebar, 124). Here, the veil serves as a protector of women’s bodies, creating a space for them to rest, in death, and ignores the normative veiling paradigm which “deprives women of self presence, of being” (Lazreg, 86). Alternatively, the veil makes their *individual* oppression invisible, the body parts are wrapped and not identifiable as limbs until they are unveiled, but still the bloodied white veils serve as a reminder of collective oppression, as they are covered in *someone’s* blood (Djebar, 97,124). This depiction of the veil echoes what Lazreg notes as a troublesome effect of writing about the veil, “the veil has held an obsessive interest for many writer,” when it is presented in feminist writing, “it essentially stands for women” (Lazreg, 85). Djebar wraps unidentifiable body parts in veils, seemingly buying into the notion that veils “stand in for women.” But, again, she doesn’t end there, Atyka’s murder and her refusal to veil leads the reader to conclude that if she had veiled, she would have been afforded mobility in the public sphere and thus been able to continue educating students against the grain of Islamic fundamentalist rhetoric (Djebar, 125). Here, it seems that Djebar heralds the veil as a promise of mobility, albeit a complicated promise. A similarly positive portrayal of the veil is projected onto Atyka’s student where it is framed as a symbol of the progressiveness of Islam, for even a veiled woman can be educated in a French classroom and maintain the equality inherent to Islam, but ironically, the Islamic fundamentalists burst into the classroom and demand that she conceal herself, “close your eyes or lie down under the tables!” (Djebar, 122). The veil here functions as a marker of progressive Islam, but Djebar

problematizes the progressive veil as she describes how the murderous Islamic fundamentalists force the progressive version of the veil into hiding. Each of Djébar's representations of the veil trouble the Western perception that the veil retains a fixed meaning, presenting instead, "a confrontation of opposites" which the reader is left to contend with (Lazarus, 87).

Djébar's metanarrative storytelling technique, her temporal leaps and shifts in genre similarly functions to jar the reader, never allowing her to be pulled in to the lull of the story. The reader is constantly displaced by the metanarrative style, and Djébar demands that she stay alert as she navigates through the labyrinth of narratives. Cixous describes this approach, characteristic of political feminine writing: "a feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty, thirty times over" (Cixous, 53). Joyce Lazarus asserts that "Djébar's writings have a sense of urgency that compel her readers to listen," each of Djébar's non-normative writing techniques feed into the writing's sense of urgency (Lazarus, 83). The story opens with the tale of the young wife, her mutilated body found by the caliph; abruptly, the reader is thrust into contemporary Algeria, where the narrator recounts the story of Atyka's life and her in omniscient fashion, explains the reasons for Atyka's storytelling. Next, the reader is told that the story of the young wife is not being told by Atyka, but that Atyka is recounting the tale through the story of Scheherazade. Each of the shifts in narration is denoted by a change in typeset: Atyka's voice is marked by italics, Scheherazade's story is in regular typeset. But as the two stories meld together and the young wife's decapitated head is replaced by Atyka's mutilated limb, the demarcation between the two stories disappears (Djébar, 123-125). Additionally, the genre shifts in the text work to jar the reader and demand she never comfortably rely on the authenticity of the text. The "truth" of each sentence in the story is questionable, as Clarisse Zimra explains of Djébar's various works, "the openly staged fictional elements cast doubt on the reliability of documentary ones" (Zimra, 121). Hence,

as Atyka's murderers charge into the classroom, the reader may fall into a pattern of believing the narrative, but as her decapitated head begins speaking, spurting blood from her lips as she imparts her message on the reader and her students, the reader's notion of "truth" becomes destabilized. In these ways, Djébar demands an interactive reading, one which requires the reader's participation in uncovering who is speaking, which story is being told and when the story is taking place. As Zimra says, "'Woman in Pieces' foregrounds participation" (Zimra, 105). This meets Cixous's condition of feminine writing. Since the non-linear narrative "can't be predicted, isn't predictable, isn't knowable and is therefore very disturbing," Djébar never allows mere consumption of the horror (Cixous, 53).

Djébar's untidy endings and unclear boundaries serve as testaments to what Cixous calls an "endless" quality of feminine writing, "a feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there's no closure, it doesn't stop, and it's this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read" (Cixous, 53). Not only is the reader prevented from comfortably consuming the Muslimwoman and her oppression because he is left with the horrific sight of Atyka's talking head, submerged in a pool of blood, but the reader is confronted with untidy endings: a young boy bearing witness to "the body, the head. But the voice? Where has Atyka's voice taken refuge?" (Djébar, 125). Similarly, the last line of the novella inverts the male/female binary, placing woman in a position of unfeeling power and man in a position of emotional passion, "in the white city of today... Omar hears the caliph Haroun el Rachid weeping ceaselessly before the body of the woman in pieces" (Djébar, 125). The caliph inhabits the space of woman and the woman, the space of man. What could have functioned as Lazreg's "museum of horrors," instead destabilizes the reader, probing her to experience discomfort, a discomfort intentionally elicited by Djébar's refusal to provide the reader with tidied endings.

As an Algerian woman writing about Muslim women's experiences, Djébar should have been more conscious of the effects of border crossing. While reading her narrative is never comfortable nor predictable, which may lead the reader on a quest to make sense of the context, she could have prevented the reader from being allowed to fall into the pattern of decontextualization and recontextualization by way of footnotes. There is some contextual information provided at the end of the text, but it is part of the afterword, and framing it as such certainly does not indicate to the reader that it must be read in order to understand the context of the *nouvelles*. Gillian Whitlock explains that afterwords tend to be consumed by readers simply with a "glance, a flip through," surely they are not read with the same attentiveness as the heart of the text (57). Granted, footnotes can be similarly ignored, but the location of a footnote at the bottom of the page enters the reader's line of vision in a way that encourages she read it, whereas the afterword is not necessarily seen. Djébar's decision to exclude contextual information allows her characters to fall prey to the effects of border crossing which could ultimately result in a misreading of the text's message.

Additionally, "Woman in Pieces" presents an irreconcilable tension between an emphasis on collective sisterhood and favoring the individual. Djébar's refusal to subscribe wholeheartedly to either paradigm retains the "endless" quality Cixous demands of "feminine writing." Representing images of women across temporal and geographic divides within one story with strikingly similar experiences implies that there is a distinct Muslimwoman experience; all Muslim women are united in the struggle against being silenced by Islamic male discourse. Atyka and the young wife are united in their silencing. "Cut into pieces" by Islamic men who refuse to "hear" them, "they are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard" (Cixous, 49). As Jane Hiddleston describes, "[Djébar] participates in a wider feminist movement, aware of the

political necessity for solidarity and mutual support,” linking each of the women’s experiences against a unified oppressor; thus Djébar calls on Muslim sisterhood (92). But, at the same time, Djébar “goes to pains to subvert modes of criticism that homogenize the feminine community”; even in their uniformity they are strikingly different: the young wife, a subservient, nameless Muslimwoman and Atyka a defiant, subversive Muslim woman (Hiddleston, 92). The women share the experience of being cut into pieces, thus they are united in their mutilation but their individual limbs refuse to be fused, even in death they are wrapped separately, “Atyka’s body and head in two linen veils... are placed in two coffins” (Djébar, 124). Consequently Djébar complicates the readers’ ways of knowing, unsettles their experience and demands the reader step into the text and attempt to resolve the irreconcilable tensions.

Certainly Djébar’s contention that “narration must not tell the story but interrupt it: which is to say, suspend it, surprise it at all costs” is realized in her collection of short stories, *The Tongue’s Blood Does Not Run Dry* (Zimra, 108). As a third-world woman, writing about Muslim women’s oppression, Djébar wishes to “interrupt” the Muslimwoman “story”. The “endless” quality of Djébar’s text, the refusal to subscribe to singular representations of Muslimwomanhood, while heralding a collective Muslim woman experience as well as her disturbing use of frame narratives which cross temporal and geographic divides discourage the reader from falling into a “savior complex” and resist palatable consumption of Muslim women’s oppression. Instead, Djébar’s narrative shakes the foundation of the Western discourse of “knowing” the Other, producing a piece of “feminine” writing that effectively re-presents Muslim women without falling into the trap of the Muslimwoman.

Reasserting Orientalist Sentiment in Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*

I asked Cousin Malika, who was two years older than I, if she could show me where the hudud (frontier) actually was located... since then, looking for the frontier has become my life's occupation. Anxiety eats at me whenever I can not situate the geometric line organizing my powerlessness.
-Dreams of Trespass, 3

Fatima Mernissi, world renowned sociologist and self-proclaimed Islamic feminist, asserts that while *Western* notions of feminism and Islam cannot be reconciled, using a cultural relativist approach makes Islamic Feminism sustainable. Mernissi's memoir, an autobiographical piece fixed in the temporal frame of early childhood, is heralded as a testament to Mernissi's journey towards learning to reconcile the two seemingly paradoxical ideologies: Islam and feminism. The narrative describes Mernissi's childhood experiences growing up behind the barred doors of her family's harem and the complications that arose amongst the single-gendered cohort. She explores her relationship to her mother, her aunts, her cousins and her grandmothers. While no resolution is reached, the tale's conclusion is heralded by the majority of critics as a successful victory over the misogynist underpinning of the male dominated Muslim culture, and a testament to the sustainability of Islamic feminism when women work as a collective. Yet, a closer examination of the text reveals that Mernissi's narrative loses credibility as resistance writing and as a viable Islamic feminist work as she idealizes Westernism, sensationalizes the Eastern Other, frames her fictionalized tale as autobiographical and falls into patterns of essentialized representations of the "average third world woman," ultimately failing at her attempt to extract the Muslimwoman from her role of oppressed-haremed-silenced-Other, reifying her marginalized position.

The mainstream opinion of literary and feminist critics alleges that Mernissi's memoir is a productive representation of Islamic feminism, a voice for the marginalized Other and a blueprint

for effectively writing the Muslimwoman without reinscribing her oppression. The narrative has been lauded for the chronicling of Mernissi's personal journey into feminism by way of Muslim female role models, as Filiz Turhan-Swenson, literary critic describes: "*Dreams of Trespass* presents the powerful feminist perspectives even among supposedly traditional, older, illiterate women of the harem... lay[ing] the groundwork for Mernissi's own feminism" (1487). In a similar vein, the book is considered a model of "third world" writing that engenders a space for Muslim women to maintain feminist sentiment without foregoing cultural commitments. Anne Donadey, North African feminist scholar, states that *Dreams of Trespass*, "recounts the development of [Mernissi's] feminist consciousness as she learns from a variety of role models and from personal questioning" (86). Donadey claims that Mernissi's development as a feminist occurred not in opposition to her female cohorts, but as a result of Mernissi's relationships to her "role models," her grandmother, her mother, her aunts and her cousins. Mernissi's indigenous role models do not denounce Islam in the name of feminism; instead they seek to manipulate the patriarchal power structures which govern them, to work within the confines of the paternalistic religion to develop a sense of autonomy, ultimately breeding viable Islamic Feminism. According to this reading, Mernissi's text avoids the conundrum of the female Muslim writer, what Lazreg calls "problematical assumptions that underlie the area study of the Middle East and North Africa" (84). Initial representation of Mernissi's mother corresponds with the contention of many literary and feminist critics, that Mernissi's memoir proves successful in finding a balance between representing Islam in a positive light.

The reader's initial introduction to Mernissi's mother speaks to an indigenous feminism, borne of the harem, one which co-exists with Islam: "she had always rejected male superiority as nonsense and totally anti-Muslim—'Allah made us all equal,' she would say" (9). Mernissi

characterizes her mother as a follower of Islam and a feminist, for she defies Western imaginings of the silenced-oppressed Muslimwoman insisting that Allah does not purport male superiority, thus claiming that women's oppression in Islam is manmade rather than religiously sanctioned. Mernissi imagines her mother as a feminist heroine, Mernissi's guide toward feminist ideals.

In contrast to the positive portrayal of Mernissi's mother at the opening of the narrative, the portrayal shifts drastically throughout the text. The mother's initial commitment to tradition and Islam is replaced with a yearning for Westernism.. The decision on Mernissi's behalf to first portray her mother as an Islamic feminist and then to assert her denunciation of Islamic oppression intensifies the disdain the western reader is likely to feel toward Islam reinforcing Islamophobia and the role of the West as "savior." The reader sees that an attempt at Islamic feminism has been made, and ultimately is unsustainable, abandoned by Mernissi's maternal feminist guide. The shift is made evident in several spaces within the text. Firstly, in the Mernissi household, the women were required to collectively consent to which meals were to be prepared for the family. One family member, Lalla Radia, held the key to the pantry and dictated the family's eating patterns in the harem. Mernissi's mother felt stifled by the tradition, one which Mernissi frames as an unwavering requirement of Islamic culture. Mernissi describes the tug-of-war between her mother and her father regarding abandoning the tradition:

"What a waste of time," mother would say, "these endless discussions about meals! Arabs would be much better off if they let each individual decide what he or she wanted to swallow"... from there father would say that he could not just break away, that if he did, tradition would vanish, "we live in difficult times, the country is occupied by foreign armies, our culture is threatened, all we have left is these traditions" (78).

The tradition is positioned as an Arabic one, one which is conflated with Muslim culture. Examining the conflation through Narayan's concern of metonymic blurring, the oppression of women, the demands of collectivism and female subservience are inevitably read as the fault of

the Islamic culture. Mernissi's mother is presented as wishing to abandon tradition and defy the Arabic culture, for a more individualistic one, one which is compared to the "occupying forces." Additionally, Mernissi's mother demands that in order for the narrator to be successful she must abandon traditional garb, "'dress says so much about a woman's design... if you plan to be modern, express it through what you wear. Otherwise they will shove you behind gates... Caftans may be of unparalleled beauty, but Western dress is about salaried work'" (85). Mernissi depicts her mother as a woman who believes in a woman's right to salaried work, who believes women should be able to enter the public sphere and partake in the "men's domain," but that the only way for a woman to do so is through presenting herself as a Westerner. In a similar encounter, Mernissi describes her mother's struggle with reconciling feminist ideals and Islam, "I ran around with one of my mother's scarves securely tied around my hair, until she noticed and forced me to take it off. 'Don't you ever cover your head!' mother shouted. 'Do you understand me? Never! I am fighting against the veil and you are putting one on?!'" (100). Thus, Mernissi's feminist heroine, the woman who is ultimately her guiding force, ushering the narrator toward an adulthood of women's rights reaches not for a culturally sound model of feminism but an unveiled Western one. Framing Islamic feminism as paradoxical and Western feminism as the ideal encourages Islamophobic sentiment and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Rather than lessening the divide between the East and the West, Mernissi's characterization of Islam foregrounds the West's sense of superiority in opposition to the East's barbarism. In effect, Mernissi reinscribes Orientalism and Western readers are encouraged to experience the East as a brutal, oppressive Other, and the West as enlightened and victorious.

In addition, Mernissi fetishizes the Muslim woman's experience. Speaking to a Western audience, she paints a portrait of Muslim women's desire to escape the mystical harem, feeding

the Western imaginary's image of a victimized sensationalized Other. Critics like Turhan-Swenson contend that the text rejects sensationalized notions of Muslimwomanhood, avoiding the sexualized stereotype of the Muslim Other. Turhan-Swenson explains that Mernissi's portrayal of the hamam (public bath) is not the archetypal space of "luminous naked women" and that Muslim women's beauty rituals reject male attention, instead of "intoxicating [them] with her irresistible sexuality" (1537). But, a more holistic approach toward the book proves that the majority of critics fall into the mode of confirmation biases, relying on instances which prove their presuppositions rather than examining the totality of the narrative.

The book's peritext entices readers to peek into and unveil the world of oppressed Muslim women by way of the title, the illustrations and the book reviews represented on the covers. Whitlock describes the impact of peritext in Muslim women's writing, one which "characteristically the titles draw on ... the trope of truth and authenticity revealed in life narratives such as these, tapping into a fantasy of the illicit penetration of the hidden and gendered spaces of the 'Islamic world'" (58). The title of her memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, conjures notions of mystery and unveiling. The reader is invited into the "vanished world" of the Maghrebian woman's harem life, to penetrate the world of the unknown through consumption of the narrative. "Trespass" promises an "authentic" peek into the cloistered world of Muslim womanhood. Additionally, the book's cover hosts an illustration of the harem courtyard, laden with phallic columns which seem to uphold the structure in which women are pictured walking away from the reader, beckoning her to follow. Mernissi's decision to portray only the backs of the women in the illustration suggests that the women in the narrative and the Muslimwoman represented by the narrative, are not individuals, rather some version of woman allowed by the harem life—a dehumanized conflated model of Muslimwomanhood. Their faces are not pictured, no identifying

marker allowing them individual uniqueness, instead they are the harem women, a conflated version of oppressed woman that exists within Islamic structures. Furthermore, the Muslimwoman's experience in the harem is sensationalized by way of the textual descriptions of the harem and the terrace, a space where women could not escape without the consent of men:

Chama and Mother did not consider escaping from the terrace to be a viable alternative to using the front gate. The terrace route had a clandestine, covert dimension to it, which was repulsive to those who were fighting for the principle of a woman's right to free movement. Confronting Ahmed at the gate was a heroic act. Escaping from the terrace was not, and did not carry with it that inspiring, subversive flame of liberation (60).

Mernissi's portrait of an insulated, impenetrable harem guarded by men and walls fortified as to derail plans of escape feeds the Western imaginary, freezing Muslim women in a position of sensationalized Other.

Similarly, Mernissi is said to have rejected Mohanty's notion of the "average third world woman," resultantly engendering a space for individual women to recount their personal histories, rather than function as talking pieces for an imagined essentialized version of oppressed Muslimwoman. Mernissi's narrative depicts two camps of women, those who bought into the harem lifestyle, who concurred with the benefits the harem walls ensured, "all respectable men provided [harems] for their womanfolk so they did not have to go out in dangerous, unsafe streets" and those who decried the oppressiveness of the harem, "Men's power is no longer measured by the number of women they can imprison" (46, 45). But, ultimately, portraying two polarized groups does not allow room for the spectrum of responses to the harem lifestyle. The illustration of "pro-harem" individuals and "anti-harem" individuals can be read as "Eastern" and "Western" women or "oppressed" and "liberated" women; thus while Mernissi avoids falling prey to a singular, essentialized representation of Muslimwoman, the alternative is the binarized model, one which is read as "incorrect" and the other as "correct." The binarized depiction plays into the

Western tendency to define the Western individual relationally to the Oriental Other, “creating a battleground of separates,” an affirmation of Said’s theory of Orientalism (Said 46). Rather than individualizing specific women’s experiences within the walls of the harem, the narrator generalizes the dream of escape—despite later claims that not all of the women wished to be free of the walls. At the opening of the text the narrator asserts:

Roaming freely in the streets was every woman’s dream. Aunt Habiba’s most popular tale, which she narrated on special occasions only, was about ‘The Woman with Wings,’ who could fly away from the courtyard whenever she wanted to. Every time Aunt Habiba told that story, the women in the courtyard would tuck their caftans into their belts, and dance away with their arms spread wide as if they were about to fly. (22)

Rather than attributing the desire of flight, of escape to specific women, a singular model of Muslimwomanhood is presented by way of the collective language: escape was “every woman’s dream” and “the women in the courtyard” partook in imagined flight. Thus, Mernissi robs her characters of autonomy, reinscribing the Western projection of the “average third world woman” in place of individual experience. While, later in the text, Mernissi introduces varying relationships to harem life, the women who do not wish to escape the harem are framed as ignorant and backward, “some of the women... were in favor of the harems and always went along with men’s decisions... mother accused them of being largely responsible for women’s suffering” (141). Mernissi deepens the fissure between the progressive Westernized woman—her mother—and the backward Eastern woman—those who support Islamic culture. The effect is a furtherance of the myth of Arabic savagery and oppressiveness.

Further problematizing the representation of the Muslim woman, Mernissi positions her text as a memoir, an autobiographical recounting of her journey from haremed child into an assumed feminist adulthood. The narrator, an adult Mernissi remembering her experience as a nine-year-old child describes her residence at the “Mernissi household,” indicating Mernissi as the

he narrator (81). Additionally, the book's peritext situates Mernissi as both author and narrator, "'I was born in a harem in 1940 in Fez, Morocco...'" So begins Fatima Mernissi in this exotic and rich narrative of a childhood behind the iron gates of a domestic harem... Mernissi weaves her own memories... with the courtyard of her youth" (cover). Carine Bourget, literary critic, assents, stating, "both text and paratext of the English original affirm the autobiographical genre of *Dreams*: it is labeled a memoir on the back cover... the text completely identifies the main protagonist, the narrator, with the author" (31). Locating the text in the genre of autobiography, enables the tale to function as an authoritative testament that is both viable and authentically representative of Muslimwomanhood. Cixous explains that "women more often than men—they are immediately asked in whose name and from what theoretical standpoint they are speaking, who is their master and where they are coming from: they have, in short, to salute... and show their identity papers" (51). While Cixous contends that the feminist goal is to develop a voice which resists such a requirement, she recognizes the reality of women's plight. Thus, Cixous would concur that Mernissi's academic successes and respected voice position her as an authority. Her position as prominent sociologist and feminist, lends her narrator's voice credence and renders her narrative one to be taken seriously.

Mernissi's authoritative voice is jeopardized by the French version of her memoir. Where the English version frames the narrative as autobiographical, the French version brings into question the genuineness of several of the book's characters. In the French text, Mernissi describes that "this version of the facts surrounding the demand for independence is not historical, one can guess; it's the version of my mother, who is a fictional character, just as the child who speaks and who is supposed to be me" (234). In reframing the narrative as ahistorical, and her mother as a "fictional character," the effect of portraying her harem cohort as powerful feminists is

destabilized in its authenticity. It is not “authentic” Muslim women who push back against oppression, but merely Mernissi’s fictionalized version. If read as an autobiographical text, Mernissi opens a space for silenced, illiterate women’s voices to be heard within the public sphere, as literary and feminist critic Suzanne Gauch explains, “by seeming to confer speech on such figures, who until now seem to lack the means and authority to voice their stories, *Dreams* entices readers with the hope that this absence may be overcome” (53). One may claim that Mernissi’s characterizations, while flawed, serve the greater purpose of creating positive, feminist, Muslim role models, but by misrepresenting the text as autobiographical and the illiterate women’s voices as authentic, she uses their bodies as ventriloquized puppets for her own agenda, literally speaking through them, as Bourget describes: “Mernissi is drowning out illiterate women’s voices by filling it with her own because she is not solely trying to reconstruct what she heard from the illiterate women of her childhood: she invents characters that long for a Western lifestyle” (35). To a Western reader, the text serves as an authentic testament to Muslim womanhood, as the author is reliable, deeply steeped in academia, and she is Muslim. But, as the French version indicates, large portions of the text are fictionalized. Mernissi is able to direct her characters to push her agenda rather than depicting a more complex portrait of harem life. The narrator’s voice is Mernissi’s own, but it is a manipulated version—one which tells a tale she wishes to divulge, not one that comports with historical events.

While Fatima Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass* is read by the majority of critics as an autobiographical narrative representative of Muslim women’s writing that avoids reinscribing stereotypes of Muslim womanhood, a holistic survey of the text proves otherwise. Mernissi’s admission that the text is fictionalized discredits her characters’ voices, cementing them as sensationalized characters crafted of an amalgamation of Western sentiments and Mernissi’s own

imagining. Mernissi's storytelling ultimately silences of the Other and further erases individual women's histories, perpetuating Orientalist tendencies, conceptions authenticated by Mernissi's position as trustworthy Islamic feminist.

Conclusion: Untidied Endings

At a historical moment when Muslim women's stories serve as a testament to the East's barbarism and justify the West's "War on Terror," Western readers are drawn to texts which invite the readers into the world of the Muslim woman in need of saving. Texts written by Muslim women allow readers to engage with the silenced women behind the veil, to rescue them from their plight by way of narrative engagement. Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* attempts to reconcile the seemingly paradoxical ideologies assigned to Islam and Feminism, weaving a story of heroic Muslim women who guide her in her feminist upbringing. Ultimately, Mernissi's text fails, instead reifying the stereotypes of Muslim women, cementing them more deeply in their role as oppressed-harmed-silenced-Other. In contrast, Assia Djebar's post-modern text, *The Tongues Blood Never Runs Dry* refuses to conform to literary conventions, appropriating Hélène Cixous's model of feminist writing as a blueprint for writing the Muslimwoman, freeing her from the grasp of the Western reader. While the temporal and geographic space of contemporary Western readers resists Muslim women's narratives that avoid Orientalist sentiment, Djebar reaches toward a successful iteration of Muslim women's writing, providing a model for other female Muslim authors.

Works Cited

Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013. Print.

Arvin, Maile, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill. "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy." *Feminist Formations* 25.1 (2013): 8-34. Web.

Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print.

Bourget, Carine. "Complicity with Orientalism in Third-World Women's Writing: Fatima Mernissi's Fictive Memoirs." *Research in African Literature* 44.3 (2013): 30-49. Web.

Cavness, Anna. "Disseminating Shahrzad in Postcolonial Algeria." *Postcolonial Text* 5.4 (2009): 1-16. Web.

Chow, Rey. *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*.
Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. Print.

Cixous, Hélène. "Castration or Decapitation?" Trans. Anette Kuhn. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7.11 (1981): 41-55. Web.

Cooke, Miriam. *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.

Djebar, Assia, and Tegan Raleigh. *The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry: Algerian Stories*.
New York: Seven Stories, 2006. Print.

Donadey, Anne. "Portrait of a Maghrebian Feminist as a Young Girl: Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass*." *Edebiyat* 11 (2000): 85-103. Print.

Gauch, Suzanne. *Liberating Shahrzad. Feminism, Postcolonialism, and Islam*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007. Print.

Hiddleston, Jane. "Feminism and the Question of 'Woman' in Assia Djebar's 'Vaste Est La Prison.'" *Research in African Literature* 35.4 (2004): 91-104. Web.

Kuhn, Anette. "Introduction to Hélène Cixous's 'Castration or Decapitation?'" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7.11 (1981): 36-40. Web.

Lazarus, Joyce. "Writing as Resistance: Assia Djebar's Vaste Est La Prison." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 11.4 (2010): 83-96. Web.

Lazreg, Marnia. "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria." *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (1988): 81-107. Web.

- Mernissi, Fatima. *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub., 1994. Print.
- Mernissi, Fatima. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub., 1991. Print.
- Mernissi, Fatima. *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed, 1996. Print.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61-88. Web.
- Mortimer, Mildred P. "Edward Said and Assia Djebar: A Contrapuntal Reading." *Research in African Literature* 36.3 (2005): 53-67. Web.
- Narayan, Uma. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Sadiqi, Fatima, and Moha Ennaji. "The Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, The Family Life and Social Change in Morocco." *Journal of Middle East Women's Study* 2.2 (2006): 86-114. Web.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print.
- Turhan-Swenson, Filiz. "Voices Across the Frontier: Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood." *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity through Writing*. Ed. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley. 1st ed. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2007. Kindle.
- Whitlock, Gillian. *Soft Weapons Autobiography in Transit*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2007. Print.
- Zimra, Clarisse. "Sounding off the Absent Body Intertextual Resonances in 'Lafemme Qui Pleure' and 'La Femme En Morceaux.'" *Research in African Literature* 30.3 (1999): 108-24. Web.

