**Voices of transgression and the quest for a third space in postcolonial Maghrebi women’s writing:**

**A comparative analysis of Assia Djebar, Fatima Mernissi and Fawzia Zouari**

**By**

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**Declaration of authorship**

I, Yasmina Nagnoug Mejai, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**ABSTRACT**

Francophone Maghrebi women’s literature is fairly new as it started around the independence of Maghrebi countries in the 1950s. Coming out of silence and trespassing their domestic sphere to step into the public field of agency in order to express themselves in writing has often proven to be a daring enterprise and an ambivalent experience for Maghrebi Muslim women.

This thesis explores voices of transgression and the quest for a Third Space in postcolonial Maghrebi women’s writing through a comparative analysis of three contemporary and prismatic Maghrebi women writers: the Algerian literary avatar Assia Djebar, the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi and the Tunisian journalist and novelist Fawzia Zouari. The corpus comprises a novel by each writer: *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* by Djebar; *Dreams of Trespass: tales of a harem girlhood* by Mernissi; and *La Retournée* by Zouari. These texts are not only all autobiographical narratives, they also share the commonality of being anchored in the History of each Maghrebi country during a critical era: either before or after the wars of independence.

The problematic is to examine the different modes of negotiations employed by these three subversive authors writing both “within” and “against” their patriarchal society as well as either “on”, “for”, or even “with” subaltern women of their community who cannot speak for themselves.

The first chapter presents the multi-layered dimension of the postcolonial francophone Maghreb in order to situate postcolonial Maghrebi female literature and to understand the conditions and complexities within and often “against” which women writers such as the three under study write.

The second chapter focuses on each writer’s feminist engagement as creating a discourse of resistance against patriarchy leads necessarily to represent the subaltern women, erased from the colonial history, who cannot speak for themselves. However, the way each author writes “for” the voiceless of her respective community reveals both a distinctive commitment towards them and a specific feminist ideology.

The third chapter discusses the implications of the postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographical genre, which is conceived at the intersection of the individual and the community and therefore becomes a collective form of writing: “a writing with”. We furthermore investigate each author’s cultural production and trajectory as a writer so as to determine whether her form of writing encourages a discourse of openness, testimony and sorority. We finally reflect on the shift in today’s Maghrebi literature in that it is becoming a transnational literature which facilitates porousness and tends to place the writers’ literary creations within a Third Space.

We conclude on the political scope of these three important Maghrebi women writers’ works and on a reflexion of “writing as” an emancipated Arab woman in today’s global geo-political tensions between the West and the Islamic world.

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**INTRODUCTION:**

**WRITING: NEGOTIATING A POSITION**

**INTRODUCTION :**

**WRITING: NEGOTIATING A POSITION IN RELATION TO THE POSTCOLONIAL MAGHREBI CONTEXT**

“*Depuis longtemps - par suite sans doute de mon propre silence, par à -coups, de femme arabe je ressens combien parler sur ce terrain devient (sauf pour les porte-parole et les “spécialistes”) d’une façon ou d’une autre une transgression.*

*Ne pas prétendre “parler pour”, ou pis, “parler sur”, à peine parler près de, et si possible tout contre: première des solidarités à assumer pour les quelques femmes arabes qui obtiennent ou acquièrent la liberté de mouvement, du corps et de l’esprit. Et ne pas oublier que celles qu’on incarcère de tous âges, de toutes conditions, ont des corps prisonniers, mais des âmes plus que jamais mouvantes.”*

Debar, Assia, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* (Paris: A. Michel, 2002), 9

*Il fallait dire la parole dans (à) une société qui ne veut pas l’entendre, nie son existence quand il s’agit d’une femme qui ose la prendre. […] La parole est déjà une prise de position dans une société qui la refuse à la femme.*

Ben Jelloun, Tahar, *Harouda* (Paris: Denoël, 1973), 84

Djebar realises that speaking – and notably writing – is a transgression when one is an Arab woman in the context of today’s Arab countries. Therefore, she underscores the necessity to negotiate a position when one is an emancipated Arab woman who has had the opportunity to obtain an education and a relative freedom of movement and thought. However, taking a position underlies a specific meaning and impacts on the context of today’s global geo-political situation in general and within the postcolonial Maghrebi historical, socio-political, linguistic, religious, and cultural context in particular. The francophone Moroccan novelist, Tahar Ben Jelloun, reminds us that Maghrebi women’s writing in its beginning has been a difficult enterprise since women are traditionally supposed to be publically silent and discrete. Consequently, daring to speak publically and thus to write results in taking a position within such a society: “La parole est déjà une prise de position dans une société qui la refuse à la femme.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, women were traditionally denied public speech by their societies to the point that in order to dare to write some women have had to use pseudonyms, such as Djebar, or have been published posthumously[[2]](#footnote-2), like their Western counterparts during the 19th century. Situating the field of postcolonial francophone Maghrebi women’s writing should enlighten us on the challenges women have had to overcome, and the development of this new literature.

**The Field of Postcolonial Francophone Maghrebi Women’s Literature**

French literature on the Maghreb started as early as the 1900s, but was written mainly by French writers or ‘*pied noir*’ writers, that is people who are born in the Maghreb but who are not originally from there as they are descendants from the colonisers (mainly French, Italian, Spanish or Maltese). Next to their famous male ‘*pied noir*’ counterparts, such as Albert Camus and Albert Memmi, one can mention Marguerite Duras and Hélène Cixous whose literature made the Maghreb region more known in the Metropolis during the colonial era. Jean Déjeux, a specialist in North African literature written in French, points out that the first French women authors writing on Maghrebi societies and Maghrebi women followed generally a colonial feminist agenda (with the exception of a few like Isabelle Eberhardt) and wrote ‘on’ and ‘for’ Maghrebi women without really acknowledging the real impact of colonisation on these societies and on women’s emancipation:

C’est surtout de 1919 à 1939 que fleurissent les romans de Françaises sur la colonie. Le féminisme battait son plein en France. En Algérie on allait donc “se pencher” sur le sort de nos “sœurs” musulmanes pour les “relever” et les faire “monter” vers la civilisation et la culture apportées par la France.[[3]](#footnote-3)

On the contrary, native people who started writing about their countries in French in the 50s address issues that are affecting them directly in their societies, such as their lack of civil rights within a colonial society or the problems of acculturation. Moreover, such writers usually speak in the name of Maghrebi men and women:

Il est évident que malgré la bonne volonté de certaines de ces romancières, même connaissant l’arabe, écrivant dans le contexte de la domination française, ces auteurs ne pouvaient pas rendre compte des situations réelles des Algériennes, Marocaines et Tunisiennes, même si certains romans ne manquent pas d’approches intelligentes. […] Les indépendances recouvrées, des littératures de langue française ont fait leur apparition. Des romancières algériennes, marocaines et tunisiennes ont donc pris leur place à un moment donné de l’histoire de ces productions en français, à des dates diverses selon chaque pays.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Male writers were the forerunners with Abdelkebir Khatibi, Mohamed Dib, Driss Charibi, and Kateb Yacine. Women Maghrebi writers soon followed suit with Taos Amrouche (*Jacinthe noir*, 1947), Djamila Débèche (*Leila, jeune fille d’Algérie*, 1947), and Assia Djebar (*La Soif*, 1957). Even though Maghrebi women are the only ones really able to give an account of what they are living, this becomes a whole new “adventure”[[5]](#footnote-5) for them, as Déjeux remarks. Within a society that does not encourage women’s public speech, one could ask the following questions: What pushes these Maghrebi women to dare to write? Under what circumstances are they writing? What are their motivations and aims in writing? Who are they mainly writing for?

Regarding the first Francophone Maghrebi women writers’ motivations in writing, Jean Déjeux remarks about their vital need to speak, to express themselves, and their desire to come out of silence (“de sortir publiquement du silence”) for the vast majority of them.[[6]](#footnote-6) Regarding the form of their writing, he notes that there are many testimonies and life narratives, particularly among Algerian women, as they feel the need to testify about women’s sufferings and injustices committed against them, especially in relation to the ordeals of Algeria’s War of independence. Hence, much of their work is autobiographical. Some writers characterize this type of writing as therapeutic because it enables them to liberate themselves, even if that means liberating oneself through fiction only. Despite the contradiction, being able to voice one’s feelings in writing is already a step towards emancipation in traditional Maghrebi societies where women had little freedom outside their domestic sphere. The Algerian novelist Hadjira Mouhoub remarks in the late 1980s: “la femme n’a que l’imaginaire pour se libérer.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In the context of the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s, where women were often the targets of Islamic fundamentalists, the Algerian woman writer Malika Mokeddem, underlines her vital need to write as it enables her to free herself and resist somehow her very condition of being a woman within such circumstances:

Ecrire pour moi est un besoin existentiel. Pour une femme, c’est la meilleure preuve d’affirmer sa liberté, c’est aussi une forme de résistance au quotidien qui risque de vous dévorer par sa médiocrité.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Even though editors, especially French ones, expected Francophone Maghrebi literature in its beginning to be descriptive – i.e., sociological –, as Djebar points out[[9]](#footnote-9), we argue throughout this thesis that writing and being published for Maghrebi women was, and still is, a properly “critical” act, a means to express oneself and to come out of silence within a society that would rather silence them. Writing becomes thus not just a reflection of the real, but an intervention in the real.

The fact that very few Maghrebi women, if any, wrote before the 1950s, may be explained by several factors, notably the tumultuous history of the Maghreb region. The formation of the Maghreb is the result of a succession of conquests, invasions, and colonisation from both the Orient (mainly the Islamic conquest and the invasion by the Ottoman Empire between the 7th and 9th century) and the Occident (essentially the Roman Empire’s conquest starting after the 3rd Punic War and ending with the Muslim conquest in 698; and the imperialist enterprise by France in the 19th century). The French Colonial Era was particularly traumatic for the native Maghrebi people, especially for the Algerians, since it lasted for a long period of time (132 years), and Algeria was a colony of settlement resulting in important social changes for the population.

From a social perspective, few people were literate at the eve of the independence of each Maghrebi country. This was particularly true for women, since female education was neglected during the French colonisation of Algeria, and at the time of the Moroccan and Tunisian French protectorate. Marnia Lazreg, an Algerian sociologist, explains that education was a political issue and fell under the jurisprudence of the War Ministry (instead of the Ministry of Education which oversaw schools for French children) during colonised Algeria, and as such it was class and gender biased:

While they were concerned about the creation of a group of French educated Algerian men to serve as their links with the native population, colonial leaders evinced no such interest in women. [...] The first attempts at educating native girls drew the ire of some colonists and the lukewarm support of others[[10]](#footnote-10).

**Women’s status in Maghrebi societies**

If some progress has been made as to Maghrebi women’s situation since the independence of their countries (e.g. access to schooling for most of them), one may argue that women’s condition has been degraded somehow partly because of the loosening of the communitarian society, the split of large family units, that used to promote solidarity and protect women to a certain extent, and above all the economic and social crisis of the 80s plunging thousands of people into poverty, as

the historian, Pierre Vermeren, specialist in the history of the Maghreb explains:

Depuis les années 80, la crise économique et sociale a en effet profondément dégradé les conditions de vie des sociétés du Maghreb, pesant en premier lieu sur les plus faibles, à commencer par les femmes. […] Malgré les progrès intervenus pendant une vingtaine d’années, le délitement de la société communautaire brise des solidarités ancestrales qui, malgré leur pesanteur, pouvaient placer les femmes dans une protection relative.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Among the consequences of these factors, Vermeren mentions the tremendous expansion of the phenomenon of maids, notably in Morocco: “Plus d’un million en 2000, dont plus de la moitié sont des gamines de 6 à 15 ans.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Moreover, he stresses the issue of prostitution and of sexual tourism, which has tragic impacts on women and their children nowadays:

Mais, avec la nouvelle prostitution urbaine, les prostituées sont désormais livrées à elles-mêmes. Elles sont impures, illégales, immariables, et leurs enfants éventuels, aux termes de la *Moudawana*, ne peuvent avoir d’identité légale (ce sont des *Ouled Haram*, des sans-nom). Elles sont ainsi en butte à toutes les violences possibles.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Indeed, the family codes – called the *Moudawana* in Morocco and nicknamed “the code of infamy” in Algeria by Algerian women activists who have been protesting against it for a long time – are largely responsible for the predicament of a certain number of women in the Maghreb, since these codes grant them little judiciary rights and often put them in an unfair position which can have tragic consequences both for them and their children, like in Algeria:

Enfin, en bout de chaine de la misère, l’Unicef révèle que le pays est à son tour frappé par la prostitution infantile: “Le Code de la famille accorde, en cas de divorce, le droit au logement aux maris, chassant femmes et enfants et les jetant dans la rue” (déclaration du ministre algérien de la Famille et de la Condition féminine, Mme Boutheina Cheriet). (“L’Unicef tire la sonnette d’alarme”, *Le Matin*, 12 décembre 2002)[[14]](#footnote-14)

With the exception of Tunisian women who have been granted juridical equality with men by their first post-independence President, Habib Bourguiba, eager to modernize his society quickly[[15]](#footnote-15), Maghrebi women still remain in an inferior and compromised position, legally speaking, in their society. The traditional model of Muslim societies reinforces this state of affairs.

In Muslim countries, religion is paramount and the functioning of the societies relies on a patriarchal system where women often have an inferior status compared to men. The traditional model of the Muslim society bases itself on a spatial division, which sustains a system of hierarchy and power that has been for many decades, if not centuries, the founding of Maghrebi societies, as Fatima Mernissi explains:

The symbolism of sexual patterns certainly seems to reflect society’s hierarchy and power allocation in the Muslim order. Strict space boundaries divide Muslim society into two sub-universes: the universe of men (the *umma*, the world religion and power) and the universe of women, the domestic world of sexuality and the family. The spatial division according to sex reflects the division between those who hold authority and those who do not, those who hold spiritual powers and those who do not. The division is based on the physical separation of the *umma* (the public sphere) from the domestic universe. These two universes of social interaction are regulated by antithetical concepts of human relations, one based on community, the other on conflict.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Hence, the public field is reserved for men, assures them, and concerns matters outside the household; whereas, the private field refers to domestic matters and to women’s space. Stepping outside that sphere, Mernissi explains, is considered an anomaly, a transgression, and can only lead to a conflict relationship:

Women - who are citizens of this domestic universe and whose existence outside that sphere is considered an anomaly, a transgression - are subordinate to men, who (unlike their women) also possess a second nationality, one that grants them membership of the public sphere, the domain of religion and politics, the domain of power, of the management of the affairs of the *umma*.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Since writing implies stepping into the public sphere, reserved traditionally for men only, it is therefore considered a transgression when one remains a woman in Arab Muslim culture. Despite the conflict relationship with their men holding power, writing is nevertheless an empowering experience giving Maghrebi women powerful agency and opening up unlimited spaces where they negotiate their identity and create a new feminine, if not feminist, discourse.

**Thesis problematic**

The word transgression comes from the Latin verb ‘transgressum’, which meant to sin and to go beyond limits. So historically, when one transgresses, one both becomes a sinner (a state) and moves across fixed boundaries (an action). The broad aim of this thesis is to examine the different modalities of overstepping boundaries across the range of socio-political and historic conditions that have determined the spaces into which women of the Maghreb have moved as writers. By first delineating the differences in how entry into the public sphere has been achieved, it also explores the notion of the creation of a third space that becomes neither simply the private nor the public domain; it is a place of contradictions because it is an antithetic space of both negotiation and marginality, a space of both empowerment and exile, of feeling both close to one’s community and separated from it; that is, of both sorority and solitude. Our problematic analyses the different modes of negotiations employed by these three subversive writers within the corpus of three autobiographical novels: *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* by Djebar, *Dreams of Trespass: memoirs of a harem girlhood* by Mernissi and La *Retournée* by Zouari. As Djebar tells readers in the epigraph opening the introduction, writing implies certainly a ‘transgressive’ move for Arab Muslim women writers. Yet, this opportunity given to free, educated women like her can be negotiated differently. There are different positions to be taken for postcolonial women writers in the Maghreb: “against”, “for”, and “with”. These positions all involve different political, religious, and ethical relations to the culture of the Maghreb, and more specifically to that of Muslim women of Maghrebi origin, and perhaps more broadly still to transnational literature of the “South”. If writing allows Maghrebi Muslim women to speak “publically” not only “within”, but also “against” their patriarchal society, it leads them at the same time to speak either “on” or “for”, or even “with” the subaltern women who cannot speak for themselves. This thesis aims to explore these different positions negotiated through the examples of three Maghrebi Muslim women writers and verify whether Zouari’s writings correspond more to a “writing against”, Mernissi’s sociological works to a “writing for”, and Djebar’s literature to a “writing with”, and even “within a third space.”

Does the fact of being in an “emancipated space of agency” distance these emancipated feminist writers from the subaltern women they in reality wish to represent by speaking “for” them? Or, do they simply wish to assume the role of the “spokesperson”? How do they negotiate the fact of being at the same time separated from and connected with their community and country, as well as between acquiring a certain agency and experiencing a feeling of exile? This leads us to tackle notably the question of representativeness in light of the writers’ political voice and/or role vis-à-vis the “subaltern women”. To rephrase Assia Djebar, one simply asks the following questions: Do these Maghrebi women writers speak “for”, “on”, “alongside”, or on the contrary “against” the subalterns?

What sort of negotiations, and what kind of voices emerge from each writer’s literary production and drive therefore our interest? Moreover, the fact that these three women writers come from a different professional background – literature and history for Djebar; sociology regarding Mernissi; and journalism in Zouari’s case – leads us to examine different types of writing, and asks whether it is easier to negotiate one’s identity when one is writing from either a literary, a sociological, or a journalistic perspective. In other words, how is this negotiation of identity transformed by different writing trajectories?

The aim of this thesis is therefore to try and answer these key questions by examining the writings of these three important Maghrebi women writers and to focus particularly on the various positions they attempt to negotiate within their respective postcolonial Maghrebi societies and also beyond.

Nicholas Harrison, a postcolonial specialist, points out two important demands that postcolonial literary critics should follow when studying literary works in this field:

When confronting a work of fiction they encounter two demands that can be difficult to reconcile: on one hand they must give adequate weight to the text in its individuality and ‘literality’; on the other they must apprehend it in the socio-historical context from which it emerged and in relation to which it needs, at some level, to be understood.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Following Harrison’s admonition, the aim of this thesis in general, is on the one hand to historicize and contextualize the writings of contemporary Maghrebi women authors, like Djebar, Mernissi and Zouari; and on the other hand to differentiate each writer’s work and approach to the common space of the Maghreb by giving each text of the corpus adequate weight ‘in its individuality and literality’. Despite the commonalities of the three texts under analysis, notably being autobiographical novels set in the Maghreb at a pivotal time of history, differentiating each text is nonetheless important as not only their quality as literary texts differs, but also, as we have said, the three writers come from diverging professional backgrounds.

Several other critical theorists provide analyses that furthermore support our reading on the link between fiction and cultural history as well as between literature and politics. Due to the specificity and the importance of the socio-political and historical context from which Postcolonial North African Literature originates, we thus discuss the impact of literature and intellectuals on society according to the entwined relations of discourse, knowledge, and power. Such discussion entails examining different forms of knowledge production and seeing how they collide with each other in relation to the current geopolitical conflicts, to wit, the neo-imperialist discourse creating a climate of “Islamophobia” vs. the counter discourse by some post-colonial intellectuals reacting to it. Indeed, the outcome of this thesis is to reflect on the role of Arab Muslim women writers, such as Djebar, Mernissi and Zouari, in the context of the contemporary highly intense international political platform where Muslim women are being caught between two dual oppressions: “Islamophobia” and Islamic extremism.

Given these facts, this thesis tends to contribute to the debates on the Maghreb as a particular geo-political space from the French colonial era to nowadays. This analysis of Maghrebi women writers intends furthermore to be an original and timely point of view on Muslim women’s experiences both from this region and worldwide and on their representation both in literary production and in the media.

**Corpus of the thesis**

The corpus under scrutiny consists of autobiographical novels set during a critical time of the history of the Maghreb; that is, either during the colonial period (Morocco in the 40s in *Dreams of Trespass*; in *Nulle Part*, Algeria before the war for independence, i.e., between the late 30s and the beginning of the 50s) or the post independent years (*La Retournée* deals with the political climate in Tunisia in the 80s and the consequences of the post-independent regime). Despite the fact that each Maghrebi woman author comes from a different country of the Maghreb - i.e., Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia -, they all tackle more or less the same themes: patriarchal societies; war; colonization; juggling between opposite cultures; the tension between tradition and modernity; religion; and gender relationships. Furthermore, because of the socio-political and cultural crises that North African countries have experienced during the French colonial era, the post-independent years, and to some extent today, the three female protagonists of the novels face similar dilemmas and often have double or even fragmented identities. Identity looms as the key issue among Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari, since their autobiographical novels reflect their own quest for identity as they have been brought up in a divided and complex society.

Indeed, Djebar, Mernissi and Zouari share a similar upbringing and education, in that they were brought up in their homeland (either during the colonial French period or just after) and have had the opportunity to attend French schools at a time when few girls received an education, albeit a graduate one. They also all pursued their post-graduate studies in France. This similar upbringing, which has probably influenced their personality and work, has nevertheless placed them in a dual space where two sets of education (modern, Western type of education at school vs. a traditional upbringing at home), two cultures (mainly the French one and their local Maghrebi culture), two languages (mainly their Arabic dialect and French), and two sets of values and thoughts often collide with one another. This put these three Maghrebi women writers in an ambivalent position of being “in between” two worlds – that is, mainly the Oriental/North African one and the Occidental/French one. Hence one may label them as “border women” according to Gloria Anzaldùa’s definition. Anzaldùa, who defines her own self as a “border woman” has developed this concept in her book, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*[[19]](#footnote-19)*,* in order to refer to herself as a Chicana. Her thesis can also apply to other persons who regard themselves as having a complex multiple identity:

For Anzaldùa, a Chicana writer and teacher and self-identified ‘border woman’, the new mestiza tolerates contradictions and ambiguities and learns to ‘juggle cultures’: she has a ‘plural personality’ and ‘operates in a pluralistic mode’. The work of mestiza consciousness is to transcend dualities: ‘the answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts.’[[20]](#footnote-20)

One of the most important commonalities of these writers remains nevertheless gender and the fact that their writing is not only feminine, but also feminist. They all denounce the patriarchal nature of their societies, contest gender inequality, and are very concerned with women’s emancipation and the relationship between men and women in the contemporary Maghreb. However, their feminist and religious views do differ. As we shall see more into details in the course of the thesis, Zouari appears like an Orientalist feminist who blames Islam for the ill treatment of women, whereas Mernissi is the forerunner of Islamic feminism, which does not attack Islam but rather attacks some men’s biased interpretation of it so as to maintain their own masculine power. As to Djebar, she joins Mernissi in some respects, and shows a more balanced and critical opinion on both women and religion.

These three writers remain best for consideration because they represent different professional fields, as mentioned previously. Assia Djebar is not only the literary North African female writer par excellence who received numerous awards (notably her admission to the *Académie française*); she is also a historian, a novelist, a playwright, and a filmmaker. Fatima Mernissi is also well known worldwide, but more of a sociologist scholar and a Muslim feminist activist. Concerning Fawzia Zouari, she has a degree in French and comparative literature, and is mainly known in Tunisia and in France where she works as a journalist for *Jeune Afrique*. Hence, tackling key issues like gender, colonisation, and religion from different, but complementary angles – literature, sociology, and journalism – clearly provides this thesis with a multi-disciplinary picture of both Maghrebi women’s writing and the socio-political and cultural context of the contemporary Maghreb.

It remains paramount to share Djebar’s opinion on the importance of communication between women: “Je dis que l’essentiel c’est qu’il y ait deux femmes, que chacune parle….”[[21]](#footnote-21) Therefore, we aim throughout this thesis to create dialogues between these women writers from the contemporary Maghreb and to show in which aspects they converge and diverge. Whatever their differences, the three of them share nonetheless the commonality of writing from within the multi-layered entity of the Maghreb - a space rich in diversities and contradictions.

**Structure of the thesis**

The objective of the first chapter is to examine the multi-layered dimension of the Maghreb from a historical, socio-linguistic, religious and cultural point of view, in order to understand the context “within” which postcolonial Maghrebi women authors write. Contextualising the three prismatic women writers in question leads us at the same time to analyse how the context influences their subversion, and how each one borrows a particular aspect of her culture to subvert the latter. If Zouari chooses to focus on non-Islamic customs practised mainly by women, Mernissi emphasises alternative histories of Islam, so as to counter the mainstream male version of the cultural histories of their respective nations. As regards Djebar, she focuses on the multi-linguistic feature of Maghrebi culture in order to underscore the different means Maghrebi women employ to express themselves despite the relative censorship of public speech they are facing. Therefore, these three subversive Maghrebi women writers employ different modes of transgression in order to “write against” the patriarchal nature of their societies, which range from breaking the ancestral silence of the domestic sphere, to unveiling the harem, and finally to creating a feminine / feminist discourse.

Within the socio and geo-political context of the contemporary Maghreb, we examine in a second chapter how “writing against” patriarchy becomes for the Maghrebi women authors in question inevitably a form of feminist engagement: “a writing for” the subaltern women who cannot speak for themselves. By creating a discourse of resistance to all forms of patriarchy (be it social, political, or religious), these three postcolonial Arab feminist writers represent, so to speak, and write for “subaltern women” who have been subdued by both the colonial and the post-colonial regimes. However, we stress how each writer engages differently with her community. Zouari defends a secular feminist position that shows a superior voice among the women of her clan, which may prevent her from playing her role as a spokesperson. Contrary to Zouari’s position, Mernissi’s Islamic feminist ideology leads her to become “the voice” of the Muslim women community, and above all the subaltern and illiterate women she empathises with and wishes to represent by “writing for” them, instead of “against” them. Djebar’s postcolonial feminist perspective implies also a discourse of sorority “with” her “subaltern sisters”, whom she is careful to speak “close to” in order not to misrepresent them. Her writing goes therefore one step further and becomes a “writing with”.

The purpose of the third chapter is to demonstrate that producing a discourse which is open to one’s community, one’s country and even beyond one’s borders is conductive of a porous form of writing, which we define as a “writing with”. We analyse the characteristics of the postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographical genre, since it is conceived at the junction of the individual and the community, anchored in the historical and socio-political reality of one’s country and usually promoting a “plural” form of autobiography, and thus facilitating a “writing with”. In light of this analysis, we assess Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar’s cultural production in order to determine whether they progress throughout their writing careers to a more open form of knowledge production. This is in keeping with the shift in today’s Maghrebi francophone literature, which fosters a discourse of openness, confession and testimony. We therefore examine the phenomenon of ‘diasporisation’ in the contemporary Maghreb and the reasons for it. This transnational type of literature, situated “within a Third Space”, is very well reflected in the last phase of Djebar’s writing career, which she names the writing of expatriation. Given the Civil War in Algeria in the 1990s, and more broadly the socio-political context of the African continent “given over to catastrophes”, Djebar was led to exile and to write with a “far-off-gaze”. Thanks to the technique of “writing as listening”, she has managed to practise a “*francophonie* of resistance”, that is a certain type of humanist writing attitude at the end of her career, as exemplified by *Nulle Part*.

Given we are nowadays living in an era defined by the “war on terror”, where Arab Muslim women are often at the centre of debates both in the international cultural production and in the media, we conclude on a reflection of the socio-political scope of Djebar, Mernissi and Zouari’s knowledge production. Considering that all these three Arab women writers came of age prior to 9/11 and published mainly prior to 9/11 (with the exception of Zouari who is still publishing), the corpus takes us back to a moment that may be finished, and which has been transformed, to a certain extent, by the current geo-political conflicts happening around the world and especially in the Middle East since the Arab Spring. We therefore ask what does it mean today for the three authors under study to write “as” an Arab Muslim woman?

**CHAPTER ONE:**

**WRITING “AGAINST”**

**CHAPTER ONE: WRITING “AGAINST”**

*Si l’écrivain-homme est confronté avec ce qu’il a à dire, l’écrivain-femme fait face, en plus de cela, à la transgression fondamentale qu’est le seul fait d’écrire, de prendre la parole. Pour elle, écrire, c’est le faire contre quelque chose, contre les autres, contre l’homme en particulier. La femme est coupable du seul fait de s’exprimer; [...].*

Gafaiti, Hafid, ‘L’autobiographie plurielle, Assia Djebar, les femmes et l’histoire’, Hornung, Alfred & Ruhe, Ernstpeter, eds., *Post-colonialisme et Autobiographie : Albert Memmi, Assia Djebar, Daniel Maximin* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998)

“*La parole en Algérie, c’est une nécrose. Je refuse, sous prétexte que je suis de là-bas, d’écrire sur le deuil. C’est ca qu’on me demande. Ce qu’on attend de moi, en tant qu’écrivain, c’est de prendre position, de témoigner sur le présent, et là-bas, en effet, le spectacle du féminin ne rend possible qu’une écriture de militantisme, de journalisme, de protestation. Mais c’est justement parce que je suis écrivain que je suis partie. J’écris par rapport à un public intérieur, et non par rapport à ce qu’on veut de moi.”*

Assia Djebar, ‘Je ne pleurerai pas mes amies d’Algérie’, interview by Van Renterghem, Marion, *Le Monde* (28 avril 1995)

In the context of Algeria’s civil war in the 1990s causing the “intéllocide”[[22]](#footnote-22) of its elites, Djebar declares that she does not wish to write on mourning in the form of a militant type of writing. Even though she acknowledges the pain she feels towards her friends’ killings and the tragic fate of her country, she does not wish to take up the role of the traditional women mourners and exhibit Maghrebi women’s misery: “le spectacle du féminin”. Instead of writing what is expected from her and from other Third World emancipated women, that is, a testimony of the tragedy her country is experiencing in the form of a protest and a journalistic type of writing; she affirms that she writes for an internal audience - “un public intérieur” -, referring probably at the same time to her hybrid identity, the plurality within herself, and the women of her maternal tribe: “l’écho des femmes de ma tribu”.

How does Djebar’s determination to make writing speak to “a public intérieur” nevertheless mean that it speaks “from within” and “to” a socio-historical context? Why does writing from within the multi-layered space of the Maghreb lead inevitably to a militant type of writing? How can writing from “within” a strong traditional Islamic and patriarchal tradition mean taking a position “against” that same entity? When one is both a woman and a Muslim Maghrebi, Gafaiti reminds us, one is forcefully in the position of a transgressor, who writes “against” something, “against” the others, and above all “against” one’s male counterparts. For emancipated Arab Muslim women writers of the Maghreb, such as Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari, the very act of writing lead them therefore to a militant space, a space of resistance and protest. However, one may choose to remain in this position or to surpass it, like Djebar wishes to.

Throughout this chapter, we therefore intend to explain the complexities of writing both “within” and “against” the Maghrebi cultural and socio-political context. We firstly explore the various parameters constituting the Maghrebi context “within”, and often “against” which postcolonial Maghrebi writers, especially women authors, write. Presenting the multi-layered space within which the three writers under scrutiny write helps us, in a second section, at the same time to historicize and differentiate their writing. Through their texts, we examine in particular Maghrebi people’s hybrid identities, the significance of language and bilingualism for Maghrebi authors, and the way each writer underlines a specific feminine aspect from the Maghrebi hybrid culture. Thirdly, we are led to analyse these three prismatic writers’ modes of transgression and the implications of “writing against” one’s society. The overall objective of this chapter is to understand on the one hand, how the context of the postcolonial Maghreb influences Djebar, Mernissi and Zouari’s subversion and, on the other hand, how these three writers become themselves subversive, for writing equals transgressing and can only lead to a writing “against” a male-dominated society, gender inequality, and injustice.

**1.1. THE MAGHREBI CONTEXT: A MULTI-LAYERED AND COMPLEX ENTITY**

**The Maghreb: a plural space**

In order to comprehend the entity of the geopolitical space of the Maghreb and the Postcolonial Maghrebi women’s literature stakes, we explore the parameters constituting this complex region and rendering it a plural space from several viewpoints.

From a geographical standpoint, the Maghreb situates itself to the south of the Mediterranean, thus to the south of Europe, the north of the African continent, and in the continuation of Arab countries starting from the “*Mashriq*” (meaning in Arabic: the land where the sun rises) and ending at the “*Maghrib*” (in Arabic literally signifying: the land where the sun sets). Though the word Maghreb ironically indicates the west in Arabic, it has been perceived as the Orient by Western countries. Therefore, its strategic geographical position, at the crossroads of the Orient and the Occident, has always made the Maghreb a privileged space in terms of cultural and linguistic exchange:

Situated between the East and the West, at the intersection of Africa, Europe and the Middle East, the Maghreb constitutes a privileged geographic and cultural site for the dynamic interplay of different cultural traditions and mixed ethnic groups, of cultural pluralism and multilingualism.[[23]](#footnote-23)

As far as history is concerned, the Maghreb has over the centuries been through tumultuous conquests, invasions and colonisations both from the Orient and the Occident, resulting nowadays in the political instability, economical difficulties and the social upheavals that the three main countries – Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia – are experiencing. The French colonial era and the post-independence years can account largely for the relatively politically tense and complex situation that we can witness in the Maghreb today. The French colonial period has been particularly traumatic for the Maghrebi population and is often the main theme of Postcolonial Maghrebi literature. Indeed, the colonisation of the Maghreb by France – though different in its political aims in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco – lasted for a long period of time (132 years in Algeria, 64 years in Tunisia, and 49 years in Morocco). In the case of Algeria, the influence of France was the strongest for it was a French Department and a colony of settlement where French people and Europeans settled with their families over several generations. Moreover, the colonial period was the longest in Algeria: from 1830 to 1962. Finally, not only was the conquest of Algeria very harsh for the Algerian population, but also the war of independence of Algeria was seen as one of the most horrific wars of de-colonisation. The theme of war and the tension between France and Algeria are therefore often reiterated in the imaginary of Algerian literature. Regarding the political engagement of France in Tunisia and Morocco (the latter also occupied by Spain), it was of less importance since both countries remained normally French protectorates. Yet, the post-independent regimes played a significant part in the political and social instability of the three countries, because they have often been regarded as dictatorial regimes and not real democracies. This all culminated recently in the “the Arab Spring” – the revolutionary movements by the peoples of Arab countries – that started in Tunisia in 2010.

Ethnically speaking, people from the Maghreb arise from different ethnic origins. One may distinguish people from Berber origins, mainly in Morocco and Algeria[[24]](#footnote-24), some from Turkish and / or Arab origins, and even some from African origins. Moreover, France’s cultural imprint in the Maghreb since colonisation is still very much noticeable today. The multi-ethnicity of its people explains the rich and varied culture one encounters in the Maghreb today.

This mix of cultures is also reflected from a linguistic standpoint. Though classical Arabic is the official language of the three Maghrebi countries since their independence, French remains an important language both for communication and education. Moreover, people speak different Arabic dialects – which are quite different from literary Arabic – and even different Berber dialects. Réda Bensmaïa, a Postcolonial Algerian critic, stresses, for instance, the linguistic pluralism of Algeria:

In Algeria, this state of affairs reflects a profound linguistic pluralism. Several languages are spoken in addition to classical and dialectic Arabic. This situation predates the French conquest. Kabyle is spoken in the mountains of Kabylia, Touareg in the desert, Mozabit in the oases – and these languages are themselves divided into dialects.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Acknowledging its cultural diversity and pluralism, the Algerian government broadcasts the news in its three main languages: classical Arabic, French, and Amazigh (a common Berber dialect).

It appears thus that the Maghreb is a multi-layered entity in terms of culture, language, and identity. This results in Maghrebi people having a hybrid identity. Many critics and Maghrebi writers themselves have stressed the hybrid nature of Maghrebi identity and culture. The Moroccan philosopher and writer Abdelkébir Khatibi, for example, has written lengthily on this particular subject. He develops a real culture of hybridity in his books: *Amour Bilingue* (1983/1992), *La Mémoire Tatouée* (1971/1979), *Maghreb Pluriel* (1983), *Penser le Maghreb* (1993). He repeatedly insists that the Maghreb should only be considered within the mode of multiplicity and plurality:

Il faudrait penser le Maghreb tel qu’il est, site topographique entre l’Orient, l’Occident et l’Afrique, et tel qu’il puisse se mondialiser pour son propre compte. […] D’une part, il faut écouter le Maghreb résonner dans sa pluralité (linguistique, culturelle, politique), et d’autre part, seul le dehors repensé, décentré, subverti, détourné de ses déterminations dominantes, peut nous éloigner des identités et des différences informulées.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Despite its hybridity, the Maghreb – essentially constituted of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia – has nonetheless always been considered as a unified space, that shares notably a common Islamic heritage.

**The Maghreb: a unified space**

If Maghrebi people often feel that a special link brings them closer to one another and have the sentiment that they share a common cultural and historical heritage, this is because of several factors that contribute to unite and unify its peoples.

First of all, Maghrebi people share a common history, as mentioned earlier, and the actual borders between the countries used to be not as delimited as they are now. The succession of Muslim powers, which attempted to rule over the totality of the actual Maghreb and impose each a certain philosophy of Islam, during the formative period of the Muslim Maghreb (from the middle of the 7th century to the middle of the 13th century), resulted in shifting borders constantly:

The fall of the Almohads marked the end of the formative period of the Muslim Maghreb. It had seen the rise and fall of a series of states, from small city-states to empires, with shifting borders that generally did not coincide in any way with those of today.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Therefore, in Maghrebi people’s mind today there is generally a feeling that the actual borders are only “artificial” since they used to be part of one big land - the Maghreb -, which little by little became divided into the three actual countries constituting Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia.

The idea of unifying in a concrete manner the three main countries of the Maghreb, with the project of the “Grand Maghreb”, dates back to the period of colonial history as a solidarity effort to beat French colonialism:

L’unité maghrébine est une idée-force qui a connu son point culminant au moment de la lutte contre le colonialisme. Elle s’est développée surtout après l’indépendance, même si elle trouve son origine durant la période de l’histoire colonial.[[28]](#footnote-28)

However, according to the Maghrebi historiography – that is, the reading of the history of the Maghreb by Maghrebi people and not from a Eurocentric perspective, and of which Ibn Khaldoun is a forerunner – the “Kharijism” movement in the 8th century, which was fostered by a religious, political choice by the Berber chiefs to unite the Maghreb, is a testimony of the ancient Maghrebi personality[[29]](#footnote-29):

Le kharijisme avec ses adeptes venus du désert, ascétiques, autoritaires, imprégnés d’égalitarisme, apparaît comme “l’adoption d’une idéologie justificatrice” qui permettra au Maghreb d’échapper à l’autorité califale. “A partir de cette date, on peut dire que le Maghreb avait déjà gagné son autonomie ;… mais cette fois sous l’emblème d’un schisme islamique.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Indeed, the period of the Berber empires constitutes for many the apogee of the Maghrebi history. It is called, ‘the imperial Maghreb’ by the Moroccan historian Laroui, because Maghrebi people themselves reigned over the region: “le Maghreb fut désormais entre les mains de ses maîtres naturels…”[[31]](#footnote-31) The historian Brondino describes this period of Maghrebi history as follows:

L’historiographie est généralement unanime pour reconnaître la période des empires berbères comme étant l’apogée de l’histoire maghrébine. Pour la première fois à la fin du XIe siècle, et toujours au nom d’une idée religieuse unificatrice, l’empire des Almoravides réunit le Sahara occidental, le Maghreb occidental et l’Andalousie sous le malékisme intransigeant de Ibn Yasin. Au XIIe siècle, lui succède l’empire des Almohades. Ces derniers, avec le berbère Ibn Tumart, unirent eux-aussi et jusqu'à la moitié du XIIIe siècle le Maghreb, de l’Ifriqiya (actuelle Tunisie), à l’Espagne musulmane, sous l’emblème de la plus grande rigueur islamique.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Indeed the factor, which has linked these three countries the most, is probably the religion of Islam. Islam has been the main religion in the Maghreb since the Islamic conquest in the 7th century and is probably the element contributing the most to the homogeneity of today’s North Africa:

L’homogénéité de l’Afrique du Nord dans le domaine spirituel est le résultat de l’islamisation quasi totale de la région depuis la conquête arabe du VII ͤ au IX ͤ siècle. Les Arabes ont rencontré une vive résistance des autochtones berbères, mais la religion musulmane qu’ils imposèrent aux vaincus bouleversa la région.[[33]](#footnote-33).

Furthermore, the idea of a common Islamic theology, called “Sunni Islam”, progressively grew in the Maghreb and has since then united its peoples, who are today all Sunni Muslims, following a Maliki tradition, in opposition to Shia Muslims (who are found mainly in Iran):

A sense of a ‘common’, or sunni Islam grew. In the Maghreb, Tunis became a centre for such Sunni theology, in close contact both with al-Andalus and with the intellectual centres of the east. Thus, after the Fatimids’ departure, the period of religious experimentation was largely over, and the Maghreb became a solidly Sunni region, and has remained so ever since.[[34]](#footnote-34)

If the Maghreb is a multi-linguistic space, classical Arabic, of course the language of the Qur’an, holds a privileged place for contributing strongly to the cultural and religious unity of the Maghreb:

Véhiculée par le Coran, écrit dans cette langue, devenue de ce fait langue sacrée, l’arabe devint le support de l’unité culturelle et religieuse du Maghreb, qu’elle fait ainsi participer à *l’Umma*.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The concept of the  “*Umma*”, which literally means: “a community of Muslim people / brothers,” has always had a strong impact in the Muslim world to unite the worldwide Muslim community. During the rise of the nationalist movements, aiming to free Maghrebi countries from colonial domination, the *Oulemas* (religious reformists, such as Allal el-Fassi in Morocco, Thaalbi in Tunisia, and Ben Badis in Algeria) started spreading throughout the Maghreb the notion of the “*Umma*” and the conviction that Muslim people represented a community linguistically, culturally, and historically. Their cultural action was a real threat to the colonisers because they look for references outside the Western patterns: “[…] leurs références ne devaient rien au libéralisme occidental et qu’ils s’adressaient à des hommes que le nouveau système ne pouvait assimiler.” [[36]](#footnote-36) According to the historian Brondino, their “pan-maghrebism” strategy constitutes the basis of the Maghrebi personality:

La portée de leur action, dans l’optique panmaghrébine, n’est donc pas de nature politique, mais bien culturelle. Elle constitue une véritable stratégie dont le but ne se limitait pas à l’enseignement de l’arabe à travers la scolarisation coranique, mais visait à la revitalisation des valeurs islamiques à travers la langue, à l’éloignement progressif des modèles de la culture occidentale et à la consolidation de la conscience musulmane, base de la personnalité maghrébine.[[37]](#footnote-37)

From a political point of view, the religious Islamic concept of the “Umma” as well as the common official Arabic language have played a part in trying to unify the Maghrebi countries under several institutions. If the economic integration of the Maghreb under the constitution of the “Maghreb des Etats” failed in 1970, the political ambition to unite the “Big Maghreb” persisted. On 17 February 1989, this long-standing project gave birth to the “Union du Maghreb Arabe (UMA)”, uniting Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Libya. It is based on a common jurisdictional framework and its objectives are mainly to guarantee a regional political security and to create an integrated economic space, similar to the European Union. Ten years after its implementation, the assessment of its success appears quite positive, despite some obstacles, according to El Kadirri:

L'UMA suscite des jugements différenciés. Pour les dirigeants maghrébins, elle se construit lentement, mais surement, en tenant compte des conditions objectives de la région. Elle a même atteint des résultats positifs pour l'avenir, en ce sens qu'un cadre juridique aussi solide que diversifié, fait d'un ensemble de conventions, de plans et de programmes a été mis en place.[[38]](#footnote-38)

To conclude, the idea that the Maghreb is a unified space and that the peoples of the Maghreb should be united, despite some obstacles and discordances, can be summed up in the text of the National Algerian Charter (1976) related to the second Algerian President Houari Boumedienne’s wish to promote the “Maghreb des peuples”:

Par-delà les intérêts des Etats, il faut construire le Maghreb des peuples. La population de ce vaste ensemble est fondamentalement unie par sa langue, sa religion, sa civilisation, ses modes de pensée, son histoire et sa vision de l’avenir. L’histoire récente nous montre que l’unité ne se réalise pas par des accords au sommet, mais se forge, à la base, par la solidarité et l’action commune des masses populaires autour des mêmes objectifs…[[39]](#footnote-39)

Because of the commonalities the peoples of the Maghreb share (language, religion, civilisation, history, etc.), Boumedienne underscores the importance of uniting the Maghrebi people, and encourages a solidarity effort from the popular masses of this vast and rich region.

This brief analysis of the entity of the Maghreb emphasises the ultimate role that Islam has been playing in the ideology of the Maghrebi people. Therefore, if we examine now the place of women within this multi-layered space, and in particular the Muslim conception of feminine identity, we may be further enlightened as to the roles attributed to women within Maghrebi societies.

**The Maghrebi feminine identity**

Despite the fact that each writer under study comes from a different Maghrebi country, Zouari, Mernissi and Djebar all share the common fate of being a woman, and thus of being defined mainly in relation to man. As Simone de Beauvoir writes: “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.”[[40]](#footnote-40) In the case of Maghrebi women, this observation is reinforced by the fact that women are generally raised within a Muslim, patriarchal society.

Unlike the Western philosophical tradition, in which sexual inequality has been based on the belief that women are biologically inferior, the traditional Muslim view of the feminine has been more wary of their “devious” power. Indeed, equality between all mankind is anchored in the philosophy of Islam: “The democratic glorification of the human individual, regardless of sex, race, or status, is the kernel of the Muslim message.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Nevertheless, like their Western counterparts, Muslim women have often considered their status in Muslim societies as inferior; and this for several reasons. Then, how are women conceived in Muslim philosophical thought? And, within certain boundaries, why are Muslim societies often perceived as promoting gender inequality in their system?

Contrary to what some Westerners may assume about Muslim women’s supposedly inferior status in Muslim societies, Mernissi argues that not only is their inferiority not rooted in Islam, but also that it is in reality because women are seen as so powerful and potentially dangerous that all sexual institutions, such as polygamy and sexual segregation, have been implemented:

In Islam there is no such belief in female inferiority. On the contrary, the whole system is based on the assumption that women are powerful and dangerous beings. All sexual institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual segregation, etc.) can be perceived as a strategy for containing their power.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Drawing on Imam Al-Ghazali’s classical work, *The Revivification of Religious Sciences*[[43]](#footnote-43) (in particular his chapter on marriage), Mernissi explains the Muslim theory of male-female dynamics:

The implicit theory, driven far further into the Muslim unconscious, is epitomized in Imam Ghazali’s classical work. He sees civilization as struggling to contain women’s destructive, all-absorbing power. Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties. Society can survive only by creating institutions that foster male dominance through sexual segregation and polygamy for believers.[[44]](#footnote-44)

If women are seen as a danger to men’s piety, it is because the feminine sexuality is considered as active. Unlike the Western theory as epitomized by Freud who sees the female as passive and the male as active, Al Ghazali, “casts the woman as the hunter and the man as the passive victim,” because of her “*qaid* power”, that is, the power to deceive and defeat men, “not by force, but by cunning and intrigue.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Indeed, for him, women have a destructive power in the Muslim social order for “the feminine is regarded as synonymous with the satanic.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Therefore, to maintain order in the Muslim social system, men have tried to subjugate the woman’s power and to neutralize its disruptive effect.[[47]](#footnote-47)

According to Arab feminist activists like Mernissi, the negative view on female sexuality and the implementations of such institutions that tend to subjugate women and put them under male authority would have repercussions on women’s emancipation over centuries within most Muslim countries. For example, women were confined to a harem-type of life, were often illiterate, and had for most no part to play in the public sphere.

Yet, with modernization affecting Muslim societies, provoking social desegregation, and women gaining access to education and work in the second half of the 20th century, there has been some progress in women’s situation, which causes changes in gender relationships and at the same time, creates conflicts between the traditional Muslim ideology and the modern economic and social reality:

Muslim ideology, which views men and women as enemies, tries to separate the two, and empower men with institutionalized means to oppress women. But whereas fifty years ago there was coherence between Muslim ideology and Muslim reality as embodied in the family system, now there is a wide discrepancy between that ideology and the reality that it pretends to explain.[[48]](#footnote-48)

It is this complex conflicting relation between traditional ideology and modern reality, which generally underlies postcolonial Maghrebi literature, so well exemplified by the three novels of the corpus.

This brief portrait of the entity of the Maghreb from several viewpoints helps one to understand now the implications for Mernissi, Zouari, and Djebar to write from within both a hybrid and unified space as well as from within an Islamic context and its strong patriarchal tradition.

**1.2. WRITING FROM “WITHIN” A MULTI-LAYERED SPACE**

While Mernissi, Zouari, and Djebar inevitably write from “within” this multi-layered space of the Maghreb by notably reflecting its hybrid nature from an identification, linguistic, and cultural point of view, they also subvert this space by borrowing specific feminine aspects from their culture.

**Hybrid identities**

The elites and intellectuals, especially those born during the colonial period in the Maghreb, such as Khatibi, Djebar, and Mernissi, among many others, build their identities on the mode of hybridity, for they have lived during a time when their society was divided between the native people trying hard to hold on to their traditions, and the colonisers experiencing in general a more modern European lifestyle. In postcolonial theories, the term “hybridity” refers generally to the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha’s analysis of the interaction between the coloniser and the colonised:

Bhabha argues that the cultural interaction of colonizer and colonized leads to a fusion of cultural forms that from one perspective, because it signals its ‘productivity’, confirms the power of the colonial presence, but that as a form of mimicry simultaneously ‘unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power’ (Bhabha, Homi K., “Signs taken for wonders” in *The Location of Culture*, London & New York: Routledge, 1994).[[49]](#footnote-49)

The complexity of the relationship between colonisers and colonised underlined by Bhabha certainly appears in the three autobiographical novels and particularly in each protagonist’s quest for identity. Moreover, the fact that the three authors grew up within a society where most people, especially girls and women, were illiterate probably has some consequences on their personalities and identities. Having the privilege to go to school means indeed, that Maghrebi girls receive an antithetical education: a French/Western and modern education at school vs. a traditional and Maghrebi Muslim upbringing at home. The three writers of the corpus well explain this state of affairs in their writings and the implications of having a hybrid identity.

Indeed, the female protagonist Rym reveals a fragmented identity in *La Retournée*. After a fifteen-year exile in France and after being married to a French man with whom she runs away from Tunisia, Rym suddenly returns to her hometown with her bi-national five-year old daughter on the occasion of her mother’s death. Yet, she has become in the meanwhile an emancipated woman with a French mind-set and her encounter with her very traditional and patriarchal family creates some confusion, for she is caught between two countries, cultures, languages, and modes of thought that are opposite. For example, sitting on the terrace of a coffee shop in Paris is so simple and banal for Rym that she forgot how

it remains taboo in her native village:

A mi-chemin de la maison, fatiguée et cédant aux sollicitations de ma fille qui a soif, je m’assois à la terrasse du Café Marcel. Tout d’un coup, les passants ralentissent le pas. Les flâneurs s’arrêtent, frappés de consternation. […]

Je comprends soudain ma bêtise. Aucune Tunisienne n’oserait s’exhiber ainsi, au cœur du village, dans un café. Car ce lieu est réservé aux hommes, au nom d’une mystérieuse loi. […] J’avais oublié tout cela. Pardonnez-moi. Des années à fréquenter les terrasses des cafés parisiens m’ont donné de mauvaises habitudes. Le doux anonymat de la capitale française a endormi ma vigilance. J’ai oublié l’œil du cyclone d’Ebba […][[50]](#footnote-50)

Her habits and lifestyle in Paris differ so much from the life she is experiencing in Ebba that she does not know anymore how to behave in public places and keeps making mistakes that offend her community. Being confronted with two diverging cultures creates some confusion in *Dreams of Trespass*’s young protagonist’s mind too.

The little girl Fatima, the intra-homo-diegetic narrator of *Dreams of Trespass*, is indeed confused about her double, and somehow antithetical upbringing, by a mother who aspires to an emancipated, modern type of education for her daughter and a father who would rather his daughter preserve the traditions of his country and family. Yet, readers may feel that towards the end of Mernissi’s memoir, the objective of her protagonist is to combine the two types of education she receives in order to become a balanced happy Muslim modern woman. To follow her mother’s wishes and to emulate the King’s daughter in her ability to speak several languages remains ideal to Fatima in her desire to become both a modern Western lady and a traditional Moroccan woman:

To live in a combination of two worlds was much more appealing than living in just one. The idea of being able to swing between two cultures, two personalities, two codes, and two languages enchanted everyone! Mother wanted me to be like Princess Aisha (the teenage daughter of our King Moahmmed V who made public speeches in both Arabic and French) who wore both long caftans and short French dresses.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The division between tradition and modernity is seen as a real issue in postcolonial Maghrebi literature and Mernissi explores this in her novel. The author stresses this dichotomy, which takes place in the Moroccan society of the 1940s and explains the tension between generations. While their eldest desire to preserve the Moroccan Muslim traditions and a harem type of life, the young aspire for a more modern Western type of life and more freedom and individualism. Fashion displays much about the generation gap occurring between their fathers who stick to traditions, and themselves who are under the influence of the French and Western culture:

“But what good does our wearing traditional dress do,” Father joked one day to my young cousins sitting around him, “when all you young people dress like Rudolf Valentino?” Without exception, they all wore Western attire, and with their short hair uncovered and cut above the ears, they looked very much like the French soldiers standing at the end of the street. “One day, we will probably manage to throw the French out, only to wake up and find out that we all look like them,” added Uncle.[[52]](#footnote-52)

This example shows the double bind of the struggle for liberation and how acting “against” – or even writing “against” – colonial oppression may sometimes appear as being party to that very system. If the colonised may manage to free themselves politically from their colonial regime and gain the independence of their country, freeing their “colonised minds” from the coloniser’s culture can turn out to be more complex and challenging. This turns out to be even more complicated when it comes to women, for they are supposed to be the guardians of traditions for the future generations; hence men’s resistance to see them evolve into modernization and above all emulate the colonisers and Westerners.

In *Nulle Part*, Djebar reiterates the dilemma between modernity and tradition and shows also the tension between two cultures, languages, and systems of values. Indeed, Djebar’s protagonist experiences a similar duality to Mernissi’s during her upbringing in colonial Algeria. As a young girl she was made to understand that there existed two spaces, cultures, languages, and above all two peoples living paralleled lives.

As she had the opportunity to be sent to school by her father who was also a schoolteacher, at a time when very few native girls received an education, she could step outside and experience the colonisers’ life. At the same time, whenever home, she would share her mother’s world of traditional songs and customs. Journeying home by bus every Saturday from the French boarding school, she would witness the division of the society outside: “[…] ces foules d’hommes et d’enfants immanquablement divisés en deux espèces, et jusqu’aux lieux: les cafés maures surpeuplés et bruyants d’un côté, et de l’autre, […] plusieurs brasseries européennes…”[[53]](#footnote-53) Aware of being an exception, she nevertheless knows that outside she could not behave like people from the European community. She thus refrains from kissing her father in the street when they re-unite after a week’s separation:

Chaque fois, d’instinct, je sais que je dois me retenir de ne pas lui sauter au cou […] je dois au-dehors, aux yeux de tous – tous les Français d’un bloc confondus et les ‘nôtres’, uniquement des garçons et des hommes, la gente masculine rassemblée -, dès lors moi, ressentie d’emblée comme une exception, moi une fille d’apparence européenne mais sans l’être, je dois, dans la rue, réfréner tous mes gestes, même si la rue se trouve par hasard désertée.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Despite of being a paradox outside: “moi une fille d’apparence européenne mais sans l’être”, inside, at home she would be allowed to act naturally and receive the warm welcome of her traditional mother:

[…] sauter au cou de ma mère ce sera pour moi retrouver le naturel à la fois de l’enfance ou de l’adolescence qui pointe, mon exubérance n’étant qu’une parure de plus pour la jeune mère, qui, elle, sans avoir quitté son modeste royaume, se laissera étreindre par moi dans la douceur.[[55]](#footnote-55)

While Djebar’s protagonist needs to adapt to two different attitudes according to the place she finds herself in, Djebar herself acknowledges that her own identity has been based on two parts: a masculine part acquired thanks to her father who gave her the opportunity to be educated in the French language and the freedom to step into the public space; and a feminine part which links her to her mother’s genealogy, the Arabic dialect, and a feminine private world of customs, traditions, and a sense of affection and sorority:

Cette pratique [de la langue française], des l’âge de cinq ans, s’étant inaugurée sous le patronage paternel – et ce, de la première enfance à l’âge nubile (onze ou douze ans), ce fut comme si je développais au-dehors, dans ce petit village d’une plaine colonial algéro-française, une partie masculine de moi-même, et que mon coté féminin restât dans l’appartement derrière les persiennes, aux cotés de ma mère voilée et qui ne sortait pas.[[56]](#footnote-56)

This separation that Djebar feels between outside / the masculine space and inside / the feminine one corresponds in reality to the division of traditional Muslim societies, as explained in the introduction:

Venant d’un monde et d’une culture profondément marqués par une traditionnelle ségrégation sexuelle (les femmes au-dedans, séparées des hommes au-dehors, le “public” masculin opposé à l’intime et au familial […]).[[57]](#footnote-57)

To feel divided either by a masculine part and a feminine part or by French in the public space and the Arabic dialect in the private sphere is typically felt by most Maghrebi writers, who have received a bilingual education and/or grown up in a bilingual environment.

**Bilingualism**

Many theorists demonstrate that culture, language, and identity are closely related notions. The sociolinguists Chris Barker and Dariuz Galasinski notably explain the importance of language, for that remains the foundation from which one constructs one’s personality and one’s identity as a social being: “Without language, not only would we not be persons as we commonly understand that concept, but the very concept of personhood and identity would be unintelligible to us.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

Some critics, like Philippe Gardy explain that for bilingual or trilingual Maghrebi authors a real “écriture bilingue” takes place when they are writing: “Ça zigzague entre deux langues, entre deux systèmes d’usage linguistique et ça parle et ça écrit dans cet intervalle, dans cet entre-deux.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Therefore, when a Maghrebi writes in French, he / she does not just proceed to a basic translation from his / her mother tongue to the French; he / she thinks differently within a context that is familiar to him / her[[60]](#footnote-60). This situation may lead to some antagonism, but it also conducts to a special space, a Third Space, rich culturally and revealing a plural identity, if not a transcultural one. The study of the Third space in Maghrebi women’s literature constitutes the objective of the last chapter and we shall thus come back to this notion later on in this thesis.

This “bi-lingual” space or the concept Khatibi calls “bi-langue”, is usually experienced by Maghrebi writers and underlies what Khatibi names “une pensée autre” that puts the writer in a state similar to schizophrenia.[[61]](#footnote-61) This is especially true for exilic writers who seemed “inhabited” both by their Arabic mother tongue and the foreign French language.[[62]](#footnote-62) According to the literary Tunisian critic Amel Fenniche-Fakhfakh, Fawzia Zouari confronts such a situation in her fictions, and in particular in her autobiographical novel *La Retournée,* whose setting is Tunisia:

Fawzia Zouari habite la langue arabe et la langue française ; son imaginaire est façonné par son appartenance à deux pays différents, à deux modèles culturels – dont l’un l’attire vers l’Orient et l’autre vers l’Occident – et à deux continents dont l’un souffre encore des séquelles du colonialisme tandis que l’autre permet à la majorité de sa population de vivre dans des conditions prospères.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Rym, her novel’s protagonist, indeed reflects this specific bilingual state, which suggests schizophrenia. Her way of communicating and using alternately her Arabic mother tongue and the French language shows a constant shift of identities. When at the cemetery trying to reconcile herself with her mother, she communicates at times in Arabic and at times in French without even realising it:

Ma communication avec ma mère s’est interrompue il y a si longtemps. J’ai oublié le ton sur lequel je lui adressais la parole.

Peu à peu, des phrases *en français* se bousculent dans ma bouche, comme chaque fois que je dois livrer l’essentiel de moi. Il se pourrait que maman ait la pratique de toutes *les langues* dans l’au-delà. Mais je ne peux me résoudre à lui chuchoter dans *une autre langue que la sienne*. Ce serait la blesser de nouveau. Compromettre son salut auprès d’Allah. Je me dois de revenir dans *son giron*. De reprendre *son accent*, sans quoi, elle ne comprendra pas. Sans quoi, elle me deviendra étrangère. Alors, je murmure *en arabe* […]

- Regardez-la !

Je me retourne. Au même moment, je prends conscience que je viens de parler *en* *français*. Le spectacle que je découvre me cloue sur place. Une dizaine de garçons que je ne connais pas ont surgi soudain entre les tombes. Ils sont jeunes, entre quinze et vingt ans, vêtus de blousons et de casquettes vissés sur le crâne.

Je demande *en arabe* :

-Que faites-vous ici ?[[64]](#footnote-64)

This unconscious shift of languages between French and the Tunisian dialect shows not only a kind of schizophrenic state, but also a hybrid identity that is constantly threatened and unstable. The village teenagers are so surprised to hear Rym speaking to herself at the same time in French and Arabic that they make fun of her as if she were a mad woman. Yet, Rym is neither mad, nor in total control of this bilingualism, for it is part of her hybrid identity. She explains to her nephew Tahar: “Là, je me defends en français, tout en injuriant en arabe.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

If Zouari depicts her protagonist as bilingual, she nevertheless does not apply a bilingual mode to her text. Apart from inserting a few Arabic words, which can be difficult to translate in French for cultural reasons[[66]](#footnote-66), she only gives readers a flat version of the French, and silences the Arabic.

Unlike Zouari, Djebar maintains not only a complex relationship to language in defining her identity, but also in constructing her very aesthetic of writing. Like other Maghrebi francophone writers, Djebar defines her complex identity in relation to the French language throughout her works. Similarly to Khatibi’s concept of “bi-langue”, she develops her aesthetic of writing around the theory of what she calls, “l’entre-deux-langues,” and which she defines as follows:

L’entre-deux-langues, j’y suis comme écrivain depuis trente ans, dans un tangage-langage - comme dirait Michel Leiris - qui détermine jusqu’à mes résidences géographiques. Un aller-retour entre France et Algérie et vice-versa […]

Et c’est ainsi que l’autre-langue - parce que c’est l’une, parce que c’est l’autre ou simplement l’entre-deux inconfortable, enserre, étroit par moments à étouffer, la frontière toujours frontière - oui, c’est ainsi que l’autre langue a inscrit sourdement, insidieusement, le rythme de mes lieux, de mon territoire meuble d’ancrage possible. Et je ne crois même plus qu’il y ait encore nomadisme. Comme si la caravane ancestrale perdait, une fois pour toutes, le tracé de son parcours…

Ce tangage entre deux langues s’inscrivant dans mon espace de vie, il me semble en avoir établi un bilan initial dans un premier livre, ouvertement autobiographique: *L’Amour, la fantasia*.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Michele Vialet argues that Djebar’s constant reflection on “l’entre-deux-langues” reveals, “an impressive mutation of her poetics and her views on the role of contemporary Algerian writers.”[[68]](#footnote-68) Her concept implies more than just a reflection on bilingualism, cultural “in-betweeness”, or on her sense of alienation in belonging to neither Algeria nor France. Indeed, language in general and bilingualism in particular plays a crucial part in Djebar’s writing and her poetics. As she claims herself, *L’Amour, la fantasia* reveals a true reflection on language in relation to her identity as “this pitching and tossing between two languages” inscribes itself in her own space of living.[[69]](#footnote-69) She declares that what really triggered the writing of her first openly autobiographical book is an existential interrogation she had in relation to her bilingualism, since she realised that she could not truly express any feelings of love and affection in French:

Une des motivations, la plus personnelle, de *l’Amour, la fantasia*, c’est de m’être rendu compte, à quarante ans passés, que dès que j’étais dans un besoin d’expression amoureuse – je veux dire dans ma vie de femme – le français devenait un désert. Je ne pouvais pas dire le moindre mot de tendresse ou d’amour dans cette langue, à tel point que c’était un vrai questionnement de femme.[[70]](#footnote-70)

While French allowed her to become emancipated by avoiding seclusion, it remains tainted by the context of war and colonisation; whereas her Arabic dialect refers to desire, affectivity, and pleasure. This explains her attempts to rework the French language in order to transcribe her language of desire.[[71]](#footnote-71)

After her ten years of silence, or rather her break from publishing, and her filming experience, Djebar realised that she needed to translate the complexity of Algerian history and above all of Algerian women’s experiences of war and suffering into the very language of her writing:

J’aborde le passé du dix-neuvième siècle par une recherche sur l’écriture, sur l’écriture en langue française. S’établit alors pour moi un rapport avec l’histoire du dix-neuvième siècle écrite par des officiers français, et un rapport avec le récit oral des Algériennes traditionnelles d’aujourd’hui. Deux passés alternent donc ; je pense que le plus important pour moi est de ramener le passé malgré ou à travers l’écriture, « mon » écriture de langue française. Je tente d’ancrer cette langue française dans l’oralité des femmes traditionnelles. Je l’enracine ainsi.[[72]](#footnote-72)

*L’Amour, la fantasia*, and some of the works that followed the shooting of her films, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* and *La Zerda ou les chants de l’oubli*, attempt to translate this dilemma between the written and the oral, between the French literary language in which she writes – both the enemy’s language and her father’s tongue who gave her the freedom of movement[[73]](#footnote-73) – and the oral Algerian dialect – her mother’s tongue of warmth and feminine sorority – in which she speaks “for” and “with” the women of her tribe and in relation to an internal audience (“un public intérieur”). She explains, for example, that the first part of *L’Amour* is written in a quite elaborate style so as to translate the official discourse of war, whereas the third part (Les voix ensevelies) aims at exploring the past through the voices of women who express themselves in the Algerian dialect and in a rather sober and concise manner in order to fully relate their experiences of suffering:

Vous trouverez dans ces récits de femmes des sortes de tournures populaires que j’insère par une traduction voulue au premier degré. Ces paysannes dissent, “La France est montée au village”, au lieu de dire, “L’armée française est montée au village.” Par moments la traduction essaie d’épouser ces tics qui apparaissent parce qu’il y a la guerre. […] Non, j’ai voulu une sobriété du style quand il y avait rappel de la souffrance. […] Pour moi la voix de ces femmes est l’opposition voulue à tout le style officiel. Que ce soit en Algérie ou ailleurs, après une guerre, il y a une manière “ancien combattant” avec des discours très pompeux sur la souffrance et la mort des autres.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Whatever experience Djebar endeavours to translate in writing, the issue of language inhabits the very core of Djebar’s quest for words capable of reflecting life: “l’écriture – de cinéma ou de littérature – doit rendre présente la vie, la douleur peut-être mais la vie, l’inguérissable mélancolie mais la vie!”[[75]](#footnote-75) Language is such a key issue for Djebar that she considers it as what describes best North African literature written in French:

La question du langage, je la considère souvent comme le problème numéro un de la littérature Nord Africaine d’expression française. Je dirais, et certains sentiront cela comme une provocation, qu’il nous faut arabiser le français, avec une condition: en passant par la beauté, traduisons: par la poésie.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Therefore, Djebar invites Maghrebi writers to use their bilingual ability in a creative manner. In spite of the strong patriarchal tradition “against” which and “within” which Maghrebi women like Djebar write, they furthermore usually turn to other resources within their rich hybrid cultures to translate not only the complexity of the Maghreb, but also their complex selves.

**A hybrid culture**

While Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari reflect the multi-layered dimension of the Maghreb by writing “from within” this complex space, they also subvert it by writing “against” it. Instead of choosing the mainstream, male version of Maghrebi culture, each of the women writers borrows certain aspects from their hybrid culture that emphasize the feminine perspective of that same culture, to wit, either the non-Islamic customs, alternative histories of Islam, or the recourse to women’s various forms of expressions.

Despite Islam being the main religion in the Maghreb, pre-Islamic customs and practices also persist as a part of traditional Maghrebi people’s spirituality. For example, the cult of worshipping Saints and visiting their tombs, and the influence of the African Marabou’s practices continue today in the Maghreb. Fatima Mernissi and Fawzia Zouari refer to these pagan beliefs in their works in order to show notably their importance in women’s daily lives. Indeed, these practices concern mainly women who are often portrayed as being more superstitious than religious.

For example, Zouari claims in *La Retournée* that women usually prefer Saints to God: “Pourtant, si je me souviens bien, Allah était rarement le recours des femmes qui lui préféraient les Saints.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Moreover, the story of the sanctuary of “Sidi Misouni” (i.e. the Saint Misouni) is central to the plot because the key themes of colonisation, beliefs, and religion relate to it. As the mayor plans to build a road that will cross over the archaeological site of Tuburbus, Rym thinks of a strategy with her lover Moncef to rally the people against this project by pretexting to save their mausoleum. Indeed the sanctuary has more importance than the archaeological site or anything else for the village people, especially for women:

* Depuis cette histoire de route, je suis de mauvaise humeur. La nuit dernière, je n’ai pas fermé l’oeil. Que ne donnerais-je pour voir épargner Tuburbus !
* Il suffira d’avertir les villageois de la menace que fait encourir le tracé sur Sidi Misouni. Ils n’ont pas d’intérêt pour l’histoire antique, certes, mais ils en ont pour les marabouts qui, croient-ils, orientent leur destin. Les femmes surtout, elles commandent derrière les murs. Les hommes ne pourront rien entreprendre sur ce registre sans leur assentiment. Crois-moi, en menant une campagne autour de Sidi Misouni, tu pourrais sauver le site.[[78]](#footnote-78)

By focusing on non-Islamic customs, Zouari writes at the same time “from within” her hybrid culture and “against” her traditional patriarchal society. She shows that there are other forms of identification than the Islamic ones for Maghrebi people, and especially for women.

Mernissi equally borrows other resources from the Maghrebi culture to sustain her Islamic feminist discourse throughout *Dreams of Trespass*, in that she underlines alternative histories of Islam. In order to write against her patriarchal society, she choses not to focus so much on non-Islamic resources, but rather on a feminine interpretation of Islam. Throughout her memoir, Islam is practised and interpreted by women who make their own sense of their religion. Instead of following the mainstream Islam and a male interpretation of the sacred texts, the strong feminist characters of the story choose to contest such a biased interpretation and to put forward their own theory and understanding of Islam. For instance, they continuously insist that Islam is gender equal and reject any practices or attitudes that they deem against the Islamic principles of equality. For Fatima’s mother, her daughter’s birth is the occasion to remind all the family members that a girl is equal to a boy, and thus both should be given the same importance:

Samir and I were born on the same day, in a long Ramadan afternoon, with hardly one hour’s difference. He came first, born on the second floor, the seventh child of his mother. I was born one hour later in our salon downstairs, my parents’ first-born, and although Mother was exhausted, she insisted that my aunts and relatives hold the same celebration rituals for me as for Samir. She had always rejected male superiority as nonsense and totally anti-Muslim - “Allah made us all equal,” she would say. The house, later she recalled, vibrated for a second time that afternoon, with the traditional *you-you-you-you* and festive chants, and the neighbours got confused and thought that two baby boys had been born[[79]](#footnote-79).

Moreover, Mernissi explores religion throughout her memoir from the perspective of important women figures like the Prophet’s wives, such as the most admired Khadija and Aisha, instead of from the Prophet’s and his companions’ points of view:

Among the religious figures, the most popular were Khadija and Aisha, the wives of the Prophet Mohammed and Rabea al-Adaouiya, a mystic. Their lives were usually staged during Ramadan […].[[80]](#footnote-80)

If Mernissi chooses to emphasize Khadija and Aisha in particular among the other Prophet’s wives, it is probably because not only the Prophet loved them dearly, but also because they were known to be strong, independent women. Staging Arab feminists, including religious women characters, in Chama’s theatre also contributes to offering the readers alternative histories and interpretations of Islam, that is from a feminine / feminist point of view.

As regards Djebar, the main plot of *Nulle Part* constitutes itself a “writing against” the patriarchal system of colonial Algeria. The protagonist’s suicide attempt may indeed be interpreted as a gesture of rebellion against a culture and a tradition that favours men over women. Emphasising the multi-linguistic aspect of the Maghreb is also a way to write “against” a patriarchal culture that tends to favour a mono-linguistic version of that space by bringing classical Arabic into prominence over the other languages. In her desire to write at the same time from “within” her rich culture and “against” a simplistic version of it, Djebar proposes instead a linguistic triangle, where the Arabic, the Berber, and the French languages co-exist in order to revive the memory of the history of the Maghreb and its real identity[[81]](#footnote-81). In accordance with this ideology, Djebar describes her own identity within this linguistic triangle:

Je suis femme algérienne, mais je devrais faire référence plutôt qu’à la terre natale, du moins à la langue des aïeux et des aïeules : « je suis femme arabo-berbère », et en sus « d’écriture française”».[[82]](#footnote-82)

Not only does Djebar stress the multi-linguistic nature of the Maghreb, but also Maghrebi women’s different forms of expression. In this connection, her “writing against” becomes more complex and subversive. She explains indeed that Maghrebi women enjoy the possibility of expressing themselves in four languages, that is, Arabic, French, Libyco-Berber, and the “language of the body”:

Pour les fillettes et les jeunes filles de mon époque – peu avant que la terre natale secoue le joug colonial -, tandis que l’homme continue à avoir droit à quatre épouses légitimes, nous disposons de quatre langues pour exprimer notre désir, avant d’ahaner : le français pour l’écriture secrète, l’arabe pour nos soupirs vers Dieu étouffés, le lybico-berbère quand nous imaginons retrouver les plus anciennes de nos idoles mères. La quatrième langue, pour toutes, jeunes ou vieilles, cloitrées ou à demi émancipées, demeure celle du corps que le regard des voisins, prétend rendre sourd et aveugle, puisqu’ils ne peuvent plus tout à fait l’incarcérer ; le corps qui, dans les transes, les danses ou les vociférations, par accès d’espoir ou de désespoir, s’insurge, cherche en analphabète la destination, sur quel rivage, de son message d’amour.[[83]](#footnote-83)

However, women’s fourth language or means of expression, to wit, the “language of the body” exists only in close connection with the other three languages (“Trois langues auxquelles s’accouple un quatrième langage : celui du corps…”[[84]](#footnote-84)). Furthermore, this fourth language is ambivalent, because if the body freely expresses itself through dances and movements within the private space, it is restricted in the public sphere, where women can only move covered and with great discretion:

Par contre un besoin d’effacement s’exerce sur le corps des femmes qu’il faut emmitoufler, enserrer, langer, comme un nourrisson ou comme un cadavre. Exposé, il blesserait chaque regard, agresserait le plus pâle désir, soulignerait toute séparation.[[85]](#footnote-85)

While Djebar escapes from this prescription of veiling her body in the public sphere thanks to her education and to her instruction in French, in particular, (“Elle lit’, autant dire que l’écriture à lire, y compris celle des mécréants, est toujours source de révélation : de la mobilité du corps dans mon cas, et donc de ma future liberté.”[[86]](#footnote-86)), she nevertheless defines her own writing between the voice and the body:

Entre corps et voix

Ainsi va, cernée, encerclée, mais elle va

Mon écriture.[[87]](#footnote-87)

What complicates her conception of writing is that this voice is not single, not only hers, but multiple, for it includes other women’s voices: “la voix des ombres sororales aussi.”[[88]](#footnote-88). Because it encompasses other women’s voices – like her youngest sister’s, her daughter’s, and that of her female ancestors’[[89]](#footnote-89) – it gives her the strength to uplift her body and set it in movement:

Ma voix multiple

Qui soulève ce corps

Le porte haut

L’envahit, le bouscule, le tire,

L’emplit.[[90]](#footnote-90)

The complexity of writing in close connection with four languages places Djebar’s writing on the one hand “against” and “outside” the boundaries set by a male-dominated society that gives high prominence to the official literary Arabic language and a mono-linguistic vision of the Maghreb. But on the other hand, this makes it also ambivalent because her writing is conceived as an “inclusive writing” consisting of a multiple voice, that is women’s voices, and thus equivalent to a “writing for”, as explored in the following chapter.

In this way, Djebar as well as Mernissi, and Zouari underline in their writing the rich resources Maghrebi women can borrow from their hybrid culture to write at the same time “from within” the Maghreb and “against” that patriarchal space. From these analyses, it may be argued that these three prismatic Maghrebi authors’ “writing against” a complex, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural Maghrebi context denotes a highly conflicted situation where they play out various modes of transgression.

**1.3. MODES OF TRANSGRESSION: IMPLICATIONS OF “WRITING AGAINST”**

Within a society that traditionally places women in a position of subjugation, confined to the domestic sphere of society, with little or no access to the public sphere reserved for men, writing becomes a leap forward in women’s emancipation. In this respect, Maghrebi women writers such as Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari employ different modes of transgression directed “against” the patriarchal order of Maghrebi societies; these range from breaking the cultural silence in which women are enclosed, called the “s’irr”, to unveiling the women’s sphere, i.e., the traditional harem, and foremost disrupting the social order by creating a feminist discourse.

**Speaking = breaking the silence / the “s’irr”**

Djebar stresses the weight of the silence which is inscribed in their culture and which is hard to break when one is a woman from an Arabic-Muslim background:

Parce que femme d’éducation arabe - ou disons de sensibilité maghrébine -, et cela, au creux même de la langue française, je crois que j’ai élaboré ainsi, par tâtonnements, mon esthétique. Je peux résumer celle-ci rapidement: écrire pour moi se joue dans un rapport obscur entre le “devoir dire” et le “ne jamais pouvoir dire”, ou disons, entre garder trace et affronter la loi de l’ “impossibilité de dire”, le “devoir taire”, le “taire absolument”.

Le silence, silence plein qui sous-entend le secret (le *s’irr* de mon dialecte), s’impose donc souvent à moi comme matière de départ : les mots à chercher, à trouver, à esquisser viennent se placer, malgré eux et malgré moi, autour du rempart intérieur de la mutité, certes au plus près, au risque parfois d’ébranler cette zone de silence, de secouer les nerfs de ce silence tremblé, au risque aussi de devoir retomber dans un vide de l’écriture, dans un épuisement…”[[91]](#footnote-91)

What she calls, “the impossibility to speak”, “the necessity to keep quiet”, and “the absolute necessity to remain silent”, reflect this predicament linked to Maghrebi women’s culture and the internalized censorship (‘autour du rempart intérieur de la mutité’) they face when they “speak publically”, and thus write and express themselves. This leads them to oscillate between “the necessity to speak” and “the impossibility to ever speak”, because of this specific silence, this secret, this *s’irr* that circumscribes their culture.

Furthermore, this difficult negotiation between ‘the obligation to speak’ and ‘the inability to ever speak’, implies the creation of a third space[[92]](#footnote-92) which is neither simply the private nor the public domain; it is a space of contradictions, an antithetical space of both negotiation and marginality, both of empowerment and exile. Indeed, paradoxically, this process of empowerment within the public sphere leads also to a place of marginality and exile from the traditional female circle, because “empowered women” end up only a few among “powerful men”. It is within this complex space that Maghrebi women negotiate a new feminine identity. According to Spivak and the Western conception of the public and the private – similar to the Islamic one in its main aspects –, breaking the silence and moving into a space of communication automatically leads women not only to deconstruct ‘the opposition between the private and the public’, but also to overturn all pre-existing social constructions.[[93]](#footnote-93) It is this process that involves, moreover, the negotiation of a new feminine identity different from the traditional one and yet still linked to one’s traditional community.

The critic in women studies Valérie Orlando argues that accessing the realm of the public and establishing agency by negotiating and re-inscribing one’s identity can furthermore be seen as a new beginning and a new becoming for women of the Maghreb[[94]](#footnote-94). Drawing on the theory of the becoming-woman by Deleuze and Guattari[[95]](#footnote-95), Orlando considers the issue of ‘becoming’ as important in studying the feminine identity in the works of contemporary Maghrebi Francophone writers, for “the concepts of the ‘woman’, ‘feminity’, and ‘identity’ are inherently in constant motion and exile.”[[96]](#footnote-96) She argues that the becoming woman philosophy, “frees woman from a subjugated position as an appendage of man, releasing them to new modes of self discovery and individualism.”[[97]](#footnote-97) Therefore, Orlando views this empowerment process as an enabling experience for Maghrebi women, since they enter into ‘an inter-subjective Third Space of negotiation’ that permits them to write of a new mode of feminine identity while providing possibilities of ‘becoming’:

This inter-subjective realm affords women an opportunity to re-inscribe their own identity; they *become*, in the Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, aware of a new feminine agency that allows for a dialogue with the stereotypical, the mimetic and the oppressive discourses of domination to which they have historically been victims. Feminine being, especially, is rewritten into the history of the past and the present.[[98]](#footnote-98)

While Orlando sees the process of entering the public sphere of agency and a space of communication as a positive experience for Maghrebi women, one may wonder whether this negotiation of a new feminine identity really results in a change of attitude in the case of postcolonial Maghrebi women. This relative unity and stability of women’s position within Maghrebi Muslim culture remains well explored in the corpus as this exegesis demonstrates here.

While breaking the silence anchored in one’s condition as a Muslim woman living in a traditional culture may be the first step in transgressing that very culture and speaking publically “against” its patriarchal order, unveiling the private women’s universe by telling one’s readers about the very specific forbidden space of Maghrebi Muslim women imply another mode of transgression.

**Telling = unveiling the harem**

For women,writing “against” the patriarchal order of Maghrebi societies is not only a transgression, it is also a subversion of that very specific male-dominated order for it is a window opened unto the feminine universe, which is supposed to remain private. The harem, where women were traditionally confined, symbolizes this private feminine sphere. Though there are various definitions of this term, what is of interest to us is the domestic harem in the Muslim tradition. This space refers to a family unit, usually composed of extended family members (e.g. A man, his sons and their wives), where non-related male strangers are prohibited from entering:

In these domestic harems, a man and his sons and their wives lived in the same house, pooled their resources, and requested that the women refrain from stepping outside. The men need not have many wives, as is the case in the harem, which inspired the tales of this book. What defines it, as a harem is not polygamy, but the men’s desire to seclude their wives, and their wish to maintain an extended household rather than break into nuclear units.[[99]](#footnote-99)

Opening the realm of Maghrebi Muslim women to public scrutiny and emphasizing women’s customs, subjectivity, and feelings flies against the principles of harems and of Islam. This all the more so when we know that the term “*haram*” in Arabic also refers to religion and moral values. It means what is forbidden as opposed to what is permissible in Islam, “halal”[[100]](#footnote-100). The “Haram” also designates the most sublime and sacred place in the Muslim religion: Mecca; as Fatima’s grandmother explains: “Yasmina explained that Mecca, the holy city, was also called Haram. Mecca was a space where behavior was strictly codified”[[101]](#footnote-101). Hence, the family harem is important and should not be violated by becoming public.

Throughout *La Retournée*, *Dreams of Trespass* and *Nulle Part*, Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar tackle very specific feminine themes, such as marriage, a couple’s relationship, women’s interaction, women’s past times and beauty treatments, children’s education, etc. The readers, especially the Western ones who are not familiar with the Maghrebi Muslim culture, are thus led into the feminine realm. For example, any description of the public bath called “the hammam”, which represents almost an institution considering its social importance in Maghrebi women’s daily life, can only be done from a woman’s point of view. Indeed in the three stories of the corpus, the writers’ references to the “hammam” could be considered as taboo, for it unveils a very private feminine space:

Dans la salle froide de l’entrée du hammam, au fond d’un coin sombre avec estrade, est réservé un lieu où sont installés des divans confortables et où s’amoncellent des matelas couverts de tapis aux vives couleurs. Chaque jeudi après-midi, ma mère et moi (j’ai alors quatre ans, puis cinq, puis six) nous y prenons place avec sérénité, comme dans un véritable salon. […] L’hôtesse nous a précédées dans la salle d’attente si fraiche, bruissante de lointaines rumeurs, de ruissellement d’eaux à l’arrière et de l’écho des voix criardes de baigneuses à demi nues, régnant sur les salles intérieures, leur peau sans doute déjà rougie par la chaleur humide que je redoutais, moi, dès l’entrée, avant de m’y soumettre à mon tour.[[102]](#footnote-102)

While telling involves unveiling the harem, to wit, women’s specific private sphere; it also implies removing one’s veil and making oneself “public”, so to speak. So as to understand the link between writing within the Maghrebi society and implicitly becoming unveiled, it becomes necessary to understand the institution of the veil in the Islamic tradition. The veil or “*hijab*”, often discussed in the media today, has always been a source of debates since the beginning of Islam. Though people have been debating, and still are, about what the veil is supposed to cover in the female body – mainly the body and the hair only or also the face, the hands and feet – and how it should be worn (different clothes and veils have been worn over the years according to the era and place), it is widely considered as a religious prescription inscribed in the Qur’an in three “*surats*”:

« Quand vous demandez (à ses épouses) quelque chose, adressez-vous à elles derrière un rideau (*hidjab*). C’est plus décent pour vos cœurs et pour les leurs. Vous ne devez pas offenser l’Envoyé de Dieu, ni jamais épouser ses femmes après lui. Ce serait une énormité auprès de Dieu. » (Sourate, Les Coalisés, verset 53)

«O Prophète, dis à tes épouses et à tes filles et aux femmes des croyants de ramener leurs voiles (*jilbab*) sur elles. Ce sera pour elles le moyen le plus commode de se faire connaître et de ne pas être offensées. » (Les Coalisés, verset 59)

« Dis aux croyantes de baisser les yeux (devant ce qui leur est interdit de regarder), de sauvegarder leurs sexes (de tout rapport illicite), de ne pas exhiber leurs atours *zina* hormis ce qui est visible. Qu’elles rabattent leurs voiles sur leur poitrine (*yadhribna bi khimarihinna ala juyubihinna*). Qu’elles ne montrent leurs atours qu’à leurs beaux-fils, à leurs frères, à leurs neveux (fils de leurs frères et sœurs), à leurs compagnes, à leurs esclaves, aux domestiques mâles impuissants, aux garçons qui ignorent tout des parties cachées (*awra*) de la femme. Qu’elles ne fassent pas tinter (en marchant) les anneaux de leurs pieds pour qu’on sache ce qu’elles portent comme bijoux cachés. » (Sourate, La Lumière, versets 30 et 31)[[103]](#footnote-103)

Although some contentions exist over the interpretation of these verses and the prescription of the veil as compulsory for Muslim women, what should be stressed is a message of modesty (‘draw their veils over their bodies, necks and bosoms’) and a code of conduct between men and women when they interact (‘behind a veil,’ implying some kind of segregation) in view of respecting women and fostering their protection from harassment.

Furthermore, historians acknowledge that the clothes covering the female body or women’s face existed before Islam. The prophetic message was based on the clothing customs that existed during the Prophet’s era and has only prompted people to be more decent in order to regulate male and female relationships at a time of social disorder, called ‘*Jahiliya*’ in the Islamic history; an era when women were often simple commodities. On top of that, the use of the veil was not generalized to all Muslim women after the Prophet’s death. People at first thought it applied mainly to the Believers’ mothers.[[104]](#footnote-104) It progressively evolved and it only became a common practice as well as an Islamic symbol three centuries after its revelation in the Qur’an[[105]](#footnote-105). Moreover, the conquered peoples who embraced Islam implemented the veil differently. The Persians were known to be quite strict, since this custom existed before Islam in Persia, whereas in the Maghreb the Berber women were initially unveiled and enjoyed a lot of freedom in their relationships with men:

Les Arabes qui arrivent au Sahara maghrébin se montrent choqués de découvrir les berbères non voilées en présence des hommes. Le grand voyageur Ibn Batouta (1304-1378) relate avec étonnement le fait que des époux autorisent leurs femmes à s’entretenir seules avec leurs amis masculins.[[106]](#footnote-106)

Therefore, the veil did not become totally institutionalised in the Islamic Maghreb. Indeed, some Berber tribes as well as the majority of the rural world were against this practice, either for practical reasons or because of a phenomenon of social classes.[[107]](#footnote-107) This explains why in *Dreams of Trespass*, the protagonist’s maternal grandmother and her co-wives enjoy much more freedom of movement and attire in the countryside than the female family members of her household situated in the heart of Fez, a very religious city at that time:

There were really no limits to what women could do on the farm. They could grow unusual plants, ride horses, and move freely about, or so it seemed. In comparison, our harem in Fez was like a prison.[[108]](#footnote-108)

Nowadays throughout the Muslim world, there are many ways of wearing a veil and many veils, so to speak. Yet, whatever its appearance, it is commonly recognized that the core function of the veil is to protect women who step outside their private spheres, or home, and cross the public one, that is a gender mixed environment like the street or a workplace. Comparing the institution of seclusion or harem with that of the veil, Mernissi explains that it is a matter of space, boundaries and segregation:

La réclusion et le harem, c’est un phénomène de classe qui n’a jamais existé que dans les classes supérieures. […] le harem ce n’est pas se mettre un voile sur le visage, c’est être enfermé dans un espace auquel les hommes n’ont pas le droit d’accéder : il s’agit de cacher la femme comme propriété. Et le voile, c’est quand vous quittez le harem. Vous vous-voilez quand vous traversez les espaces publiques[[109]](#footnote-109).

Mernissi also specifies that in the traditional Muslim culture, women are only allowed to trespass in the public space while wearing a veil, which means they are invisible in that space:

Traditionally, women using public spaces, trespassing on the *umma* universe, are restricted to few occasions and bound by specific rituals, such as the wearing of the veil. Moroccan women wear the veil only when they leave the house and walk through the street, which is a male space. The veil means that the woman is present in the men’s world, but invisible; she has no right to be in the street.[[110]](#footnote-110)

Therefore, when a woman writes and is being published, not only does she implicitly step into the public space pertaining traditionally to men, but also she is neither any longer discrete, invisible, nor silent. On the contrary her act of writing exposes herself, her body and soul so to speak, and thus symbolically the woman writer is seen as unveiling in public. In this sense, the act of writing for Maghrebi women involves subverting the patriarchal system of the society by stepping into the masculine domain and becoming public, which is perceived as a morally reprehensible act in the Muslim context. Indeed, for Djebar, to become public equals ‘me dévoiler / to unveil’, which equals ‘me dévoyer / to be misguided’. In the first phase of her career, she goes as far as comparing herself to a public woman whose virtue is doubtful when she realized that *Les Allouettes naives* contains some autobiographical parts:

Ainsi pour revenir à mon expérience, me dévoiler - même dans cinquante pages d’un roman de trois cent cinquante - n’était plus vain : danger dès lors du dévoiement, oh oui… Ecrire soudain, cela signifiait pour moi, au sens propre, “me dévoyer”. L’écrivain-femme deviendrait-elle presque la femme publique? Je n’ai pas publié ensuite pendant dix ans, ou un peu plus, à cette époque de ma vie.[[111]](#footnote-111)

Her uneasiness can be accounted for, on the one hand, the fact that the fifty pages she refers to are about the sensuality of a newly married couple, and, on the other hand, they are autobiographical. Thus not only does she deal with themes, which are taboo in a Muslim society, but also she slips outside the veil of fiction: “Ecrire donc pour une femme, si elle ne peut se cantonner dans la fiction, lui devient a posteriori *dévoilement*.”[[112]](#footnote-112) This is the reason why she thinks of fiction like a veil and declares that during the first phase of her career she wrote while being veiled: “Je me dis à présent que j’écrivais tout en restant voilée. Je dirais même que j’y tenais: de l’écriture comme un voile!”[[113]](#footnote-113); and yet paradoxically to dare to write within her patriarchal society is comparable to unveiling. It is noteworthy to point out, however, that Djebar wrote *Les Alouettes naives* in the late 60s and her writing has evolved since her novels of youth. After her ten-year silence, she begins her Algerian quartet, beginning with *L’Amour la Fantasia*, which she clearly described as autobiographical: “[…] in *l’Amour*, I went unveiled.”

Moreover, what should be understood is that the case of autobiographical writing is seen as all the more immoral for Maghrebi writers, especially for women, because it involves a double and even a triple transgression: stepping into the public sphere of agency; unveiling the feminine subjectivity and women’s desires; and expressing one’s opinion within a society that does not encourage individualism, since individuals supposedly exist only within their community:

Comment une femme pourrait parler haut, même en langue arabe, autrement que dans l’attente du grand âge? Comment dire ‘je’, puisque ce serait dédaigner les formules-couvertures qui maintiennent le trajet individuel dans la résignation collective?[[114]](#footnote-114)

Indeed, autobiographical writing takes on a particular importance when it comes to Maghrebi Muslim women, for it is linked to their condition of being both women and Muslim. Despite the feeling of empowerment provided by saying “I”, autobiographical writing leads also paradoxically to a feeling of shame, or “*hochma*” as Djebar qualifies it. It refers to a specific feminine sense of decency anchored in the Maghrebi, Islamic customs: “…la *hochma*, c’est-à-dire, en arabe, de la ‘honte’, en fait de la pudeur, seule spécificité féminine, pourrait-on dire, de la littérature autobiographique.”[[115]](#footnote-115)  This psychological state is particularly linked to the period after publishing, which she calls: “le retour de violence de l’écrit autobiographique”. It corresponds to a traumatic period[[116]](#footnote-116); it is when she realizes that her text has fled from her and “her own person” has become public: “je ressors de cette exposition du moi en texte publié.”[[117]](#footnote-117) While more details follow in the third chapter about the autobiographical dimension of Maghrebi women’s writing, we can mention that by choosing an autobiographical mode of writing, the three writers of the corpus subvert strongly their patriarchal context.

Considering this very specific condition of the Maghrebi woman, we conclude that unveiling the harem as well as unveiling oneself in pubic by telling about women’s experiences within Maghrebi societies correspond not only to a transgression, but also to the disruption of the social order. Telling about women’s lives and their subjectivity implies furthermore creating a feminine, and even a feminist discourse - a process that is even more disruptive in the Maghrebi context of a strong Islamic and patriarchal tradition.

**Disrupting = creating a feminine / feminist discourse**

If unveiling the private universe of Maghrebi women’s subjectivity involves a transgression of the patriarchal rules characteristic of Maghrebi Muslim societies, writing about women’s experiences and feelings implies also the creation of a feminine, and possibly a feminist, discourse that inevitably contests the mainstream male discourse, most often the official one in such societies. When Maghrebi women authors, like Merinissi, Zouari, and Djebar, write about their society from a woman’s perspective, they usually project a new point of view, which is different from, if not opposite to, that of their male counterparts. As Gafaiti says in the epigraph: “Pour elle, écrire, c’est le faire […] contre l’homme en particulier.”

Writing about gender relationships in her society in the early 1950s, Djebar stresses, for instance, the tension that her intra-homo-diegetic narrator feels in the streets between native men and women when she is a student in Algiers. As she loves walking outside and goes unveiled, she must pretend that she is a European and must speak French whenever she meets some man to ask for her direction. She is aware that speaking in the Arabic dialect and showing an Algerian identity may likely be met with some disdain from her male compatriots, since they don’t accept that a woman trespasses ‘their’ public space without wearing a veil, and thus appear in a state of ‘indiscretion’ and ‘visibility’. She thus deplores the lack of fraternity between the two genders of her community at a time when her country is already divided between the natives and the colonisers:

Ma jupe courte tournoyant au-dessus de mes mollets, j’aurais eu envie de les apostropher, tous ces petits mâles de mon clan :

-Je suis de chez vous ! Je suis comme vous !

Ils auraient ricané, m’auraient insultée.

C’était pourtant la soif de “leur” reconnaissance qui me taraudait !

Je me remémore cette illusion de mon âge d’alors, due à ma naïveté d’adolescente devant ceux que j’aurais pu appeler des “frères”, s’ils avaient accepté de me saluer dans ma neuve liberté ![[118]](#footnote-118)

If Djebar’s protagonist transgresses the rule of the veil when trespassing the male public sphere, she nevertheless looks for some kind of recognition from her male counterparts: “C’était pourtant la soif de “leur” reconnaissance qui me taraudait !” In this sense, we may argue that breaking the rules is never total and that Djebar’s discourse of protest, of “writing against”, proves complex. While Djebar develops a feminine point of view and creates a feminist discourse by showing her protagonist subverting the socio-cultural and patriarchal rules of her society in the 1950s, her discourse is nevertheless ambivalent. Indeed, her autobiographical character may transgress the patriarchal order, but she wishes at the same time that she would not need to act somehow in complicity with the colonial regime by taking up the identity of a European girl coloniser.

On the other hand, we argue that Maghrebi women’s writing becomes even more disruptive when they criticize Islamic practices and institutions, such as the veil, the harem, and polygamy. Such discourse may indeed encounter censorship within Muslim countries.

Zouari is probably the most openly critical of her society; her comments on Islam and women’s status sometimes appear quite daring. She ironically reiterates the stereotypes (generally uttered by some Muslim misogynist) about Muslim women’s faith in order to show that Islam is not gender equal:

La religion, elles la pratiquaient sans la pratiquer, parce qu’elles sont femmes, sans foi ni raison, oublieuses par définition de l’Unique, lequel ne peut s’en offusquer véritablement puisqu’Il a délégué la croyance au sexe masculin.[[119]](#footnote-119)

As to Mernissi, she cleverly questions all the institutions that foster gender inequality in order to prove that they are against the kernel of Islam, which is gender equality. For example, through the character of her maternal Grandmother, Yasmina, Mernissi tries to prove that polygamy is an unfair institution and against the principles of equality inscribed in Islam:

But Lalla Thor on the farm, just like Lalla Mani in Fez, never laughed. She was always very serious, proper, and correct. As the first wife of Grandfather Tazi, she had a very important position in the family. She also had no housekeeping duties, and was very rich, two privileges that Yasmina could not abide. “I could not care how rich this woman is,” she would say, “she ought to be working like all the rest of us. Are we Muslims or not? If we are, everyone is equal. Allah said so. His prophet preached the same.” Yasmina said that I should never accept inequality, for it was not logical. That was why she named her fat white duck Lalla Thor.[[120]](#footnote-120)

As far as Djebar is concerned, she questions the Islamic inheritance laws so as to underscore the injustices women are often victims of: “Pourquoi, mais pourquoi faut-il que je me retrouve, moi et toutes les autres, “nulle part dans la maison de mon père”?[[121]](#footnote-121)

A closer analysis of the three writers’ feminist discourse follows in the next chapter. In the meantime, we conclude that attacking Islamic institutions like the harem, polygamy, heritage laws, severely disrupts in a male-dominated society. If the socio-political and cultural context of Maghrebi women has traditionally been one of silence, enclosure, and submission, the three Maghrebi women writers in question have managed, by the very act of writing, to break the “s’irr” – the self censorship and cultural silence in which they were raised – expose their harem under public scrutiny, unveil themselves, and step into the public sphere of agency in order to negotiate a new identity, and finally to create both a feminine and a feminist discourse.

Even though these writers clearly wish to write “against” their respective society, transgressing rules is always a complex process in which Zouari, Mernissi and Djebar employ various modes of transgression. If Zouari’s position is very anti-patriarchy, anti-religion, and anti-conformist in general, she stays within a limited context of France vs. Tunisia, men vs. women, secularism vs. religion. While she does not seem conscious of the complications of “writing against”, Djebar is very self-conscious of the conflicted situation of writing both “within” and “against” one’s society, because this specific society is itself very complex and multi-layered, as we have underlined. Similarly to Djebar, Mernissi stresses the complicated situation of Muslim women living under colonization or a patriarchal system; yet she tries to rationalize it and suggests solutions for women to gain some freedom. Raised by a mother, who was “so anxious to see [her] escape tradition”,[[122]](#footnote-122) and a father, who insisted that she preserved her traditions, Mernissi would grow up trying to rationalise the complicated condition of Muslim women living both under colonisation and a patriarchal system.

If writing “against” is a reactive process to the context “within” which Maghrebi women write, they however also play other, more active, roles from within their society, such as that of transmitting the speech of other women, in particular the ones who are still enveloped by an ancestral silence (“enveloppées de mutisme”[[123]](#footnote-123)), and whose body remains immobile in the shade (“elles dont le corps reste rivé dans une pénombre et un retrait indument justifiés par quelque loi pseudo-islamique”[[124]](#footnote-124)). Therefore, by writing “against” the conditions of seclusion and silence under which these women live, Maghrebi women who are given the chance to write should play the role of the transmitter / “passeuse” and write “for” their subaltern sisters:

Pour qui veut écouter, puis transmettre, puis précautionneusement dire, à peine laisser perler, ne pas déformer par l’enflure, par l’hyperbole d’une révolte attendue, en somme pour qui a souci de faire le passeur – la passeuse – sur un ton juste, d’une voix sûre, et prolonger cette parole pleine, grave ou hésitante, ou fragile, pour la fixer sans la souiller, ni l’exhiber – seulement pérenniser cette trace, tatouage de l’origine -, serait-ce cela vraiment écrire, quand on est femme et que l’écho de la tribu fantôme vous devient maison et prison ?[[125]](#footnote-125)

According to Djebar, the one who transmits her sisters’ “secret speech”[[126]](#footnote-126) in order to revive their memory should not use an hyperbolic tone, but rather one must be as authentic and objective as possible in transmitting “the women’s tribe echo”.

One should ask though whether authenticity and objectivity are the right criteria when writing is viewed as transmitting, or when the writer occupies the place of a transmitter within his/her community? In order to answer this question we need to examine the role of the writer in relation to her community, which will be tackled in detail in the next chapter. Yet, we may mention now that the criteria to write about the Maghreb, and especially Maghrebi women, vary from one writer to another. If Djebar wishes neither to taint nor to exhibit the speech from the women of her tribe, the following chapter demonstrates that this may not correspond to Zouari’s motivations in writing about Tunisian or Maghrebi women. We aim at exploring further the various roles that Djebar, Zouari, and Mernissi play as “transmitters” within their respective communities, as well as clarifying Djebar’s expression: “écrire pour”[[127]](#footnote-127). We explore particularly these three prismatic writers’ postcolonial feminist engagement and the notion of representativeness in their writings.

**CHAPTER TWO:**

**WRITING “FOR”**

**CHAPTER TWO: WRITING “FOR”**

*Parole et écriture […] A plus forte raison quand il s’agit des femmes, ou l’éloquence leur est reconnue, mais rarement le don, et le pouvoir d’écriture, elles dont le corps reste rivé dans une pénombre et un retrait indûment justifiés par quelque loi pseudo-islamique : écrire, pour chaque femme, ne peut que nous ramener à ce double interdit, du regard et du savoir.*

*Ecrire serait inévitablement nous cogner, à travers elles, nous-mêmes, à ces murs du silence, à cette invisibilité. Ecrire deviendrait-il, par cela même, à cause de cette urgence, “écrire pour”, c’est-à-dire un engagement du verbe, une écriture de passion et de lutte?*

Assia Djebar, *Ces voix qui m’assiègent* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), p.93.

*It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem.*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Questions of multi-culturalism’, *Modern Criticism and Theory, 3rd edition,* Lodge, David & Wood, Nigel (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2008), p.597.

Speaking about Maghrebi women’s contemporary literature, and considering the difficult socio-political condition in which Maghrebi women have been writing, the patriarchal nature of their societies, the atmosphere of silence and enclosure in which they have been traditionally condemned to live because of “pseudo”[[128]](#footnote-128) Islamic rules that prevent them from exploring the world and themselves, Djebar argues that writing has conducted women to violate a double prohibition: that of the gaze and knowledge. According to her, if Maghrebi women’s traditional role as storytellers has been recognized, their ability or gift to write has seldom been acknowledged. However, after their country’s independence, Maghrebi women had the courage to take the pen / the *qalam*, as Djebar says, to write about both themselves and their “sisters” whose “bodies have been secluded in the dark”[[129]](#footnote-129). Their writing, which often took the form of a testimony in its beginning[[130]](#footnote-130), soon becomes a writing of “passion and struggle” in that, they want to denounce both the oppression of their people under colonisation and of women living under a patriarchal system. Therefore, Djebar considers Maghrebi women’s act of writing as inevitably a form of commitment: “a writing for”.

Among these women, who dared to take a position and speak “publically” by writing, Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari all engage in a postcolonial feminist discourse. Their struggle and writing “against” both the subservience of their people by the colonial or postcolonial regimes and the subjugation of Maghrebi women implicitly implies a commitment towards, a “writing for”, their “subaltern sisters”. This chapter aims at demonstrating that on the one hand, each writer’s writing of passion and struggle reveals a specific feminist engagement; and, on the other hand, each writer’s “writing for”, which can take various stylistic forms, involves a complex process of representation of her respective community. We will first examine each author’s feminist ideology and stance as a spokesperson within her community, then interrogate the sensitive issue of “representativeness” and see how the writers respond to this problematic, and finally return to our literary texts in order to compare each author’s diverging form of “writing for” and its impact on her feminist engagement.

**2.1. The writers’ feminist engagement = “a writing of passion and struggle”**

As we situate Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar’s literature within the field of post-colonialism, their positions must be examined in relation to the postcolonial feminist trend. Postcolonial feminism may be defined as a combination of postcolonial and feminist theories:

Feminist postcolonial theory has engaged in a two-fold project: to racialise mainstream feminist theory and to insert feminist concerns into conceptualisations of colonialism and post-colonialism. Feminist activism and struggle, including most pertinently struggles with other feminists, is where we situate ourselves: these are our intellectual antecedents, the ideas that formed us.[[131]](#footnote-131)

According to this definition, Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar may be described as postcolonial feminist writers. However, each writer displays a specific attitude and sustains her own discourse towards postcolonial feminist issues, as we shall now demonstrate by examining closely their feminist ideology.

**Fawzia Zouari: a secular feminist position**

Although Zouari adopts a critical stance, throughout *La Retournée*, towards her post-independent country and to a certain extent the post-traditional experience her society is experiencing, her postcolonial political view does not appear as closely linked to her feminist engagement. The narrator’s perspective on colonialism, for example, does not reflect a postcolonial feminist position by the author. Although Zouari mentions that the native people were divided as to their relationships with the colonisers (i.e., those who collaborated, or at least were friends with the colonisers vs. those who resisted their domination and presence: “Cela dépend à qui tu t’adresses: ceux de tes oncles qui ont frayé avec les Français ou les vaillants qui leur ont résisté”[[132]](#footnote-132)); overall she does not strongly condemn colonisation throughout her story and above all, she does not tackle the issue of colonisation with a feminist perspective. In the following passage, for example, she does not compare the oppression of her people by the French with the subjugation of women by their male counterparts, as Djebar does or other postcolonial feminist writers or critics do:

Hamma revient sur l’Époque de la colonisation. Je suis, à n’en pas douter, un rappel constant de l’ancien envahisseur aux yeux des villageois, une sorte d’ambassadrice de France sans titre :

- Nous avons vécu en bonne intelligence avec les *Gouirras*, malgré tout. Certains nous fréquentaient assidument, d’autres avaient pris souche chez nous.

J’écoute l’éloge de mon pays d’accueil sans ciller. [[133]](#footnote-133)

On the contrary, these few allusions tend to show some kind of complicity with the colonial power: “une sorte d’ambassadrice de France sans titre”; and this despite Zouari’s ironical tone.

However, if Zouari’s postcolonial feminist engagement is not explicitly expressed, she overtly defends a feminist view in her writings in general. Therefore, we wonder which feminist philosophy she usually sustains in her works and in particular what kind of feminist voice is reflected in her autobiographical fiction. We argue that though Zouari’s approach to politics and gender may appear similar, in some regards, to the Orientalist feminist trend, in reality she supports more a secular feminist ideology.

While Orientalism is generally the study of the Orient, and in postcolonial critical terms the biased representation of the Orient by the Occident with the aim of justifying imperialist enterprises and colonial domination of the Third World[[134]](#footnote-134), feminist Orientalism corresponds more to the neo-Orientalist movement and the politicians’ use of “women’s rights as an excuse to legitimate their colonial presence and their modern version, such as the current neo-conservatives who raise support for war in defence of women’s rights.”[[135]](#footnote-135) As to Orientalist feminism, it can be defined as a modern project and, “a type of feminism that advocates and supports particular foreign policies toward the Middle East.”[[136]](#footnote-136) The postcolonial critic, Roksana Bahramistash, argues that some bestseller books in North America, like Geraldine Brooks’ *Nine Parts of Desire* and Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran,* combine both feminist Orientalism and Orientalist feminism for they have raised “support for the neo-conservative agenda to stir anti-Muslim sentiment in North America as well as to promote the war on terror.”[[137]](#footnote-137) Drawing from the Iranian writer Parvin Paydar’s book on the role of Iranian women in public spaces called *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran*[[138]](#footnote-138), we can distinguish three characteristics of Orientalist feminism. Firstly, it is based on binary oppositions and represents the West as progressive as opposed to the East, which is seen as backward; secondly, Oriental women are only seen as victims in their societies, never as agents; thirdly, Orientalist feminism generalizes women’s conditions and assumes that all societies in the Orient are the same. Though the term Orientalist feminism usually applies to Western women writers, some bi-national writers like the American-Iranian Nafisi may fall into this category. Zouari, a bi-national too, may thus be compared with this movement.

At first reading, Zouari’s novels can indeed be interpreted as Orientalist feminist fictions for they establish a binary opposition between the Orient and the Occident, often place the latter in a superior position, transmit negative images about Oriental people and Islam, and portray Muslim women as mainly victims in their societies. If some of her novels like *La deuxième épouse* are steeped in an Orientalist discourse (the narrator’s husband’s characterization in particular is negative and stereotyped, as he is given all the attributes of the misogynist and machismo Arab), in other books, such as *Ce Pays dont je meurs,* one discovers a more complex than typical Orientalist feminist fiction. As to *La Retournée*, though Zouari stages in the foreground a young Tunisian woman’s feminist rebellion against her conservative, patriarchal family, and backward village people; in the background, she tackles more sensitive issues like the complex relationship between the Orient and the Occident, and more particularly between Tunisia and France with its immigrant population. On a smaller scale, the relationship her female Tunisian semi-autobiographical character, Rym, entertains with both her “Orientalist” ex-husband, Bruno (a former expat French teacher) and her Tunisian lover, Moncef, with whom she hopes to build a better future for herself and her country, underscores the ambivalence of Zouari’s feminist discourse.

Indeed, on the one hand we discover Rym’s Orientalist feminist discourse. This autobiographical character appears as the archetype of the feminist woman fighting for women’s rights in a very patriarchal Tunisian village. More than any feminist, she is associated with a Western feminist type, rather than an Arab or a local one, for she comes from France, where she has acquired Western feminist values. Throughout the story, Rym denounces men’s machismo attitude, such as that of her uncle Slimane, and tries to defy them by refusing to abide to the patriarchal rules of her traditional society: “Eh bien, nous allons voir qui aura le dernier mot ! dis-je à Zina. Je ne partirai pas avant d’avoir montré à Slimane ce dont une femme est capable. Le défi me donne des ailes.”[[139]](#footnote-139) Moreover, she endeavours to change the conditions of secluded and powerless women like her aunt Zina. Indeed, in the end of the story Rym’s submissive and traditional Aunt Zina has changed so much under her niece’s influence that she dares to speak out and confront her eldest brother Slimane in order to obtain the right to remain in her late brother Brahim’s house, where she spent most of her life:

Zina est de retour, une expression de défi sur le visage :

* J’ai crié et tempêté. J’ai frappé de mes pieds sur le sol et j’ai menacé Slimane d’ameuter le village s’il ne m’écoute pas. […] « Le testament de mon frère Brahim ou un scandale ! », ai-je averti. Alors, il s’est exécuté.[[140]](#footnote-140)

The example of the inheritance case, which is central to the plot of the story, shows not only her success in her feminist endeavour, but also her influence on other women who would not have dared to exceed beyond their traditional boundaries. Indeed, Rym acts as a women’s rights counsellor among the village women who are facing similar problems of inheritance and injustice. These uneducated village women regularly come and visit her to gain some advice from someone they see as a French ambassador:

La nouvelle du procès s’étant propagée, des femmes confrontées au même problème d’héritage viennent solliciter mes conseils. […] Les femmes m’écoutent religieusement, les yeux baissés. Je ne sais si je dois l’imputer à mon attitude ou à leur condition. […]

Quelques visiteuses se croient obligées de me vanter les vertus de la France, comme on le ferait pour une personne physique :

* La France est unique. Elle est rigoureuse, propre et honnête.[[141]](#footnote-141)

The municipality is not only aware of the important role that Rym plays among the village women, but also of the danger of the feminist ideas she transmits. One of the mayor’s counsellors, Farid, even fears a revolution and despises Rym for being so strong and educated:

* Me prendriez-vous pour un idiot ! Je connais assez votre parcours et ce dont vous êtes capable. Vous suggérez à ces femmes qu’elles ont des droits qu’elles ignorent, des terres qui leur ont été injustement confisquées. Autrement dit, vous voulez les dresser contre leurs frères et leurs maris. Demain, elles pourraient nous demander de partager la vallée. Et ce serait la révolution. […]

*- Naal-bou França* qui t’a appris ces grands mots ! [[142]](#footnote-142)

One notices that even men of authority compare Rym with France, and thus Farid admits and deplores at the same time her superiority. From the few passages quoted above, it thus appears that the semi-autobiographical protagonist of *La Retournée* acts like a French feminist whose mission is to save Muslim women from their backward, misogynist, and patriarchal men. This is exactly the kind of attitude of some Orientalist feminist writers, like Geraldine Brooks, whom the scholar Bahramitash denounces:

The book [*Nine Parts of Desire*] is full of examples where Brooks as an Orientalist feminist takes the experience of Muslim women as the Other. [...] These examples show Brooks’ ‘situational superiority’ vis-à-vis the women about whom she is writing – or perhaps judging. She is unable to accept these Muslim women as her equals.[[143]](#footnote-143)

Yet, Zouari’s fiction cannot be categorized so easily and deemed to be only Orientalist. Indeed, at a closer reading, the relationship between the Orient and the Occident is not clear-cut, and the writer’s position appears as ambivalent. It seems that neither the East, nor the West is the best place on earth. Zouari is as critical of the French (whom she often portrays as racist) as of the Arabs who are repeatedly stereotyped as backward and misogynous.

At a closer look, I therefore argue that Zouari’s approach throughout her narrative is more that of a secular feminist, who believes that women’s emancipation should be sought outside religion. In a recent interview with the French journalist Anne Sinclair, Zouari expresses herself on her book to be published, *Le corps de ma mère*, and confirms clearly her secular position and ideology:

Nous sommes restées dans une forme de négociation avec la religion qui fait que nous sommes piégées dans le référent religieux. Et tant que nous ne sommes pas en terrain de laïcité totale, c’est-à-dire qu’on fait de la religion une affaire personnelle et pas une affaire politique, ni une affaire législative. Tant qu’on n’est pas arrivé là, on ne s’en sort toujours pas.[[144]](#footnote-144)

Some scholars in the Muslim world have proposed a secular approach to feminism, that is, they prefer to leave religion aside while defending the equality between men and women. They aim at transforming their patriarchal society and changing norms and laws that tend to privilege men and put women in a position of inferiority and submission. As early as the 19th century, some feminists (men and women) in the Arab and Muslim world put forward this approach, which emulates Western feminism. The Egyptian lawyer Qassim Amine is a forerunner of this approach with his book *The Liberation of Woman* (1899), which created much debate at that time, because he not only argues for the abolition of the veil, but also for major reforms socially and culturally speaking in Egypt and in Muslim countries at large[[145]](#footnote-145).

Zouari clearly portrays her heroine as secular. In reality, Rym, has undergone a transformation and become a secular person after her fifteen-year exile in France:

Autrefois, lorsque je revenais pour la fin du Ramadan de la ville voisine ou j’étais pensionnaire, je pouvais connaître à cette même distance l’heure du *moughreb*. Il me suffisait de guetter l’instant précis où les lumières du minaret fendaient le crépuscule pour irradier dans la plaine. A travers leur scintillement, je croyais voir les clins d’œil intermittents d’Allah, sa face complice, nous faisait signe de rompre le jeûne. J’avais alors les quelques dattes soigneusement enroulées dans une serviette au fond de mon cartable et je gardais le reste de ma faim pour l’arrivée.

Depuis que j’ai quitté mon pays pour la France, je ne jeûne plus et j’ai souvent oublié qu’il existe un mois appelé ramadan. Les lumières du minaret s’étaient éteintes et la rumeur du vent de l’Ouest ne m’était plus parvenue.[[146]](#footnote-146)

The contrast between the first paragraph and the second one shows a radical change of attitude from the part of the intra-homo-diegetic narrator, Rym. Not only is the adult Rym secular, she also despises religion and repeatedly gives a negative image of Islam, and especially of the way her village people practise their religion. More precisely, we think Zouari points out that the changes that have occurred in her society as to religion, in the past twenty years or so, demonstrate a rise of fundamentalism and a hypocritical attitude on the part of some people who may seem quite religious only on the outside; yet, in reality they do not hold proper religious values:

La nuit, j’ai peur de l’obscurité et de l’aboiement des chiens errants, comme quand j’étais enfant. Le tapage des derniers ivrognes qui passent sous ma fenêtre m’empêche de dormir. La prière de l’aube que l’imam du village nous inflige à cinq heures du matin, à travers un haut-parleur grésillant, réveille ma fille en sursaut, d’après Zina qui dort avec elle. Depuis l’avènement de la technologie, Dieu s’est fait moins discret, bien que plus absent. Il n’est plus tant l’objet de notre piété qu’un diktat de militants qui nous somment de l’aimer. On lui impute la loi qui impose le port du foulard et de la barbe, mais on Le chercherait en vain dans les cœurs. Mon père disait qu’invoquer son nom cent fois fait accéder à « un sommeil doux comme un nectar d’abeilles ». Pour le moment, son nom psalmodié par la voix enregistrée de notre imam, provoque mes insomnies.[[147]](#footnote-147)

Zouari’s secular opinion and critical stance towards Islam throughout her novel is reinforced by her view on the new trend of feminism within the Muslim world called Islamic feminism. Her ironic tone and scepticism about Islamic feminists’ ambition is expressed in a newspaper article in which she explains this new trend of feminism appearing in the Arab world:

La montée de l’islamisme voit naître dans le monde arabe une nouvelle catégorie de féministes qui affirment pouvoir rouvrir et discuter le registre du passé, de la tradition et des sources premières de l’islam. Sociologues ou historiennes, elles s’attellent à une forme inédite d’*ijtihad* (exégèse) voulant répliquer sur le terrain de la religion, relire les textes fondateurs en les féminisant, en quelque sorte. Ces chercheuses érudites entendent battre leurs coreligionnaires masculins sur leur propre terrain et sont persuadées qu’une connaissance du texte coranique est plus pertinente que toute référence aux traités féministes occidentaux jugés hors contexte.[[148]](#footnote-148)

In the quotation above, Zouari probably refers to the sociologist Fatima Mernissi among other Islamic feminists, especially since the latter is regarded as the forerunner of this new form of feminism, as will be discussed next. While, for Mernissi, Islam is not to be blamed for the subjugation and ill-treatment of some Muslim women, Zouari doubts that Islam supports equality of men and women alike: “Est-il dans la nature intrinsèque de l’islam d’être pour ou contre les femmes ?”[[149]](#footnote-149)

**Fatima Mernissi: an Islamic feminist vision**

If Zouari’s postcolonial feminist engagement does not form the basis of her ideology, Mernissi is more concerned about anchoring her feminist discourse within the issues of colonialism or post-colonialism. This is exemplified in her memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, which is set during colonial Morocco and at a time when Arab colonised countries wanted their political liberation, like Egypt. Several Arab feminists at that time desired to link women’s emancipation with decolonization.

This explains why women in the Mernissi’s harem support Chama’s theatre plays, staging the Egyptian female activist Huda Sha’raoui, since they are impressed by her double struggle, i.e., to fight the British occupation, and to fight for women’s rights:

But the most successful pioneering champion of women’s rights, as far as the terrace audience was concerned, was Huda Sha`raoui, an aristocratic Egyptian beauty, born in 1879, who bewitched Egypt’s rulers with ardent speeches and popular street marches. [...] Forced into an early marriage at age 13, Huda fascinated Chama because she was able to transform a whole society in just a few decades by sheer stubborn will. Huda managed to do two seemingly contradictory things at the same time – fight the British occupation and end her own traditional seclusion and confinement.[[150]](#footnote-150)

As far as Moroccan women are concerned, Mernissi explains that some progress in women’s emancipation occurs on the day of her country’s independence. Despite having a strict husband and being secluded, Fatima’s mother finally manages to leave her harem and discard her veil once her country is free:

Later, in 1956, as soon as Mother heard that Morocco had gotten independence and the French armies were leaving, she joined the march organized by the nationalists’ wives, and sang with them until late in the night. When she finally came home exhausted from walking and singing, her hair was uncovered and her face was bare. From then on, there were no more black *litham* to be seen covering young women’s faces in Fez Medina; only old ladies and young, newly migrant peasants kept the veil[[151]](#footnote-151).

It is also significant that the nationalist movement imagines a freer society for both men and women citizens once liberated from colonial oppression: “The nationalists advocated the end of seclusion and the veil, […]”[[152]](#footnote-152). Therefore, in *Dreams of Trespass*, women’s revolution for emancipation parallels the people’s revolt in gaining their independence.

However postcolonial feminist discourse does not constitute the main thread of Mernissi’s autobiographical narrative. We argue that Mernissi’s memoir may rather be read as an Islamic feminist manifesto, for it contains the basis of her ideology on this fairly new feminist trend, of which she is one of the pioneers.

Since the late 20th century, some Muslim women (both religious and not religiously observant) around the world, in the Islamic community, have engaged in a feminine hermeneutic of Islam by the practice of *ijtihad* – the individual interpretation of the Qur’an and sacred scriptures – in order to promote gender-equality and women’s emancipation within Muslim society. Many consider Fatima Mernissi as the forerunner of this new phenomenon, especially with her revolutionary book, *Le Harem Politique*[[153]](#footnote-153) published in 1987 in France, and said to be the first major work of Islamic feminism. Through a study of the *hadiths*[[154]](#footnote-154), that constitute the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings and teachings that all Muslim people should follow, she denounces some false *hadiths* that have circulated over centuries and contributed to a misogynist interpretation of Islam giving a negative and degrading image of the Muslim woman. Other Muslim scholars, especially in Iran, have dared since then to follow suite and to reinterpret the sacred scriptures of Islam from a feminine point of view and have thus generated a public debate on gender issues in Muslim communities. For Margot Badran, a specialist and scholar in feminism in Islam, these courageous women are not “adjuncts to masculinist political projects. Quite to the contrary, they are finding a separate space between secular feminism and masculinist Islamism.”[[155]](#footnote-155) They form a space in-between. This movement, which appeared in the context of the emergence of Islamist movements, “or movement of political Islam […] as well as during the widespread Islamic religious cultural revival in many Muslim-majority secular states and minority societies”[[156]](#footnote-156), aims at both paving the way for gender liberation and social change[[157]](#footnote-157). According to Badran, Islamic feminists are eager to transform Muslim societies fundamentally: “Its concern has not been simply a religious and societal reform but a fundamental transformation reflecting the practice of an egalitarian Islam.”[[158]](#footnote-158)

The key concepts of Islamic feminism are gender equality and social justice, two core values inscribed in the original message of Islam through the Qur’an. Yet, because of the hegemonic deviant interpretation of its scriptures, this religion has unfortunately become patriarchal over centuries:

Islam, uniquely among the three religions of the “people of the book,” through its scripture – the Qur’an as the Word of God – introduced a message of the fundamental equality of women and men as human beings (*insan*), women’s rights, and social justice, yet this message was subverted in the name of Islam itself. The patriarchal ideas and practices the Qur’an had come to temper and ultimately eradicate (in Arabia and other societies into which Islam was introduced over the centuries) proved highly resistant. Islam was embraced while patriarchy was retained. The hegemonic manipulation was such that the notion of a patriarchal Islam became naturalized, and the inherent contradiction between the revealed Word and patriarchy was obscured and Islam’s call for gender equality and social justice was thwarted.[[159]](#footnote-159)

Although *Dreams of Trespass: tales of a harem girlhood* is not seen as important as Mernissi’s other scholarly books[[160]](#footnote-160), as regards feminism in Islam, it contains the author’s ideology and denounces the problems encountered by women in a traditional Muslim society such as Morocco in the 1940s. We argue that throughout her memoir, Mernissi creates an Islamic feminist discourse so as to question gender inequality of the Moroccan society in the 1940s, as exemplified specifically by the institution of the harem, which is based on a patriarchal tradition rather than on the core-values of the religion of Islam. Mernissi deems un-Islamic any practice (such as, polygamy, women’s seclusion, and the veil), which contradicts the original message of Islam and prejudices women’s freedom and agency.

Mernissi clearly weaves the web of an Islamic feminist discourse throughout her narrative by, on the one hand, developing a message of gender equality and social justice, and on the other hand by denouncing any practices, which are deemed against these two key Islamic principles by her feminist characters, such as Fatima’s mother or grandmother. Furthermore, *Dreams of Trespass* deals with Mernissi’s awareness of feminism from a very young age. In this autobiographical narrative, her female protagonist, Fatima, is surrounded by a few feminist figures that try to shape her personality and instil feminist core values in her. By making her realize the countless injustices women suffer from, they teach her how to be strong and defend her rights as she represents their hope for an improvement in women’s conditions.

Fatima’s mother, in particular, wishes her daughter to develop a strong personality and to rely only on herself:

But Mother kept saying that I could not rely on Samir to do all the rebelling for me: “You have to learn to scream and protest, just the way you learned to walk and talk. Crying when you are insulted is like asking for more.”[[161]](#footnote-161)

She also teaches her daughter some important feminist values like to become modern and educated in order to be financially independent:

“Dress says so much about a woman’s designs,” she said. “If you plan to be modern, express it through what you wear, otherwise they will shove you behind the gates. Caftans may be of unparalleled beauty, but Western dress is about salaried work.” I therefore grew up to associate caftans with lavish holidays, religious festivals, and the splendours of our ancestral past, and Western dress with pragmatic calculations and stern, professional, daily chores[[162]](#footnote-162).

As far as her maternal grandmother, is concerned, she urges Fatima to not accept injustice and fight for her right in demanding a monogamous marriage. Although Yasmina bears up under her condition of being one of the nine wives of Grandfather Tazi, and the unjust privileges that Lalla Thor enjoys as the first wife and cousin of their shared husband, she always seeks subtle revenge and hopes that her granddaughter will benefit from a much better situation when she grows up:

Naming the duck Lalla Thor was Yasmina’s way of participating in the creation of the beautiful, new Morocco, the Morocco that I, her little granddaughter, was going to step into. “Morocco has changed quickly, little girl,” she often told me, “and it will keep on doing so.” That prediction made me feel very happy. I was going to grow up in a wonderful kingdom where women had rights, including the freedom to snuggle up with their own husbands every night[[163]](#footnote-163).

It is especially thanks to the education Fatima and other girls from her generation receive[[164]](#footnote-164) that her lot turns out to be better than that of her elders who were not educated, and thus powerless: “for you know, the problem with women today is that they are powerless. And powerlessness stems from ignorance and a lack of education.”[[165]](#footnote-165) This educational opportunity, reinforced by the critical interpretation of Islam strong feminist figures, such as her mother and grandmother, instilled into her, will permit Mernissi, later on, to play her role as a spokesperson for her community. However, we may wonder whether her position, as an educated emancipated woman, does prevent her from fully “speaking for” less privileged, illiterate women, like her grandmother. We shall examine more in detail Mernissi’s role as a spokesperson for subaltern women in the second section of this chapter.

Djebar, also had the privilege to receive an education at a time when few native girls were educated during colonial Algeria. Though Djebar’s position towards religion is similar to Mernissi’s, that of an Islamic feminist, her discourse clearly sustains a postcolonial feminist perspective, which tackles hand in hand issues of gender with that of colonialism or post-colonialism.

**Assia Djebar: a postcolonial feminist perspective**

It may be argued that Djebar’s postcolonial feminist concerns are displayed early in her writing career with her first novel, *La Soif* (1957). It was indeed written while she was on a student strike in Paris, as a gesture of solidarity with her Algerian counterparts, at a time when her country was under fire in the middle of a bloody eight-year war. At that time, she had already gained the exception as the first Algerian woman to be admitted at the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. Though some French critics compared her to Françoise Sagan, her male compatriots in general did not however receive her novel with the same acclaim and blamed her for her lack of patriotism; they read that novel as outside the anti-colonial discourse of that time. Nonetheless, twenty years later, as a mature woman and writer, Djebar wrote incontestably a masterpiece of postcolonial feminist literature with *L’Amour, la fantasia* (1985).

For many critics, *L’Amour, la fantasia* remains a prototype of the postcolonial feminist novel, insofar as it inserts feminist concerns into both colonialist and post-colonialist issues. Throughout this polyphonic autobiographical novel, which intercalates several narratives, the thread of the narrator’s personal story (very private autobiographical details are given about her marriage, her family and relatives, and her career) interweaves with that of the history of Algeria (a large period is covered from the time of the French conquest at the beginning of the 19th century to the War of Liberation of Algeria from 1956 to 1962, and it includes some references to present day Algeria, particularly the recent Civil War in the 1990s). Furthermore, as a historian, Djebar embarks on a quest to revive the memory of her people from an Algerian point of view and not a Eurocentric one. Her decision stems from this observation: out of the 37 accounts she has found on the conquest of Algeria, 32 are written by French military officials and only 2 by the conquered camp (that of a Turkish religious figure, the Hadj Ahmed Effendi, written in Turkish, and that of one Algerian, the Bey Ahmed of Constantine’s secretary, who wrote in Arabic). She therefore decides to thwart the French subjectivism by assuming her own point of view: that of both an Algerian and a woman:

Un mois après, Barchou se souvient donc et écrit : “Des femmes, qui se trouvent toujours en grand nombre à la suite des tribus arabes, avaient montré le plus d’ardeur à ces mutilations. L’une d’elles gisait à côté d’un cadavre français dont elle avait arraché le cœur ! Une autre s’enfuyait, tenant un enfant dans ses bras : blessée d’un coup de feu, elle écrasa avec une pierre la tête de l’enfant, pour l’empêcher de tomber vivant dans nos mains; les soldats l’achevèrent elle-même à coups de baïonnette.”

Ces deux Algériennes – l’une agonisante, à moitié raidie, tenant le cœur d’un cadavre français au creux de sa main ensanglantée, la seconde, dans un sursaut de bravoure désespérée, faisant éclater le crâne de son enfant comme une grenade printanière, avant de mourir, allégée – ces deux héroïnes entrent ainsi dans l’histoire nouvelle.[[166]](#footnote-166)

The contrast between the French officer’s narrative (the first paragraph) and Djebar’s (the second paragraph) is striking. For her, the two Algerian women must be considered as heroines, and not as savages, and therein enter the new history of Algeria written by Algerians for Algerians. It is clearly “for” these Algerian heroines, once erased from both the French history books and the national historiography of her country, that Djebar writes not only *her/story*, but also the *his/tory* of Algeria. She feels it is indeed her duty to write “for” these anonymous Algerians, who were victims of the colonial war and whose memory was “mutilated”, i.e., erased from History:

Fromentin ramasse dans la poussière, une main coupée d’une Algérienne anonyme. Il la jette ensuite sur le chemin. Plus tard, je me saisis de cette main vivante, main de la mutilation et du souvenir et je tente de lui faire porter le *qalam*.[[167]](#footnote-167)

In *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, which is set during colonial Algeria, Djebar also expresses her postcolonial feminist engagement; yet, it appears on a more personal level. The intra-homo-diegetic narrator’s personal story is nonetheless also embedded in her country’s history and the socio-political context of both colonised Algeria and post-colonial Algeria, as well as to a certain extent within today’s socio-political concerns of third world women throughout the world. Her identity crisis, which triggers her suicide attempt, is linked to the fate of her country, because Algeria soon experiences a political crisis that leads it to a tragic war for its independence. Her own rebellion against the patriarchal authority of both her father and her ‘fiancé’[[168]](#footnote-168) is therefore anchored in the revolt of her own country against colonialism. This parallelism between her predicament and the situation of her colonised country may furthermore be extended to include all Algerian women living under patriarchal rule, and thus suffering from an inferior status within their society:

Je n’ai plus de “maison de mon père”. Je suis sans lieu, là-bas, non point seulement parce que le père est mort, affaibli, dans un pays dit libéré où toutes les filles sont impunément déshéritées par les fils de leurs pères.

Je suis sans lieu là-bas depuis ce jour d’octobre – un an et quelques jour avant qu’une autre explosion ne se soit déclenchée sur cette même terre : en mille morceaux ce territoire où se succéderont expulsions, meurtres, morts héroïques ou barbares, espoirs piétinés et toujours renaissants…[[169]](#footnote-169)

Alluding to the present day Algeria, “un pays dit libéré”, Djebar deplores, like Mernissi, that though her country is no longer under the yoke of colonialism, some men still subjugate women, so they suffer from both social injustice and gender inequality. Henceforth, this explains her decision to write “close to” her “subaltern sisters”, that is, to become their spokesperson, somehow. Acting as the representative of one’s community is nevertheless a sensitive issue, which implies various possible roles that a writer may play.

**2.2. Writing “for” = acting as a spokesperson for “subaltern women”**

It is significant that Djebar dedicates her autobiographical novel to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a leading postcolonial theorist and critic. Indeed, her own mission may be connected to Spivak’s, who deals lengthily with the category of the subaltern and its representation in colonial production. The term ‘subaltern’ refers to, “the category of those who are lower in position or who, in the military terms that are always appropriate to the colonial situation, are lower in rank.”[[170]](#footnote-170) Spivak borrows the term from Antonio Gramsci to describe the lower layers of colonial and postcolonial society. She focuses especially on the female subaltern and argues that she has traditionally been doubly marginalized: both by the colonial regime and her patriarchal culture:

[…] It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.[[171]](#footnote-171)

In her article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak demonstrates that not only has the female subaltern been doubly marginalised, but also she cannot be represented:

The oppressed and silenced cannot, by definition, speak or achieve self-legitimation without ceasing to be that named subject under neo-colonialism. But if the oppressed subalterns cannot be spoken for by Western intellectuals – because this would not alter the most important fact of their position – nor speak for themselves, there can apparently be no-non – or anti-colonial discourse.[[172]](#footnote-172)

Spivak raises the problem of the subalterns’ predicament, since they face a dead end situation in relation to their representation. According to her, being represented by Western intellectuals would not change the subalterns’ position because of the possibility of misrepresenting them[[173]](#footnote-173). Furthermore, considering their condition as being oppressed or silenced, they cannot possibly speak for themselves. As a result, Spivak argues that no non- or anti-colonial discourse can take place.

However, postcolonial women intellectuals – not the Western ones, but the ones from previous colonial countries – have precisely been trying to create an anti-colonial or post-colonial discourse by giving voice to the subaltern women of their communities, and thus representing them. Examining now the stance of each writer in relation to her respective community, especially towards the subaltern women, should enlighten us on their roles as feminist spokespersons. We furthermore compare how each author applies her respective feminist ideology – to wit, secular feminism (Zouari), Islamic feminism (Mernissi), and postcolonial feminism (Djebar) – in speaking “for” other Maghrebi women, especially the disenfranchised ones.

**Fawzia Zouari: a superior voice among the women of her clan**

Zouari, like most Arab women writers, acknowledges that Arab women were traditionally living in a world of silence and enclosure. For Zouari, Arab women writers should nevertheless not emulate the figure of the Oriental storyteller, Shahrazade, because she did not benefit from a real agency and could not really speak freely:

J’ai traversé les siècles en silence, exclue du cercle des parlants, étouffée par le brouhaha des désirs des hommes et de leurs commandements. Je n’ai pu m’exprimer que par chuchotements et n’ai bénéficié de complicités que muettes.[[174]](#footnote-174)

Women like her were bribed to stay indoors in their harem and remain quiet:

Pour acheter mon silence, les hommes me fabriquèrent des ailes en soie afin que je retombe sur leurs résistances sans bruit. Puis ils m’alourdirent d’or, pour que, ni de l’envol, ni de la chute, je ne connaisse le goût.[[175]](#footnote-175)

The traditional subaltern Oriental woman’s predicament was that she was neither allowed to speak about the world and herself, nor to leave any mark of her history, for she was forbidden from the public space of agency and power that belonged to men exclusively:

Le geste utile remplaça en moi la parole. J’ai préparé, soigné, accompagné, sans paraître ni parler. J’ai observé et écouté sans avoir le droit d’intervenir de mon point de vue. J’ai marché les yeux baissés n’ayant pas la permission de fixer le monde. J’ai tout entassé au fond de ma mémoire, n’ayant pas à juger par l’esprit.

Je devais couler sur l’espace et le temps sans laisser de sillons ni d’aspérités, sans endommager de mes désirs ou de mes volontés l’univers bien ordonné des hommes. Je devais regarder et mourir sans avoir jamais l’occasion, publiquement, de témoigner.[[176]](#footnote-176)

However, Zouari affirms that the condition of the traditional Arab woman - provided by the image of Shahrazade, a woman who lives passively and quietly in her harem - has evolved. This Arab woman model has rebelled against the patriarchal system of her society and emancipated herself:

Maintenant que je suis sortie, je ne rentrerai pas.

Maintenant que j’ai parlé, je ne me tairai pas.

J’ai juré de régler son compte au silence. J’ai déchiré les ailes des anges et jeté au fond des mers les poids précieux qui me rendaient prisonnière de leur éclat. J’ai tourné le dos aux siècles d’oppression. Aux temps exclusivement masculins.[[177]](#footnote-177)

According to Zouari, some progress in Arab women’s condition has occurred, and nowadays they are, for most, no longer considered as subaltern subjects. Zouari claims that they are free to speak and be the agent of their future. We are therefore witnessing a new era for the Arab woman whose future and destiny is from now on within her hand:

Contrairement à ce que l’on peut croire, à toutes les images et les caricatures, il ne sera pas donné à la femme arabe de vivre une époque plus investie d’intensité.

A son tour aujourd’hui de dire : l’avenir, c’est moi. [[178]](#footnote-178)

As a consequence, Zouari does not wish to speak “for” the “subaltern Arab woman”, who is portrayed as oppressed according to the Western media: “dans cet Occident où je vis, où les trompettes médiatiques sonnent régulièrement une guerre supposée être la mienne”[[179]](#footnote-179); and this for the simple reason that she cannot identify with her:

A-t-on le droit d’être femme arabe et heureuse à la fois ? Si oui, comment expliquer cette faille dans laquelle se trouve le point de vue occidental dès qu’il désigne cette femme ? Ses chroniques où elle figure éternellement au rang des martyrs. Ses photos qui jettent son image voilée et humiliée à la face du monde, et devant lesquelles encore une fois, l’on se demande : se peut-il qu’une femme arabe goûte à la joie, qu’elle connaisse le plaisir, qu’elle se hasarde à regarder au loin? […] Que suis-je alors, si je ne suis pas cette femme, m’arrive-t-il de me demander, devant le regard étranger ?[[180]](#footnote-180)

Zouari claims that the portrayal of the suffering, inferior, oppressed Arab woman does not correspond to millions of Arab women who are free and emancipated, as she herself is:

Comment oserai-je dire qu’une majorité de ces femmes sont si peu envieuses de ressembler à un autre modèle, à adopter exclusivement l’être-au-monde occidental ? Par quel miracle puis-je encore retrouver sur leur visage ce sourire radieux et rebelle qu’aucune atteinte masculine n’a réussi à effacer, ce regard en coin, qui observe ce que l’homme ne voit pas, cette humeur égale, cette santé morale, cette liberté transcendante?[[181]](#footnote-181)

If most Arab women are emancipated according to Zouari, we may therefore argue that she contradicts herself by portraying most women of her novel, *La Retournée*, as being submissive and having an inferior status in their traditional and patriarchal society, and therefore as being “subaltern Arab postcolonial female subjects.” Indeed, on her arrival in the village, Zouari’s feminist protagonist realizes the effects of seclusion on the women of her family:

La tête de Noura, sa jumelle, est couverte par un foulard noué à l’ “islamiste”, d’où je vois échapper quelques mèches blanches jurant avec ses traits de quadragénaire. Il y a aussi mes tantes, mes cousines et mes belles-sœurs: Hassiba […] La plupart ont les yeux rétrécis, les lèvres desséchées, une ou deux dents qui manquent. Le temps a fait son œuvre. La réclusion aussi. Les roses se sont fanées sous les serres.[[182]](#footnote-182)

The only real emancipated woman of the novel is the intra-homo-diegetic narrator, Rym, who shares similarities with the author. We may thus wonder why does Zouari portray Rym as having a superior attitude towards most women of the narrative? Why does she show an Orientalist feminist attitude, as demonstrated earlier, by giving a negative image of Arab Muslim people and portraying women as victims of their patriarchal society? If Zouari’s intention is neither to promote a militant type of writing, nor to defend any feminist cause (“toute arabe que je suis, je ne fais pas partie du clan de la revendication active”[[183]](#footnote-183)), one wonders why her protagonist behaves like a Western feminist coming back home to save her “subaltern sisters” from the backward mentality of their male counterparts and the unjust and gender unequal community in which they live.

On the one hand, Zouari indeed contradicts herself between what she preaches in her essay, *Pour en finir avec Shahrazade*, and what she writes in her autobiographical novel, *La Retournée*. Therefore, this places Zouari within the category of the Westernized [non-European] intellectuals who speak “for” the subaltern of their community as a superior entity and tend to misrepresent them by giving not only a negative image of them, but also by considering them as a homogenous group. She speaks “for” them without really taking into account the subaltern women’s voices and differentiating them. According to Aijaz Ahmad these writers are not in the best position to speak for the colonised and neo-colonised masses.[[184]](#footnote-184)

On the other hand, if Zouari’s protagonist may appear as a Western feminist in the eyes of her traditional people; however she represents in reality the new, modern Tunisian woman, who is still close to her origins and people, but wishes to change them for the better. She is against a backward mentality that imprisons women, men’s chauvinist attitude by refusing to dialogue with women and consider them on an equal par, and a traditional society that does not evolve with its time and tends to promote social injustice. Therefore she may be considered as an agent of change to lead her post-traditional community into modernity.

Such an argument is reinforced by Zouari’s sentiment with regards to her exile and writing, which she shares in her essay *Pour en finir avec Shahrazade*. After describing her village of birth and her feelings as she comes back to her place of origins[[185]](#footnote-185) – a passage which is very similar to the opening scene in *La Retournée*[[186]](#footnote-186) – she explains that it is both the need to hear her mother’s voice, symbolising not only her origins, but also her private self, and to be close to the women of her community, which triggered her desire to write. She argues that both her experiences of exile and writing give her the right to use others and appropriate their lives as well as to make “their voices resonate for herself”:

“L’exil” est sans doute pour quelque chose dans cette monopolisation du souvenir évoqué et dans cet oubli de la part de l’autre, mais il n’y a pas que cela. L’écriture aussi, ou son projet, qui nous concède ce droit de disposer des autres, de nous approprier leur vie et de faire résonner pour nous leurs voix.[[187]](#footnote-187)

By using the first person plural “we”, Zouari probably refers to writers, like her, and more precisely to Arab women writers if we take into account the whole thesis of her essay, *Pour en finir avec Shahrazade*. While Zouari claims that she needs to say “we” (“En disant *nous*, je revêtais ma parure de femme”[[188]](#footnote-188)), to belong to her gender (“que j’appartienne en premier lieu à mon sexe”[[189]](#footnote-189)) in order to be able to tell her personal story and say “I” (“pour l’ultime expérience du je”[[190]](#footnote-190)); she now wishes to speak in the name of all the other Arab women writers as to her experience of exile and writing. Yet, does the fact of pretending to become a kind of resonance chamber “for” her people and speaking in the name of other women writers, make her a faithful spokesperson? Does she really make the voices of the women of her clan resonate through hers in her writing? We would be tempted to say “no”. In the same way she argued in favour of bilingualism without really performing it in her texts, Zouari may appear to be in the position of a spokesperson who speaks through the voices of the women from her community, without actually doing it.

If through her autobiographical protagonist Rym, Zouari imagines herself the leader of the newly emancipated women for the new modern postcolonial Tunisia, Mernissi‘s autobiographical self dreams of becoming the voice of the Muslim women’s community and to lead it to a gender equal Islamic society.

**Fatima Mernissi: the voice of the Muslim women’s community**

Growing up in contact with strong feminist role models such as her mother and her cousin Chama, the young protagonist Fatima, of *Dreams of Trespass*, progressively develops a feminist attitude and imagines herself becoming one day the spokesperson of Moroccan women subalterns with a new vision of the Islamic tradition. In the world she conceives, Muslim women are free from all constraints, and on a par with their male counterparts; they live in a socially just society:

As I watched Chama perform, I vowed to myself that when I became a grownup woman as tall as she, I would dazzle Arab crowds, neatly seated in rows and looking up at me, and tell them about how it felt to be a woman intoxicated with dreams in a land that crushes both the dreams and the dreamer. […]

Oh, yes, I would tell them about the impossible, about a new Arab world, in which men and women could hug each other and dance away, with no frontiers between them, and no fears.

I would help them walk in a world where the difference needed no veil, and where women’s bodies moved naturally, and their desires created no anguish.[[191]](#footnote-191)

As for the author herself, we argue that by denouncing not only Moroccan women’s subaltern position within her society in the 1940s, but also all Muslim women from the Arab world who may hold a similar position of “subalternity”, Mernissi becomes the voice of the Muslim women’s community. Through an Islamic feminist discourse, Mernissi speaks “for” Muslim women in order to defend their cause and demand more equal rights within their Muslim societies. Wondering why the original message of the Prophet Mohammed has been distorted as well as why the era where women could participate in public debates, express their opinions freely, and demand to have equal rights with men has been obliterated from both the people’s memory and the official history, Mernissi regretfully points out that today the image of the Muslim woman is so negative:

How did the tradition succeed in transforming the Muslim woman into that submissive, marginal creature who buries herself and only goes out into the world timidly and huddled in her veils? Why does the Muslim man need such a mutilated companion?[[192]](#footnote-192)

She concludes that if the history of great Muslim women, like that of the prophet’s wives Aisha and Umm Salama, and his great-granddaughter Sukayna, has been forgotten, the Muslim woman of our time should help the Muslim man remember that era through dialogue and “daily pressure for equality”[[193]](#footnote-193)

On top of trying to prove through her scholarly books that Islam is gender equal and socially just despite the reality showing unfortunately often the contrary, Mernissi has been carrying out some research, notably for UNESCO. The main aim was to do some concrete field works as a feminist activist within her society in order to improve Moroccan women’s conditions and the most deprived people. Her book, *Doing Daily Battle: interviews with Moroccan women*, reveals such work, as she conducted about 100 interviews (only 15 have been published in this book) on subaltern Moroccan women living under very difficult, or complex, conditions. The objective of this book, as Mernissi states, is truly to “break that ancestral silence” of women, which is, “one of the bases of Moroccan civilization”, in order to understand the Moroccan society, with its challenges and struggles, “that justify life and structure it”, from the female point of view. In short, she intends to examine: “How does Morocco appear through the words of its women?” [[194]](#footnote-194) (The French original title is very telling in this matter: *Le Maroc raconté par ses femmes*). Therefore, instead of speaking “for” the subalterns, as she is led to doing in her more scholarly books, here Mernissi lets subaltern women speak “for themselves” about their real daily issues and struggles:

Only a minority of women – and one that is disappearing – still lives in a harem. For all others, life is played out around the struggle for food, for wages, for some income, however minimal. In the Morocco of women, earning one’s living is the essential concern and purpose in life. Women exist above all as economic agents, as sources of income, energy, and work, ceaselessly struggling against poverty, unemployment and insecurity.[[195]](#footnote-195)

“Through the words” of subaltern women, Mernissi underlines the discrepancy, if not the divorce, between the male perception, which she describes as the ‘pervasive’ male discourse that reverberates in legislation and the state-operated mass media, and the female perception, based on a broad sample of women from various social classes and situations, on issues such as sex roles, the notion of the marital couple, and contraception. For example, one interviewee reports her eventful dealings with contraception, because she cannot afford in her poverty to have many children, especially given limited housing options:

Finally I had had enough of getting pregnant. Each time I told myself that after this baby, I was going to enquire about getting some remedy or going to see a *faquih*. The pill was out of the question for me because I had had an operation for a cyst. And then I had a weak heart; I had never gone to see a doctor about it, but I was convinced that my heart was weak – it must be that. So, I told myself that if I began to take the pill, it would kill me. And everybody says that when you take the pill, you have to eat well, either a banana or a little milk for breakfast. You see? But for someone like me, who, so to speak, has to diet, for lack of money, how was I going to be able to take the pill? […]

So anyway I stopped nursing and I bought a pill at four and a half dirhams to bring on a miscarriage. I knew what I was doing wasn’t a good idea, but never mind. […]

In short, I was fed up and I took that pill so that the child would sleep for at least six months or a year. Better than a miscarriage. I took it and I got my period. I continued to have them until not very long ago. A neighbour had just had a baby. It was at her house that I took some herbs. Some women brought them and prepared them.[[196]](#footnote-196)

If Mernissi prefers letting women express themselves about their real daily issues, and therefore the qualitative approach to represent women’s conditions in Morocco in the 1980s to the quantitative approach with the technique of the questionnaire, it is because she wants to minimize her role as a spokesperson in order to let the subalterns “speak for themselves.” Moreover, she deems the position of the interviewer in the quantitative approach somewhat intimidating and superior to the interviewees, whereas she wishes to be close to these subaltern women in order to let them express themselves openly in a relaxed atmosphere, so they can really share their life experiences in detail. In this way, she gains more and better information from the anecdotal than from the quantitative data. For instance, she claims that interviewees like Tahra Bint Muhammad (cf. the above quote), give her more relevant information than any statistical tables:

“[…] it [the statistical table] is far from encompassing or expressing all the facets of the reality of a family. The interview with Tahra Bint Muhammad conveys to me an amount of information on ‘household consumption’ that no statistical table can ever catch.”[[197]](#footnote-197)

Consequently, if Mernissi’s approach is not typical in her endeavour to best represent the life experiences of many Moroccan women, from the 1970s to the 1980s, her objective remains, nevertheless, to build trust with these subaltern women in order to allow them to speak “for themselves”. Moreover, she provides her readers an image, much closer to authenticity of women’s daily life in Morocco, because she bases her conclusions on their own perception of their reality, and not on the official, male point of view, or on some so-called objective data collected in a non-sensitive manner. However, she does not claim these interviews to be “an exclusive depiction of the reality of Moroccan women”, since “such a claim would be contrary to the open-mindedness that must guide our research into Moroccan reality, our desire to be faithful to it.” She concludes that: “they [the interviews] are merely a very tentative effort to understand the complexities of that reality.”[[198]](#footnote-198) Furthermore, by publishing this particular representation of Moroccan women’s reality, she not only gets her interviewees to “speak”, but also their voices to “be heard”.

So, not only is Mernissi’s objective to let women speak “for themselves”, but also to be “close to” them by empathising with them and their experiences as well as in being sensitive in her respecting each interviewee’s self and personality. Similarly, Djebar empathises with the subaltern women of her community in speaking about their difficult life experiences. However, Djebar deems that speaking “for” other women may not always be the best way to become their spokesperson and to represent them.

**Assia Djebar: encouraging a sorority dialogue “close to” her “subaltern sisters”**

As mentioned earlier, *L’Amour, la fantasia* may be considered as a major work of postcolonial feminist literature, where Djebar attempts to give voice to the voiceless subalterns of colonial history. Thanks to her research work conducted in the course of making her film on the women of her tribe, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua,* in the 1970s, Djebar has gathered real testimonies of war experiences and sufferings by women, who have been erased from the official history. She has included some of these authentic stories, or oral tales, in the third part of her novel, significantly entitled “voix”. By empathising “with” these war heroines and embedding their stories in her personal story and letting them express themselves almost directly to the readers (cf. the use of the direct speech), Djebar encourages a sorority dialogue. In relation to Spivak’s theory, not only does Djebar prove through her novel that the subaltern female “has a history in the context of colonial production”, but also “a voice”; she does so in translating her narrative tale of war in a written, published form. On the other hand, thanks to her strategy of speaking “very close to” (“parler si possible tout contre”) her “subaltern sisters”, in a solidarity effort, Djebar fully assumes her role as a spokesperson in a sensitive and empathising manner.

This discourse of empathy and sorority is also found in *Nulle Part*, but in a more subtle and complex form. Indeed, in this novel the main subaltern is the autobiographical character of the narrative. Indeed, the main plot follows a traumatic event in the life of the intra-homo-diegetic narrator, Fatima, when she is seventeen. Following an argument with her “fiancé”, she feels so desperate that she attempts suicide. In an interview[[199]](#footnote-199), Djebar confides that she did try to commit suicide when she was a teenager living in Algiers. Yet, she has repressed that trauma most of her life, and it is especially because she did not, “dare to delve further into this abyss”[[200]](#footnote-200), and because she could not speak “for herself” and her delicate situation at that time, that she decided to write about it in *Nulle Part*.

The definition of the subaltern must not be limited to a homogenous group or social class, as “the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous.”[[201]](#footnote-201) Moreover, one of Spivak’s examples of a subaltern female in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, does belong to the middle class, since “woman’s interception of the claim to “subalternity” can be staked out across strict lines of definition by virtue of their muting by heterogeneous circumstances.”[[202]](#footnote-202) We may thus argue that Djebar’s autobiographical protagonist or retrospective self, is a “subaltern” in her narrative, or self analysis, *Nulle Part*, since she could not speak at that time of both colonial oppression and patriarchal submission:

Ma mémoire éperonnée me livre une ultime image, alors même que ma voix s’est éteinte: toujours dans ce vestibule, au cœur de la pénombre, une flaque de soleil a pénétré de l’extérieur dans ce marais de solitude.

Deux êtres face à face : l’homme qui a ordonné, la jeune fille qui regarde, mais à partir d’une prison enfin béante. A quel point ce flot de clarté la baigne, elle, l’adolescente ?

Moi qui écris désormais, si longtemps après, je comprends : je suis à cet instant une jeune fille certes vulnérable, qui a répété comme une antienne, toute son année de philosophie, à cause de sa correspondance d’amour secrète, oui, je suis celle qui a scandé tout en frappant sa coulpe, au bord de ce qu’elle croyait être le “péché”, à commencer par le premier baiser donné sous l’arbre et dans la pluie : “Si mon père le sait, je me tue!”[[203]](#footnote-203)

Following her failed suicide attempt, the protagonist could still not speak:

A partir de ce matin-là, je me suis tue devant les miens […] Je me suis tue devant le “fiancé” […] Le plus étrange est que je me suis définitivement tue sur cette matinée-là, même face à celui qui avait, après tout, déclenché les prémices du drame.[[204]](#footnote-204)

Yet, if the autobiographical protagonist could not speak, it is because she could not find an interlocutor, she could not be heard, and thus be understood, at that time:

Je me suis engloutie à force de m’être tue. […] Devant les autres, mais quels autres? Si jeune, que pouvais-tu faire et à qui parler, à qui demander de chercher avec toi, de douter sur toi, même après coup ?[[205]](#footnote-205)

Nobody can really understand her paradoxical situation at that time, that of being liberated only from the outside (“moi, une fille d’apparence européenne, mais sans l’être”), but inside she is constantly under her father’s authority (“Si mon père le sait, je me tue”). Even though Fatima has obtained the freedom of movement and is not secluded in a harem, such as her cousins in their village, she always fears the father figure, who symbolizes the patriarchal censorship that always lingers in the back of her mind. She remains a subaltern whose mind and speech are therefore not emancipated: “je sais que je me le reprocherai, que l’ombre de mon père viendra me servir des arguments ‘de fond.”[[206]](#footnote-206)

If Djebar’s autobiographical character or past self could not speak at seventeen, as a mature woman writer, Djebar does however make herself heard not only by publishing her tragic story, but also by using the predicament of her own experience to exemplify other subaltern women’s stories: her Algerian sisters or even the ones who live on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. In this sense, her story may be read allegorically and the whole autobiographical novel may be read as a plea for women’s rights in societies where they are unjustly treated:

Pourquoi, au dernier stade de ta vie, ne pas te dire dans un semblant de sérénité, une douce ou indifférente acceptation: ne serait-ce pas enfin le moment de tuer, même à petit feu, ces menues braises jamais éteintes ? Interrogation qui ne serait pas seulement la tienne, mais celle de toutes les femmes de là-bas, sur la rive sud de la Méditerranée…

Pourquoi, mais pourquoi faut-il que je me retrouve, moi et toutes les autres, “nulle part dans la maison de mon père ?ˮ [[207]](#footnote-207)

While the moral, so to speak, of *Nulle part* may be to encourage a sorority dialogue, we argue however that Djebar’s mission of transmitting (“Dire à mon tour. Transmettre ce qui a été dit, puis écrit”[[208]](#footnote-208)) both a memory (“un porte mémoire”) and a speech (“un porte parole” [[209]](#footnote-209)) is a difficult one that necessitates a series of mediations according to Donadey.[[210]](#footnote-210) Furthermore her role of transmitter within her community implies a process from the listener, to the speaker, and finally the writer, as Mireille Calle Gruber poetically sums up:

Passeuse de mots, l’écrivain-algérien-dans-la-langue-française se désigne « diseuse », « parleuse », « scripteuse » des paroles que les femmes sans alphabet lui dictent. Et qu’elle trans-crit. Trans-met. [[211]](#footnote-211)

This is the reason why Djebar would rather speak “close to” women and encourage a dialogue “with” them. She insists a sorority dialogue remains the only solution to solve their problems:

Je ne vois pour nous aucune autre issue que par cette rencontre : une femme qui parle devant une autre qui regarde, celle qui parle raconte-t-elle l’autre aux yeux dévorants, à la mémoire noire ou décrit-elle sa propre nuit, avec des mots torches et des bougies dont la cire fond trop vite? Celle qui regarde, est-ce à force d’écouter, d’écouter et de se rappeler qu’elle finit par se voir elle-même, avec son propre regard, sans voile enfin…[[212]](#footnote-212)

The image of the mirror expresses the strong empathy between the speaker and the listener to the point that they seem to exchange identities. Women need each other to understand their identity and communicate their “selves”. To the question of how will Arab women’s emancipation take place (“Comment se fera le passage pour les femmes arabes ?”[[213]](#footnote-213)), Sarah, another of Djebar’s autobiographical characters in *Femmes d’Alger*, puts forward a possible answer: “N’est-ce pas trop tôt – chuchota-t-elle – pour parler au pluriel ?”[[214]](#footnote-214). This solution may then consist in expressing oneself in the plural and favouring a “we” rather than an individualistic “I”. The idea that Djebar may conceive “a plural autobiographical I”, or develop “an autobiography in the plural” in her autobiographical texts, will be explored in the third chapter.

To conclude on the writers’ role as spokespersons within their communities, we argue that because of fiction writing, they are essentially representatives of both their own autobiographical protagonist, and the Maghrebi women they speak “about”; and this, whether they intend to play that role or not. To the imagination of the reader – particularly the Western reader who may not be familiar with the foreign culture depicted – Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar give a certain representation of the Maghreb and Maghrebi women during either the colonial or the postcolonial era. However, to further qualify this statement about whether an author wishes or not to fully assume her role as a spokesperson, especially according to the manner in which she conducts this role, she may do so either in a superior way or in a more sensitive manner. In connection to this, Zouari tends to act as a superior spokesperson for the Tunisian women of her native village, whereas Mernissi and Djebar conduct their role as spokespersons for their respective communities in a more empathising way, in that they put themselves on a par with the subalterns they speak “for”.

Another issue that should be taken into account when representing one’s community and speaking “for” the subalterns is the stylistic manner of writing “for” them as well as the awareness of each author on the risk of misrepresenting either a country or a community. Now follows an examination of how Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari tackle the issue of representativeness in all its complexities in their “writing for.”

**2.3. Writing “for” and the issue of “representativeness”**

If speaking “for” or writing “for” subaltern women and acting as their spokesperson remains “a thorny enterprise”, it may be because the issue of representativeness presents a very problematic frame, linked to the questions of representation, interpretation, and the problematizing of language itself. Many postcolonial writers have reflected on their difficulty to represent a specific geographical space, others - especially the subalterns - or even themselves through their literary writings. Spivak repeatedly warns postcolonial critics and intellectuals in general of the risk of misrepresenting the subalterns when writing “for” them:

It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem.[[215]](#footnote-215)

She explains that the intellectual’s solution is not however, “to abstain from representation,”[[216]](#footnote-216) because there is a demand for authentic voices. One should nevertheless be aware that the issue of “representativeness” is “a very problematic field.”[[217]](#footnote-217) Furthermore, Spivak’s motivation is not to speak for the female subaltern, but instead to save the female subaltern from misrepresentation.[[218]](#footnote-218) In their role as spokespersons of their respective communities, how do Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari deal with the risk of misrepresentation in their writings, and within the context of their feminist engagement?

**Some issues implying a risk of misrepresentation**

When Westerners are confronted with the subalterns’ foreign culture and customs and they want to speak “for” them, they risk misinterpreting their culture and thus misrepresenting them. Spivak, long aware of this issue, takes the example of the widow sacrifice during Colonial India to explain how the British condemned this practice as barbarous and forbade it. Spivak raises the problem that the British took this measure without even listening to the motivations of the women in question. She concludes that the danger of replicating occidental patterns of understanding results in the fact that: “there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak.”[[219]](#footnote-219)

This danger of misunderstanding and subsequent misrepresentation should not apply to the three writers under study here, since they are not “Westerners”, but Maghrebi women post-colonial writers, who are supposed to interpret correctly the culture and customs of the subalterns they speak “about” and represent, even if in a fictional way. However, we may also argue that these three women writers have been educated in the West (the three of them have pursued their post-graduate studies in France), and therefore they likely have come under the influence of Western theories or modes of interpretation in examining the life experiences of the subalterns and writing about them. Furthermore, we should point out that Mernissi, Zouari, and Djebar all have mainly published for the West, targeting a Western audience – though not exclusively in the case of Djebar and Mernissi, who have also been translated internationally. So, they may be labelled as “the Westernized intellectuals” according to Aijaz‘s term. In this case, if Mernissi, Zouari, and Djebar share a country and a culture in common with the subalterns, they may not share the same life experiences with them because of their intellectual background and their Western education; thus they may risk misinterpreting the subalterns’ ways of life and misrepresenting them by speaking “for” them.

Another issue that may lead to misrepresenting the subalterns is the problematic of language in relation to literature. Indeed, can language be a faithful vehicle to speak “for” others in the case of literature? Since there is always a process of indirection built into language, one must not assume that language can always be a faithful vehicle for others. It is literature that makes language work for meaning. Because of its ‘indirect’ and ‘subjective’ nature, language therefore sometimes triggers various interpretations that may conflict with each other. The reception of a work of literature is another problematic subject, which is explored in the last chapter. Yet, since language can also be a powerful tool of persuasion and can influence others, the knowledge production of certain works can have a real impact on a community.

**Attempts to avoid “misrepresentation”**

Confronted with these issues, writers like Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar envisage some solutions to avoid misrepresenting the subaltern women they write “about” and tend to write “for”. Their attempts to avoid misrepresentation and to let the subalterns of their respective community “speak for themselves” lead Zouari to investigative journalism by reporting some interviews or testimonies, Mernissi to conduct interviews with women from all walks of life, and Djebar to have conversations with some women of her tribe.

In Zouari’s case, as a professional journalist, she investigates numerous issues both in France and in Tunisia. In France, she particularly focuses on the Maghrebi immigrant community from the second generation, called “*the Beurs*” [[220]](#footnote-220) and their uneasiness in integrating into French society, as well as on the veiled young women from the same community and the political issue of veiling in France. In her essays, *Le voile Islamique* and *Ce Voile qui déchire la France*, she examines the issue of veiling in France from different angles in order not only to confront the often conflicting points of view on the issue (those who reject the veil vs. those who tolerate it), but also to comprehend both why French born young women turn to the veil and why the majority of the French reject their practice of veiling. We argue that the women she refers to may be regarded as subalterns within the French society, because they are both rejected by the general public opinion and its official representatives. Indeed, some laws have been passed to forbid these young women from wearing their Islamic veil in public places like schools, without having really been “heard” and allowed to “speak publically”. State media tends often to give a distorted image of these subaltern “veiled *beurettes*” (according to Zouari’s term), and thus to misrepresent them. These “neo-veiled women” are “the disenfranchised”, as Spivak calls them, within French society, because they have been denied the right to attend French public schools, or to work for the French public sector (sometimes even for the private sector); in short to represent French citizenship with their veil.

Therefore, Zouari investigates the French neo-veiled women, “the disenfranchised of French society”, in order to find out their points of view. For example, she publishes the testimony of a veiled young woman called Karima, who is struggling to integrate into French society without being discriminated against:

Moi je rêve qu’on m’ouvre les bras. Je n’ai pas envie d’imposer ma foi, mais de la vivre. Bien sûr, mon voile n’est pas discret. On le remarque. Cependant, j’aimerais qu’on ne dise pas en me voyant : « Tiens, une voilée ! » mais « Tiens, c’est Karima ! » J’espère qu’on arrêtera de croire que sous le voile il y a une kalachnikov. Sous le voile, il y a une tête qui pense et un cœur qui souffre lorsqu’on attaque les tours américaines et qu’on tue des victimes innocentes.[[221]](#footnote-221)

Thanks to her objective position as a journalist trying to research on the veil in France, and her approaching it from different, sometimes conflicting, points of view, Zouari avoids misrepresenting the subalterns she speaks “about”. Yet, at the same time, the stand she takes creates some distance between her and “the subalterns” she refers to. This is reinforced by her intention not to speak “for” them or “in favour of” them, as she clearly states:

S’il ne m’appartient pas de trouver les réponses à ces questions, il me semble opportun de revenir aux racines du « mal ». Je n’ai pas vocation à représenter les voilées, n’étant pas pratiquante et n’ayant aucune sympathie pour le foulard. Sous d’autres cieux, ou le *hidjab* peut représenter une réelle menace politique, je n’aurais pas écrit ces pages. Dans des pays où il est une obligation, j’aurais lutté pour la liberté de l’enlever.[[222]](#footnote-222)

If Zouari, who defends a secularist ideology as proven earlier, is not particularly eager to represent - in the sense of speaking “for”, i.e., “in favour of” - the veiled, Merinissi’s stance differs, because she anchors her feminist vision more closely to her religious faith. Moreover, since both authors generally write within their “specialist” field, that is, journalism or sociology, their respective approaches in tackling the representativeness of the subaltern women from their respective communities may be fruitfully compared.

Mernissi, as both a sociologist and a feminist activist, is also led to investigate on subaltern women from her community in the field of her work. As mentioned earlier, *Doing Daily Battle*, reflects such sociological work. What is noteworthy to point out nevertheless is the precise methodological approach Mernissi follows in conducting this work among subaltern women from her community.

What is interesting in Mernissi’s work is that not only does she prefer the qualitative approach to represent women’s conditions in Morocco, instead of the quantitative approach[[223]](#footnote-223), but she also conducts these interviews according to her own methodology so as to be as loyal as possible to the reality of women’s experience: “they [my interviews] give me a feeling of fidelity to the reality of women’s experience that no statistical table has ever given me”[[224]](#footnote-224). She explains that regardless of what she is taught in Western universities, she breaks the rule of objectivity with regard to the persons she interviews, because she cannot but identify with these women, especially the illiterate ones:

I cannot be objective toward an illiterate woman, because I have a very special affective relationship to her: I identify with her. I was born in 1940, and very few Moroccan women of that generation have had access to writing and still fewer to an advanced education. So I have a very strong feeling of having escaped illiteracy by an almost absurd miracle.[[225]](#footnote-225)

Furthermore, the methodology Mernissi applies aims at being on an equal par with the interviewee to enable the latter to express her personality as much as possible, instead of using the technique of “controlling the give and take”[[226]](#footnote-226):

One of these rules is that the interviewer must, as much as possible, cultivate a relationship of equality and maintain an atmosphere in which the personality of the person being interviewed can freely unfold […] As for me, I have learned that the best rule is to know how to give up control […] I have learned that an illiterate woman has her own narrative pace, and that a Moroccan interviewer must learn to be sensitive to that pace and respect it.[[227]](#footnote-227)

Finally, because of the constraint of transforming the spoken word into a readable text, she had to do some editing and in doing so, she, “develop[ed] as much as possible an attitude of self-criticism of continual testing of [her] subjectivity in relation to that of the other person.”[[228]](#footnote-228)

Unlike Zouari, Mernissi adapts therefore her approach to her “speakers” in order to be “close to” these subaltern women and to be on an equal par with them, rather than to hold the superior position of the official interviewer and thus to distance herself from them. In this way, Mernissi’s approach is more subjective than Zouari, as she tends not only to side with the subalterns, but also to speak “for” them, that is, “in their favour”. Her approach remains also more representative, in that, she is aware of the question of difference, like Spivak, in her efforts not to “misrepresent” the subalterns. Even among the subalterns she interviews, she carefully differentiates among them and avoids generalising: “[…] it is necessary to avoid generalising, to avoid projecting on poor women our own preoccupations and problems, and, above all, to do our work as intellectuals.”[[229]](#footnote-229)

A last point about Mernissi, which positions her closer to Djebar than to Zouari, is that her motivation to write as a whole relies heavily upon her relationship with the subalterns: “For me, trying to give voice to the illiterate woman is to give voice to this self of mine which should have been doomed to the ancestral silence. My relationship to writing and its uses are very strongly conditioned by this fact.”[[230]](#footnote-230) She thus would rather speak “close to” them, as Djebar attempts to do.

Concerning Djebar’s work as a “specialist”, so to speak, it is more her shift to film production in the late 70s that led her to conduct interviews. Her decision to stop publishing books for ten years and to turn to various other forms of cultural production, notably the cinema, is motivated by her need to go back to the roots of her mother tongue,[[231]](#footnote-231) and thus to capture the sounds of a feminine language among the women from her tribe: “[…] je voulais d’abord saisir le son, la voix, enregistrer la parole et la langue du vécu, en particulier du vécu féminin.”[[232]](#footnote-232) Therefore, she then worked more as an ethnologist or a sociologist than as a film producer. She lived among the people of her community for a while, and dialogued with them, rather than conducted typical interviews:

Je travaille au cinéma de cette façon-là, c’est-à-dire que je commence comme ferait un ethnologue ou un sociologue. Cela me permet d’entrer dans un groupe social que je connais déjà, dans lequel je me mets à vivre, non pas de temps en temps comme une journaliste, mais vraiment avec eux.

Je commence des entretiens libres, j’essaie de me rendre compte non seulement de ce que disent les gens sur leur présent et leur passé, mais de la façon dont ils le disent, de la façon dont une femme va employer telle expression ou telle autre, quand elle évoque un souvenir, quand elle développe une expérience passée, douloureuse ou non. […] son rapport à sa mémoire.[[233]](#footnote-233)

In this way, Djebar’s first film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1978), which is half documentary, half fictional, enables the writer to be “close to” the women of her tribe, to capture the memory of her genealogy and her country’s history from a feminine perspective, and above all to let the subaltern women “speak for themselves” on their past sufferings and life experiences. In a similar manner to Mernissi, she therefore identifies with the women she converses with; she really listens to them in a sensitive way. Furthermore, her filming experience made it possible for the Algerians (and to some extent for people abroad) to “hear what their women had to say”, with their own voice, own language, and about their own experiences from their perceptions of their own reality.

To conclude, these three writers allow the subalterns to “speak for themselves”, to a certain extent, and to share their experiences with the readers thanks to the publishing of their texts. However, their methodologies differ from being the most objective and distanced (Zouari), to the most subjective and close (Djebar) towards the subalterns. This, of course, impacts their awareness about the risk of misrepresentation. Djebar, probably the most successful in avoiding misrepresenting “her subaltern sisters”, speaks “close to” them and in their own language in her film, *La Nouba*. In addition, their methodology probably influences the way the readers or the audience receive their work and listen to the subalterns. For my part, as a French-Algerian, I claim a close identification to the subaltern women of Djebar’s film, and I also feel very moved by reading Mernissi’s interviews. As to Zouari’s essays, I would say that it is more the testimonies of the victims of the law against veiling in France, rather than the writer’s objective journalistic accounts on that matter, that allow me to feel close to the subalterns.

If I am able “to listen to” the subaltern women interviewed, in some ways, it is moreover because I can read French and understand the Algerian dialect. Furthermore, if I am able “to empathise” and even “sympathise” with these “voiceless women”, it is because I can relate to them in many ways out of my own personal background, since I am both a woman and my family comes from the Maghreb region. However, I realise that other readers may not feel the same way as I do (especially if they come from a different culture). Furthermore, the subalterns themselves may never hear what they have said or what other women have shared about their experiences, because of the simple reason that most of these women are illiterate or will probably never have the opportunity to read such books.

Further arguments on this sensitive question of the reception of Maghrebi literature are explored in the third chapter; however follows now, another issue that may also prevent the writers from “speaking for” the subalterns and the subalterns themselves from being “listened to” – that of writing in a language foreign to the subalterns.

**The issue of writing in a language foreign to the subalterns**

The three writers of the corpus most often write in French, whereas the subalterns they speak “about”, or “for”, or attempt to speak “close to” are usually illiterate and their understanding of French may be limited, since their language of expression is dialectal Arabic or Berber. Therefore, there may exist an underlying contradiction in a writer’s willingness to represent the subalterns by writing in a language unknown, or little known, to the subalterns.

Before answering this question, we should explain first why most Maghrebi writers of the colonial and postcolonial period are led to write in French instead of the official Arabic language. As explained in the first chapter, because of its historical context, the Maghreb has always been a hybrid, multi-linguistic space, where the French language has been important since the colonial period. However, since the independence of the three main Maghrebi countries in the middle of the twentieth century, the French language has become problematic, for some consider it the language of the oppressive coloniser and thus, the aggressor. For the Maghrebi writer who chooses to write in French, it thus belies perhaps either a feeling of guilt or the expression of betrayal on the part of the writer:

Ecrire en français revêt l’aspect d’un délit aux yeux de certains « esprits traditionalistes et nostalgiques » qui dénient aux auteurs maghrébins le droit de s’exprimer dans la langue de l’ancien colonisateur, allant jusqu’à les taxer de trahison[[234]](#footnote-234).

Most of the postcolonial Maghrebi writers, like Assia Djebar, Kateb Yacine, Abdelkebir Khatibi, or Youssef Essedik, have felt the need to justify themselves on their use of the French language in their writings. If Kateb talks about the French like, “a booty of war” from the colonial era, Khatibi affirms his right to claim it for himself in his own way[[235]](#footnote-235). Because of Zouari’s preference for writing in French and because of her exile in France, this Tunisian woman writer views herself not only as being “outside” culturally, psychologically, and linguistically, but also as betraying her own mother tongue, which is supposed to define her identity:

[Je suis] dehors tout près du délit, depuis le jour où j’ai choisi d’écrire dans la langue d’une autre mère que la mienne, dans la langue de l’étrangère. Car c’est là plus qu’ailleurs, ce jour précis, terrible jour, où j’ai mis en péril cette notion même de « langue maternelle » que j’ai consommé de façon radicale le retournement contre ce qui est censé définir l’identité de ma personne : ma langue maternelle.[[236]](#footnote-236)

The postcolonial – and before that, the colonial – writers find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. Their linguistic choice limits them to classical Arabic – considered as sacred for it is the language of the Qur’an – the Arabic dialect which is spoken rather than written – or the French – which has been their language of instruction for most of them. Fenniche Fakhfakh explains the complex linguistic situation that confronts most postcolonial Maghrebi writers:

Mais une question se pose : la langue française est-elle un choix ou une contrainte pour l’écrivain maghrébin de la période postcoloniale ?

Une langue maternelle bafouée, une hiérarchie établie entre les idiomes – l’arabe étant considéré comme relativement plus noble que le berbère – et deux langues apprises en même temps sur les bancs de l’école primaire et présentant autant de difficultés l’une que l’autre (l’arabe classique et le français) : telle est la situation linguistique à laquelle est confronté l’écrivain maghrébin.[[237]](#footnote-237)

The choice of language remains all the more crucial because of the impact that a language has on one’s culture, identity, and the way that one relates to the world around one in general. Several sociolinguists prove that language, culture, and identity are too closely interwoven in the construction of an individual in society to be separated one from another:

Thus, historical and cross-cultural work suggests that the resources that form the material for personhood are the language and cultural practices of specific times and places. We are born into a world that pre-exists us and learn to use a language, which was here long before we arrived. In short, we are formed as individuals in a social process using culturally shared materials. Without language, not only would we not be persons as we commonly understand that concept, but the very concept of personhood and identity would be unintelligible to us.[[238]](#footnote-238)

As far as Maghrebi writers, this choice between writing in classical Arabic or in French underlies thus two different systems of thought and two opposite ways of apprehending the world. Classical Arabic language, not only sacred because of its religious connotations, also refers to traditions and the respect for one’s ancestors’ values, whereas the French connects more to the Western world of modernity, of freedom, and even of protest. Besides Fenniche Fakhfakh’s argument, Djebar also considers Arabic as the language of power and the State, thus of male patriarchy. Some Maghrebi women writers therefore admit that only the French language – not Arabic – makes it possible for them to tackle feminist subjects and to defy patriarchy:

Le rapport antithétique entre tradition et modernité joue à plein dans le choix du mode d’expression. Opter pour la langue française dénote non seulement une fascination pour le monde « civilisé », mais une distance prise avec la langue des ancêtres et partant, avec toutes les valeurs auxquelles ceux-ci ont adhéré et qu’ils ont cherché à léguer à leurs descendants. La langue étrangère se transmue en banderole de combat et de lutte que les femmes (en particulier) brandissent allègrement contre tout esprit rétrograde, toute valeur considérée désormais comme obsolète.[[239]](#footnote-239)

Djebar remains well aware of her complex relationship with the French language. If she claims that the French language opens doors for her and leads her to the masculine public world, she not only considers it as “the enemy’s language”, that of the former conqueror, but also as an element separating her from the women of her genealogy, the women she wishes to speak “close to”, rather than “for”. She therefore employs various strategies to use the French language without feeling distanced from the women she wishes to represent. Her first solution brings her into the realm of cinema for about ten years. As examined earlier, at some point in her career, Djebar needs to be closer to her people, and especially to the women from her genealogy, representing her roots, her inner identity. She thus goes on a quest for sounds by examining in details the language of the women from her tribe; as well as on a quest for memory by recapturing the History of her country from the women’s point of view; and finally on a quest for images by respecting the code of the veil and avoiding being in the position of “a voyeur”, like the Orientalists or “the peeping-toms of her clan”[[240]](#footnote-240).

Laurence Huughe argues in her article, “Ecrire comme un voile”, that cinema is a medium of expression that led Djebar to: “a new mode of looking, free from the feeling of alienation associated with writing in the enemy’s language”[[241]](#footnote-241). Huughe explains thus how Djebar’s film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, allows a role reversal where women are the seers and men the seen. In this way, women re-appropriate the public space. Moreover, the emphasis on dialogue among women allows the main protagonist, Lila, to: “achieve the ultimate peace of recovered memory and reconnection with collective identity”[[242]](#footnote-242). Huughe argues that thanks to her strategies in this film, Djebar can regain the women’s quarters, because she is no longer attempting to ‘speak for’ the subaltern but rather ‘close to’ them. She explains that by focusing on the multiple voices of women, Djebar “discovers orality as a language specific to Algerian women.”[[243]](#footnote-243) Since, “through the camera’s eye, reality no longer appears through ‘the eyes of the French language”[[244]](#footnote-244), but through the “voice-eyes” of Algerian women, Djebar thus confides: “this film work somehow cleansed me of any unease I had felt with respect to the French language.”[[245]](#footnote-245)

Another solution Djebar discovers after this film consists in “arabicizing” the French language[[246]](#footnote-246), to veil it with a certain modesty – inherent to the language of the Maghrebi women speaking under their veil – in order to yield to “the voices of reality”[[247]](#footnote-247), that is, to women’s voices. In her article, “The Multilingual Strategies of Postcolonial Literature: Assia Djebar’s Algerian Palimpsest”, Anne Donadey explores Djebar’s practice of multilingual writing and argues that: “she creates a multilingual palimpsest which both reflects the process of the violent French colonization of Algeria and subverts it linguistically by ‘arabiciz[ing] French’ (“Romancier”, p.119).”[[248]](#footnote-248) For Donadey, Djebar writes in a fully subversive manner, and she “re-appropriates French by inscribing within it the trace of oral Arabic, creating a bilingual palimpsest.”[[249]](#footnote-249) Through a detailed analysis of Djebar’s uses of Arabic within her text, Donadey classifies Djebar’s language into five categories ranging from, “words that are completely foreign to French, to a blending of Arabic and French that can be hard to notice for a monolingual French reader.”[[250]](#footnote-250) Djebar’s linguistic strategies aim essentially at being closer to her mother tongue, and thus closer to the women from her genealogy she wishes to speak “for”, or rather “close to”: “C’était… la sonorité de la langue maternelle que je tenais à retrouver constamment dans la chair de la langue française.”[[251]](#footnote-251)

This analysis has proven that conducting investigative journalism, or interviews, or producing documentary films has helped Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar to let the subaltern women “speak for themselves”, and thus to avoid “misrepresenting” them to a certain extent. For comparative purposes, we wish now to focus specifically on the three literary works of the corpus and examine the diverging forms that each writer employs in her “writing for”.

**Different forms of writing “for”**

In this section, we wish to demonstrate that specific stylistic features impact on an author’s feminist engagement, and more precisely on the way she acts as a spokesperson and therefore represents the subaltern women of her community. The three texts of the corpus are classified as fiction; nonetheless the three writers’ diverging fields of professional work (i.e. sociology for Mernissi; journalism for Zouari; and history and literature in Djebar’s case) have influenced their literary writing and the way they wrote in particular these three novels under study.

As mentioned previously, Mernissi’s memoir, *Dreams of Trespass*, grounds itself on her more scholarly books and essays, especially on the theme of Islamic feminism (e.g. *Beyond the Veil*, *The veil and the male elite*). Moreover, this pleasant autobiographical novel shows the trace of her sociological works on women’s lives in Morocco, notably the aforementioned book, *Le Maroc raconté par ses femmes*. One could perhaps entitle Merinissi’s fiction as: “Le harem raconté par les femmes marocaines.” Indeed, *Dreams of Trespass* may be read more as a sociological account of women’s lives in Morocco in the 1940s than as a memoir. This book has the characteristics of sociological ones, since it is very informative and detailed with regards to people’s life experiences at that particular time in Morocco. Moreover, Mernissi emphasizes the characters and their relations to each other rather than the plot or the stylistic effects, which characterize literary works in general. Furthermore, Mernissi provides an important socio-cultural context by setting her story in the human life world. The following passage illustrates the aforementioned characteristics of Mernissi’s sociological writing:

Several years before, Mother had fought Father, first about the fabric that the veil was made of and then about the *haik*, or traditional long cloak that women wore in public.

The traditional veil was a rectangular piece of white cotton so heavy that it made the simple act of breathing a real accomplishment. Mother wanted to replace it with a tiny triangular black veil made of sheer silk chiffon. This drove Father crazy: “It’s so transparent! You might as well go unveiled!” But soon the small veil, the *litham*, became the fashion, with all the nationalists’ wives wearing it all over Fez – to gatherings in the mosque and to public celebrations, such as when political prisoners were liberated by the French.

Mother also wanted to replace the traditional women’s *haik* with the *djellaba*, or men’s coat, which many of the nationalists’ wives had taken to wearing as well. The *haik* was made of seven long meters of heavy white cotton cloth that you had to drape around yourself. You then had to hold on to the ends of the *haik*, awkwardly tied up under your chin, to keep it from falling off. “The *haik*,” said Chama, “was probably designed to make a woman’s trip through the streets so torturous that she would quickly tire from the effort, rush back home, and never dream of going out again.” Mother hated the *haik*, too.[[252]](#footnote-252)

This type of narration provides the reader with a certain clarity and simplicity that readily facilitates access to information. Moreover, it is a very enriching reading, because the reader’s experience heightens with such a clear representation of the conditions of women living in Morocco during that period of history.

Regarding Zouari’s autobiographical novel, it provides readers with a clear sense of the writer’s journalistic style. It is not coincidental that Zouari’s protagonist’s behaviour is compared to that of a journalist:

Je lui [Moncef] téléphone du bureau de poste. Lui raconte tout. Il répond que je me suis comportée comme une journaliste à la recherche d’un scoop. Je démens. Il persiste, affirmant que c’est une façon de verser dans « le sensationnel » : « Je dirais même plus, le culte de l’irrationnel typique des Européens.»[[253]](#footnote-253)

Indeed, Zouari’s fiction clearly shows journalistic roots, in particular tabloid journalism, as she emphasizes sensational events. In the novel, the narrator provides readers with a rapid unfolding of actions, numerous facts, and a reporter’s type of narrative accounts. For example, the so-called arrival of the Tunisian President is told not only in a humorous way, but also very much like it would be reported in a newspaper article:

Alors qu’à l’aube de cette journée historique, le village commence à s’ébranler vers la route principale pour accueillir son hôte illustre, la fille de Messaouda enregistre à mon intention les faits suivants […]

En ce matin du 1er juillet 1986, on dirait Ebba pris de démence. La presse mettra cela sur le compte de la liesse créée par l’annonce de la visite présidentielle. Nous savons ce qu’il en est. Il suffira de faire témoigner Baya. […][[254]](#footnote-254)

Such narration sometimes distances the narrator, who takes up the role of the journalist, from the other characters of the story. A certain distance with the reader also occurs, because one often finds oneself in the position of a spectator of the scenes unfolding. Beside the journalistic style, this narrative has similarities with plays, because of the theatrical, comic scenes. Finally, because of the sensational effects of this narrative, the objectivity of the accounts of women’s ways of life in this Tunisian village may appear questionable; hence Zouari’s representation of women in Tunisia at that particular time, that is post-independence Tunisia in the 1980s, may reflect an unwanted bias.

Unlike Zouari, Djebar does not adhere to this type of writing. If a journalistic type of writing is what is generally expected by publishers and readers from Third World women writers, especially Muslim ones, Djebar does not yield to that demand and prefers not taking up the role of ‘the traditional criers’ (*les pleureuses*) by lamenting for her subaltern sisters:

Toutefois, si d’autres publics attendent de nous des témoignages journalistiques qui nous feraient reprendre une nouvelle version du rôle traditionnel de la pleureuse (du style “lamentez-vous, ô femmes esclaves et prisonnières !”), grâce à Dieu, nos improvisations ou notre recherche sur les contradictions, sur les mystères de notre condition, ne se feront pas ainsi sur commande… Nous ne nous avançons pas au-devant d’une scène ; nous cherchons seulement comment vivre, chez nous et ailleurs.[[255]](#footnote-255)

Djebar’s literary style differs indeed considerably from Zouari’s, and even from Mernissi’s. Djebar’s autobiographical narrative, *Nulle Part*, a very complex literary masterpiece, may be characterized as follows: a language difficult to broach; complex narrative forms and types of discourse; a skilful plot with some suspense; a challenge to conventional types of writing as it oscillates between autobiographical writing, self-analysis, including psycho-analysis; and finally a complex “post-modernist type” relationship between author – narrator – characters – and reader. The main effect of this type of narration invites the reader to actively take part in the narrative in order to make sense of it. Moreover, empathy and sympathy effects (or on the contrary distance and irony effects) are created throughout the story. Furthermore, as a historian and a postcolonial feminist engaged writer, Djebar stresses the importance of the historical setting as well as the socio-political and cultural context of her narrative to transmit to her readers a specific perspective on the events taking place at that time of the story in that particular country, i.e. colonial Algeria on the eve of the War for Liberation.

To conclude on the form of writing that the authors privilege so as to both engage as feminist “spokespersons” and to represent the subaltern women of their community, we argue that if “the specialist” type of writing, such as Zouari’s journalistic or Mernissi’s sociological writing, is a more direct form of expression which offers less freedom and less subtlety on the part of the writer; it also includes a more objective and informative worldview than the literary form as to women’s conditions living in a particular place, at a particular time. Moreover, such writing, similar to anthropological writing, is the expectation of publishers from Maghrebi francophone novelists of the first generation. Furthermore, such “specialist” type of writing functions more often as an influential tool of persuasion. Therefore, the “specialist type” of writing is more conducive for writers, such as Zouari and Mernissi, to “speak for” and represent subaltern women of their communities. In contrast, because of its indirectness and stylistic richness, literature offers more freedom and subtlety for the fiction writer in dealing with the issue of representativeness. In this connection, Djebar has been successful in her endeavour to speak “close to” the subalterns, instead of “for” them, and thus to avoid misrepresenting them. If Djebar chooses to express herself through the medium of fiction rather than that of history or documentary film making, it is because of her sensitive approach to her country, to the women of her tribe, and to her “subaltern sisters”, whom she would rather speak “close to”. Indeed, she does not desire to speak “as” a specialist for she does not pretend to be able to “speak for” subaltern women, without risking misrepresenting them: “… (sauf pour les porte-parole et « les spécialistes ») […] Ne pas prétendre « parler pour », ou pis, « parler sur », à peine parler près de, et si possible tout contre […].”[[256]](#footnote-256) We furthermore argue that Djebar’s form of writing is so refined and sensitive that it gives her multiple possibilities from which “to speak” and “to be listened to”. Indeed, she has opted for the complex form of “the veiled writing” (“écrire comme un voile”) in order to partake her opinions: “la fiction comme moyen de penser.”

Acting as a spokesperson for the people of one’s community is consequently a sensitive issue because of the risk of misrepresenting them. Aware of that risk, each writer attempts in her own way both to convey her feminist ideology - her writing of passion and struggle - and to “speak for” and thus to “write for” the subalterns. Not only would Zouari rather not “speak for”, i.e., “speak in favour of” the veiled women of French society, her claims to appropriate the words of the women of her Tunisian community, through her mother’s voice, and thus to “speak through” them have not been verified in her texts either. As to Mernissi, as the foremost Islamic feminist, she becomes naturally the voice, or a least an important one, of the Muslim women’s community around the world (especially for Muslim practising women who aspire to gender equality within their faith). On a lesser scale, she also attempts to best represent her country, Morocco, “through the words” of its female population thanks to her interviews. Mernissi’s position is consequently the most anchored within a “writing for”, in that, she really takes on her responsibility for her community. If she feels deeply part of her Moroccan community, and beyond, and genuinely identifies with the subaltern women, she nonetheless maintains a different relation to that community because of her education, her literacy, and her perspective on world history and religious thought. While there is no rejection and no desired distance, unlike Zouari’s position, there is perhaps little effort to disrupt in some way what she has gained through her education; whereas Djebar does, to a certain extent, seek to disrupt and almost hinders herself in order to speak “close to” the subalterns, and “from the heart” of that community. Because, she is eager not to misrepresent her “subaltern sisters”, whom she empathises strongly with, Djebar can only conceive both her personal story within the women from her tribe and her/story within the his/story of Algeria. In this connection, Djebar succeeds in her film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, to let the voiceless be heard, with a minimum of intervention on her part because of her methodology in filming and above all because they speak in their own language, without being translated either in French or literary Arabic, or without their words being transcribed for the written text. Yet, if Djebar’s film is a success in the field of “representativeness” of postcolonial subaltern subjects, this field remains, as Spivak warns us, always a highly problematic one.

To rephrase Spivak, if neither letting the disenfranchised speak “for themselves”, nor speaking “for them”, is a solution; how can the radical critics or the intellectuals in general represent them and make them exist in colonial history? We may argue that “speaking with” the disenfranchised or the subalterns may then be a solution to represent them in a more faithful manner. If Mernissi’s sociological work in interviewing a sample of Moroccan subaltern women and Djebar’s filming experience among the women of her tribe enabled the latter to both identify “with” them and speak “close to” them, thus write “with” them in a way, can the autobiographical form of each novel of the corpus permit a “writing with” as well? Do Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari progress in their writing careers from a “writing against” – a ‘transgressive’ position – to a “writing for” – a wish to represent one’s community – to reach finally a more open form of writing: a “writing with”? So as to better understand the complexity of each novel under study and the way each author negotiates a position, we analyse deeper the specifics of Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar’s cultural production in the following chapter.

**CHAPTER THREE:**

**WRITING “WITH”**

**CHAPTER THREE: WRITING “WITH”**

*Comment me dénierez-vous le droit de dire je ? Moi qui parle pour la première fois. Qui ne parle plus par procuration. Moi qui découvre avec enchantement et surprise la liberté des mots, la magie de leur pouvoir.*

Fawzia Zouari, *Pour en finir avec Shahrazade*, p. 15

*For me, trying to give voice to the illiterate woman is to give voice to this self of mine, which should have been doomed to the ancestral silence.*

Fatima Mernissi, *Doing daily Battle*, p. 18

*Quand je me pose des questions sur les solutions à trouver pour les femmes dans des pays comme le mien, je dis que l’essentiel, c’est qu’il y ait deux femmes, que chacune parle, et que l’une raconte ce qu’elle voit à l’autre. La solution se cherche dans des rapports de femmes. J’annonce cela dans mes textes, j’essaie de le concrétiser dans leur construction, avec leurs miroirs multiples.*

Assia Djebar, in Mortimer, Mildred, ‘Entretien avec Assia Djebar, Ecrivain Algérien’, *Research in African Literatures*, 19 : 2 (Summer 1988), pp. 197-205

The three epigraphs above are all written in the autobiographical form. Yet, not only does each reflect a different perspective and position from its writers, they also entail different types of knowledge production. To be more precise, in these epigraphs, each author produces a particular discourse: either one of transgression (Zouari), of empathy (Mernissi), or of sorority (Djebar). Given the various analyses of our corpus and of Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar’s writing positions, in the previous chapters, we argue that these epigraphs are characteristic of the writers’ overall cultural production and the types of discourse they tend to promote in their writings. We wish to assess in this last chapter which type of writing, which discourse, and which position foster the most a certain openness to one’s language, one’s readers, one’s community, one’s country, and even beyond one’s borders. We qualify this open form of “literary genre”, or knowledge production, as a “writing with”.

The objective of this chapter consists firstly in defining our concept of “writing with”, and analysing how it manifests itself best in the postcolonial Maghrebi female autobiographical genre, which is often conceived at the intersection of the individual and the collective. Secondly, we compare each writer’s cultural production and attempt to assess their trajectories as writers to see whether they evolve towards a more open type of writing: a “writing with”. This leads us to demonstrate that producing a discourse, which is open to one’s community and country, in particular, is the most porous. In this connection, we finally analyse the shift in today’s Maghrebi (francophone) literature, in that, it is becoming a transnational literature, which facilitates a “writing with”, and may propel one’s literary creation to a writing “within a Third Space”. We notably study Djebar’s last phase of writing, which we situate in the writing of expatriation and qualify as a writing “with a far-off gaze”.

**3.1. Maghrebi autobiographies: fostering a “writing with”**

We mentioned in the introduction that the choice of the corpus was partly motivated by the fact that these literary texts are all first-person narratives that portray not only each writer’s life, but also her native country. Our aim is to interrogate, in this chapter, the three writers’ impulse to write in the first person singular, and demonstrate that their choice of a first-person narrative is a means of negotiating the complex relation between individual experience and national narrative. We underlined in the first chapter the importance of understanding the socio-political, religious, cultural and linguistic context of the Maghreb in order to examine postcolonial Maghrebi women’s writing. This is all the more relevant in the analysis of autobiographical narratives, since each writer’s quest for identity is to be understood within the complex situation of her respective country in terms of history, sociology, culture and politics.

According to the Algerian critic Abdelkader Cheref, “the practice of autobiography is essentially an effort to conceive, confirm or stress a certain sense of identity.”[[257]](#footnote-257) Although Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari’s novels are not formally presented as autobiographies, they certainly enact a personal quest for identity and share the characteristics of postcolonial Maghrebi female autobiographies; a genre conceived at the junction of the individual and the community and which facilitates a “writing with”. Analysing now the specifics of the postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographical genre shall enlighten us on our concept of “writing with” and help us understand our corpus better.

**Postcolonial Maghrebi literature: the autobiographical genre reinvented**

Critics have found it difficult to classify the autobiographies of the Maghreb. Yet, one of the main characteristics of Maghrebi literature, which has emerged during the last phase of the colonial period, is according to Richter the autobiographical discourse:

L’un des rares points sur lequel, généralement, les chercheurs s’accordent est que le discours autobiographique est une des principales caractéristiques de la littérature maghrébine qui émerge lors de la phase finale de la colonisation française du Maghreb.[[258]](#footnote-258)

In order to understand this genre better, we explore its main characteristics: its political dimension, its anchor within a historical discourse, and the conception of an identity based more on the community than on the individual. All of these points describe a “writing with” that encourages a discourse of openness and testimony.

The genre of autobiography, in its contemporary Western conception, usually indicates the biography of a person written by him or her (Jean Starobinski[[259]](#footnote-259)). The French critic Philippe Lejeune dissociates autobiographies from other forms of the writing of the self according to an autobiographical pact, where the “I character = the I narrator = the I author” who refers to a real person.[[260]](#footnote-260) He describes an autobiography as a: “récit rétrospectif en prose qu’une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu’elle met l’accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l’histoire de sa personnalité. ˮ[[261]](#footnote-261) The three autobiographical narratives chosen for the corpus may correspond to Lejeune’s definition of an autobiography, since they all recount retrospectively a person’s life – who is supposedly the author’s – by stressing her personality. However, critics often criticize Lejeune’s autobiographical pact as too rigid to allow any innovation in literature. Moreover, the reader is constrained by certain reading codes and the writer by the construction of a “I” which could be artificial.[[262]](#footnote-262) Nowadays, Western autobiographies tend indeed to move away from the typical autobiographical pact and resemble more “auto-fictions”, that is, a combination of autobiography and fiction according to Doubrovski[[263]](#footnote-263).

Against George Gusdorf’s essentialist (and imperialist) thesis, which proclaims that the genre of autobiography belongs only to the West, for it translates the Western man’s unique preoccupations (“…l’autobiographie [ne] se soit jamais manifestée en dehors de notre aire culturelle ; on dirait qu’elle traduit un souci particulier à l’homme d’Occident”[[264]](#footnote-264)), Elke Richter and other critics wish to prove the contrary and especially the fact that there has existed a tradition of autobiography in the Arabic world.[[265]](#footnote-265) It is therefore more correct to say that the genre of Maghrebi autobiography has taken its inspiration not only from Western autobiographies, but also from Arabic ones: “…l’autobiographie maghrébine est ancrée dans une tradition de l’écriture autobiographique arabe, en plus de son enracinement dans la culture et l’histoire des genres littéraires occidentaux.”[[266]](#footnote-266) This argument is reinforced by the Maghreb’s geo-political position and cultural history at the crossroads of the Orient and the Occident:

Le “je” autobiographique est arrivé au Maghreb par le “je” biographique à l’image de l’autobiographie occidentale et arabe. L’autobiographie maghrébine se distingue par son originalité historique, elle se ressource de l’Occident et de l’Orient. Cela s’explique par le positionnement du Maghreb en tant qu’ancienne colonie de la France, le situant au carrefour des cultures arabe et occidentale.[[267]](#footnote-267)

The importance of the Islamic heritage, as well as the influence of the ex-coloniser’s culture and literature, must therefore both be taken into consideration in the formation and the study of the genre of Maghrebi autobiographies. Taking the example of Djebar’s *L’amour, la fantasia*, Richter argues that by choosing Ibn Khaldoun and Saint Augustin, as her “literary fathers”, Djebar places her life narrative within the inter-textual space of autobiography, a space which she situates both in the European and the Arab Muslim culture.[[268]](#footnote-268)

A useful concept to understand the evolution of Maghrebi autobiographies is the process of “rewriting”, a postcolonial term including a strategy of revision and re-interpretation, which disrupts the colonisers’ canon of literary texts by a new or oblique writing[[269]](#footnote-269). The rewriting of a text implies: “la rédaction de versions alternatives de l’Histoire et de la littérature dans lesquelles sont inscrites les voix, jusqu’à présent absentes des colonisés.”[[270]](#footnote-270) Richter argues that it is exactly what happens for postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographies. The metaphor of the palimpsest, used in the postcolonial discourse to show that the postcolonial culture is made of various layers, but its origins are not erasable, furthermore explains the process of the evolution of Maghrebi autobiographical writing:

The concept of the palimpsest is a useful way of understanding the developing complexity of a culture, as previous ‘inscriptions’ are erased and overwritten, yet remain as traces within present consciousness.[[271]](#footnote-271)

Indeed, the critic Abdallah Memmes explains that Maghrebi writers base their autobiographies both on the pre-colonial conceptions of identification and their narrative expressions, which have not been completely erased, as well as on the Western writing stylistic techniques:

Ainsi, à côté de l’usage des techniques scripturales en vogue en Occident […] nos auteurs réactualisent, dans leurs œuvres, des formes esthétiques relevant de leur propre patrimoine culturel. Ces formes […] se superposent et s’amalgament aux formes esthétiques occidentales.[[272]](#footnote-272)

From this short critical review of postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographies, it is best to situate this genre at the junction of the Western and the Arabic traditions of autobiographies. In this sense, we may argue that the postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographical genre is itself a “bi-cultural” form of writing, so to speak. Henceforth, it generates a porous discourse, a “writing with” both in the footpath of one’s ancestors and into the European modernity.

Another main characteristic of Maghrebi autobiographies is the importance of the Maghrebi socio-political context translated in the texts. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari point out the fact that “minor literature” should be analysed differently from “major or great literature”. The term “minor” should not be considered pejoratively for they define it as the literature of a minority expressed in a “major” language. This is certainly the case of North African writers using the French language as their medium of expression. Deleuze and Guattari advocate that the political dimension is paramount in “minor” literature:

Dans les ‘grandes’ littératures […] l’affaire individuelle (familiale, conjugale, etc.) tend à rejoindre d’autres affaires non moins individuelles, le milieu social servant d’environnement et d’arrière-fond ; si bien qu’aucune de ces affaires œdipiennes n’est indispensable en particulier, n’est absolument nécessaire, mais que toutes ‘font bloc’ dans un large espace. La littérature mineure est tout à fait différente : son espace exigu fait que chaque affaire individuelle est immédiatement branchée sur le politique. L’affaire individuelle devient donc autant plus nécessaire, indispensable, grossie au microscope, qu’une toute autre histoire agite en elle. C’est en ce sens que le triangle familial se connecte aux autres triangles, commerciaux, économiques, bureaucratiques, juridiques, qui en déterminent les valeurs. Lorsque Kafka indique parmi les buts d’une littérature mineure ‘l’épuration du conflit qui oppose père et fils et la possibilité d’en discuter’, il ne s’agit pas d’un fantasme œdipien, mais d’un programme politique.[[273]](#footnote-273)

We believe the characteristics of “minor literature” apply to postcolonial Maghrebi literature, especially that of francophone expression, for every individual story usually connects to the socio-political context of the author’s country of origin, and thus it becomes magnified, as Deleuze and Guattari explain.

At the same time, Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari’s autobiographical narratives embody both a personal and a political discourse in the context of the postcolonial Maghreb. Therefore, we may also consider these texts as national allegories according to Frederick Jameson’s definition. Jameson asserts that in Third World texts, the personal story is often an allegory of the national narrative for the private and the political are so much linked:

Third World texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society. Need I add that it is precisely this very different ratio of the political to the personal which makes such texts alien to us at first approach, and consequently, resistant to our conventional western habits of reading?[[274]](#footnote-274)

Though there is a controversy as to considering all Third World texts as national allegories (cf. Aijaz Ahmad[[275]](#footnote-275) and Imre Szeman[[276]](#footnote-276)), to a certain extent we may argue that Mernissi and Djebar’s respective texts, in particular, can be read as such, because the personal tends to represent the national allegorically, that is, symbolically.

For example, in her memoir, Fatima Mernissi situates her birth in the precise context of colonial Morocco and political instability, as well as in the context of her family history, and Arab women’s claims for more social rights. By connecting her very existence to this specific time of socio-political unrest, Mernissi amplifies her rather trivial family story and gives it a significant political dimension:

I was born in a harem in 1940 in Fez, a ninth-century Moroccan city some five thousand kilometres west of Mecca, and one thousand kilometres south of Madrid, one of the dangerous capitals of the Christians. The problems with the Christians start, said Father, as with women, when the *hudud*, or sacred frontier, is not respected. I was born in the midst of chaos, since neither Christians nor women accepted the frontiers. Right on our threshold, you could see women of the harem contesting and fighting with Ahmed the doorkeeper as the foreign armies from the North kept arriving all over the city.[[277]](#footnote-277)

Since the private and the collective are interrelated, we can thus put forward that *Dreams of Trespass* can be read as a national allegory according to Frederick Jameson’s theory.

Yet on the other hand, the constant parallelism between her personal story and her country’s socio-political history throughout her memoir also places her narrative within the postcolonial feminist discourse which advocates a double struggle against colonisation and patriarchal structures. As analysed in the previous chapter, *Dreams of Trespass* may indeed be read as a postcolonial feminist text. The desire for women’s emancipation is underlined by the fact that the narrator was born at the start of a revolutionary era for women. We learn that harems were starting to disappear and that more and more girls had access to education. This budding “feminist” revolution parallels Morocco’s nationalist movement for independence from French colonisation. Women’s struggle for emancipation in Mernissi’s household is reflected on a larger scale in Moroccan people’s fight for freedom.

Regarding Assia Djebar’s Algerian Quartet as a whole (including her last novel *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*)*,* it may also be read as a national allegory, since the private and the political are so much linked in each narrative. For example, Djebar’s protagonist’s personal psychological crisis (the suicide attempt) on the eve of Algeria’s war for independence may be interpreted as Algeria’s national crisis and Algerian people’s political insurrection. The metaphor of her female body running in order to merge with the sea of Algiers[[278]](#footnote-278) could also be considered as the national body in action towards a political rebellion:

M’en aller au plus loin, courir au plus vite, me précipiter, me projeter là-bas, éperdue, au point exact où se noie l’horizon ! Ne m’arrêter que là où la mer m’attend… m’attend… [[279]](#footnote-279)

Although there is a tendency by critics of postcolonial literature to equate the female body to the national body, we agree nevertheless with Réda Bensmaïa that this can be problematic for two reasons. First, as Bensmaïa argues postcolonial feminist texts are often ambivalent, because they show at the same time complicity with and opposition to dominant powers.[[280]](#footnote-280) Second, I contend that their nationalist discourse is different from their fellow men’s, since theirs is not only nationalist, but also often feminist.

This is particularly characteristic of Djebar’s Algerian Quartet, especially *L’Amour, la Fantasia*, in which her patriotic and anti-colonial discourse is made clear by her re-interpreting the history of her country from an Algerian perspective. Yet as examined in the second chapter, we must also take into consideration her feminist discourse in giving voice to subaltern women by transcribing women’s oral accounts of dramatic war experiences and denouncing their subjugation under a patriarchal nation. In the above extract, Djebar’s postcolonial feminist position is also made clear, for she places her personal crisis within both her country’s political crisis and Algerian women’s predicament under a patriarchal society that has perpetuated injustices towards them.

While Mernissi and Djebar’s postcolonial feminist discourses locate their texts in a “writing with” that combines feminist and nationalist perspectives and balances the intimate world “with” the political world of Algeria and Morocco, another significant feature of postcolonial autobiographical narratives is the way Maghrebi writers contextualise their individual story within the framework of their respective nation’s History.

Because of the censorship of artistic expressions in countries like Algeria, Gafaiti wonders whether we could possibly designate Algerian writers as historians and sociologists.[[281]](#footnote-281) What is then the link between fiction and History? Pierre Barberis argues that a novel may be read as a historical document: “[…] le roman est aussi document historique et peut être lu comme tel. Ceci dit, il a son langage propre, et il dit des choses que ne dit pas le document historique.”[[282]](#footnote-282) As to Paul Ricoeur’s point of view, he argues that a narrative can be quasi-historical: “Le récit de la fiction est quasi historique dans la mesure où les évènements irréels qu’il rapporte sont des faits passés pour la voix narrative qui s’adresse au lecteur; c’est ainsi qu’ils ressemblent à des évènements passés et que la fiction ressemble à l’histoire.”[[283]](#footnote-283) Finally, Jacques Derrida tells us that literature is an attempt to write history.[[284]](#footnote-284) In order to shed light on the relation between fiction, autobiography, and history within the context of postcolonial Maghrebi literature, and to verify whether we may designate Algerian writers in particular as historians or sociologists, we wish to study essentially Djebar’s Algerian Quartet and focus our attention on *Nulle Part*. We also try to answer the following question: how can a text, which is explicitly personal, i.e. autobiographical, be read as a vehicle for a collective history? The aim is to determine how much this enables an author’s writing to open up and thus to become a “writing with”.

According to the postcolonial critic Alfonso de Toro, we witness nowadays a new wave of the representation of history, be it individual (“*la petite histoire*”) or collective (*“la grande Histoire”*)[[285]](#footnote-285). This is part of the actual debate on “memory”, which is particularly expressed in Maghrebi literature:

Les grandes vagues migratoires, la conscience et les conditions de la mondialisation sont les résultats de la vive actualité du discours ou de la représentation historico-individuelle ou historico-collective qui se manifeste dans la littérature, dans la culture et la pensée maghrébines pour diverses raisons: la première et la plus évidente a été initialement marquée chez les auteurs et auteures maghrébins d’expression française par la confrontation avec la langue de l’autre, la langue de l’ancien colonisateur […].[[286]](#footnote-286)

The importance of the relationship between History and autobiography can be accounted for the fact that an individual’s sense of identity is closely linked to an understanding of his/her past History. This is particularly true for people who come from a country with a tumultuous history, like Algeria for example. Djebar remains very sensitive to this issue, since she conceives her first autobiographical narrative, *L’Amour, la Fantasia*, as a double autobiography – i.e., of her own self as well as that of Algeria:

Comment justifier que j’écrivis deux années ma double autobiographie, celle de ma personne et celle de l’Algérie envahie par les soldats français, puis par les colons, puis par la langue, comment comprendre que ces deux années dans ma quête, sous double face de cette vérité algérienne et de son encerclement, je n’avais pas imaginé qu’il y aurait pour ce texte un seul lecteur ?[[287]](#footnote-287)

Critics have commented extensively on Djebar’s exemplary piece of postcolonial writing[[288]](#footnote-288), and especially on the link between autobiography and history reflected in the first novel of her Algerian Quartet. On examining Djebar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia*, Nicholas Harrison acknowledges Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s argument that women “write themselves into history” and are already part of that history, though a neglected one[[289]](#footnote-289). Drawing from Celia Britton’s analysis of the postcolonial female voice[[290]](#footnote-290), he moreover argues that: “the self that Djebar expresses or writes exists only in dialectic with history. History, so to speak, writes itself into and constitutes the self.”[[291]](#footnote-291) The critic Patricia Geesey also shows that in *Fantasia*, the history of Algeria and the autobiography of contemporary Algerian women are integral and interdependent components of the quest for a viable postcolonial Algerian identity[[292]](#footnote-292). This explains Djebar’s desire to use History as a quest for identity in her novel: “L’histoire est utilisé dans ce roman comme quête de l’identité.”[[293]](#footnote-293) Djebar’s relation to fiction, autobiography, and history in *L’Amour, la fanta*sia, may be summed up by Bensmaïa, who finds her postcolonial project a success in reconciling fiction with History: “ Djebar s’est attaché à résoudre l’un des problèmes les plus délicats qui se posent aux écrivains ‘postcoloniaux’ […] concilier l’histoire avec la fiction.” [[294]](#footnote-294) She indeed manages to put in relation individual history with big History, or History in general, without falling into simplification and didacticism.[[295]](#footnote-295) She herself describes her relationship to history in physical terms: “Ce fut dans ce corps à corps avec l’Histoire que j’écrivis.”[[296]](#footnote-296)

Without wishing to delve too much into Djebar’s novel and its relation to both autobiography and History, we may add that her need to encounter her past is typical of women coming from (previously) colonised countries.[[297]](#footnote-297) Indeed, we argue that this is true of the three writers of the corpus. Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar’s personal experiences are clearly situated within an important historical framework, i.e., the transition of the post-independence years of Tunisia (Zouari), the rise of nationalism and women’s movements for emancipation in the Arab world and more precisely in Morocco (Mernissi), and colonial Algeria on the eve of its war for independence (Djebar). In this way, the three writers engage not only with their personal stories (“la petite histoire”), but also with the collective Histories of the Maghreb (“la grande Histoire”) by recollecting their childhood or early adulthood during a key moment in time.

For the critic Samira Farhoud, Maghrebi female writers furthermore reveal a new version of the history of their country by focussing especially on women’s lives in the Maghreb:

C’est à partir de l’écriture autobiographique conçue comme jonction entre l’individuel et le collectif que les auteures maghrébines font des interventions autobiographiques dans les sociétés maghrébines et occidentales, révélant une nouvelle version de l’Histoire de leur pays et de leur vie des femmes musulmanes du Maghreb ou issues de l’immigration maghrébine.[[298]](#footnote-298)

We argue that it is through each protagonist’s quest for identity, contextualized during a critical historical time and within a certain socio-political atmosphere, that each writer reveals a new version of the history of Algeria, or Tunisia, or Morocco.

For example in *Nulle Part*, the History of colonial Algeria that Djebar reveals is a complex one; both different from the French official historiography and the national one written in postcolonial Algeria as a campaign in favour of the unique political party in power, the FLN (The National Liberation Front). Gafaiti informs us that in 1980, the Algerian government launched a campaign to write the modern history of Algeria, that is, according to him, “in order to falsify”[[299]](#footnote-299) it. This resulted in some “literary puppets” writing “a new corpus of semiofficial literature” with the aim of encouraging nationalism and celebrating the unique political party[[300]](#footnote-300). Henceforth, he considers Djebar’s literature (especially her Algerian Quartet) as a double challenge to this nationalist call:

She challenges the dominant discourse of nationalism by presenting a more subtle and complex analysis of the relationship between Algeria and France. At the same time, she constructs the modern history of Algeria from the perspective of those whom the official ideology excluded by reducing them, against all evidence, to a secondary role: women.[[301]](#footnote-301)

In the following passage, for example, Djebar ironically confronts these two versions of the History of Algeria, i.e. the French official version and the Algerian one:

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…[[302]](#footnote-302)

As Djebar stresses, time seems divided between one History for the French colonisers, and another one for her people: the Algerians. Yet for her, neither version can fully translate women’s experiences in general and her personal experience in particular. Growing up in a world divided into two opposite parts would have consequences for her personality and sense of identity. Her autobiographical protagonist, Fatima, feels torn between two cultures, languages, educational systems and mindsets to the point that she neither belongs fully to the coloniser / European community, nor to the colonised / native one. Therefore, she rejects both versions of history, since neither is able to reflect the reality of a complex bond between two opposite peoples. Djebar’s protagonist is “a product”, so to speak, of this complexity, of the complicated inter-cultural exchange or confrontations – depending on the way one views the History of colonial Algeria – as she constantly wavers between the coloniser’s community with its French, Christian, European, modern values and culture, and the colonised community with its Algerian, Muslim, traditional values and culture. In this connection, she is unable to develop a real friendship in either community, because she is an exception in both. We realize that her friendship with her French classmates – like Jacqueline, her roommate – is restricted to the boarding school:

Elle [Jacqueline] venait de mon village, mais elle ne rentrait pas, le samedi, par le car comme moi.

Sa maison – son père devait être un petit colon – était située au centre de ce bourg, finalement pas si loin de notre immeuble pour familles d’enseignants. Je ne suis jamais entrée chez elle, ni elle chez nous. Sans doute qu’une fois au village, retrouvant mon espace familial, je reprenais d’instinct « mon rang », celui de ma communauté, les « indigènes » ; quant à « eux », eh bien, en langue arabe, avec ma mère (comme avec les femmes du bain maure), c’est à peine si nous les nommions : « eux », c’étaient… « eux », sans plus ![[303]](#footnote-303)

In a similar way, whenever in the company of young Algerian girls, like her cousins, she feels quite distanced, for she cannot adhere completely to their opinions about the colonisers. When Fatima mentions her friend Jacqueline’s flirtations to them, they deem the Westerners’ morals as outrageous: “Les Françaises ? Toutes des dévergondées ! […] Je me sens blessée.”[[304]](#footnote-304)

Aware of the division of the society and the intricate bonds between two opposite communities during colonial Algeria, which have impacted on her personal story and development as a young adult, the version of History Djebar reveals is therefore a more complex one than the French official one or the nationalist Algerian one. It is an ambiguous and almost absurd His/tory, as the metaphor of the orange reflects:

Ainsi la partition coloniale restait-elle pérenne : monde coupé en deux parties étrangères l’une à l’autre, comme une orange pas encore épluchée que l’on tranche n’importe où, d’un coup, sans raison ! Mieux vaudrait en dédaigner les morceaux. Coupé ainsi, ce fruit serait bon à jeter, jusqu’à plus soif ![[305]](#footnote-305)

It is a “His/story” that would inevitably lead to a very harsh war where both sides would neither fully win nor lose; it is “her/story” of a painful quest which would tear her inner self to the point of attempting suicide. In this way, we may answer our initial question affirmatively, that is, the fact that a text, which is explicitly personal, can be read as a vehicle for a collective History. *Nulle Part* manages indeed to transmit a very personal story that could be read as a vehicle for a collective History. Djebar’s autobiographical character’s complex quest for identity and fragmented self do indeed translate the division and tension of the socio-political atmosphere of Algeria in its colonial years. In this sense, Djebar’s narrative is a very porous one, opening up to the History of the author’s country by the intermediary of a woman’s story. As such, it corresponds to our definition of “writing with”.

To conclude, saying “I” and contextualising one’s life story within the framework of one’s nation’s History is a means for each writer to negotiate in her own way the complex relation between an individual experience and a national narrative, especially at a critical historical moment. However, we should bear in mind that autobiography is neither fiction, nor history. It is often at the intersection of the private and the collective, especially in the postcolonial Maghrebi context. Since Maghrebi literature is very much anchored in the palimpsest dimension of the Maghreb, as demonstrated in the first chapter, the writing of the self is not only linked to the History of one’s country, but also to its linguistic, socio-cultural and political context. This may explain why postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographies tend to be labelled by critics as collective or plural autobiographies, as we shall now examine.

**Postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographies: plural autobiographies?**

Some postcolonial critics, like Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, consider the plural or collective autobiography (“l’autobiographie au pluriel”) as a genre of Maghrebi literature of French expression. The latter defines it as follows: “[when] a personal account of one’s intimate and private experiences is enlarged into and measured against national and universal preoccupations.”[[306]](#footnote-306) Abdel-Jaouad regards Djebar’s *L’amour, la fantasia* as not only the writer’s “most mature and accomplished novel”, but also, “in and by itself, [as] a case study of the genre of ‘plural autobiography’ […] a now prevalent genre in Maghrebian literature of French expression.”[[307]](#footnote-307) He argues that in *L’Amour, la fantasia*, “the I engages the Thou in an informative and insightful dialogue where facts (personal and historical) are engrossed by fiction, in the self-conscious vein;” and where Djebar makes important use of some of the post-modern terms of engagement, such as “inter-textuality and inter-subjectivity.”[[308]](#footnote-308) Gafaïti, contends that Djebar’s novel is: “éclairée par le principe que l’histoire du sujet est un texte inscrit dans le champ général de l’Histoire… le « je » est porteur d’une expression et d’un message qui ne sont pas seulement personnels mais collectifs.”[[309]](#footnote-309) Both critics describe Djebar’s writing as a very enabling form that opens up various possibilities and which corresponds precisely to our problematic of “writing with”.

Several other postcolonial critics, such as Anne Donadey[[310]](#footnote-310) or Katherine Gracki[[311]](#footnote-311), have pondered over the link between autobiography, fiction, and history, as well as on the concept or the genre of “plural or collective” autobiography in relation to Djebar’s literary masterpiece *l’Amour, la fantasia*. However, little has been said regarding Djebar’s last novel, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*. It would therefore be interesting to verify whether this autobiographical text, and Mernissi’s memoir lend themselves to this concept or genre of postcolonial Maghrebi literature, i.e., the “plural autobiography”. Do *Nulle Part*, and *Dreams of Trespass*, in a similar way to *L’Amour*, fuse, in Abdel-Jaouad’s term[[312]](#footnote-312), a personal itinerary with that of a whole nation then? Does each “I” in these two autobiographical narratives encompass both an expression and a message, which are not only personal, but also collective?[[313]](#footnote-313) Or, does the “I” always correspond to a “we”, so to speak?

Before answering these questions in light of the analysis of the corpus, we should point out that the value of the postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographical “I” has stirred a lot of debates among both Maghrebi literature critics and Maghrebi writers themselves. For Jean Déjeux, a specialist in Maghrebi literature of French expression, the conception of the Maghrebi subject should be considered differently from the Western one, since a person’s individuality is often conceived within his/her community in the Islamic tradition: “Le “je” de nombreux écrivains du Maghreb est donc en fait un “je-nous.”[[314]](#footnote-314) Indeed, in the Islamic traditional society, the individual is considered as part of the community, called “*Umma*”. Any attempt to distinguish oneself from the community is strongly disapproved as Mernissi explains:

Notre identité traditionnelle reconnaissait à peine l’individu qu’elle abhorrait, car perturbateur de l’harmonie collective. En islam, la notion d’individu à l’état de nature, dans le sens philosophique du terme, est inexistante […] Toute initiative privée est *bid’a*.[[315]](#footnote-315)

Déjeux nevertheless explains that to consider that every “I” masks a “We” can be problematic for mainly two reasons. Firstly, it does not take into account the phenomenon of French acculturation and the influence of the Western school of thought. This is all the more important for Maghrebi writers who attended French schools and write in French. Secondly, we must acknowledge the changes in the structure of Maghrebi societies due to modernity and globalization. Even though the prevalence of the community over the individual is part of the Islamic tradition, Muslim societies have become more and more individualised, as Jean Déjeux explains:

Cette question de l’apparition de l’autobiographie est primordial au regard des écrits maghrébins. De fait, le ‘je’ et l’exposition du moi, de l’homme sujet, ne vont pas de soi dans le contexte de la civilisation et de la culture arabo-musulmanes. Or, ce ‘je’ a bel et bien fait son entrée dans les romans autobiographiques et dans les récits de vie non fictionnels, histoires de vie, journaux intimes et mémoires. […] De prime abord, l’impression dominante est en effet que c’est le ‘nous’ qui d’un désir ardent de faire connaître aux étrangers les réalités maghrébines et de donner à voir les Maghrébins, la véritable voix narrative de ce roman […] Et pourtant, nous constatons bien une émergence du ‘je’ dans la narration chez un certain nombre d’auteurs lors de la naissance de cette littérature maghrébine, mais surtout dans les récits de vie. Les romanciers ont voulu mettre en évidence leur moi, ceci dans un contexte d’acculturation française et de modèles venant de l’école moderne occidentale, mais aussi dans une évolution des pays maghrébins eux-mêmes vers la modernité aux prises avec les changements socio-économiques et les mutations dans les mentalités sous la pression de l’étranger colonisateur, hier, et des bouleversements intervenant dans le monde.[[316]](#footnote-316)

Without disqualifying completely Déjeux’s arguments, we argue that the postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographical “I” is probably best described by Abdelkebir Khatibi, as: “ni un ‘je’ égoïste, ni un ‘il’ aussi abstrait qu’impersonnel, mais un ‘nous’ terriblement exigeant et foncièrement ambivalent.”[[317]](#footnote-317) To describe more specifically the Maghrebi women’s autobiographical “I”, we draw on Samira Farhoud and argue that her “I” is more or less inclusive of a community of women in particular, rather than of the Maghrebi community as a whole. Their autobiographies are conceived at the junction of the individual and the community[[318]](#footnote-318), and their autobiographical “I”: “cesse d’être un ‘je’ au singulier pour atteindre un ‘je’ pluriel, un ‘nous’ des femmes, un ‘nous’ de sororité.”[[319]](#footnote-319)

In light of this short critical review on the postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographical “I”, and in relation to our initial question, that is, whether two novels of our corpus should be considered as part of the genre of the plural autobiography, we now examine how Djebar and Mernissi conceive the link between the private and the collective in their autobiographical text.

So, firstly, does *Nulle Part* compare with *L’amour, la fantasia* with regards to the genre of a plural autobiography? Does Djebar’s last and most autobiographical text become, like *L’amour, la fantasia*, “avec urgence, quête personnelle, intime tout autant que collective”?[[320]](#footnote-320) Though *Nulle Part* is not a polyphonic novel giving voice to multiple women narrators, like *L’amour, la fantasia*, and thus facilitating a “plural” voice, we argue nonetheless that it can be considered as a plural or collective autobiography for its emblematic dimension. We mentioned already the way Djebar links her personal account of growing up within a divided society and under an antithetical education with the destiny of other Algerian women being victims of contradictions within their patriarchal society, and makes her story symbolic of a community of not only Algerian women, but as she says, a community of all the other women from the South of the Mediterranean Sea, that is, all the underprivileged. We may furthermore argue that the very title of *Nulle Part dans la maison de mon père*, places this narrative within the community of Muslim women, since it refers to a sentence pronounced by the Prophet Mohamed’s daughter, Fatima, whom she considers as the first victim of a Muslim patriarchal society after her father’s death - a man who was said to foster gender equality his whole life. His sermons would turn out to be in contradiction with the practices of her society giving predominance to men over women:

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?... Où est-ce là que se dissipe ce rêve : l’amour paternel qui vous confère le statut envié de “fille de son père”, de “fille aimée”, à l’image, dans notre culture islamique, du Prophète, qui n’eut que des filles (quatre, et chacune d’exception ; 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 ! »).[[321]](#footnote-321)

Djebar’s “I” becomes therefore both an expression and a messenger of the collective according to Gafaiti’s expression. Djebar’s allegoric discourse or meta-discourse, so to speak, propels her writing beyond her community; it surpasses the theory of “writing with” to reach a “writing within a Third Space”, as will be analysed in the last section of this chapter.

As far as *Dreams of Trespass* is concerned, we argue that Mernissi’s personal memoir reads easily like a plural autobiography, firstly because it is deeply anchored in the history and socio-political reality of Morocco. This fact, associated with a postcolonial feminist motive of joining women’s struggle for emancipation with the nation’s fight for independence, leads to a constant parallelism between the personal story and the collective story. Henceforth the personal itinerary fuses, to a certain extent, with the nation as a whole. However, we may also argue that Fatima’s itinerary in *Dreams of Trespass* is that of a person belonging to a certain privileged social class; therefore her personal account of private experiences is not completely representative of the whole community of Moroccan women. Yet, as we examined in the second chapter, Mernissi does attempt to include in her “I” women from all walks of life and to speak “for” the underprivileged like her divorced aunt Habiba or her ex-slave African nanny. Consequently, it is plausible to regard *Dreams of Trespass* as a collective autobiography.

Since Mernissi is a sociologist and *Dreams of Trespass* bears the characteristics of a sociological account of Moroccan society, and especially of the condition of Moroccan women, during the French colonial period, we may also compare this autobiographical narrative to an auto-socio-biography. Examining the work of the French woman writer, Annie Ernaux, Francine Dugast-Portes describes it as an auto-socio-biography, whose aim is less to explore the self than to lose it within a broader reality, a culture, or a condition.[[322]](#footnote-322) As to the critic Veronique Montemont, she qualifies *Les Années*[[323]](#footnote-323) by Ernaux as a social autobiography, since “l’être qui est au centre du récit se trouve en contact avec des cercles relationnels (familiaux, amicaux, collégiaux et amoureux) dont il a la charge d’apprendre les codes.”[[324]](#footnote-324) She also describes her work as a balance of discourses, between the private speeches and the public sphere, between personal events and historical facts. [[325]](#footnote-325) All these characteristics of the social autobiography or the auto-socio-biography and this tendency to focus more on the society than on the self seem to correspond to Mernissi’s memoir and her sociological works in general. Whether we compare Mernissi’s scholarly books to Ernaux’s works and *Dreams of Trespass* to an auto-socio-biography or else a collective autobiography, we cannot under-estimate the social dimension of this narrative as the individual experience is staged within the socio-historical context. These characteristics make Mernissi’s writing certainly porous and exemplify our concept of “writing with”.

To conclude this section, postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographies take on a complex form, difficult to fit a single definition. Nevertheless, this genre of Maghrebi literature has all the proprieties of facilitating an open form of writing, “a writing with”, that links the private with the collective: a significant political dimension within the plot, the propensity of anchoring an individual story within the larger History of one’s country, and the ability of staging an “I” which includes a “we”.

Since the three postcolonial Maghrebi women authors of our study have mostly written first-person narratives, examining now their cultural production shall enlighten us on their progression in their writing career. Indeed, have Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar moved from a ‘transgressive’ position, where they all started considering the cultural context of their postcolonial societies in the early 60s (Djebar), or late 70s (Mernissi) or in the 80s (Zouari) to a more open position and a more porous form of writing towards the end of their careers?

**3.2. Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar’s cultural production: a move towards “writing with”?**

Exploring further how “writing with” manifests itself in our corpus, we assess each author’s trajectory as a writer to determine whether they progress from a “writing against”, to a “writing for”, in order to reach a “writing with”. We also wish to find out which type of knowledge production is the most conducive of a “writing with”. Is it an oppositional discourse centred on the self, a discourse of empathy, or a discourse appealing to solidarity and communication? Since Djebar’s trajectory as a writer is exemplary as to our notion of “writing with”, we furthermore examine how she negotiates a feminine identity in and by her writing thanks to the concept of “agentivity” and the notion of a meta-discourse.

**Fawzia Zouari: the trajectory of an “exceptional” Arab woman**

If there exists a trajectory in Zouari’s cultural production as a whole, we might argue that it reveals the career of a writer who wishes to differentiate herself and her literature from other postcolonial Maghrebi authors. Both her essays and literary books may show a kind of opposition with the mainstream cultural production of Maghrebi women writers in particular. We argue that this oppositional or “transgressive” position is reflected in *La Retournée*, which enacts the trajectory of an “exceptional” Arab woman, who has overcome several obstacles within her traditional community and succeeded not only to empower herself among her backward village people, but also to change somehow the mentality of her patriarchal community by doing justice to women over men.

In her essay, *Pour en finir avec Shahrazade*, Zouari claims that she needs to belong to a familiar, intimate space, in order to join the women’s clan, to identify “with” women so as to reach a personal path, and to say “we: the female gender” before being able to say “I: a woman”:

Le jour où, pour la première fois, j’écrivis ce nous, j’eus l’impression de rentrer dans une demeure familière. Je migrai du clan communautaire, - où l’exil m’installait d’office -, pour le lieu des femmes.

Pourtant peu de choses me poussaient à employer ce pronom de l’identité. Peu d’arguments justifiaient un quelconque pacte de solidarité au féminin. […]

Je m’aperçus plus tard que ce désir de retrouver les femmes était la première étape d’un retour vers moi. Il fallait d’abord que je me désigne comme femme, que j’appartienne en premier lieu à mon sexe. En disant nous, je revêtais ma parure de femme. Je me posais en entité face à un monde où s’effaçaient les frontières et poussaient les négations. Je m’abreuvais en ce lieu, comme un voyageur à une source, pour l’ultime expérience du je.[[326]](#footnote-326)

However, in *La Retournée* and mostly in her other works, it seems that Zouari’s position towards her community, especially the subaltern women, remains superior and Eurocentric. Her narcissism is felt throughout the text, as in the following episode recounting a verbal fight at the “*hammam*” between her autobiographical character Rym and her brother-in-law’s sisters accompanied by Hadda, a former immigrant:

Elles avaient les cheveux enduits de *tfal*, le basin entouré de pagnes à rayures bleus et les seins nus. C’est surprenant, un groupe de femmes aux poitrines dénudées. J’ai pensé aux amazones. Sans épées toutefois. Ni courbes fermes. Seul le *swak*, une écorce de noyer censée blanchir les dents et rougir les gencives, leur dessine une bouche couleur de sang, clin d’œil possible aux guerrières de la légende.

- Il y en a qui crèveraient de faire la même chose que nous, ai-je prononcé, toujours vers Lila. Mais elles n’en ont pas eu la chance. De toute façon, ce sont des candidates recalées au voyage.

- Parce que tu crois que la France intéresse encore quelqu’un ? Pauvre émigrée ! a soupiré avec délectation la femme d’Aziz.

J’ai fixé mon interlocutrice, dans les yeux cette fois, avant de m’attarder sur ses cuisses flasques qui collaient à sa combinaison bon marché. Ses cheveux étaient balayés de mèches pourpres. Sans doute des fonds de tubes de coloration, achetés passage de l’Industrie ou boulevard de Strasbourg.[[327]](#footnote-327)

The tone of contempt and superiority of the intra-homo-diegetic narrator towards traditional Tunisian women is quite explicit in this extract. We argue that Zouari’s autobiographical “I” (i.e., me: the emancipated modern Tunisian woman) translates a superior stance in front of “them” (i.e., the rural traditional subaltern women).

We already mentioned her feminist stance, which though ambiguous is close to the Orientalist feminist discourse, in that, she tends to use binary oppositions to describe the West in rather positive terms whereas the Orient is seen in a negative way. If Rym’s “Western” or “Orientalist” feminist project in influencing the subaltern women of her village, like her spinster aunt Zina, to fight for their rights, makes her somehow close to the women of her clan; her superior and narcissistic attitude prevents her to fully empathise and thus “write with” the subaltern women. Zouari’s lack of empathy and at times sympathy towards subaltern women, as towards the “*Beur*” community, is reiterated in her autobiographical project.

The only instance when Zouari is more genuinely close to the subaltern women is the staging of women’s victory over the male, patriarchal clan led by Rym’s foremost enemy and previous aggressor: her brother in law Toufik. As some of the villagers came to defend their mausoleum Missouni against its destruction by Toufik for the benefit of economic expansion, Rym is at last accepted within the group of women: “la fille Ben Amor est ici comme vous et moi” [[328]](#footnote-328), says the young militant Baya to defend her feminist mentor, Rym. Leading the group of women, Nassima, a subaltern widow who in the past lost her young son because of Toufik’s zealous behaviour, shows so much imposing bearing and dares to speak out in the name of not only all the women, but of the whole community. She is characterised as a heroine and with such positive terms that the readers, including the audience within the text, cannot help but sympathise with her:

* Ca suffit ! Séparez-vous !

Je reconnais aussitôt Nassima. Elle vient de se détacher des rangs des femmes et se dresse devant Toufik, voilée de la tête aux pieds.

* Qui t’a donné l’autorisation de toucher au patron du village ? Interroge-t-elle, la voix changée par le morceau de tissu blanc qui dissimule le bas de son visage, ne laissant apparaître que ses yeux.
* Je ne parle pas aux femmes, esquive Toufik, en essayant de s’arracher à ce face-à-face inattendu avec son ancienne victime.
* Si, puisque je te parle ! intime-t-elle. […]

La voix de Nassima vibre avec la force de ceux qui ne parlent que parcimonieusement et dont la poitrine, j’en suis persuadée maintenant, a gardé intactes les anciennes douleurs. Ses mots sont nets et ses phrases ne souffrent aucun démenti. Si mon village s’était avisé de laisser parler les femmes, on aurait pu consigner depuis des siècles, non seulement de la belle prose mais des propos aussi sages que ceux des prophètes.[[329]](#footnote-329)

We believe it is one of the few instances in the text where Zouari lets subaltern women speak and wishes to speak “with” them. Her “we” and claim to be close to her women’s clan is therefore genuine in this episode. We may also contend, nevertheless, that this passage serves as the climax within the plot to show the protagonist’s victory over patriarchy in her feminist quest. This episode only then proves the outstanding success and influence of a feminist Arab woman’s undertaking. In this way, her autobiographical “I” stands out as an exception.

Zouari’s position in this autobiographical project may also be compared to other Arab women writers, who through their life writings, desire to stand out as exceptions among other Arab women. The critic Patricia Geesey argues that in earlier Arab-Muslim women’s self-writing projects:

[T]he single voice narration serves the purpose of strengthening the protagonist’s desires to distinguish herself as “different” and separate from not only the oppressive male-dominated realms of politics, religion, and society, but also to mark her exclusion from the world of her fellow countrywomen.[[330]](#footnote-330)

We believe this type of autobiographical project corresponds somehow to Zouari’s, who narrates the adventures and success of an exceptional Arab feminist woman.

This argument is justified by Zouari’s comments on her own writing as she wishes to stand out among Arab women writers and refuses to take up the role of the long admired Shahrazade of the classic Arab story-book *One thousand and one nights*. She deplores the fact that many Arab women write within the tradition of Shahrazade, that is according to her, only to entertain men: “Celle qui assigna à la parole féminine la seule mission de distraire le genre masculin.”[[331]](#footnote-331) She deems essential to distance oneself from the Oriental women’s traditional role as storytellers:

C’est lorsque Shahrazade se tait, que je commence à dire. Ma prise de parole est au prix de son silence définitif. […] Chaque fois que je fus tentée de parler, il y eut un nouveau conte de Shahrazade qui m’assigna au silence. Ses contes ne se terminent jamais, là est mon tourment !”[[332]](#footnote-332)

Storytelling as a subterfuge to survive is not a genuine empowering experience for Zouari: “Car, je ne raconte pas pour survivre aux autres. Je raconte pour mieux vivre avec moi-même.”[[333]](#footnote-333) She prefers to be free from all constraints and claims a real agency, different from men’s. Yet, she does not want to enter into a war of the sexes; she wishes instead a feminine world “next to” the masculine one and not inferior to theirs:

Que serait le monde au féminin ? […] On nous attend sur le terrain du semblable, alors que nous sommes dans la capacité de produire du différent. On nous juge sur des moyens similaires là où nous gagnerions à agir autrement. Rien ne valide une supériorité intellectuelle de l’homme.[[334]](#footnote-334)

To sum up her thoughts, Zouari prefers the feminine figure Nidaba, “the goddess of writing”, to Shahrazade, for the former had a capacity to create, to write instead of telling only. Like Nidaba, she claims her right to create and write far from men’s sight: “De là sans doute l’insistance des hommes pour ressusciter le souvenir de Shahrazade et notre préférence définitive pour un nouveau mythe, celui de Nidaba.”[[335]](#footnote-335)

Considering Zouari’s cultural production as a whole, we conclude that her oppositional type of discourse focused mainly on the self has not much evolved to a more open form of writing. This may explain why she has been mainly published in France and Tunisia and has written exclusively in French. Her books are either essays, which resemble investigative journalism, or fictions in an autobiographical form. In both types of works, we argue that her writing is not porous, but rather dichotomous. Indeed, Zouari tends to promote a feminist ideology and discourse where binary oppositions prevail. We have remarked that she often opposes for example the colonisers to the colonised; France vs. Tunisia; the French community vs. the “*Beurs*”; traditional women vs. modern ones; the veiled vs. the non-veiled; “me” vs. “them”, etc. This is in keeping with her bi-polar vision of the Maghreb, which replicates the colonial conception of this space, i.e., the French (viewed as the superior civilized colonisers) vs. the Maghrebi people (considered as inferior and barbarous). She has therefore remained in the “writing against” throughout her career, and has not really managed to open up to either her community in Tunisia or to the community of Maghrebi immigrants in France, and therefore to reach a “writing with”.

Both Mernissi’s motive in relation to her autobiographical narrative and her cultural production differ from Zouari’s, as we shall now examine. Unlike Zouari’s trajectory as a writer, we do notice a progression in Mernissi’s writing career.

**Fatima Mernissi: from “writing against”, to “writing for” and reaching “writing with”**

Mernissi has managed to move from an oppositional type of discourse, found more in her early scholarly essays, like *Beyond the Veil*, to a discourse of empathy and sympathy in her more fictional books, such as *Dreams of Trespass*.

Unlike Zouari who has conceived both her autobiographical “I” as an exception and her feminism has somehow different from the majority of Arab women writers, it is important to understand that Mernissi conceives both her “I” or identity and feminism “with/in” the world of the Muslim “*umma*”. In *Dreams of Trespass*, it is an autobiographical “I” inclusive of a “we: the Muslim women”, and which translates the trajectory of a feminist in the making “within” the Muslim community. The feminist consciousness, which emerges from the little Fatima, is developed in contact and closeness “with” the subaltern women of her surrounding. She wishes to be on a par with the community of women and links her dreams with other women’s dreams. More than “speaking for” them or “writing with” them, the little girl envisages “to create with” them a better, more socially just, and gender equal, world for Muslim men and women:

I would create for and with the audience, long poems about the absence of fear.

Trust would be the new game we could explore, and I would humbly confess that

I knew nothing of it either.

In my theatre, I would earn enough money to serve tea and cookies to the audience, so that people could sit and relax for long hours while digesting the novel idea of a planet on which people walked without fears.

Just walking without feeling the chilling need for veils and boundaries.

Though her dreams seem somewhat childish, the formation of Mernissi’s Islamic feminism shows through from this extract; it is a feminism, which is conceived at the intersection of the individual and the community, that is, “with/in” Moroccan community and even “with/in” the Muslim *umma*.

Thanks to this type of empathic discourse, Mernissi’s cultural production has progressed from a “writing against” a patriarchal interpretation of Islam and political Islam[[336]](#footnote-336), to a more performative writing, a “writing for” the subaltern Moroccan women[[337]](#footnote-337), and attained a “writing with” the community of Muslim women all over the world. Her activism positioned her as one of the main Islamic feminist spokespersons around the world by speaking not only in favour of Moroccan subaltern women, but also for all women from the Muslim community. Therefore, Fatima Mernissi’s knowledge production is one of openness and inclusivity thanks to the universal medium of religion in general, and Islam in particular which promotes solidarity among its members, combined with her feminist ideology. Indeed, her Islamic feminist vision expressed in most of her writings has enabled her to reach out to many Muslim women around the world. This, all the more so as she has written in three main languages – French, Arabic, and English – and has been widely translated and internationally published.

At the same time, her cultural production shows a reflexive trajectory from global to personal, since she started with very broad themes (such as religion, women, modernity), and finished with more personal writings like *Dreams of Trespass*, or *Sheherazade Goes West*.

Although Djebar is, in similar ways like Mernissi, an Arab feminist woman encouraging a sorority dialogue and developing a knowledge production open to her country and community, we argue that both her conception of the autobiographical “I” and “writing with” are more complex than that of any other writers of the corpus, especially because her selfhood is a fragmented one growing up within a divided, torn society, and experiencing many challenges, especially since Algeria’s Civil War and her exile.

**Assia Djebar: a meta-discourse leading to the negotiation of a feminine identity**

Djebar’s autobiographical “I” is far different from the Western autobiographical “I” of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, different from Zouari’s narcissist “I”, and even different from Mernissi’s compassionate “I”. We believe her complex “I” is to be understood with regards to the ambiguous, and sometimes contradictory, relationship she develops with language throughout her writing career. This French language she employs for writing and which she describes as “La langue des Autres” reveals her inner struggles and complex self, because it is on the one hand tainted with the blood of her country’s colonial past, and on the other hand it has played such a key emancipatory role in her life as a Maghrebi Muslim woman. She uses this language to describe herself as a writer “from within”, that is, a writer who writes both “with the Others” – the previous invaders and intruders in her culture – and in unison “with her people”:

[…] ou simplement un lien de solidarité indéfectible, mais le seul moyen d’ignorer la rancune, la dépossession du passé, la douleur des miens gelée et jamais cité… Justement, pour cela, il ne fallait ni crier, ni vitupérer, seulement écrire : en premier, écrire pour réinventer, aller de l’avant, me libérer de toute rancune et de chaque dépossession, de chaque malheur, m’emparer de LA LANGUE DES AUTRES – […] oui, saisir cette Langue française, pour oublier les prisons de ma propre société et les garde-fous de ceux d’en face : premier acquis de l’écriture sans-relâche, de l’écriture-à-perdre-souffle – si bien que je me découvre aujourd’hui, écrivain mais “de l’intérieur”, avec les miens et avec ces Autres, eux autrefois les intrus, les envahisseurs, les Maitres.[[338]](#footnote-338)

We argue that her aesthetics of writing and this difficult process of attempting to write with a language, which is not hers but the Others’, is very much linked with her negotiating an identity throughout her life-writing projects during her trajectory as a writer. Indeed this negotiation is intertwined “with” the voices of “her subaltern sisters”; “with” the sounds of the Berber and the Algerian dialects of the women of her tribe – the only languages in which she can really express love –; “with” the memory of tumultuous wars that have not been recorded in a faithful and satisfactory manner; and “with” the Others, once the invaders and Masters, who brought her a tool of writing: the French.

Because of the subversive nature of the female Maghrebi autobiographical “I”, the writing of the “self” as a Subject in the traditional and patriarchal Maghrebi culture necessarily leads women writers like Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari to the negotiation of a feminine identity. This negotiation may be explained either by Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the “becoming-woman”, as argued in chapter 1, or else by the concept of “agentivity”. Drawing from Barbara Havercroft and the sociologist approach of “agentivity” which aims at identifying the elements in feminine writing, which make the woman “subject” of her discourse and free from the dominating powers[[339]](#footnote-339), Rachel Van Deventer elaborates a theory of literary “agentivity.”[[340]](#footnote-340) Her theory is based on four fields: “l’agentivité extratextuelle, l’agentivité transtextuelle, l’agentivité interdiscursive et l’agentivité intratextuelle.”[[341]](#footnote-341) Without entering into much details, what is of interest to us is Havercroft’s idea that literary feminine writing offers a great power of “agentivity”, because it is firstly a major form of cultural representation and secondly, it permits women writers, “de décrire leurs expériences, de les critiquer ou de les reformuler, en même temps qu’elles se construisent comme sujets dans et par leur écriture.”[[342]](#footnote-342) In this thesis, we draw from both Havercroft and Van Deventer to argue that in the context of feminine literature, and above all postcolonial Maghrebi women’s writing as exemplified by the study of our corpus, women writers like Djebar, Zouari, and Mernissi may take different trajectories in order to construct themselves as a Subject in and by their writing.

The most obvious case of this negotiation of a feminine Maghrebi identity is Djebar’s trajectory as a writer, which, over fifty years, led her progressively to write more and more fully her “self” as a Subject within both her society and community of women. Instead of the term, “autobiography”, to describe the complexity of her writing on the self, “l’écrit sur soi”[[343]](#footnote-343), Djebar employs various expressions, such as “l’auto-analyse”, “l’auto-dévoilement”, “l’hybris de l’écriture-aveu”. These terms underline the complexities of the writing of the self as a reflection on the self, an itinerary either intellectual or spiritual as in the case of her mentors – Ibn Arabi, the Andalou and Ibn Khaldoun, the Maghrebi[[344]](#footnote-344) – and a trajectory in which the “moi” is both remembered and “re-membered” we would add (in that she has to put the pieces together to make sense of the whole self):

Dans mon modeste cas, la nécessité qui a animé cet “écrit sur soi” – cette trajectoire éclatée, livrée par brisures – ne s’était pas vraiment imposée, du moins dans l’urgence… Serait-elle comme la définissait Hannah Arendth, une “impatience d’auto-connaissance”?[[345]](#footnote-345)

Throughout her career, her “fragmented” trajectory as a writer delivered by breaks (“par brisures”), she would at times reveal and conceal herself to her readers:

Dans ce long tunnel de cinquante ans d’écriture se cherche, se cache et se voile un corps de fillette, puis de jeune fille, mais c’est cette dernière devenue femme mûre qui, en ce jour, esquisse le premier pas de l’autodévoilement.[[346]](#footnote-346)

Van Deventer argues that *Nulle Part* is the acme of Djebar’s project, especially from an autobiographical point of view, in that we find not only some similar themes but also some episodes, which usually complete the ones of her previous novels.[[347]](#footnote-347) She thus concludes that Djebar’s last novel is a “méta-bio-texte, qui tient compte du parcours et du vécu de l’auteure, complète la trajectoire de l’écriture de soi chez Djebar.”[[348]](#footnote-348)

We may argue that the fact that she finally opens up to her readers about her intimate world and above all confides about a serious, reprehensible act in the Islamic culture, such as a suicide attempt, shows that she has managed to negotiate her feminine identity within the Maghrebi patriarchal context, and therefore to construct herself in and by her writing. Towards the end of her autobiographical project or her “impatience d’auto-connaissance”, Djebar enacts this negotiation as she enters into an internal monologue and addresses herself in the second person singular, with her multiple roles in the narrative (“ton rôle de narratrice, d’autrice, de manipulatrice”), to the point that we have the impression of seeing both the character and the author as one and the same person “in flesh”:

Tu comprends à présent, puisque tu es enfin revenue à cette aube d’octobre 1953 […] alors que toi, tu n’es désormais de nulle part […] – oui, c’est cette voix d’inconnu qui te revient, ou plutôt tu la réentends chaque fois que (deux ou trois ans après) tu te lances dans une écriture aveugle, gratuite comme une danse, une écriture mobile, mais griffée, striée, par jeu, crois-tu, par pure fantaisie, par luxe peut-être ? Tu prenais ta première fiction pour un simple jeu d’hirondelles dans l’espace et soudain, ivre de cet élargissement, tu en échafaudais aussitôt une deuxième, une troisième…

Te voici donc à “écrire”, et tu t’imagines inventer de toutes pièces, mais non : c’est “écrire” certes, mais pas vraiment ! Jouer, alors ? Non, à peine, car cette sorte d’allégresse a tôt fait de retomber. […][[349]](#footnote-349)

This passage exemplifies a meta-discourse and confirms Van Deventer’s argument about considering *Nulle Part* as a “meta-bio-texte”. It also leads us to conclude that *Nulle part* is indeed different from and more powerful than an autobiography, since not only does its dimension enable the writer to dare to write “her self” as a subject, “oser écrire sur soi”, to write “corps et coeur noués”, but also because it stages her difficult negotiation to acquire a full identity as a Maghrebi francophone woman from a Muslim background in and by her writing on the self (“l’écrit sur soi”).

Despite the difficulty she has been finding throughout her career in unveiling herself, in writing in French and coming to grips with all the contradictions of her complex hybrid identity, her trajectory as a writer led her to progress from fiction to a preparation of an autobiography and finally to a “self-analysis”. Furthermore, despite her attempt to write fictions with a veil (“l’écriture comme un voile”), Djebar has finally managed to write “her self” without a veil, to negotiate her complex hybrid identity, to find a way between “le devoir dire” and “le devoir taire”, and therefore to exist as a Subject in her writing: “écrire, n’est-ce pas me dire?”[[350]](#footnote-350) The outcome of her writing career, with *Nulle Part*, has been to reconstruct her fragmented self to make it the “subject’ of her meta-discourse and to “free herself from the dominating powers” so that “the writing of the self” becomes a “silky” and a “less torturing” experience:

J’aurais pu intituler ce texte Silence sur soie, comme si oser écrire sur soi, cet exercice rêche […], m’incitait à ce que cette remémoration, avec son effort de dédoublement progressif, m’amène à du “soyeux” et non du torturant.[[351]](#footnote-351)

In this connection, Djebar’s position in the “writing with”, verges on a “writing within” a Third Space, to wit, a very porous form of writing opening up to a transnational space, as will be explained next. Thanks to a very encompassing discourse, a multi-polar vision of the Maghreb, and a feminist desire to promote a community of female voices, Djebar therefore manages to produce a meta-discourse, putting into practice a certain “agentivity”, and opening up various possibilities.

In light of these analyses about the three authors’ cultural production, we conclude that the way each writer conceives her “autobiographical I” within her life-writing project is not only symptomatic of her relationship with her community and country, it also reveals a certain type of knowledge production. While Zouari’s oppositional and self-centred discourse is not conducive for a “writing with”, Mernissi’s inclusive and progressive position, as well as Djebar’s expressive and compassionate stance, do enable a certain porousness that opens up their discourse to both their communities and countries. Yet, Djebar’s knowledge production is the most porous as it propels the readers to another dimension, a “Third Space”, beyond borders.We now intend to analyse further Djebar’s literature and this notion of “writing within a Third Space”.

**3.3. Djebar: from “writing with” to “writing within a Third Space”**

The objective of this last section is firstly to examine today’s shift of Maghrebi (francophone) literature into a transnational form of writing, or a “writing within a Third Space”. This leads us to close our chapter with a reflection on the last phase of Djebar’s writing career, ending up in *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, and which is situated in her writing of expatriation – or what she calls a writing “with a far-off-gaze” – that expresses a “*francophonie*” of resistance.

**Contemporary Maghrebi literature: a transnational writing?**

A few critics of French Maghrebi literature, like Charles Bonn, Jacques Noiray, Christiane Chaulet Achour, and Abdallah Mdarhri, try to trace the evolution of this writing since its beginnings (in the 1950s approximately) till nowadays. Some focus mainly on French Algerian literature, which is the most important, others on women’s writing. Although it is not the objective of this thesis to examine in detail the evolution of contemporary Maghrebi literature of French expression, we underline a few points as to its fairly recent shift. We base our comments mainly on Hafid Gafaiti’s analysis[[352]](#footnote-352), since it is the most pertinent to us.

Gafaiti’s main objective is to analyse the phenomenon of “diasporisation” in relation to the literary and cultural production of Algeria and the Maghreb, based on a study of two major Maghrebi writers: Assia Djebar and Rachid Mimouni. On the evolution of Algerian literature, he notes some continuity between the first literary texts published on the eve of independence and the works written in the context of Algeria’s socio-cultural and political crisis taking place from the 1980s to the 1990s. Furthermore, he stresses how the socio-political atmosphere of Algeria has shaped and transformed the writings of its writers, in particular Djebar’s and Mimouni’s. In the case of Maghrebi literature, he chooses the term “diasporisation”, because of its dynamic connotation, to the term diaspora[[353]](#footnote-353). Drawing essentially from Stuart Hall and Khachig Tololyan, he defines the concept of “diasporisation” by underlining firstly the relationships between identity, culture and History; secondly the creative dimension of this phenomenon, despite its often tragic aspect (Edward Said); and thirdly the transnational dimension of this concept, which contains such terms as expatriation, exile, immigration, etc.[[354]](#footnote-354) Concerning Maghrebi literature, he defines its relation to “diasporisation” as follows:

Pour ce qui est de la littérature maghrébine, au-delà du concept de tiers-espace produit par Homi Bhabha pour décrire la culture et l’expérience postcoloniale, il y a dans le cas des écrivains considérés ici un déplacement fondamental de l’espace de la nation à celui du dehors, de l’extérieur, de ce que Régine Robin appelle le hors-lieu. Ainsi se définit, au-delà des frontières physiques du territoire et de l’imaginaire circonscrit à l’idéal de la nation, un champ et un espace nouveau qui est en même temps celui de l’Histoire et de la littérature s’écrivant aujourd’hui.[[355]](#footnote-355)

Among the factors of the phenomenon of “diasporisation” of Maghrebi cultural and literary production, he stresses the effects of migration leading Maghrebi people throughout History (especially both during the colonization and the decolonization periods) to migrate elsewhere, essentially in European countries like France. He notes that the Maghrebi post-colonial regimes of military oligarchy are also responsible for the exile of so many writers and intellectuals. Moreover, because of the successive foreign conquests of the Maghreb, he remarks that writers have been not only confronted with a physical and psychological “de-territorialization”, but also to a linguistic one because Maghrebi cultural production has often been expressed in a foreign language. This has resulted in Maghrebi writers being cut-off from their national readership. At the same time, they have acquired a transnational impact:

Cette situation d’écriture dans la langue de l’autre a fait que la plupart des écrivains maghrébins ont toujours été plus ou moins coupés de la plus grande partie de leurs lectorats nationaux. En même temps, en retour, ils ont toujours eu des lecteurs dans le reste du monde et se sont inscrits dans des cultures hybrides, ce qui, depuis le début, a donné à leurs productions une dimension et un statut transnationaux.

Gafaiti also mentions the tragic impact of the Algerian civil war in the 1990s on intellectuals, since they were the targets of extremist groups: “…la violence intégriste, la répression étatique et le terrorisme sous toutes ses formes ont poussé au départ de nombreux intellectuels et écrivains.”[[356]](#footnote-356) The number of intellectuals and executives going in exile has been estimated to 150 000[[357]](#footnote-357). The politics of “arabization” (changing the main language of instruction to classic Arabic instead of French) in the case of Algeria, initiated at the beginning of the 1970s by the President Boumédiène, has also impacted greatly on the use of the French language in literature. Concerning the economic factors, which are very much linked to the socio-political atmosphere of Algeria, buying a book was so expensive that very few people could afford it during the economic crisis[[358]](#footnote-358). To sum up, all these elements have contributed to make the Algerian literature (mainly in French, but also in literary Arabic) condemned to expatriation.[[359]](#footnote-359) He furthermore points out that this situation is also true, especially from an economical point of view, for the Tunisian and the Moroccan literatures, which are mainly published abroad.[[360]](#footnote-360)

Because of this phenomenon of “diasporisation” of Maghrebi literary and cultural production, we argue that we are witnessing today a more open form of writing, of a testimonial type, which facilitates a “writing with”. The dramatic effects of the fairly recent Algerian Civil War of the 1990s has led Algerian writers, in particular, to testify against the violence and to share “with” readers their experiences of fear, shock, or mourning, as Charles Bonn explains:

L’aggravation, la perte de sens généralisée de l’horreur en Algérie depuis le début des années quatre-vingt-dix, ne vont cependant pas éteindre la production littéraire. Mais cette production, dans les toutes dernières années et depuis la mort symbolique de Tahar Djaout, semble avoir en grande partie tourné le dos à la littérarité, pour multiplier les témoignages.[[361]](#footnote-361)

Sharing “with” her readers her sorrows about the socio-political reality of her country, attempting to pay tribute to the victims of the renewed violence, and mourning her friends and writers, who were killed by the tragic events of the Civil War, is exactly what Djebar turns to do in the mid-1990s by writing *Le Blanc de l’Algérie*. If Charles Bonn points out more focus on the politics and the documenting and less on the “literarity” in this type of narratives, we do not notice this in Djebar’s book. In *Le Blanc de l’Algérie,* Djebar testifies in a very humanistic and courageous way about both the cultural and socio-political situation of her country since its independence. She explores the friendship she had with some Algerian intellectuals, who either died or were killed during the Civil War. She communicates “with” her readers in the most authentic manner about the predicaments Algeria and Algerians are going through at a time of increased violence. Yet, this writing “with” should no longer be understood as a bridge between the individual and the community, because there has been a fracture within this community that has been torn apart. According to Abdallah Mdarhri, the Algerian writer of the 1980s-1990s is no more the spokesperson of his community; he has moved from a communitarian consciousness to a more individual one:

L’écrivain de la veille de l’indépendance, d’une manière générale, voulait être le porte-parole d’une communauté dont il exprimait les “doléances”, parallèlement au travail que faisaient les militants sur le plan politique; quand il s’adressait en français à la population de la métropole, il le faisait en tant que membre d’une société dont il était solidaire. Ce n’est pas le cas des romanciers actuels (…), qui n’adhèrent pas aux idéaux antagonistes déchirant l’Algérie, ni n’acceptent la passivité apparente de leur communauté.[[362]](#footnote-362)

The comments of this Algerian critic on the shifting position of the Algerian writer towards his/her community is reinforced by Djebar’s opinion in the 1990s: “L’écrivain Maghrébin - comme dans tant d’autres pays du tiers monde - ne peut plus jouer son rôle de porte-parole, ou même de passeur.”[[363]](#footnote-363) In re-evaluating the complexity of the Algerian political system since its Revolution (1954), and the situation of the Algerian culture, which has suffered from both the FLN regime and the Muslim fundamentalists, Djebar needs to distance herself from her community in order to understand it better, and above all to criticise an authoritarian vision that does not allow creativity and freedom of thought to express themselves. Hence her urgency to write not only “on” Algeria, but “with” Algeria, that is, “to speak Algeria”, to translate its reality and culture, which have been silenced:

Il m’a souvent semblé que, dans une Algérie de plus en plus fragmentée culturellement (ou la ségrégation sexuelle de la tradition a accentué les verrous), toute parole de nécessité s’ébréchait avant même de se trouver, à la lueur tremblante de sa seule quête… Je ne suis pourtant mue que par cette exigence-là, d’une parole devant l’imminence du désastre.

L’écriture et son urgence.

L’écriture pour dire l’Algérie qui vacille et pour laquelle d’aucuns préparent déjà le blanc du linceul.[[364]](#footnote-364)

Despite this difficulty of playing the role of the spokesperson of a community divided by Civil War, Djebar’s strong empathy and sympathy towards her people in general and women in particular has nonetheless not died down. In the case of *Oran langue morte*, probably the most testimonial of her books, and thus the most porous, she has been listening to the oppressed and victims of this tragic war so as to transmit both their fears and lack of understanding as well as hers. This book, which she declares being the most “personally attached to”[[365]](#footnote-365), constitutes a series of novellas that are at the outset documentary: “All of them, except the earlier story of Annie and Fatima, are about the violence [of the 1990s], but they remain documentary in origin. Nearly all the facts related in the novellas are true.”[[366]](#footnote-366) We have previously seen that her cinematographic work, based on documenting stories among the women of her tribe on the War of Liberation, made Djebar produce “close to” and “with” her Algerian sisters. In a similar manner, documenting the stories and testimonies of women who have been victims of the tragic Civil War has opened up her literary writing, has facilitated her communication “with” both her community and her readers:

Dans ces nouvelles (y compris un récit et un conte), qu’ai-je cherché entre deux espaces, entre Algérie et France, ou dans la seule Algérie, tandis qu’elle est de plus en plus écartelée entre désir et mort ? Qu’est-ce qui a guidé ma pulsion de continuer, si gratuitement, si inutilement, le récit des peurs, des effrois saisi sur les lèvres de tant de mes sœurs alarmées, expatriées ou en constant danger? Rien d’autre que le désir d’atteindre ce “lecteur absolue” – c’est-à-dire celui qui, par sa lecture de silence, de solidarité, permet que l’écriture de la pourchasse ou du meurtre libère au moins son ombre qui palpiterait jusqu’à l’horizon…[[367]](#footnote-367)

This writing of testimony, and of both sharing “with” and listening “to” in Djebar’s case, takes place within a Third Space, within a new territory, a second land (“un territoire nouveau, terre seconde”[[368]](#footnote-368)), or rather between two specific spaces – between Algeria and France. This may explain her desire to locate both her writing and speech between the South and the North. She positions herself in this weird situation, which is neither of a refuge, nor an immigrant, nor an exile. She defines herself more as a fugitive (“fugitive et ne le sachant pas”) being “in-between”:

Durant ces quinze années, je me suis définitivement installée donc dans cet entre Nord/Sud, c’est-à-dire pour moi entre deux rives de la Méditerranée, entre deux territoires, entre deux langues ; également entre deux mémoires.[[369]](#footnote-369)

In this connection, we argue that Djebar’s last phase of writing has shifted from a writing of the community to a writing of expatriation, from a “writing with” to a “writing within a Third Space”:

Même dans l’absence et le corps d’une nation dont elle est déshéritée, elle continue d’écrire à partir de la nécessité de la vie. Cependant, cette démarche de courage, de lutte et de survie transforme le projet initial d’une œuvre conçue ou, du moins, voulue dans la plénitude d’une communauté ensemble imaginée en une entreprise autre, endeuillée, déterritorialisée, et selon les termes de la romancière, “expatriée.”[[370]](#footnote-370)

In order to understand better Djebar’s shift to a “writing within a Third Space” or her writing of expatriation, we examine now how it is translated in her later works, including *Nulle Part*.

**To write “with a far-off-gaze”: the writing of expatriation**

Mainly because of the tragedy that Algeria has experienced in the 1990s, Djebar has been propelled to a writing of expatriation leading her to write within a Third Space, a new territory as she describes it, or a place between the North and the South where debates are nowadays taking place: “Nord/Sud : c’est à l’intérieur de cet espace que les débats, aujourd’hui, que les textes, les œuvres, pour moi, écrivaine maghrébine, s’éclairent.”[[371]](#footnote-371)

While Djebar shares with Mernissi the multi-polar vision of the Maghreb, and a certain openness in their discourses of empathy and sorority, we argue that Djebar is the only writer of the corpus who practises a writing of expatriation which propels readers to a Third Space, beyond one’s national borders, a space of creativity and humanity. Djebar, herself, confirms Gafaiti’s and other literary critics’ opinions on this new shift of literature, which concerns not only Maghrebi writing but other types, notably francophone African literature, especially because she considers Africa as a continent “given over to catastrophes.”[[372]](#footnote-372) On today’s global political situation and the rise of fundamentalism, Djebar thinks that the writer who practices *ijtihad*, that is, who strives to understand and interpret the world, is doomed to write in expatriation:

Aussi, disons-le fermement, dans un monde qui tend à s’installer comme Islam politique, être écrivain, être né pour l’écriture (c’est-à-dire, en somme, dans *l’ijtihad* exercer sa volonté de comprendre, d’interpréter, de rechercher dans l’effort et le mouvement de la pensée), être donc ainsi écrivain pour la trace, pour la vertu de la trace, c’est évidemment, depuis dix ans au moins, et pour cinquante ans encore, être voué à l’expatriation ; le plus vraisemblable avenir pour beaucoup sera d’écrire dans l’expatriation.

[…] l’écrivain du Sud ne sera jamais plus porte-parole dans sa communauté, mais davantage le remords - vivant ou mort - d’un monde voguant sur l’océan des ténèbres.[[373]](#footnote-373)

Because of the violence that Algeria in the 1990s experienced and other African countries are still experiencing, leading so many people to flee their country – like she herself did -, she furthermore qualifies the writing of expatriation as that of a survival:

Survivre, et en rendre compte, ne serait-il pas à la fois une apparente gratuité, un accident, une chance dont on aurait quelque peu honte si elle ne se transmuait pas en devoir de mémoire, en exigence de solidarité ? Oui, je dirais aujourd’hui - pour moi, pour d’autres en début de fuite ou en cours d’échappée - qu’écrire c’est tenter désormais de fixer, de rêver, de maintenir un ciel de mémoire.[[374]](#footnote-374)

Surviving a traumatic experience incites “the writer of expatriation” to show solidarity with his people by writing on this immediate memory, like she herself did in *Le Blanc de l’Algérie* and *Oran, langue morte*.

However, as a “writer of expatriation”, Djebar raises an important issue in relation to a writer’s duty of memory (“maintenir un ciel de mémoire”), that is, how to write in the presence of survivors, during or after the disaster:

[…] what can one’s writing achieve during, or right after the disaster? In other words, how does one write in the presence of rage, or even exploding violence, whether the violence of civil war, or that of a tyrant? How does one speak, how does one dare speak in the presence of the survivors, whether addressing them directly or indirectly?[[375]](#footnote-375)

To this stylistic question, Djebar proposes the technique of “the writing as listening”:

Well, you see, one does not speak. One approaches them in the bewilderment of shared silence. One dares – if one dares – present oneself before the survivors, and one listens to them, or listens to their silence, then to their fear or to their persistent memory. Writing in this way is not speaking, but listening. These are silent words, but writing, under these conditions, before these survivors, necessarily means listening first.[[376]](#footnote-376)

She remarks that there exist nonetheless two types of “writers of expatriation”, or what she calls “two sides of la *francophonie*”[[377]](#footnote-377) because she considers two types of “writing attitudes” in the face of tragedies: one she characterizes as a francophone literature that “exhibits misery” in order to expect “facile compassion” from its audience (compared to the effect of watching horror on TV); and another type of francophone literature which she qualifies as a “*francophonie* of resistance”[[378]](#footnote-378). The latter type of writing, which is more humane and encourages solidarity, applies the technique of writing as listening:

On the other side, and in contrast, there might be – I want to put this in the conditional – there might be a francophone writing that would first be a listening: to listen to the other, to listen to the most humble, or even the most furious, to listen to the defiant ones, to listen to them in their own language and within the spontaneous form that their furor takes; and this particular *francophonie*, which I call “of resistance”, can only be a water-diviner, because it goes to the source, to the source of reality. It is polyphonic, waiting, porous to other languages.[[379]](#footnote-379)

As Djebar defines it, this type of writing is very open to the others, especially the survivors, because it needs to translate “the survivors’ words”[[380]](#footnote-380). It is both porous and polyphonic, and we argue that it leads the writer to write both “with” the others – the witnesses and/or the survivors – and “with” the readers. In this connection, we may wonder whether Djebar’s works belong to the first “side”, or the second one of the *francophonie*. Moreover, if her novels belong to a “*francophonie* of resistance”, how does she implement the “writing as listening” strategy in her texts? She herself mentions her short-stories constituting *Oran, langue morte* to illustrate “a writing inseparable from this listening to the other”, and which she has written “in a sort of continuous violent encounter.”[[381]](#footnote-381)

If she collected the testimonies of her alarmed Algerian sisters as a “writer-listener”[[382]](#footnote-382) in *Oran, langue morte*, we wonder whether her last novel (which is not a collection of stories or testimonies, but rather a “self-analysis” as examined earlier), is a writing of expatriation belonging to a *francophonie* of resistance. We argue that this very complex autobiographical project, written in exile by Djebar, reflects to a certain extent her thoughts on the “*francophonie* of resistance”, and implements her stylistic narrative techniques of “writing as listening”.

Comparing herself to two women writers of the 20th century, Maria Zambrano (Spanish) and Hannah Arendt (German), who were forced to live in exile because of either a totalitarian regime or a civil war and fascism, we argue that Djebar must also, “live elsewhere, write from elsewhere, with this ‘far-off gaze’ penetrating the very core of an experience that is at once collective and individual”[[383]](#footnote-383). Written in exile (in New York and Paris), after the Algerian disaster (between 2005-2007), we argue that Djebar did write *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* with a “far-off gaze”, according to Zambrano’s expression, because she belongs, like both Zambrano and Arendt, to “a community forged in suffering and a heroism that does not proclaim its name.”[[384]](#footnote-384)

The narrative of her traumatic experience, expressed in the suicide attempt and which is symbolic of other women’s sufferings, may be read as a “writing as listening”, because the writer herself, who becomes a double of both the character and the intra-homo-diegetic narrator, is the survivor. We, the readers, listen to the “survivor’s words” while the “writer-listener”[[385]](#footnote-385) unfolds her own “self-analysis.” Indeed, in the last parts of the narrative (especially the epilogue and the post-face), the writer confesses to the reader her suicide attempt, and tries to understand both her motivation in committing such an act at that time and the reason why she refrained it for so long and kept silent about it. The “protagonist/narrator/writer’s”[[386]](#footnote-386) testimony and existentialist interrogations make this triple narrative instance so close to the readers that we are under the impression that Djebar, herself, is talking to us as we read, or rather that we are listening to her as she speaks. In the following passage for example, which is very confessional and emotional, we listen to the “Survivor’s words” just after the tragedy, that is, her failed suicide attempt:

Je me suis relevée, en ce matin d’octobre 1953. Je suis restée debout, trois ou quatre minutes ; soutenue de part et d’autre, je ne sais par qui : des inconnus de passage sur ce boulevard de “front de mer”… […]

Cela aussi, je puis l’écrire, fixer la scène : moi, soutenue de part et d’autre – mais rigide, les yeux secs. Qui ne voient rien, ou qui voient… quoi donc ? Quel invisible, quel au-delà ? Cela, je ne sais le dire.

Même allongée peu après et transportée par l’ambulance, je comprends que je ne m’envolerai plus de la sorte : ne jamais plus courir, aveuglée, pour me projeter dans la mer, là-bas tout au fonds ! Quelle mer et pourquoi courir, avec quel désir de rupture, de déchirure ?

[…] je ne me veux pas objet de spectacle. Au cœur du groupe qui m’entoure, suis-je celle qu’on dévisage comme une sauvage qui aurait bondi hors de quelle sombre forêt ?

Si longtemps après, quasiment une vie entière, par accès ou dans le demi-sommeil, en rêve surtout, glissant pêle-mêle sous ma peau, oui, « tout ce temps » distendu me fait enfin monter les larmes non versées.

Enfin, devrais-je dire, non versées sur moi-même, et qu’elles ne soient pas d’amertume !

Une sensation s’accroche à moi, avec insistance : parvenue au terme de ce récit, je regrette, oui, je regrette que ce conducteur que je n’ai jamais vu, dont la voix, avec son interrogation désolée, impuissante, s’est gravée en moi jusqu'à aujourd’hui, comme si elle devait m’être dorénavant sauvegarde, je regrette que le sort, ou la chance, ou le hasard qui, par essence, est neutre, oui, vraiment, je souffre du fait que ce conducteur du tramway, ce matin-là, sur le boulevard Sadi-Carnot, à Alger, n’ait pas laissé sa machine lancé en trombe poursuivre son élan ! L’on aurait retiré mon corps en morceaux tandis que seuls mes yeux seraient restés grands ouverts sur le ciel pur d’automne.

Je refais le scenario, insatisfaite de sa fin bien réelle : « une fin… ratée ! ».[[387]](#footnote-387)

This kind of serious testimony and this type of writing as listening belongs to what Djebar calls “the special books” – “les livres à part” – because the readers can feel the body of the writer (“le corps même de l’auteur”) – though he may have been dead for a long time (“couché(e) à jamais depuis lors”) – as the latter turns the pages along with us (“tourne pourtant avec nous les pages”)[[388]](#footnote-388). Djebar points out that it is not only because of the literary strategies the writer employs, it is also because of the weight of the book due to its seriousness or irreversibility (“ne pèsent-ils pas, de par leur degré de gravité, ou plutôt de leur irréversibilité, plus lourd hélas?”)[[389]](#footnote-389). It is as if we are witnessing the writer suffering in front of us: “Nous y entrons, nous en ressortons, parfois le cœur serré, comme si l’auteur(e), sous nos yeux qui ne peuvent s’arracher aux pages […] comme si l’auteur était en train d’en payer le prix au centuple!”[[390]](#footnote-390) We argue that *Nulle part* belongs to this category of books, which Djebar names also the “books of mourning” – “livres de deuil” – since we hear and feel the voice of the writer, Djebar’s voice here, speaking so close to us, and being torn out of the latter’s throat and body: “la voix de celui (de celle) qui écrit s’est en quelque sorte arrachée progressivement de sa gorge, de son corps”.[[391]](#footnote-391)

Djebar furthermore explains that there have been three cycles – or what she calls “circles” - in her fifty-year long writing career, and that the third one will probably coincide with her death. In the last circle, the character – created by or born out of the author (“auteure”), metamorphosed in” “Dieu-le-père” and in “Dieu-la-mère”, thanks to “La Sainte-Fiction”[[392]](#footnote-392) – escapes the writer, who becomes more of a follower (“le suiveur”), thus a reader of the life of the text (“la vie du Texte):

[…] c’est vous soudain, non plus l’auteur, mais le suiveur, l’obligé, le serviteur, l’aimant d’amour, par ombre portée de l’Autre, cette fumé, cette ombre-sœur et ennemie en mots et en voix, laquelle est vous et n’est pas seulement vous…”[[393]](#footnote-393)

We argue that this kind of metamorphosis of both the character, becoming almost real, and the writer, becoming a follower or reader of his/her own text, is exactly what happens at the end of *Nulle part*. In the following extract, there is such a blurring of the roles between character / narrator / writer / reader that Djebar really

transports us – the real readers – to a Third Space of creativity:

Or, un autre œil la suit, une ombre sœur au regard vigilant : toi donc, veillant, presque maternelle, mais prévoyant, mais sachant quoi? Qu’elle est heureuse, ta créature de mots, courant échevelée, et elle veut quoi, cette ombre qui cavale, toutes amarres rompues, dans cet espace-là, plus tellement de jeu, entre rêve et réalité, entre joie et cauchemar – car ta mémoire, sous ta main autoguidée, travaille, te travaille, se réveille, accéléré, tente en somme de te faire sortir de ton rôle de narratrice, d’autrice, de manipulatrice : puis tu laisses malgré toi le personnage partir jusqu’à l’horizon, c’est comme un alcool que tu goutes ou que tu délaisses (par prudence, par regret ?), pour, in extremis, ramener la barre bien droite ![[394]](#footnote-394)

This extract makes us conclude that *Nulle part* is indeed an exceptional book, “un livre à part”, a piece of art which is so innovative and beyond any categorization: autobiographies, “self-analysis”, “auto-dévoilement”, “impatience d’auto-connaissance” or books of mourning, “livres de deuil”, “l’hybris de l’écriture-aveu” “l’écriture en fuite… et en sanglots”, etc. We argue that it is a book in which Djebar expects an active participation of the reader in order to implement her “writing as listening” strategy or “*francophonie* de resistance”. In this way, Djebar has managed not only to write “close to” and “with” the subalterns, her Algerian sisters and all the others living on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea (“interrogations […] de toutes les femmes de là-bas, sur la rive sud de la Méditerranée”[[395]](#footnote-395)), but also to encourage a sorority dialogue (“l’amitié entre femmes, dans un dialogue léger”[[396]](#footnote-396)) “with” all women, both from the South and the North, and finally “with” the readers (“le lecteur absolu”). Consequently, Djebar recommends that it is through “a far-off gaze” that writers “in the expatriation”, like her – or “within the Third Space” living in a new territory between the North and the South – can practice today, confronted with the misery of Africa, “a *francophonie* of resistance”:

It is thus, dear colleagues, through this “far-off gaze” that tries to set fire to the words of listening - words that catch fire not too, too close to us, that do not explode, but try to project their horror very far away - of listening to the one who has suffered through the experience and cannot believe he is still alive, and to the one who steps forward and tries to grasp what remains of one who has experienced horror, it is thus, as I see it, that I practice, that one can practice today, confronted with the misery of Africa, a “*francophonie* of resistance.” Within a listening on the borderline of language, and we must hope that this shall not always be to listen to misery only.[[397]](#footnote-397)

To conclude this chapter, we argue that the medium of autobiographical writing has proven to be the appropriate one for postcolonial Maghrebi women writers, such as Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari, to write on the self in the context of the Maghreb. Situated between the Orient and the Occident and within the socio-political, linguistic, and cultural context of the Maghreb, each author’s autobiographical project, anchored in the History of her respective country, has attempted to negotiate a personal experience with a national narrative. To write at the junction of the private and the collective with the aim of writing “an autobiography in the plural”, that is, when a personal account is “enlarged into and measured against national and universal preoccupations”[[398]](#footnote-398), has enabled particularly Mernissi and Djebar to construct their “self” as a Subject within the complexity of both colonial and postcolonial Maghrebi societies, which tend to be patriarchal and relegate women mainly to the domestic sphere of silence and enclosure. Being able to say “I” becomes therefore an empowering experience where the Maghrebi woman regains her subjectivity, acquires agency, and has the possibility to negotiate a feminine – and also often a feminist – identity.

To better understand the concept of “writing with”, we have differentiated each author’s cultural production and trajectory as a writer in light of the conception of their autobiographical “I” and the type of discourse they tend to produce. If the type of knowledge Zouari produces is rather dichotomous, Mernissi’s is more encompassing. As to Djebar’s life-writing project, spanning over many years and including several works, we have demonstrated that it can only be understood with regards to her relation to language and in close connection with both the History of Algeria and the reality of her people, and in particular women’s experiences, for she is a writer “from within”: “with her kind and with the Others”.

Indeed among the three authors of our corpus, Djebar’s trajectory as a writer remains unique and very progressive, since she has moved from the writing with a veil (“l’écriture comme un voile”, i.e., fiction writing), to a writing where she went unveiled (“je me suis dévoilée”) with her preparation of an autobiography (in reference to the first novel of her Algerian Quartet, *l’Amour, la fantasia*), and finally to a complex self analysis propelling her writing to a transnational form of writing “within a Third Space” of creativity. Her last phase of writing, written in expatriation, and within the tragic context of Algeria’s Civil War, is a very porous form of writing challenging not only any antagonistic political views, but also any conventional forms of writing. It is a humanistic, polyphonic, compassionate writing that encourages a sorority dialogue “with” women, from both the North and the South, and “with” her readers across the borders.

**AFTERWORD:**

**WRITING “AS” AN ARAB WOMAN**

**AFTERWORD:**

**WRITING “AS” AN ARAB WOMAN IN THE POLITICAL AND CULTURAL INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT**

*“The subjection of women in Muslim societies – especially in Arab nations and in Iran – is today very much in the public eye. Accounts of lashings, stonings, and honor killings are regularly in the news, and searing memoirs by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Azar Nafisi have become major best-sellers. One might expect that by now American feminist groups would be organizing protests against such glaring injustices, joining forces with the valiant Muslim women who are working to change their societies. This is not happening.”*

Hoff Sommers, Christina, ‘The Subjection of Islamic Women: And the Fecklessness of American Feminism’, *Weekly Standard*, (May 21, 2007)

*The distance between the height of British imperial power in the nineteenth century, when the term “Middle East” may indeed have originated in the 1850s in the British India Office, and our own era of “war on terrorism” marks the space where modes and manners of knowledge production vary and oscillate on the borderline where imperial projects need a vision of the world compatible with their domination.*

Dabashi, Hamid, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. 211.

Following Harrison’s recommendation to postcolonial critics, this thesis has managed, on the one hand, to historicize and contextualize the writings of contemporary Maghrebi women writers, such as Mernissi, Zouari, and Djebar, and on the other hand to differentiate each writer’s work and approach to the common space of the Maghreb by giving each text of the corpus adequate weight in its individuality and literality. Following a three-step progression – writing “against”, “for”, and “with” – we have unfolded the problematic of analysing how these three prismatic Maghrebi women authors negotiate various positions to write across the range of cultural, linguistic, socio-political, and historic conditions “within” patriarchal societies that do not traditionally encourage women to overstep the boundaries of the private sphere of relative enclosure and silence, and to search for spaces of agency and communication that translate not only their feminist resistance but also the struggles of their “subaltern sisters”.

**From “writing against” to “writing with”**

The first chapter has enabled us to present the field of postcolonial Maghrebi women’s literature and underline the importance of the historical, socio-political, linguistic, and cultural context of the Maghreb in order to understand the stakes of such a literature in general, and the three prismatic writers’ works in particular. We have explored the palimpsest dimension of the Maghreb from different angles, and concluded that it is both a plural space (especially in terms of ethnicity, culture, language and identity) and a unified one, notably because of its common History and strong Islamic tradition. We have examined the corpus within the multi-layered space of the Maghreb by stressing in particular Maghrebi people’s hybrid identities, the significance of language and bilingualism for Maghrebi authors, and the ways each writer underlines a certain aspect from her rich Maghrebi culture. Indeed in *La Retournée*, Zouari focuses on non-Islamic customs (e.g. the worshipping of Saints) practised mainly by women to counter mainstream male Islamic spirituality. In her memoir, Mernissi chooses to partake alternative histories of Islam through her female characters so as to support her Islamic feminist discourse. As for Djebar, she emphasizes not only the multi-linguistic aspect of the Maghreb, but also demonstrates that Maghrebi women have various possibilities, including the language of the body, to both express and liberate themselves.

In this connection, this analysis has shown that if Maghrebi women writers, such as Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari, anchor their writings “within” such a hybrid space, they also borrow other resources than the “official-male” ones from their rich cultures, in order to subvert and write “against” this complex patriarchal context. Indeed, writing “within” the socio-political and cultural context of the postcolonial Maghreb leads inevitably Maghrebi women writers to a writing of resistance and protest “against” their patriarchal societies. The conception of the Muslim feminine identity and sexuality within Muslim Arab societies in general, and Maghrebi ones in particular, furthermore reinforces this statement, because their sexuality has traditionally been considered as a threat and therefore institutions, such as the harem, have been implemented to try and maintain women uniquely in the domestic sphere of the society. Therefore, writing has implied for Maghrebi emancipated women authors, such as Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari contesting the traditional roles attributed to Maghrebi Muslim women and employing different modes of transgression, which range from breaking the ancestral silence within which they have been enclosed to moving out of their domestic sphere; as well as unveiling the forbidden, private harem and exposing it under public scrutiny by the very act of publishing; and finally creating a feminist discourse that disrupts the social order by contesting patriarchal institutions such as the veil, polygamy, and segregation.

However, writing both from “within” the complex historical legacy, the multi-lingual and multi-cultural geo-political space, and above all “against” the strong Islamic patriarchal context of the Maghreb often denotes a highly conflicted situation between a traditional ideology and a modern reality, which generate contradictions as expressed in the novels of the corpus. In this sense, Maghrebi women authors, such as Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari are conducted to negotiate a new feminine, and often feminist, identity that places them in an antithetical third space of empowerment and exile. If the very act of writing leads a Maghrebi woman writer to enter a public space of agency traditionally reserved for men, it also marginalizes her from the traditional circle of the Maghrebi women of her community.

Hence these three prismatic women writers need constantly to negotiate a position in their writings. If the act of writing allows them to speak publically “from within” the multi-layered space of the Maghreb, and also often “against” their patriarchal societies, writing leads them at the same time to negotiate a position where they speak either “on”, “for” or “with” the subaltern women of their communities who cannot speak for themselves.

Indeed, we have demonstrated in the second chapter that writing “against” patriarchy becomes for Maghrebi women authors inevitably a form of feminist engagement: “a writing for” their subaltern sisters. However, each writer’s writing of “passion and struggle” reveals a specific feminist discourse and ideology. In Zouari’s works in general, and in *La Retournée* in particular, this French-Tunisian author shows a secular feminist position, which shares some points in common with Orientalist feminism. Not only does Zouari’s autobiographical character and narrator reject religion in women’s pursuit for emancipation, she also maintains a binary vision where she represents a Eurocentric superior voice among the women of her clan, whereas the latter traditional women are perceived in negative terms and often stereotyped. On the contrary, Mernissi’s position is anchored in religion, for she defends an Islamic feminist philosophy throughout *Dreams of Trespass* as she tries to prove that Islam is gender equal and socially just by acting as the voice of the Muslim women’s community. More precisely, she writes “for” the subaltern Muslim women in Morocco and Arab countries, as well as “against” a patriarchal interpretation of Islam that tends to subjugate Muslim women by implementing institutions such as the harem and polygamy, which promote injustices towards Maghrebi women and Muslim women in general. If Djebar shares more Mernissi’s feminist ideology than Zouari’s in blaming an often male biased interpretation of Islam rather than Islam itself, this Maghrebi woman literary avatar has been acknowledged for her postcolonial feminist perspective in her works in general. In *Nulle Part*, her postcolonial feminist engagement is reiterated in the sense that, she constantly establishes a parallelism between her country, Algeria, at a time of colonisation and oppression, and Algerian women’s inferior status and double predicament by both the colonial and patriarchal systems.

However, as an emancipated Arab woman writer, Djebar feels that her duty is more to speak “close to” rather than “for” her “subaltern sisters”, whose bodies may be “imprisoned”, but souls are free and “in movement”. Indeed, Djebar is aware of Spivak’s warnings on the risks of misrepresenting the others, and above all the subaltern women, who have been doubly wronged by the patriarchal and colonial systems and therefore erased by both the colonial history and the official, male versions of national histories. Acting as a spokesperson for the people of one’s community remains consequently a sensitive issue, because of the complexities involved in the question of representativeness, such as representing a subaltern group who cannot speak for itself, the risk of misinterpreting a foreign culture, and the problematizing of language itself linked notably to the style in which one attempts to “write for”. If the specialist form of writing, such as Zouari’s journalistic style or Mernissi’s sociological approach, permits more objectivity and ease in both informing readers and representing the subaltern women from their respective communities, Djebar’s literary writing offers more subtlety and freedom for the fiction writer in her mission to “speak close to” the subalterns and thus to avoid misrepresenting them.

Consequently, the search for a more open and a more collective type of writing, such as a “writing with” one’s community – above all a community of women – appears as the solution for these Maghrebi women authors who are relatively concerned about misrepresenting the subalterns they speak “about” and tend to speak “for”.

In this connection, the study of the postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographical genre against the backdrop of our concept of “writing with” has been the first objective of our third chapter. We have argued that this fairly new genre, which may be characterized as a porous form of writing, enables the three women writers under study to write relatively in closeness “with” their respective communities and countries. Because postcolonial Maghrebi autobiographical narratives are generally at the intersection of the private and the collective, have been inspired by both the traditional Islamic tradition of the writing of the self and Western modern autobiographies, balance the intimate world with the political one, and are contextualized in the socio-cultural reality of the Maghreb and strongly anchored within its History, they attempt to be inclusive and are often labelled as “plural autobiographies.”

We have furthermore explored how this concept of “writing with” manifests itself in our corpus by comparing each writer’s cultural production and particularly assessing their trajectories as writers to determine whether they evolve towards a more open form of writing in the course of their careers. The aim was to evaluate if Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar have moved from a “transgressive” position, a “writing against” fostering an oppositional type of discourse, where they more or less all started, to the stance of the spokesperson of their communities by the intermediary of their feminist engagement, their writing of “passion and struggle” speaking “for” their subaltern sisters, to reach more openness in their knowledge production towards their communities, countries, and even their readers to a certain extent, and encourage a porous form of writing that offers various possibilities, such as the promotion of human values and solidarity, in short, a “writing with”.

In light of this problematic, we have argued that Zouari’s trajectory as a writer reflects that of an exceptional Arab woman who is not only constantly in opposition with patriarchy, tradition, religion, and even her community to a certain extent, but also trying to differentiate herself from both her male and female counterparts. This explains mainly why she has remained in the “writing against” favouring a dichotomous discourse and has been able to open up neither to the traditional women of her native village, nor to the “*Beurs*” community of her country of residence, France. Unlike Zouari’s cultural production, Mernissi’s is rather progressive and reflects our three-step progression: from writing “against”, to writing “for”, and reaching writing “with”. Indeed, thanks to the universal scope of religion, her Islamic feminist ideology, her activism by carrying out social works in Morocco, Mernissi has taken up her role as a spokesperson genuinely by identifying “with” the subaltern women she attempted to represent and write “for”, and opened up to the whole community of Muslim women across the borders. Similarly porous thanks to a very encompassing discourse, a multi-polar vision of the Maghreb, and a feminist desire to promote a community of female voices, Djebar’s cultural production goes nevertheless one step further than Mernissi’s, since it is situated “within a third space.” Djebar’s writing is so profound and empathizing that her discourse of peace and sorority crosses borders to become transnational. Djebar’s trajectory as a writer is so exemplary that she has enacted the negotiation of her complex and hybrid identity in and by her writing, thanks to the concept of “agentivity”. Over her fifty-year long career, she has progressively moved to a writing of the self (“l’écrit sur soi”), which has enabled her to partake and ponder on her complex experiences as an Algerian francophone woman writer from a multi-cultural and multi-linguistic background, in an attempt to both analyse “her/self” (“l’auto-analyse”) and construct “her/self” as a subject “in” and “by” her writing, as well as “within” her complicated patriarchal and post-colonial society that translates a tumultuous history. With *Nulle Part*, she has completed her trajectory delivered “by breaks” (“cette trajectoire éclatée, livrée par brisures”) as a writer, and managed to unveil in front of her readers (“me dévoiler”) by confessing about a very reprehensible act in the Islamic culture, a suicide attempt; this is certainly thanks to her “impatience d’auto-connaissance” and her practice of *ijtihad*, that is her self-struggle to understand her self and the world, in her writing.

In connection with the last phase of Djebar’s writing career and the socio-political context of the Maghreb since the 1990s, we have examined in a third section today’s shift in Maghrebi (francophone) literature into a transnational form of writing. We have explained that we are now witnessing not only a “diasporisation” phenomenon of Maghrebi intellectuals, notably following the Civil War in Algeria in the 1990s, but also a more open form of writing, where writers tend to testify and share “with” their readers their often, harsh experiences of war and exile. This type of writing takes place “within a third space”, within a new territory, between the South of the Mediterranean Sea and the North of Europe. The last phase of Djebar’s writing career exemplifies best this new type of writing and what she has called “a writing of expatriation”, as she was led to live in exile after the tragic Civil War in Algeria in the 1990s. She and other African francophone writers, who are doomed to write in the expatriation because of the increasing wars and violence in the African continent, “given over to catastrophes”, enact a “writing of expatriation”, also qualified as a “writing of survival”, with a duty of both memory and solidarity towards their peoples. More precisely, since the 1990s, Djebar has been practicing a “*francophonie* of resistance” and writing “with a far-off gaze” by employing the technique of the “writing as listening”, that is, to be respectful and compassionate towards the ones who have suffered and write “close to” them, rather than “on” or “for” them. Her last novel, *Nulle Part* is an exceptional book (“un livre à part”) due to its weight and seriousness, which reflects such writing and propels the readers into a third space of creativity and sorority.

Indeed, Djebar’s novels, especially the ones written in the last phase of her writing career, such as *Le Blanc de l’Algérie* and *Oran Langue Morte*, are not only exceptional because of their weight in terms of meaning, but also because of their socio-political scope within the international cultural and information platform. We argue that since 9/11, and the increased tensions between the West and Muslim countries, writing a book about Muslim people, above all Muslim women, is bound to attract attention and have a political dimension, especially if this book is published in the West and the author is a woman. We may partly explain this by the impact of literature on society and the different types of knowledge production that exist nowadays.

**Different types of knowledge production**

One of the initial objectives of this thesis was to analyse the impact of literature and intellectuals on society, notably according to the entwined relations of discourse, knowledge and power. Because of the word-length limitation and the significant scope of such a study, we have not been able to develop this question in detail. We aimed in particular at examining the different forms of knowledge production in relation to the current highly intense geo-political conflicts, mainly linked to 9/11 and the Arab Spring, and which are taking place in particular in Arab countries since the beginning of the 21st century. Without delving too much into this paramount issue, some postcolonial critics, like Hamid Dabashi, explain that there exist two types of knowledge production nowadays, both in the academies and in the media. On the one hand, we witness the neo-imperialist discourse, which generally has a political agenda in support of the “war on terror” and creates “disposable knowledge”:

My suggestion here is that what we are witnessing today in the course of the U.S. war on so-called “terrorism,” predicated on a mono-polar imperial imaginary that produces disposable knowledge at the rate of one military adventurism after another, is the sign of a complete paradigmatic meltdown of disciplinary formalism in knowledge production, which amounts to the normative dissolution of disciplines, and above all an *epistemic endosmosis* in which the public is mobilized as a weapon of mass deception for one military project or another.[[399]](#footnote-399)

On the other hand, we attend a new era where intellectuals, especially from the Third World and the former colonies, contest the neo-imperialist views and create thereof a counter-discourse, which resists power and destabilizes the hegemony of the West by denouncing contradictions and surpassing binary oppositions such as the East vs. the West:

Precisely in their formal destruction of disciplinary formalities, these *auteurs* point to the way in which from the epistemic dissolution of our disciplinary scholarship new modes of inquiry beyond Orientalism or Occidentosïs, beyond the fake and falsifying binary of the East and the West, might in fact be emerging.[[400]](#footnote-400)

According to the French journalist, Anne Sinclair, we witness in today’s French political arena, for example, two discourses about Islam and notably about Muslim women. On the one hand, there is a discourse criticising Islam and above all Muslim women’s oppression, and on the other hand, there is a counter-discourse, which does not only abstain from criticising Islam, but also labels the formers as “Islamophobic”:

Fawzia Zouari, sommes nous arrivés à une fracture au sein de la gauche française entre ceux qui se permettent de critiquer l’Islam, notamment sur la situation des femmes musulmanes au nom de valeurs universalistes; et ceux qui s’y refusent et taxent les premiers d’Islamophobes?[[401]](#footnote-401)

To this question, Zouari points out that unfortunately French Muslim intellectuals, especially women, have been denied the right to enter this debate and to speak “for themselves”:

C’est à dire, vous avez d’un côté un discours français, qui est un peu un discours paternaliste. Vous avez une gauche qui se fait passer pour nos avocats d’office et qui veut parler à notre place. Et qui dit que tout va bien dans notre monde. Et jusque là, on disait, tiens, les Musulmans ne parlent pas! Maintenant, nous voudrions parler pour dire ce qui ne va pas chez nous. C’est-à-dire qu’on ne se complait plus dans la position et la posture de la victime.[[402]](#footnote-402)

However, Zouari raises the problematic of Muslim women when they do “speak about” Islam, and above all Muslim women’s conditions that can sometimes be deplorable as she points out, and what she calls “Islamophobia blackmail” (“le chantage à l’Islamophobie”):

Nous voudrions rentrer dans le champ de la parole et dire ce qui ne va pas chez nous. Or, on n’a pas le droit de le dire. Vous parlez de ça. Et vous êtes… Il y a le chantage à l’Islamophobie. Vous êtes tout de suite Islamophobe. Ce n’est pas vrai.[[403]](#footnote-403)

Indeed, when one does speak “as” an Arab, Muslim woman, one is often “stuck” between two main types of discourse: the one feeding “Islamophobia”, and the other either denying Muslim women’s oppression and criticising the former discourse, or even feeding the Islamic fundamentalists’ discourse.

Magrebi feminists, and by extension Muslim feminists, have thus to battle on two fronts: the neo-orientalist movement that encourages “Islamophobia” and misrepresents Arabs and Muslim women by generalizing their conditions and portraying them as oppressed and deprived of any agency; and the fundamentalist factions that equally restrict women’s agency and freedom by limiting their rights on the ground of extremist and often biased interpretations of Islam. Jasmine Zine, a sociologist, examines how Muslim Feminists deal with these opposing views that both prejudice womanhood and women’s rights:

Discourses of race, gender and religion have scripted the terms of engagement in the war on terror. As a result, Muslim feminists and activists must engage with the dual oppression of Islamophobia that relies on re-vitalized Orientalist tropes and representation of backward, oppressed and politically immature Muslim women as well as religious extremism and puritan discourses that authorize equally limiting narratives of Islamic womanhood and compromise their human rights and liberty.[[404]](#footnote-404)

Caught between these antagonist oppressions, Muslim women are divided and “Muslim feminists battle not only both these fronts, but also the often-conflicting ideological positions they hold among themselves.”[[405]](#footnote-405) As exemplified by these three prismatic Muslim feminist writers of our thesis, we therefore often witness a whole spectrum of ideologies from the Muslim secular feminists to, what Zine calls, the “faith-centred Muslim feminists.”[[406]](#footnote-406)

This leads us to discuss, even briefly, the role of Arab Muslim women writers, such as Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari, within such an international context of inflected tensions both politically and culturally, and where Muslim women are often being caught between various opposing discourses. In order to develop further the original and timely point of view that this thesis has contributed to the field of Muslim women’s experiences from the Maghreb region, and their representation in the international cultural production, we now reflect on the impact of “writing as” an Arab Muslim woman in the contemporary geo-political tense context.

**Writing “between” or “beyond” ‘Islamophobia’ and Islamic fundamentalism**

Both “as” women and “as” writers from Arab postcolonial countries, the three contemporary Maghrebi women authors’ voices – often “transgressive” – are all the more important and “political”, because Third World writers are often perceived as representatives of their community by their international readership. Spivak explains that the question of “speaking as” a Third World person, within the geo-political international context, entails “an important position for political mobilization today.”[[407]](#footnote-407) When one “speaks as” an Indian, or a woman, or a feminist like her, Spivak argues that there is some distancing from oneself taking place, as the third world speaker will tend to generalise herself in order to make herself a representative of that subject position, for indeed, “there are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing.”[[408]](#footnote-408) This process implies therefore a political consciousness and the issue of being able to “distan[ce] from one’s self, whatever that self might be.”[[409]](#footnote-409) However, Spivak affirms that the issue of “Who will listen?” is in fact more crucial than “Who will speak?”[[410]](#footnote-410). This is notably due to the way Third World intellectuals’ discourses and cultural production are received within the worldwide socio-cultural and political arena. Indeed, the hegemonic people, or the “cardcarrying listeners” as Spivak terms them, have certain expectations from and often prejudices towards Third World intellectuals, and thus they tend to homogenize their discourses and make them less authentic to listen to:

But when the cardcarrying listeners, the hegemonic people, the dominant people, talk about listening to someone ‘speaking as’ something or the other, I think *there* one encounters a problem. When *they* want to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, a Third World woman speaking as a Third World woman, they cover over the fact of the ignorance that they are allowed to possess, into a kind of homogenization. [[411]](#footnote-411)

Therefore, in the case of the three Maghrebi women writers under scrutiny, one must ask firstly whether Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari have a certain political consciousness when they do “speak as” or “write as” Arab Muslim women; and secondly, if the hegemonic people, who constitute an important part of their readership, tend to homogenize their discourses.

From our various analyses throughout this thesis, it would appear clearly that these three prismatic women authors have been politically involved when they speak or write “as” Arab / Maghrebi Muslim women. We need nevertheless to differentiate among them once again with regards to their political consciousness, as defined by Spivak.

As mentioned, Zouari’s secular Orientalist feminist view as well as her bi-polar vision of the Maghreb do not favour many subject positions, and above all a certain distance from her principal subject position which inhabits her, to wit, a secular French-Tunisian feminist journalist and writer, who defends throughout her career a “writing against” patriarchy, religion, and traditions. If she is aware of the political debates and discourses taking place around the question of the Muslim woman, and the risks of being categorised as an “Islamophobic” when you do denounce Muslim women’s oppression, it may be difficult to perceive a political consciousness, as Spivak defines it, in her “writing as” an Arab Muslim woman. We may argue instead that she is very attached to the political stance she defends and in which she is writing and sometimes speaking “as” a secular feminist Tunisian woman living in France and being opposed to any obstacles to women’s emancipation. As to the question: “Who will listen to her?”; we put forward that she is mostly listened to by the hegemonic people both in France and in Tunisia, and probably by the ones who follow the mass media production and wish to listen to an “Arab woman writer” rebelling “against” patriarchy, misogyny, and Islamic fundamentalism. Her latest interview, in which she supports strongly her secular feminist position, by the famous French journalist Anne Sinclair on *Europe 1*, confirms very well this statement.

Unlike Zouari, Mernissi does hold a certain political consciousness according to Spivak’s definition, because firstly she is very aware of the fact that the hegemonic people may consider her as a representative writing “for” her community, and secondly because she inhabits many subject positions by being “the voice” of the Islamic feminist community; an ideology which is inclusive rather than exclusive. Hence, she does make the effort of distancing herself from her position as an emancipated, Arab, Muslim, woman. This probably explains why she adheres neither to the Western methodology of representation, nor to the Moroccan national one, and wishes instead to identify with her interviewees, especially the subaltern ones (“trying to give voice to the illiterate woman is to give voice to this self of mine which should have been doomed to the ancestral silence”[[412]](#footnote-412)), before speaking “for” or “as” a Muslim woman. In this connection, Mernissi has been listened to mainly throughout the Muslim world, and even in the West by the ones who wish to listen to a type of knowledge production different from the hegemonic one.

Aware of the risks of misrepresentation and homogenization, Djebar has a very strong political consciousness when speaking “as” an Arab and Berber Algerian, postcolonial feminist writer. Therefore, she constantly attempts to distance herself from the various positions she inhabits: an Algerian; a woman writer; a North African francophone writer; and a postcolonial feminist wishing to speak both “within” the complex and tumultuous history of her country and “close to” the women of her tribe and “Algerian sisters”, whose bodies may be imprisoned but whose souls are free. More than distancing from her ‘self’ and the multiple subject positions she inhabits, Djebar is constantly self-criticizing the different roles she may play in the socio-cultural and political arena “within” her country, Algeria, “within” France, her ex-colonisers or invaders, “within” the (francophone) African continent “given over to catastrophes”, and even “within” the international intellectual circles, like the *Académie française*. Consequently, Djebar is very well aware of the hegemonic people or “the cardcarrying listerners” inviting her to “speak as” an Algerian woman writer too. Invited to speak about Albert Camus’s “*Le Premier Homme*”, at Bekerley University, Djebar pertinently remarks that if the hegemonic people did not appreciate in Camus’s literature the fact that he wrote “as” an Algerian, on the contrary they do appreciate Djebar’s writings because she is precisely an Algerian, and on top of that a woman; she thus represents “as” a writer both Algeria and Muslim women – a certain political position within today’s international geo-political context indeed:

Et je souris à celui qui, dans une des notes accompagnant le texte inachevé, remarquait à propos de son double:

« *Ce qu’ils n’aimaient pas en lui, c’était l’Algérien*. »

Justement, je souris à cet Algérien-là, moi qu’on accueille de si loin et dans une université prestigieuse parce qu’écrivain, parce que femme et parce qu’algérienne : je note à mon tour, en contrepoint à Camus, « ce qu’ils reconnaissent en moi, c’est l’Algérienne ». « Ce qu’ils reconnaissent » ? Rectifions : « Ce qu’ils espèrent de moi, c’est l’Algérie-femme. »[[413]](#footnote-413)

From this short analysis on the various positions the three writers, constituting the corpus of our thesis, may hold in the international political arena, and the socio-political scope of their writings “as” Arab, Muslim authors, we conclude by putting forward the following tentative problematic. Writing “against” and “as” an Arab Muslim woman, such as Zouari, may be conductive of producing a discourse which feeds the ideology behind “Islamophobia”; whereas, writing “for” the subaltern women of one’s community by empathising with them when one is such a public figure and thinker “as” Mernissi “within” the Muslim world may perhaps be interpreted by the hegemonic people as a discourse which defends Islamic extremism, or to be more correct, a counter-discourse to that of Islamophobia, fabricated by Islamic groups who manipulate Muslim women for their own causes. Indeed, some intellectuals, like Zouari, believe that Islamic feminism is an imposture and not viable to defend women’s rights:

Je dis qu’on est dans l’imposture. C’est-à-dire qu’on nous a inventé, et la gauche aussi soutient ce discours là, on nous a inventé la révolution sous le voile, comme quoi on peut être libre sous le voile, et on nous a inventé la formule du féminisme islamique. C’est-à-dire que ces femmes sont tout le temps dans une sorte de concession vis-à-vis de l’Islam.[[414]](#footnote-414)

While a more porous form of writing, a writing “with” encouraged by a humanist ideology, such as Djebar’s literary and cultural production at large, may favour a discourse which surpasses a binary discourse like the “West” vs. “the rest”, or the “Islamophobic” vs. the religious extremists. Indeed, among the intellectuals or what Dabashi calls the “auteurs”, a term borrowed from film production, in the sense that they are critical thinkers with “a rich visual and performative idiomaticity”[[415]](#footnote-415), he cites Djebar. These *auteurs* engage in new modes of inquiry beyond Orientalism, or Occidentosis, or binary oppositions, and thuscreate a new space of “emancipatory thinking” with regards to Islam and the Middle East:

The fact that all these thinkers as authors or *auteurs* in one way or another address the questions of women’s rights within the shifting epistemics of critical thinking in pre- and post- 9/11 wars of terror and terrorism at once roots them in the immediate materiality of their time and yet points to manners of emancipatory thinking yet beyond our horizons.[[416]](#footnote-416)

As far as our position as postcolonial critic is concerned, we claim that throughout this thesis, we have not only managed to listen carefully to Third world intellectuals, such as Zouari, Mernissi, and Djebar, speaking “as” Maghrebi, Arab, Muslim women writers without homogenising their discourses, but also to produce a knowledge about their works different from the hegemonic “cardcarrying listeners” or from some postcolonial critics on the Maghreb region, by precisely bringing out the differences, the subtleties, and complexities among these three prismatic women writers and attempting to make their authentic voices be heard.

On the other hand, we have managed to create a dialogue between a very unlikely trio of pre-9/11 Arab women writers: the literary avatar Algerian writer Assia Djebar; the famous sociologist and Muslim feminist activist Fatima Mernissi; and the less internationally known bi-national (French-Tunisian) journalist Fawzia Zouari. This dialogue has proven fruitful in showing a perspective on a pre 9/11 world, which could now be easily forgotten, and where the Maghreb and Maghrebi writers in particular played an important role in relation to their cultural dynamism and creative potential. In comparison with these three women writers who came of age and mainly published pre 9/11, we might argue that the post 9/11 cultural production of Arab women writers is perhaps less rich and diversified, considering the dichotomy of ‘Islamophobia’ vs. Islamic fundamentalism in which they are often caught.

In light of this current dichotomy and within such a tense international geo-political context and given the fact that in some Muslim countries the freedom of expression can be restricted and even censored, Djebar, Mernissi, and Zouari’s respective responsibilities and autonomies as intellectuals from Third World Postcolonial Arab countries remain very crucial:

J’écris parce que l’enfermement des femmes, dans sa nouvelle manière 1980 (ou 90, ou 2000) est une mort lente parce que la non-solidarité (présente) avec les femmes du monde arabe se fait dos tourné à un passé peut-être de silence, mais certainement pas d’entr’aide…

J’écris parce que je ne peux pas faire autrement, parce que la gratuité de cet acte, parce que l’insolence, la dissidence de cette affirmation me deviennent de plus en plus nécessaires. J’écris à force de me taire. J’écris au bout ou en continuation de mon silence. J’écris parce que, malgré toutes les désespérances, l’espoir (et, je crois, l’amour) « travaille » en moi…[[417]](#footnote-417)

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