Assia Djebar's Women and Their Multiform Love

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When feelings are involved –when individuals *feel*
as opposed to *think* they are committed—and when
those feelings are infused with self-reflexive truths
as well as some sort of moral authority, actions
become fully politicized.
Patricia Hill Collins (*Fighting Words* 244)

Love is, after all, language-less, needing
greater faculties and facilities than language can offer; love does
not forgo language but perhaps works to create a language
that is less crippled by mastery, something subtler,
more intimate and precise, more clean.
Kevin E. Quashie (*Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory* 170-71)

From *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* until her last work, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, the impact of French colonization on Algerian society, particularly on Algerian women, will progressively become Djebar's analytical framework within which she explores human relationships. The latter emerge from multilayered interactions where the emotional sphere is inevitably forged by the social and the historical one. First and foremost, female characters usually have the courage and vital force to break social inertia and traditions and to experiment alternative ways of connecting with themselves and with people around them. Standing out against Algerian society's stagnation and manifested in different forms, such as dignity, affection, attachment, passion, pleasure, tenderness, solidarity, charity, devotion or self-connection, the female energy often unfolds in terms of love, moving towards connection and belonging. The underpinning of all these types is the female characters' life force reaching out and creating alternative forms of bonding. The latter undermine both the introjected colonial system of dichotomized

relationships and the internalized self-hatred and fragmentation that often come with colonial reality.

In this essay, I will analyze in particular the meaning of love as interrelatedness, as it manifests in "La nuit du récit de Fatima," a story added to the 2002 edition of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, and love as self-connection as expressed in *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*. This choice comes from the desire to show how this "rapport fondateur" that Djebar's writing maintains with grief and death implies a parallel movement towards love and connection.[1] Because "La nuit du récit de Fatima" was published twenty-two years after the first edition of *Femmes d'Alger*, it is interesting to see how different Djebar's approach is to the relationship between women, past memories and war. Moreover, although in *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, to use Mireille Calle-Gruber's words, "on peut mesurer la peine de l'écriture," one can also witness a self-reflection on internalized self-hatred that becomes the manifesto of self-compassion and love (13). In this context, I will use the word 'love' to describe a multiform life force that moves female characters to connect over fear, alienation and opposition; sometimes towards self-understanding, and most of the time toward compassion and relatedness.

If love, and above all romantic love, has been a recurrent theme of literature throughout the past ages, this century has also brought a renewed interest in understanding the nature of it. From very different perspectives, disciplines such as social psychology, philosophy, literary criticism, gender studies, sociology, theology and evolutionary biology are inquiring about definitions of love and its multidisciplinary intersections and impacts. Because love has the characteristic of being both largely recognized as a 'universal' emotion and locally influenced by social codes, it takes different forms and needs to be understood in its cultural and historical context. The scenario becomes more complicated in colonial and postcolonial societies as well as in conditions of exile and migration. In these situations, people's original values and emotions are subjected to confrontation with the new ones and often to reinterpretations, revisions and adjustments.

Concerning love, in 2000, bell hooks underlines how: "Affection is only one ingredient of love. To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (5). She also notices the following: "In popular culture love is always the stuff of fantasy. Maybe this is why men have done most of the theorizing about love. Fantasy has primarily been their domain, both in the sphere of cultural production and in everyday life. Male fantasy is seen as something that can create reality, whereas female fantasy is regarded as pure escape" (xxiii). Hooks' attention to this preconceived idea that male fantasy is the only one able to create reality is crucial to the understanding

[1] In the "Introduction" of *L'Esprit Créateur* 48, 4 (2008), Anne Donadey underlines how Mireille Calle-Gruber, Carine Bourget, Françoise Lionnet as well as herself, all stress in their articles: "le rapport fondateur que l'écriture djebarienne entretient avec le deuil et la mort" (3).

of past and present difficulties for women to link female's nurturing love to social transformation. In addition, the relationship between love and women is a controversial terrain that has been historically manipulated by religious and political forces. Traditionally and empirically, because of maternity, love for women is bound to self-sacrifice, altruism and self-denial. Understanding how love could be misused or misread when referred to women, Kevin Quashie underlines: "love, like language, is a conundrum especially because its predominant social narrative limits women's agency, demanding selflessness and thwarting self-achievement" (171). Although the thinking in terms of self-achievement is a privilege of women benefiting from geographical location or class, we can surely state that: first, love is politically charged and gender connoted; and second, for women love seems to collide with self, and above all with self-respect, a topic dramatically revealed, as we will see, in Djebar's last autobiographical work. Furthermore, women's lack of self-respect interferes with the possibility of creating female bonds and solidarity, a notion often problematic in Assia Djebar.

In 1979, at the Second Sex Conference in New York, Audre Lorde brilliantly stated that it is only within the patriarchal frame that limited interpretations of women's nurturing and love are validated and enforced. In that conference, criticizing the absence of papers on lesbians and 'Third World' women's mutuality, interdependence and shared-support systems, she emphasized the following:

> Yet it is only in the patriarchal model of nurturance that women 'who attempt to emancipate themselves pay perhaps too high a price for the results,' as this paper states. For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women. Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative.[2] (111)

In this passage, it is paramount for Lorde to subtract the female "need and desire to nurture each other" from the patriarchal system of interpretation and evaluation. In so doing, what the patriarchy constructs as a form of female physical or mental disease, which needs to be feared, can be reevaluated as a source of power, the power of women (re)gaining possession of themselves and of their most intimate desire: to be authentically connected. This knowledge allows women to unfold all their potential in society. In the essay "Uses of the Erotic as Power," Lorde will further

[2] Originally presented during the Second Sex Conference in New York in 1979 with the title "The Personal and the Political Panel," this article has then been published in 1984 in *Sister Outsider* and titled "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."

develop the meaning of female "real power."[3] Going beyond patriarchal and religious interpretations of maternity as a reproductive act feeding their exploitative systems, "real connection" and "social power" need to be understood as care and support for the growth and development of both the self and the other. Finally, because of the authenticity of this connection, the transformation from "the *I* to *be*" will be possible, which is to say the revolution from isolation to the recognition of reciprocal needs and the conversion from passivity to self-awareness. Real connection will eventually make possible the implementation of social and political change on the base of interdependency, the latter nowadays recognized as the most intrinsic necessity for global societies' survival.

Since Lorde's presentation, constructive discussions among women around the world, leading to the development of transnational movements, have followed. At the end of the '90s, recalling Lorde's words about feelings that arouse women to action, Patricia Hill Collins believes that: "Ideas that engage this deep love, caring and commitment can energize people and move them to struggle" (243). However, she also expresses concern about the capitalist marketplace's manipulation of women's erotic power, for this has been and still is routinely sexualized and "the strength of deeply felt love" also "feared" (243). Associating fear, love and connection, hooks reminds us that on a personal level: "When we choose to love we choose to move against fear – against alienation and separation" (93). To this end, one of the most prominent issues discussed among women in the last thirty years is how to conceive and construct forms of solidarity and connection at the base of women's diversities, in order to impact society. In 2002, Chandra Talpade Mohanty revises her most famous article "Under Western Eyes" and rethinks feminist solidarity in terms of "a political as well as ethical goal" that needs to be defined "in terms of mutuality, accountability and the recognition of common interests" (3, 7).[4]

In 2005, continuing from Lorde, Jacqui Alexander further explains the meaning of both connection and interdependency in societies that have been colonized. She states that the practice of decolonization succeeds whenever it is able to envision a space of connection and belonging that transcends federations, nations, communities, groups and families. This space can only be found in a sacred and spiritual connection and interdependency that is within us but that transcends the individual. Understanding how to relate to and evolve in interdependency is then the most successful path for social transformation and emotional healing, that "can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment" (281-82).

[3] *Sister Outsider*, 53-59.

[4] Concerning this topic, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty. *Feminism Without Borders. Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham & London : Duke University Press, 2003, and in particular ch. 9, "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles," originally published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 28 no. 2 (2002): 499-535.

In 2006, commenting on women's solidarity, Jane Hiddleston notices the similarities between Nawal El Saadawi's notion of solidarity, stressing: "the need for a unity created over and above particular differences," and Assia Djebar's "'feminist' project" locating: "common experiences while also stressing dissimilarities, conflicts and differences. Complicity and solidarity between women is reflected at the same time as disidentification and dissent" (85, 88). If solidarity in Djebar does not translate into an unproblematic sorority, as Hiddleston underlines, the attention then should be on the multiplicity and varieties of solidarities that the author uncovers. In both "La nuit du récit de Fatima" and *Nulle part* solidarity takes a step forward toward nurturing and supporting self and other: in the first, it moves towards love as interconnectedness and interdependence between men and women, in the second, toward love as self-connection.

Love as Interrelatedness: "La nuit du récit de Fatima"

> I am incomplete and unreal without other women.
> I am profoundly dependent on others without having to be
> their subordinate, their slave, their servant.
> María Lugones (*Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* 83)

As has already been remarked, in *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* women's solidarity expresses itself as both dialogue and oral transmission among different generations of women. In addition, as the author emphasizes in the *Ouverture*, "La nuit du récit de Fatima" has the central role of supporting and enlightening solidarity among women: "Ce récit le plus récent, placé juste après l'ouverture du recueil, je souhaiterais qu'il soit comme une lampe sur ce seuil, pour éclairer la solidarité de toute parole féminine, notre survie" (10). Asking Assia Djebar about the reediting of *Femmes d'Alger*, Carine Bourget reports that the reason for the 2002 edition originated from the new publishing company's request to ameliorate the quality of the old paperback edition by also adding an unpublished short story, which Djebar wrote in 2000 (92).

Without discounting the *Ouverture* variations that Bourget analyzes in detail to notice how, twenty years later, Djebar's tone is much more pessimistic, the added story's purpose offers a more nurturing way of talking about past traumas and solidarity (94). First of all, that uneasiness of recalling traumatic experiences from the war and the resulting fragmentation of the narrative structure that Hiddleston punctuates, gives way here to a narrative-thread the unifies all characters in their effort and willingness to tell the story (61-63). In addition, although the recalling of traumatic past creates anxiety, and for this reason is often displaced and told by somebody else that witnessed it, narrators clearly refuse to evoke past violence or loss and choose to remember events fostering love and connection. A third element of interest is that both colonial internalized self-fragmentation and female subjugation to patriarchal rules surface in

narrators' consciousness and are sublimated in some way through irony. Last, the whole story is about interconnectedness and reciprocity.

In "La nuit du récit de Fatima," Fatima begins recalling the circumstances of her parents first encounter. At the end of World War I, after fighting in the French army, Algerian Toumi comes back home. He meets the young Arbia and asks her brothers to marry her but these last refute the offer. With the blessing of Arbia's mother Magdouda, Toumi and Arbia decide to escape. Arbia will be repudiated and forbidden to see her mother again. One year later she will conceive Fatima. Longing for a son that will never come, when Arbia's brother Hassan, now a widower, asks her for help with his son Ali, she is very happy to accept. Arbia's decision will make it possible to see her mother again and to be reconnected to her family, after four years of separation. Fatima thus grows up with Ali, and when she is fourteen, her father Toumi marries her to thirty-five year-old officer Kacem. One year later, in 1936, Fatima gets pregnant. In the same year, Ali abruptly leaves home to secretly join the navy; Fatima thus decides to give her first son Mohammed to her mother as a gift, to console her of Ali's loss. Fatima's narration ends with her second son Nadir's birth in 1941. Her daughter-in-law Anissa continues the narration describing the departure of her mother Taos to the Balearic Islands after Algerian independence, her encounter with Nadir at the university and her announcement to Fatima of her pregnancy. To be able to finish her studies, Anissa decides to accept Fatima's help for taking care of her daughter Meriem. As the relationship between Nadir and Anissa starts to deteriorate, in spite of Nadir's opposition, Anissa decides to secretly leave Algeria with Meriem and to reach her mother in the Balearic Islands.

The narration in itself is the string that creates bonds among characters. It takes figuratively the shape of a thread –"le premier fil" – that later on becomes a silver and at times ebony thread glowing in the night; this last image functioning as a metaphor of a shining tie marking existence in connection (13, 33).[5] This short story is structured in five chapters. Spanning at least over two nights, the first four chapters, "*Le rapt*," "*Le petit frère*," "*L'école*" and "*L'enfant à donner*," are told by Fatima to Anissa, her young daughter-in-law. During these four narrations Fatima is not the only one recounting. Her father Toumi and her mother Arbia, the latter narrating to Fatima and Ali the story of their grandmother Magdouda, intervene in it. At the end of the fourth narration there is a clear caesura punctuated by: a change in time, the dawn approaches, Anissa's introduction of herself and her annunciation to take over the narration from Fatima: "*Mais c'est à mon tour de plonger, non dans le récit, plutôt dans une confession ordinaire*" (39, 40).

About the transition from "*récit*" to "*confession ordinaire*," one can speculate that it marks the passage from international historical events into private ones. It can also stand as a metaphor of the change from an historical period with stronger political

[5] One cannot avoid seeing the association between this glowing thread and the image of the "lampe" shading light on solidarity, referred to "La nuit du récit de Fatima" in the *Ouverture* (10).

activism, ideals, and expectations to one the post-independent characterized by the stagnation of Algerian society, which makes a story ordinary. After this caesura one expects Anissa to take charge of the narration; instead Nadir starts recalling his memories about the first time he met his brother Mohammed. We learn that Nadir, during Fatima's recounting, has always been asleep and physically close to the two women; he then awakes at dawn to take over his mother's narration: "à cet instant, Fatima rentre, constate que Nadir la relaie dans la narration du passé" (42). In the fifth part, "*L'enfant à donner de nouveau?*," after Nadir's reminiscence, Anissa recounts the last year of her relationship with Nadir from the time Meriem was born until their departure.

The bond the narration generates is so tight and deep that it brings discomfort to both Fatima and Anissa, these last repeating: "le récit est exigeant," to accentuate the responsibility deriving from it (33, 45). Fatima feels at times caught and swallowed up by the narration while Anissa has the impression of being squeezed and imprisoned by it (26, 45). In addition, as soon as Fatima's memories bring back her misfortunes, anxiety comes back in the form of sticky bats or crows' wings she needs to fight to keep the story going (33-34). Nonetheless and despite this uneasiness, both women continue their narration and help each other to carry it on: when Fatima progressively loses energies and interest in continuing her story, Anissa will take over. This time it is Anissa sharing her memories with Fatima by introducing her mother Taos and some details about how she met her son Nadir.

By remembering her deceased brother Mohammed, Nadir too contributes to the narration and establishes a nurturing bond with him, his mother and his spouse. Nadir retells his story in the cozy atmosphere of an early morning in her mother's house, surrounded by the love of Fatima and his pregnant wife Anissa. Warm honey donuts that Fatima expressly prepares for him add to the sheltered setting. As soon as Nadir starts to approach his traumatic memory Anissa will take over his narration: "La suite, conclut-il car il ne veut plus advancer dans ce passé, tu la connais, Anissa!" (44).[6] If for all characters the thread of the narration constitutes the trace of their existence in connection, the story in itself is a gift of trust that nourishes and transforms one another. The narrator, by telling her story, reaffirms bonding and affiliation and the listener, by receiving the story, begins to feel connected. Both create an enduring legacy witnessing interconnectedness over loss. In this context, interconnection means also interdependency because without helping each other and being in the presence of the other the narration would probably end.

Furthermore, even though no character in this novel is exempt from grief, each of them decides to stress past events nourishing their connection, which is also why Fatima ends her narration in 1941 and Anissa starts hers after the independence. The

[6] From Anissa we know that as a combatant during the Algerian resistance, Nadir had been wounded and probably witnessed his brother's death fighting in the *maquis*; he then spent the rest of the war of independence in the infamous *Barberousse* prison in Algiers.

first episode Fatima chose to narrate, announced by a somber title, *Le rapt*, and an equally somber introduction, "par quoi commencer de mes malheurs," surprises for it uncovers her parents' story of love (13). In their first encounter she describes, ironically, the power of the gaze, usually associated in Djebar's work to voyeurism, possession, power an objectification, it expresses here equality and correspondence between Toumi and Arbia and irreversible attraction and love at first sight: "Ils se regardèrent dans les yeux . . . Ils s'étaient reconnus . . . et ils se fixaient longuement" (16-17). Despite her family's repudiation, Arbia will have the blessing of Magdouda, which will strengthen the connection between mother and daughter. Mother-daughter's bond is the leitmotiv of this novel: from Magdouda to Arbia it will continue between Arbia and Fatima as well as between Anissa and her mother Taos.

In addition, at the core of "La nuit du récit de Fatima," and under very different circumstances, there are two episodes emphasizing interdependence and a sense of communal reciprocity. In the first, Hassan, no longer able to look after his son Ali, asks his sister to take care of him, confident that Arbia will love Ali as if he was her own son. Toumi and Arbia's consensual decision to keep Ali will increase cohesion and trust among members of the two families; it will make possible the transformation of Hassan who now respects and values his sister, the reconciliation of the two families, the reunion of Magdouda and Arbia and the enhancement of trust, respect and love among all of them. The episode of Toumi coming back home and hearing the desperate crying of little baby Ali for the first time is a perfect example. Following that cry, he reaches the room and sees 'the' scene: surrounded by Hassan's two little sons playing together, his wife Arbia sits on the floor holding on her lap Ali and softly reassuring him with a tireless and patient voice; close to Arbia is her mother Magdouda, who she has not seen in four years, and both women are softened up by the joy of their reunion and the presence of these children. Remembering that picture of harmony, peace and love, Toumi recalls his own emotions of tenderness and twice repeats: "'J'ai senti mon cœur bondir'!" (24).

In the second episode, Fatima gives her first son Mohammed to her mother Arbia to console her of Ali's loss. At age fifteen, Fatima offers Mohammed as a pure gift of love, unconditioned and only motivated by the desire of making her mother happy again: "je pensais sincèrement qu'ainsi, cela lui comblerait le vide laissé par mon frère Ali" (35). As time goes by, Fatima's desire to support and nurture her mother will prevail and prevent her from asking Mohammed back. Anissa's discomfort in giving Meriem to the care of her mother-in-law Fatima needs to be analyzed from a different perspective. Anissa's insistence on parental duties – "Toi et Moi, nous sommes, nous, les responsables de notre enfant!" (50) – and her progressive anxiety toward patriarchal codes, marks a transition to a different historical period, after independence, where old values are questioned and new ones are hard to apply.

Finally, in some way through irony, both Nadir and Fatima are able to sublimate their painful recollections. Anissa, in describing Nadir says: "Il utilise toujours un ton

ironique jusqu'à sembler provocateur, surtout quand il rappelle des souvenirs, toujours par fragments, de son temps du maquis comme de celui de la prison," and Fatima pursues: "—Nadir, c'est pour cela qu'on l'aime! . . . Il tourne tout en plaisanterie, surtout quand on risque d'être noyé par le chagrin !" (41-42). Many times Fatima uses irony to distance herself from patriarchal traditions such as her mother's desire for a son or the paternal decision to marry her at 14 (19, 33). Nadir laughs bitterly describing himself as a product of the colonial alienation (43). Finally, the whole story is about interconnectedness, and reciprocity: besides the mother-daughter bond, one can witness the father-daughter tie between Toumi and Fatima, and the mother-son connection between Arbia and Mohammed as well as between Fatima and Nadir.

Love as Self-Connection: *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*

> Truth as ritual encountering, a continued practice of self-regard and clarity, a perception, a discernment,
> an analysis and response, a process that any human body can and must engage.
> Kevin E. Quashie (*Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory* 173)

> Toutes ces années derrière toi, tu vieillis
> ou seulement tu avances, seule, à tâtons, intrépide ou
> superbement ignorante. Ignorante de tout, sauf de tes pulsions.
> Assia Djebar (*Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* 394)

Djebar's last work, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, exceeds every expectation in terms of both autobiography and political engagement. Previously introduced in *L'Amour, la fantasia*, the narrator recasts her attempted suicide at age seventeen, contextualizing it now in all its social and political complexity (129-130). Declaring to be also the author and the reader of herself, the narrator witnesses and denounces her internalized self-hatred as the effect of multilayered and intermingled processes of patriarchal oppression. By revealing the interconnections between the paternalistic colonial order, the Algerian patriarchal society, the paternal condemnation, and her suicide attempt, she lucidly displays the devastating social effects of hate on women. On the one hand, the novel dramatically represents the idea of no return and placelessness for the narrator and by extension, for Algerian women; on the other hand, by exposing her deeper feelings and her most vulnerable self, the narrator's process of self-discovery becomes also one of self-connection from where to restart building a more truthful self.

Generally, in Djebar's work, the concept of home as origin and belonging is problematic and that one of home as a safe place is almost absent. Female characters often start to define their identity elsewhere or in their back and forth between their country and the outside. They are usually characterized by a necessity of escaping, a

propelling life force reacting against their societal passivity and stagnation. In search of something that they do not know yet, the character of the *fugitive* uses the foreign space to understand herself, out of reach of the gaze of her compatriots and the oppressive traditions. Between the space of New York and Paris, in this autobiography too, the narrator is in search of something that the reader will understand at the very end of the novel: she is looking for the reason(s) why she attempted suicide. By revisiting all her past, the narrator progressively makes the reader understand how at the core of both her life and her generation, there is a dichotomous perception of reality, mirroring an equally internal opposition. In the narrative, the rupture is metaphorically represented by a section in italics, the *Intermède* [Interlude] that stands in the table of contents on its own, without any numeration. It is there to mark a split or a pause, to indicate a difference with what goes before and after. It is there to denote a refusal of integration. One can read:

> *Qui dit que la 'colonie', c'est forcément un terrain vierge où s'installent et s'aventurent des pionniers-impatients de construire à vide, à neuf et pour tous ? Non, la colonie c'est d'abord un monde divisé en deux : 'nous qui construisons parce que nous avons détruit' (pas tout, mais presque tout !) et 'ce qui reste d'avant' (avant nous et avant nos destructions, nos combats traînant dans leur sillage un souvenir supposé glorieux). 'Cela' nous regarde, anonyme, depuis l''avant'- car le Temps s'est fracturé, il y a une durée, une histoire pour les uns, une autre pour les autres.* (35)

Because of the colonizer's initial act of negation of the colonized, negation symbolized by the invention of the colony as an empty space to invade, an irreversible rupture happens between the colonized and his homeland. The idea of colony as untouched and uncontaminated space, where indigenous people are invisible presences, is the base upon which the colonizer's practice of irresponsibility is formed.

The colonizer's irresponsibility leaves the colonized with the burden of its consequences. For this reason, the colonized is automatically situated in a context of self-destruction. He destroys and alienates himself sustained by the illusion of having to reclaim a masculine idea of past glory and heroism. In reality, this past, the ruins of today, becomes anonymous, without name. For the link between the colonized and his own past has been severed by the first act of negation of the colonizer. Since then, the rupture is permanent because the value of time has changed: it is no longer indefinite; it now has duration with a beginning and an end. Time is now history with a dichotomous value for the two parties.

The narration continues: "*Depuis l''avant' et pour plus tard, pour ceux qui ne seront les enfants ni des uns ni des autres… La colonie est un monde sans héritiers, sans héritage. Les enfants des deux bords ne vivront pas dans la maison de leurs pères !*" (35). In a colony there are neither heirs nor heritage, that is to say a future and a past, because the colony tears off every bond the indigenous has. The psychological split between the child and his homeland

starts as a spatial rupture. The child's heritage will thus be one of resentment, amnesia and desire to run away. The colony's devastating outcomes affect all realities: "*La colonie, la division elle l'enfante : elle est inscrite dans son corps, chacun des sexes est divisé, chacun de sa postérité est-écartelé, chacun de ses cadavres ou de ses aînés est renié !*" (35). The verb 'enfanter,' to give birth to, which evokes the image of a mother that creates and feeds her children, reveals the dark side of a mother reproducing divisions, hatred, death and madness. Division infiltrates as a poison first, as lack of understanding between men and women, that is to say within families and couples; then, it penetrates as oppression between generations, in terms of lineage and future; lastly, at the social level as alienation and denial among human beings.

Little by little, in a circular motion, after the colonial system, the narrator attacks the Algerian patriarchal order, namely her own father. In Djebar's autobiography as well as in her interviews, one of the most recurrent themes is one of her gratitude towards her father, allowing her to study and to go into the public space unveiled. Already present in both *Vaste est la Prison* and *Ombre Sultane*, in *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* the cracks on the idealized figure of the father-liberator and the father-emancipator break out.[7] Progressively, new aspects of his personality emerge, such as violence, harshness, severity, mistrust and bigotry toward his daughter, helping the reader to understand the self-destructive dynamics that colonization put in motion. In the previous autobiographical works, the recurrent image of the daughter going to school hand in hand with her father, symbolizing the daughter's complicity, love, respect, gratitude and emancipation, here is absent. Going home from school, the father let her daughter walk in front of him, because in his village an Arab man is not supposed to show tenderness: "Il me laisse marcher toute seule, en le précédant. Il ne me prend pas la main . . . . Je marche les yeux baissés. . . . moi devant, en jupe plissée, et lui derrière" (86, 88).

There is no recrimination or accusation in her tone, but a progressive understanding of the self-denial process:

> Je me demande : est-ce que toute société de femmes vouées à l'enfermement ne se retrouve pas condamnée d'abord de l'intérieur des divisions inéluctablement aiguisées par une rivalité entre prisonnières semblables ?... Ou est-ce là que se dissipe ce rêve : l'amour paternel … à l'image, dans notre culture islamique, du Prophète, qui n'eut que des filles (… la dernière, seule à lui survivre, se retrouvant dépossédée de l'héritage paternel, en souffrira au point d'en mourir. Je pourrais presque l'entendre soupirer, à mi-voix : 'Nulle part, hélas, nulle part dans la maison de mon père !'). (207)

[7] Different versions of the same paternal rage's episode against the daughter recur in *Vaste est la prison* (265) and *Ombre sultane* (145-148).

In this passage, to the division caused by colonization, the narrator adds the internal one between women, whose rivalry originates from religious and patriarchal codes reinforcing each other reciprocally. What women share is oppression and lack of freedom that put them one against the other and further alienate them from both their men and their own country.

This situation clearly recalls Nawal El Saadawi's question in 2006, at The Seventh International Conference of Arab Women Solidarity Association, when she asks her audience: "When a woman is her own enemy, what can we do?" (24). To this question El Saadawi answers by reaffirming values like solidarity as well as women's awareness and creativity:

> To fight against neocolonialism and fundamentalist movements, women must join hands, think and act together, and network. To mitigate or overcome their differences, women need awareness, a true consciousness, creativity, and inventiveness … We women and men at this conference are united in our opposition to the antagonism between East and West, between South and North, and among whites, coloreds, and blacks that we have inherited from colonial history. We reject the idea that there is no meeting ground for women and men … We believe that change is the essence of life, that our creativity and social action will re-create our world. (26, 31)

Because of El Saadawi's stress on solidarity based on diversity, although she does not explain what she means by 'awareness,' one can infer that it stands for understanding of both self and differences. In addition, awareness and consciousness could also be related with women's knowledge of historical and political systems of oppressions and exploitation. Awareness and consciousness find their perfect complementariness in creativity and inventiveness, the latter to be applied in society as tools for alternative perspectives, perceptions and solutions.

Undoubtedly, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* is a novel about female awareness. From the moment the narrator observes a picture of herself at seventeen, close to her first boyfriend who will become her husband and abuser, she notices how her expression lacks life and her smile is absent and vague. In a progression of anamnesis, recollection, and re-patching fragments of memories together, she associates her paternal repression – paternal understood here in the larger sense of father-patriarch – to her real father and to death and thus reenacts her suicide attempt. In so doing, she eventually arrives to her first truth: "Je me suis engloutie à force de m'être tue" (385). This silence within herself is the first sign of neglect of herself, of her feelings and needs, which will feed the germ of self-denial. Once the narrator's introspective journey is concluded, one can start seeing how behind her personal self-denial stands that of

Algerian women, and behind this latter that of Algerian men, whose patriarchal and religious systems' rigidity helps them to also survive against the colonizer's first disavowal: all linked, all accomplices and partners in crime. Eventually, the narrator's process of self-discovery becomes one of self-connection from where to restart building a more truthful self. At the end of the novel, the final space of silence, which is a space of contemplation and meditation on herself and her past, becomes also her place of connection: "Enfin le silence. Enfin toi seule et ta mémoire ouverte!" (398).

Finally, the novel is about love and creativity, too. The chapter titled "*Lettres dites 'd'amour,'*" describes the first letters exchanged between the narrator and her first boyfriend, letters already introduced in *L'Amour, la fantasia* (71-76). Differently from the latter, where the narrator's stress was on the cultural transgression of communicating with a man and receiving a letter from him, one can find here what the narrator envisions as love. To start with, the title ironically introduces cultural differences in expressing and conceiving love, differences that are first perceived in terms of sounds and rhythms between languages. To the French translation of the first Arabic poetry that Tarik sends her, the narrator thus reacts: "je me mis à lire, le cœur battant, les vers en arabe … Je parcourus aussi la traduction française … Après quoi s'insinua en moi une légère insatisfaction" (285).

Later on, difference takes the shape of discrepancies between Tarik and her way of conceiving love. She is disappointed because of his poetry's choice: she finds *el Khansa*'s verses boring and her style comparable to that of an inconsolable mourner. Rather than associating love to grief, she imagines it as an authentic and physical expression of lyrical emotion, and thus explains to Tarik why she likes the *Mu'allaqat*: "Les *Mo'allaquats*, ces odes célèbres, se déployaient, elles, avec un lyrisme que j'imaginais pur ou sensuel et, me disais-je, avec un romantisme qui … parlait d'amour, d'un amour absolu: cette inspiration qui avait fleuri ensuite en Andalousie avait influencé la poésie des troubadours et 'l'amour courtois' du Moyen Age occidental " (286).[8]

The cultural reference to the *Mu'allaqat* serves two functions. First of all, the *Mu'allaqat* is pre-Islamic, which allows the narrator to place the 'pure' love before the advent of Islamism, which also means before the beginning of the dichotomization East/West. Second of all, by underlining how these poems historically influenced troubadour poetry and inspired the western medieval tradition of courtly love, she brings attention to the autonomous development of the notion of love for those who consider this subject and romance as an imported European expression. In the end, of the last poem Tarik sent, the narrator memorizes two verses in particular, verses that she will fervently repeats for days, in both Arabic and French: "*Et que donner aujourd'hui ne t'empêche pas, Demain, de donner !*" (287). The act of donating as a repetitive act that does not require anything in return is the perfect metaphor of what she means as love.

[8] The so-called Mu'allaqat, which means *The Suspended*, is the name of a group of seven pre-Islamic Arabic poems. The name comes from the fact they were suspended on the walls of the Kaaba in Mecca during annual fairs.

Moreover, the function of gift as an expression of relationship, friendship and gratitude implicitly strengthens the bonds between lovers and by extension among human beings.

In conclusion, Djebar's characterization of human relationships is politically and historically framed within the context of French colonization's consequences on Algerian society. Human emotions and actions can be triggered here by internalized schemas of dichotomous representations of reality. Despite these conditions, female characters often express their vital forces in terms of love, by reaching out and choosing to connect over fear, alienation and opposition. In fact, if Djebar's work habitually deals with grief and death, it also engages with love and connection. Expressing women's solidarity but not limited to, love as a multiform life force moves female protagonists towards the creation of new forms of bonding and being in relationship with others. By analyzing both "La nuit du récit de Fatima" and *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, one can find powerful messages related to love as interrelatedness in the first, and as self-connection in the second. In "La nuit du récit de Fatima," in spite of war's traumatic memories mirroring self fragmentation, characters find a different way of both retelling their stories and dealing with them. Thanks to their will to be connected and to help each other witnessing their life's story, the thread of the narration constitutes the trace of their existence in connection. In *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, readers are invited to participate in the narrator's self-reflective journey during which she understands one paramount truth: she forgot herself by silencing her inner desires and needs. By exposing her feelings and her vulnerability, the narrator acknowledges her self-denial, because of internalized self-hatred. This process leads her to a personal space of self-connection from where she can envision a more truthful self. In both works, the configuration of alternative love bonds subverts the rigidity of oppositional relationships and suspends the repetition of internalized processes of self-hatred.

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