

Rewriting Gendered Violence in Assia Djébar's *La Femme sans sépulture*

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Algerians' experiences of colonization, decolonization, and the more recent violence have inordinately impacted women. Assia Djébar's novel *La Femme sans sépulture* represents this multi-layered violence through the story of Zoulikha, a forgotten heroine of the Algerian war of independence. Tortured and killed by the French, her body disappeared. The quest to recover the forgotten is motivated by the need to illuminate and understand the reasons behind the reiteration of violence in postcolonial Algeria. The story is a complex interplay between past and present, and movement from a modern city, Algiers, to an antique space, Césarée—present day Cherchel. This movement is underscored by the return of a narrator-author to her hometown, Césarée, which is described as haunted.

Through the idea of return to a haunted postcolonial space, Djébar repeats a common requirement in postcolonial theory, basically, as defined by Homi Bhabha, who emphasizes the imperative of the return to the site of past struggles to relieve this past from its traumatic effect through recognition and representation (18, 198). Yet Djébar repeats then reverses Bhabha's imperative by projecting a postcolonial Algeria which is still haunted by the specters of a colonial past which could not be healed from their traumatic effects despite the different attempts to rewrite colonial history. At different levels, the novel criticizes the way this history has been represented and effaced in different accounts, which repeat what Michael O'Riley describes as the imperialist dynamics of "appropriation and effacement," ("Haunting" 2) or to appropriate the past through an act of representation that allows its effacement. Therefore, the quest for the forgotten involves the writer in a deep level quest, namely, how to recover the past without risking its effacement.

In this article, through the reading of Djébar's novel in counterpoint with "Pour Djamila Boupacha," a two-page essay written by Simone De Beauvoir in 1960 to decry the violence practiced by the French military forces against the Algerian revolutionary Djamila Boupacha, I will argue that Djébar's text constitutes a polemical response to De Beauvoir's representation of gendered violence. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse,

namely hidden polemic, I will show that Djébar's text challenges De Beauvoir's appropriation of the story of gendered violence to allow its effacement.

In a hidden polemic, dialogism, marked by indirect criticism, is not expressed through a direct reference of one text to another; the relation between texts is implicit. To define a hidden polemic, Bakhtin writes,

In a hidden polemic the author's discourse is directed toward its own referential object, as in any other discourse, but at the same time every statement about the object is constructed in such a way that, apart from its referential meaning, a polemical blow is struck at the other's discourse on the same theme, at the other's statement about the same object. A word, directed toward its referential object, clashes with another's word within the very object itself. The other's discourse is not itself reproduced, it is merely implied, but the entire structure of speech would be completely different if there were not this reaction to another person's implied words (194).

La Femme sans sépulture is essentially focused on the link between colonial and contemporary violence. The violence experienced in the past is described in a way that invokes the violent years of the 1990s when Algerians witnessed political, social, and economic unrest after the annulment of the first democratic elections won by a popular opposition party, the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS). The repression of the democratic process and ongoing social and economic problems blew up the country into violence.¹ The reader is reminded of the curfews, of the searches and nocturnal assassinations and massacres, of the invasion of intimacy by unknown men in the small rural villages even in daytime, of the interrogations of suspect individuals in the police stations, of tortures in unknown places of citizens who have never been judged and sentenced, and of the millions of innocent missing people.²

The novel shows, though indirectly, that like the traumatic experience of colonial violence, the new one has been particularly detrimental for women. It explores parallels between the earlier violence and the new one in their effects on women. It hints to gendered violence as it reconstitutes the story of coercion, detention, rape and tortures inflicted on Zoulikha's body from fragmented texts told by many female voices, including the voice of the dead martyr, allowed to participate in the recuperation task through four monologues, made up by the author. These fragmented texts emphasize, as Anne Donadey puts it, "the need to

resist historical amnesia and to speak the unspeakable” (67) or the experience of torture that “may be evoked but not depicted in detail” (70).

Djebar’s representation of gendered violence can be paralleled to Simone de Beauvoir’s essay “Pour Djamila Boupacha.” Djamila Boupacha was an Algerian revolutionary, illegally imprisoned, raped, and tortured by the French paratroopers. De Beauvoir responded to the appeals of Gisele Halimi, a lawyer and human rights activist, who needed support in her battle against the war methods used by the French army in Algeria. In June 1960, De Beauvoir’s “Pour Djamila Boupacha” was published in *Le Monde*. At the request of Halimi, she headed a committee demanding a fair trial for Boupacha. Thanks to the committee’s efforts, the latter was transported to a prison in France, and her case was transferred to a metropolitan court. In 1961, De Beauvoir and Halimi’s actions for Djamila were crowned by the publication of their co-written *Djamila Boupacha* (Khanna 79-91).

Although De Beauvoir’s and Djebar’s texts address different audiences and have different functions and purposes, they share many concerns. While Djebar’s piece is a historical novel with different purposes, De Beauvoir’s is a short militant essay of approximately one hundred and twenty words, written during the time of armed struggle to save the life of an Algerian militant whose confession to a bombing in Algiers was obtained through torture. The two texts represent the stories of revolutionaries who were victims of gendered violence. However, where De Beauvoir relies on Djamila Boupacha’s own words, as recorded in the legal disposition describing the violence she endured, Djebar relies on the testimonies of Zoulikha’s relatives and friends, in addition to what she calls “liberté romanesque” (novelistic freedom) (9),³ imagining what could have happened to Zoulikha during her custody. Djebar represents gendered violence in what she entitles “monologues,” in an attempt to recover Zoulikha’s words which, though lost to history, could be recovered through associating Zoulikha’s story with other stories of gendered violence. Indeed, Djebar explains her purpose in using “novelistic liberty”: “J’ai usé à volonté de ma liberté romanesque, justement pour que la vérité de Zoulikha soit éclairée davantage, au sein même d’une large fresque féminine” (I used at will my novelistic freedom, precisely in order to illuminate further the truth about Zoulikha, within a large feminine fresco) (9). Furthermore, the two texts call attention to the imperialistic dispositions of the violence of French colonialism. While De Beauvoir describes the violence practiced by the French army in Algeria as a reiteration of the violence of the Nazi occupation of France,⁴ Djebar points to the

interiorization of this imperialistic violence in contemporary Algeria. Both authors emphasize the responsibility of those who allow the reiteration of violence. Similarly, both acknowledge their own responsibility to deal with the problem.

“Ce qu'il y a de plus scandaleux dans le scandale c'est qu'on s'y habitue,” (The most scandalous aspect of any scandal is that one gets used to it), writes De Beauvoir in “Pour Djamila Boupacha”, before providing a vivid metonymic description of the tortures perpetrated on Djamila’s body. She uses multiple voices to describe torture, her own voice, Djamila’s voice, the voices of witnesses, and the voices of the persecutors. De Beauvoir reports what she describes as “facts” retraced by Djamila and witnessed by many other people who could also confirm the accuracy of the victim’s accounts about her trauma. She provides minute descriptions of the victim’s naked body under torture, aimed to shock and move her reader to action.

De Beauvoir merges Djamila’s voice with the voices of witnesses to describe torture as a common war method used against all Algerians. Djamila is then allowed to speak alone, in direct speech, about what seems to make her case highly outrageous: having to endure “le supplice de la bouteille” (the “bottle treatment”), while a virgin. De Beauvoir individualizes Djamila and allows her to speak in an independent and unmerged voice to describe “la plus atroce des souffrances” (the most appalling torture of all), as if she wanted to allow the traumatized young Algerian to externalize her pain, which seems both physical and psychic. When Djamila points out her loss of consciousness during that particular level of torture, a witness’s voice was called to confirm and add other details about the violence practiced against Djamila’s inert body. The author adds a final parenthetical comment to close Djamila’s testimony, “(Djamila était vierge)” (Djamila was a virgin). De Beauvoir also reports the aggressive words the persecutors addressed to Djamila during the interrogation: ““On va pas te violer, ça risquerait de te faire plaisir’, lui dirent, quelques jours plus tard, les hommes qui la questionnaient” (Several days later the men interrogating her said: “You won’t be raped, you might enjoy it.”)

Here De Beauvoir simulates a jury trial, which she substitutes for the torture trial that made Djamila confess. In this jury trial, Djamila is represented as the plaintiff, the tortured victim, who is summoned with witnesses to expose facts before prospective jurors; the author stands for the attorney who offers evidence and arguments to help the judge and the jurors

make a fair decision. De Beauvoir wants the French people to assume the function of the judge. In *Algeria Cuts*, Ranjana Khanna explains that De Beauvoir uses a legal discourse to describe torture; she repeats the testimony that Djamila gave the court and provides a precise description of the instruments of torture such as bottles, cigarettes, and electrodes. Instruments, as Ranjana Khanna explains, serve as “indexes of pain” in courtrooms (84).

After the presentation of facts denouncing the war methods used by the French army in Algeria, De Beauvoir confronts the French government and people with their responsibilities. She first calls the government to control its army, which arrogantly sullies justice in Algeria. She then requests that the French people react against the scandals committed in their name. She finally warns that abandonment of responsibility is a form of betrayal: “Par cette abdication c'est la France entière qu'ils trahiraient, c'est chacun de nous, c'est moi, c'est vous” (such an abdication of responsibility would be a betrayal of France as a whole, of you, of me, of each and every one of us.)

However, De Beauvoir's humanist appeals were silenced by the Evian agreement and then the amnesty laws. In 1962, the Evian agreement announced the retreat of the French army from Algeria and the end of armed struggle. The agreement adopted amnesty laws, which granted pardon to the torturers of Djamila, who was soon released from jail (Khanna 80). These laws have created a state of amnesia, which has been harmful to both France and Algeria as noted by Benjamin Stora in *La Gangrène et L'oubli*.

Djebar repeats De Beauvoir's concerns and strategy but with a difference. Djebar's text repeating images of torture denounced by De Beauvoir underscores a hidden polemical relation to the predecessor text. Like De Beauvoir, Djebar represents violence and torture using multiple voices including the voice of the tortured. In the parts representing Zoulikha's interior monologues, we learn that like Djamila, Zoulikha has been illegally imprisoned tortured and possibly raped; the text hints to torture and rape through fragmented images. However, instead of the legal language focused on pain and victimization used by De Beauvoir, Djebar uses a language that does not stand on pain, trauma or victimization, a language that does not show the freedom fighter as victim. Djebar repeats the metonymic images of the tortured body, which is strong enough to overcome pain, and she depicts the instruments of torture for different purposes from those of De Beauvoir.

Like de Beauvoir, Djébar uses polyvocality which, in a literary text, assumes a different function from Beauvoir's polyvocal text with its legal and militant purposes. Djébar uses polyvocality to extend the possibilities of the representation of history in art through the complex narrative mode she adopts to write the story of Zoulikha. She engages changing points of view, which consist in the shift of the narrative perspective from one character to another. Djébar uses the first person voice of the prelude and epilogue, which assumes an autonomous presence in the middle of the narrative, conversing directly with the other voices of narration, revealing the narrator-author's own thoughts, previously expressed through the third person voice of the narrative commentary. In addition to the first person voice, a third person voice, which shifts between internal and external focalization, resumes the narration, which is intermittently interrupted by the monologues of Zoulikha.

In a hidden polemic underscored by irony, the monologues recall the same instruments and same methods of torture described in De Beauvoir's text. The instruments of torture as "le supplice de la bouteille" (the bottle treatment), "the bath treatment" "the administration of electric shocks" (Pour Djamila Boupacha) used to torture Djamila's naked body in De Beauvoir's text return in a broken language interrupted by ellipsis without focus on pain in Djébar's text. We, therefore, may read, "Le supplice de l'hélicoptère [...] ... Le supplice de...Qu'importe leur jargon?" (The helicopter treatment [...] ... the treatment of... Whatever their jargon?) (69) "ils posaient déjà les fils de la gégène, ils apportaient les bidons d'eau pour la baignoire, ils aiguisaient les couteaux dans le crissement convenu, tout cela, au fond pour prendre les mesures de mon corps" (they already placed the gégène cables, they filled the bathtub with water, they sharpened the knives in the agreed crunch, all that, basically to take the measurements of my body) (220). The instruments of torture are recalled not to stress pain but to mock fascination with the female body as suggested through the reversal of the function of these instruments which turn into measuring tools. From instruments of torture to measuring tools, a polemical blow is struck at De Beauvoir's text which projects the combatant's body naked.

Little focused on pain, the monologues represent torture through a fragmented text and a broken language aimed to project trauma in the present. In the monologues, images of the tortured body come in fragments, which represent violence metaphorically. Thus, such images as "pieds ensanglantés ... seins [...] qu'ils s'apprêtent à torturer..." (bleeding feet ...breasts [...] that they are about to torture ...) (69) "peau jetée en dépouille," (skin thrown in mortal

remains) (218) and “vagin électrifé” (electrified vagina) (221) project torture metonymically. These metonymic images stand as metaphors for the reiteration of violence.

Structurally, the text representing torture is characterized by what Anne Donadey calls “breakdowns of language” marked by “the constant use of ellipses that interrupt Zoulikha as she attempts to speak of torture.” These breakdowns stand for a paradoxical situation, “the impossibility of fully accounting for the horrors of the trauma with words” and the necessity to “speak the unspeakable” as a means to “resist historical amnesia” Donadey explains (70).

The monologues represent torture in a broken voice, which gives little importance to pain endured in the past. The last monologue describing torture shows that Zoulikha is able to transcend the horrors of the past. “Zoulikha resisted torture by trying to concentrate on the memory of love,” writes Donadey (70). Her soul and heart have never been affected despite torture on her body, which finds a way to “metamorphose” (*Femme* 218). Being a woman’s body, which has endured pain mixed with the pleasure of giving birth, it can also endure the brutality of the enemy with the same mixed feelings of pain and pleasure. The tortured woman is able to transcend her pains and thus feel the pleasure of a mother who offers her own life as a sacrifice to save her children. The tortured mother is reinforced by her experiences of giving birth when her pain is mixed with the joy of seeing her offspring.

However, when the text repeats images associating “the pain of physical torture with the pain of childbirth” as Mildred Mortimer puts it in “Tortured Bodies” (113), and when it repeats images associating the sacrifice of mothers and that of the freedom fighters, it rejects “reducing” these experiences of mixed pain and joy into the idealized projections of women as sacrificial mothers. Describing the period of torture, the text through the voice of Zoulikha reads:

Torture ou volupté, ainsi réduite soudain à rien, un corps—peau jetée en dépouille, à même le sol gras—[...] mon corps—peut-être parce que corps de femme et ayant enfanté tant de fois—se met à ouvrir ses plaies, ses issues, à déverser son flux, en somme il s’exhale, s’émiette, se vide pour autant s’épuiser ! Du moins pas encore ... peut-être qu’il cherche dans le noir, et hors du temps, quelque métamorphose?

Penser aux quatre enfants que j’ai eus, au feuillage de murmures, de gémissements, de râles déchirés et d’assauts furieux qui ont précédé leur venue à chacun—t’imaginer plus

particulièrement toi, Mina [...] cela m'a permis de traverser cette durée de la torture si longue sans que le sang, le pus ou l'urine m'éclaboussent l'âme, me souillent le cœur .

Torture or voluptuous pleasure, thus suddenly reduced to nothing, a body—skin thrown in mortal remains on the greasy ground [...] my body—perhaps because a woman's body and having given birth many times—begins to open its wounds, its orifices, to give off its flux, in short it exhales, crumbles, empties itself in order to exhaust itself! At least not yet ... perhaps it searches in the night, and outside of time, some metamorphosis?

Thinking about the four children I have had, the foliage of whispers, moans, gasps torn gasps and furious assaults that preceded the arrival of each, more particularly, to imagine you, Mina [...] it allowed me to get through that so long period of torture without any blood, pus or urine splashing my soul, defiling my heart (218-9).

While the text repeats images of sacrifice, it objects to the restriction of women's roles to functions assumed suitable with their biology, notably mothering, which is generally equated with sacrifice. This is evident in the ironic tone of the text above, where Djébar mocks the way the experiences of the revolutionary are "suddenly reduced to nothing, a body." The irony is noticed in the way the text confirms the sacrificial images within "perhaps...to exhaust itself!" to reverse them through "At least not yet." The revolutionary's body, strong enough by its experiences, searches and finds a way to overcome the long period of torture that the French started and that seems to continue until the present, in independent Algeria. Reference to the present is underscored by the use of the present tense to describe torture.

The irony mocks the way women in independent Algeria have been "suddenly" required to assume functions suitable with their biology by the nationalist leadership ruling the country. Actually, women were required to assume the idealized role of the mothers of the new nation to restrict their roles in society. The monologue addressed to the daughter expresses Djébar's expectations of a "metamorphosis," or a rebirth of the spirit of defiance through the revolutionary's offspring, 'particularly' females against the new silencing. Therefore, it seems that Mortimer misses Djébar's irony when she has argues that the association between torture and childbirth suggests, "the martyr, in the throes of pain, is

transformed symbolically into a ‘founding mother of the new Algeria’ as she gives birth to the new nation” (113).

According to Algerian scholar Marnia Lazreg, the silencing of women has been accomplished through emphasizing their sacrifices. Lazreg explains that women have always been required to play sacrificial roles by the FLN—Front de Libération Nationale, the political party which led the armed struggle against colonialism and which ruled the country until the 1990s. When the wartime FLN perceived women “as creatures of sacrifice” writes Lazreg (130), in postcolonial Algeria “women, as a group, were seen as necessary to the building of the state, but as contributors, not participants. [...] Sacrifice, not duty complemented by right, was the cornerstone of the new state’s view of women” she adds (*Eloquence* 146).⁵

The text’s repetition of images of sacrifice and its association between torture and childbirth have other implications. The repetition of images of sacrifice, which are soon reversed, is significant as it shifts emphasis away from the pain caused by torture endured in the past. The text’s repetition of the fragmented images of the tortured body offer an ironical reversal of the projection of a virgin’s nakedness and pain at focus in De Beauvoir’s text. The text above projects a non-virgin’s body, which finds a way “to metamorphose,” to transcend pain against the image of the virgin that the French reader is summoned to save. Ironically, having no chance to be saved by a French public opinion or to be defended by a French feminist who finds it necessary to emphasize that her protégée “was a virgin,” the non-virgin finds, nonetheless, a way to rise above limits and to “fly” freely. Djébar projects a strong Algerian woman who is strengthened by her experiences to endure torture and to transcend pain against the frail fragile ‘virgin’ that De Beauvoir’s text offers as a model of Algerian womanhood, ignoring the young revolutionary’s strength and courage expressed through her rebellion against colonialism, to focus on weakness and victimization.

Though the images of gendered violence in Djébar’s text are repeated to express the ability of a woman’s body to negate pain during past trials, pain seems, nonetheless, reinstalled as soon as negated. The fragmented images of the tortured body are focused on the pain of Zoulikha about the reiteration of violence. The text focuses on the disappointment of the tortured revolutionary and her fears for her daughter, Mina, in independent Algeria, which is not secure and still filled with horror just as it was during the colonial period. The woman

who endured the tortures of the past is unable to find rest and feels haunted by the same fear of the colonial times.

The shift of emphasis toward the new causes of pain is underscored by a shift of the narration from colonial to postcolonial time and the use of the present tense to represent torture. This shift is noticed in the following: "c'est à partir de cette aube que, dorénavant, je te parle, ô Mina, ma petite" (It is from this dawn that henceforth I speak to you, o Mina, my little one) (222). Zoulika addresses her daughter from the dawn of independence, which seems as troublesome as the colonial time, and she probes : "est-ce que la peur me tenaille encore, me mord, m'affaiblit [...] ou ne serait-ce pas désormais une peur tournée vers toi, vers ton corps si frêle, vers ton visage de jeunesse, vers ton avenir? Comment puis-je rejoindre le royaume des morts rassérée si me hante encore mon angoisse pour toi" (is fear still tormenting me, biting me, weakening me [...] or wouldn't it henceforth be a fear turned for you, for your body so frail, for your youthful face, for your future? How can I rejoin the realm of the dead reassured if I am still haunted by my anxiety for you) (224).

The present is as troublesome as the past for women. During the 1990s, the consequences of the civil unrest were particularly distressing for women, and some of them suffered the worst penalties. Women were kidnapped, tortured, and raped. In *Guerre Invisible*, Stora reports that "L'Algérie des années 1992-1999 présente la 'particularité' d'être ce pays où la violence à l'égard des femmes est des plus atroces. Ainsi, le gouvernement annonce, le 22 décembre 1994, que 211 femmes ont été assassinées depuis décembre 1993, avec viols, mutilations, décapitations" (The Algeria of the years 1992-1999 has the 'peculiarity' of being a country where violence against women is most atrocious. Thus, the government announced, on December 22, 1994, that 211 women had been killed since December 1993, with rapes, mutilations, decapitations) (99).

In *Violence et Corps des Femmes du Tiers-Monde*, Jacqueline des Forts records accounts collected from the daily newspaper *El Watan* of 24 January 1995, about what she calls "viols de guerre en Algérie" "war rapes in Algeria." Warda's testimony is very significant to show the relation between gendered violence in the past and in the 1990s. Warda is a seventeen-year-old girl kidnapped and sequestered in an unknown old house with about twelve other adolescent girls, who were used to cook and do the washing up among other chores, and who all were tortured and raped. In her testimony, the same images of

torture return. Warda tells about how her persecutor threatened her with a knife to cut her body, which he burnt with cigarettes before raping her; and just like Djamila, the young Warda lost consciousness while being raped. Warda tells us that though the other kidnapped girls advised her not to resist “the terrorists” to lessen her pains, she resisted and angered the menacing “terrorist,” trying to remind him that the religion he defended prohibited rape. Warda’s testimony gives account of scenes of torture entangled with her arguments with the angry “terrorist” (154).

This testimony recalls the barbarity that Djamila endured and shows that the violence the French inherited from the Nazi was reiterated in Algeria of the 1990s, where torturers were saved from “the rigors of the law.”⁶ Though Warda dared to speak about gendered violence, indifference and amnesia, which characterized the 1990s, were reinforced by an amnesty charter which saved Warda’s oppressors just as Djamila’s torturers had been saved by the Evian agreements despite De Beauvoir’s appeals. Amnesia has been reinstated with the September 29, 2005 national referendum, through which Algerians passed the “Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation that granted amnesty to nearly all terrorists and full amnesty to all agents of the state” (Le Sueur xix), despite Debar’s warnings.

When Debar expands the echo to say that the violence the French inherited from the Nazis has been transferred to Algeria, she also warns against the state of indifference towards this new violence. She describes this indifference as an “amnesia” saying that “les gens vivent, presque tous, la cire dans les oreilles: pour ne pas entendre la vibration qui persiste du feu d’hier. Pour couler plus aisément dans leur tranquille petite vie, ayant choisi l’amnésie” (People, almost all of them, live with wax in the ears: not to hear the vibration which persists from yesterday's fire. They have chosen amnesia to fit more easily into their quiet little lives) (236). Like De Beauvoir, Debar warns against the indifference and the state of amnesia towards the violence persisting in Algeria. She points to the responsibility of all, including herself, in allowing this reiteration of violence through this choice of amnesia. She points to her own responsibility for being so late in denouncing violence (239).

Here it is worth noting that the novel’s hidden polemic with De Beauvoir’s text points to the limitations of French feminism. Debar's attempt to expand the feminist appeals of De Beauvoir, silenced by the laws of amnesty, shows that French feminism is too self-centered to see the trauma of the “Other,” and it consequently betrays the very values it fights to

implement. Surprisingly enough, a feminist like De Beauvoir makes of “virginity” a key instrument in her rebellion against gendered violence. Just as surprisingly, she was duped by the politicians who adopted the amnesty laws. The humanist values of French feminism seem exclusive as they could not enclose the trauma of the Other, the psychic trauma of Djamila, whom De Beauvoir abandoned after the armistice.

De Beauvoir was relieved to see the French army retreat from Algeria, but she seems to have undervalued the fact that a retreat with amnesty involves the ignorance of the pains of Djamila and all the victims of gendered violence, whose stories were condemned to effacement under the laws of amnesty and amnesia. After Djamila’s release from jail, De Beauvoir advised that Djamila should return to her country and participate in the building of the new nation completely ignoring her pain (*Pour Djamila* 01:43:26). After the independence, Halimi requested that Djamila should withdraw her legal complaint as a consequence of the end of armed struggle (Djamila Boupacha 00:12:36). Unfortunately, the advice of both the French feminist and the lawyer and human rights activist to the Algerian revolutionary seem to encourage historical forgetfulness.

In her novel, Djébar's position toward French feminism seems implied within the text's central image, which represents the author's reflections on the dynamics of “appropriation and effacement” in relation to the legacy of imperialist history. These reflections appear in the chapter “Les oiseaux de la mosaïque” (the birds of the mosaic), through which the author exploits and modifies the canonical Homeric episode of imperialist seduction, “Ulysses and the Sirens,” depicting Ulysses seduced by singing sirens. Actually, the novel depicts a two-century old mosaic, which reproduces the Homeric episode, held in the museum of Cherchel—Césarée in the novel. This mosaic shows the sirens as beautiful women musicians on the point of flying off. The body of one of the sirens is half effaced in the mosaic. The sirens contemplate a boat where a central character, Ulysses, is tied to the mast of the boat, while a crew of two men lead the boat with wax in their ears. Ulysses seems charmed by the songs (118-119). Despite being warned against the danger of listening, he listens to the songs telling the story of imperialist violence, but he chooses to resume his voyage. Years later, De Beauvoir, like Ulysses, listened to the story of imperialist violence in the guise of Djamila’s story of torture, and like Ulysses, she chose to retreat, leaving violence behind.

Indeed, after appropriating the story of Djamila, De Beauvoir allows its effacement. The story of Djamila is inscribed through its repetition by French feminist voices within a story that repeats those same imperialist dynamics of “appropriation and effacement.” First, Djamila’s story is effaced and her lived reality distorted in a text that projects the nakedness of her body without allowing this body “to metamorphose.” In De Beauvoir’s text, the only status that Djamila is allowed is that of a victim whose voice is, even present, weak; it ultimately fades away. Secondly, through the projection of Djamila as a victim of gendered violence who could never have access to justice, the text doubly condemns her (Djamila) to effacement.

By denying agency to the Algerian revolutionary and encouraging amnesia, the French feminist distorts the feminist values she celebrates elsewhere. By defining Djamila as “virgin,” she denies her what she claims for the “woman” of her *The Second Sex*: “It is not nature that defines woman; it is she who defines herself” (65). De Beauvoir’s plea for justice ignores Djamila’s revolutionary activism, which represents the way Djamila defined herself when she chose to fight against colonialism, when she defied her persecutors verbally during the interrogations and officially through the legal complaint that she refused to withdraw after the independence despite Halimi’s advice (Djamila Boupcha 00:12:36). When she chose to be a revolutionary, Djamila knew that she was risking her life, regardless of the virginity valued by the French feminist, who elsewhere expresses her disregard to what she calls the “myth of virginity,” or “the cult of the virgin” (see *The Second Sex*). By standing in the position of the savior of the virgin, the French feminist betrays her own values. Here, Lazreg’s warning against distorting the lived reality of non-western women by western feminists who see them as ‘different’ proves relevant. Lazreg writes, “The misrepresentation of “different” women is a form of self-misrepresentation. It bespeaks a repression of one’s femaleness and glosses over the fact that the representer is also engendered and remains far from having achieved the freedom and capacity to define herself” (“Feminism” 97). Missing the opportunity to achieve freedom and self-definition despite her contact with “different” women, the French feminist ends up like the epic traveler who indifferently resumes his imperialist voyage after listening to the songs of the sirens.

Like Ulysses and De Beauvoir, the narrator of *La Femme* listens to the songs of the sirens in the guise of listening to the story of Zoulikha as told by multiple female voices, but unlike them, she returns to expand their echo. Actually, the narrator identifies with the epic

traveler many times in the novel, yet she distances herself from him, disapproving of the complicit refusal to confront the violence that the sirens echo. Like Ulysses and De Beauvoir, Djébar listens, saying: “Je l'entends, et je me trouve presque dans la situation d'Ulysse, le voyageur qui ne s'est pas bouché les oreilles de cire, sans toutefois risquer de traverser la frontière de la mort pour cela” (I can hear it, and I find myself nearly in the same situation as Ulysses, the traveler who did not plug his ears with wax, without however taking the risk to cross the border of death for this) (236). However, unlike Ulysses, who continues his imperialist voyage ignoring the violence of the place after having listened, and unlike De Beauvoir who was silenced by the laws of amnesty and amnesia, our narrator refuses to resume her voyage saying: “Je ne m'éloigne pas; je n'ai pas demandé à être immobilisée. Non!” (I am not leaving; I did not ask to be immobilized. No!) (242). Actually, unlike Ulysses and De Beauvoir who both “listen” but side with amnesia, the narrator returns to expand echoes about gendered violence within a text which is too vigilant to repeat the dynamics of “appropriation and effacement” that De Beauvoir's text knowingly or unknowingly repeats.

Djébar's revision of French feminism seems to join Lazreg's reaction against Western feminists' misappropriation of the reality of women from North Africa and the Middle East. In “Feminism and Difference,” Lazreg shows that the reality of these women has been “appropriated in one form or another by outsiders” (81) whose interest in “different” women's lives underlies a “desire to understand their own institutions better,” (87) which results in the distortion of these women's history. Following Lazreg's argument, De Beauvoir's appropriation of Djamila's story may underlie “the desire to understand [French] institutions better.” While calling for justice for Djamila, the French feminist needed to test the French legal system and its ability to achieve egalitarian universalism. She consequently needed to celebrate the superiority of French institutions, which could defy injustice and force politicians to respect justice. She dared for this cause to project the naked body of an “oriental” virgin who desperately needed salvation by a superior legal system protected by a vigilant public opinion.

De Beauvoir was indifferent to the risks Djamila took when she agreed to defy the taboos around the female body and female sexuality in a traditional society which encouraged silence about gendered violence even if the torturer was the common enemy.⁷ As opposed to the Algerian young revolutionary, the French Feminist did not take the risk to defy the taboos surrounding the deviances of a French legal system which proved vulnerable before the plans

of politicians. The French feminist chose to side with the less risky solution of amnesty and amnesia though she had previously courageously claimed "L'affaire de Djamilia Boupacha concerne tous les Français. Si le gouvernement atermoie c'est à l'opinion [...] d'exiger impérieusement le renvoi du procès de Djamilia, l'aboutissement de l'enquête qu'elle réclame, [...], et pour ses bourreaux les rigueurs de la loi" (The case of Djamilia Boupacha concerns all the French. If the government procrastinates, public opinion is to [...] imperiously demand the forwarding of the trial of Djamilia, the completion of the investigation she demands, [...], and for her executioners the rigors of the law). Her choice reinstated silence despite Djamilia's courage. Consequently, while De Beauvoir's early egalitarian appeals encouraged Djamilia to defy silence, her later retreat from her earlier humanistic egalitarian project silenced Djamilia forever.⁸

De Beauvoir's retreat from the humanistic egalitarian project was prompted by the end of the war in Algeria. Here one should mention Lazreg's questioning of the antihumanistic tendencies which emerged among French intellectuals, including some feminists following "the collapse of the French colonial empire, more specifically the end of the Algerian war" ("Feminism" 99). Lazreg wonders: "what does antihumanism offer 'different' peoples? On what grounds (moral or otherwise) can powerless people struggle against their relegation to the prison house of race, color, and nationality into which antihumanism locks them?" ("Feminism" 99). Here we wonder on what grounds the eternal victim can struggle after seeing her story relegated to silence and amnesia despite the risks she took to break the silence.

Decades later, when violence returned, Warda and a few others dared to speak about gendered violence. Warda's fiery challenges recall the strength of the Algerian woman past and present, which need to be celebrated against the silence that French feminism, in complicity with politicians, imposed. Inspired by Warda's daring defiance, and reminded of Djamilia's silenced courage, Djébar finds the most adequate way to write the story appropriated and effaced by French feminists. Zoulikha's or Djamilia's story needs to be written in its relation with Warda's.

Djébar ends her novel with an optimistic note, suggesting that despite the half effacement of the story or herstory of Zoulika, her voice and her song, standing for the herstory and voice of the Algerian revolutionary, survive. Thus we read: "L'image de

Zoulikha, certes, disparaît à demi de la mosaïque. Mais sa voix subsiste, en souffle vivace” (The image of Zoulikha certainly half disappears from the mosaic. But her voice remains, in a vivacious breadth) (242). Unlike the songs of the sirens in the Homeric poem, the story of Zoulika “n'est pas magie, mais vérité nue” (is not magical but naked truth) (242). In an earlier passage, the novel provides the reasons that allow this voice to persist. Exploiting and modifying the Homeric episode reflected in the mosaic, the narrator says that it shows “Des musiciennes prêtes à ... s'envoler” (Women musicians ready to ... fly away), then she recapitulates: “Une seule femme s'est vraiment envolée: [...] c'est Zoulikha” (a single woman has really flown [...] it is Zoulikha) (118-9). This text suggests that the only woman who can fly free from restrictions is the revolutionary woman whose voice persists and whose story can be heard though half effaced, through its repetition within narratives that misappropriate its essence.

The voice of the Algerian female freedom fighter persists. This voice, represented through the monologues of Zoulikha, metonymically stands for the voices of the women revolutionaries, who rebelled against all limits aimed to restrict their freedom. The novel shows that women rebel against the restrictions of their society before they can engage into the rebellion against colonialism. The text shows Zoulikha's defiance to the severe mores of Césarée, which impose strict rules for women's conduct including veiling and seclusion, just as they impose definite roles for women, namely the role of sacrificial mothering. Hence, these women revolutionaries rebel against the notion that they are victims who need to be saved by an imperial savior.

The power that Algerian women gained through their engagement in the war of decolonization soon weakened. The text shows this decline through parallels with the image of the women of the mosaic, who cannot fly away even if they seem ready. The hopes of the Algerian woman to fly free from restrictions were dashed, like the hopes of the narrator contemplating the mosaic: “Je me disais, [...]: Elles vont s'envoler; c'est sûr, ces femmes de la ville: avec leur chant et leur légèreté! Or (et je m'attriste, tout haut) la torpeur, depuis 1962, s'est réinstallée écrasante: on la sent dans les rues, dans les patios” (I thought, [...]: They will fly; sure, the women of the city with their singing and lightness! Yet (and I grieve aloud) torpor, since 1962, has been reinstalled overwhelmingly: we can feel it in the streets, in patios) (119). The hopes of Algerian women to fly free were dashed by torpor and by the dreadful silencing of the spirit of rebellion and freedom in postcolonial Algeria. Despite the

silencing, the novel allows hope for the Algerian woman in contemporary Algeria to rise against torpor and to take cues from the history of rebellious women about how to rebel.

Djebar distances her text from French feminism and its humanist overtones underscored by the victimization of women, and she sets a path for Algerian feminism, which undertakes the task of rewriting history. This history emphasizes the strength of women and the capacity of a woman's body to overcome pain, "to metamorphose." It undermines the projection of pain to provoke false empathy, or to appease the guilty conscience of French feminists. This feminism detaches itself from French feminist attempts to sell images of Algerian women's bodies, whether these are the metonymic images of the electrified body of young tortured Djamila or the images of victimized womanhood projected elsewhere about the oppression of women in culture.⁹

Djebar sets the foundation of a feminism that underscores the strength of Algerian womanhood. This feminism strengthens women with voices that rise "dans chaque lieu où se sont entremêlés peur et attente, audace et, hélas, crime sauvage dans l'ombre" (in every space where fear and expectation, audacity and, alas, wild crimes in shade intertwine) (242). This feminism refuses silence, amnesia and the appropriation and effacement of history to serve "the interests of a male elite", to use the words of Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi (ix). This feminism allows no bargaining aimed to delay women's need to "fly" free from restrictions for the sake of achieving a national "freedom" or maintaining "social peace." This feminism calls for a metamorphosis through a new rebellion against sacrificial roles; it calls on women to achieve "duties complemented by rights." This feminism relies on the complicity between mothers and daughters, which the text underscores, emphasizing the need for postcolonial women to strengthen relations with the inspiring women who witnessed colonial turmoil. This feminism calls for rebellion, and the novel finds in the Berber and Islamic heritage of Algeria, multiple examples. Djebar cites the rebellion of the legendary Berber queen Kahina, "notre reine des Aurès," (our queen of the Aures mountains) (78). She reminds her readers of the female Berber fighters whom the French soldiers called "Amazones." Indifferent to this prejudice, these women defied the enemy who wondered, "quel est donc ce peuple, pour avoir de telles femmes?" (who are these people to have such women?) (136).

In other instances, the text calls for inspiration from the rebelliousness of Muslim women like Lalla Fatima, the cherished daughter of the Prophet Mohammed, and her female progeny. In a conversation between the narrator and the daughters of Zoulikha, Hania, the eldest daughter, affirms that “Zoulikha [...] doit sa première force, dans sa jeunesse, à son père ! Après tout, c’est la tradition de l’islam : avec Lalla Fatima et son père, notre prophète qui a eu beaucoup de filles, ce sont les fils de Fatima qui furent suppliciés et les filles de Fatima qui déroulèrent une parole de reproche et de révolte, devant tous !” (Zoulikha [...] owes her first force in her youth to her father. After all, it is the tradition of Islam: with Lalla Fatima and her father, our prophet who had many daughters; it is the sons of Fatima who were slaughtered and the daughters of Fatima who uttered the word of reproach and revolt, in front of all!) (150).

Mernissi writes about rebellious women in the history of Islam such as Aisha and Umm Salama, the most eloquent and politically aware among the prophet’s wives. They rebelled against the silencing of women and asked the prophet to protect women’s rights against a “male elite,” composed of misogynist religious men as well as politicians. Mernissi also informs us about the rebelliousness of the most famous among the daughters of Fatima, Sukayna, “one of the great-granddaughters of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima,” known for her “revolt against political, oppressive, despotic Islam and against everything that hinders the individual's freedom” (192).

The feminism underscored in the novel claims agency and empowerment to represent Algerian womanhood against overtones of victimization and celebratory attempts of salvation underscored by French feminism and against emphasis on women’s sacrificial roles defended by nationalists. Through such claims, this feminism responds to postcolonial feminism especially as represented by Gayatri Chakravory Spivak. Firstly, Djébar’s inscription of the history of the revolutionary within a tradition which celebrates rebellion and defiance against restrictions emphasizes the agency and the empowerment claimed by Spivak and other postcolonial feminists as necessary for the representation of non-western womanhood.¹⁰ Additionally, the text’s attempts to recover the forgotten, the lost words of Zoulikha, through the questioning of discourses of victimization and discourses of idealization reminds of Spivak’s own quest of the history of *sati*—widow sacrifice—lost between patriarchal discourse advocating women’s sacrificial roles and colonial discourse of self-praise for the salvation of victimized Indian womanhood (1992 103-104). Similarly, Djébar’s recuperation

of the lost words of Zoulikha through investigating backward and forward, reminds of Spivak's search for the voice of the subaltern through investigating backward in the pre-texts defining *sati* then forward through tracing the story of the modern young freedom fighter Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, who disguises her activism in an act of widow sacrifice (1992, 104). Finally, Djébar's questioning of French feminism underlying the polemical response of her text to De Beauvoir's misappropriation of the story of gendered violence seems to join Spivak's own critique of French feminism and its claim to speak for all women (1981).

To conclude, the analysis of Djébar's rewriting of the history of gendered violence, focused on demonstrating the polemical response of Djébar's *La Femme* to De Beauvoir's "Pour Djamila Boupacha" has enabled us to explore historical experiences as well as literary engagements. The fictional rewriting of the story of gendered violence allows the recovery of much of what was forgotten about Algerian women's lived reality, distorted in historiographical projects, which appropriated this reality to allow its effacement. To recover the effaced, the rewriting of this story is achieved through careful investigations backward and forward. The novel's attempts to recover the words of the tortured martyr, inscribed in invented monologues, is achieved through questioning texts collected from colonial historiography—as De Beauvoir's "Pour Djamila Boupacha"—and through investigating forwards the reasons of the reiteration of colonial violence in postcolonial Algeria.

Reading dialogically has, we hope, allowed refuting the prejudiced representations of Algerian womanhood focused on victimization as De Beauvoir's text which, though written to save the life of the tortured freedom fighter, silenced her forever and relegated her story to effacement. This reading has, we also hope, permitted insight into Djébar's feminist tendencies. Djébar's feminism finds sources in Algerian history and Islam even if the language used to write these preoccupations is the language of De Beauvoir, whose representation of gendered violence, is polemically echoed in *La Femme*. Djébar's feminism detaches itself from French feminism and its overtones of victimization and historical forgetfulness. It, nonetheless, sustains a different feminist perspective, namely postcolonial feminism, which claims the need to overcome historical amnesia through the rewriting history with focus on female agency and empowerment.

¹For more information about the violence of the 1990s, see Youcef Bedjaoui, Abbas Arroua, Meziane Ait-Larbi, eds, *An Inquiry into the Algerian Massacres* and Benjamin Staura, *La Guerre Invisible*.

² In *Postcolonial Haunting and Victimization*, Michael F. O'Riley explores the link between colonial and contemporary violence in Algeria in Djébar's New Novels including *La Femme*.

³ All translations from French texts quoted in this article are the author's.

⁴ Most of De Beauvoir's positions towards the colonial war in Algeria are expressed in her autobiography *Force of Circumstance*, where she incriminates the French who turned into persecutors after having themselves been victims of Nazi oppression.

⁵ In *The Eloquence*, chapters 7 and 8, Lazreg analyses in detail the role of women in the decolonization struggle as well as the complexities of the relationship between gender and the FLN leadership during the war and after independence.

⁶ This phrase is taken from "Pour Djamila Boupacha" where De Beauvoir claimed "les rigueurs de la loi" to punish Djamila's torturers.

⁷ Louise Ighilahriz, the Algerian combatant testifies that her mother made her promise never to speak about the violence she endured while in prison. See "Tortured Bodies" (110).

⁸ After a long silence, Djamila Boupacha reacted against the misappropriation of her story by Halimi through her book, *Djamila Boupacha*, and also by the producer Caroline Huppert, through the telefilm "Pour Djamila" based on the book. Yet despite her criticism of Halimi and Huppert, she does not show any will to recall the courts against those who used her personal history for self-serving purposes. See "جميلة بوباشة" 'Djamila Boupacha' 00:12:36).

⁹ I refer to the prejudiced projection of what De Beauvoir calls "Moslem woman" and describes as "a slave" in *The Second Sex*, "The veiled and sequestered Moslem woman is still today in most social strata a kind of slave" (108).

¹⁰ For more information about postcolonial feminism see Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, eds, *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*.

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