Sisters to Scheherazade: Revisioned Histories of Gender and Nation in Postcolonial African and Asian Women's Literature

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Abstract

Traversing geographical boundaries and cultural locations, and using a comparative, cross-cultural framework, this thesis examines and critiques a selected range of women’s writings from postcolonial Africa and Asia. It foregrounds the works of Assia Djebar, Mariama Bâ, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nayantara Sahgal and Attia Hosain and outlines the processes through which women writers decentre imperialist, patriarchal underpinnings of the grand récit, defy conventions of autobiographical practice, make sense of a feminized past and revision a different collective personal history that has emancipatory potential for women and other oppressed groups.

Referring to Eurocentric “male-stream” histories that have systematically thrust women to the margins, the study illustrates through a variety of literary texts and genres the complex ways in which past histories have obliterated women’s presence and voice-consciousness. While appraising diverse textual strategies of narratives, it discusses the “fictional” nature of historical work and the underlying ideologies framing supposedly “truthful” archival records; the ambivalent role of the historian; the gaps and fissures in historical memory; and the significance of history as a palimpsest. By excavating subsumed histories and “spectres” of the past, the study assesses the way specific texts reconstruct totalizing masculinist chronicles and counterpoise them with alternative feminine inscriptions that are multi-layered and polyphonic, and sometimes also fragmented, “silent” and inconclusive.

Additionally, the thesis demonstrates how the process of overwriting the palimpsest has situated women in pivotal positions to articulate issues relevant to a dialogue between gender and nation/alism. The strategic role women have undertaken in decolonization processes worldwide, the ambivalent attitude of male nationalists to women’s concerns after independence, and the multiple dilemmas confronting women in a globalized neo-imperial world scenario are central to this discussion. Here, the thesis also probes the implications of veiling for Muslim women of contemporary times, sex-segregation based on an antiquated ideology of purdah, women’s (limited) access to public space, and the question of agency and women’s voice-consciousness. The study highlights current global conditions (such as modern migrations and economic transnationalism) and multiple categories of race, class, gender and ethnicity that intersect in complex ways to represent the Otherized identities of women.
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** 5

1 **Introduction: Retracing Borders and Boundaries** 7

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Mapping a Textual Practice: Feminist Readings across Cultural Divides

1.3 Locating the Postcolonial

1.4 Addressing Semantic Ambiguities

1.5 Appendix: Situating Translation

2 **Assia Djebar** 33

2.1 Introduction

2.2.1 The Kabyle Myth and the Construction of Imperial Identities: A Context for Fantasia

2.2.2 Unravelling Fictions of Factual Representation

2.2.3 The Narrative as a Palimpsest of Peripheral Histories

2.2.4 Forked Tongues, "Translated Narratives" and the Dilemmas of Dispossession

2.2.5 Resurrecting So Many Vanished Sisters

2.3.1 Reading A Sister to Scheherazade and So Long a Letter

2.3.2 Locating Differences and Common Threads of Narration

2.3.3 The Subject of Veiling and Spatial Stratification: The Algerian Case

2.3.4 Reinventing Dinarzade’s Legacy: Weaving a Narrative of Sisterhood and Survival

2.3.5 So Long a Letter: Mapping a Hybrid Feminist, Epistolary Novel

2.4.1 Far from Madina

2.4.2 The Language of Feminine Memory: Unveiling Spectres of History

2.4.3 Trials of the Beloved Daughter: Questions of Succession, Dispossession and Polygamy

2.4.4 Remembering Aisha, "Source of the Living Word": Isnad, the Oral Narrative and Islamic Discursiveness

3
### 3 Ama Ata Aidoo

3.1 Introduction
3.2 Inscribing an African Diasporic History
3.3.1 Cartographies of Dislocation and Syncretic Strategies: Reading *Our Sister Killjoy*
3.3.2 Pan-African Nationalism, Cross-Border Travels and Displaced Subjects of Modern Migrations
3.4.1 Gender Politics, Otherized Subjects and Female Agency
3.4.2 Multiple Narratives, Multiple Alternatives: Women at the Crossroads of Changes

### 4 Nayantara Sahgal

4.1 Introduction
4.2 Private Self/Public Spaces: Autobiographical Practice in *Prison and Chocolate Cake*
4.3.1 Situating the Historical Narrative: Constructing a Framework for *Mistaken Identity*
4.3.2 The Narrator as Storyteller
4.3.3 Myths of Womanhood: Configuring Women’s History
4.4.1 Hegemonic National Narratives/Peripheral Women’s Histories
4.4.2 The Indian Emergency: A Pitfall of National Consciousness?
4.4.3 Authoritarian Regimes, Oppressive Ideologies and the Struggles and Survival of Women
4.4.4 Muting Voices in the Discourse of Sati

### 5 Attia Hosain

5.1 Introduction
5.2.1 Recovering Feminine Histories in Partition Narratives
5.2.2 Between Two Worlds: Overcoming the Barriers of *Purdah*
5.2.3 Revisioned Transitional Histories, Divisive Nationalisms and Configurations of Agency

### 6 Epilogue: Becoming a Presence

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Chapter 1

Introduction:
Re tracing Borders and Boundaries

In the brilliance of this desert, in the safe harbour of writing in quest of a language beyond languages, by trying fiercely to obliterate all the furies of the collective self-devouring in oneself, finding "the word within" again that, alone, remains our fertile homeland.

Assia Djebar, Algerian White

And the past, which can still split the first person into the second and the third - has its hegemony been broken? Will the voices be still?

Christa Wolf, Patterns of Childhood

1.1 Introduction
The introduction aims to configure a conceptual and analytic framework for examining and critiquing a selected range of women's literature from diverse geographical and cultural locations in postcolonial Africa (Algeria, Ghana, Senegal) and Asia (India, Pakistan). It does not propose to arbitrarily represent or "speak for" other national and cultural clusters covered by deceptively simple geographical markers such as "Asia" and "Africa". To collapse disparate national and cultural spaces into homogenizing categories would mean to obscure specificities and contextualization, integral to a politics of location. According to Caren Kaplan, a politics of location as a practice of affiliation "identifies the grounds for historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities, and possibilities for alliances."¹ The selected texts will corroborate the difficulty of demarcating uniform categories in sites where there are vastly heterogeneous historical circumstances, and social groups with diverse religions, languages, traditions, class and caste relations, political commitments and life-experiences. They will underscore, for example, the difficulty of constructing homogenizing theories about the practice of hijab in the "Muslim world" as an array of factors from diverse sociohistorical and cultural contexts intersect in complex ways.

to make the practice liberating, oppressive, or acceptable to Muslim women worldwide.\(^2\)

Similarly, it is difficult to establish categorical views about issues such as purdah and sex-segregation, or the Islamic practice of iddah in diverse cultures of Asia and Africa, as numerous factors operate simultaneously to make them distinctive and specific to certain locations. Taking Aijaz Ahmad’s cue, this study aims not to fetishize "difference" and yet to be judicious when dealing with the subject of cultural otherness that can allow "metropolitan readers to exercise fantasies of unrestricted movement and free will" in an era of globalization where such developments are indeed a possibility.\(^3\) Given that quite a few of the fictional works focus on contexts and characters emerging from "Muslim cultures" in North Africa and South Asia, the thesis strives to apprehend the impact of religious ideology, together with other significant categories such as race, class and gender in the colonization and decolonization of the postcolonial woman subject.

On the question of difference it needs to be emphasized that meanings do not necessarily have to manifest rigidly polarized oppositions, and by that logic, "difference" does not necessarily oppose sameness or allude to separatism, as it is often perceived in the grands récits or the master narratives.\(^4\) As Trinh Minh-ha observes perspicaciously: "There are differences as well as similarities within the concept of difference. One can further say that difference is not what makes conflicts. It is beyond and alongside conflict .... Many of us still hold on to the concept of difference not as a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance, but as a tool of segregation, to exert power on the basis of racial and sexual essences."\(^5\) To deconstruct or destabilize such homogenizing truths is then, in a sense, to move towards a world-view that undercuts extreme oppositions, essentialisms and arbitrary closures, and celebrates multiplicity, accepting life with all its contradictions and ruptures and acknowledging the indeterminacy of the Self.

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\(^2\) The term "Muslim" is used here instead of "Islamic" because not all Muslims accept all the norms, practices and values of the religion, Islam, even though they are born into the faith which makes them Muslims. Conversely, "Islamic" or "Islamist" refers to a religious identity.


\(^4\) This phrase is borrowed from Jean-François Lyotard’s assessment of the problems and limitations of "scientific knowledge" (as opposed to narrative knowledge) in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

"where she constantly drifts in and out": differences do not exist only between the Self and Other, or the insider and outsider, but also within a single entity, that is within the outsider herself or the insider (Minh-ha 76).

The emphasis of this study is on literary works, in particular fiction, and to a lesser degree on poetry and dramatic works. While the study makes a modest attempt to analyze writings across larger geopolitical classifications, its scope is restricted to specific issues intricately linked with the discourse of historiography and hermeneutics, gender and nation/alism. Taking into account the expansive field of postcolonial women's literature, the thesis foregrounds the works of Assia Djebar, Mariam Bâ, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nayantara Sahgal and Attia Hosain, focusing on particular cultures and nations to which these authors are linked and to which they allude as they pursue the task of revisioning hegemonic phallocentric histories. Reference will also be made to other women writers in locations such as the Indian subcontinent (Bapsi Sidhwa, Ismat Chughtai), Africa (Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta), and the Caribbean in general.

The study will demonstrate through a selection of writings the way specific contexts set out to expose the history of what might otherwise seem outside history, recovering simultaneously a Self for the "ex-centric", that is, those on the borders or margins of society, conspicuously via a language of femininity (écriture féminine). Critically, this is a language that abjures hierarchy, domination and ahistorical essentialisms; a language that strives to avoid homogenizing the voice of the ex-centric even as it marks the desire not to be silenced or defeated. While helping to recuperate potentially subversive counter-narratives of totalizing histories, this language also helps to reveal how transformed palimpsestic histories can become strategic and powerful modes of cultural resistance.6

The writers' investigation of historiography not only underscores the ambivalent disciplinary distinctions between history as a scientific study and literature as imaginative constructions, but it also disrupts Eurocentric colonialist and patriarchal underpinnings of master narratives, veering the texts in the direction of historical metafiction. The writers' recourse to "feminine" autobiographical practices, polyphony, plurality and heteroglossia (discussed in detail in the individual

6 The process of "overwriting", where each new layer of writing eclipses the one that precedes it, usually incorporates palimpsestic/palimpsestuous texts. According to James Arnold, in antiquity a palimpsest consisted of "a lambskin, or velum, that one scraped to erase an earlier layer of writing before applying a new one." See his "Césaire's Notebook as Palimpsest: The Text before, during, and after World War II," trans. Scot Allen, Research in African Literatures 35, no.3 (2004):134.
chapters) undermine not only totalizing Western/patriarchal historiography but sometimes also the counter-discourses, paralleled as alternatives to European imperialism and other dominant narratives of the nation. The works of postcolonial women thus envision a compelling collective personal history that helps to reclaim feminized trajectories of women's memories, experiences, testimonies and consciousness.

The introduction identifies certain critical problems arising in the use of "postcolonial", a term notorious for its semantic vagueness. The main objective here is to specify the postcolonial as part of a framework that aims to define an operable feminist praxis. Because of the disparate nature of the works discussed, the introduction strives to apprehend how viable it is to use a framework that assesses texts across cultural divides, taking into account the ambivalent boundaries of modern nation-states and addressing current global trends such as multinational capitalism, migrations, diasporic conditions and issues of "hybridization". It is hoped that such a framework will help to locate a dynamic site where texts can read side by side, despite different cultural contexts and histories, heterogeneity of languages and styles, and diverse speaking positions. It is also hoped that such an analysis across wide vistas will provide an exciting glimpse of the need for feminism to be inclusive and flexible, and to appreciate and acknowledge differences and similarities while grappling with issues of varying time-scales.

1.2 Mapping a Textual Practice: Feminist Readings across Cultural Divides
If we perceive the contemporary world to be structured by global, transnational affiliations and cultural asymmetries, it is difficult to pursue a discourse of feminism without reference to these structures that dominate the contemporary world. Broadening and deepening the assessment of gender, in relation to contemporary global conditions that have impacted upon women's lives, has helped in the formation of new modes of analysis and new approaches to feminist praxis. As Chandra Mohanty highlights very broadly, the two dominant phenomena that have changed interacting patterns between nations in the new world economic order are the corporate global cartels that thrive on cheap labour from poor countries, and massive migration of ex-colonial populations to the industrial centres of Europe primarily to fill the need for cheap labour. These conditions have created "new kinds of multiethnic and
multiracial social formations ... [that] invite cross-national and cross-cultural analyses for explanation of their own internal features and socioeconomic constitution."

Such transcultural and transnational relations have been especially responsible for breaking the fragile barriers of the nation-space, fragmenting conventional notions of space, and decentring capitalism. In other words, it is today "increasingly difficult to point to any nation or region as the centre of global capitalism." In this age of multinational finance "both national boundaries and earlier global divisions [have become] equally subordinate to the maximization of capital." Correspondingly, as Arif Dirlik suggests, with economic fragmentation comes cultural fragmentation that aspires to forge "a common future" for an ethnically diverse or "multicultural" national community.

Additionally, because of these transnational flows and the horizontal diffusion of global economic structures that have cut across the finite boundaries of the nation, the world we inhabit today has, in a sense, shrunk. The compression of space has intensified links between nations and states, distorting conventional theories of global relations and destabilizing essentializing, monolithic divides such as East/West, local/global and First World/Third World. The tendency in colonial and early postcolonial discourses to suppress issues of diversity and conflict within categories is, therefore, at least partially resolved in current postcolonial and postmodern discursive practices as a result of such decentred Manichaeian dichotomies.

A series of discursive questions can be addressed in an effort to define a suitable analytic framework for a study of women's texts from different locations. What approach can we use to link feminisms of diverse historical and cultural contexts? What kind of methodology will create linkages without attempting to equate these specific cultures, or produce a totalizing master theory, or cultural and economic hegemony? What critical strategies will enable us to engage in dialogues without attempting to appropriate the voices and experiences of others? In the process of "speaking" from a privileged space, how can the academic/theorist avoid

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11 We need to bear in mind the ramifications of multiculturalism, and interrogate as Huggan does "Is multiculturalism a genuine attempt to move toward greater interethnic tolerance ... or is it a smokescreen that hides the continuing privilege of the dominant culture, and that diffuses the ethnic tensions that threaten to divide the nation? (xiii).
falling into a situation where s/he recreates essentializing binarisms or reinforces the oppression of the group spoken for?  

As Aihwa Ong argues perceptively, we need to bear in mind changing circumstances of the global community and acknowledge the limitations of our own traditions and explanations. That is, "We begin a dialogue when we recognize other forms of gender- and culture-based subjectivities, and accept that others often choose to conduct their lives separate from our particular vision of the future." The knowledge base we strive to construct in exploring and assessing our thoughts and ideas is critical for disseminating information and shaping the views of others. It can have a formidable impact "on both pedagogic strategies and the kinds of knowledges that are developed within the classroom." As Jacqui Alexander and Mohanty reveal: 

"We cannot overestimate the need for conscious self-reflexivity about the complicity of intellectual frameworks in politics, in the fact that something is at stake, in the very process of reauthorizing and mediating inequalities or regressive politics of different kinds" (xviii).

Some forms of feminism in the past and some modes of feminist analyses have not been able to come to terms with historical and geopolitical distinctions as well as vicissitudes of existing socioeconomic patterns, integral to a contextual analysis. These examinations have condensed knowledge to their confined insular spaces, overlooking cultural asymmetries and historical specificities and effacing the dynamics of relations in the new world order. To cite Robert Carr:

To erase differences is to celebrate elite ignorance and cohere with the imperialist constitution of the Third World subject: 'they are just like us, they want what we want,' gives way to 'they want what we have,' the forced insertion of the subalterns in the periphery into the production side of the international division of labor for, purportedly, their own good.  

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12 For a detailed reading of how speaking for the Other, often from a "discursively dangerous" location, can result in the erasure of the Other or reinscription of various hierarchies, see Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for the Other," Cultural Critique 20 (Winter 1991-1992): 5-32.


15 See for instance Chandra Mohanty’s celebrated essay "Under Western Eyes" for multiple examples of works that have evaded contextualization of distant cultures, in Third World Women, ed. Chandra Mohanty, Anne Russo and Lourdes Torres, 51-80.

The results of such studies will inevitably be inaccurate or flawed as they have not explored the determining impact of multiple factors among which is the rapidly expanding global capitalist network on the lives of marginalized peoples in particular locations.

Foregrounding some of these asymmetrical economic links and their direct impact on women, in a speech delivered in Seattle in 1999, Vandana Shiva, a renowned environmentalist, reveals how the WTO (World Trade Organization), by forcing Indian farmers to open up their seed supply to the global seed merchants, pushed Indian peasants into mass suicides. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of displaced Indian peasant women were forced to migrate into the cities in search of jobs and have become cheap labour for transnational manufacturing enterprises. Making a scathing attack on WTO's agenda, Shiva claims that the competition promoted by WTO in the global markets is a strange kind of competitiveness where the world’s largest corporations want to compete-out the smallest peasant. As Ama Ata Aidoo demonstrates through her multiple works explored in Chapter 3, such processes of domination and exploitation are rampant in an era when investment flows and capital transfers have moved out of a specific centre, into a more complex network of interactions.

These sinister currents in the new world order, in a sense reflect the failure of decolonization processes to take ideally the initiative for constructing the structures of civil society. Gayatri Spivak asserts that "transnationality is shrinking the possibility of an operative civil society in developing nations," where the focus - in the name of Development - has shifted from "service to the citizen to capital maximization." Highlighting specific locations, she then adds that women of the diasporic underclass in the North, and poor rural women and women of the urban subproletariat of the South are the super-subordinated and super-exploited in these changing socioeconomic circumstances.


Outlining these adverse conditions affecting women’s lives, Inderpal Grewal and Kaplan set out to locate a conceptual framework across cultures that could help feminist movements [and feminist/women’s literature] come to terms with the material conditions structuring contemporary women’s lives. Understanding the dynamics of these conditions will enable women to organize themselves better in their efforts at dealing and negotiating with powerful economic and cultural forces in the new world order. Grewal and Kaplan disclose the need to relate gender “to scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, 'authentic' forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression on multiple levels” (17). Such a practice will rely on a cross-cultural framework where the analysis will shift from the national and local to relations and interactions across nations and cultures.

As opposed to a strictly comparative approach to postcolonial women’s literature, the thesis will incorporate a cross-cultural approach that will aim to present "a comparative, relational and historically based conception of feminism" (Alexander and Mohanty xvi). Susan Bassnett recalls that the old Eurocentric models of comparative literature "rejected comparison with non-European texts on the grounds of unbridgeable difference and the absence of a place in the western canon." As an analytic praxis, early practitioners of comparative literary studies sought to locate similarities, points of origin and influences of one author on the other, frequently using Europe as the yardstick to measure other literatures. That is, a comparative framework works on the premise that there is a common ground for analysis. The problem with such a framework is that it may not sufficiently lay emphasis on specificities within cultures, fundamental to a contextual analysis of most postcolonial literary texts. As Gregory Jusdanis remarks, "literary texts do not stem from one source in the way that human beings or even languages do" (106). Furthermore, a comparative framework for cultures outside the West can proceed towards "exceptionalizing the West through its absence on the discursive stage," and produce homogenizing notions of problematic rubrics such as "Third World".

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Conceptualizing situations in such dichotomized oppositions can in turn erase complex patterns of global relations where power relations run unevenly across and within nations, and where there are multiple centres and peripheries rather than definite divides.

1.3 Locating the Postcolonial

Early postcolonial theory, overlooking the intricate interacting patterns between nations, strove to underscore a politics of opposition by foregrounding the relationship between the periphery to the metropolitan centre. The consciousness of an uneasy Manichean world of oppositions spurs critics such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, authors of a seminal text on postcolonial literature, to theorize on discursive counter-narratives based on the centre/periphery paradigm. Thus, texts such as the above work produced in the West, give the impression that the primary objective of the postcolonial writer is to recover the Self against either European appropriation or rejection.

While this is one way of interpreting the postcolonial, nevertheless, as Vijay Mishra, Bob Hodge and many other recent critics argue, it is a misrepresentation of meaning if we perceive the postcolonial strictly in terms of counter discourses. As they point out, while The Empire Writes Back is sensitive to “difference” in diverse postcolonial literatures, this difference is “contained within a single pattern, the coexistence of two kinds of relationship to the language and culture of the centre: ‘abrogation’ or refusal, and ‘appropriation’” (278). Endorsing this view of The Empire Writes Back, Tiffin writes elsewhere that “[b]ecause post-colonial and colonial perspectives are necessarily informed by the imperial vision with which they are always in various ways and to varying degrees implicated” [emphasis mine], postcolonial literatures are essentially seen only in their relation to a still dominant West.

26 The thesis does not delve into the intricate problems that arise when one collapses a diverse group of nations (for example the US, Australia and Canada on the one hand, and India, Algeria and Jamaica on the other) under the rubric “postcolonial”. It is however important to be aware that such homogenizing constructs can proceed to erase historical specificities of the different nations that fought for independence at various moments in history. Such categorizations may also succeed in obliterating differences between settler colonies and
However, if we perceive the definition of (post/)colonialism within a broader framework - as "the invasion of an indigenous culture by a foreign one" - we may wish to interrogate whether the term in fact predates modern history, and incorporates most of the world's historical processes as almost all parts of the human world have at some point or other experienced invasions, exploitation and colonization. That is, as Deepika Bahri reminds us, "it is customary but misleading to fix on colonization as a 'Western' preserve, although the term itself may have its roots in Western language." 27 Nevertheless, because postcolonial theory often tends to limit its definitions to the marauding enterprises of European mercantilism, the postcolonial is applied frequently to the most recent wave of imperial expansion. 28

Striving to configure reasons as to why the term "postcolonial" has produced much conflict and discontent in the realm of current theory, Stephen Slemon remarks: "the attributes of postcolonialism have become so widely contested in contemporary usage, its strategies and sites so structurally dispersed, as to render the term next to useless as a precise marker of intellectual content, social constituency, or political commitment." 29 Similarly, tracing the elusive meaning structures enmeshed in the term, Bahri infers that "[t]he confusions inherent in its multiple deployments are significant because they point to its limitations in explaining contemporary global relations; moreover, even in its purely definitional sense the term can lead to cognitive erasures, displacements, and suppressions" (138).

Exploring the root of the term "postcolonial" Ella Shohat partially attributes its conceptual ambiguities to the tension that arises, on the one hand, in defining the term intellectually and theoretically and linking it with other "posts" such as "poststructuralism", "postmodernism" and "postfeminism", and on the other, perceiving it chronologically as "a movement beyond a specific point in history, that of colonialism and Third World nationalist struggles." 30 The latter definition which aligns the "post" of postcolonialism with the meaning "after" or "past" can insinuate emerging Third World nations, and equating the experiences of colonized white settler communities with indigenous peoples whose experiences of oppression have continued into the contemporary world. Using a term broadly without qualification can give the incorrect impression that these different groups maintained similar or identical relations in their interactions with the imperialist centres.

28 By reflecting upon a broader definition, this study does not attempt to undermine in any way the scale, scope, organizational skills and the levels of exploitation of European colonialism. 29 Stephen Slemon, "Introductory Notes: Postcolonialism and Its Discontents," Ariel 26, no. 1 (1995): 7.
a new age, as well as a definite closure of a particular historical epoch. This is despite the fact that the nations to which we attribute the term “postcolonial” attained independence at strikingly different moments in modern history. Interpreting the postcolonial in this way can be quite unsettling as it conveniently proceeds to efface colonialist/racist/chauvinistic policies of white settlers and nationalist patriarchal elites in the post-independence phase, and hegemonizing neocolonial global alliances between First World nations and the Third World. Moreover, the term used in its restrictive sense also obfuscates the rights and interests of indigenous peoples whose lives continue to be defined and manipulated by First World agencies, multinational industries and the ruling elite classes of Third World nation-states.

Because these gaps, slippages and contradictions are inevitably linked with the postcolonial, we must be cautious in using conventional interpretations - such as defining the postcolonial in a strictly chronological sense or attributing to it simplistic binarisms. Simultaneously, even while acknowledging the ambiguities and dissonances in the terms we use, we may be compelled to incorporate, often with reluctance, abstract shorthand terminology as points of departure to reduce the risk of “discoursing” ourselves into obscurity, fatuous ambivalence and stasis. Thus in an academic context at least, we find that the postcolonial is being associated with the Third World, even though in the more recent past it has also been linked with “Third World diasporic circumstances of the last four decades - from forced exile to “voluntary” immigration - within First World metropolises” (Shohat 102).

With the shift of focus in postcolonial studies from "resistance literatures produced in the imperialist and neo-imperialist sites of struggle to a more domestic celebration of cultural diversity and difference" (Indrani Mitra cited in Bahri 159), critics such as Kumkum Sangari and Arun Mukherjee have drawn attention to prejudicial Eurocentric theories that "perpetuate the notion of the 'Third World' as a residue and as a 'periphery' that must eternally palpitate the center."31 As Ahmad informs us, rather than striving to assert an identity in relation to an absent Other (that is Europe or the West), it will help to perceive postcolonial literatures as works coming to grips with, as Hosain does in her fiction, “our class structures, our familial ideologies, our management of bodies and sexualities, our ideologies, our silences” (21).

Conversely, as Stuart Hall or a writer such as Sahgal argues, our cultural spaces are never really that "pure" or "authentic", even though they may have distinct characteristics - "a sort of collective 'one true self'" - within a particular hybridity that recognizes rupture and discontinuity. That is, we need to recognize the near impossibility of claiming an origin for the Self or Other within a framework that perceives identity as an essence or a totalizing representation. Centuries of conquests, invasions and migration in many parts of the world have created cross-cultural alliances and cross-fertilization of ideas, values, religions, traditions and languages which make theories of pristine societies increasingly difficult to be endorsed in this day and age. These critical moments in history together with current global trends of mass migration, border crossings and displacements, discussed at length by writers such as Aidoo, are responsible for decentring notions of authenticity and promoting a kind of global hybridity or cultural heterogeneity, intrinsic to the postcolonial and postmodern worldview.

This syncretist tendency has been particularly responsible for fracturing essentializing perspectives and purist notions of history with a view to recovering a multiplicity of representations within a category such as "cultural identity". While such anti-essentialist views on hybrid identities may help to de-essentialize and destabilize homogenizing meanings, it also needs to be said that "essentializing" discourses have helped disempowered peoples at strategic moments to unite in their collective resistance against such varied conditions as forced acculturation, violence, genocide and discriminatory colonialist, racist, chauvinist policies and practices. To this crucial point, theorists such as Hall, Spivak and Shohat return in their efforts at negotiating essentialist and anti-essentialist theories with postcolonial/diasporic identities. These theorists view "strategic essentialism" (Hall refers to the process as a provisional "moment of arbitrary closure") as a useful tool for activist work, such as forging a resistance collective identity to attain a political aim. As Shohat puts it succinctly,

The question, in other words, is not whether there is such a thing as an originary homogenous past, and if there is whether it would be possible to return to it, or even whether the past is unjustifiably idealized. Rather, the question is: who is mobilizing what in the articulation of the past, deploying

what identities, identifications and representations, and in the name of what political vision and goals? [110]

At the same time, while acknowledging the usefulness of essentialism especially for political activism, Spivak warns us that essentialism can work to conceal divisions and differences among women that can have negative impact on different women's movements. Significant, these theorists are neither claiming an entirely essentialist nor anti-essentialist stance. Rather they are building on specificities and differences that can be strategically used by the disempowered and the disenfranchised to canvas for a particular cause so that in due course they can take control over the processes of history by assuming not only subjectivity, but also agency.

For these reasons cultural representations need to be reconfigured through negotiations between shared experiences which give a community of people a distinctive identity and purpose, and critical points of difference which help in shaping the individuality of every person. In this sense, cultural identity which belongs to the past as well as the future "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being' ... transcending place, time, history and culture," and in a constant state of transformation (Hall, "Cultural" 394). As Hall elaborates in his musings of the complex diasporic Caribbean identity:

Cultural identities are ... the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'. [395]

1.4 Addressing Semantic Ambiguities
Even though theorists and critics have problematized the use of totalizing rubrics such as "First World" and "Third World", these terms continue to be circulated in postcolonial studies and other related disciplines as cultural, social and political theory have not yet developed a more instructive vocabulary to define these world spaces with their heterogeneous historical and geopolitical conditions. As there are no suitable alternative terms at this point in time, the thesis refers to such terms with an awareness of their inadequacies, and their tendencies to essentialize and freeze meaning. Thus, for example, the First World broadly refers to the industrialized

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34 For an in-depth analysis of the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate see Rooney's interview with Spivak, esp. 124.
nations in the West, commonly called the "developed" world. The Third World, derived from the notion of "third estate" developed in France to refer to the "commoners", is enmeshed in a multiplicity of (often misleading) meanings. Incorporating Cheryl Johnson-Odim's cogent definition, the Third World is used to address "'underdeveloped'/overexploited geopolitical entities, i.e., countries, regions, and even continents; and to refer to oppressed nationalities from these world areas who are now resident in 'developed' First World countries."35

Equally problematic are labels such as "Western feminism" (or "First World feminism") and "Third World feminism" which is used here with some apprehension. "Feminism", like other contentious terms in current usage, has been at the centre of theoretical debates, not only in the West but also in non-Western academic circles. As an analytic category, it eschews fixed notions and unitary theories of gender, incorporating manifold ideas about concepts such as oppression, exploitation, human rights, agendas, empowerment and agency. Indeed, there is no pristine school of feminist thought when we refer to the categories of First World feminism, feminism in the Third World, multicultural feminism, Marxist/Socialist feminism and so on, even though women of colour have long challenged the hegemonizing impact of a specifically First World (white middle-class) feminism on the lives of Third World women.

The problem of using a particular analytic practice with its principle components is that while it underscores those aspects that are integral to its framework, other facets which may be as important are subordinated in the process. For example, when we focus on a non-Western feminism we may unwittingly turn our attention to a distinctly oppositional feminist politics (in relation to a First World feminism) within a global scenario, subsuming other indices such as race, class and ethnicity that contribute in decisive ways to the shaping of women's and men's lives in Third World situations. By doing so we may (often quite unintentionally) essentialize the experiences of people in particular locations, thus losing sight of what we originally set out to achieve - that is, to avoid basing our analyses on rigid theories of gender relations. The need to maintain "a plurality of intellectual and political positions" is therefore vital for any analytic framework we consider for our studies.

and methodology. In other words, we need to speak "in many voices, with inconsistencies that are born of our different social locations."36

While stressing that "Western feminism" is by no means homogenous, Mohanty for instance, addressing certain representative texts, draws attention to "similar effects of various textual strategies used by writers which codify Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western" ("Under" 52). The "coherence of effects" makes it possible for the authors of these texts to project the West as "the primary referent in theory and praxis". Clearly, such trends that can be criticized for creating crippling oppositional divides cannot only be restricted to Western feminism: non-Western feminists too fall into a similar pattern of theorizing and critiquing when they use their middle-class values and norms to codify and speak for the histories, cultures and experiences of those in less-privileged strata of their societies. In fact, in the recent past, because Western feminists in particular have striven to assert a hegemonic control over what constitutes feminism, some non-Western writers, academics and activists have either rejected the use of the term "feminism", or been reluctant to identify themselves as feminists, even though they work with commitment to promote women's interests and rights.37 This bias against feminism is highlighted by a US-based Ghanaian academic in a report produced after the 1996 women's conference in Beijing:

Ghana has a reputation of being advanced in terms of the status of women (Ghanaian market women have attained legendary status in women's studies circles), and this is not entirely unfounded. But there are constraints; one can be a strong market woman, but one certainly cannot be a feminist scholar; the hostility faced if one tries to put one's theory into practice as a philosophy of life can be soul destroying .... [It] can be an uphill task in a society where feminism is still a very bad word ....38

While Abena Busia implicitly draws attention to existing patriarchal power structures in Ghana, she also indicates that her active Ghanaian women colleagues have not sufficiently networked for the establishment of a viable feminist community. Though Busia does not give details, the barriers for such networking arise partly from male-dominated environments that find such situations threatening to their own agendas,

37 This is further elaborated in Chapter 3 of the thesis in relation to the discussion of Black feminist theory.
and partly from people's general scepticism about feminist movements and their objectives.

It should now be clear to Western and non-Western feminists alike that there is no universal patriarchy, or global male conspiracy attempting to oppress women across nations and cultures. To perceive human relations in such polarized universal terms, without contextualizing or historicizing circumstances will once more be an attempt to fracture the world into male/female oppositions. By rejecting such divides, however, the Third World feminist is not dismissing issues of gender inequality, or overlooking the fact that women, especially of the under-classes and oppressed races, are more likely to be exploited and subordinated than men in similar classes and races of society.\textsuperscript{39}

Nevertheless, the ethos of a Third World or non-Western feminism is not only preoccupied with gender inequities. While stressing that gender discrimination is at the core of its concerns, a Third World feminist vision intersperses this with other interlocking structures such as colonialism, imperialism, racism and global capitalism. Moreover, non-Western feminist writers and activists have also to address other adverse conditions in the developing world like poverty, illiteracy, economic exploitation and unemployment. To cite Alice Walker, these women are concerned with the "survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female", exploited and subjugated by a multitude of forces in various locations.\textsuperscript{40}

It needs to be highlighted that problems of poverty, illiteracy and economic exploitation are not confined to the Third World alone. Making such assumptions will effectively efface multiple problems faced by migrant communities, ethnic minorities and the working-classes on the peripheries of First World societies. Even though in First World locations, the problems encountered by these social groups, are not dissimilar to the issues confronted by communities of people in the Third World. Identifying a connection between these different areas in the period of colonization, in her study of transnational travel Grewal examines how the myth of the "savage" in colonial discourse was reflected in a different context at "home" as well, that is in England:

\textsuperscript{39} See IPS/PANOS, "Microfinance: Not the Panacea for Women," (24 January 1997), for more details of how, for example, microfinance institutions target women and children for poverty alleviation schemes, and the current problems faced by women (such as loans given to women being controlled by men in the families and the absence of pension schemes) as regards such projects.

Comparisons between the English factory workers and "savages" enabled the English working class to see themselves as similar in their exploitation but also critique discourses of abolition because of what they ignored close to "home." Working-class concerns were at once ignored by the upper classes in the construction of English racial and civilizational superiority .... However, the education given to all classes was one of participation in imperialism and of the view of the world as consumable and colonizable, although the relation to this world was different according to class and gender .... [Home 14]

Though not manifested explicitly in the orthodox European master narrative, the myth of the native/"savage", which the colonizer used as a pretext to fabricate his discourse of la mission civilisatrice, was not restricted to the space of the colonized world. In other words, theories of the civilizing world were both a colonial as well as a class construction. The above example reinforces that interacting patterns between peoples of different races, classes, genders and religious/ethnic identities, and between nations cannot be conceived through simplistic frameworks of opposition; they need to be negotiated and perceived through a network of often asymmetrical relations.

It will help to draw attention to Miriam Cooke’s definition of feminism as it entails different changing states of consciousness, “each reflecting women’s understanding of themselves and their situations as related to their social and biological conditions.” She remarks: "It is no more Arab than it is American, no more Mediterranean than it is Northern European. Feminism seeks justice where it can find it.” Cooke’s persuasive argument underscores an attitudinal as well as an activist position Muslim women and women in the Islamist movements of the Third World, in particular, have advocated in recent times to establish “a new, contingent self-positioning that celebrates multiple-belongings”. Her discussion of the multiple strategies contemporary Muslim women have adapted to create better conditions for women from within the systems that are trying to marginalize them is especially useful to a more nuanced reading of the works of Muslim writers such as Djebar, Mariama Bâ and Attia Hosain, all of who emerge from complex conditions in specific Third World locations. As Cooke informs us, for many of these women,

Feminism provides the analytical tools for assessing how expectations for men’s and women’s behaviour have led to unjust situations, particularly but not necessarily only for women. Feminism provides a crosscultural prism through which to identify moments of awareness that something is wrong in

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the expectations for women’s treatment or behaviour, of rejection of such expectations, and of activism to effect some kind of change. [143]

Nevertheless, irrespective of their differences and the intricate situations in which they are entangled, Muslim women continue to be regarded by outsiders in reductive homogenizing terms, often as victims, largely because of the way they are portrayed by the international media based on myriad, tenuous factors such as repressive regimes within Muslim nations, women’s choice of dress (in particular hijab/veiling) and lifestyles based on religious convictions. Here we can reflect on Minh-ha’s argument that “[i]f the act of unveiling has a liberating potential, so does the act of veiling. It all depends on the context in which such an act is carried out, or more precisely, on how and where women see dominance” (73). In other words, what needs to be assessed is to what extent women have the freedom and the will to make life choices without being coerced into submission by the dominant sex or the dominant culture. So that when women decide to reveil, for example, “they might do so to reappropriate their space or to claim a new difference in defiance of genderless, hegemonic, centered standardization” (Minh-ha 73).

Since “woman” is a critical index of feminist scholarship, to use it as a “category”, as a composite monolithic Other, runs the risk of producing meanings and knowledge which thrive on a false universalism. In other words, it can proceed to efface the heterogeneous lives of women by creating fixed notions or an essence based on some general features related to gender and sexual difference. Contemporary feminist theory informs us that when “woman” is used as a homogenous category, the classification is usually derived on the basis of the socially-constructed notion of gender. Mohanty indicates that this group is produced “not on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals .... What binds women together is a sociological notion of the ‘sameness’ of their oppression” (“Under” 56). It is this notion of a shared oppression that has been used ahistorically by some Western feminists to produce essentializing knowledge about women in other worlds, and promote theories and critical thought about sisterhood across cultures, without highlighting specificities within a context. To avoid forming such reductive analyses, it is imperative to contextualize and historicize situations, wherever possible. A commitment to this awareness will reduce the risks involved in flippantly using concepts such as Third World women, global sisterhood and Western/non-Western feminism. As this study aims to demonstrate, it
is difficult to produce monolithic perceptions of categories such as "Indian womanhood" or "African Women", let alone a universal sisterhood, as women in these divergent locations are constituted as women through the integration of multiple facets that include class and caste, religion, ethnicity, language, regional and "tribal" allegiances, ideological beliefs and political affiliations.

Having emphasized that generalizations can only go to distort meaning and knowledge, it can then be added that across culture we may also observe overlapping areas among the histories and struggles of Third World women which can be used constructively as comparative material for a cohesive analysis of diverse texts. Of critical relevance to Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 of the thesis is to explore the ways writers such as Djebar, Aidoo, Sahgal and Hosain reconstruct homogenized palimpsestic histories with alternative historical trajectories, frequently using "difference" as a textual strategy. Simultaneously, these chapters strive to configure how the writers concerned reclaim subjectivity (and, in some instances, agency) for women and other "minoritized" communities of the postcolonial world. Indeed, as they pinpoint, these are histories that have long been subsumed by the biases, prejudices and ideologies of colonialists, racists and patriarchs. The revisionings and recuperations carried out by postcolonial women writers while restoring to subjectivity a Self for the oppressed Other, often deconstruct totalizing "truths" that have historically muted women's voice-consciousness. By deconstructing such knowledge the writers are not suggesting that there is no subject, no history, no truth. Rather, they question a privileging of identity where someone is believed to hold the truth. As exemplified by Djebar in Chapter 2, or by Sahgal in Chapter 4, among other things, the aim of deconstruction is to persistently assess how truths are being configured, how histories are conceived and homogenized by those in hegemonic positions.

Entwined with the subject of historiography, are questions pertaining to gender and nation(-alism). As explained earlier, the thesis uses a Third World feminist praxis to broach the issues of gender, coalescing views of non-Western feminists (or feminists-of-colour) who are sensitive to colonial and postcolonial discourses as well as to discourses of race. The notion of gender in the thesis is restricted primarily to a discussion of issues and positions shaping and determining the lives of women in colonial and postcolonial circumstances. However, it needs to be borne in mind that gender is a socially determined concept which "covers all the established differences between men and women, whether they are individual
differences (studied by psychologists), or social roles or cultural representations (studied by sociologists and anthropologists).”

Some of the nodes of intersection the thesis highlights in examining both the Asian and African writers relate to the question of veiling (in Chapter 2); purdah and the segregation of sexes (in Chapters 2, 4 and 5); marriage and polygamy (in Chapters 2 and 3); the question of space and the struggles women have encountered in claiming this space for themselves within (pre/)colonial, nationalist and neocolonial frameworks (in the four main chapters); and women’s rights pertaining to issues such as inheritance (in Chapters 2 and 4). While being conscious of specificities and differences, identifying these points of convergence especially in cross-cultural studies, can give greater coherence to an otherwise seemingly disconnected series of thoughts and observations. On the other hand, even though shared concerns or common agendas may give a sense of solidarity to people in divergent sites, their experiences of these commitments or their pursuit of these agendas will, very often, not at all be the same or equal.

While a major portion of the thesis is devoted to an analysis of woman-centred questions, stemming from the discussion of power relations between the dominant and the subordinate are larger issues, affecting the oppressed, disempowered communities of North and West Africa and South Asia. In the postcolonial context these communities include not only women, but as the different chapters point out, the working classes, peasants and other disadvantaged groups.

The thesis recognizes “nation” to be both historically configured and general. As Timothy Brennan suggests, the concept of nation outlines both modern nation-states as well as a more ancient definition of a local community or family endorsing a condition of belonging, bonding and bordering. Intrinsically linked with the nation is “nationalism”, an ideology that has evolved from within “larger cultural systems”,

43 For example, in dealing with the writers in South Asia (Nayantara Sahgal), North Africa (Assia Djebar and Mariama Bâ) and West Africa (Aidoo), the thesis addresses the general subject of polygamy. The practice of polygamy in these geographically varying locations has been prevalent for many centuries, cutting across national, cultural, ethnic and religious differences. Yet, to make such a statement and not proceed to explore the issue in detail (through historicization and contextualization) will subject this study to a reductive cross-cultural comparison. As Chapter 2 discloses, even within Muslim states where Islamic law (Shari’ah) is practised, the legal injunctions pertaining to polygamy are applied in many diverse ways, so that their implications are felt differently by people in different sites of the so-called Muslim world.
striving artificially to create an identity not of individual people but of communities who see themselves as a social group based on a set of common standards, related to such aspects as ethnicity, religion, language, territory and so on. It can also be explained as a social construct, shaped by political ideologies pertaining to state-power and government, or as Homi Bhabha asserts, "an emergent expression of the 'national-popular' sentiment preserved in a radical memory." Bhabha states eloquently that "[n]ations like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye." Linking this with Benedict Anderson's now celebrated notion of "the imagined community", he then accentuates the ambivalence, "the cultural temporality" which continues to haunt the idea of modern nationhood which is "both communal and authoritarian, friendly and bellicose, all at the same time" (Tom Nairn cited in Brennan, 45).

It is to this Janus-faced quality of nations and nationalisms that Djebar, Aidoo, Sahgal and Hosain return in their efforts at grappling with a formidable complex of issues in postcolonial Algeria, Ghana and India. Chapters 2 and 4, while questioning the ambivalent positions of male nationalists to the woman question in post-independence Algeria and India, discuss the inequities and corruption, the escalating violence and the marginalization of the "subaltern" classes in post-independent Algeria and India. Enhancing these views, in Chapter 3 Aidoo makes a scathing attack on the iniquitous neo-imperialist agendas of postcolonial African male leaders that are dragging the continent to further chaos today. Concurrently, Chapter 5 illustrates how in the wake of Indian independence, mounting ethnic tensions lead to the bloody Partition of the subcontinent, senseless massacres and the enforced migration of millions of citizens. Hosain's novel, similar to Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*, captures in vivid detail the inherent dangers of nationalist rhetoric - especially when spurred by sectarian politics; the ideological disposition of nationalism "fraught with the same duplicity that characterizes its attitude to the women's question;" the futility of remapping boundaries; and, ultimately, of the cataclysmic implications of fracturing a territory to make a two-nation theory viable.

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45 Homi Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha, 1.
1.5 Appendix: Situating Translation

As an appendage to the introduction, this section dwells on some problems the reader is likely to encounter in studying translations (such as the works of Djebar or Bâ), a critical component of contemporary Postcolonial Studies. A consciousness of and sensitivity to the practice of translation will enable the reader to be more alert to specific issues concerning translations that help distinguish these works from originals. As we are aware, the focus on Translation Studies has grown in the last few decades due to developments such as rapidly growing cultural interactions and negotiations in an era of globalization. Since it has now entered an age of internationalism where the study itself has moved from "overtly parochial and Eurocentric beginnings, towards a more sophisticated investigation of the relationship between the local and the global," it is fitting here to highlight the relevance of the subject for a study of texts across cultures.

In his Introduction to Charles Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, Walter Benjamin begins by asking a pertinent question: "Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original?" A few lines later he indicates that "it seems to be the only conceivable reason for saying 'the same thing' repeatedly," inferring not incorrectly that a translation tells very little to those who are already familiar with the language of the original text. For the reader who has a grasp of the source language, a translation may appear redundant or inconsequential as the latter work may not necessarily enrich the content or structure of the former work. On the other hand, even though a translation can never really replace the object text, it can benefit those readers who have either little or no knowledge of the language of the original

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47 I am grateful to Dr. Lakshmi de Silva for generously sharing with me her expert knowledge and experience of translating texts.
49 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens,*" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn ([1968], London: Fontana Press, 1992), 70. Benjamin's essay sets out to foreground problems the translator encounters in the process of translating from the original to a new language. However, it is also a confusing essay which while seeking to address the translator's task, ends up, curiously, focusing on the failure of the translator, and endorsing that the translator can never really aspire to attain the status of the poet or the artist. Additionally, for Benjamin, the process of translation has only the appearance of life, that is, "life as an afterlife" because "translation also reveals the death of the original". For an illuminating and provocative study of Benjamin's essay see Paul De Man, "'Conclusions' on Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator,'" *Yale French Studies* 97 ([1985]; 2000): 25; 10-35.
text, exposing them to a fertile literary, linguistic and cultural heritage of another world, that is, a text located elsewhere both in time and space.\textsuperscript{50}

In its simplest sense, translation, according to Anthony Appiah, is "an attempt to find ways of saying in one language something that means the same as what has been said in another."\textsuperscript{51} Enhancing this view, Bassnett points out that the translating process also incorporates "a whole set of extra-linguistic criteria" (Translation 13). She defines translation as "an act that involves not only writing, but also reading[,] and what we see when we read a translation are the traces of each individual translator's own subjective interpretation of the source text."\textsuperscript{52} The act of translating requires not only effective reading and writing skills but also a consciousness on the part of the translator to be faithful to the original text, responding to subtleties and nuances and decoding with intelligence and sensitivity "layers of meaning that writers encode into their writing" (Judging 43).

Yet, the fact remains that the translator can never really aspire to attain a perfect translation because of the complex and disparate nature of different language compositions which make word to word transposition a near impossible task. Something is always already lost when the translator (or bilingual writer) travels from the source language to the target language. This view of translation, assumes "a theory of language in which meaning is slippery because [it is] contextually determined."\textsuperscript{53} As Soviet semiotician, Juri Lotman asserts "No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture," and Bassnett endorses this point with the view: "Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture" (Translation 14).

The problem of slippage is compounded by the fact that the original text, like the translation, is also a fragment of a greater language which subjects the process of communication (in both texts) to different degrees of disruption. Elaborating this aspect Benjamin remarks: "In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized" (80). So in every act of translation, "there is a residue of infidelity towards language, a trace of the intention to subvert and dislocate it, within

\textsuperscript{50} Bassnett points out that while so much attention is paid to what is lost in translation, little focus is devoted to what is gained as a result of the translation process. See Susan Bassnett, \textit{Translation Studies,} rev. ed., (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), 30.
the translator's awareness of his or her inability to reproduce the original, to 'carry it over' intact."

The risk of disarticulation is a factor that every translator has to bear in mind in the process of surrendering to the original text, and reading it with the objective of transmitting its myriad meanings to another language. The very fact that a word, phrase or sentence can have multiple meanings makes the translator's task a laboured one, if not a daunting one. There may be moments when the way the translator responds to the meaning of the object text conflicts with the intentions of the original writer. A typical illustration can be located in reading the English translation of Djebar's Francophone text, *L'amour, la fantasia*.

One of the focal concerns of this novel is to inscribe in the narrative the bilingual writer's unsettling, ambivalent relationship with her Arabo-Berber oral heritage and the French written tradition: "my writing is immediately caught in the snare of the old war between two peoples" (216). Even though the French language is inextricably interlocked with the violent colonial history of Algeria, for the author, paradoxically, the language of the oppressor has also been a route to a more fulfilling life. Hence, there is in this novel a deep preoccupation with the author's bilingual heritage, with its "in-between" experiences, its ruptures, and its moments of indecisiveness. Reading the original, the reader is likely to perceive with greater intensity the author's profound sense of apprehension as she strives to reconcile her mother tongue (Arabic) with French, her "stepmother tongue". In the translated medium, that intensity is lost somewhat because the content upon which the translation focuses does not relate spontaneously to a new and an estranged language such as English. In other words, the unity and the intimacy between content and language in the original diminish considerably once the text is transformed into another language. To complicate matters further are Djebar's forceful poetic and elliptical style and, indeed, issues of grammaticality and semantic loss incurred in the process of translation. In this situation, the translation does signify "a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien" (Benjamin 76). Indeed, the reader needs to be wary of such lapses and inconsistencies when reading and studying translated material.

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Apart from problems of compatibility, the translator may also face instances when a word, phrase or thought becomes untranslatable, or, when strict literal translation may distort or obscure the meaning of the original work. As a result, though fidelity to the original text should be a fundamental concern for the translator, s/he also needs to exercise a degree of freedom in the recreation and transformation of the original text. That is, the translation must mirror "the intentio of the original not as reproduction but as harmony ..." (Benjamin 79).

Commenting on the intricate act of translating a text, Spivak indicates that the risk or "violence" to the translating medium is often caused by the rhetorical nature of language which can be defined as a "menace of a space outside language". This rhetoricity, intrinsic to every language, needs to be contrasted with the logical interferences of language that make up the more direct literal intentions of the original work. Often the logic of the text-in-translation is disrupted because of the menacing presence of rhetoricity. Drawing a link between meaning, logic and rhetoric, Spivak declares:

Logic allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections. Rhetoric must work in the silence between and around words in order to see what works and how much. The jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic, condition and effect of knowing, is a relationship by which a world is made for the agent .... ["Politics" 179]

Translation, then, is not merely a literal transformation of synonym and syntax of a text into another language. It is a "staging", a process of interpretation (in the way an actor interprets a script) within a "three-tiered notion of language", that is, as rhetoric, logic and silence. Because of this complex nature of the translating process, the translator’s commitment to the text, and "a correct cultural politics" alone are sometimes inadequate for a responsible translation: "The history of the language, the history of the author’s moment, the history of the language-in-and-as-translation, must figure in the weaving as well" (Spivak, "Politics" 184).

However difficult the task of translation may be, and however complex it may be to grasp the author’s literal intentions as well as other implicit meanings, the act itself is not entirely impossible. In fact, it may be the case that the translator is obliged to interpret a term "in a way that is unfaithful to the literal intention,"

56 For example, Djebar’s inability to produce an Arabic term to define "rape" because rape is a culturally taboo subject in conservative Algerian society. See Chapter 2 for details.
because s/he is attempting to preserve other more critical aspects of the text concerned. Appiah thus argues "faced with a real live text, it seems bizarrely inappropriate to spend one's time speculating about the author's intentions: the author may be long dead, unknown to us, uninteresting, and surely, it will seem, her intentions have nothing to do with what we are interested in" (814). While he is right in suggesting that the translator may not always be in a position to decipher the writer's intentions or every objective of the original text, it is nevertheless imperative that the translator bears in mind the writer's aims and line-of-argument, her political commitments (as in the case of Francophone writer, Djebar, or the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi), as well as other aspects of language such as rhetoricity, the multiplicity of potential meanings and subtleties of the original text, to produce a responsible translation. Ideally, the translator's objective should not only be to produce a transparent translation. As Anton Popovič explains succinctly: "The translator also has the right to differ organically, to be independent, as long as that independence is pursued for the sake of the original ... to reproduce it as a living work."  

Ultimately, the reader will benefit more from focusing on the textual qualities of the translated work that make it worth reading, examining and teaching, than in perusing painstakingly characteristics that go to make the rewritten text a mirror image of the original. Appiah exclaims, "it is part of our understanding of literary judgement, that there can always be new readings, new things that matter about a text, new reasons for caring about new properties" (816). These new readings or rewritings can challenge the reader to undertake the more difficult task of demonstrating a genuine respect for others in different circumstances, while responding sensitively and intelligently to a rich and varied body of literature from diverse cultural contexts. In addition, as Bassnett sums up articulately: "Despite what is always lost in translation, something also is gained and the art of the translator is to help us forget loss in the excitement and energy of discovering writers whose voices would otherwise be silent to us" (Judging 44).

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58 After all, every text has the power to manipulate a given society in order to "construct' the kind of 'culture' desired". As Bassnett rightly affirms: "A writer does not just write in a vacuum: he or she is the product of a particular culture of a particular moment in time," and the writing, whether it is an original work or translation, reflects multiple factors (such as race, gender and class), including the material conditions affecting the production and marketing of texts. See Constructing Cultures X, 137.

Chapter 2

Assia Djebar

Looking into the past their history could be kept alive on tongues, through speech and in songs - but too much of their future lay at the bottom of the sea in lead coffins or scattered through the earth on the plantation. For all its tenderness, her vision was sad.

Michelle Cliff, Abeng

One song would bridge the finite in silence
Syllable vocal vowel consonant
One word erect the finite in memory

M. Nourbese Philip, she tries her tongue, her silence softly breaks

2.1 Introduction

Assia Djebar (b. 1936), a major novelist of North African descent, is arguably the most renowned woman writer of contemporary Algeria and the Maghreb. The first African woman to be accorded Germany’s premier literary award, Le Prix de la Paix, in 2000, Djebar was selected for her fictional works because they "set a sign of hope for the democratic renewal of Algeria as well as for peace in her homeland and understanding between cultures." In the last four decades Djebar has written a formidable collection of novels, short stories, poetry, essays and a play in 4 acts, and directed two films during a ten-year hiatus from writing. A historian by training, Djebar demonstrates a profound sensitivity in her fiction to issues intricately linked with the discourse of historiography: the narrative strategies embedded in the construction of official history; the question of hermeneutics and the interventionist positioning of the chronicler/"archon"/historian/narrator; the blurring barriers demarcating history, fiction and autobiography; and the palimpsestic nature of historical works with their subterranean layers of meaning. Her texts continuously strive to subvert the overwriting

2 The literary accolades she has received so far are numerous and include: Le Prix de la Critique Internationale at the Venice Film Festival in 1979 for La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua (The Mount Chenoua Band of Women); the Prix Maeterlink for her prolific contribution to francophone literature in 1995; in October 1996 she became the 14th Neustadt Laureate for her contributions to world literature.
3 The thesis employs the Derridean definition of the archon as a person who has the power to interpret the archive, to “‘exercise social order’ not discursively but hermeneutically through the interpretation of texts.” See Sandhya Shetty and Elizabeth Bellamy, “Postcolonialism’s Archive Fever,” Diacritics 30, no. 1 (2000): 27-28 in particular, for a comprehensive account of how the archon causes violence to the archive through mistranslation, misinformation and errant commentary.
process by underscoring the temporality of written history and the interconnectedness of diverse historical moments.

Acutely responsive to women's aphasis and thwarted efforts at textually inscribing their selfhood, her narratives, written in une langue adverse, configure a recuperative process that foregrounds a distinctly "feminine" voice. Simultaneously they recover a historical consciousness that bridges the chasm between past histories and events of an ephemeral and yet palpable present, between individual voices and the collective. She thus sets out to deconstruct the palimpsestic master narrative of history and restore to the blank page alternative readings of the past. 4 In this trajectory, Djebar harks back to her maternal ancestors and the oral tradition of her Berber roots, resuscitating simultaneously the subsumed histories and voices of anonymous women, "the ululation of convulsive sisterhood". 5

The objective of this chapter is to analyse the dynamic multivalent strategies Djebar employs to restore Algeria's history and foreground a series of complex political and social problems that has led to a long trail of blood in postcolonial Algeria. While subverting the hegemony of master discourses that have historically suppressed all voices (especially the colonized feminine ones) on the peripheries of Algerian society, these manifold textual strategies help to recuperate the experiences of women, chronicled inadequately in the works of male historians and writers. The texts examined in detail here are Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade and A Sister to Scheherazade that belong to a projected quartet, 6 and Far from Madina which Djebar composed when her work on the original project was unexpectedly disrupted, as Algeria plunged into bloody political turbulence in 1988. 7

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4 The thesis does not rigorously advocate any specific brand of deconstruction even though certain sections allude to Derridean deconstruction. These sections have also benefited from the works of Gayatri Spivak, especially, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that is informed primarily by Jacques Derrida's Of Grammatology. Spivak’s essay frames a deconstructive feminist praxis to configure a subaltern subjectivity within a politics of resistance. See Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York & London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 66-111.

5 I am indebted to Assia Djebar for her illuminating introductory lectures and discussions at Cambridge University in Autumn 1996 that inspired me to undertake an in-depth study of her work.


7 Assia Djebar, Far from Madina, trans. Dorothy Blair (London: Quartet, 1994) - henceforth referred to as Madina. I have chosen not to use diacriticals for Arabic words except for the single closing apostrophe (') to represent the Arabic "hamza". The exception to this rule is in
As this chapter demonstrates, Fantasia grapples primarily with questions of historiography in the context of Algeria's colonization; the struggle of the oppressed for autonomy and voice-consciousness; the author's access to a space of writing (in French) and the recovery of women's silenced oral testimonies (in Arabic mainly and Berber) for the restoration of a collective feminine history. In highlighting the oral culture of these courageous peasant women who in Djebar's palimpsest become transmitters of Algerian history, the author probes the intricate relationship between written and oral traditions, the dialectics of bilingualism, and her ambivalent position, or her "dispossession" within a multilingual, cross-cultural framework.

Conversely, Sister strives to unveil the shrouded spaces of the Algerian women's world, outlining issues that are central to women's survival and self-preservation in dominantly masculinist African (Muslim) cultures. The latter work will be read in conjunction with So Long a Letter, written by the Senegalese Francophone writer, Mariama Bâ, in an on-going process to locate women and examine their concerns in a wider cross-cultural framework. Like Sister, Letter is a compelling study of Muslim women's experiences within a space of feminine enclosure, their aspirations and desire to gain access to the gendered outer world of men, and the conflicts and tensions they encounter as they renounce the norms of patriarchy and strive to attain visibility, mobility and the more fulfilling possibilities of a world away from home. Spurred by the volatile circumstances and violence in Algeria, in Madina, Djebar retreats to the past in order to re-read sacred historical chronicles, revision the early years of a strikingly "feminine" Islamic history and recover Islamic alternatives through a personal ijtihād (literally "effort") for the unsettling conditions of contemporary Algeria.

In the early phase of her vocation as writer Djebar was deeply preoccupied with the impact of the colonial experience on the Algerian psyche [Fantasia, Women of Algiers in Their Apartment], while exploring concurrently the multifaceted post/colonial condition and negotiating between tradition and modernity [Sister]. Emphasizing the dynamics of dislocation and alienation intrinsic to her bicultural experience, these works trace the contradictions and pluralities of the hybrid

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the reproduction of transliterations of proper names/titles and other words in quoted works. Arabic words (as in the case of French words) are generally italicized, except those that ordinarily appear in English dictionaries. See also Djebar's Loin de Médine (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991). All subsequent references are to these editions.


postcolonial Self and seek innovative ways to restore to history the dehistoricized subjects on the peripheries. In striving to resurrect a space for the marginalized, the silenced and the misunderstood, Djebar's most recent fictional histories [Madina, So Vast the Prison]\(^{10}\) have become increasingly concerned with the condition and status of Muslim women of Algeria, "'crushed' under the weight of a patriarchal system, where the old foundation, Berber and Islam, brings mutual reinforcement."\(^{11}\)

Conflating the cultural with the political, the writer's later works progressively deal with the brutal legacy of a colonial war that has scarred Algerian history with internecine conflicts, religious fanaticism and repression, civil wars, torture, assassinations and mass murder. In Algerian White, for example, Djebar weaves into her elegiac narrative her growing anguish and pessimism as she records the bloody convulsions and "collective self-devouring" ("l'autodevoration collective") that have plunged Algeria into further chaos.\(^{12}\) While aiming to fill in the blank pages of her nation's "whitened" postcolonial history, she weaves an epic tapestry of a group of writers, poets, journalists, scholars and other fellow Algerians who had worked boldly and tirelessly to reform and restore the stifled nationhood of a battered Algeria, hurtling headlong into anarchy: "How to withstand mourning for our friends, our colleagues, without first having sought to understand the why of yesterday's funerals, those of the Algerian utopia" (Algerian White 230).

Many of Djebar's later fictions ultimately meditate upon a confluence of thoughts and ideas pertaining to decolonization, nationalism, patriotism, and the subjects of sovereignty, civil rights, women's self-preservation and empowerment. The core concern of these fictional histories is Algeria, which John Erickson describes provocatively as: "the stillborn unrealized state of Algerian nationhood promised by the War of Liberation that claimed more than a million lives during eight years of bloody conflict against the French (1954-1962).\(^{13}\) The novels in progress become a quest, "a quest within a form, to find a language, a quest which begins from a contradiction, from an aporia, or in the case of the present Algerian crisis, from an 'ensavaging.'"\(^{14}\)

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\(^{10}\) Assia Djebar, So Vast the Prison, trans. Betsy Wing (New York & Toronto: Seven Stories Press, 1999).


\(^{14}\) Assia Djebar, at a lecture delivered at Cambridge University in November 1996.
Alluding to the architectural structure of the traditional Andalusian Mauresque house ("la grande maison"), Djebar perceives her unfinished quartet of four volumes as "[un] edifice que l'on pourrait parcourir", a memory space where the reader is free to wander through the winding corridor of words, exploring them imaginatively. Conceived out of personal sentiments of exile from the motherland, exclusion and alienation, Djebar's Algerian quartet encompasses four mostly polyphonic texts (Fantasia, Sister and So Vast the Prison are already published) that bind autobiographical fragments with Algerian history (Fantasia and So Vast the Prison), and the second in the quartet, that is, Sister, substituting history with the celebrated legend of Scheherazade from Thousand and One Nights. Unlike Fantasia and So Vast the Prison which make forays into wider vistas of history, Sister aspires fundamentally to seek alternative answers to the cloistered lives of the writer's Algerian sisters. Significantly, even though Djebar's texts strive to grapple with her sentiments of angst and unease about her tenuous links with her maternal world, this is a world with which she never really lost ties, and to which she continually returns to draw inspiration for her imaginative work. In So Vast the Prison Djebar travels to the deepest recesses of the sub-Saharan desert to recover the secret script of her Berber maternal ancestors, "an Arabic-Andalusian vernacular", preserved for the writer in the language of embroidery in women's garments, some residual accent of Arabic-Andalusian speech and the languorous andalouse lute music (174-175). In Madina, as this chapter demonstrates, this maternal world incorporates the eloquent feminine voices and bodies of Islamic history, voices and bodies that have been muffled and marginalized by official versions of historiography.

2.2.1 The Kabyle Myth and the Construction of Imperial Identities: A Context for Fantasia

Fantasia undertakes a journey to the subterranean recesses of both a collective history of the Algerian people and of the individual Self, emerging out of the complex conditions of postcoloniality. Entwining multiple narratives of often discordant perceptions, the text is both polymorphic and polyphonic, shifting eloquently from autobiographical narrative to historical discourse and archival record; from monologue, soliloquy and silence to a symphony of women's collective testimonies and

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"vociferations". As historical narrative, the novel reframes the history of Algeria by decentring the discursive privilege of authoritative Western historiography and underscoring the subjectivity of the colonized indigenous class.

Foregrounding the thematic concerns of the thesis, this section demonstrates how specific discourses, privileging a hegemonic West and using Europe as a yardstick, set out to configure essentialist, orientalist representations of Algeria and its people. Such orientalism, as Djebar’s text informs us, was part of a larger plan to stratify society hierarchically by dehistoricizing the indigenous classes and projecting the colonialists as the dominant Other.

The construction of the Manichaean Kabyle myth, for example, was a strategy undertaken by French imperialists to divide Arabs and Berbers, the two main ethnic communities in Algeria.17 The existing ethnic dichotomy was linked to a socio-geographical one, where the Arabs were defined as nomadic plain-dwellers, and the Berbers as sedentary mountain-dwellers.18 The myth assumed a racial dimension when the French "discovered" similarities between earlier Germanic tribes (especially the Vandals who were Aryan Christians) and existing Berber tribes, with the objective of constructing a set of characteristics they hoped would accelerate the process of acculturation and subjugation in Algeria (Lorcin 22). Using French society as a referential point, the European colonialists rationalized that unlike "the errant", "immoral" and "fanatical" Arab, the "industrious", "commercially-minded" and "impious" Kabyle was more susceptible to the mission civilisatrice. The main objectives of this process were to draw the largest Berber community into the French system, alienate and marginalize the Arabs who were an obvious threat to French interest in the settler colony, and exert control over the territory through the infamous divide and rule policy. As Danielle Marx-Scouras elucidates:

the "barbarization" of the Other ("barbaros") takes place through a process whereby we attribute to his "nature" what is really the result of cultural nearsightedness (we inferiorize what is different from us) and social oppression (the West needs, for example, to view the Third World as underdeveloped). By barbarizing what is different or other, we are thus able to legitimate the "spiritual adventure" called civilization.19

17 Unless a wider meaning is suggested, when I refer to "Arabs" here I am restricting my definition to Algerian Arabs.
The binary representation of Arabs and Berbers thus attains a mythic significance, not so much because such a representation is fallacious, but because the visualization was rationalized through restricted information to which the colonizer had access, and because the colonizing race is always used as a standard of reference to judge other cultures and construct identities and meanings for the oppressed Other. In the case of Algerian Arabs, the representation becomes progressively derogatory, because, as opposed to the Kabyles with whom the colonizer made some contact, the French officers were never really able to invade the mobile space of nomadic Arab communities. This created obstacles for the colonizer who found it difficult to penetrate the "mysterious" recesses of the Islamic faith. It was this inaccessibility and incomprehensibility that led the French to weave mythic identities around the Arabs, in particular, and other Algerians in general. As Edward Said remarks in discussing the subject of how the West appropriates the voice of the Other:

> there is no question of an exchange between Islam's views and an outsider's: no dialogue, no discussion, no mutual recognition. There is a flat assertion of quality, which the Western policy-maker, or his faithful servant possesses by virtue of his being Western, white, non-Muslim. 20

Such Orientalist perceptions, as Said perceives astutely are "statement[s] of power and a claim for relatively absolute authority", configured out of racism, religious and cultural disparities, and political and economic might.

Decolonizing such essentializing categories, contemporary Maghrebian writers such as Assia Djebar and Abdelkebir Khatibi pose alternative discourses that centrepetal theories and interrogate the legitimacy of such biased constructs. Of particular relevance to Fantasia as a counter discourse are the forceful occupation of Algeria by the French for 132 years, the effective resistance by a subject people for an Algerian nationhood, the war of independence - a bloody 8 year revolutionary struggle (1954-1962) to liberate the nation from colonial domination, and the strategic role women assumed during the period of decolonization.

The notion of "desire to possess" in Fantasia implies a striking duality that is both sexual and colonial: the narrator's youthful relationship with a stranger from a neighbouring school and her growing love for him are paralleled ironically with the violent relationship of the Algerian masses and the French colonial officers that mirrors...

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a history of "rape" and conquest. Deliberately appropriating the perspective of the Orientalist, in the initial scene of invasion and occupation Djebar personifies Algeria as a woman in order to emphasize a history of aggression and reinforce notions of rape, subjugation and brutal suppression of Otherized communities. Posed concurrently with the narratives of colonialism and youthful love is the record of the history of Algerian peasant women whose dichotomized roles as "cloistered" mothers and daughters, and as resistance fighters of the FLN (National Liberation Front) are examined perceptively by Djebar in the latter part of her fictional history.

The section that follows aims to demonstrate how Djebar destabilizes orientalist accounts of Maghrebian women and resurrects women's histories in order to reclaim for them a subjectivity that was effaced by colonialist and patriarchal historical narratives. Here, some emphasis will be placed on the significance of history as a written narrative where the ideological convictions and writing strategies of the chronicler/historian contributed to the construction of a particular knowledge. Djebar's fiction illustrates how the colonialists fabricated information where those on the borders, the colonized subjects, were neither legitimately represented nor allowed to articulate an alternative viewpoint. The archival records which the writer introduces to the textual fabric are particularly relevant to expose Eurocentric underpinnings in the master narrative, and foreground a pensée-autre for the silenced Others of colonial and postcolonial histories.

2.2.2 Unravelling Fictions of Factual Representation

Fantasia contains a non-linear narrative structure and an array of innovative stylistic devices that work effectively to destabilize Western imperialistic modes of history-writing and disclose the dehumanizing actions of French imperialists, beginning with the initial invasion of Algiers. The splitting of the narrative into many layers and the narrative digressions take place through the juxtapositioning of the present and the past. The events in the novel, both historical and personal/autobiographical, continue to oscillate between 19th and 20th century Algeria, with the third and final section recovering the testimonies of women, suppressed by the master narrative of Western imperialist discourse and overshadowed by other versions of patriarchal history.

Paralleling the violent history of imperialism with her intimate personal history, Djebar inscribes in the text her troubling relationship with France (her country of residence since her exile from Algeria) and the French language, notably in the context of her bicultural heritage (or rather, tricultural, if one were to include her Berber inheritance). Concurrently, despite the many atrocities the French committed against indigenous peoples, she does not fail to pay homage to French citizens, such as Pauline
Roland, who fearlessly gave their support to the Algerian resistance because of their resolute anti-colonialist stance. Hence Djebar suggests that the anonymous, feminine voices from the ravaged countryside of Algeria could applaud Pauline with their ancestral cries of triumph.

It would help to ask here why the author ironically commences her narrative with a comment on her bicultural/bilingual inheritance, a stark consequence of French colonialism in Algeria. In other words, what makes Djebar, a trained historian, write a non-linear, semi-autobiographical narrative, inverting chronological happenings, disrupting the sequential flow of events and presenting the consequence (her access to the colonizer’s language and culture) prior to the antecedent (invasion of Algiers) as a prologue to the novel? Djebar seems to be doing several things simultaneously in this first scene:

A little Arab girl going to school for the first time, one autumn morning, walking hand in hand with her father. A tall erect figure in a fez and a European suit, carrying a bag of school books. He is a teacher at the French primary school. [3]

By linking the Arab girl with a language of colonialism at the outset, the author focuses on the tensions embedded in the relationship between the French and the subjected Algerian civilians. Resentment and remorse on one hand, and a sense of privilege and fulfilment on the other, are interspersed paradoxically in the reflections of the narrator’s childhood. The act of going to a European school and being exposed to a Western education are defined as alienating experiences that cause a rupture in the relationship between the girl and her community. The older generation would rather have her wrapped in veils, ensuring her invisibility and making her “more unseeing than the sightless”. The younger generation, in contrast, strives to adapt to the emerging new circumstances of an ambivalent heritage, whilst being conscious of the power of the written word to construct, distort or deconstruct personal and national histories. The access to the written word in a predominantly oral culture will give them privileges and

21 The English translations cited in this chapter are not always accurate or satisfactory. As it is to be expected, neither can they reproduce the essence of the original text intact. This is an issue to which Djebar herself drew attention (especially in relation to Madina) during a conversation I had with her in Cambridge, in Autumn 1996. Despite the inevitable gaps and slippages, the translations have been a huge source of help to understand with more clarity the otherwise complex nuances of the original French scripts.
a freedom which their elders may have never known, despite the dangers inherent: "For her the time will come when there will be more danger in love that is committed to paper than love that languishes behind enclosing walls" (3), "Viendra l'heure pour elle où l'amour qui s'écrit est plus dangereux que l'amour séquestré" (11). The author implies here that the young can neither be suppressed by centuries-old, rigid patriarchal traditions nor imprisoned by oppressive political ideology.

The existing tension between the young and old is sensed in the writer's/narrator's relationship with her father as well, even though it is her father himself who first introduced her to a Western education and a foreign language. Thus, at the age of seventeen when the narrator receives her first "love" letter, her father is enraged. In his eyes the "stranger's" suggestion to exchange letters "is not merely completely indecent, but this invitation is tantamount to setting the stage for rape" (4); "Indécence de la demande aux yeux du père, comme si les préparatifs d'un rapt inévitable s'amorçaient dans cette invite" (12).

Ironically, the stage is also set for rape in another time, in other circumstances, as we move on to the first episode of Algeria’s colonial drama on 13 June, 1830. Subject to the gaze of European imperialists, Algiers is metamorphosed into an "Oriental Woman", about to be penetrated and violated by hordes of marauding French troops. This violent encounter is metaphorically described as a dazzling performance, an ironic overture to 132 years of exploitation, subjugation and oppression. As the narrator visualizes this initial scene, where the majestic squadron prepares itself to invade the city at the entrance of the bay, she imagines "the prelude to the cavalcade of screams and carnage which will fill the ensuing decades" (8); "le cortège de cris et de meurtres, qui vont emplir les décennies suivantes" (17). Simultaneously, by attributing the voyeuristic gaze to the native Algerians who observe with consternation the approaching French Armada from the terraces of Algiers, the woman writer subverts conventions of official historiography and reverses roles for the colonizer and the colonized. The stable spaces in the terraces, as opposed to the shifting waters on which the colonialists stand, seem to give the "silent spectators" a solid foundation from which they could recapture "the tale when the encounter is over" (7). This tale, significantly, will be in direct contrast to the accounts given by the colonizers as historians, chroniclers, geographers, painters and artists.

To use the language of the colonizer in order to reconstruct his atrocities 150 years later is, indeed, one of the many inevitable contradictions that Djebar endeavours to negotiate in the text. The novel creates space for the exposition of dominant
archival records, the written narratives of European imperialists, and counterposes them with the narrator’s personal observations and the stifled testimonies of peasant women from the mountains whose contribution to the liberation struggle can by no means be underestimated. By interspersing thus different versions of Algeria’s colonial history, Djebar constructs an archive of conflicting and discordant narratives that centre the totalizing vision of Western imperialist historiography.

To achieve this degree of multiple representation and fracture the hegemonic Western historical perspective, the writer consciously introduces into her text a series of chroniclers and their archival records or “narratives”. As the novel discloses, depending on each chronicler’s ideological and political affiliations, and verbal strategies, the slant of interpretation varies considerably. The novel in fact endorses Hayden White’s provocative argument that unlike the novelist who may create his story purely from imaginative circumstances, “the historian confronts a veritable chaos of events already constituted, out of which he must choose the elements of the story he would tell.”

Though White is here specifically referring to writers of history, the principal difference between historians and chroniclers is that unlike the historian, the chronicler may actually be present in the location where an event occurs, even if, as Djebar pinpoints, this may not always be the case. Nonetheless, like the historian, the chronicler too will be compelled to make a selection of details in order to emplot a story and textualize the past. Hermeneutics, or interpretation, is therefore vital to the historian’s task of making his work coherent, continuous and aesthetically connected to his discourse.

Chroniclers and later historians of the West had a distinctly crucial task to perform in disseminating information about the affairs of the dominant entity. However, because of the chroniclers’ empathy with those in power, that is, a profound bias towards a Western agenda, the history they constructed has been tainted with contradictions, leaving fissures and distortions in the archives. In Fantasia Djebar intervenes to subvert and deconstruct this hegemonic history and to restore a sense of subjectivity to the silenced Others, thrust to the peripheries of a Western discursive tradition. To achieve this restoration, the novelist assumes the position of the colonized (woman) subject, invading persuasively the space of the patriarchal colonial text.

24 This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 of the thesis.
2.2.3 The Narrative as a Palimpsest of Peripheral Histories

While problematizing the subject of written history, Fantasia assesses the extent to which colonial administrators systematically engaged in the activity of chronicling events and describing scenes of carnage and destruction in the colonies:

Hordes of interpreters ... diverse scholars and professional scribblers will swoop down on this new prey. The supererogatory protuberances of their publications will form a pyramid to hide the initial violence from view. [45]

Des cohortes d'interprètes ... docteurs divers et écrivains de profession s'abattront sur la nouvelle proie. Toute une pyramide d'écrits amoncelés en apophyse superfétatoire occultera la violence initiale. [56]

As Djebar suggests, they were "infected by a veritable scribblomania", and the textual words in "this new enterprise of rapine" were systematically transformed into effective weapons. Resolved to promote a colonial ideology, and to shape the representation of Algeria through French eyes, these colonial officers devoted their efforts to reinforcing myths that promoted their political, financial and territorial interests.

Selected chronicles, letters and other material of the French are exposed in the novel to highlight the problematic of writing history, to dismantle orthodox knowledge pertaining to truth and authenticity, and extend the discourse of historiography: "I, for my part, am thinking of those who sleep through this night in the city ... Who will sing in the days to come of the death throes of their liberty?" (42); "Je songe, moi, à ceux qui dorment, en ces instants, dans la ville ... Qui chantera plus tard cette agonie de la liberté ...?" (53). This process of reconfiguring colonial history to reclaim previously displaced versions of the oppressed classes, relies to a great degree on counter narratives, rhetorical questions, and the uncovering of inconsistencies, absences and prejudicial views of the dominant West.

Beginning with the initial invasion, Djebar interleaves several historical episodes with specific chroniclers or archons, commenting concomitantly on their ideological convictions and idiosyncratic dispositions. The first confrontation which is witnessed by the chief officer of the French Armada, Amable Matterer, is recorded with the aloofness and lack of compassion in the colonizer's gaze (26). The violence of the act and the perversity of the colonial desire attain multiple implications as the colonial encounter is presented first as a theatrical performance and is later described as a grotesque parody of death and as sexual violence: "But why, above the corpses that will rot on successive battlefields, does this first Algerian campaign reverberate with the sounds of an obscene copulation?" (19); "Mais pourquoi, au-dessus des cadavres qui vont pourrir sur les successifs champs de bataille, cette première campagne d'Algérie fait-elle entendre les
It is profoundly ironic that in the midst of this dying humanity another officer, a war artist, should execute preliminary sketches of "piled-up corpses", "for a picture destined for the Museum". The irony is intensified in Matterer's observation that "[t]he public [that is the French] will be able to obtain lithography," as though the death toll was an indication of the colonizers' commitment to the imperialist project in the spaces they conquer. Interwoven with these observations are the questions Djebar poses to articulate the voice of the ex-centric, the absent Other, and to reconstitute his/her subjectivity:

Thousands of watchful eyes there are doubtless estimating the number of vessels. Who will pass on the number? Who will write of it? Which of all these silent spectators will live to tell the tale when the encounter is over? [7]


The explosion at Fort Emperor less that a month later is recounted by another chronicler, J. T. Merle, described as a "theatre manager" who was never present in the theatre of warfare, nor "tormented by any scruples that he may be shirking his duties" (28). Despite his absence on the battlefield, he compiles war reports and comments on a war that he never witnesses. Indeed as Adlai Murdoch remarks, he

becomes a figure for the paradoxical absence, the lack which ultimately underlies the entire colonial undertaking .... This constant slippage which figures the relationship between Merle's presence and the events he seeks to recount marks the entire discursive contextualization of the colonial invasion. 25

It is such a slippage that leads him later to sensationalize and misconstrue information, transferring the responsibility for the death of a young, injured Arab to his aged father: "'father disturbed by French humanity'; 'Arab father bitterly opposes his son's amputation which the French doctors advise'; 'Muslim fanaticism causes the son's death, despite French medical science'" (32). This is a succinct illustration of how the French perceived Algerian Arabs as ignorant zealots. What he declines to mention, as Djebar informs us later, is that the military interpreters brought by the French from the Middle East to Algeria, fail to comprehend the local Arab dialect, and therefore, misinterpret statements and misinform in the early exchanges between the French and Algerians.

The over-determination of the discursive representation by the colonizer becomes even more apparent as increasing numbers of witnesses, most with colonialist agendas, enter the scene of battle. Of the thirty seven accounts recounting the fatal events of June 1830, only three narrate the viewpoint of the besieged, contributing to the almost complete erasure of the colonized subject’s identity and representation. This is a clear instance of the dehistoricization process in 19th century colonial Algeria.

On the other hand, in a later scene when Pelissier, the colonel in charge of a horrendous massacre, writes a graphic report to the Parisian government about the fumigation of an entire tribe in a cave, it does have unexpected repercussions for the officer concerned. In his enthusiasm to write an explicit account of the dead, Pelissier reveals injudiciously the dehumanizing aspect of the colonial process which was deeply injurious to the image of the mission civilisatrice. By unearthing this tragedy in the caves where men, women, children and their flocks are systematically asphyxiated by smoke, Djebar recovers the narratives of her dead ancestors, the silenced subalterns, and gives voice to their inadequately chronicled trauma:

"I am obsessed by the memories exhumed from this double necropolis, which spur me on, even if I feel I am opening a register of the dead, in the region of the forgotten caves, for those who will never have eyes to read."[78]

La mémoire exhumée de ce double ossuaire m’habite et m’anime, même s’il me semble ouvrir, pour des aveugles, un register obituaire, aux alentours de ces cavernes oubliées. [92]

Pelissier’s record thus becomes a palimpsest on which she "now inscribe[s] the charred passion of [her] ancestors" (79). Through this inscription, she disrupts and deconstructs the narrative of the archon, proclaiming with indignation and resentment: "Pelissier ... is for me the foremost chronicler of the first Algerian War! ... Pelissier, butcher-and-recorder, brandishes the torch of death which illuminates these martyrs" (78); "Pelissier ... me devient premier écrivain de la première guerre d’Algérie! .... Pelissier, bourreau-greffier, porte dans les mains le flambeau de mort et en éclaire ces martyrs" (92).

Though subsumed by hegemonic colonial historiography, some decades later the Hanefite Mufti, Ahmed Effendi, records poetically the efforts of resistance initiated by indigenous Muslims who united to fight their enemy:

' The entire population,’ he writes, ‘men and women, thronged around the threshold of my house with the heart-rending cry: "Since we must perish, it is better to perish before the door of an alim [one who has knowledge]!'"[43]
"Toute la population, hommes et femmes, se pressait au seuil de mon logis en criant d’un ton lamentable : - Puisque déjà il faut périr, mieux vaut mourir devant la porte d’un alim!" [54]

It is noteworthy that in this account we hear for the first time the resolute voices of women who would rather face death than be dishonoured by the "infidels".

The history of women’s resistance in colonial and patriarchal systems is discussed with greater intensity in a later narrative which relates the story of Princess Badra, the only daughter of the ruler of the independent city of Mazuna. On the day of the princess’ betrothal ceremony, the bride and her young sister-in-law are taken captive together with their procession by the legendary Bu Maza, whose rebellious nature, especially in his war against the foreign enemy, had raised his stature to mythic heights. Especially noteworthy is the way in which the two young women confront the warriors on horseback who arrive to raid the procession. Though different in their methods of resistance, both women face their indigenous rivals fearlessly. Stirred by the daring attitude of these abstruse feminine figures of Algerian history, Djebar contemplates their fates:

No-one knew, the next day, if the two virgins had scorned the Sharif when he came to take his place before them, or if it was he who was reluctant to use force when faced by his victims - were they repelled or fascinated by him? [94]

Personne ne sut, le lendemain, si les deux vierges dédaignèrent le Chérif, quand il prit place face à elles, ou si ce fut lui qui, devant ces proies révoltées ou fascinées, répugna à utiliser la force. [109]

In the process the author dismantles patriarchal historical knowledge and discursive traditions and constructs a palimpsest where women become central figures of history. Simultaneously, the scene also manifests the disenchantment of warriors like Bu Maza with the callous extravagance and indifference of some tribal groups to the resistance efforts of other groups who were struggling to overthrow their colonial enemy at a crucial juncture of Algerian history. Through this episode Djebar addresses the internal divisions and antagonism among tribal communities that made resistance activities less organized and effective, and the fate of the women who were implicated in the early phase of colonialism.

With remarkable poetic sensibility, the chapter on the Bride of Mazuna elaborates the notion of the Fantasia: "a set of virtuoso movements on horseback executed at a gallop,
accompanied by loud cries and culminating in rifle shots,"^{26} in the sudden appearance of the rebel warriors:

As the dust haze spread, tall figures could be clearly distinguished bending low over their sturdy mounts .... Suddenly the regular, staccato thud of galloping hooves was upon them like the syncopated chugging of some invisible machine .... [90]

_Dans un poudroiement diffus, des masses hautes, tête baissée sur de courtes montures .... Soudain, le rythme régulier, saccadé, sembla encore plus proche, comme une mécanique invisible .... [105]

The image of the Fantasia, the _leitmotif_ of the novel, oscillates between a multivalency of meanings, evoking the binary view of a distinct Arab cultural tradition, displayed at ceremonial gatherings (like Badra's wedding celebration) on the one hand, and on the other, war activities and military triumphs. The equestrian performance is deeply symbolic of the love/hate, desire/conquest, peace/war paradox, intricately woven into Djebar's narrative.

Equally significant for its structure is Fantasia as a musical composition, free and spontaneous in its improvisatory style. This is of particular relevance to Part Three which is a chorus of feminine voices, a crescendo of once muted sounds, resurrecting the stifled stories of bygone years. The metaphoric significance of the Fantasia also projects another ambivalent dichotomy which wavers between two opposing concepts. At one level, the evocative image, projecting an inherent cultural feature, feeds into Orientalist perceptions that define Arabs in essentialist terms, as elusive, belligerent fanatics. At another, the improvisatory nature of the Fantasia as musical composition enables the author to subvert such essentialisms, and recover the voices of her oppressed ancestors. Simultaneously, the author's desire to move towards subjective signification, reflects another ambiguity that "the colonial process has inscribed upon the colonized subject, as it alternates between the erasure of its own culture, and the desire to assume that of the Other [through the act of writing, which is intrinsic to the Other's culture]" (Murdoch 76). These dichotomized representations, persistently echoed in the novel, oblige us to be conscious of nuanced interpretations and intricate layers of knowledge which prevent us from reading the text in any one way.

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^{26} See Dorothy Blair's "Introduction" to _Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade_, esp. xviii.
2.2.4 Forked Tongues, "Translated Narratives" and the Dilemmas of Dispossession

In Part Three of Fantasia, Djebar abandons the written traditions of Eurocentric discourses and reconfigures the narrative to incorporate "the raw material", that is, the vernacular accounts of peasant women during the revolutionary struggle. Dedicated to these obscure, and yet courageous figures of modern Algerian history, this section is a choric record of their collective sufferings, the travails and traumas of women who sacrificed not only their few material possessions, but also their families and their lives to resurrect the nation from the mire of colonial oppression. The last section is also a striking illustration of the bilingual text where the writer speaks across languages to reconstitute the subjectivity of the fragmented Self, and radically adapt the foreign language to the needs of indigenous experiences.

Aptly subtitled "Voice", "Whispers", "Murmurs", "Clamour" and so on, the five "Movements" of this final part are embellished with musical allusions, and conclude with a penultimate section called "The Fantasia" which is followed by the coda, "Air on a Nay [an ancient flute]". Here, more than any other section of the novel, we find the tone shifting effortlessly between irony and pathos, between violence and lyricism, and anticipation and despair. As a musical composition Part Three strives to identify and harmonize (despite the dissonant sounds) different thematic chords. Translating the testimonies of the illiterate peasant women, Djebar dislodges privileged historical discourses of the West, and weaves into her bilingual text feminine narratives, perspectives and experiences. To produce a counter discourse, the author skilfully interleaves written records with oral accounts that probe "memory's subterranean store-house" and recover "the discordant dirge of inarticulate revolt" (122).

At the same time, because of the transcription of indigenous experience in a foreign language, that is the language of the former oppressor, we, like Djebar, are also conscious of an uneasy tension in the mirroring of the Arabo-Berber oral culture with the French written tradition: "my writing is immediately caught in the snare of the old war between two peoples. So I swing like a pendulum ..." (216); "aussitôt la guerre ancienne entre deux peuples entrecroise ses signes au creux de mon écriture. Celle-ci, tel un oscillographe ..." (242). Here the author attempts to apprehend the subject of


28 The two established languages in Algeria are Arabic and Berber with their many dialects. When the text refers to the Arabic language, it is specifying the Algerian Arabic dialect, the oral language to which Djebar had access. This language needs to be contrasted with classical Arabic in which Qur'anic scriptures are written.
bilingualism, with its "in-betweenness", its conflicts and moments of indecisiveness. Indeed like the translator, the bilingual writer is conscious that in selecting one language over another, she is invariably betraying one language in favour of another and there is "a residue of infidelity towards language" because of the inability to reproduce the original intact.

The oscillation between the first and third person narrative voices in this last section, and the growing tendency to write in the third person, draw attention to the ambivalent position of the author who finds it progressively difficult to inscribe her Self and subjectivity in the personal narrative she writes: “By laying myself bare in this language I start a fire which may consume me. For attempting an autobiography in the former enemy's language” (215); "Me mettre à nu dans cette langue me fait entretenir un danger permanent de déflagration. De l'exercice de l'autobiographie dans la langue de l'adversaire d'hier ...” (241). As she observes a little later, practising autobiography in the enemy's language "has the texture of fiction, at least as long as you are desensitized by forgetting the dead that writing resurrects” (216); "se tisse comme fiction, du moins tant que l'oubli des morts charriés par l'écriture n'opère pas son anesthésie” (243). In a sense, then, this predicament nullifies the narrator's and her subjects' vital presence in the seamless tapestry of history:

While I thought I was undertaking a 'journey through myself’, I find I am simply choosing another veil. While I intended every step forward to make me more clearly identifiable, I find myself progressively sucked down into the anonymity of those women of old - my ancestors! [216-217]

Croyant "me parcourir", je ne fais que choisir un autre voile. Voulant, à chaque pas, parvenir à la transparence, je m'englouis davantage dans l'anonymat des aîeules! [243]

The situation is further compounded by the cultural expectations of a milieu that gives precedence to collective identity over the individual Self. So the first person singular "I" is discreetly displaced, and in the characteristic Maghrebian tradition the writer shifts to a less personalized level of narration.29 Sentiments of uncertainty and doubt propel her to question her role as storyteller who attempts to resurrect the fragile voices of the aged peasant women: "Can I, twenty years later, claim to revive these stifled voices? .... What ghosts will be conjured up when ... I see the reflection of my

29Citing Jean Déjeux, Katherine Gracki points out that “the singularity represented by the 'I' transferred the traditional anonymity surrounding any confessional discourse.” Transgressing the accepted norm had “far reaching symbolic consequences for women” because such diversions amounted to “unveiling or denuding”. See her “Writing Violence and the Violence of Writing in Assia Djebar’s Algerian Quartet,” World Literature Today 70, no. 4 (1996): 835.
own barrenness, my own aphasia" (202); "Vingt ans après, puis-je prétendre habiter ces
voix d’asphyxie? .... Quels fantômes réveiller, alors que ... me sont renvoyées ma propre
aridité et mon aphasie" (227). Here Djebar implies that the colonizer’s language and
her responsibility as writer are inadequate and incongruous to inscribe subjectivity on
the violated feminine body.

Despite the critical self-reflection, she can neither efface nor be desensitized to
the power and the cathartic function of the written word to relieve the "burdens of
memory", revision the discourses of the silenced Other, and thus deconstruct colonial
and patriarchal discursive strategies: "Writing does not silence the voice, but awakens
it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters" (204); "Ecrire ne tue pas la voix,
mais la réveille, surtout pour ressusciter tant de soeurs disparues" (229). Such obvious
contradictions in her assessment of her vocation burden the narrator with ambivalent
feelings which make her task of writing increasingly difficult.

The narrative also strives to come to terms with the author’s personal efforts at
coping with the complex problems emerging from her access to a bicultural/bilingual
heritage and a plural identity. Retracing Algerian and Moroccan history, Jacqueline
Kaye and Abdelhamid Zoubir in their study of language and national identity are
especially keen to focus on the transnational identity of postcolonial Algeria, and the
consequence of inheriting a language which became a "positive force" during the
Algerian war of Independence: "Algeria’s cultural reality is a mosaic, which is in
constant random motion and is recharged cyclically by an inorganic current which, in
fact, reverses the discharge of organic current into a dynamic process."30 The inorganic
current with regard to this specific linguistic conundrum relates to the "coercive
Frenchification and evangelization of Algerian culture" which nevertheless left the
nationalists during the revolutionary struggle with a "privileged weapon" to counter
colonial domination.

Even though in postcolonial Algeria, Arabic has been restored as the "official
language",31 writers/critics like Jean Déjeux, Khatibi, Kaye and Zoubir argue that
"Algerian literature manifests itself bilingually" with specific exceptions such as So Vast
the Prison that weaves into its French text Arabic as well as Berber allusions and
cadences. Furthermore as Fantasia reveals, despite, or because of the contradictions

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30 Jacqueline Kaye and Abdelhamid Zoubir, The Ambiguous Compromise: Language, Literature
31 In Algerian White Djebar vehemently indicts the Algerian government for its short-sighted
policies pertaining to the institutionalization of Arabic as the "national language". The
myopic regulation has systematically restricted "the living space" of other languages in
Algeria and, according to the author, enforced a "sterilizing monolingualism" that has
suppressed even diglossic Arabic with its iridescent regional variations (228).
and conflicts, “bilingualism is a fertile source of creation in the literary field,” and in the postcolonial Algerian oral field, “the situation is rather trilingual and complicated with diglossia” (Kaye and Zoubir 1990, 69). Additionally, apart from this multilingual/polyglossic heritage, for Djebar, a postcolonial feminist writer, the (feminine) body too is an important medium of expression and interaction in a milieu dominated by masculinist thoughts and values. Again and again Djebar’s writings celebrate the body’s movements which represent a salient fourth language in a community where many women are illiterate and a patriarchal culture that prefers “whispers”, “murmurs” and “subdued voices” over “trances, dances or vociferations” (180). This is reiterated and endorsed in So Vast the Prison where the unveiled Isma - mother, wife, university professor - suddenly comes to grip with her privileged unrestricted life in a world where most women are cloistered and forced to live in segregated spaces: “I danced on. I danced. I feel I have been dancing ever since” (61).

Critically, the French of the Maghrebian writer whose mother tongue is either Arabic or Berber is a “language of outsidedness”. To use a phrase of Khatibi, Maghrebine literature tends to function as a “translated narrative” ("un recit du traduction"), a narrative that speaks in many languages. The reason for this may partly reside in the way language adapted itself to changing circumstances, when it was uprooted from its original territory and transported to another world with other dominant languages. These languages are classified as “mother tongues” by writers such as Khatibi and Djebar because they are “the earliest code of exchange, and because [they are] learned directly from the mother in a physical sensual manner.”

32 For the Francophone writer, therefore (as it is for other Third World/postcolonial writers facing similar predicaments), the language of childhood can never be subsumed completely, even though other “languages” may appear to have effaced it: “This [Arabic] script, which I mastered only to write the sacred words, I see now spread out before me cloaked in innocence and whispering arabesques ...” (181); “Cette écriture [arabe] que, pour ma part, j’ai apprivoisée seulement pour les paroles sacrées, la voici s’étalant devant moi en pelure d’innocence, en lacs murmursants ...” (204). For Djebar, this position of ambiguity creates many, sometimes adverse, polarities leaving her in “a dichotomy of location” and an “inner exile”, born of the yearning to cohabit with the native language and the imposed one. This brings to mind the perceptive observation made by the Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, that “[t]he writer is a solitary person

whose territory is the wound". The initial wound is the separation from one's maternal tongue, but as Déjeux points out "this wound quickly scars over and can become an advantage to the writer" through a process of acculturation:

the use of French allows writers to transgress boundaries they might encounter in Arabic .... Only by taking recourse to another language - a form of 'otherness' - could [s/]he overcome the constraints of the parental superego, especially its feminine (maternal) component. [9-10]

Addressing the positive aspect of bilingualism, Moroccan critic Basfao asserts that the otherness helps the writer to express "what we really shouldn't express and what we cannot say in our mother tongue" (cited in Déjeux 10) - as in the instance where Djebar broaches the subject of rape and even in the original text in French refers to it periphrastically. Instead of using the Arabic term for "rape" (as opposed to other instances where her text introduces many Arabic words), she employs the euphemistic French term dommage to refrain from slipping into a situation that Arab culture would consider improper and inappropriate for discussion. Enhancing his argument Basfao suggests: "The mother tongue is a taboo terrain, a field where any and all investigation is experienced as an intrusion, an unbearable penetration." According to him, therefore: "The Maghrebian writer cannot spell out his [her] mother tongue because that signifies, phantasmatically, the violation of the mother, the life-giving and protecting bosom" (cited in Déjeux 10). Nonetheless, the writer can never really sever ties with his/her mother tongue which is etched incisively in the linguistic memory. So s/he is compelled to repress her/his desire, for expressing it in Arabic would mean "striking a blow against the wholeness of the mother's body and her domain: the mother tongue". Déjeux points out the way in which writers can overcome the mother’s devouring aggression is by giving way to the "critical spirit", thereby escaping the "language of fusion", that is a space of conformity. Simultaneously, to protect themselves from the "beautiful but maleficent stranger" (Khatibi's euphemism for French), they must also dismember the foreign language, as Djebar does in her texts, and adapt it radically to the requirements of indigenous circumstances.

In the section entitled "The Quranic School", Djebar broaches the subjects of bilingualism and heteroglossia with striking poetic eloquence. While contemplating her

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34 See Anne Donadey, "The Multiple Strategies of Postcolonial Literature: Assia Djebar’s Algerian Palimpsest, World Literature Today 74, no.1 (2000): 27-36. This essay demonstrates at length how Djebar transforms her French text into a bilingual text via a process of Arabization.
privileged position as a woman who has access to "four languages" (Arabic, Berber, French and the fourth being the feminine body, which acts as a substitute for those who cannot read and write), she is also deeply aware of her ambivalent relationship with these languages. In the sonorous, visually powerful and sensual description of writing Arabic, she compares the act of writing to making love, where the rhythmic movement of her body harmonizes with the curves and curlicues of Arabic calligraphy.

In contrast, she identifies French as her "father tongue", or "stepmother tongue", the latter symbolizing her love/hate relationship with the language. This is reflected in the expressive paradox "L'amour, ses cris (s'écrit)". Love that is committed to paper, like the cries uttered in the throes of sexual pleasure, has an element of vulnerability. Here again we are offered a dual consequence of articulating one's emotions in writing: while it intensifies the intimacy between two people (as in the case of the narrator's parents), it also has the daunting effect of inscribing intimate thoughts on paper, where "[the] voice, albeit silenced, will circulate .... The word will take flight" into the limitless space of the unknown. For writers like Djebar, therefore, the rupture is never fully complete: "I am alternately the besieged foreigner and the native swaggering off to die, so there is seemingly endless strife between the spoken and written word" (215); "je suis à la fois l'assiégé étranger et l'autochtone partant à la mort par bravade, illusoire effervescence du dire et de l'écrit" (241).

This linguistic fracture has a definite impact on the writer's sense of Self, and contests orthodox notions of identity, authenticity and truth. Indeed as Marx-Scouras declares, Maghrebine literature has "no roots or origin to legitimate it, save those determined by the aberrant historical context of colonialism" ("Poetics" 3). As she continues, the Maghrebian francophone writer occupies "an untenable site", "[h]ence a profound sentiment of intrusion, non-belonging and alterity on the part of the writing subject who alienates him[/her]self in the language of the Other" (3).

2.2.5 Resurrecting So Many Vanished Sisters
Part Three of Fantasia literally gives voice to and preserves in writing the experiences of Algerian women during the war of independence. It is a fascinating example of the writer speaking tout contre: in other words, recounted in the first person narrative voices mostly, this last section, rather than appropriating the voices in the peripheries, records verbatim testimonies of women who participated in the decolonization movement. Interlaced with these memories are the narrator's ambivalent experiences in a conservative Algerian social milieu and other experiences of women recalled in the third person narrative voice, as in the section entitled "Plunder". The chapter implies
that women’s collective attempts at storytelling by means of “understatement, proverbs, even riddles or traditional fables, handed down from generation to generation ... (155)”; “la litote, le proverbe, jusqu’aux énigmes ou à la fable transmise ...” (176), is a therapeutic process that enables them to grapple with and surmount their daily sufferings courageously. Historically, storytelling has enabled women to negotiate their way in colonial/patriarchal milieux that have condemned them to accept the rigid codes of subservience while denouncing outright their privileges as individuals:

How could a woman speak aloud .... How could she say ‘I’, since that would be to scorn the blanket-formulae which ensure that each individual journeys through life in a collective resignation? [156]

Comment une femme pourrait parler haut .... Comment dire "je", puisque ce serait dédaigner les formules-couvertures qui maintiennent le trajet individuel dans la résignation collective? [177]

Yet, the writer observes, the ancient craft of orature which has helped preserve the "unwritten language of childhood" is in danger of "vanishing" (156). Hence her concern to secure the memories of bygone years by attempting to write an autobiography in the colonizer’s language, lending herself inevitably "to the vivisector’s scalpel” when "[w]ounds are reopened, veins weep, one’s own blood flows ...” (156); “Les blessures s’ouvrent, les veines pleurent, coule le sang de soi ...” (178). By superimposing thus oral narratives with written accounts of the colonizer, Djebar fills in the blank spaces of official records, underscoring the palimpsestic narrative of imperialism that is hermeneutically displaced and deconstructed to give a more nuanced reading of Algeria’s colonial history.

Djebar’s fictional history reconstitutes nationalist strategies by giving voice to the heroic women participants/activists of the nationalist struggle who were made invisible by colonialist and patriarchal master narrative/s. Amidst a deluge of blood, hate and barbarism, Djebar enacts the women’s agonizing experiences of loss, torture, rape, dispossession and dislocation, and restores to history the stories of women, such as Cherifa, who during the resistance struggle not only took over responsibilities in the domestic realm, but also participated actively with the Algerian maquis (the mujahideens) in harrowing circumstances. 35

35 One report indicates that 10, 949 (3.1%) women were active participants in the combat. According to Danièle Amrane-Minne this number is around the same as the percentage of European women who took part in World War II. Approximately 200 Algerian women joined the maquis, constituting 16% of all militants. Of this number 74% were below the age of 25, and 50% - like Cherifa in Fantasia - were less than 20 years old. See her "Women and Politics
By shifting the women from their marginalized domestic spaces to the forefront of Algerian politics, Djebar projects them as revolutionaries, making a compelling case that the women of Algeria deserve to be considered full citizens in the independent postcolonial nation they helped to build along with their male compatriots during the struggle for decolonization. The stories of Djebar and the women freedom fighters thus become stories of Algeria and the journey from colonial subjugation and patriarchal dominance to independence and emancipation - an urgent reminder of the need to revitalize civic powers for both men and women within an ethical postcolonial Algerian state. A significant objective of this last section is to restore women's voices and, thereby, a subaltern subjectivity within a politics of resistance. To attain this goal, the writer composes an eloquent exposé of women's silence while claiming simultaneously a textual moment, that is, a discursive space for the marginalized Other.

2.3.1 Reading A Sister to Scheherazade and So Long a Letter
To facilitate a more integral overview of the disparate conditions shaping the destinies of contemporary women in the Islamic world of the Maghreb, North Africa and the Middle East, this section considers the above works of Djebar and Bà. A comparative/contrastive reading will help to assess the degree to which women's subjective testimonies, articulated textually in Sister and Letter, have shed light on the historically devalued female experiences. In the process the study strives to configure the extent to which the recovery of women's presence through their testimonies has produced positive results for women in specific locations. The texts will also be used to demonstrate how centuries-long patriarchal ideologies, beliefs and practices (such as coerced veiling, polygamy and seclusion of women) impact upon the present, and contribute to women's further disempowerment in the postcolonial situation.

Western philosophical discourse, dominated by the thoughts of men, has historically conceived the world in terms of hierarchies and oppositions, as presence/absence, culture/nature, identity/difference, Self/Other and so on.36 In this aesthetic of difference meaning is derived not purely through antithesis but through a strategically established dichotomy and hierarchization between terms within a unit that necessitates a consideration of oppositions as mutually inclusive and interdependent. The feminine in the phallogocentric world of logic and philosophy has always been

subordinated by the masculine presence (the dominant terminology of the unit) to the extent that until about the mid-20th century, women (with a few exceptions) have been excluded from the production of speech and writing.

Importantly, this phenomenon has not been exclusive to the West. In the postcolonial context also, until recent times, the written text has been the prerogative of male writers whose gendered representations of their (mostly) nationalist narratives have limited women's roles to iconic goddesses, fetishized mothers and idolized wives. Similarly, if we read the works of many postcolonial women writers we are made aware of instances where varying sociocultural and political conditions have suppressed women from textual self-representation. As Farzaneh Milani discloses in a study of Iranian women writers, women's self-representation "is not divorced from their cultural representation; and in a culture [or cultures for that matter] that idealizes feminine silence and restraint, not many women can or will opt for breaking the silence." While women's aphasia is a predominant feature of the sexually segregated communities in the Maghreb, the Middle East and parts of Africa (not to mention parts of Asia), there are also unique exceptions where traditional crafts such as storytelling, ritualistic dances and trances, singing and chanting have been used effectively by women to break the silence of the once muted voices of history.

Carving out a literary space for themselves, the works of postcolonial women from Asia and Africa to the Caribbean and Latin America configure alternative ways of perceiving gender relations (without simply reversing or endorsing old hierarchies), articulating women's diverse experiences - the "wounds" of often mutilated memories, and creating a greater consciousness of experiences specific to women. Within a Derridean framework, such configurations have led to deconstructive processes where oppositions are re-evaluated and meanings often reversed, reconstructed or destabilized to produce sometimes radically different perspectives. The aim of many women writers has been to transcend existing realities and conceive an alternative knowledge that has positive implications for women. This consciousness on the part of women has been an important stepping stone for a reassessment and reinterpretation of traditional mores and customs, legal and other rights affecting women's lives in many parts of the developing world.

In *Sister and Letter*, the authors place two women in central positions as narrators of their texts to relate the histories of women facing victimization in their respective patrilineal worlds. The privileged positions they occupy give them access to

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the written word and to textual space on which they inscribe their subjective positions that is vital for the recovery of their selfhood. For these women, writing becomes a fruitful area of resistance to power and to monolithic constructs of selfhood. As Simon Gikandi puts it lucidly: "To write is to claim a text of one’s own ... because the other confers on us an identity that alienates us from ourselves, narrative is crucial to the discovery of our selfhood."38 While endorsing this point, it would help to perceive if these characters (as well as the authors) in recovering the narratives of victimization, use their subject positions in ways that are generally enabling and empowering for women. In other words, while it is clear that women’s fiction has created a greater awareness of women’s issues, it needs to be ascertained to what extent (and here I cite Shoshana Felman) "otherness can be taken for granted as positively occupying the un-thought-out, problematical locus from which the statement is being uttered" (10).

As highlighted in the introduction to the thesis (see Section 1.2 in particular), many questions arise in attempting to address this aspect of the debate. Who is victimized and how do they overcome oppressive circumstances? Is there recovery and revisioning in the process? We need to explore whether the texts provide a site of protest, a site which asserts the writer’s power of communication, and from which the writer can reinvent language and history (by speaking through silences or body movements or dreams, by using the technique of the palimpsest, or narrative devices such as the mirasse which Bâ employs in Letter). We also need to trace whether the strategies in women’s fiction have given adequate focus “to the changing ideological and material situations in which the evolution of literary myth takes place”; that is, the text should be read in relation to “shifting historical situation[s] in which literary redefinitions and evolutions [unfold].”39 Indeed, such a study should necessarily consider the complex link between the text and its many contexts that include the sociocultural, political and historical.

2.3.2 Locating Differences and Common Threads of Narration

At a cursory glance, Djebar and Bâ in their texts appear to be dealing with two primary issues: spatial confinement and seclusion (by veiling and the practice of iddah respectively) and polygyny, due to the nature of events encountered by the protagonists (Isma and Ramatoulaye) when their marriages disintegrate.40 On a deeper analysis we

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40 Ramatoulaye is condensed henceforth to "Rama".
apprehend that even though the texts refer to male spouses such as Modou Fall and Mawdo Bà (Letter), and “the man” (Sister) who take on second wives, their female counterparts (Rama, Aissatou and Isma) never really embrace polygamy, either because they choose not to do so (Aissatou and Isma), or in the case of Rama, because she never gets an opportunity to live polygamously as Modou Fall abandons her for their daughter’s adolescent friend, Binetou. Curiously enough, therefore, though the two texts refer to marriages where monogamy is not practised strictly by the male spouses, and there are strong hints of polygamy, neither author actually sets out to probe the issue of polygyny in their respective worlds. As such we are never really exposed to any character who embraces polygamy and faces the consequences of such a lifestyle. This is despite the fact that Bà upholds monogamy, and thereby indirectly denigrates polygyny by alluding to men’s polygamous instincts.\textsuperscript{41}

Like Djebar and Bà, other African writers such as Flora Nwapa in Efuru and Buchi Emecheta in The Joys of Motherhood have also broached this subject in discussing the situation of women in their individual texts.\textsuperscript{42} However, even these writers restrict their assessments of polygamy to background information, focusing instead on other topical issues relevant to their individual works (women’s subservience and personal struggles for autonomy, patriarchal dominance, encounters with racism and experiences of exile

\textsuperscript{41} One wonders if Bà upholds this view because today, in affluent urban communities of Islamic West Africa, polygamy is no longer an institution practised in a way where men especially (and indeed women) take responsibility for the decisions they make about living polygamously. Vincent Monteil remarks:

Certainly, polygamy is in the decline in a big city like Dakar where it is difficult for a civil servant to maintain two or three homes. In practice, what obtains is a "serial" polygamy facilitated by quick divorces and conjugal instability.


According to Islam, polygamy is permitted under certain conditions. Three primary conditions for those who wish to practice polygamy are the equitable distribution of resources among wives (this by definition necessitates financial stability on the part of the husband), justice between wives, and sexual capability. No woman can be forced to be a co-wife against her will for women’s consent is an essential legal condition for marriage in Islam. Furthermore, if a first wife is dissatisfied with a polygamous arrangement, according to Islamic law, she can file for divorce and be released from the contract.

In (Islamic and non-Islamic) indigenous African societies polygamy also had other significance. While being a factor of prestige, it enabled the smooth functioning of agrarian societies where many hands were needed to maintain the fields. Other reasons include female infertility and the culturally imposed desire for male children. In many traditional African communities, women in a polygamous family maintained separate houses usually within the same compound while the man took responsibility for the well being of each of his wives and their children.

and alienation). Perhaps because of the highly charged texture of the subject and the complex nature of an indigenous cultural tradition, many writers shy away from discussing it in depth, inviting instead the readers to examine the implications for themselves. In the African context, Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* is an example of a forthright debate on the subject: in this novel the educated and independent protagonist, Esi Sekyi, decides to marry the polygamous Ali, despite being fully aware of the precarious situation into which she is getting herself. In contrast, the English memsahib in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich like Us* is hardly aware, when she commits herself to Ram, that he has another wife with whom she will have to share his world once they move to India. In the above texts the writers seem more prepared to examine the subject despite its contentious nature, discussing in more detail the day to day happenings of women within polygamous setups.\(^{43}\)

In *Sister*, like Nwapa in *Efuru*, Djebar is more focused on dealing with the sisterly bond between women within the oppressive setting of a patriarchal milieu (Hajila's reliance on Isma, and Rama's on Aissatou can be juxtaposed with the free-spirited, strong-willed Efuru's intimate relationship with the resourceful Ajanapu). Contrary to stereotypical representations of rivalry among co-wives, in Djebar's text polygamy is delineated as a practice reinforcing women's solidarity within a dominantly masculinist world: "Respite comes: the husband will take a co-wife; Oh, to feel free at last ..." (128). While the implicit reference to polygyny is a striking feature that Djebar's and Bà's novels share with contrasting views, there are other similar facets with which these novels are preoccupied. These common threads help to give greater coherence to a comparative reading of the texts.

To begin with, by recording events of a very personal/private nature both narrators steer their fiction in the direction of the autobiographical where a praxis of memory, often wounded and traumatized, merges with a history of women's multiple experiences. The narrativization of women's lives, as Shaun Irlam indicates in a reading of *Letter*, does indeed knit the memories into "a cultural umbilical cord". The interspersion of the histories of women from diverse social backgrounds, with different

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43 In the works of African male authors (See, for example, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* or Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*) the subject of polygamy is even less detailed and is often used as inconsequential backdrops for male-centred issues. Women in such texts occupy a marginalized space and are portrayed as passive individuals, freely available to be circulated among the menfolk in patriarchal communities. This brief, and yet telling, citation from Achebe's novel exemplifies the abject servitude of most women in male-authored texts: "He had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives". Often identified collectively, women attained some respect and recognition by executing their conventional (mostly maternal) duties and responsibilities. See Chinua Achebe, *The African Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1988); Wole Soyinka, *Collected Plays 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
class/group affiliations, literacy levels, and dispositions - both emotional and psychic - confirms that the novels "[serve] as a synecdoche for an entire generation, an entire 'imagined community' of women helping to make an independent Senegal," and in the case of Djebar's fiction, an independent Algeria. Both novels disclose the untold stories of women, a historically subjugated group, who do not necessarily belong to the same social stratum, nor have similar exposure to education, wealth and other resources of society (Isma can be considered a foil to Hajila, and Rama to Aissatou even though each pair in the respective novels unites in ways that reveal sororal bonding).

The two texts also share elements of the autobiographical where the first person narrative voice is employed in striking ways. While both authors set out to reveal the traumatizing/therapeutic process of writing one's history through the intimacy between women entrapped in unhappy marital circumstances, they also develop the themes of sisterhood and solidarity between women who experience oppression in the hostile world of patriarchy. In Letter a period of waiting called iddah leads to a disclosure or mirasse where Rama relives her past for an intimate friend by means of epistololarity. In contrast, Sister merges the first person narrative voice with the second to harmonize the alternating voices of two women united by circumstances. This narrative device gives Isma the liberty to recall her past while simultaneously unwinding an imaginary dialogue with Hajila. Though the two characters are presented as opposites, their voices never really conflict. Rather they merge without collision primarily because Djebar's narrative structure underscores Isma's presence and presents Hajila as a character in the discourse constructed by the narrator. In doing so, Isma's narrative, perhaps unwittingly, overshadows Hajila's history, making Isma's presence central and Hajila's marginal to the textual plot. Simultaneously, their histories, entwined by their relationship to one man, address the issues of failed communications and dysfunctional relations between married couples in contemporary Algeria. These are issues which Rama also explores in disclosing her troubled personal history to her childhood friend, Aissatou.

2.3.3 The Subject of Veiling and Spatial Stratification: The Algerian Case
The novels of Djebar and Bâ traverse a space, defined as "domestic" and carved out exclusively for women for many centuries in most parts of the world. While narratives such as Fantasia and Madina grapple with historical issues of a macroscopic space, that is the outer domain, Sister meanders into the quartet's interior locations to explore the

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private inner chambers of the *hammam* and women’s quarters. In a world where patriarchal values dominate women’s lives, these are sanctuaries that have for centuries given women liberty to mingle with each other, and in the case of *Sister*, to converse and console themselves, enter into dialogue and resolve problems through sororal bonding and cooperation. However, the scope of Djebbar’s text is not to restrict the narrative to these enclosed areas. Through a process of subversion, the narrative strives to conquer the world outside, enabling the recovery of the aphasic female self, subsumed historically by notions of anonymity and absence.

In contrast, Bâ’s epistolary structure becomes the vehicle for the narrativization of certain critical moments of Rama’s private/domestic life in *Letter*. While the marital crisis in Rama’s life is the key point of the text, the novel also manifests concern for larger matters of the nation that transcend the private realm, and issues pertaining to African women that assume a moderate feminist tone.

Bound to the thematics of space in *Sister* is the subject of the veil45 which in the novel has significantly regressive implications (the subject of space in *Letter* is interlinked with the practice of *iddah* that will be discussed shortly). It may help to

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45 Due to the complex nature of the subject, the implications of veiling will be restricted to the Algerian context and the phase of decolonization. The veil, referred to in different contexts and locations as *haik* (in Algeria), *chador*, *hijab*, *jilbab* and so on, is an outer garment (a head scarf, or in some contexts a more body-concealing clothing) worn by some Muslim women for a multitude of reasons such as personal choice, religious convictions and political necessity. Among Muslims, there are diverse interpretations about what constitutes proper dress code for women. This is mainly due to the ambivalent nature of the Qur’anic pronouncement on modesty that is applicable not just to women but also to men (see footnote 50 for citation). Women’s veiling is mentioned very generally in the Qur’an and no specific details are provided to reveal the exact extent to which a woman requires covering. Hence, some consider a loose headscarf to be appropriate; to others the dress entails complete concealment of the head and, in extreme cases, the covering of the entire body, including the face.

Additionally, in the case of nations like Algeria (or Iraq under the present transitional government), the veil is serving “fundamentalist” political agendas. Since the emergence of armed groups (such as the GIA - Armed Islamic Group, the MIA - Armed Islamic Movement and the AIS - Army of Islamic Salvation) in recent times much violence has been perpetrated against men and, especially women, on the pretext of a pseudo religiosity. Women whose lifestyles contradict the ideologies of these armed forces and fundamentalist insurgents (for example, not adhering to the veil, or assuming non-traditional professions) are potential military targets, frequently subject to rape, other forms of physical/emotional harassment and, in extreme cases, death.

ascertain here as to why veiling in general is viewed negatively by the author, since opposition to the dress is not a universal phenomenon, even among women who assert their right to be independent and "progressive": in fact some readers and critics may construe Djebar’s perceptions to be a typical Western bias that leads to another example of "historical injustice". Moreover, wearing the veil does not necessarily have to be a factor determining Muslim women’s oppression or disempowerment as Western media critics often insinuate.

While there are diverse, even conflicting, responses to this sensitive subject concerning Djebar’s novel, one of the reasons could be that the postcolonial female Algerian psyche, because of recent sociopolitical developments in an anarchic, war-torn Algeria, associates the garment with a retrogressive multifaceted ideology based on coercion. This is a predominantly masculinist ideology that was initially consolidated and set in motion with the passing of the infamous 1984 Family Code. The Code blatantly contradicted the laws of the country that forbade sexual discrimination, and traditional laws which, according to Danièle Amrane-Minne, even if they lower the status of a woman, guaranteed her protection (72). The Family Code, tangled in the ambiguity of religious and nationalist rhetoric, firmly institutionalized gender inequality in matters pertaining to personal autonomy, polygamy, divorce and the right to work outside the domestic sphere. Marnia Lazreg sums up succinctly the effect of the Code as follows: "the code is an anachronistic piece of legislation that erased with the stroke of

46 This is an important factor to which critics, such as Marnia Lazreg, draw attention. Conversely, Lazreg makes certain uncharacteristically sweeping comments about Djebar’s texts in her otherwise articulate and informative work on Algerian women. The tone of her reading is accusatory as demonstrated in the following critique:

Whatever the characterization of Djebar’s early work, it represents the author’s rejection, expressed in subsequent novels in one form or another, of native women’s lifestyles. The litany of complaints about “tradition” and Islam stifles her characters’ voices, and turns them into pitiful, empty-headed puppets.

It needs to be emphasized that Lazreg’s brief study of the writer’s texts excludes Djebar’s serious and mature works such as Fantasia, Madina and Vast is the Prison (note that the first two texts were published before 1994, the year in which Lazreg’s book was published). Statements such as the above do not adequately justify Djebar’s later work such as Fantasia where the writer devotes an entire section to recount and recover the testimonies of women who participated in Algeria’s struggle for independence; moreover, far from being “puppets”, many of the female characters in Madina assume significant positions in their specific social locations, and some, in fact, even act as agents and arbiters of change. See Marnia Lazreg, The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), 199-201.

a pen the historical changes that had taken place over a hundred and fifty years" (Eloquence 156). In the process, she continues, the earliest socialist principles of independent Algeria that projected women as a sacrificing class, were "transformed into a structural exclusion of women as a group in need of affirmative action by the state's development practice" (157). As a result of such strategies introduced over a period of time by the nation's official representatives, the ideological base of successive governments, so-called religious groups as well as emergent armed factions, succeeded in excluding women from self-representation, infringing specific women's rights and, in some instances, blatantly violating basic human rights. These are aspects that are witnessed increasingly in the day-to-day living of many Algerians today.

Gender-bias and discriminatory actions against women are features that generally define nationalisms that emerged in many parts of the postcolonial world after decolonization. A primary reason for this is that almost all national movements were dominated by male power elites, even though in countries such as Algeria, for example, women played a critical role in guerrilla operations of the Algerian resistance movement. Despite earlier pledges to provide women with better opportunities for self-advancement (especially at the crucial moment when colonized men and women participated collectively to fight the enemy), the female presence in the post-independence scenario has become a disconcertingly symbolic one. As Elleke Boehmer asserts in a study of African nationalisms: "[S]he is the strength or virtue of the nation incarnate, its fecund first matriarch, but it is a role which excludes her from the sphere of public national life."48

Algerian women’s participation in the decolonization process and the donning of the veil for strategic reasons did indeed contribute, among other factors, to the success of the independence struggle. At the same time, as Lazreg argues persuasively, Algerian women’s voluntary decision to veil themselves had significant repercussions that were, naturally, not felt until a later point in postcolonial history. Reveiling, even as a


Lazreg emphasizes that, contrary to prevailing feminist readings about Algerian women's role in the war, Algerian women were not "duped" into participating in the freedom struggle by their male counterparts. Women's involvement in decolonization had many complex reasons of which the need to address the grievances of the colonized class was a pressing one. However, in comparison with male freedom fighters, women's participation "entailed greater personal sacrifices and dangers". Moving out of the traditional space of home created uncertain futures for many women as it "radically upset the value system that had hitherto governed gender relations" (Eloquence 119). This is one reason why there has been so much ambivalence about the woman question in the post-independence phase.
military tactic, inadvertently drew attention to the sexed female body that was initially manipulated by French imperialists, and later by postcolonial government authorities, so-called religious factions and armed terror groups for a variety of reasons contributing to their individual agendas.

During the phase of decolonization, the subject of "women's emancipation" was mired in the rhetoric of Algerian nationalist politics and designed to be compatible with the ideological biases of male nationalists. The woman freedom fighter assumed a monologic identity that stultified other representations of her presence: in an abstract way, based on some vague biological reasoning, she was glorified and sanctified as the all-sacrificing, all-suffering maternal icon. Attempting to perceive the logic of such nationalist rhetoric may however prove to be unsuccessful and spurious. At the same time, such rhetoric demonstrates the ineluctable link that was established between nationalist politics, a religious identity based on a particular reading of Shari'ah (Islamic law), women's status and cultural authenticity. This is endorsed further by Eleanor Doumato in her paper on women's rights in Saudi Arabia:

For women, human rights are caught in the additional bind of a political culture that links government legitimacy to Islam and women's roles to cultural authenticity so that women's rights are hostage to shifting political currents and struggles over who is allowed to define national culture.

Her discussion of the subject is clearly applicable to the Algerian context while it also illustrates how existing governments by using national, religious and cultural rhetoric, employ insidious strategies to restrict women's access to public space.

In contemporary Algeria, the rigorous enforcement of policies such as a strict dress code have systematically stratified spatial arrangements in ways that have restricted women from occupying public space and entering non-traditional professions. Many of the factions struggling to attain power in Algeria today are in ideological agreement that women's social freedom must be restricted and confined to traditionally domesticated feminine roles, as exemplified in the following statement made by Ben Hadj, a former FIS leader: "In a real Islamic society, the woman is not destined to work

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... [S]he will not leave her home and *consecrate herself* to the education of men” (emphasis mine). Veiling, Milani remarks, has become

a ritualistic expression of culturally defined boundaries. Like walls that enclose houses and separate inner and outer spaces, the veil makes a clear statement about the disjunction between the private and the public .... [V]eiling sanctifies a system of censorship and self censorship. It sustains a system of silencing the concrete, the specific, and the personal. [23]

Djebar endorses this spatial division, segregation and erasure of selfhood at various points in her novel, as in the instance where she cites Germaine Tillion from *The Harem and Its Cousins* to construct the backdrop for Isma’s and Hajila’s histories. Sadly, even though Muslim societies have “a built-in mechanism for promoting human rights of its people” based on a flexible Islamic law, as Doumato insists, this very law is distorted and misrepresented so that, while it benefits one dominant segment of society, it curtails the thoughts and actions of another historically subordinated segment (153). It is no wonder, then, that contemporary Algerian women should return underground (as the militant women did during the pre-independence phase), this time to confront, using different strategies no doubt, the violence and fanaticism of some of their male counterparts.

At the same time, it needs to be emphasized that while the conventional perception of the veil as a signifier of the silenced/invisible woman who eludes the male gaze is applicable to certain sociocultural spaces, it cannot be universalized nor generalized to refer to all veiled women in Muslim nations. As Milani rightly informs us, in the case of present-day Iran: “The conventional equation: veiled/silent/absent proved to be no longer operative. Some veiled women are both publicly articulate and visible. In this shifting meaning of the veil, women are neither eliminated from communal life nor relegated [sic] to the domain of the private. They are voiced and ever so present in the public scene” (38).

Meanwhile, in recent times, Muslim women scholars, in particular, have attempted to provide alternative readings of veiling based on the Qur’anic citation on modesty, and are challenging patriarchal interpretations about issues such as notions of modesty, veiling and women’s seclusion. Since the Qur’anic proclamation on modesty

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52 There is no doubt that the Qur’an advises women to dress modestly: “[S]ay to the believing women/That they should lower/Their gaze and guard/Their modesty ... they should/Draw their veils over/Their bosoms and not display/Their beauty except/To their husbands, their fathers ....” Significantly, this sura (verse) is preceded by the instruction: “Say to the believing men/That they should lower/Their gaze and guard/Their modesty ....” Emphasizing
has no absolute meaning - as in the case of some, relatively minimal dictates in the text that are obligatory for Muslims - these scholars claim that it is open to contextual reasoning or interpretation (ijtihad). While the alternative explications have been frowned upon and even viewed as blasphemous by some orthodox ulama (the learned), they have nevertheless made an impact and altered the way in which Muslims today perceive the religion.

2.3.4 Reinventing Dinarzade's Legacy: Weaving a Narrative of Sisterhood and Survival
Djebar’s text recounts the story of two women who are brought together by their relationship to one man whose inflexibility and aggressive disposition make two marriages dysfunctional. Set against the mythic history of Scheherazade in Thousand and One Nights, Djebar relates the dissimilar, and yet, corresponding histories of Isma and Hajila, “an arabesque of intertwining names”: O Hajila! I must unearth you from this mouldering heap under which you have been buried” (139); “ô Hajila! Te déterr er hors ce terreau commun qui embourbe” (149). Their alternating voices in the first and second persons are merged in rare instances as in the last section of the fiction when the two women unite in the healing haven of the hammam.

The narrative commences with Isma who, recently divorced from her husband, has been refused custody of her only child, Meriem, because she chose to live abroad instead of in her native land. Now that Meriem no longer wishes to remain with her father and his new wife, Hajila, Isma returns to Algeria to take over her daughter. At the point of her return, Hajila is pregnant, despondent and suicidal, being married to a man who has become increasingly reclusive, abusive and alcoholic. For Hajila these developments only serve to intensify her despair and disillusionment which she has endured since her marriage to “the man” (his identity is never specifically divulged and is therefore represented in abstract terms). Surprisingly, the narrative discloses that it is the seemingly “progressive” Isma herself who had initiated her husband’s second marriage, in collusion with Hajila’s mother, Touma.

Though it is also Isma who eventually rescues the unsuspecting Hajila from virtual entrapment in an injudicious marriage, this development does not transpire until the end of the narrative, nor until Isma takes responsibility for her role in having brought about, albeit unwittingly, Hajila’s luckless fate. Isma’s candid acceptance of her part in

the second part of the sura, orthodox scholars insist that veiling is a compulsory act for women. Modesty is interpreted rigidly and literally to mean the concealment of the entire body, with the exception of the face and hands about which there are diverse opinions, based on the life of the Prophet and his hadith (authoritative narrative). See sura Nur from Al Qur’an, vol. 2, trans. A. Yusuf Ali (Lahore: Ashraf Press, 1975), 904-905.
this marriage, which is made evident at the outset the text, is the first step in a sequence of events that leads to her redemption:

Did I intend to offer you up as a sacrifice to the man? Did I intend to model myself on the queens of the harem? These, by presenting a new bride to their master, were in fact liberating themselves at the expense of a pseudo rival .... [1]

Ai-je voulu te donner en offrande à l'homme? Croyais-je retrouver le geste des reines de sérial? Celles-ci, quand elles présentaient une autre épouse au maitre, en fait se libéraient aux dépens d'une fausse rivale ... [10]

Hajila’s mother (not unlike Binetou’s in Letter) is also responsible for the misery her daughter endures in an unfortunate union. Touma, like Binetou’s mother, comes from the underclass of Algerian society and thus sees a bright future for her daughter in getting her married to Isma’s affluent husband. However this future is not made accessible to Hajila who gradually finds herself adrift and imprisoned in a meaningless marriage. In both texts we discover ambitious mothers luring their daughters into marrying wealthy, older men. The difference lies in the fact that while Binetou enjoys and exploits her recently found privileges and takes full advantage of her new role as a wife (indeed at the expense of sacrificing her education and independence), Hajila never succumbs to the opulence of her new life. Marital disharmony between Hajila and the man is made evident at the very outset of the narrative, particularly in the responses of Hajila. Incessant crying, lingering illness, the yearning to throw up and cleanse herself in water, the reference to the dirty little quail, all signify Hajila’s sense of loathing and impurity, not only at the level of the physical but also the emotional and psychic.

The filmic movement of the text, interplaying alternately sequences of images and scenes related to the main characters, helps to juxtapose and underpin the strikingly different lifestyles of the two women, one veiled, secluded and silenced, "a solitary, mute self", the other, apparently carefree and happy, "I find myself floating in a sea of eyes", talking at random "about anything that comes into my head" (12). This narrative strategy is also responsible for producing Hajila in more abstract terms. Interestingly, the abstract presence of Hajila is more apparent in the original text than in the translation of Dorothy Blair that tends to give more agency to Hajila, the object of Isma’s gaze. Chapter 5, for example, is replete with instances where Hajila is portrayed as a picture in a montage. Isma’s gaze, like that of the narrator behind the camera in So Vast the Prison (256-257) “zooms in” a range of actions related to Hajila. They include the narrator’s access to otherwise inaccessible areas: that is, the plausibly
unknowable, such as Hajila’s intimate personal experiences (the scene of rape and her thoughts about seeking freedom by unveiling), her innate sentiments and instinctual responses (her feelings of nausea and intense grief, her spontaneous reactions to specific events). As omniscient narrator, Isma not only feels for Hajila, but she is also acutely receptive to every movement of Hajila, recording instantaneously her thought processes at specific moments and seeing the world through Hajila’s eyes (for example, the scene in which Hajila unveils outdoors, and the episode revealing Touma’s past life). To reduce the burden of her presence, the narrator, therefore, occasionally addresses herself in the third person narrative voice and juxtaposes herself as a character along with Hajila in the story she weaves.

As the narrative develops, however, we discover that the seemingly blissful Isma is also troubled, overcome by fears, anxieties and grief. Unearthing fragments of her past, Isma realizes that her deteriorating relationship with the man had been an “adolescent folly”, and recollects wistfully that with the birth of their child she had become “a woman lying on dead leaves, amid a host of persistent smells, disregarding the damp of the last days of spring ...” (38-39); “une femme étalée sur un sol de moisissures, malgré l’humidité de cette fin de printemps, aux senteurs vivaces ...” (47).

Meanwhile, the oppression Hajila endures in a dysfunctional relationship is extended further to her lifestyle. Brought up in the traditional milieu of a shantytown and forced to swathe herself in a veil, Hajila finds the old garment particularly stifling in the hostile new conditions of the city. As in Sahgal’s Mistaken Identity, discussed later in the thesis, here too the subject of veiling is interlocked with the idea of dark, oppressive enclosures, and interplays with imagery of light and shadow. The notion of confinement and segregation is further established at the outset of the narrative by the reference to Tillion’s text that alludes to barriers of many kinds imprisoning the women of the harem.

Set against this backdrop is Hajila’s desire to unveil, to conquer the outer world and embrace the light that she has been so denied. The yearning for a liberated space, “the thrill of the outdoors”, commences when Hajila resolves to unveil herself in public and appropriate the right to see, albeit at first without her husband’s knowledge. This act of defiance leads to domestic violence and, eventually, to the break-up of their marriage.

While the removal of the veil is an important step Hajila takes to gain access to an otherwise seemingly inaccessible space, this act of defiance alone does not grant Hajila her independence and freedom. As Lama Abu Odeh quite rightly points out in
negotiating the uneasy relation between feminism and veiling, the veil on its own does not disempower or disable women, as many complex factors function simultaneously to create a debilitating environment. Even though Djebar implies that Hajila by unveiling is moving from shadow to sunshine, her future — similar to that of many other women — is yet uncertain and ambivalent: there are other issues to be addressed (for example, her financial insecurity, her intense relationship with an ignorant, controlling mother and an orthodox family setup), and barriers (sociohistorical, legal, political) to be overcome before she can actually be free and empowered. The writer herself broaches this subject generally in the last section of the text to which I will return shortly.

Relevant to textual strategy is Isma’s role in retrieving Hajila’s history, and revealing to the reader Hajila’s gradual transition from a naïve young woman to a more independent person who has the potential to take control of her life in the future: “... I can tell at first glance ... where the woman is going: from shadow to sunshine, from silence to speech, from night to truth stripped bare. The first step reveals both the silhouette and the hope” (157); “J’ai l’audace de prétendre qu’au premier regard ... je perçois dans la passagère le passage: de l’ombre au soleil, du silence au mot, de la nuit au nu de la vérité. Le premier pas qui pointe fait jaillir à la fois la silhouette et l’espérance” (167). Much of the restoration of Hajila’s story takes place through Isma’s voyeuristic gaze: “I followed you quite openly .... I feel I’m not only walking for walking's sake, but as a spectator ...” (156-157); "Je t’ai suivie sans me dissimuler ... je me sens à la fois promeneuse et spectatrice” (167). By offering Isma the right to see and speak for/about herself and her sisters, Djebar subverts a tradition intrinsic to the phallocentric ideals of Algerian society. According to Mildred Mortimer: “the prohibition against women seeing and being seen is at the heart of Maghrebian patriarchy, an ideological system in which the master’s eye alone exists.” Isma’s attempt to attain subjectivity and agency by inscribing her selfhood in the narrative she constructs, therefore, reflects the struggle of (colonized) oppressed classes in various processes of resistance and decolonization.

However, by appropriating the gaze for herself, the protagonist of Djebar’s narrative constructs a textual space that privileges her story over the co-wife’s, and inscribes textually a rivalry between herself and Hajila. This rivalry impedes somewhat the theme of sisterhood and women’s solidarity in the text as it diminishes Hajila’s

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subjectivity which Isma initially professed to recover. (It is difficult to agree with Anjali Prabhu that the element of rivalry between co-wives is evident even at the level of narrative plot because it is Isma herself who initiates a marriage between Hajila and her husband and, as the narrative discloses, Isma departs before Hajila’s arrival to the scene: "I had left the man months before you saw me" [145]. Furthermore, Hajila herself displays no desire to want to compete with Isma for a man whom she hardly loves.)

Prabhu’s in-depth reading of Djebar’s original and translated texts rightly highlights instances where Blair’s English translation gives more agency to Hajila than Djebar’s original text. The following citations, for example, illustrate how the French text sets out to make Hajila’s physique (parts of her body) the subject of the sentences, while the translated script, by addressing Hajila as "you", gives more agency to the object of the narrator’s gaze:

1. You walk .... You come to a sudden stop .... [30]
   Tu marches .... Ton pied s’arrête .... [39]

2. Then, with your right hand, you wrench the cloth away .... [31]
   Ta main droite tire alors l’étoffe .... [40]

3. You turn your head mechanically: what are you to say? [42]
   Ta tête s’est tournée mécaniquement: que dire, que faire? [50]

As explained earlier, by using devices of cinematography, the narrator - like the woman behind the camera - sets out to capture images of Hajila in performance that resemble not so much a textual inscription as an artist’s portfolio or a film-director’s montage of cinema film. It is partly because of this narrative strategy where the voyeuristic Isma takes on the role of omniscient narrator that the textual representation of the marginal becomes problematic. Simultaneously, at the level of narrative plot too there are multiple inequalities (degree of education; access to language, speech and writing; spatial freedom; social status) that make it difficult for the narrator to give equal subjectivity to her two primary characters. Significantly, Isma’s gaze not only penetrates the space occupied by Hajila’s violated body. Hajila’s narrative is woven and brought into dialogue with Isma’s past. By doing so, the author merges the lives of the two women and metaphorically links them to the mythic legend of Scheherazade in order to blur differences and unify their marginalized feminine histories.

It would help here to focus briefly on the complex ways in which the Scheherazade-Dinarzade metaphor operates in the text:

A shadow and a sultan's bride; a shadow behind the sultan's bride .... Which of the two is the shadow who will become the sultan's bride? Which one is to be the bride at dawn, only to dissolve into a shadow before noon? [1]

Ombre et sultane; ombre derrière la sultane ... Laquelle des deux, ombre, devient sultane, laquelle, sultane des aubes, se dissipe en ombre d'avant midi? [9]

On one hand, at the level of plot, by assisting Hajila to escape the shackles of a hopeless marriage, Isma assumes the role of the protective Dinarzade, the shadow of the sultana. At the level of textual strategy, Isma as Scheherazade becomes the weaver of the narrative while Hajila is transformed into Dinarzade: as the shadow of Isma, her (absence of) presence enables the inscription of Isma's selfhood. While the narrative, as Prabhu suggests, is all about "appropriating words to [reinstate] the 'I'" (82), the distinction between "I" and "you" identities continues to overlap throughout the text and becomes less stark, especially towards the end of the text. This is further reinforced by Isma's evocation of "derra", an Arabic word conflating multiple meanings such as the new bride or the "rival" co-wife, the wounded, as well as the one who wounds (91, 145).

Together these obscure feminine histories reflect an Algerian world where men, though often the dominant group, are on the periphery: "I do not know why the bodies of these women always precede me on my journeyings ..." (127); "Je ne sais pourquoi les corps couchés des femmes me devancent..." (137). This is not dissimilar to the task Djebar undertakes in her collection of short stories, Women of Algiers in Their Apartment, a canvas portraying in different hues and colours the experiences of women, mostly against the backdrop of post-independence Algeria.

The autobiographical traces in the narrative, related to Isma's past, are revealed through the voice of the female "I" narrator. As observed earlier, Djebar regards this process of writing her/story in the first person pronoun as an act of transgression in a patriarchal culture that expected women to be physically and metaphorically veiled. Elaborating this further in the "Afterword" to Women of Algiers in Their Apartment, Djebar says: "The upbringing I received from my own mother ... had two absolute rules:
one, never talk about yourself; and, two, if you must, always do it anonymously [that is, never use the first person narrative voice]" (172).

The confessional "I" mode gives the writer the space and freedom to talk of intimate, private experiences and autobiographical details which is tantamount to unveiling and denuding, and thereby opening herself to criticism. Acutely conscious of the problematic of expressing oneself subjectively in native Arabic, Djebar seeks an oppositional strategy through the "Western narrative". To sustain a semblance of anonymity, she also supplies her texts with French and Arabic epigraphs, brief citations, archival records and oral testimonies of women (and men) from different walks of life. Anonymity is further consolidated through strategies of the palimpsest where even as the author rewrites history through a self-conscious subversive mimicry (that is, through a counter discourse), that history too is problematized by a chorus of unifying and yet polyphonic voices: "Scarcely has the plot started to unfold than it slowly disintegrates" (1); "L'intrigue à peine amorçée, un effacement lentement la corrode" (9).

However it is not only "uneasiness", as Mortimer suggests, that propels Djebar to move from autobiography "to autofiction and collective autobiography". We will observe this in greater detail shortly in Djebar's references to the legendary/mythic history of her ancestral mothers. For the author, as it is for other postcolonial women writers, there is no clear division between autobiography and collective memory, between the private self and the public. Many of her narratives are fine examples of representations that are shaped by sociohistorical and political realities. As Gayatri Spivak points out there is only a tenuous division between the private self and the public, and this becomes starkly evident in Sister, especially in the last section where Djebar refers to the distress of all women. In the case of Djebar, a writer preoccupied intensely with the subject of history and its impact on the present moment, autobiography can never really be a subject on its own: it is always already veering in the direction of a collective voice, a collective historical representation of women in the contemporary Maghreb.

For the author, writing autobiography has always been a crippling, mutilating process: "For a long time I believed that writing meant dying, slowly dying, groping to unfold a shroud of sand or silk over things that one had felt trembling ..." (So Vast the Prison 1). As we observe, what Djebar proclaims in this recently translated work in

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response to the pathology of carnage devouring Algeria today, has already been endorsed in her earlier fiction, *Fantasia*: "To attempt an autobiography ... is to lend oneself to the vivisector's scalpel ..." (156). Katherine Gracki remarks that this double exposure (both physical and metaphorical) did indeed effect an inevitable vulnerability that is evoked in Djebar's fiction through women's traumatized bodies: "It is through this intensely corporeal imagery that Djebar weaves together her own stories of wounds and mutilated memories with those of her Algerian sisters, and ultimately with those of Algeria herself" (835).

To return to *Fantasia*, the most graphic image of this mutilation is represented in the writer's recovery of a woman's dismembered hand which the 19th century French painter, Eugene Fromentine, discovers and subsequently discards during his sojourn in war-ravaged Algeria. The woman's amputated hand reflects the horror, the violence and devastation that is intrinsic to any war scenario. At the same time, it can also be a metaphor for a violated Algeria whose history has been written and shaped by the colonizing Other. Conversely, the dismembered hand could signify women's thwarted attempts at writing themselves into a phallocentric history.57 That is, the hand could be a symbol for the mutilation of women's desire to write their histories: histories that were suppressed by colonialists only to be stifled again by the patriarchs who moulded "independent" Algeria. Djebar's act of picking up the "hand of mutilation and memory" in order to offer it the "qalam" is then significant of the woman writer's commitment to rewrite a history that has been defaced by colonial aggressors and myopic nationalist leaders.

Such merging of feminine histories, voices and identities is particularly noteworthy in a narrative that alludes to *A Thousand and One Nights* to illustrate the significance of sisterhood for the survival and well being of women:

Every night a woman prepares to keep watch to prevent the executioner's bloody deed. The listener now is the sister. Her vigil ensures that she will render without fail the promised assistance; she brings the hope of salvation before the new day dawns. [98]

*Chaque nuit, une femme s'apprête à veiller pour parer au geste sanglant de l'exécuteur. L'écouteuse, cette fois est la soeur. Son insomnie assure l'entraide sans faille; elle permet d'entrevoir le salut d'avant le jour.* [107]

The mythologized narrative of the writer's legendary maternal ancestors, Scheherazade and Dinarzade, is thus woven into the histories of Isma and Hajila. This underscores the

importance of women’s solidarity in cultural locations where relationships between men and women are hierarchized to the detriment of women, and patriarchal values and practices are privileged and used unjustly as a measure of reference for both men’s and women’s lives. By interlocking the maternal legacy of Scheherazade with the histories of Algerian women, Djebar strives to give the latter mythic significance. This strategy enables the author to place a distinct group of women and the daily battles they encounter in postcolonial Algeria within a broader historical framework so that their oppression (both domestic and public) transcends specificities of time and location.

Furthermore, the recourse to storytelling as a means of distracting the sultan who controls Scheherazade’s fate is another important thematic strand. It is Scheherazade’s skill in weaving imaginary tales (and indeed Dinarzade’s strategic cooperation at a critical moment) that thwarts the sultan’s impulse towards violence. Through this allegory Djebar succeeds in underpinning the relevance of nurturing women’s talents, such as storytelling, for women’s survival in predominantly masculinist systems: “a woman prompts the other with a word at the first sign of weakening. Her voice is ready to fly to the rescue, picking up every dropped stitch in the tale...” (98); *une femme lance le premier mot qui devance la défaillance. Sa voix est prête à voler pour chaque maille filée du récit...”* (107).

Having merged the multiple narratives of Algerian women in enclosed spaces in Part 11, and interposed the legend of an ancestral mother with the freedom Hajila attains in Part 111, the text concludes disconcertingly in the section entitled “The Lute”. Here Djebar takes women out of specific contexts and locations and interlocks their situations with that of Scheherazade. Djebar suggests that the future of all women is as uncertain, precarious and unstable as that of Scheherazade: “... we feel the same distress .... [C]an we women resuscitate our lost childhood, we who were mutilated in our adolescence ...? ... Where shall we find a resting-place?” (160); “*nous palpitons de la première angoisse ... [L’]enfance disparue, pouvons-nous la ressusciter, nous, les mutilées de l’adolescence ...? ... Dans quel lieu faire halte?”* (171). Given this bewildering predicament, the writer emphasizes that women’s unity is the goal towards which all women, despite divisions and differences, must aspire, as in this lies a semblance of hope for the future.

By alluding to a collective identity Djebar is not marginalizing specificity. Rather, she is attempting to depict the unifying elements within difference that could be effectively mobilized to bring about change that has positive historical impact on women’s lives all over. In the case of Algeria, Djebar knows that it is only through
women's collective participation that any constructive resolution for women's problems can be sought. As one woman activist challenging fundamentalist violence in Algeria proclaimed: "It is important for people to know that a democratic Algeria exists in the women's movement. If these values did not exist, there would be no struggle here."  

Re-reading the last section, one feels that Djebar is employing a humanist/ethical framework for her narrative where she strives to consolidate the idea of intersubjectivity, that is, "the relationship between the varieties of modes of being different in the world." Lazreg defines this intersubjectivity as a factor that de-essentializes difference (as opposed to Western feminist scholarship which celebrates difference to the point of objectifying and essentializing the Other woman, thereby creating undesirable antitheses among women):

It means that their lives like "ours" are structured by economic, political, and cultural factors. It means that these women, like "us," are engaged in the process of adjusting, often shaping, at times resisting and even transforming their environment." ["Feminism" 98]

By juxtaposing the overtly different characters of Isma and Hajita, and thereafter synchronizing their predicaments with the plight of other Algerian women, Djebar is not submerging the diversity and complexity of women's lives, experiences and aspirations. She is, in fact, striving to establish a political strategy that would enable women to resist collectively different kinds of oppression.

2.3.5 So Long a Letter: Mapping a Hybrid Feminist, Epistolary Novel
Meanwhile Bâ in Letter advocates a humanist, and at times a universalist, view of feminism, even while addressing issues that are pertinent to an African (or Third World) feminism: "I will never forget the white woman who was the first to desire for us an 'uncommon' destiny" (15); "je n'oublierai jamais la femme blanche qui, la première, a voulu pour nous un destin 'hors du commun'" (27). While upholding values that are intrinsic to an African way of life and an African feminism, Rama configures a feminism hinged on the ethos of universalism. Her perception is based on a deep conviction that despite differences in locations and contexts women share similar anxieties: "[the] cry is coming from the heart of all women everywhere ...." (cited in Irlam 82).

There is a fundamental concern in the text for the welfare (especially the education) of women: "We have a right, just as you have, to education .... We have a

right to equal well-paid employment, to equal opportunities" (61); "Nous avons droit, autant que vous, à l'instruction .... Nous avons droit au travail impartialement attribué et justement rémunéré" (89). Equally passionate is the plea for women to be politically involved in directing women's struggles and shaping the nation's future: "Women should no longer be decorative accessories .... Women are the nation's primary, fundamental root ...." (61-62); "la femme ne doit plus être l'accessoire qui orne .... La femme est la racine première, fondamentale de la nation ...." (90). Through Daba, Rama's daughter, Bà is particularly keen to develop a consciousness of women's politics that is contrasted significantly with the kind of politics in which men engage. As Wole Soyinka points out, in Africa this male politics reflects the "moral failure" of leaders and social injustice that have given rise to bankrupted economies, social instability and corrupt governments, operating without "purpose or ideology beyond self-perpetuation through organized terror". 60 Similar to the idealistic aspirations of the larger-than-life protagonist in Emecheta's Destination Biafra who is placed fair and square in the midst of an internecine crisis spear-headed by men ("A few years ago it was 'Independence, freedom for you, freedom for me.' We [women] were always in the background. Now that freedom has turned into freedom to kill each other"), 61 in Letter, Rama's daughter (Daba) contemplates a unique brand of women's politics, fundamentally as a reaction to the failed leadership of men in contemporary Africa.

Interestingly, Virginia Woolf undertakes a similar mission in her 1930s polemic, Three Guineas. 62 Rebuking an authoritarian male-centred leadership, in this essay she encourages women to defy the laws of the state and envisage a voice of the outsider where the masculine and the feminine converge to produce a non-hegemonic voice. Curiously, though Woolf does not outline a clear, alternative manifesto to counter dominant masculinist politics, she inspired early 20th century British women from various class backgrounds to think of alternative independent lifestyles based on women-centred values and experiences. 63

Meanwhile, Djebar, while not pursuing the subject of autocratic male leadership in Sister, does address the issue in her later works (such as Algerian White) where she condemns Algerian leaders for failing to restore an ethical system of government in war-

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torn post-independence Algeria. As for Daba in Bà’s text, while not radical in her definition of what she perceives to be “women’s politics”, her configuration of politics is provocative and indeed revolutionary for her epoch:

‘I don’t want to go into politics; it’s not that I am not interested in the fate of my country .... But when I look at the fruitless wranglings ... when I see men’s greed for power, I prefer not to participate .... No: I prefer my own association, where there is neither rivalry nor schism .... [W]e are mobilized by ... a healthy militancy.’ [74]

‘je ne veux pas faire de politique, non que le sort de mon pays .... Mais à regarder les tiraillements stériles ..., à regarder l’appétit de pouvoir des hommes, je préfère m’absentir.

‘No ... je préfère mon association où il n’ya ni rivalité, ni clivage ... [C’]est un militantisme ... qui nous mobilise, mais c’est un militantisme sain .... ’ [107-108]

By focusing on the decadence and the moral and spiritual withering of Africa’s male leaders, Daba draws attention to the debased values African men have unashamedly inherited from their colonial masters.

Bà’s feminism, align with a Third World feminist praxis, is not restricted to the issue of gender alone. Since Africa is a part of the location we define as the "developing world", a feminism emerging from this world-space often shares certain concerns with feminisms from other Third World locations: “Developing a country is not easy .... I am speaking of the whole range of material and moral poverty” (62); "Ce n’est pas simple de développer un pays .... Il s’agit de toutes les misères matérielles et morales" (91). Bà’s view of feminism is intrinsically enmeshed with other issues that are fundamental to the socioeconomic fabric of the developing world.

It may help to assess whether Bà’s configuration of feminism, so overtly textualized in Letter, is exclusively African given it leanings towards issues of the developing world. In order to do so, one needs to consider the position of the woman writer, the postcolonial intellectual, or to borrow a pithy epithet of Spivak, “the privileged marginal”", in relation to Bà’s text. Like Bà, her protagonist, Rama, a Senegalese schoolteacher, is also a member of the Westernized postcolonial elite (the nationalist bourgeoisie) which emerged in full force at the point when nations such as Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria gained independence after many decades of colonization: “It was the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence” (25), "Privilège de notre génération, charnière entre deux périodes historiques, l’une de domination, l’autre d’indépendence” (40).
Of particular relevance to a study of the elite class of Africa is the link it maintained with the West, despite the shattering impact of colonialism. Exposed to a Western education and, in the case of Senegal, a distinctly French culture, it is almost inevitable that the nationalist bourgeoisie should have appropriated a hybrid identity where the amalgam of values is more than vaguely evident. In Rama's case, her access to the West through her education and other ties makes her uphold, often unselfconsciously, a Western brand of feminism that is underpinned by the philosophies of universalism and humanism:

To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world ... to develop universal moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable [French] headmistress. [15-16]

Nous sortir de l'enlisement des traditions, superstitions et moeurs; nous faire apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de la nôtre; élever notre vision du monde ... faire fructifier en nous les valeurs de la morale universelle; voilà là tâche que s'était assignée l'admirable directrice [française]. [27]

(Similar pronouncements are made by Rama throughout the text, emphasizing phrases such as "human destiny", "essential qualities", "universal moral values" and so on [see for example pages 11, 20, 32 and 52]).

While humanist philosophy bases truth primarily on human experiences, and values on human nature, Immanuel Wallerstein defines universalism as a belief that there "exist meaningful general statements about the world - the physical world, the social world - that are universally and permanently true" (these views however are subverted/decentred by recent structuralist and poststructuralist theory which place greater importance on the differential play of language). According to Wallerstein,

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65 Opposing the advocates of New Criticism, structural and poststructural (including deconstruction) theories dismantle the idea of texts as isolated, self-sufficient artefacts, and displace the privileged position writers have occupied historically. Highlighting systems of linguistic, literary and cultural codes embedded in literary texts, these theories draw attention to multiple meanings that a critic can hermeneutically elicit from deciphering complex codes. While structuralism sees the text as a closed entity containing a definite meaning which it is the critic's task to configure, poststructuralists perceive meaning as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers. According to poststructuralism, the text has no singular essence and is therefore open-ended and subject to multiple interpretations. While decentring notions of truth and authenticity, and dissolving fixed binary oppositions of structuralist thought, poststructuralists and deconstructionists perceive the author not as a sole authority but merely as the locus through which codes pass to create meanings. See Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
because of universalism's links with capitalism and free market policies, it has underwritten in recent times such phenomena as Westernization, globalization and, indeed, cultural and economic imperialism. Furthermore, universalism's tendency to homogenize truths often creates friction between cultures whereby "indigenous cultural practices and beliefs have been discredited and devalued by those who wield economic and political power in the capitalist world-system" (Champagne 27). The Westernized elite class, separated from the masses of workers, is a construction of the ideology of universalism that requires the latter group to manage and control the workforce. Wallerstein implies that universalism is the language and the tool that the elite class, or the nationalist bourgeoisie, uses to support the system it promotes. A significant feature of this class is that there was inevitably "a good deal of repetition of the colonial episteme in the presumed rupture of postcoloniality" (Spivak cited in Champagne 28), despite earlier commitments to build the newly independent state after decolonization.

The inclination to be repetitive, that is to write in the universal language of the colonizer, is evident in Bâ's text. The novel achieves a hybrid quality because of its tendency to uphold indigenous values and practices on the one hand, and conform to colonial standards on the other. For example, even while criticizing colonialism and its exploitative practices and assimilationist tendencies ("The assimilationist dream of the colonist drew into its crucible our mode of thought and way of life .... [A] whole generation suddenly became aware of the ridiculous situation festering in our midst" [24]; "Rêve assimilationniste du colonisateur, qui attirait dans son creuset notre pensée et notre manière d'être ..., toute une génération prit, d'un coup, conscience du ridicule que vous couviez" [39-40]), the novel upholds Western ideology. As the above citation reveals, the French imperial policy of cultural assimilation led sometimes to a fusion, but more often to a conflict of values between tradition and modernity, between indigenous attitudes and practices (Rama's decision to be in iddah - a period of waiting from marriage after the death of a male spouse - in accordance with her faith), and foreign/Western thoughts and praxis (her love of Western dancing, celebration of Christmas and so on). In fact, the contradictions apparent in Rama and her coterie of friends are displayed on multiple levels and can be viewed in relation to such diverse areas as religion, class loyalties and political leanings.

As for Djebar's text, even though references to the impact of colonialism are not underscored in Isma's narrative, there is generally an acknowledgement in the quartet of the "endless strife" defining acculturation, and the permanent alternation of the Self, as the besieged foreigner and the native swaggering off to die (see in particular "The Tunic of Nessus" in Fantasia). Texts such as Fantasia and So Vast the Prison articulate persuasively conditions of ambivalence and the often conflicting positions bequeathed upon the colonized subjects by an unrelenting colonial process.

A striking illustration of Rama's ambivalent standards in Letter can be noted in her dealings with Binetou and her mother, and Aunty Nabou. Here her views are influenced by her class loyalties and class-consciousness which make up another important aspect of the text. Even though Binetou's mother and Aunty Nabou are both responsible for breaking up two marriages (hers as well as Aissatou's), Rama is able to condone at least implicitly Aunty Nabou's actions, and unwittingly, even has some admiration for her aristocratic disposition. Meanwhile, she has little sympathy for Binetou's mother who is quickly dismissed as a member of Senegal's new rich bourgeoisie. Obioma Nnaemeka's references to the French text display further the novel's preoccupation with a class-conscious society:

The fact that Ramatoulaye lives in a very class-conscious culture is evidenced in the many vernacular words in the text that refer to class distinctions: ngac (bush [unsophisticated, uncivilized] woman), ndol (the poor), Gulewär (Princess), guer (statutory nobleman). In addition to Mawdo's mother who in her aristocratic arrogance treats Aissatou condescendingly because she comes from the class of craftsmen ... Ramatoulaye herself is equally guilty of class arrogance .... ["Urban Spaces" 182]

The contradictions extend to Rama's political beliefs as well. Like Djebar, Ba (and Rama) recognizes the need to be politically active in order to destabilize oppressive colonial regimes so that nations such as Senegal could advance towards establishing a more just system for its citizens: "Many of us rallied around the dominant party .... To be productive in the crowd was better than ... hiding behind imported ideologies" (25); "Beaucoup d'entre nous ralliaient le parti dominant .... Etre productif dans la mêlée valait mieux que ... s'abriter derrière des idéologies importées" (40). At the same time, curiously, she also appears to condone and acknowledge passivity, nonresistance and "acceptance under the merciless whip of fate": "Your stoicism has made you not violent or subversive but true heroes ..." (11); "Votre stoïcisme fait de vous, non des violents, non des inquiétants, mais de véritables héros ..." (22).
A similar issue is raised by Charles Sarvan who points out that Rama's desire to sustain the existing system of Senegal's nationalist bourgeoisie makes her support an autocratic one-party system to the detriment of oppositional politics: "Part of Ramatoulaye's refusal to have anything to do with politics and public life stems from her wish not to endanger a system that, by and large, favoured her class though not her sex. If women agitated overtly and aggressively, will not the poorer classes follow suit?" While Rama's elite upbringing plays a primary role in shaping her thinking to the extent that her class affiliations overpower her commitment to national politics, she is nevertheless not unpatriotic. In Rama's case, the problem lies in her inability to be more actively involved in order to put her thoughts into productive action (it is noteworthy that Rama's privileged class affiliations parallel the ties Sahgal's protagonist maintains with the elite class of postcolonial India in Rich Like Us). As Albert Gérard and Jeanine Laurent comment succinctly:

In Senegalese fiction of this last colonial decade, both writers and protagonists were usually privileged Africans .... Though their sympathy with the plight of the colonized masses was undoubtedly genuine, there was nevertheless something abstract and doctrinaire about it.

From this point of view, Rama's feminism is not "radical" by any means: she is a moderate, and in her own words, only "a bit of a rebel".

Given the manifold conflicts and contradictions in the text, the reader may face the dilemma of having to resolve an array of questions such as - does the protagonist's tendency to eulogize Western philosophy affect the novel negatively? Is the novel lacking in coherence because of its syncretist tendencies and inconsistencies, its gaps and lacks? Or, do the contradictions and fissures only go to highlight the complex situations writers such as Bâ encountered at a particularly significant moment in their nations' histories (that is the post-independence phase)? One way of reconciling these incompatibilities is to acknowledge them as the inevitable outcome of the historical circumstance of postcoloniality. By asserting this view, however, I do not intend to obscure the actions of official leaders of postcolonial states, or to minimize or underestimate the resultant consequences, as they have contributed in significant ways to the making and, more often, the breaking of nations (a case in point in sub-Saharan Africa is Nigeria or Zimbabwe; in the Maghreb, it is Algeria). At the same time, the

conditions of postcoloniality require the reader to maintain an open-mindedness to the
tensions, the nonresolutions and the seemingly incompatible nature of events textually
represented in works such as Letter and Fantasia. These features are part of the legacy
inherited by most postcolonial writers situated at a point of confluence, a point of
interaction and ambivalence where new and old ideas, local and foreign values,
indigenous and Western traditions collide in complicated ways.

The structure of Bà’s novel is also underpinned by a hybridity that requires some
consideration. The form of the text interplays between a Western genre, which is the
epistolary novel, and indigenous oratorical traditions that do not neatly fit into the
familiar categories of literate culture. The latter is particularly evident in the
iterative style Rama employs to address Aissatou - the fictive reader within the
epistolary framework - and reinforce the seriousness of the letter, the digressions, the
repetitions, the invocation of praises to the dead, the elegiac expression of funeral rites
and, indeed, the conversational pattern of storytelling that defies spatial and temporal
linearity of novelistic action.

The informal approach to storytelling, the nonlinearity of conflated events and
the central position occupied by the female "I" narrator are striking features Bà’s text
shares with Sister. Critical to both novels are the alternative approaches (especially of
oral narratives) the women protagonists adapt to inscribe their agency and write
themselves into a totalizing masculinist history. Both texts underscore feminine
experiences, women’s shared woes and sororal unity, while setting out to recover the
agency of the gendered postcolonial subject. Like the traditional oral performer (for
example, the women soloists of Akan funeral dirges or oriki custodians from Yoruba
society) the African woman writer does not merely tell a story or recount a communal
grievance or concern that is not personal: while recounting a specific event (such as
Rama’s experiences of marriage in Letter or her involvement in the struggle for
independence in Senegal), she also sets out to verbally represent her selfhood even
though this verbal assertion of her presence may not in practice radically defy the
boundaries set out by the patriarchal order.

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111-146; Elizabeth Gunner, A Handbook for Teaching African Literature, 2nd ed. (London:
Oxford University Press, 1988); and Karin Barber, "Yoruba Oriki and Deconstructive Criticism,"

70 Oriki is adulatory religious poetry usually praising various members of the pantheon of
Yoruba divinities. While official oriki artists are men, non-professional oriki performers are
generally women.
It is noteworthy that even though many African women writers employ the novel form to narrate the histories of women, as Ali Mazrui informs us, the novel (as opposed to other genres such as poetry and drama) is in many ways "the most purely European".\(^{71}\) Evidently, the epistolary form of the novel writers like Bâ inherited from 18\(^{th}\) century English novelists (such as Samuel Richardson) who employed the conventions of fiction writing (plots, characters, themes and so on) less assiduously that their 19\(^{th}\) century counterparts. Access to the repetitive, long-winded epistolary form made the writer's task of expressing personal thoughts a lot easier, though not less complex. It has elements of the autobiographical even though it does not fall strictly into this category. The references to the experiences, thoughts and actions of the fragmented "I" subject, the narrator, allow the text to be simultaneously traumatic, confessional and therapeutic. The ebb and flow of memories which inspire introspective analysis and enable the narrator to come to terms with her inner thoughts and conflicts, emerge not in a cautiously thought-out chronological sequence but in a fragmented pattern. Merging the present, the past and the future, as Nnaemeka points out, "[t]he intensity of this whirlwind of superimposed and colliding images throws Rama into disarray and ultimately leads her to seek support and strength in her long letter."\(^{72}\)

Bâ commences the narrative with Modou's death, and reveals the extent to which he was respected in his community before proceeding to elaborate Rama's experiences and perspective. Rama and Binetou, the young co-wife, or more precisely Modou's second wife, have just about gone into iddah which is, literally, a period of waiting before remarriage after the death of a woman's husband or her divorce from him, or the separation of a couple (for widows the period is up to four months and ten days; for divorced women the time frame is reduced to three months).\(^{73}\) Traditionally,


\(^{73}\) According to strict religious requirements, iddah is a period of waiting before remarriage rather than a period of confinement as various literary critics have pointed out with regard to Bâ's novel. The period of waiting does not necessitate confinement, and women/widows who have financial and other responsibilities are under no compulsion to remain at home as some cultural situations may demand.

A primary reason for the practice of iddah in the Islamic world is to make it known if a woman is pregnant, so that there is no confusion about the paternity of an unborn child if a woman is to remarry immediately after a divorce or the death of her husband (if a woman is pregnant, the man is responsible for the wife's maintenance until their child is born). A second reason is to give a period of time to a married couple who wishes to be legally separated or divorced. Ideally, this period should be a time for introspection and an opportunity to see if the relationship could be mended. See 'Abdur Rahman Doi, Women in Shari'ah (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1989), 100-104.
in many Muslim cultures widows also allocate the period of *iddah* for prayers and meditation. Thus we find Rama at the beginning of the narrative observing *iddah* in parallel with her religious and cultural obligations. This gives her the opportunity to take on a more passive role and absorb the events at the funeral dispassionately as a spectator to whom things happen, rather than an active participant.

*Iddah* has been defined differently by critics such as Uzo Esonwanne and Irlam among others to signify a period of confinement or seclusion where a woman in mourning is prohibited from conversing/maintaining contact with those outside a restricted space. Curiously, the Arabic term is never actually used by any of the above critics even though the subject itself is discussed exhaustively. While *iddah* as a period of waiting is a Qur‘anic injunction which all Muslim jurists uphold, the way in which it is practised varies considerably according to different sociohistorical and cultural circumstances. Thus, over time, in some locations the practice of *iddah* has transformed, often without rhyme or reason, into a cultural practice of confinement - even though theoretically at least, *iddah* is supposed to be observed by widows who are in a position to do so (physically, financially or otherwise). In extreme circumstances, there is some blockage of exchange with the outer world as the above critics suggest. However this blockage is only restricted to physical contact with certain members of the opposite sex (with or without awareness of the initial reasons for the establishment of *iddah* as a religious injunction). From this we can infer that written correspondence with men and/or women has not been an issue even for those women who are subject to confinement. Hence, we find Rama corresponding with Aissatou, now divorced and living in New York, by letter, and more critically, interacting with the potentially eligible Tamsir and Daouda Dieng (the customarily tabooed “male” group), both of whom approach her with proposals of marriage during the course of her so-called confinement or seclusion.

The writer’s decision to employ the convention of *mirasse*, therefore, has more to do with a personal preference of narrative technique for candid disclosure, than with, as Esonwanne and others imply, a tradition of confinement. In complying with a hybrid form, Bâ syncretizes the technique of *mirasse* with epistololarity which becomes a crucial vehicle for the exposition of intimate personal details. Simultaneously, this subversive hybridity encourages the reader to be informed about some of the larger, more pressing socioeconomic and cultural issues challenging African women today.

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It is starkly ironic that Rama at the outset should witness people extolling her husband's virtues and generously contributing to her coffer as tradition required, while she endures in silence the tumultuous history of her marital life. Juxtaposed with public opinion is Rama's solitary narrative to Aissatou which, curiously, does not lead to an exchange of correspondence. The irony is intensified by our knowledge that the period of mourning that would have been customarily reserved for prayers for the dead is now devoted to a disclosure or mirasse of Modou Fall's ill deeds, and the humiliation and sufferings Rama endured because of his betrayal and abandonment of responsibilities: "The mirasse commanded by the Koran [sic] requires that a dead person be stripped of his most intimate secrets" (9); "'Le Mirasse', ordonné par le Coran nécessite le dépouillement d'un individu mort de ses secrets les plus intimes" (19). Mbye Cham succinctly condenses the Islamic precept of mirasse as follows:

> a juridical principle, that defines and stipulates in precise mathematical terms the nature of inheritance in the Islamic family, be it monogamous or polygamous. This notion of inheritance, laid out in the chapter on women in the Qur'an, implies disclosure of all known and unknown or secret material possessions of a deceased for division among survivors.  

Extending the conceptual significance of mirasse, Bâ skillfully incorporates the device to divulge not only details of a material kind but also those that are non-material and relevant to her intimate marital life, and ultimately to Africa's socioeconomic fabric.

Studying Bâ's technique, one may query why Rama sets out to give such lengthy details of her past life to someone who already shares these memories with Rama, and why one never hears Aissatou's voice or her perspectives directly. Even Rama's attempt to disclose to Aissatou smatterings of information about Aissatou's own life, her relationship with Mawdo Bâ and the breakup of their marriage instigated by the mother-in-law, Aunty Nabou, appear strange and redundant (the technique of introducing Aissatou through Rama's narrative in a way parallels Djebar's technique of representing Hajila through Isma's narrative). One way of resolving this question is to apprehend the letter as a cathartic (textual) expression of Rama's many sufferings. In the same vein, one can question why the letter-writing exercise was undertaken in the first place if, as Rama indicates, she is to meet Aissatou shortly. Re-reading the text one tends to feel that the epistle is addressed not to Aissatou, but to the reader: the process of writing (écriture) is a recuperative act, exteriorizing a personal history marked by multiple traumas, "a wound hardly healed" (Letter 26). Viewed from this angle, the letter tends

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to slip into the mode of a journal where the protagonist recovers a therapeutic space to inscribe through a praxis of memory her tormented personal experiences and sentiments.

Though contextually different, the situation Rama faces in having to live with a man who decides to take a second wife while still being married to the first, is not dissimilar to the fates of Nwapa's childless Efuru and the protagonist of Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, who is made to live, much to her dismay and disillusionment, in a polygamous setup in squalid urban Lagos. At the same time it needs to be emphasized that even though Rama decides to live with Modou Fall in a polygamous relationship, she never gets an opportunity to experience the life of a co-wife simply because Modou Fall does not adhere to the rules of polygamy either in accordance with Islamic rules or African practices. Traditions tend to collapse when women attempt to practise them in unconducive urban milieus where men exploit circumstances to their personal advantage and women as dependents often have no control over events that transpire. In a recent publication Nnaemeka also points out the conflictual positions so-called modern African men occupy in urban centers:

In order to fully account for the ways in which these contradictions are complicated and exacerbated by the dissonances in the African environment itself, one must examine critically the way in which the "modern," urban (but not so urbane!), African man juggles and manipulates different, sometimes conflicting, systems in an attempt to enjoy the best of all possible worlds. In many ways, the so-called modernity has intensified the masculinization of the African tradition, thereby deepening the marginalization of women and creating instances (for the women in particular) where tradition is progressive and modernity reactionary. ["Urban Spaces" 171]

However, although Nnaemeka in this discussion is confining her assessment to the aberrant behaviour of certain men, Bâ's references to men's exploitative tendencies in the text tend to be more general than specific. While agreeing with Nnaemeka that the subject of specificity is vital "because criticism of African literature has the tendency to naturalize, 'normativize,' and generalize the behaviours, inclinations, and actions of the characters in the literary work" (171), this specificity is not made apparent in Bâ's text - at least with regard to the primary (curiously all middle-aged) male characters. As in Aidoo's *Changes*, here too men are portrayed generally as people with polygamous instincts, albeit this does not necessarily lead to a critique of polygamy: "Whereas a woman draws from the passing years the force of her devotion ... [a man's] egoistic eye looks over his partner's shoulder" (41); "Alors que la femme puise, dans le cours des
 Importantly, though Bà makes certain generalizations about men, she strives not to stereotype women's victimization in African societies: for example, the submissive Rama who charts a new life for herself after the death of her husband is counterpoised with the more resolute and confident Aissatou, and Rama's strong-willed daughter, Daba. These characters in turn can be juxtaposed with others such as Jacqueline who endures temporary depression but recovers and takes on a new life. Jacqueline's case can be paralleled with that of Mireille, the main character of Bà's second novel, The Scarlet Song, as both confront similar marital crises and are subject to severe mental breakdown. While Jacqueline's situation, however, is a temporary setback, Mireille's predicament turns out to be more disastrous (she unintentionally kills her baby and stabs her husband). Indeed, these diverse female characters - as opposed to the male characters - prove to be "a refreshing corrective dose of balance in an area too often littered with crude, uninformed and sweeping generalizations and stereotypes about male oppression of women in Africa" (Cham 35).

As for Rama, even though she knows deep within herself what steps she should take to overcome her predicament, she is too overwhelmed to make a decision that would put an end to her marriage. Evidently, she idolizes Aissatou and appreciates the choices she makes for herself with the breakdown of her marriage. However, Rama has neither the will nor the courage to follow Aissatou partly due to her (Rama's) somewhat conservative upbringing, and partly to the secure middle-class lifestyle to which she has been so accustomed. She finds it difficult to challenge societal expectations and endure the repercussions of ostracism that a woman without a husband is likely to encounter in a traditional African social setup. Posing a contrast to Rama is the protagonist of Sister who, acting as a matchmaker for her own husband, finds him a second wife and releases herself from the initial contract of marriage. Indeed for Rama (as for Bà) "the dilemma persists due to her inability to come to terms with her feminism" (Nnaemeka, "Mariama" 26), to liberate herself from a meaningless marriage, and in her own words, to "[d]raw a clean line through the past" (Letter 40). Like Hajila in Djebar's novel, the course of action Rama takes eventually will be neither simple nor straightforward: "My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult ..." (88); "Mon coeur est en fête chaque fois qu'une femme émerge de l'ombre. Je sais mouvant le terrain des

acquis, difficile la survie des conquêtes ...” (129). Despite this, she does make a positive decision, and in this decision lie the ideals she so aspires to embrace.

Here I disagree with Chikwenye Ogunyemi who, in an attempt to consolidate the notions of black womanism and the unity among blacks, gives the impression that Rama is unperturbed by the events that befall her (“Rather than collapsing, she [Rama] remains undaunted with little acrimony”77) and that it is a biological factor that determines Modou Fall’s actions. By doing so, the critic unwittingly (?) justifies Modou Fall’s deception and betrayal of Rama, producing a defence of the practice of polygamy under any circumstance:

Men must be men, it seems, but women do not have to be like them. Having accepted men with their libidinous disposition, she can create a stable life around her numerous children, male and female, along with their spouses. This is womanism in action .... Though she recognizes the inequities of patriarchy, she never really fights for her "rights" .... [76] Critically, Rama herself, though traumatized by her husband’s decision to take a second wife, upholds this reductive, biological reasoning. By doing so she treads on dangerous ground, defying her feminist undertakings and condoning the patriarchal practices of a system she claims to oppose. In a sense then, as Sarvan points out, Rama is “a conservative in revolt”, who can simultaneously justify men’s polygamous instincts while strongly believing, as her Eurocentric education would propel her to do, that the nation can only be stable if it upholds monogamy, that is, the harmony of a couple within a monogamous union: “The success of the family is born of a couple’s harmony .... The success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family” (89); “C’est de l’harmonie du couple que nait la réussite familiale .... La réussite d’une nation passée donc irrémédiablement par la famille” (130). In contrast, Djebar’s narrator in Sister has a different perspective. Rather than deride a cultural practice intrinsic to African/Islamic societies, she sees in polygamy an opportunity for women to strengthen their “sisterly solidarity” (despite superficial rivalries), and liberate themselves from the distressing circumstances of an oppressive masculine world.

This section has attempted to demonstrate the way in which Bâ intertwines the personal history of a Senegalese woman and a history of a nation with their multiple contradictions, disjunctions and fractures. It is a distinctly contemporary African history, conflating domestic and national concerns, and incorporating an overwhelming complex of often colliding values and traditions (African, Islamic, Western, regional,

colonial, postcolonial, universal-humanist, feminist and patriarchal), where tensions are not quite resolved. Rather, they remain on a tide of negotiation, emblematized in the "dialogue" initiated by Rama (and indirectly Aissatou) in their continuing search for a meaningful way forward (Irlam 89).

2.4.1 Far from Madina
Djebar conceived Madina out of specific circumstances in October 1989 when Algeria was plunged into bloody turbulence with the eruption of fundamentalist politics in the nation's public life:

The shock was the riots of '88, blood flowing in the street .... I told myself that the only possible response for me, as a writer, was to go back and plunge myself again into the original texts [sources] ... that the fundamentalists were in the process of claiming for themselves ....

Propelled by these terrible events, Djebar began drafting her novel, Madina, partly to reassess questions pertaining to succession and political rivalries in contemporary Algeria, and partly also, to re-evaluate the status of Algerian women in the 20th century by revisioning and recuperating dialogically the history of (especially Muslim) women in the early years of Islam. Significantly, as in Fantasia, in this novel too Djebar is preoccupied with recovering the missing pieces in the archival records of (Islamic) history and juxtaposing hegemonic accounts with her personal readings of the past: "What triggered my interest was that I noticed 'blanks' in the text of those historians who happened to write later, long after the birth of Islam, particularly regarding the role of women."79

By the "opening up of a luminary time into a counterfactual possible world,"80 the narrative contests prevailing inequities and discriminatory practices in the contemporary "Islamic world",81 and thereby seeks alternative meaning structures or realities within a distinctly Islamic framework. While the novel is "written to indict the 'official' version of history, according to which Woman must be all covered up ... and kept housebound,"82 her discourse is anchored firmly in the teachings of Islam, the

81 The fact that the "Islamic" or "Muslim" world falls into no convenient continent is a problem of categorization and identity that needs to be highlighted. The Islamic world has no specific geographical site and its roots are found in a cluster of continents that vary from the Middle East and Africa to other locations in Asia and Europe.
82 Djebar cited in Zimra, "Not So Far," 823.
Qur’anic ethics and injunctions, and the traditions of Muhammad (sunna), the Prophet of Islam. In the re-reading of Islamic history, Djebar focuses on the brief but significant “golden age” of Islam when pre-Islamic women were first introduced to economic and legal sanctions as a means of protecting their status and rights in an evolving new faith. This pursuit of Islamic alternatives with a view to recovering a “feminist” vision by contemporary Muslim writers and scholars has much to do with, according to Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “the changed status of women and the need to accommodate their aspirations for equality and to define and control their increasing participation in the politics of the Muslim world.”

Djebar highlights early Islamic history as the locus of comparison and contrast for the authoritative Algerian governments that have been in power for many decades now. Operating as omnipotent centralizing entities, these powerful bodies have been deeply influenced by conservative Islamists whose vision for the nation has been an essentially “fundamentalist” one, based on a totalitarian, fixed and monologic perception of the Qur’an and hadith (sayings attributed to God, his prophets, especially Muhammad, and Archangel Gabriel, as recounted by the Prophet’s Companions). Though not foregrounded in the narrative, it is through a recuperative process which relies on dialogue, debate and discursiveness that the text subtly alludes to the masculinist biases and misogynist attitudes of some contemporary Muslim traditionalists. These are traditionalists who have (mis)represented the religion by promoting their own brand of Islam, thereby fossilizing and obfuscating the ethics of the Qur’an, and denying Muslim women their Islamic rights.

As an “Algerian reading”, the novel sets out also to critique implicitly existing Algerian political and legal structures that have, by enacting legislation such as the

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83 According to Shi’ite Muslims, the golden age is the ten-year phase during which the Prophet ruled. For the Sunni Muslims, it extends to four decades and encompasses the years of the first four Caliphs. See Haleh Afshar, "Islam and Feminism: An Analysis of Political Strategies," in Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives, ed. Mai Yamani (London: Ithaca Press, 1996), 198.


86 "Fundamentalism" is referred to here with caution as it has been subject to many misconceptions and distortions in the recent past. The term has been used imprudently, especially by Western media critics, in their monolithic representation of Muslims, in particular. However, as there is no other alternative term in current usage, I use fundamentalism to refer to a process where religion is (mis)used and abused by people for political ends and gain, and justified by literalist interpretations of the Qur’an and other relevant scriptures.

87 Djebar at the lecture on Far from Madina, delivered in Cambridge, 26 November 1996.
Family Code of 1984 (with its retrograde provisions on marriage, polygamy, custody rights, divorce and women's right to work) systematically reduced women to "minority" status. This predicament has succeeded in confining women spatially, and depriving them access to the political and economic spheres of an independent postcolonial Algeria.88

In *Madina*, Djebar establishes the recuperative act through the fusion of orthodox Islamic history (written by men) and the radically genderized collective memory of women whose perspectives counter totalizing, patriarchal interpretations of Islamic ideology. Locating the dialectic of revisionism in the text, Djebar remarks elsewhere that in the process of re-reading the dominant chronicles she "discovered a whole series of incredible anecdotes", some of them dangerous and subversive:

> Were one to start retelling them/passing them around, they might be called sacrilegious. And yet, those anecdotes are in those historians' [works]. All one has to do is go see/read: I am inventing nothing.89

Here, as in *Fantasia*, Djebar at once takes on the role of historian seeking to construct a story out of a chaos of information *already constituted*, and the novelist who is preoccupied with material both of a factual and fictional nature.

Though Djebar refers to the novel as a "fictional" composition, paradoxically it relies to a great degree on the writings of reputed and respected Arab scribes such as Al Tabari, Ibn Sa'ad and Ibn Hisham. At the same time, the text attains fictional status because of the author's efforts to replenish "the gaps in the collective memory - essential for me to be able to recreate those times in which I wished to dwell, and to try to put those distant days into their context" (*Madina*, "Foreword" xv). The feminine narrative is thus resurrected in order to make sense of a silenced and previously shrouded past.

The effort to resuscitate history through an imaginative reading of received knowledge is, as Linda Hutcheon points out in her study of the principles and strategies of postmodern discourse, "not a dishonest refuge from truth but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs."90 The process of problematizing orthodox historical knowledge, by juxtaposing it alongside feminine counter narratives,

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89 Cited in Zimra, "Not So Far," 825.
veers the text in the direction of historical metafiction. In other words, the text transforms chronicle into story (or narrative), appropriating selectively events from the vast and open-ended past to question the validity of "authentic" history, and to evaluate the extent to which history has been subject to interpretation rather than to "objective", dispassionate assessment. At the same time, Djebar is not merely preoccupied with decentring orthodox notions of history. As she says in the "Foreword", her objective is tantamount to an *ijtihad*, that is, an intellectual attempt involved in the quest for truth - especially in new and unique situations where information is lacking or competent authorities are not present.

The narrative thus becomes a tapestry of Islamic history, interweaving the master narratives of distinguished male scribes with the lesser-known collective memory of women participants and eyewitnesses who lived in the Arab world, in Madina in particular, from about the last days of the Prophet until the death of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, and the succession of Umar as the second Caliph of Islam.

### 2.4.2 The Language of Feminine Memory: Unveiling Spectres of History

The two sections that follow will elaborate Djebar's notion of "feminine memory", and observe how this memory helps the novel's scheme of revisionism. In the process, the fictional history reconstructs the lives and identities of some prominent female figures, in particular Fatima and Aisha, who occupy a special place in Islamic history. In her "Foreword" to *Madina* Djebar remarks:

> I was particularly struck by the fate of many women living during the period touched on in these pages, which begins with the death of Muhammad; I have tried to make them live again .... [xv]

> *Au cours de la période évoquée ici, qui commence avec la mort de Mohammed, de multiples destinées de femmes se sont imposées à moi: j'ai cherché à les ressusciter ....* [5]

To a great extent the author's attempt to resurrect the lives of these women, the "spectres" of history - to cite a Derridean image - has been inspired by her knowledge that the male chroniclers of Islam, though conscientious in their efforts to document facts scrupulously, have been "habitually inclined to let any female presence be overshadowed". In other words, the text refers to certain widely acknowledged chronicles which tend to impart particular interpretations of Islamic history based significantly on the viewpoint of men. By re-reading these records and by reconfiguring the historical experience at the advent of Islam, Djebar strives to demarcate a space for
the women of those nascent years, highlighting simultaneously the heterogeneous roles they occupied in the history of a burgeoning faith.

To deny their existence and the activities they carried out by textual effacement is, as Djebar points out, not only an attempt to erase the critical roles women like Fatima and Aisha assumed during and after the Prophet's life, but it also gives a one-sided perspective of Islam and negates the precedents set by these representative Islamic women for Muslim women of future generations. Rather than subscribe to Evelyn Accad's view that the "whole novel is a paean to Medina, a glorification of the Prophet and of his women," I suggest that the novel is a counter discourse, interrogating and re-configuring orthodox interpretations of Islamic history, and redefining the identities and roles of Muslim women.91 By this trajectory the author attempts to expose conservative leaders of the contemporary world to a more benevolent and just Islamic worldview where women, rather than being spatially confined to domesticity, took more responsibility for the social, political and economic activities of the worlds they inhabited then. This reconstruction of their spectral presence "allegedly known to all" is defined by the writer as "a sort of staging":

In the absence of a theatre in the original Islamic culture ... in the Sunni world the writing of History cannot be left only to chronicles, exegetes and theologians. Accordingly, collective memory is no longer something merely 're-visited'; it also reveals itself in bodily presence, in the concretely human with all its possibilities, its doubts, and in the light of the religious sensibility of simple people, in short, of poetry. [emphasis mine]92

Despite the set backs faced by some of the principal characters, the text attempts to inscribe incisively the subject positions of these women, stressing their movements and travels, and the spatial freedom they enjoyed in a larger, non-domestic world: "I choose to stress the initiative these women exhibited. What interests me is to describe them physically …. One can see their bodies, and the problem of the veil does not interest me - it does not yet exist."93

The women who occupy the centre stage of the text comprise Muslims and non-Muslims. Apart from these central characters there are several other women, all Muslim Migrants, some prominent because of their relationship with the Prophet and his Companions (both men and women), others less known or almost anonymous figures of a distant history. These women form Djebar's second tier of characters whose presence is

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92 Djebar, citation from the lecture at Cambridge.
93 Djebar cited in Zimra, "Not So Far," 824.
endorsed above all by their voices. Deeply moved by the life and activities of the Prophet, Djebar explains that "they cannot stop recalling, speaking of, almost transmitting scenes of everyday life, with the naive piety a little in the manner of Giotto, in the attempt to take us close to the magic and poetry of an exceptional epoch." These women, together with the central figures of the novel who later become acknowledged transmitters of Islamic history, are responsible for initiating "a language of memory", vital for the textual revisioning of women’s history.

In recovering the history of the Yemenite Queen, for example, Djebar retrieves a record which she suggests has not been adequately documented in dominant accounts of Islamic history. The Yemenite who is introduced to the reader at the inception of the narrative, comes into the limelight after the death of her husband and her unanticipated betrothal to the enemy who killed her husband in battle. The text implies that historical sources focus neither on her strength of character nor on her instincts for survival in an unstable regime. Djebar draws attention to this when she lightly impugns Islamic historian, Tabari, for having excused the Queen because of her alleged fear and intimidation. Although Tabari infers that it is fear that impels the Queen to marry a rival leader, Djebar is more sceptical, questioning the consequences and the motives of an adept Queen: "Is the Yemenite a submissive victim or pretended acquiescent prey? Aswad ... claiming to be a prophet, appears before her" (10); "La Yéménite est-elle victime soumise ou fausse proie consentante? Aswad ... se voulant prophète, est apparu devant elle" (20).

However, with her realization that Aswad is no second messiah rivalling the Prophet of Islam, she becomes disillusioned, and the scene shifts to the night of bloodshed when she conspires with a male cousin to get rid of her husband. As Djebar dramatizes the scene of murder, she fills in the gaping spaces of the incomplete historical narrative with questions, innuendoes, alternative answers and thought-provoking suggestions. In this revisionist project the author neither romanticizes nor glorifies the Yemenite who has the skill and the cunning to avert danger even as she indulges in crime and bloodshed. To the author the Queen is not an "Arab Judith, bringing back the head of a new Holofernes", but only "a minor character in these early days of Islam". Nevertheless, her determination and will epitomize the strength of some of her contemporary Bedouin sisters who assumed prominent roles in their respective communities. Critically, however, with the death of Aswad and the emergence of her male cousin Firuz, the Yemenite’s presence is expunged from the

94 Djebar, citation from the lecture at Cambridge.
chronicles of history. In different ways, there are also other women, non-Muslim characters such as Selma, the rebel, and the self-proclaimed prophetess Sajah, who rise against a growing Islam which the Prophet and his disciples strove to disperse beyond the borders of Arabia. These ghostly feminine figures who are rescued from the obscure annals of history will emerge from the recesses, together with others like Fatima and Aisha, to construct a feminized historical record of Islam in Madina.

2.4.3 Trials of the Beloved Daughter: Questions of Succession, Dispossession and Polygamy
The two chapters entitled "The Beloved Daughter" and "The Woman Who Said No in Madina" are devoted to the Prophet’s daughter, Fatima, who died six months after her father’s demise, stricken with grief and loss. Significantly Fatima, whose defiance and insubordination (over the issues of succession, inheritance and polygamy) swept her into conflict with the people of Madina, is identified in the reputed Islamic chronicles not as a separate individual who courageously stood up for her rights and beliefs, but as a daughter, and later as wife and mother of the three martyrs Caliph Ali, Hassan and Hussain: "Are all the sources really silent? Why do the chroniclers not mention Fatima until she is the mother of Hasan and Husayn?" (51); "Les sources se taisent-elles vraiment toutes? Pourquoi Fatima n’apparaît-elle chez les chroniquers qu’une fois mère de Hassan et Hossein?" (61-62). In Djebar’s novel, however, this intrepid foremother of Islam refuses to remain a mere shadow. She rises "as a specter to perform the impossible deconstruction of the binary opposition between male and female Muslims" (Spivak, "Ghostwriting" 79), thus concretizing the writer’s personal ijtihad.

Immediately following the Prophet’s death, Fatima is dramatically drawn to the centre stage of Islamic history when her life is inevitably entwined with the destiny of her religion. Fatima, a woman, becomes the only surviving descendent of the Prophet who will transmit "through her sons - virtual twins - a double masculine lineage - the principal blood link" (47); "par ses fils à elle - presque des jumeaux - une descendance masculine doublée - le lien principal de sang" (58). Her presence in Islamic history is therefore critical, as it is she who will provide future generations of Muslims with a link to the Prophet. At the same time, Djebar ironically implies that the tragic deaths of Fatima's sons, Hassan and Hussain, in Karbala more than fifty years later will violently disrupt the unified growth of Islam, fracturing the nascent Muslim umma (community) into Sunni and Shi’ite sects.
In the last moments of the Prophet’s life, to which we are introduced in the Prologue, the question that troubles him concerns the succession issue, as Islam was still in its infancy and a strong leadership was crucial for the furtherance of the new faith. Despite the many prominent roles women took in the Arab world, the society at the time was still patriarchal and patrilineal, and selecting a male successor to guide the heterogeneous Islamic community was undoubtedly a problem that the dying Prophet could not dismiss as irrelevant. At the time of his death, however, the problem had not yet been resolved, leading to uncertainties about the succession and the identity of a successor. The initial conflicts that erupt among the Muslims after their leader’s death directly relate, therefore, to this pertinent issue: "It was as if the body of Islam had to break apart, itself to give birth to civil strife and quarrels, all this as a tribute payable for the Founder’s polygamy ..." (48); "Comme si le corps de l'Islam devait se diviser, enfanter par lui-même luttes civiles et querelles, tout cela en tribut payé à la polygamie du Fondateur ..." (59). By focusing on the rupture that was beginning to surface in the umma, the narrative also foregrounds the Prophet’s female lineage, and constructs imaginatively a link between the succession problem and Fatima’s sexuality and gender:

Yes, if Fatima had been a son, the final scene of the transmission would have been different: whichever wife was instructed by the dying man, she would not have failed to bring him ‘the’ son, even if he were not her own son. [48]

Oui, si Fatima avait été un fils, la scène ultime de la transmission aurait été autre: quelle que fût l’épouse mandée par le mourant, elle n’aurait pas manqué d’amener “le” fils, sinon son fils. [59]

We may never really know how Fatima felt about this moment in history as her presence and her impressions are never fully inscribed in the archives. Nevertheless, it is implied that this daughter-wife may have felt responsible at least indirectly for a community in disarray as she is "transformed into a pawn for a male power play".95 As the writer notes with hints of irony, the Prophet’s Companions and the sons of the Companions engage in internecine warfare all because Fatima was a female descendent and could not succeed the Caliphate after her father’s death.

The author suggests that though happy to be a woman, Fatima’s awareness of her position as the only surviving (girl) child of the Prophet of Islam, may have brought her into conflict with her own sexuality and gender: "... Fatima wished she were a boy. Subconsciously. To be both her father’s Daughter (for the affection) and his Son (for the

95 Djebar cited in Zimra, "When the Past," 121.
A particularly tense moment for Ali, Fatima and the people of Madina occurs in the period following the Prophet's death. Fatima, in particular, feels deeply betrayed when the succession question takes precedence over her father's death, and the devoted Companions, especially the future Caliphs such as Abu Bakr and Umar, direct their attention to the leadership dispute, neglecting the funeral rites of her father-Prophet. The question of succession is also ultimately, inextricably bound with the fate of Fatima's husband, Ali, the fourth Caliph. The tensions in the interactions between the Companions (many from different tribes and locations) who vie to promote their own leaders for different reasons and motives are manifested vividly in the varying stages of the narrative. Thus, for example, according to Shi'ite readings of Islamic history, until Fatima's death Ali refuses to swear allegiance to Abu Bakr's Caliphate as a mark of respect to the Prophet and his beloved daughter. This created dissension within the early Islamic community, leading to schisms between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims in later years.

The contentious issue of polygamy in the narrative is primarily entwined with Fatima's fate and her relationship with Ali. The issue of polygamy is brought to the surface when Ali decides to take a second wife after eight years of marriage to her. Fatima, however, is opposed to this decision and resists the idea of having to become part of a polygamous union. In the disputes that arise between husband and wife, and in the ensuing problems, we are given an impression of how Djebar attempts to maintain a sense of critical balance in rethinking the historical Islamic narrative: "Does not this desire for polygamy detract from the image of Fatima and Ali as an ideal couple? There is no shortage of anecdotes about their conjugal quarrels" (58); "Ce désir de polygamie n'altère-t-il pas l'image - tellement idéalisée - du couple de Fatima et de Ali? Il ne manque pas d'anecdotes sur leurs querelles conjugales" (69). Simultaneously, in restoring Fatima's personal history and shedding light on her conjugal life, Djebar seeks...
to explore and reconstruct with profound sensitivity the daughter’s inner turmoil, so inadequately transcribed in the archives of Islamic history: “Does she think, at this moment, ‘What can I do?’ Is this not the natural law of men? Is it not fate? ‘Her’ fate, as a woman?” (62); “Pense-t-elle, à cet instant: ‘Que puis-je? N’est-ce pas la loi naturelle des hommes? N’est-ce pas la fatalité? ‘Sa’ fatalité à elle, une femme?” (73).

The father-Prophet’s involvement in this marital dispute transpires when the daughter turns to him for support, and says “no” to him first, thus inscribing her subjectivity and agency in a discourse where in other circumstances she may neither have been the subject nor object, but perhaps the site of debate. The Prophet is indeed faced with a quandary, for to go against his own polygamous lifestyle and to contradict a Qura’nic provision which permits a man to take up to four wives under certain conditions, can be construed by his people as a defiance of accepted norms. In Djebar’s narrative, therefore, the Prophet’s decision to say “no” to Ali publicly is expressed only after much contemplation and soul-searching:

I will not permit this marriage, at least as long as Ali has not divorced my daughter! Only then can he marry their daughter! For my daughter is a part of myself. What hurts her, hurts me! What distresses her, distresses me! [63]

Je ne permettrai pas ce mariage, du moins tant qu’Ali n’aura pas auparavant divorcé de ma fille! Alors seulement, il pourra épouser leur fille! ... Car ma fille est une partie de moi-même. Ce qui lui fait mal me fait mal! Ce qui la bouleverse me bouleverse! [74]

In the dilemma facing the Prophet the author also demonstrates her decision to portray the Prophet and his Caliphs “as simple, every day men within the simple concreteness of their daily lives.”96 This complex image of the Messenger (private/public, father/prophet, defendant/arbiter) is counterpoised with orthodox representations where he is made to appear so “sacred” that “all living colors” are effaced from his life and his personality. The solemn repetition by the Prophet of the remark “I do not forbid you that which God has permitted” seems more an effort to persuade himself that he is not betraying God than to convince his people of the legitimacy of his final resolution. This ambivalent response is also indicative of the Prophet’s profound consciousness of how such personal resolutions could have grave public and political implications that could eventually go to define and consolidate the nascent ideology of Islam. By highlighting the Prophet’s troubled sentiments and, ultimately, his decision to allow Fatima to continue a monogamous relation with Ali, Djebar not only advocates monogamy, but, as Spivak remarks, she also foregrounds the question of woman who

becomes "a figure for the impossible contradiction in the heart of history" ("Ghostwriting" 81). In other words, by consciously adapting an oppositional stance and proclaiming publicly a decision that threatens the patriarchal order, the Prophet’s actions manifest the paradoxes and contradictions of history in which women have been direct or, more often, indirect participants.

Though the Prophet seems to have initially harboured doubts, it is significant, when one delves into to the ethics of the Qur’an, that the decision he makes is closer to the spirit of the divine text which is fundamentally concerned with improving the status of women, than some Islamic laws (Shari’ah) which tend to overlook the essence of Qur’anic ethics, especially when it comes to issues affecting women and gender equality. It is relevant to point out here that there is a considerable gap between the ethical injunctions of the divine text, and Islamic laws which came into being through a process of evolution in the first few centuries after the Prophet’s death. It is true that in the Prophet’s time Islamic Arabia was patriarchal and male dominance was still a prevalent feature of many tribal communities. At the same time a unique feature of Qur’anic injunctions which were revealed to the Prophet over a period of twenty three years, is its ethical egalitarianism, fundamental to its spiritual message. This ethical dimension together with the more concrete provisions of the Qur’an strove to radically modify existing tribal laws and practices with the objective of producing a more just system from which both men and women could benefit, regardless of such factors as class, kin, social status, tribal affiliations and so on.

Although existing information about the pre-Islamic age (often called the Jahiliya period or "age of ignorance") is sparse, controversial and conflicting, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that in many of these early societies most women had “virtually no status”. To cite Noel Coulson and Doreen Hinchcliffe: "They were sold into marriage by their guardians for a price paid to the guardian, the husband could terminate the union at will, and women had little or no property or succession rights" (37). Furthermore, unrestricted polygamy and female infanticide were also quite rampant in pre-Islamic Arab societies.97

These predicaments prevailed, despite claims by critics such as Leila Ahmed that pre-Islamic Arabia was predominantly matrilineal and that women like Khadija - an

97 According to Al Tabari, one of the most respected Islamic scholars, a person who belonged to the Quraish tribe on average had ten to twelve wives. Other accounts point out that there were instances when "men married five hundred, or seventy-three to ninety women". As Asghar Engineer remarks, although there may be exaggerations in the latter numbers, they are generally indicative of an existing trend. See Asghar Engineer, The Rights of Women in Islam (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992), 21-22.
independent, influential and wealthy woman who employed the Prophet to carry out her trading activities, and was to later marry him for his reputed honesty - were products of an earlier age. While such claims may have been true in the context of some pre-Islamic Arab communities, there is no evidence to suggest that all or most communities in Arabia had egalitarian systems where women and men from disparate tribes and social strata had equal rights and opportunities. Furthermore, it would be erroneous to infer that because certain social groups in the pre-Islamic Arab world were matrilineal, and practices such as polyandry were distinct features of these systems, all or most women had some status in society and access to rights. In the works of Coulson, Hinchcliffe and Asghar Engineer, for example, there is ample evidence to indicate that women's subordination was a striking feature of the Jahiliya era.

Moreover, if we examine the immense success of Islam in the early years, we will be inundated with examples that corroborate the fact that the new faith was widely accepted and promoted not only by men, but also by women (such as Khadija, the first person to embrace Islam, and others like Asma of "the Tattooed Hands" mentioned in Djebur's text) who through their active participation helped to disperse Islam beyond the borders of Arabia.

Ahmed's suggestion in an earlier essay that the order of Islam destroyed the rights and privileges of women in the pre-Islamic world does not adequately focus on or examine any specific social groups that were in existence during this period in a particular location. It is also contradicted by some of her own observations in a later study where she highlights the egalitarian aspect of the Qur'an, and talks of injunctions pertaining to areas like marriage and divorce which, if interpreted in an unorthodox manner, could "radically alter women's position for the better". In this later study, like Coulson, she is more conscious of the question of hermeneutics so intrinsic to the textual meaning of the Qur'an, and the gap between Qur'anic knowledge which is divine, and Islamic law which came into being through a long and tedious process of human (mostly male) intervention.

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100 One of the primary features of Islamic jurisprudence is that it retained the pre-Islamic customary practices until they were superseded by the dictates of Islam. Therefore, customary laws had a dominant influence on the Islamic legal system:

The modicum of explicit Quranic legal rulings on the status of women were naturally observed, but outside this the tendency was to interpret the Quranic provisions in the light of the prevailing standards of the tribal law. In particular, the general ethical
In the process of establishing Islamic law, therefore, the ethics of the Qur’an were somehow “diluted”, and "the Quranic provisions concerning women’s status and position in the family were dissipated and largely lost. Islamic law continued to reflect the patriarchal and patrilineal nature of a society based upon the male agnatic tie” (Coulson and Hinchcliffe 38). This is evident even today in the way some laws have continued to be interpreted and applied in the Muslim world, despite Qur’anic injunctions which impart a different viewpoint, and efforts in the 20th century to review and reform some of the early laws through a process of ijma (consensus by the recognized Muslim umma). Thus, for instance, although the Qur’an emphasizes that a man who intends to practise polygamy must first be prepared to treat all his wives impartially, in reality this may not occur because the Qur’an is not a legislative document, and polygamists are under no legal commitment to abide by its rulings.

The second act of betrayal in Madina occurs for Fatima when she is unexpectedly dispossessed of her inheritance, after her father’s death:

Fatima, thus deprived of her rights, is the first of an endless procession of daughters, whose de facto dispossession, often applied by brothers, uncles, sons even, will be an attempt to stay the course of the intolerable feminist revolution of Islam in this seventh century of the Christian Era! [68]

Fatima, la dépouillée de ses droits, la première en tête de toute une interminable procession de filles dont la déshérence de fait, souvent appliquée par les frères, les oncles, les fils eux-mêmes, tentera de s'instaurer pour endiguer peu à peu l’insupportable révolution féministe de l'Islam en ce V11e siècle chrétien! [79]

injunctions of the Quran were rarely transformed into legally enforceable rules, but were recognized as binding only on the individual conscience. [Coulson and Hinchcliffe 38]

Furthermore, as some legal scholars elaborate, the Qur’an must be distinguished from the body of classical Islamic law, which was developed and established in the first few centuries following the Prophet’s death, according to the four major Sunni schools of law and pre-Islamic customary practices. The four schools of law, responsible for eventually formulating the body of Islamic law in the 10th century, do not conform to identical reading of the Qur’an and hadith when it comes to injunctions on such issues as marriage, divorce and inheritance. These differences in the readings have been to a great extent the result of multiple interpretations arising from different regional origins of the schools, and their varying customary practices.

Theoretically, according to Islamic jurisprudence, an earlier consensus could be repealed by the unanimous agreement of a new regulation. However, as Ahmed elucidates, “because of the authoritativeness with which the existent body of law was now invested, such a possibility became highly unlikely” ("Early" 60-61).

Having said this, it is relevant to point out that because of the different views upheld by the four schools of law, there are discrepancies in the way Islamic law is applied in Muslim countries today, depending on which law school each country follows.
Interpreting literally the Prophet’s characteristically dense statement that no one can inherit from the Prophets, the first Caliph prevents the daughter from inheriting her share of her father’s meagre possessions. Thus, once again Fatima is forced to rise against the orthodox establishment, this time initiating an *ijtihad*, and accusing the Caliph and his Companions of depriving her of her rights as a daughter. Fatima informs the Companions that the *hadith* on inheritance to which they refer is applicable to the special state of prophethood that is not transferable from father to his descendants, and, by that reasoning, material possession is. Citing the Qur’an and demonstrating an *ijtihad*, she proceeds to expound with moving eloquence, how by discriminating against her, the Companions were wilfully disregarding the divine injunction that permitted women to inherit, and were committing the follies of a pre-Islamic age: “You, whom they called mujahidin, you claim to invoke against me the law of the jahilia!” [70]; "*O vous qu'on appelait modjahiddines, c'est la loi de la djahilia que vous prétendez m'appliquer!*" (81).

However, more through fear of disobeying the Prophet’s proclamation than through a desire to deliberately dispossess Fatima, the Companions refuse to comply with her plea. Curiously, though, by applying the *hadith* of the Prophet in a rigidly literal sense, they miss the essence of the Prophet’s saying, and thus upset his daughter about whom the Prophet had remarked in an earlier occasion “What hurts her, hurts me! What distresses her, distresses me!” This dialectic of interpretation which overlooks the spirit in which the Prophet practised Islamic ethics parallels most strikingly the attempts of some Islamic legislators and theologians of a later time to formulate a body of law based on a monolithic perception of the divine Word and *hadith.*

In *Madina* Djebar restores to writing the historical epoch of the Prophet because, in comparison with existing Muslim societies, she perceives the early Islamic age to be a truly progressive and evolving one where women achieved legal status, were respected for the different roles they assumed in their various communities, and were gradually

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102 One could, for example, reassess the way in which Algeria’s 1984 Family Code Bill reduced women to “minority” status by inserting provisions that identified women as “wives and mothers under the guardianship of husbands and fathers”. Notably however, as Cheriet explains, some of the provisions in the Bill, such as the clause that limits women’s right to work is “nowhere to be found in the shari’a and its official schools of interpretation,” even though they were justified and implemented within a religious framework (24). Another example is the way in which Iranian leader Khomeini betrayed the women of Iran who helped him come to power in early 1979 by enforcing upon them the *hijab* (head scarf), and repealing the Family Protection Law of 1975 which restricted polygamy and men’s unanimous right to divorce. See Nayereh Tohidi, “Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 251-267; and Mir-Hosseini 285-319.
gaining more access to rights and freedom to engage in a diversity of activity. This awareness, however, does not desensitize her to the freedom and independence some women enjoyed in the pre-Islamic age. The Yemenite, Selma and women like Umm Hakim and Umm Kulthum were all products of this earlier epoch, some of whom converted to Islam of their own free will, and practised the faith in uniquely personal ways.

The question of free will, entailing women’s right to embrace a faith of their choice, is textually exemplified in the portrayal of the fifteen-year old Umm Kulthum, “the first Migrant” to have left her father’s home for God, facing many impediments before she is finally allowed to convert to Islam. It is in relation to her predicament that a new sura (Qur’anic verse) was revealed to the Prophet, granting women in particular the freedom to accept the new faith, despite an earlier treaty with the opponents of Islam to prohibit such rights under certain conditions of warfare. In Djebar’s text we are not given the impression that these women of the pre-Islamic age were circumscribed by the advent of Islam, even though there are moments when some of the early values and customs clash with the beliefs and practices of the new faith. On the contrary, we find women like Umm Hakim “not content to remain behind the lines, uttering yuyus”. They were “joyous Amazons” who continued to participate in activities that gave them personal fulfilment while at the same time being in a position to further the cause of Islam.

2.4.4 Remembering Aisha, “Source of the Living Word”: Isnad, the Oral Narrative and Islamic Discursiveness

This section elaborates Djebar’s complex narrative strategy that enables her to construct a fascinating feminine history through the testimonies of the Madinan women and the brilliant memory of Aisha, the Prophet’s young wife. A striking stylistic device that Madina shares with Fantasia is its tendency to intertextualize the narrative and synthesize the text with a polyphony of both real and fictional voices (Habiba, a potential rawiya, a female transmitter of hadith, is the only completely fictive character in the text). The novel interlaces elements of the imaginative with received knowledge from the Qur’an and hadith, a primary source of Islamic knowledge based on hundreds of thousands of orally transmitted anecdotes and sayings about the Prophet, and the lives of those who existed in the first Islamic century. For the narrative’s recuperative process, the vital framing device is isnad, the chain of transmission of hadith for which the Companions of the Prophet, both men and women, and the “Mothers of the Believers” (wives of the Prophet) took active responsibility.
This innovative stylistic feature also enables the author to synchronize a multitude of heterogeneous voices, and undermine "the procedural rationality that was the premise of both classical *ijtihad* and modernist revisionism dating from the colonial period." Because the *isnad* tradition is closely entwined with oral transmissions, alternative interpretations and techniques of non-linearity, as George Lang argues persuasively, Djebar's narrative or her personal *ijtihad* transcends a ratiocinative process, intrinsic to classical Sunni *ijtihad*. Therefore, though the interpretative process itself is not alien to Islamic knowledge, as Lang explains, it is a strategy which is "suspect from the point of view of the *ulama* [sic] (the learned), whose goal was *ijma* (consensus), and who holds the monopoly on *ijtihad*" (8). Djebar's use of *ijtihad* to revision patriarchal interpretations and recuperate a feminist reading of Islamic knowledge, therefore, could be seen by the 'ulama "as confirmation of the inherent dangers of undisciplined *ijtihad*, the very incarnation of *fitna* - [meaning] disorder ... but also in some contexts 'female beauty' (12)." As such, a conservative (Muslim) reader of Djebar's text could find fault with the writer for pursuing a "radical" personal *ijtihad*, "tampering" with and interrogating that which has been historically considered sacred, authentic and unquestionable. For the more enlightened or receptive Muslim, *ijtihad* gives an opportunity to study Islamic knowledge contextually: here the dense proclamations of the Qur'an could be examined with a "reasonable" open-mindedness that will undoubtedly complement the efforts that are being taken today to secure more rights and privileges for women in the Muslim world.

The Prophet's youngest wife Aisha occupies a central space in Djebar's historical metafiction in conjunction with *isnad* and the transmission of Islamic history. Aisha is accorded a special place in Islamic history for many diverse reasons. While being a Mother of the Believers, she was also the daughter of Abu Bakr, the closest Companion of the Prophet, destined to be Islam's first Caliph. After the death of Khadija with whom the Prophet lived in a monogamous relationship for twenty five years, he married several others. Except for Aisha, however, all his other wives were widows: some of

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104 I am grateful to Lang for his insightful analysis of the different techniques Djebar and Fatima Mernissi employ in their narratives of memory. While both writers draw on and are respectful of Islamic scholarship to produce their counter discourses, Mernissi's work uses "the principles of rational and linear interpretation" found in the tradition of Hadith documentation. Djebar's method is more imaginative, bordering on heterogeneity and non-linearity (Lang 1-22).
them widows of war, others, significantly, were those whom he wed to forge political alliances with different tribal groups and consolidate the unity within the first Islamic community.

Aisha, his first "real" wife since the death of Khadija (his marriage with Sawda, officially his first wife since Khadija, was never consummated by mutual consent), came to live with him as a child, and was later to become one of his most intimate confidantes. Despite her privileged position as the "favourite" wife (according to scriptural accounts) her life with the Prophet was not always smooth and peaceful, and this is a perspective Djebar develops in the novel in vivid detail. Having had the Prophet all to herself for almost two years, she experiences her first sorrow when the Prophet weds Hafsa, the learned daughter of the second Caliph, Umar, and for the first time, confronts "the thorny aspect of polygamy".

However, as Djebar elucidates, it is not the Prophet's polygamous lifestyle that was later to cause such turmoil for this young wife. Here the writer recovers an obscure episode from the chronicles where Aisha accompanies the Prophet on an expedition against the Banu Musta'lique tribe, and confronts a situation where she is indicted by Madinans for being unfaithful to the Prophet. The event occurs at a moment when Aisha is separated inadvertently from her husband as she goes in search of her lost necklace in the desert, and is rescued by a young male disciple of the Prophet. Later, confronted with a growing number of malicious rumours, the Prophet himself is overcome by doubts and uncertainties, and in a moment of desperation, turns to God for divine succour. In relation to this event, the Qur'anic injunction in the sura of Light was revealed to the Prophet at a crucial moment, condemning all acts of calumny and directing any accusation of adultery to be validated by the evidence of at least four witnesses.

Characteristically, Djebar's narrative technique is particularly complex in the description of this incident. In the chapter entitled "Voice, Many Voices (Aisha and those who slandered her)" myriad discordant voices coalesce to resolve the question concerning Aisha's innocence. Forming a backdrop at the outset, the voices of the rawiyat are blended with that of the "innocent woman", and vignettes from the chronicles. Further on, a chorus of voices indulge in rancorous gossip, striving to bring Aisha to disrepute: "Madina, this month of heat: idleness, gossip. And always, in the midst of the groups of true Believers, there is the same nucleus of 'Waverers'." (254); "Médine, ce mois de chaleur: oisiveté, bavardage. Et toujours, au milieu des groupes de vrais Croyants, le même noyau des Hésitants" (279). Finally, as the episode culminates in a divine resolution, the voices of the Believers, the Messenger of God and
the Angel Gabriel are united with that of the innocent woman, evoking a sense of harmony and triumph for the victimized Aisha.

This ordeal of one long month of doubt which leads to Aisha's prolonged illness and her decision to return to her parents' home, leaves her shattered, though in the end she is protected by God. Even though, eventually, she does return to the Prophet who accepts her with remorse for having doubted her, she clearly demonstrates her unwillingness to give praise to her husband who by doubting her actions distanced her from him at a particularly vulnerable moment of her life: "'No, in God's name, I shall not rise and go to him. For I will praise no one on my behalf, save God alone! Abu Bakr makes a shocked movement .... Voice of Muhammad: 'Leave her! She is right!'" (261);
"Non, par Dieu, je ne me léverai pas pour aller vers Lui. Car je ne veux louer personne, pour moi, sinon Dieu! Abou Bekr a un mouvement choqué .... Voix de Mohammed: - Laisse-la! Elle a raison!" (286-287).

Aisha's presence in Madina is especially significant in terms of the narrative framework which is configured by the distinctly oral character of isnad. In the Islamic tradition, orality supersedes the written text while human perception is considered to be inadequate to fully grasp and translate the divine message of the Qur'an (the verses of the Qur'an were revealed piece by piece over a period of 22 years to the Prophet as a divine message. Etched in his memory, these verses in classical Arabic were first transmitted by the illiterate Prophet orally to his Companions who learnt them by heart and passed them on to others. The systematic compilation and textual transcription of Qur'anic verses took place during Caliph Umar's time under Zaid bin Thabit, a Companion of the Prophet who had frequently acted as his amanuensis and scribe). Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi explain that the written text was a "poor transcription of the divine tablet", as it could not wholly capture the complex figurative and allegorical nuances of Qur'anic knowledge. Furthermore, as classical scholarship on hadith transmission reveals, writing can ultimately be an obstacle to the art of memory which was nurtured by the oral aspect of the isnad tradition: that is, "[w]riting is of value only as an aid to memory; it is neither essential, nor, on its own, trustworthy."

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105 According to Rafiq Zakaria, the authenticity of the verses and of their specific arrangement is borne out by the fact that the Prophet used to recite the whole of the Qur'an in a specific order, and the Believers recited the text aloud in unison, ritually, so that there could be no tampering. See his Muhammad and the Quran (London and New Delhi: Penguin, 1991), 395-400.
As Daniel Brown continues, in theory, "written collections of hadith are of value only when directly attested to by living transmitters of the tradition" (88).

Isnad therefore is the criterion that the people of the 1st century and a half of Islam considered to be most valid for preserving knowledge and reconstructing Islamic history from Qur'anic dictates and the life of the Prophet. As one account elaborates:

The method was based on the assumption that it was unthinkable for God-fearing men [sic] to lie about matters which they held sacred; each human link in the chain vouchsafed the others. If there were persons in the isnad whose integrity could be doubted for any reason, however small, the authenticity of the Hadith was to that extent weakened; conversely if there existed several distinct accounts and varied chains of transmission for a single Hadith, its authenticity was to that extent strengthened.108

Such transmissions are invoked frequently in Djebar’s novel as in the chapter recounting the events leading to Umar’s succession as the second Caliph, after Abu Bakr’s death. In this scene Djebar records slightly different versions of this specific historical moment by juxtaposing one account with another. However, unlike some testimonies, these varying accounts are on the whole consistent with the main events, and the fact that several distinct accounts can be found of this single hadith, strengthens the validity of this particular narrative.

A typical chain of transmission is unwound in this way: "Uthman ibn Yahia reported that Uthman al-Karlassani reported that Sufian ibn Aina reported that Qays testified as follows: 'That day I saw Umar ibn al-Khattab sitting surrounded by many men from Madina ...." (Madina 213); "Othman ibn Yahia a rapporté que Othmann el Karlassani a rapporté que Sofian ibn Aïna a rapporté que Ismaël a rapporté que Quais a témoigné: - J’ai vu, ce jour-là, Omar ibn el Khattab assis avec, autour de lui, de nombreux gens de Médine” (237-238). Following this, two more testimonies, this time by the women who were closest to Abu Bakr (Asma, his wife, and his daughter, Aisha) are paralleled to further corroborate the hadith about Umar’s succession.

Aisha was, as Patricia Geesey affirms, "a most important link in the isnad".109 She was reputed to be one of the most reliable transmitters of hadith and sunna, gifted with a brilliant memory and intelligence. As Aisha’s reputation as a scholar spread in the fifty years she lived after the Prophet, jurists, politicians and scholars, among others, came to her to verify hadith which they had heard from various sources. She

was often consulted on Islamic jurisprudence, and it is believed that one fourth of the injunctions pertaining to Shari'ah were formulated based on her testimony.

As the novel reveals, at a very young age she was aware of the strategic role she was going to take on in reliving the memory of the Prophet, and consequently, prepares herself faithfully to be the first rawiya: "she sees her destiny sketched out: yes, to feed the memory of the Believers, to undertake this long patience .... To preserve the living word for all the daughters of Ishmael" (267); elle voit son destin se dessiner: oui, nourrir la mémoire des Croyants, entreprendre cette longue patience .... Préserver, pour toutes les filles d'Ismaël, parole vive" (293-294). She develops the skill of an expert interpreter by virtue of her formidable power of recollection and her intimate relationship with the Prophet, "the living past - the nine years of her married life, of her only love - so that all women too, so that every woman, can move forward into the future" (268); "au passé vivant - les neuf années de son histoire conjugales, do son seul amour - pour que toutes, pour que chacune s'élance, à son tour, dans l'avenir" (294).

After the death of the Prophet, her education widens under the Caliphate of her father; she becomes one of the main sources from which transmission was to flow:

Seated in a corner, in the background, enveloped in her veils, she listens. She observes ...

....

Behind her father, and often facing him, she begins her political education. Aisha, in the heart of Madina. [266]

Assise dans un coin, à l'arrière, envelopée de ses voiles, elle écoute. Elle observe ...

....

Se tenant derrière son père, et souvent face à lui, elle commene sa formation politique. Aïcha au coeur de Médine. [292]

Nevertheless, Aisha, like Fatima has to confront other daunting challenges, one of which relates directly to her role as a rawiya. She strives hard to preserve the Word that she knows must live on to protect the Believers of future generations. However, her memory and her discourse are set against those of others - some of whom are "already forgetting - unaware how unreliable their memories are, how they have grasped nothing of the subtleties - in a word ... " (274); "les oubliers aussi - inconscients de leur mémoire lâche, de leur esprit n'ayant rien saisi des nuances ..." (300). Here again, as in other instances of the narrative, the author elaborates her discourse dialogically, referring implicitly to the narrow-minded Islamic traditionalists who were (and are) in the process of claiming the scriptures for themselves. Indeed as Fisher and Abedi claim eloquently:
The entire structure of Qur’an and hadith is a fun house of mirrors playing upon appearances and resemblances (mutashabih) that may or may not be grounded (muhkam), depending upon the perspective and knowledge of the interpreter. It is a structure necessitating a critical sense, but one ambivalently also permissive of uncritical belief and false leads.

It is thus a profoundly ethical structure insistent upon debate (bahth, mubahatha) and dialogue (jadal), adjustable to the level of knowledge of each person .... [emphasis mine 100]

Extending this discourse of hermeneutics and the power of the scriptures to provoke thought and debate, Djebar counterpoises the illuminating memory of Aisha "which do[es] not harden into formulas; which remain[s] poetry", with those of others: "they will transmute into cold lead the skin and sinews of bygone lofty passions" (274); "ils vont durcir la pâte encore en fusion, ils vont transformer la peau et les nerfs des sublimes passions d'hier en plomb refroidi ..." (300).

In revisioning this scene, the writer also juxtaposes the "authentic" hadith with the "inauthentic", underscoring the manifold strands of transmission, and the tensions that grew when reputed Islamic scholars and historians of later centuries devoted their lives to constructing the body of Islamic knowledge by exploring the sources of hadith transmission. As the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi observes in her study of the evolution of Islamic knowledge, hadith in particular, the person who undertook to transmute hadith had not only "to record the hadith itself as faithfully as possible, but he also had to establish its isnad, that is, the chain of people who transmitted it from its source ...."110

There were an overwhelming number of inauthentic or false hadith that came into circulation for a number of different reasons in the years following the death of the Prophet. Among them the polemical hadith which often manipulated the sacred text were inventions promoting the ideological biases of particular groups in dynastic and political struggles. Mernissi discloses that one reason for the escalation of fabricated hadith was the conflicts that erupted after the death of the Prophet when the succession issue became a critical concern for Islam’s survival.

Eminent scholars like Al-Bukhari, responsible for compiling the most established and comprehensive collections of hadith, were among those who faced the challenge of having to scrupulously distinguish the false hadith from the authentic ones, and "to avoid, as much as possible, letting subjectivity intrude, all the while humbly recognizing

that it could not be totally mastered" (Mernissi 44). Thus Bukhari, for example, accumulated over 600,000 hadith. Significantly, after having rigorously gone through the hadith compilation process, he claimed that only 7,275 (that is about 1% of the total number) were authentic hadith! Notably also, some of the argumentative and interpretative strategies that writers like Djebar and Mernissi use in their deconstructive projects parallel or are "borrowed" from this Islamic tradition of evaluating received knowledge through a conscientious process of examination and elimination.

Among the many authentic hadith are those narrated by Aisha (amounting to 2200 according to one source) who "recreates", not "invents", memories of her life with the Prophet. However, we are left at the end of Djebar’s fictional history with the troubled wife of the Prophet, deep in contemplation about her predicament in a strange new Madina, where her memory "runs the risk of seeming dust, insubstantial mist":

What can she do, all alone, against so many words, against the floods of so many speeches?

And what if one day such a transmission were to come face to face with the fire of those other words .... What if Aisha’s soft voice, the unending flow of her narration, should merge with Fatima’s eloquence in spate, the turbulence of her defiance? [274-275]

Que peut-elle, et toute seule, contre tant de mots, tant de discours qui vont affluer?

Et si un jour une telle transmission allait rencontrer le feu de l’autre parole .... Si la voix douce, si le flux continu du timbre de Aicha faisait confluent avec l'éloquence en crue, celle de l'effervescence qui brave? [300]

The Epilogue thus winds up on a note of defiance where Aisha yearns to distance herself from Madina and rise against those who distort the truth that needed to be preserved for the Muslims of future generations.

The novel ends with the chapter aptly titled "'Daughters of Hagar,' She Said", instead of the commonly applied "daughters of Ishmael". Hagar or Hajara (derived from hegira, emigration and hajra, sunstroke), together with Abraham (Ibrahim) - the first Prophet to destroy the idols of the Ka'ba (the cube-shaped "house of God" in Mecca) in his mission to promote monotheism - occupies a central position in the history of the Haj ritual. The Haj pilgrimage, as Fischer and Abedi put it succinctly, is "the womb of return, of 'hystorical' rebirth" to Muslims all over the world. In visiting Mecca for the obligatory Haj celebration, every Muslim in the course of the pilgrimage assumes the role of the exiled Hagar, abandoned by Abraham at the insistence of his childless first wife over the birth of Hagar's son, Ishmael (Ismail). By doing so they replay "the
'hystorical' running back and forth" between the two hills of Safa and Marwa, reenacting at the same time the sufferings of a mother who desperately sought water for her dying infant in the parched deserts of Arabia.

We may ask why Djebar focuses on Hagar, instead of Abraham, who is the dominant figure of the sacred Haj discourse. Here again, as in other episodes, the writer sets out to recover the history of the marginalized and the victimized, and focus on the injustice Hagar experienced when she and her son were left helpless in the arid Meccan landscape. Even as the water from the Zam Zam fountain gushes forth to renew hope for the mother and son in a miraculous moment - this episode strikingly reflects the themes of hope, renewal and resurrection developed in the last scene of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* - Djebar alerts contemporary Muslim women, the daughters of Hagar, to the fate that awaits them if they unquestioningly trace the path "the blackened legacy" of the sons of Ishmael. As Clarisse Zimra rightly emphasizes, "one of the subtle undercurrents of Médine has to do with the vigilance that women must exercise on their own behalf when it comes to Q'ranic [sic] interpretations, if they wish to empower themselves" ("When" 121).

By paralleling Hagar's narrative with that of contemporary Muslim women, Djebar ends on a note that suggests that silence, self-effacement and passive acceptance of traditional practices and laws are not solutions to the dilemmas women in various parts of the Muslim world are facing today, especially under authoritarian regimes where Islam is being (mis)used to promote different brands of religious and political ideology.

This revisioning of the originary moments of a homogenized Islamic historiography, and the re-reading of the sacred texts in the novel can indeed be viewed as an *ijtihad*, an intellectual quest undertaken by the author to restore Islamic alternatives for the problems affecting Muslim women of the 20th century. By recovering the past Djebar is not suggesting that we should uncritically accept the lessons of history, however exemplary moments of that history may have been. As this section illustrates, there are several instances in the novel where the author questions the motives and objectives of some Believers whose actions and attitudes blatantly contradicted the essence of Qur'anic ethics which the Prophet advocated and endeavoured to promote. Rather, she seems to say that the women in the Prophet's era, in comparison with most Muslim women of contemporary times (Hajila in *Sister* and the Arable women in *So Vast the Prison* are such representations), enjoyed greater freedoms because of the flexibility and caution with which the Prophet dealt with
individual situations and applied the laws that were revealed to him through the divine Source. She is here clearly contrasting the wisdom and humanity of the Prophet who strove to establish a just and equitable society, with the rigid and uncompromising systems in Islamic nations such as Algeria or many of the Arab states. These nations continue to interpret the Qur’an, the sunna and Shari’ah within an orthodox patriarchal framework with the objective of maintaining the status quo or restoring male dominance, and rationalizing existing discriminatory practices and gender inequities to the detriment of Muslim women throughout the world.

In this “memory-narrative” (“récit-souvenir”), to borrow a term from Mernissi, we discover elements of nostalgia for a lost past, and a general acceptance of historical scholarship pertaining to the Golden Age, even while this history is revisioned to recover a feminine/feminist vision and defend women’s rights in Islam. There is also a privileging of the Prophet as a figure of authority that may appear to conflict with the text’s preoccupation with issues such as the recovery of the aphasic feminine Self, the celebration of plurality, and women’s empowerment. However, the principle of textual revisionism, intrinsic to both postmodern and Islamic discourse, prevents Djebar from appraising the epoch uncritically or unanalytically. She develops a feminist consciousness where she challenges phallocentric Islamic history and brings women to the forefront, not so much as mothers but more as marital partners, daughters, warriors, advisors and leaders, actively involved in the early years of Islam. By decentring hegemonic discourses of Islamic history, the writer questions and challenges totalizing views and practices of the contemporary Muslim world, transgresses established boundaries, provokes thought that curtail passive reception, and creates space for a luminary re-reading of the Qur’an, the sunna and Islamic law. By thus deconstructing the palimpsestic master narrative she strives to configure alternatives, and produce a unique feminist perspective within a distinctly Islamic framework. Djebar believes passionately that such a practice through critical analysis could lead to a better understanding of the Qur’an and the Shari’ah that could in turn help re-evaluate and reform current traditions and practices, legal and political frameworks that have negatively impacted upon women’s lives in countries such as Algeria, Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East, and other Muslim nations in South and East Asia.
Chapter 3

Ama Ata Aidoo

Unforgiving as the course of justice
Inerasable as my scars and fate
I am here
a woman ... with all my lives
strung out like beads
before me

Grace Nichol, The Fat Black Woman's Poems

We developed new patterns of conversation, then, in which phrases floated between us in an unsaid context so limpid that it could dazzle me.

Sarah Suleri, Meatless Days

3.1 Introduction

Acclaimed Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo (b. 1942) is one of Africa's most candid and outspoken feminine literary voices. Making forays into polemical areas, the myriad themes Aidoo explores in her imaginative oeuvre - women's subordination and questions of subjectivity and agency; the dynamics of domination and resistance; histories of colonialism, nationalism and decolonization; asymmetrical global alliances; migrations and displaced diasporic conditions - assist in recovering eloquently the "marginal discourses" of African women on the peripheries of totalizing phallocentric histories.¹

The emergence of Aidoo, along with other African women writers such as Mariama Bâ, Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta, has been a vital stepping stone for a critical reevaluation of colonial and patriarchal representations of sub-Saharan African women in canonical literary texts. In striking ways, many of these writers have not only challenged stereotypical, colonial perceptions of womanhood. They have also dismantled precolonial and postcolonial renderings that have dehistoricized women by subjecting them to essentialist discourses and reductive analyses, and presented them as victims or goddesses trapped in a web of patriarchal


114
myths, religious and spiritual beliefs, and nationalist rhetoric. This is irrespective of the fact that in some African societies women have occupied complex positions (as "male daughters" and "female husbands" for example) that bestowed upon them special privileges, especially in precolonial times.

The forthright disclosure of an overwhelming complex of issues through a process of "creative theorizing" assists the very vocal Aidoo in furthering Valerie Smith's theory of black feminism that synthesizes multiple categories for a cohesive definition of the phrase. Smith succinctly defines black feminism as "a way of reading inscriptions of race (particularly but not exclusively blackness), gender (particularly but not exclusively womanhood), and class in modes of cultural expression" for understanding the Other in a politics of resistance. Black feminism is an ideology written, advocated and practised by black feminists (or women-of-colour), including black women writers, who have set out to configure alternative ways of representing the Other in oppositional discourse. As a theory, black feminism has responded to marginal discourses by being receptive to silences as well as other patterns and devices of oral communication and expression.

The works of black feminists (specifically African women's writings) have helped in significant ways to mitigate the omissions, misrepresentations and the condescending mien of earlier writers that include, indeed, African male writers and Eurocentric feminist writers. While African male writers and critics have glossed over

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2 Some exceptions from the canon are Wariinga from Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Devil on the Cross and Beatrice from Chinua Achebe's later work, Anthills of the Savannah.

3 In her provocative study of the politics of gender in the Igbo world, Ife Amadiume challenges "racist" interpretations of African women by Western social anthropologists, and highlights the existence of a flexible system of gender in Igboland where people's social roles were not rigidly masculinized or feminized, and where women, under certain conditions, were able to occupy positions (especially through their trading and political associations) that were conventionally monopolized by men. Flora Nwapa's rendition of her main character in Efuru is an example of such a woman. See Ife Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society (London & New Jersey: Zed, 1987); and Flora Nwapa, Efuru ([1966]; Oxford: Heinemann, 1978).


the category of gender in their work, (Eurocentric) feminists have glossed over the
category of race. Highlighting the parallel logic of Eurocentric feminists, and critics of
colonial texts (such as Abdul JanMohamed) who read their texts exclusively though the
privileged category of race where the female subject is under-represented by focus
being directed to the (neo/)colonial rubric, Susan Andrade explains:

This kind of analysis also encourages the conflation of categories; the violence
of colonialism is translated into the emasculation (read: feminization) of male
natives, a gesture that codes femininity pejoratively. Such analyses inevitably
elide the gendered and racial violence to which female natives are subject.
[93]

Critically neither the theoretical position of the Eurocentric feminist nor that of the
critic of colonialism provides adequate space to articulate persuasively the position
held by African feminists.

It needs to be emphasized here that "feminism" is a term that many Third
World women writers have problems identifying themselves with, given its historical
connection with Eurocentric feminism and its tendencies to prioritize the category of
gender over other categories such as race, class and culture. Hence, Alice Walker, for
example, chooses the term "womanist" over "feminist", pointing out that a womanist
is committed to the survival of people, both male and female. Meanwhile, writers
such as Emecheta and Bà have overtly expressed their reluctance to identify
themselves as feminists despite their obvious concerns with women's issues. Aidoo, on
the other hand, is more relaxed with the term "feminism" though she too qualifies it

By conflating the imperialist trope of "dark continent" with women, in her seminal
essay Hélène Cixous equates femininity with blackness and implies a "metaphoric
unknowability" in her definition of femininity. She then goes on to parallel apartheid South
Africa with the oppression of women. As Uzo Esonwanne rightly spells out, any strategy that
overlooks "the material dimension of imperialism or the manifest heterogeneity of women is
doomed to reproduce imperialist and patriarchal violence." For Esonwanne's critique, see
Suzan Andrade, "Rewriting History, Motherhood and Rebellion: Naming an African Women's

One of the primary issues with Katherine Frank's and Marie Umeh's essays is that they
produce reductive analyses of feminism where the term is essentially recognized as a
Western phenomenon, unable to redefine itself in other contexts and locations such as
Africa. Thus establishing irreconcilable differences between feminism and African cultures,
Frank remarks blatantly: "In order to be free and fulfilled as a woman she must renounce
her African identity because of the inherent sexism of traditional African culture.
Conversely, if she wishes to cherish and affirm her 'Africanness', she must renounce her
claims to feminine independence and self-determination" (478).
in her discussions of gender in contemporary Africa: "I shall not protest if you call me a feminist. But I am not a feminist because I write about women ...."

One of the main objections for all these writers has been the monolithic application of feminism as conceptualized by white middle-class Western women. Probing the concerns of Third World women and highlighting an ideology that incorporates and yet transcends gender-specificity, Cheryl Johnson-Odim remarks that while sexual egalitarian is a major goal uniting feminists, gender discrimination is perhaps not "the primary locus of the oppression of Third World women". Similarly, Aidoo is acutely conscious of the fact that women's disempowerment is a global phenomenon and that African women are not alone in their struggles for the attainment of multiple rights and privileges of which they have been deprived for far too long: "No, the position of women in Africa has been no less ridiculous than anywhere else - the few details that differ are interesting only in terms of local color and particular family needs ..." ("Unwelcome" 12). Yet, she is also an ardent advocate of a specific African feminism that is reflected in all her writings, and believes passionately that African women can draw from their own cultures to make a statement about what feminism is or ought to be for women of Africa:

I am not saying at all that sexism was introduced into Africa by colonial men. But it definitely seems that the kind of systematic exclusion that was practised was born out of a total misunderstanding of how our societies operated .... Ours have a double quarrel. Not only as Africans, but also as women. Colonized by the colonizer, then by our men with their new power.

Aidoo herself returns to her matrilineal Akan cultural milieu to conceptualize a distinct indigenous women's movement that could constructively counter multiple forms of oppression inhibiting African women today. Aidoo's literary works of multiple genres,

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8 Ama Ata Aidoo, interview with Adewale Maja-Pearce, "We Were Feminists in Africa First," Index on Censorship 19, no. 9 (1990): 17.
especially Our Sister Killjoy and An Angry Letter in January and Other Poems, are riveting critiques of phallocentric imperialist histories, while The Dilemma of a Ghost, Anowa, Changes: A Love Story and The Girl Who Can and Other Stories disrupt the very foundations of patriarchal dominance by focusing on women with considerable feminist potential. In these texts, the writer addresses multifarious conditions affecting (modern) African women as they explore alternative life-choices and pursue higher education, careers and other individual goals. As Nana Wilson-Tagoe observes in an assessment of the condition of women in Aidoo’s works, there are hardly any “rigid polarities between men’s roles and women’s roles, but rather a dialectic which sets up several perspectives within which transformation may take place.”

As for Aidoo’s characters, Sissie, Anowa and Esi, are all, quite rightly, “radical on social, political and economic issues. They rail against the oppression of women without waiting for surrogates from elsewhere to do it for them.” In Killjoy, for instance, Aidoo introduces the readers to a woman who, in comparison with the heroines in the canonical works of African male authors, appears as an apostate, uttering “truths” that are as bold as they are shocking. Sissie is thus projected as an atypical, hypersensitive protagonist, the “black-eyed squint” who by dire circumstances, has learned to perceive things with “half an eye”. Shackled by a language of enslavement, Sissie constructs a narrative that subverts accepted norms pertaining to novelistic practice, syncretizing skillfully not just novelistic prose and declamatory poetry but also blank spaces, unusual typography and a confluence of Englishes, from Germanic English and Cockney, to African English.

Aidoo’s contribution to black feminist African literature, especially the very topical Killjoy, marks a significant moment in African women’s writings as it sets out to debunk the myths surrounding African womanhood, disclosing simultaneously the unequal relations between Africa and the world’s superpowers, and between men and

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women generally. As Aidoo reiterates time and again, her writings see no closure by addressing exclusively gender-related questions. Deeply intrinsic to her imaginative, revisionist projects is the fate of contemporary Africa, threatened by the effects of neocolonialism, asymmetrical transnational alliances, boundary crossings and multiple forms of marginality and effacement arising out of such disparate conditions: "Our beautiful land. Did I say our land? One wonders whether it is still ours. And how much longer it will continue to be ..." (Killjoy 120). Interwoven thoughtfully into this creative theorizing are also her views on nationalism, and especially, Pan-Africanism, which she sees as a healthy alternative strategy Africans could adapt to build networks with people who can identify themselves collectively on racial, cultural, political, and economic grounds: "there has to be a way for us to live, and survive, and prosper as a people .... We need a kind of rallying point around which we can cohere to stop this endless exploitation of ourselves, our resources, our environment."

By undertaking a study of Aidoo's works, this chapter proposes to examine how one of the most uninhibited and articulate modern African griots\(^\text{13}\) sets out to decentre dominant colonial and neocolonial perspectives on African historiography and expose "the sexist tragedy of women's history", while celebrating concurrently "their physical and intellectual capabilities; and above all, unfolding a revolutionary vision of the role of women tomorrow, as dreamers, thinkers and doers ...." (Aidoo, "Unwelcome" 21). To apprehend with some degree of coherence the situation of Africans displaced and dispersed globally in the postcolonial scenario, Aidoo returns to the African past in texts such as Dilemma, Anowa, Killjoy and No Sweetness Here.\(^\text{14}\) In these works the writer recuperates African history with its diasporan realities, arising out of the violent rupture caused by colonialism and the dehumanizing journey from Africa into slavery.


\(^{13}\) I am aware, as Christopher Miller suggests, that the griot in the African context contains multiple connotations: from liars and crafty wordsmiths to musicians, storytellers, verbal artists and counselors for the nobility whose fate "is tied to the fortunes and reputations of orality". In a wider sense, griots also perform the function of archivists of their civilization, "great depositaries, who, it can be said, are the living memory of Africa." Ahmadou Hampaté Ba, cited in Christopher Miller, Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 86.

\(^{14}\) Ama Ata Aidoo, No Sweetness Here ([1970]; Essex: Longman, 1993). In this collection of short stories, the most sustained discussion of slavery takes place in "For Whom Things Did Not Change". Though the narrative is set in Ghana ten years after independence, Aidoo succeeds in showing how difficult it is for a man such as Zirigu to renounce his slave mentality that he had imbibed over many years in colonial Ghana.
abroad. As Anuradha Needham points out, *Killjoy* is "a rewriting of the classic colonial travel narrative, but in this case it is a Black woman, an African woman from the peripheries travelling to the center, constituting the center under her gaze and not the other way round" (129).

In configuring her narratives and reclaiming the displaced aesthetic and spiritual space of her African heritage, Aidoo, like her other sisters, constructs a language which is infused with idiom, metaphors and allusions from her Akan oral culture with its striking moralistic messages, dramatic dialogues, exaggerated plots and distinctly indigenous characterizations (see, for example, The Bird of the Wayside in *Dilemma* and The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper in *Anowa*). As the readers are made to understand, in this cultural setup, storytelling and commenting on life's happenings are a mutually inclusive process. Elaborating this further, Lloyd Brown affirms: "This art is social in the most literal sense. The artist is physically and morally located in the center of her, or his, audience, and the story itself reflects and perpetuates the moral and cultural values of the audience."15 Focusing on the symbiotic relationship between the teller and her listeners and the strategic function of the writer as storyteller, Aidoo remarks: "I believe that when a writer writes a short story, it should be possible for the writer to sit before an audience and tell them the story .... In fact I pride myself on the fact that my stories are written to be heard, primarily."16

Relevant to Aidoo's texts is also the function of the dilemma tale that is fundamentally concerned with moral values, and relies to a great degree on the different choices involved in resolving human problems. While Aidoo affirms that she did not consciously set out to employ a specific structure for *Dilemma*, the play can structurally and thematically be linked with the African dilemma folktale which is intrinsically concerned with social, moral and political problems. As William Bascom informs us, the dilemma tale often performs an adjudicative function in that it leaves "the listeners with a choice among alternatives, .... The choices are difficult ones and usually involve discrimination on ethical, moral, or legal grounds."17 The difficulties arising in specific dilemmas account for the irresolutions and ambivalences of plays

A striking feature of Anowa is the way Aidoo skillfully intersperses aspects of Africa’s traumatic colonial
legacy, particularly the complicity between Africans (specifically Fanti traders) and British imperialists in the trafficking of human labour, and the domestic slave-trade, with elements of folklore and Western literary conventions.

The manifold devices of Aidoo's written work manifest the author's ability, not unlike that of the traditional storyteller, to keep the past alive even while experimenting with new techniques which help to synthesize "a sense of permanence with a process of continual change" (Brown 99). In Killjoy, Sissie defines this narrative method as the outcome of a "secret language" that has evolved from a language that "enslaved her" before, a language that now gives her the freedom to "make love with words and not fear of being overheard" (116).

3.2 Inscribing an African Diasporic History
A salient feature of Aidoo's work is the persistent effort made by the writer to apprehend Africa's history of colonialism. Interwoven with this effort is Aidoo's preoccupation with the diasporic history of black peoples, dispersed and displaced across the postcolonial world, primarily through the transatlantic slave trade and secondarily though migrations, transnational travels and other conditions of globalization. Aidoo's oeuvre views present-day Africa with a synchronous recourse to a historical legacy scarred by colonial aggression, exploitation and oppression: "Years of economic and political tornadoes on our courtyards ... tyrannical and despotic/winds that whisked away some of/our ablest bodies and strongest minds to/our conquerors' doorsteps" (Angry Letter 27). In an interview with Adeola James, she elaborates this bewildering confluence of different historical moments as follows: "I think that the whole question of how it was that so many of our people could be enslaved and sold is very very important .... It probably holds one of the keys to our future".21

To a politically active and deeply perceptive writer such as Aidoo, historical facets are not purely a matter of the past. The tragedies that have befallen the African continent in its post-independence phase cannot be viewed in isolation, as though they were unrelated to a long history of colonialism in Africa or to the logic of contemporary global capitalism and the neocolonial manoeuvrings of the world's superpowers. This is one reason why Aidoo is reluctant to use "postcolonial", a critical

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and yet contentious word in current usage. Instead she employs the term "neocolonial" in her writings and interviews such as the one with Rosemary George and Helen Scott. Concurrently, in the following verse from "June 7, 1989 on Tiananmen Square", Aidoo critiques with forthright honesty the failure of her people, particularly the elite leadership of Africa’s micro-nations, to make the continent a safer place for its inhabitants: "We still sleep/like the python that swallowed the elephant while/the children’s bellies bloat with starvation" (Angry Letter 31). Focusing then on other potential dangers of the sinister cold blasts of unrestrained globalization and neocolonialism that can tear the continent apart, in "Speaking of Hurricanes" she exclaims:

Ow My Sister, let me lament
my openly beautiful land and her people
who hide good things and bad so well,
only decay and shame become
public,
international.

All storms are dangerous.

But I fear most
the ones I can’t see
whose shrieking winds are
not heard around the world
and
the havoc they wreak
cannot even be discussed. [Angry Letter 29]

The tone of the poem becomes increasingly more intense and condemnatory as all kinds of oppressive factors in Africa - such as poverty, starvation, illiteracy, wars and corrupt leadership that overlooks, if not encourages with complacent approval, neocolonial activities - are linked with the abject condition of women, a doubly oppressed group: "African women in various forms of/civilized bondage are/still and forever wiping/baby snot and adult shit:/bourgeois black or imperial white” (27).

Noteworthy in this poem, as elsewhere in her work, is Aidoo’s desire to “expose the sexist tragedy of women’s history” for which Africa’s as well as European

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colonialism's patriarchal social structures have been responsible. Refusing to apply an exclusionary principle to her being as a woman, even while acknowledging and emphasizing the oppression and marginalization women have endured historically, Aidoo identifies contemporary African women as the marginalized subjects on the borders of global capitalism: "over and above all the others we share with our brothers, we suffer those aspects of being - yes - an oppressed section of society: If not always, sometimes, as women only" ("Unwelcome" 22), and reveals their varying predicaments in works such as Killjoy and, especially, Changes.

Meanwhile, set in the period prior to decolonization and independence and constructed in three movements or "phases", Anowa "refigures the New World/Old World signs of rupture, schism, opening and othering" through its young protagonist's tragic history (Davies 59). It is a rewriting of an old Ghanaian legend about the life of a girl who rebels against her people to marry the man she loves. It also reclaims "a classic African folktale", virtually common to all African micro-nations, and has been adapted in different versions by African writers such as Amos Tutuola in The Palm Wine Drinkard and the Ghanaian writer Efua Sutherland in her rendition of the tale of princess Foriwa. Anowa's story recuperates the history of slavery in 19th century "Gold Coast" when Fanti chiefs initially signed the Bond Treaty in 1840 with the British to protect their turf from their neighbours, the Asante, and later, Fanti traders colluded with British imperialists "Who came from beyond the horizon", to promote a lucrative business of trading in human labour.

By highlighting this aspect of Ghanaian history through the voice of The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper (specifically the Old Man) in the Prologue, Aidoo forewarns that the subject of slavery is a primary concern of the drama. Concurrently, she draws the reader's attention to the strategic role undertaken by white supremacists who, together with their African counterparts, were responsible for consolidating a brutal legacy of colonialism, slavery and subjugation of black peoples in colonial Africa:

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23 See "Unwelcome" 21. By alluding to the chauvinistic practices of African patriarchies and European colonialism, Aidoo does not by any means aim to conflate the manner in which oppression and gender constructions transpired in these different contexts.


And yet, there is a bigger crime
We have inherited from the clans incorporate
Of which, lest we forget when the time does come,
Those forts standing at the door
Of the great ocean shall remind our children
And the sea bear witness. [66]

This complicity on the part of indigenous communities is further confirmed in the recovery of Anowa’s personal history after she leaves home as a “wayfarer” in Phase Two of the drama. In the new phase the heroine is absorbed into a diasporic world on a bustling highway, and Kofi, her husband, makes the critical decision, despite Anowa’s vehement objections, to expand their entrepreneurial ventures by trading in human labour. The highway functions symbolically as the space where the nomadic Anowa acquires her freedom as she breaks away from the conservative strictures of her home in Yebi. It is on the highway that Kofi and Anowa initially make their livelihood by selling animal skins locally and, later, amass much wealth by trading with the British. Conversely, it is also here that Kofi begins to display his conservative, patriarchal upbringing that is now compounded by the influence of Western/Christian ideas. These ideas raise Kofi’s expectations about Anowa’s future role as a “housewife” even though Anowa states pointedly that she cannot be happy if she stops working outside the domestic sphere (94). In the process of asserting his authority, Kofi obdurately renounces the matrilineal Fanti values that view marriage as a contract between equals, and consolidates his power through the subjugation of other humans, both female (Anowa) and male (the slaves Kofi acquires):

Kofi Ako: ... Something tells me [he stands up] it might be better if you stayed at home ...

... I think the time has come for us to think of looking for one or two men to help us

... I hear they are not expensive ...

... Anowa: I do not care. We shall not buy men.

... Kofi Ako: If you don’t, I do. Besides you are only talking like a woman.

Anowa: And please, how does a woman talk? I had as much a mouth in the idea of beginning this trade as you had. And as much head!
Kofi Ako: ... Anowa, who told you that buying men is wrong? You know what? I like you and the way you are different. But Anowa, sometimes, you are too different .... [89–90]

The above scene illustrates vividly how unwholesome external circumstances impact negatively upon the relationship of Anowa and Kofi, leading to a catalogue of disasters such as their childlessness, Kofi’s emasculation, their estrangement, the breakdown of their marriage and eventually their tragic double suicides.

Anowa’s sufferings and anguish are intensified as she finds it increasingly difficult to follow the advice of her grandmother, that is, to forget the past: "You are frightening me, child/... No one talks of these things anymore!/All good men and women try to forget ..." (106), and is therefore traumatized by the consciousness that many Africans (like Kofi) aided the colonizers to execute horrific forms of human exploitation which is, as the Old Woman insists, "something that is against the natural state of man and the purity of his worship of the gods" (100). The Big House Kofi acquires through the propagation of domestic slavery in Phase Three reaffirms the entrenchment of colonial power and the patriarchal dominance in African societies, while it also becomes, as Davies suggests, the site of final resistance for Anowa (61).

In the latter part, Anowa’s nightmare transforms the protagonist into Mother Africa, forcing her to witness a grotesque drama of savagery. In this dream, the men and women who pour out of Anowa’s body are destroyed violently or dispersed into other locations by crawling white predators that emerge out of the sea. Focusing on the symbolic function of the dream sequence, Maureen Eke observes: "While it is true that this dispersal led to the emergence of African cultures and people in the diaspora, it also suggests a destruction of the originating culture - the ripe ‘mother tomato’ or ‘mother Africa,’ as well as the ‘rupturing’ of African female ‘subjects’ under slavery and colonial domination." In symbolically portraying Anowa as Mother Africa, Aidoo restores to her story a collective, feminine consciousness of Africa’s colonial legacy, or as Eke suggests, a “mythic memory of her people, heightening Anowa’s significance, as female subjectivity, in the (re)membering, as in putting together and recollecting, of Africa’s history” (68).

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While on the one hand the tragic ending of the heroine predicts a historical closure for women, Aidoo in her later interviews implies that if she were to rewrite the play, she could recover different endings for Anowa. This is further endorsed by the writer in her open-ended stage directions for the final scene of the play. The ending can also be read discursively to represent "a kind of re-oralization, a re-entering of Anowa into the narratives surrounding her" (Davies 61). This perception is further reinforced by the Old Woman as raconteur who predicts that "[t]his is the type of happenings out of which we get stories and legends" (123), and reminds the readers that African orature is a dynamic source from which African writers could draw inspiration to direct their creative energies.

3.3.1 Cartographies of Dislocation and Syncretic Strategies: Reading Our Sister Killjoy
To configure Aidoo's black cultural nationalism that is set against the larger context of transnational/global capitalism, it is imperative to examine the quintessentially eclectic prose-poem, Killjoy, and address simultaneously its racialized discourse. In the process, one can question, as Ranu Samantrai does, if it is "possible to generate Pan-Africanist nationalism from a non-racialist impulse". Additionally, one can also evaluate the validity of Brenda Cooper's forceful and contentious critique that Aidoo's text projects "a right-wing black exclusivist position" which undermines a materialist standpoint, and by extension, a class consciousness. At the same time, it will help to determine if a deep-rooted racial consciousness and a commitment to a nationalist, pro-Africa agenda narrows the scope of the writer's criticism, obliterating the insidious undertakings of neocolonialism, "the economics of/The New(est) World Order" (Angry Letter 66), on a larger scale that include also Otherized communities elsewhere in the developing world.

In Killjoy, the protagonist, Sissie, departs from Ghana to enter a world crisscrossed by myriad systems of knowledge and values. The plot of this very intricate text, both in terms of content and structure, takes the naïve young Sissie from her homeland in West Africa into the heart of whiteness, that is Europe, only to reveal with shocking clarity the vastly complex state of things in the West. From the

Bavarian landscape of Germany (and implicit references to a history of genocide in Europe), she then proceeds to the imperial motherland of England to be exposed further to life’s many devastating ironies, and the harsh realities confronting minority communities on the peripheries of Western metropolises. A resilient Sissie returns home eventually, with a heightened consciousness and new wisdom about her being and identity as an African among other Africans (both indigenous and diasporic), and the state of the globalized transnational universe which we inhabit today. Intertwining multifarious genres and heteroglossic voices, Killjoy underscores the multiple stages of Sissie’s journey to maturation and consciousness.

Aidoo’s prose-poem opens with a libation to two valiant men, Nanabanyin Tandoh, an African/Ghanaian, and Roger Genoud, a Frenchman, both of whom committed themselves, despite their different socio-geographical and political leanings, to the creation of humane societies (a similar context of invoking fallen heroes is evidenced in “Loving the Black Angel” where Aidoo, as traditional griot, chants the virtues of Africa’s true freedom fighters). By recognizing at the outset the efforts of two very different individuals, the text, as influenced by its thematic concerns, is placed within a more extensive geopolitical frame and reflects a sensitivity to transnational, cross-border alliances between nations in the New World Order. In other words, Aidoo attempts to contextualize the world to which Sissie belongs long before embarking on the project of vindicating a Pan-African solidarity.

Following this libation are some striking typographical features: several blank pages of whiteness with centralized pithy phrases in black are woven into Sissie’s narrative. As Odamtten suggests, perhaps the author is here attempting to effect an entrapment by the blank of whiteness. This entrapment could also be a symbolic reference to the kind of neocolonial hegemony that the West, in particular, maintains in its relations with nations of the developing world. However, rather than be ensnared by the imposing whiteness, the reader succeeds in overcoming it due to the visual effect of the black ink to which our eyes are spontaneously directed. The brevity of the sparse black letters is then juxtaposed with the substance, “the ticky-tackies” of the Western world of materialism which have over time “blocked our views, cluttered our brains” (5), to produce a dramatic contrast. Accompanying this initiation into “A Bad Dream” is a brief prose passage and a poetic address by the

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29 See Angry Letter, 47-50.
narrator who assumes a role somewhat similar to that of a storyteller, in order to create a rapport with her unseen readers/audience. By addressing the reader as "my brother", the narrator establishes an intimacy with her reader who will otherwise remain a stranger, an inevitable consequence of communicating through the written text. The reference to a gendered reader ("my brother" instead of "my sister") could be a device the author uses to draw the attention of African men, rather than women, to the vastly complex state of affairs in postcolonial Africa for which they are, by and large, responsible.

What is particularly striking about the dual structure of Killjoy is the way it eventually transmutes into a love letter that, Ironically, never reaches its anticipated destination. The two outstanding organizing principles to which Haiping Yan also refers comprise "shifts between individual encounters represented in prose and structural mappings evoked through poetry": it is noteworthy here that the narrative does not actually commence until page eight. In the lengthiest section of the text entitled "The Plums" this double stylistic device is particularly significant. Here Sissie, a modern nomad, now situated in the heart of whiteness, encounters Marija, a neglected and disillusioned German housewife. In the meeting of Sissie and Marija we are also introduced to the problematic encounter between two female individuals in a historically consolidated asymmetrical site of late 20th century.

The odyssey Sissie undertakes is a reversal of Marlow’s journey into the heart of darkness. By covertly counterpoising Sissie’s journey with the protagonist of Joseph Conrad’s novel, Aidoo prepares the reader for a riveting and acidly forthright account of the workings of neocolonialism in the so-called postcolonial epoch. As the personalized prose-poem of Sissie evolves into a strident poetic form, similar to Angry Letter, the individual experiences extend to absorb facets pertaining to the historical, global and transnational world. Having highlighted the complex implications of permanent border crossings, and configured the "differential similarities" and disjunctive links between Europe and Africa, Sissie foregrounds local issues (such as the problem of brain-drain and the dearth of skilled personnel at home) that are high-priority concerns for the developing world today: "Gambian ophthalmologist in Glasgow/Philippino lung specialist in Boston/... While at home,/Wherever that may

be, /Limbs and senses rot ..." (32). It is significant that Sissie's observations about global travels and transnational ventures are not limited to Africa alone: her comments extend to incorporate most of the Third World and marginalized communities in other locations of the West.

Critically, the hybrid narrative form of Killjoy reflects the author's decision not to abide by any one set of norms pertaining to the tradition of writing, and by extension, any specific ideology. On the other hand, this syncretism can be interpreted as the consequence of colonialism that has "fractured African society so severely", that art can no longer perform its original function of disclosing to a community thoughts, feelings and problems through traditional aesthetic modes. Extending this argument, Elder remarks that in this process, the storyteller's "attempts at communal expression are stifled; his [or her] fate, ironically, is like that of his [/her] Western counterpart: to speak in isolation, most often in defiance and frustration" (109). This partly explains the multiple mood textures regulating the narrative thread: incorporating a bewildering range of sentiments, the text sometimes discloses feelings of icy detachment, indifference, melancholia and regret, and at others, pure humour, or bitter satire and scorching irony.

3.3.2 Pan-African Nationalism, Cross-Border Travels and Displaced Subjects of Modern Migrations

Though Aidoo's passionately articulate narrative-poem is a critique of the conditions in the globalized, neocolonial world, like Angry Letter, it is also deeply preoccupied with Africa's past legacy of colonization. European colonialism, a turbulent phase of African history, was the invention of white supremacists who considered themselves to be superior to the rest of the world, based primarily on a spurious, and yet, portent mythology related to visible racial morphology (skin pigmentation and physical appearance in particular). Henry Gates, Jr., demonstrates how European philosophers such as Hume, Hegel and Kant, by fabricating a mythology of white supremacy conflated race with intelligence to the extent that in many of their philosophical theses blackness became synonymous with stupidity. Thus Hume, for example, could erroneously assert without an inkling of misgiving:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men ... to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white .... No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences ... Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.32

Though tenuous, such myths were disseminated successfully in the colonized world through a powerful imperialist network that oppressed, exploited, dehumanized and demoralized the colonized Other.33 Aidoo harks back to such sinister theories in Killjoy through the narrator who recollects with caustic cynicism the historically consolidated pseudo-scientific reasoning of the Western world. One such recollection transpires during Sissie’s preliminary encounter with Marija at the station:

She laughed easily. Her small buck teeth brilliantly white ...

White teeth -
Used to be one of the
Unfortunate characteristics of
Apes and
Negroes.
All that is
Changed now.
White teeth are in, my brother .... [27-28]

Similarly, she satirizes the role of white missionaries who believed that it was their spiritual mission to redeem and civilize a fallen race in the African heart of darkness. To this the narrator adds the bitterly ironic aside: “Lord,/Let us Thy Servants depart in peace/Into our rest/Our oblivion and never/Dare expect/Angels who take roll-calls in/Latin ... /Since, dear Lord, Your/Angels, like You, are/Western/White/English, to be precise” (27).

Aidoo here strives to decentre the myths constructed by “a master tale-performer who knows too well, how/to change the story,/its telling,/its music,/its drums/to suit his times” (Angry Letter 28). Through the process she deconstructs stereotypical notions of hegemonic Western discourses that have over time vilified, obscured and occluded minority cultures, and thereby contributes to the

33 For an insightful exploration of the psychological impact of this myth, see Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Charles Markmann ([1961]; London: Pluto Press, 1993).
transformation of existing knowledge. Appraising the value of such a process, JanMohamed and David Lloyd assert elsewhere in the discussion of minority discourse: "A theory of minority discourse is essential precisely for the purposes of such a reinterpretation, for, in practice, the blindness of dominant theory and culture towards the positive values of minority culture can easily engulf us." Indeed, such reinterpretations (I am here referring specifically to an African context) may be critiqued by some as manifesting a revivalist impulse, harking back to the Negritude movement of the 1940s. Cooper, for example, takes this line of argument in her study of Killjoy, implying that the text reflects the quixotic Negritude philosophy in a modern context with its ineffective "myths and half-truths" (30-31).

However, Aidoo's Pan-African nationalism neither veers in the direction of an essentialist discourse that produces a totalizing monolithic African identity (as was the case with the Negritude philosophy embraced by many French-speaking black intellectuals of the colonial era), nor does it simply exalt the black race in order to project a specific brand of black cultural nationalism. In fact, critically, Aidoo's text is set more on censuring Africans than on appraising and applauding their activities in the post-independence scenario. Furthermore, the writer's vision for African solidarity is also not all-encompassing to the point that other significant categories such as class and gender, and geopolitical constructs such as "Third World", are subsumed by a stifling racial consciousness.

Reflecting on two of Aidoo's earlier works entitled "Everything Counts" and "For Whom Things Did Not Change", it can be said that these short stories are primarily a comment on the way hegemonic cultures influence and dominate non-

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35 Indeed the philosophy underlying the Negritude movement is a vastly diverse and complex subject that cannot be effectively summarized in a line or two. See for example Abiola Irele's examination of the philosophy for a more comprehensive and insightful assessment of Negritude, with the varying significance and implications it had for the intellectuals who were associated with the movement and philosophy. Simplifying an example, for Aimée Césaire Negritude meant a consciousness of being black with an acceptance of black cultural nationalism, whereas for Léopold Senghor Negritude was "an inner state of the black man ... outside the historical process." In contrast, Jean Paul Sartre identified Negritude as a historical phenomenon, "the weak stage in a dialectical progression" that will be transcended "in the realization of human society without racism". See Abiola Irele, The African Experience in Literature and Ideology (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 67-88.
Western and/or minority cultures to the extent that in the process of brazenly assimilating Western standards, minority groups may lose their identities that are so intrinsic to their being and solidarity. As JanMohamed and Lloyd insist: "For many minorities, culture is not a mere superstructure: all too often, it is an ironic twist of a Sartrean phenomenology, the physical survival of minority groups depends on the recognition of its culture as viable" (emphasis mine 6).

Ironically, as opposed to the marginalized minority groups of Killjoy, in "Everything Counts" Aidoo is focusing on a situation where Africans are technically in the majority. Despite this, the writer reveals how decades of colonization, both political and sociocultural, have altered the mind-set of Africans to the point that even today they are dominated by Western standards and values. In "For Whom Things Did Not Change" this condition is evidenced in Zirigu’s slave mentality that apprehends the world in a black/white, slave/Master Manichaean equation. Conversely, in "Everything Counts" the wig is transformed into a symbol of Westernization, used blatantly by modern African women to alter radically their physical appearances: "Suddenly, it seemed as if all the girls and women she knew and remembered as having smooth black skins had turned light-skinned. Not uniformly. Lord, people looked as though a terrible plague was sweeping through the land" (3-4).

The above predicament is further consolidated in the present context of global capitalism where imagistic strategies of mass media markets "the global" as a new form of "imagined community", obfuscating specificities of location and context. Thus in "Images of Africa at Century’s End" Aidoo poses the rhetorical question: "Now/don’t come telling me/flat noses/thick lips and/small ears/must also disappear/to put the world at ease?" (Angry Letter 15), and envisages the destructive consequences of asymmetrical cultural syncretism that can dehistoricize and displace marginal subjects: "When folks figure/You are their slave/Your past belongs to them./And mind you, The Man will try/To grab our future too" (17). While integration could be a positive phenomenon for harmonious multicultural living, Aidoo implies here (as in her study of contemporary diasporics in Killjoy) that until now this process has not taken place on equal terms in most locations of the globalized, diasporic world.

36 See No Sweetness Here, 1-29. In the context of "Everything Counts", I am using the term "minority" to represent specifically non-Western peoples or those of the developing world who were once colonized by the imperial West and who are still faced with the debilitating consequences of this historical injustice.
The writer argues that colonialism did not end with subordinate nations gaining independence and establishing their sovereignty. Like other problematic Western constructs, the ending of or "post" colonialism is also a myth that has been necessary for the survival and wellbeing of the West and other powerful forces with ulterior agendas in the developing world. These myths have been sustained in order to carry on under different definitions and guises (such as "global capitalism", "trade liberalization" and, of late, the controversial "peace keeping" initiatives of America and Britain), exploitative practices, asymmetrical transactions and unequal distribution of resources in the late 20th century.

Aidoo is aware that her racial consciousness and her Africa-centered approach in Angry Letter and Killjoy could be criticized and condemned for projecting an "anti-Western neurosis". In fact, in the letter to her lover Sissie predicts the response of even her own people to her politically radical views: "You are saying, 'There goes Sissie again. Forever carrying Africa's problems on her shoulders as though they have paid her to do it ..." (118). However Aidoo's condemnation extends not just to Western power wielders but also to all others who are responsible for oppressing and marginalizing those on the margins of their worlds: "A curse on those who for money would ruin the Earth and trade in human miseries" (115).

If the writer projects sentiments of anger and vitriolic cynicism in her discussion of white supremacists, it is justifiable because she is acutely receptive to the damage caused by the colonizers in a now ailing Africa. Indeed, it is the oppressed communities of the world, the colonized Others, who can really be sensitive to the devastating consequences of misused power. At the same time, critically, her disapproval is not restricted to the hegemonic West. Referring to a comatose elite leadership in the developing world in general, and in Africa in particular, Aidoo draws attention to the pervasive corruption (such as manipulation of power by dictatorial leaders) that is devouring the resources of the world's poorest continent, and dragging its micro-nations towards further underdevelopment:

From all around the Third World,
You hear the same story;
Rulers
Asleep to all things at
All times-
Conscious only of
Riches, which they gather in a
Coma - [Killjoy 34]

By emulating their colonial masters and their pernicious practices, Aidoo suggests (as Bà does through the voice of Daba in So Long a Letter) that the post-independence mostly-male leadership has ruined the fabric of Africa. It is in this context that the writer divulges in "Not So New in Africa": “the trouble with neo-colonialism is that/we have to cope with the same crimes, but/there are no colonial sergeants to drill/their own criminals and ours?!" (Angry Letter 45).

Aidoo broaches the subjects of cross-border travel, and diasporics and migrants as minorities and marginalized subjects through a striking exposé of the conditions of modern migrations and transnationalism. Interestingly, Aidoo’s study is an extension of the subject of migration and marginalization that African diasporic writers such as Emecheta deal with at a microscopic level in texts such as In the Ditch and the autobiographical, Head above Water.37 Reflecting on Sissie’s travels, Yan asserts that Sissie’s odyssey becomes “the locus for figurative mappings of the 'borderland inhabitants,' their trajectories that indicate how and where the boundaries of the modern world are being crossed and/or redrawn, and their dynamic multiplicity of existence and consciousness” (95). In order to comment on the complex conditions affecting modern nomads in a globalized world, the writer portrays a vast canvas of personalities.

To begin with there are references to the “pseudo-intellectual” class of Africans and other migrants (such as professionals abroad and students on scholarships) who, according to Aidoo, have betrayed their nations in multiple ways. Focusing on the issue of patriotism, she divulges the ways in which the so-called erudite class has misused resources of the continent to its personal advantage: "... they come back here/Having mortgaged the country for a/Thousand and a year/To maintain themselves on our backs/... Ow, glory" (58-59). Other migrants of transnationality continue to regurgitate antiquated universal suppositions, concealing the harsh realities about life on the borders of Western metropolises and, thereby, deliberately masking existing truths: Sissie “was to come to understand that such migrations are

part of the general illusion of how well an unfree population think they can do for
themselves. Running very fast just to remain where they are .... So when they
eventually went back home as 'been-tos', the ghosts of the humans that they used to
be, spoke of the wonders of being overseas ..." (89-90). These fractures,
ambivalences and masquerades that define many of Aidoo's borderland inhabitants and
"dress the movement of recolonization into a moment heralding the arrival of a
'borderless post-history,'" are also, as Yan continues, "registers of the structural
disjuncture and contradiction between their living conditions under transnationality
and its ideology" (116).

And yet, other groups of minorities have deserted their homelands to find new
roots in the West, seemingly without rhyme or reason: "... it is quite weird. To come
all this way just to learn how to die ..." (120). Sissie, like Aidoo, cannot apprehend as
to why borderland dwellers continue to live in the West even when the West has
nothing decent to offer them, except penurious conditions: "The place seemed full of
them but they appeared to be so wretched .... Sissie bled as she tried to take the scene
in" (85), more episodes of racism: "Distant cousin/Gotten shot down .../'Any Negro can
burn:/Potential snipers all and/Them is all alike'" (22), and bitter weather conditions.

Questioning the psyche of migrants who undervalue themselves by asserting the
superiority of everything Western, Sissie is devastated to learn that some Africans are
still struggling to prove their "worth" to the whites despite the end of colonialism. In
the process, ironically, they emulate their colonized ancestors who, in a different
context, were forced to integrate into and assimilate the dominant culture in order to
release themselves from slavery and bondage: "We are only back to square one, yes?
The superior monkey has got his private white audience for whom he performs his
superior tricks" (130). By doing so, the minorities will indeed syncretize but "without
thereby necessarily gaining access to the power that circulates within the dominant
sector" (JanMohamed and Lloyd 7). As before, one is again reminded here of Frantz
Fanon's gripping study of fractured psyches and schismatic identities defining the lives
of oppressed, subjugated classes in colonized societies.

Deeply perturbed by these ruptures, disjunctions and inequality in the West,
Sissie realizes with disillusionment that many of her people, particularly the poorer
classes, will continue to be trapped in a vicious cycle as a wretchedly displaced lot:
"as bus drivers, porters, construction workers, scavengers. Mostly scavengers" (85).
This awareness on Sissie's part, in fact, contradicts Cooper's argument that Killjoy is
Insensitive to the category of class, as "black" is the "fundamental and defining characteristic motivating history, society and individuals" in the text (27). The epistolary section of Aidoo's text radically subverts the views of her Westernized diasporic African siblings by making them uneasily conscious of the roles they have undertaken in a world dominated by whites, a world which is apathetic to the problems and issues of minority black people. Hence, with some urgency Sissie makes a plea to those out of Africa, especially the educated classes, to hurry back home for this is where they are needed most: "So, please ... [c]ome to our people. They are the only ones who need to know how much we are worth" (130), and this is where solidarity can lead to the future development and prosperity of Africa: "We have been scattered. We wander too far. We are in danger of getting completely lost. We must not allow this to happen" (118).

Burdened with a devastating history of colonial aggression and genocide, Sissie's journey to Europe is sponsored by people who strive to redress the ill deeds of their ancestors through philanthropic undertakings in the former colonies. The sponsors belong to a West-based network called International Volunteer Organization (INVOLOU) that works concurrently with "the embassy", the institutionalized representation of the European state, and the sycophantic "Sammys" who would all too willingly degrade themselves and renounce their identities just to acquire a passport to the West.

Aidoo's racial consciousness, her staunch patriotism and recourse to a specific notion of nationalism may on the surface seem to promote an essentialized African identity that at times supersedes even categories such as "Third World people", often used to refer to Africans and others in the developing locations of the globe. Clarifying her position in an interview with Adeola James, she stated a decade ago:

I don't deny that we belong to a larger non-northern world and the dynamics that operate in a situation like that, but find my commitment as an African, the need for me to be an African nationalist, to be a little more pressing. It seems there are things relating to our world, as African people, which are of a more throbbing nature in an immediate sense. [In Their Own Voices 15]

While fundamentally Aidoo upholds an African identity and a black cultural nationalism as strategic tools necessary to recover collectively a "battered and bartered continent", she does not complacently accept these definitions to be unproblematic or to have totalizing fixed essences. She configures an African identity in relation to the
historical context of colonialism that absorbs necessarily the category of race. At the same time, as I have pointed out elsewhere in this chapter, this configuration does not occlude other categories such as gender and class that are vital to Aidoo, and are dealt with extensively in works such as Killjoy, Changes and The Girl Who Can and Other Stories. Her consciousness, recognition and acknowledgement of the multiple differences and conflicts inherent within the larger framework of the African identity, make her texts significantly more meaningful and relevant to contemporary Africa. In this, Aidoo is aligned in her thinking with men like Anthony Appiah who even while recognizing that a new Pan-Africanism needs to consider shared concerns and a common political basis of African nations, acknowledge "being African is, for its bearers, one among other salient modes of being, all of which have to be constantly fought for and rethought." 38 Having said this, it needs to be emphasized that Sissie for all her racial consciousness is unable to bond with her diasporic siblings when she encounters them, smitten by the prospects of Western consumerism.

Sissie's decision to return home may symbolize a "conservative nationalism" that "condemns the nation-defying identification of immigrants and diasporic dwellers" (Samantarai 141). However as history informs us, not all nationalisms are similar, and for the developing nations in particular, sustaining strong relations with other sites in the Third World are crucial at a time when global/multinational capitalism is threatening to control the New World Order. Whatever the rubric, be it Pan-Africanism or ASEAN, or Developing Economies with its wider implications, strong alliances can be used strategically to harness political, economic and legal strength that would benefit poorer nations which continue to be strangled by the affluent West and the global cartels. 39 Relating this to a cultural context and focusing on political mobilization and struggle that are required of minority groups if they are to transcend existing forms of oppression, JanMohamed and Lloyd summarize succinctly:

39 The recent testimony of Vandana Shiva to the World Court of Women in South Africa represents the violence of globalization as violence against humanity. The testimony, with ample examples from the global scene, is a compelling condemnation of Western science, technology, and trade liberalization that have systematically created wars against nature, women, children and the poor. See The Hindu (25 March 2001) at http://www.zmag.org/CrisesCurEvts/Globalism/shivaglob.htm
The theoretical project of minority discourse involves drawing out solidarities in the form of similarities between modes of repression and struggle that all minorities experience separately but experience precisely as minorities. "Becoming minor" is not a question of essence (as the stereotypes of minorities in dominant ideology would want us to believe) but a question of position: a subject-position that in the final analysis can be defined only in "political" terms - that is, in terms of the effects of economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, social manipulation, and ideological domination on the cultural formation of minority subjects and discourses. [9]

Just as much difference is problematized in the context of colonial history that propelled the oppressed colonized classes to unite as a group in order to fight the enemy, the metaphoric squint-eyed perspective of Sissie also rejects theories of universalism. The narrator, like Aidoo, sees such universalist views to be a threat to the non-essentialized identities of varying African ethnic groups. As Christopher Miller emphasizes: "Whatever radical praxis the present may require, the imprint of the past - of identity, of difference, of the hundreds of African ethnic cultures - should not be ignored." In condemning so-called universal truths which some diasporic dwellers attempt to embrace in their desperation to assimilate Western standards and "join the great family of man", Aidoo not only acknowledges difference, especially racial, given the nature of her discourse, but also gender (through Sissie and Marija) and class differences (through the diverse group of African migrants). No doubt, the recourse to an African identity cannot avoid ethnocentrism. Miller rightly affirms that

[b]y defining the Other's difference, one is forced to take into account, or to ignore at one's peril, the shadow cast by the self. But without some attention to the African past, some efforts to describe the Other, how can we accurately read the African present? [299]

Like Miller, Aidoo apprehends that acknowledgement of difference is necessary to consolidate one's identity in relation to the Other (in this case, the oppressor). Nevertheless she also realizes that one cannot essentialize difference and disregard one's shared responsibilities and commitments in a larger global or "human" context. This is manifested strikingly at the train station in Frankfurt, when Sissie is rudely and painfully awoken by a racialized comment made by Marija on the subject of biological

difference and characteristic racial morphology: "And it hit her. That all that crowd of people going and coming in all sorts of directions had the colour of the pickled pig parts .... And she wanted to vomit" (12). In assessing the Europeans and by appropriating the gaze reserved normally for the dominant culture, Sissie is here reversing the role of white colonialists and evaluating the Other in racist terminology. However, I do not think, as Cooper suggests, that Aidoo is seeking a convenient and an obviously unbecoming channel to express her personal sentiments: "Killjoy seems simply to provide Aidoo with a protective mask by which to express her own, often abrasive views" (27), for in the lines immediately following the observation about skin pigmentation, Sissie is distressed and embarrassed to note her crude reaction, arising from an acute racial consciousness:

Then she was ashamed of her reaction.
Something pulled inside of her.
For the rest of her life she was to regret this moment when she was made to notice differences in human colouring.
No matter where she went, what anyone said, what they did. She knew it never mattered. [emphasis mine 12-13]

Though profoundly remorseful about her response, Sissie is at the same time alerted to the historical issue concerning the intolerance of difference that led to the violent subjugation and silencing of her people: "But what she also came to know was that someone somewhere would always see in any kind of difference, an excuse to be mean" (13). While in certain contexts difference is celebrated as a vital ingredient for the peaceful coexistence of diverse peoples, in this instance, vitally, difference is transformed into a subject that is inherently problematic. Here Aidoo discloses how difference as extreme otherness can lead to sinister undertakings, "Power to decide/Who is to live,/Who is to die,/Where,/When,/How" (13-16), irrespective of whether one is based in the West or elsewhere in the globe. This is further reinforced in poems such as "June 7, 1989 in Tiananmen Square" and "These Days: 1" where a troubled narrator, similar to Anowa, displaces the historically nostalgic sentiments associated with home and motherland, and exposes the internal contradictions embedded in terms such as home and exile: "home is/what we fear most;/where we think they are,/who can go/nowhere else;/where we get buried while/we wait to die" (Angry Letter 36). For Anowa, meanwhile, home becomes a site of oppression and alienation because of its stifling structures and its association with "compulsory
domesticity and the enforcement of specific gender relations" (Davies 65), while crossing boundaries into a state of exile, provides multiple possibilities: that is, a shifting space of transitions and movements where categories such as male and female, dominant and marginal, freedom and oppression, local and global, intersect and merge in complex ways.

As for *Killjoy*, the consciousness of difference associated with racial morphology triggers off in Sissie a sudden awareness of other divisions as well, especially the divisions between affluent Western nations and the poorer developing world. The shocking exposure to the multiplicity of material goods in the station jolts Sissie, reminding her of home and the unequal relations between locations where "Consumer goods/trickled from", and the locations to which the cheapest duplications of such goods trickled.

Though Aidoo passionately advocates Pan-African unity, she is fully aware that the subject contains multiple ambivalences and contradictions. This is demonstrated in the interactions Sissie has with her African counterparts - especially the men, in and out of Africa. The conflicts and tensions are evident in her relationship with her lover as well who expects Sissie, being a woman, to take on a more submissive role than she possibly can or will. Interestingly, one can parallel this situation with Kofi's desire to make Anowa a docile housewife as both episodes provide examples of men attempting to subjugate women to the patriarchal norms of conservative society.

It is true that most traditional African communities had a fairly well-defined pattern of duties and responsibilities that were shared by men and women, and by and large, most African societies had a patrilineal kingship pattern. Nevertheless, in pre-colonial African systems (like the Igbo world in Southern Nigeria) there was also a strong matrifocality and female-centredness which gave women relatively greater freedom and opportunities.

41 In Chapter 1 of her book Amadiume elaborates the Nnobi myths of origin and gender that linked femaleness with industriousness and prosperity. The female orientation gave this supposedly patrilineal Igbo community a strong sense of matrifocality that guaranteed women higher status and some political participation. See also Leith Mullings, "Women and Economic Change in Africa," in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1976), esp. 247-250. This essay is an in-depth study of African women's disempowerment by the colonizing process that dismantled indigenous systems and imposed a social structure stratified not only by race, but also by class and in some situations, sex.
empowerment in narrating the history of Efuru's mother: "Your mother prospered in her trade .... She was so rich that she became the head of her age-group. She spent a lot of money for her age-group. Then she took titles. She was about to take the title of 'Ogbue-efi' when she died" (149-150).

Recollecting this precolonial history that safeguarded some privileges for women, and attributing features of passivity and subservience to an imported ideology from the colonizer's world, Sissie reveals to her lover that

so much of the softness and meekness you and all the brothers expect of me and all the sisters is that which is really western. Some kind of hashed-up Victorian notions, hm? .... [W]asn't her position among our people a little more complicated than that of the dolls the colonisers brought along with them ... ? [117]

Focusing on gender relations in African societies, Sissie specifies in the letter the position of African women in precolonial times who maintained some degree of autonomy through their trading networks, even though many of them lived within the confines of patriarchal systems.

The heightened consciousness of a brutal colonial history in the heart of Europe, meanwhile, also makes it difficult for Sissie to sympathize with Marija, despite their shared commitments and experiences as women. The tension in their relationship mirrors the existing tensions in the relations between Third World and First World feminists which the thesis has highlighted and addressed in this chapter as well as in the Introduction and Epilogue. To begin with they communicate through an imperialist language which is familiar to Sissie but not so familiar to Marija. They also share a Christian name: Mary, Marija or Marie, to which Sissie has access through the British missionaries who were anxious to teach among "Many other things, /That/ For a child to grow up /To be a/ Heaven-worthy individual, /He had /To have/ Above all, a/ Christian name" (25). As Sissie is astute enough to note, she and Marija even have similar gender concerns: "For/ Here under the sun,/ Being a woman/ Has not /Is not/ Cannot/ Never will be a/ Child's game/ From knowledge gained since" (51).

Focusing further on how the imposition of Christianity in the colonial period altered women's status, Judith Van Allen notes that the avowed objective of the missionaries with regard to girls was "to train them for Christian marriage and motherhood," not leadership positions in African politics. See Judith Van Allen, "Aba Riots' or Igbo Women's War? Ideology, Stratification, and the Invisibility of Women," in Women in Africa, ed. Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay, 59-85.
And yet, the language through which Sissie communicates with Marija, and Marija's colour (perhaps even more than her sexual preferences) become problematic for the protagonist as they inevitably trigger off an acute racial consciousness. Sissie is not willing to give into the fantasies of the European woman who tries to appropriate Sissie with the objective of appeasing her needs or lacks. Neither is Sissie prepared to accept the morbid consumerism characterizing Western societies. The outstanding image in the text that sustains a discourse on racial difference, colour consciousness and consumerism is the plums. The metaphoric plums also become a conduit for establishing (that is, initially at least when Sissie is curious to feel and taste the exotic European fruit) a bond between two lonely women from two different racial groups.

Kofi Owusu's reference to the Akan word "di" in his linguistic analysis of Section 2 of Killjoy, entitled "The Plums", attributes dual meaning to the term "consumption" (to eat/to make love to). Owusu refers specifically to Sissie's act of consuming the plums and Marija's homosexual instincts that drive her to seduce Sissie. In general, however, the gustatory images point out to Western consumerism that is contrasted starkly with the poverty and lack of basic foods and nutrients in the South of the globe:

Sissie and her companions were required to be there, eating, laughing, singing, sleeping and eating. Above all eating.

So
They stuffed themselves
With a certain calmness
That passeth all understanding. [35]

Sally McWilliams in her essay extends the significance of the plum metaphor to incorporate the first section of Killjoy as well where the discourse of consumption is fused this time with heterosexuality. Sissie's African male peer "both consumes and loves the imperial discourses of opportunity and universalism that are fed to him by his European hosts" (Williams 340), and that are so unfamiliar to Sissie. It is noteworthy that Sissie's male counterpart is generally referred to as "Sammy" with no specific proper name given to his African/Ghanaian identity. This significantly complements

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43 Sally McWilliams, "'Strange as It May Seem': African Feminism in Two Novels by Ama Ata Aidoo," in Emerging Perspectives, ed. Ada Azodo and Gay Wilentz, 340.
his internalized Eurocentrism, and "academic-pseudo-intellectual" ideas that he attempts to impose on Sissie, similar to Sissie's male colleagues abroad. In Aidoo's text all these men try to appropriate Sissie for being a woman and brainwash her with their stultifying patriarchal views and newly-acquired Western thoughts and values. In contrast with "The Plums" section that deals with the issue of homosexuality, the first section, taking Sissie "Into a Bad Dream", focuses on the insidious workings of neocolonialism, racialized difference and heterosexuality. This is witnessed in Sammy's "discursive attempt to create in Sissie a desire to give over her sites of female strength (her black body and mind) to a prejudiced and consuming white Eurocentric humanism" (Williams 340). In both situations however Sissie is completely repelled, making these connections, from Sissie's point of view at least, meaningless and unworthy of her time and attention.

In the case of her relationship with Marija, her rejection of the German is also exacerbated by an instinctual awareness of the devastating consequences inherent in interracial relationships and alliances: "Beautiful Black Bodies/Changed into elephant-grey corpses,/Littered all over the western world" (62). Thus the fantasized "delicious love affair" with Marija - had one of them been a man - cannot materialize within the framework of a racialized heterosexuality which would debar vehemently such a bonding. The unproductiveness of heterosexuality is elaborated further in the bleak relationship Marija has with her elusive chauvinistic spouse whose name, Adolph, rekindles ironically memories of fascist dictatorships and genocide. The marital chamber into which Marija invites Sissie during one of their encounters appears poignantly sterile and lustreless: the giant white bed was "waiting to be used", the expensive beauty products are hardly touched and "still in their packaging", and the bedroom with its "funeral elegance" is a "sanctuary for shrouded dreams" (63). The relationship between Marija and Adolph is summed up discerningly in the single rhetorical statement "A love-nest in an attic that seems to be only a nest now, with love gone into mortgage and holiday hopes?" (64).

Aidoo paints a bleak picture of life in general in this episode where Marija makes sexual advances to Sissie, and she rejects her outright with little compassion. Marija reminds her instantly of a race of slave traders and missionaries which makes her remark rhetorically: "Why weep for them? In fact, stronger in her was the desire to ask somebody why the entire world has had to pay so much and is still paying so much for some folks' unhappiness" (66). Avoiding a monothematic treatment of
homosexuality, Aidoo interweaves the subject of homosexuality with the issues of racism, power struggles and gender politics which are pertinent to the overall concerns of Killjoy. As Chris Dunton remarks: "While empathy for Marija is endangered by the gulf of sexual orientation, Sissie finds reflected in Marija's social isolation both her own loneliness as a woman and the stigma that is placed on her as a black living in the West." Significantly, the loneliness Sissie experiences for being black cannot only be attributed to racism in the West. As she returns to Africa, she reminds herself "I shall be lonely again", this time for being a woman with unconventional (if not radical) political convictions among Africans who had yet to shed the mentality of a colonized class.

Needless to say, by disrupting Marija's lesbian tendencies, Aidoo is hardly attempting to develop a success story of heterosexual relationships. This is made evident not only in Killjoy, but also in her other works such as Changes, Dilemma and Anowa (the failure of heterosexuality in Killjoy, however, is not only depicted through the Marija/Adolph relationship. We witness its ineffectiveness even in Sissie's encounters with many African men during her travels, especially in London). Through the killjoy protagonist, the writer thus succeeds in drawing attention to several feminist issues among which Sissie's acute sense of alienation in a masculinist, Eurocentric world, Marija's pathetic attempt at motherhood, and the loneliness affecting all women in a gendered, hierarchized, asymmetrical neocolonial world are core concerns of the text.

In the final section where we are introduced to the therapeutic love-letter, Sissie is made to realize on her return flight to Ghana that her lover on whom she was pinning much hope will not accompany her. Even though she is shattered by this news she decides to go back to Africa alone, and by doing so, to sever her relationship with the one man she loves. Having meditated on the subject of loneliness in a fleeting moment of disillusionment, Sissie's spirit soars high as the flight reaches Africa. The text concludes on a realistic note of hope rather than of despair: "she was back in Africa. And that felt like fresh honey on the tongue: a mixture of complete sweetness and smoky roughage. Below was home with its unavoidable warmth and even after these thousands of years, its uncertainties ..." (133). The sweetness does not subsume

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the smoky ruggedness, just as much the hope for a brighter Africa does not override the immediacy of present concerns and anxieties. Sissie thus returns home, not as a naïve young student who crossed the borders into Europe with quixotic expectations, but as a woman with a heightened consciousness of the role she is to undertake in the making of her nation, and perhaps the macro-nation of Africa in the present future of transnationality and globalization.

3.4.1 Gender Politics, Otherized Subjects and Female Agency
Published in 1991, Changes parodies romantic fiction through a study of inherent power relations within institutionalized heterosexual marriages in contemporary Ghana. While Killjoy encompasses a macroscopic view of African life in an increasingly globalized world, Changes, like Assia Djebar’s A Sister to Scheherazade and Bà’s So Long a Letter, narrows and deepens its narrative to a microscopic site in an attempt to assess the lives of heterosexual couples - both monogamous and polygamous - in a still gendered and hierarchized African milieu.

At a cursory glance, Changes may appear to be a novel primarily about heterosexual relationships in modern urban Accra. At the commencement of the novel when the uneasy Esi first encounters the charmingly self-assured and “exotic” Ali, Aidoo creates an electrifying scene that indeed reminds one of romance in the Mills and Boon tradition. This encounter sets the stage for Esi and Ali to fall in love. However, by the next chapter the writer displays “the ironic reversal of the romantic stereotype by contrasting fantasy with the reality of Esi’s marriage to Oko.”

It is significant that Aidoo in an earlier interview had made the comment that as an African writer she could not see herself “writing about lovers in Accra because ... there are so many other problems ...” that are of more immediate concern for Africans. It is also significant that two decades later she should make an ironic “confession” in a separate passage preceding Changes, stating that writing the fiction was in fact “an exercise in words-eating”. Despite the tongue-in-cheek reference to romantic fiction, the narrative does not, and is not supposed to represent the traditional romance genre since much of the text veers in the direction of irony, if not satire. The text employs multifarious devices such as parody, irony, occasional

46 Aidoo, interview with Lautré, 19.
humour and ridicule to rewrite the contemporary history of women in Ghana as they set out to enrich their lives by exploring new possibilities, furthering their education and careers and fulfilling individual pursuits. On the other hand, by categorizing the text as "a love story" or an inconsequential, domesticized narrative, the politically active Aidoo willfully "undermines masculine presumptions of what constitutes an appropriate field for revolutionary action" (Bryce and Darko 12).

Representing a realistic and sometimes bleak picture of conditions affecting contemporary African women, the author creates a mosaic of women characters to assess the possibilities of female subjectivity and agency in modern urban society. Her text comes to terms with the reality that despite the advances woman have made in Africa today, even a financially independent woman like the protagonist of Changes, has to "still confront the continuity of the fundamental law that the man is the hunter and woman the hunted." Simultaneously, even though the utopian vision for a just world where men and women live harmoniously has yet to materialize in postcolonial Africa, by portraying Esi as an independent, strong-willed woman, Aidoo questions stereotypical notions about womanhood, women's subjectivity and agency. In this process she challenges and subverts conventional perceptions about gender and sexuality, power politics within the institution of marriage, female autonomy and the problematic opposition between tradition and modern values affecting the lives of African women.

It is noteworthy that even though Aidoo problematizes the link between Western and African values/practices, she does not privilege one set of values over another. In fact, in dealing with the multi-dimensional lives of the text's manifold characters, Aidoo remains impartial and detached as far as her personal views are concerned. Enfolding myriad voices and viewpoints, Changes is a polyphonic text where varying lives represent varying possibilities for women in varying African cultures. This gives the writer the liberty to focus on multiple perspectives pertinent to contemporary urban Africa, while subverting and displacing simultaneously tradition and modern ideas about heterosexual marriage, monogamous and polygamous relationships, birth control, marital rape, motherhood, sex segregation and the division of labour.

47 Aidoo, interview with George and Scott, 303.
At the same time, though employing the third person narrative voice to communicate her thoughts on very topical subjects, the text neither depersonalizes the narrative nor detaches the writer from her writing. Mildred Hill-Lubin quite rightly observes that "we always sense her presence in her creations and note that she enjoys a similar closeness with her characters and their world." This proximity is generated by the passion (and at times, the anger and frustration) with which Aidoo expresses her thoughts and views, particularly about contemporary Africa: "What I am basically interested in has not changed. I wish that Africa would be free and strong and organised and constructive, etc. That is basic to my commitment as a writer," and the complex conditions encumbering the advancement and progress of African women today.

Esi Sekyi is the protagonist of Changes through whose life many of the novelistic themes are dissected and assessed. However, the multi-vocality of the fiction must be attributed to manifold characters who contribute to the development of specific themes. An example of this multiplicity is evident in the way Aidoo embarks on a discourse on polygamy and adultery, significantly through Esi, an educated, middle-class married woman and her relationship with a married man, the affluent entrepreneur, Ali Kondey. Other characters who help in furthering these themes include Oko, Opokuya, Fusena, and Kubi all of who are in intricate ways linked with the primary character, Esi.

At a superficial level, one visualizes Esi to be a Westernized African woman holding a successful career in her government. She is portrayed as being self-assured and ambitious, composed about her sexuality, and, after her separation from her husband, enjoying her freedom with none of the societal pressures to bear children and embrace motherhood. She is also depicted as a woman with certain definite views (which appear radically transgressive to the patriarchs of her community) about issues such as gender equality, and equal involvement of men and women in sexual politics and decisions pertaining to reproductive rights.

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49 Aidoo, interview with Chetin, 25.
From her husband Oko's perspective we are told that Esi had had to devote a large amount of her time and energy to sustaining a successful career, and in fact, had sacrificed much of her personal life to securing a responsible position in her workplace. However, like most things in life, success too has a price to pay, and in Esi’s case the price includes the failure of her marriage, and the erosion of a meaningful bond with her only child who remains to the end neglected by her parents. Both these aspects are made amply evident at the outset where we encounter Esi and Oko in the midst of a heated argument, witnessed by their daughter.

The scene of marital rape in the early stages of the novel determines how Esi’s and Oko’s relationship is to evolve in the future. Angered and frustrated by Esi’s nonchalant attitude towards him and her scornful dismissal of his peers, Oko strives to assert his superiority by forcing Esi to surrender physically to his sexual demands. Oko is actually comforted by the thought that through the violent assertion of his masculinity, he could undermine Esi’s sexuality and independent spirit. Though shocked by Oko’s uncharacteristically aggressive behaviour, Esi quickly realizes that the Western concept of “marital rape” would be meaningless in a dominantly patriarchal African system where there is no equivalent indigenous word to give the violent deed any weight or significance:

Marital rape. Suddenly, she could see herself ... presenting a paper on:

'The Prevalence of Marital Rape in the Urban African Environment'

to a packed audience of academics. Overwhelmingly male, of course .... At the end of it, there is predictable hostile outrage.

'Yes, we told you, didn't we? What is burying us now are all these imported feminist ideas ....'

'And, dear lady colleague, how would you describe "marital rape" in Akan?'

'Igbo? ... Yoruba?' [11-12]

Nonetheless, disillusioned by the fact that her marriage should lead her to face such physical violence, she eventually leaves Oko and lives outside the sanctioned institution of heterosexual marriage. She observes in a dialogue with Opokuya that taking this course of action will cause many repercussions. Both women apprehend that being a “single woman” or a divorcee in a conservative social milieu entails stigmatization, for patriarchal cultures, binding women to biological reproduction and denying them identities outside the role of mothering and wifehood, expect women to restrict their activities to duties in the domestic front.
As Evelyn Glenn elucidates, the situation of restricting women's movements to certain activities occurs "in social contexts that include unequal power relations between men and women, between dominant and subordinate racial groups, between colonized and colonizer". In the African context the "reproductive significance" of women's bodies is at the heart of the "spirit of womanhood". Filomena Steady affirms that in many African societies motherhood defines womanhood and is essential for the consolidation of women's status. She continues: "women are important as wives and mothers since their reproductive capacity is crucial to the maintenance of the husband's lineage and it is because of women men can have a patrilineage at all."

However, critics like Barbara Christian, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and Ife Amadiume, while appreciating the uniqueness of motherhood, have pointed out the negative effects of limiting women's functions to mothering and domesticity which can often lead to their loss of self, subjectivity and autonomy. While recognizing that the entire social system in the African context "is a jumble of neocolonial and feudalistic, even slave-holding, structures and social attitudes," and acknowledging that sex discrimination is a major cause for women's oppression, Ogundipe-Leslie, for instance, is committed to raising women's consciousness as to their sexual inequality in society and to their rights as individuals. Moving beyond myths and misconceptions, in Changes Aidoo undertakes a similar mission in setting out to explore the opportunities available for modern African women as they negotiate their traditional roles (as wives and mothers) with other more fruitful alternatives. Critically, by Esi's act of rejecting her husband and living independently, Aidoo points out to the (very real) possibilities awaiting African women today as they pursue higher education and careers in their efforts to be self-preserved, empowered and contented.

While Esi's career-oriented lifestyle is a primary factor affecting her problematic ties with Oko, this alone does not contribute to their dysfunctional

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relationship. As we learn from the narrative, numerous other factors operate negatively to separate the couple. Significant among them is the attitude of people, both men and women, who are conditioned by the oppressive strictures of a patriarchal discourse to circumscribe women's roles to motherhood, and restrict their movements to domesticity. Thus Oko cannot come to terms with the fact that his wife has to work long hours at her work place and travel extensively outside the country which is likely to reduce the time she spends at home. Esi's glamorous career also threatens Oko who sees her to be socially more active than him, earning a formidable higher salary. The fact that Esi earns more is something Oko cannot bring himself to accept. In an ideal patriarchal system after all, Esi would not be working outside the domestic sphere in the first place, and even if she did earn a living by working in a public location such as a male-dominated, government department, she would still have to rely on her husband as tradition requires. Apart from this, factors such as the constant pressure exerted by intrusive in-laws on Oko and Esi to have more children, and the narrow-mindedness of Oko's male colleagues also contribute to the erosion of their relationship.

These critical concerns related to power struggles within marriage, and myths confining women to mothering and domesticity have been dealt with repeatedly by other African women writers such as Nwapa (One Is Enough) and Emecheta (The Joys of Motherhood, Double Yoke).

Thus Amaka in One Is Enough shatters multiple misconceptions about the socially-sanctioned institution of marriage and the sanctified role of wifehood by proclaiming articulately: "I don't want to be a wife any more, a mistress yes, with a lover, yes of course, but not a wife .... As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself" (127).

Esi's resolution to leave Oko and file for divorce takes everyone, including her closest friend, Opokuya, by surprise. The chance meeting and discussion Esi has with Opokuya after her separation from Oko are significant for several reasons as they manifest the obstacles confronting contemporary women, especially in circumstances where they are married with children, and committed to demanding careers. Esi speaks candidly (and perhaps naively in some instances) for herself and Opokuya as she

recollects her past life with Oko. While confronting similar problems to that of Esi in attempting to juggle her personal life with her work-related life, Opokuya, ironically, takes a different, more pragmatic attitude to marriage with limited idealism and expectations.

A salient factor Opokuya and Esi are forced to come to terms with in this dialogue is the blunt reality that loneliness is part of the price many women must learn to accept in their endeavour to attain certain goals and be successful in the public sphere:

'No matter what anybody says, we can't have it all. Not if you are a woman. Not yet.'
'Our society doesn't allow it.'
'Esi, no society on this earth allows that.' [49]

Analogously Sissie in *Killjoy* experiences a similar fate as she leaves Europe alone, with positive thoughts about her life and the role she is to play in a more independent and more stable Africa in the future. By inserting this viewpoint in two of her major work, Aidoo is not attempting to develop a bleak discourse for working women who also want to be married and have children. In fact what she is striving to disclose is that many societies all over the world are still fundamentally patriarchal and masculinist. They are structured in ways (socio-culturally, legally and economically) that reinforce gender discrimination and the division of labour that provide greater options for men, thus delimiting women's potentialities. Having experienced in her lifetime the debilitating consequences of a patriarchal order, Esi's grandmother, Nana, poses a critical question: "But Esi tell me, doesn't a woman's time belong to a man", and adds (perhaps ironically? - given the nature of her critique of patriarchy a few passages later) "the best husband you can ever have is he who demands all of you and all of your time" (109). It is no wonder then that the grandmother is inclined to equate marriage with a certain type of death:

it was not a question of this type of marriage or that type of marriage. It was not a question of being an only wife or being one of many wives .... It is being a woman .... Anyhow, a young woman on her wedding day was something like that [condemned to death]. She was made much of, because that whole ceremony was a funeral of the self that could have been. [110]

While becoming a wife is seen to be hazardous to women's autonomy and selfhood, Nana discloses through her personal experiences the potential (both physical
and psychic) threat of motherhood to women’s independence and self-determination: "there is a most miniscule fraction of time when the baby is tumbling out of her womb when the woman in labour dies" (110). This is exacerbated in societies where patriarchal ethics pertaining to the division of labour, based on sexual and gender roles, restrict parenting to women. By focusing on this aspect through Nana’s sagacious comments, Aidoo does not suggest that change is inconceivable, and that transformation to an alternative set of ethics and practices is unachievable. She indicates that transformation is a possibility, but as expressed elsewhere in the text (for example in Nana’s astute observations), it can only be attained through a difficult process that requires absolute commitment and hard work, among other factors: "It can be changed. It can be better. Life on this earth need not always be some humans being gods and others being sacrificial animals. Indeed, that can be changed. But it would take so much" (111). Historically women have been constituted as subjects of difference, and considered to be second-class citizens facing multiple forms of oppression particularly within colonialist, patriarchal systems and discourses. Given these realities, Nana intimates that women will have to work harder than their male counterparts to transcend existing repressive conditions, and be released from the grips of "devouring gods":

"The only way they could yield their best - and sometimes their worst too - was if their egos were sacrificed to: regularly. The bloodier the sacrifice, the better. Oh yes. There are other types of gods. No less bloody, and equally implacable. We Africans have allowed ourselves to be regularly sacrificed to the egos of the Europeans, no?" [110]

This pertinent observation, to cite Judith Newton in another context on the legitimacy of women’s experiences in history, "seemed to come straight out of reflection on our own, that is, [on] women’s experience, out of the contradictions we felt between the different ways we were represented even to ourselves, out of the inequities we had long experienced in our situations."54

Asserting her subjectivity, Esi however is not prepared to make concessions to placate the male ego or to abandon her efforts at being resourceful and self-reliant.

Nor has she any intention to jeopardize her career and her independence by being rundown by obligatory childbearing or devoting extra time to domestic activities such as mothering and carrying out her traditional wifely duties. She can thus be juxtaposed for contrast with a woman like Nnu Ego who, having sacrificed everything to attain motherhood in the context of modern Urban Lagos, realizes eventually the extent to which she has been enslaved by traditional notions of motherhood: "all because she was the mother of three sons, she was supposed to be happy in her poverty, in her nail-biting agony, in her churning stomach, in her rags, in her cramped room" (Emecheta, The Joys of Motherhood 167).

Meanwhile Opokuya does yield to the pressures of married life in order to keep her large family intact. Despite her strong personality, she resigns herself to the view that to make a marriage work, "one party has to be a fool" (45), and refuses to acknowledge separation or divorce as an alternative lifestyle to being married. On the other hand, being a devoted mother, she also gains satisfaction from the knowledge that she is responsible for the unity and well-being of her family who dotes on her and eagerly awaits her return each day from work, if only to get her to do the domestic chores.

Furthermore as opposed to Esi, Opokuya, a qualified midwife, strongly advocates one’s right to have children, especially in the contemporary context when international bodies, aided brazenly by local collaborators, are striving to cut down birth rates in the developing world:

> Meanwhile, our governments ... have learned the rules of effective begging .... Under such circumstances, how does the beggar tell the giver to go and stuff his dangerous and experimental contraceptive pills, capsules and injections? .... And they call their murderous programmes ... "family planning" .... [14-15]

Identifying an insidious link between Western notions about being fat and birth control, she destabilizes current thinking on reproductive rights which she sees as an ominous strategy of the world’s wealthy nations to control life in the Third World. In the process she vehemently refuses to change her lifestyle to accommodate a Western agenda pertaining to birth control. Curiously this view coincides with the narrator of Killjoy’s own (sometimes bitterly prejudicial) perceptions that sees “family planning” as a strategy Western science and transnational drug companies have used successfully to make women in the Third World fodder for on-going research: “From knowledge
gained since, /One wonders if their/Buxom wives had ever been/Guinea pigs to
test/The pill and other/Drugs ...?" (69-70).

3.4.2 Multiple Narratives, Multiple Alternatives: Women at the Crossroads of Changes
While the issues of birth control and reproductive rights relate to the heterosexual monogamous relationships in which Esi and Opokuya are bound, the first concrete references to polygamy are made through Ali and Fusena, an affluent African Muslim couple, and later through Ali’s adulterous relationship with Esi, after her separation from Oko. As noted earlier in the thesis, the subject of polygamy is developed more extensively in Changes than in either Djebar’s A Sister to Scheherazade or Bâ’s So Long a Letter. Comparing Changes with Bâ’s text, it is noteworthy that there is a stronger bond between Ali and Fusena than between Ramatoulaye and Modou Fall in So Long a Letter. Even though the reader may question why Fusena, an educated woman, would silently encourage her husband to indulge in extra-marital affairs, when compared with Modou Fall, there is relatively a greater commitment on the part of Ali to his wife and family. Unlike Modou who abandons his family and shows no remorse for his actions, Ali, despite his philandering, has a close relationship with his family: “He loved Fusena his wife and tried not to hurt her deliberately .... He was also too sensitive a father” (78). Furthermore, as opposed to Modou who begins an affair with a poor, young, ignorant woman, Ali’s relationship is with a divorced, working mother who is fully aware of the complex web in which she is getting entangled: “She [Esi] knew that by marriage he also meant her becoming his second wife. Although the idea fascinated her no end, she could sense that it meant complications” (86).

It is through Nana, Esi’s wise grandmother, that Aidoo gives details of the strict traditions pertaining to polygamy in African societies. Nana is particularly keen to explain the principle of equity that governed the successful operation of polygamy, an extended system of marriage prevalent in Africa: “Women could stay with their own people or you built each of them a small house .... And the days were properly regulated. Wives took turns being wives .... When her turn was over he just switched” (78).

Esi’s ignorance about the subject propels her mother and her friend, Opokuya, to familiarize her (and the reader) with intricate details of polygyny in the African world. They enlighten her about the consequences of becoming a co-wife, especially
in circumstances where Esi has not met Ali’s extended family, and in particular his first wife, Fusena: “in a traditional situation, it was not possible for a man to consider taking a second wife without the first wife’s consent .... [H]er stamp of approval was a definite requirement if anything was to become of the new relationship” (97). As Opokuya’s distressed voice forewarns, a polygamous marriage was not “a two-person enterprise. It was the business of all parties concerned” (98).

This is a vital facet that both Esi and Ali learn too late and which contributes, among other things, to Esi’s estrangement from Ali, and her gradual alienation from a community that in another context may have assisted her and given her the much needed support to overcome current impediments. Even though on the surface Esi’s father’s responses seem somewhat ludicrous, when he asks Ali, “So exactly to whom are we supposed to give our daughter in marriage?” (103), it is in fact a pertinent contextual question given that Esi is about to get into a family about which she knows very little.

Embracing polygamy in a modern/urban context is a problem not only for Esi. The thought of living polygamously also comes across as a shock to Fusena - a respected member of an affluent Muslim community. As she is highly regarded within her social milieu, even the older (male) members of Ali’s family from whom Ali seeks help, refuse to support him in his second marriage without Fusena’s consent. As the elders observe:

Of course, no woman agreed to this sort of thing willingly. There was a time - maybe up to the days of their grandfathers - when women understood the necessity a little more. Since then, they have been understanding it less and less. Now, school or no school, no woman understands. [106]

Importantly, Fusena herself has little choice in the matter once the senior members tacitly support Ali. Ultimately, the patriarchal ethics of her world that sanction polygyny determine her fate as it did for those other women who comfort her, or as Ajanapu does for Efuru in Nwapa’s text, in this moment of intense distress: “The older women felt bad. So an understanding that had never existed between them was now born. It was a man’s world. You only survived if you knew how to live in it as a woman” (Changes 107).

In the eyes of the older women, transgressive acts and rebellion of any sort are akin to heresy. Women such as Esi’s mother and Fusena’s older female relatives are inured by social circumstances into thinking that men are devouring gods who can only
be appeased by the constant sacrifices women have made throughout history to maintain the status quo. Transforming myths into living realities, these women have been conditioned by time to accept life as a form of death. The oppression women have endured within the African patriarchy is then linked with the phallogocentric logic of European imperialism to expose further the exploitation and marginalization of women in African systems.

Ultimately, despite her education, her financial independence (she owns a successful kiosk) and exposure to a modern way of life, Fusena is not much different from the older women of her community. In many ways, she is like Ramatoulaye in So Long a Letter who acquiesces to the status quo and embraces an attitude born of a fatalism which women of patriarchal cultures have imbibed over centuries of indoctrination. By doing so she accepts her position of victimization and rejects the opportunity to affirm her subjectivity and claim for herself agency that has been historically denied for women in her community.

Conversely, in assessing the predicament of women in the contemporary world, Esi questions the value of her modern education: "she was only equipped to go and roam in strange and foreign lands with no hope of ever meaningfully re-entering her mother's world ... all this was too high a price to pay to achieve the dangerous confusion she was now in ..." (114). In her view, this Anglicized foreign education is partly responsible for her current state of being so ill-prepared (to deal with a polygamous lifestyle) and so isolated, at a moment when she would have appreciated a bonding with her maternal relatives. Despite their stoic attitude toward life in general, Esi sees these women - as opposed to herself - as having grasped the art of survival. The disjunction is amplified when she apprehends the limitations of her skills to manage life's daunting new experiences. This is endorsed by Maria Olaussen in a recent critique of Aidoo's text:

The 'wisdom' of the mothers - for, of course it turns out that they are right in the end - is important here. They are not presented as outdated and out of touch with the possibilities of the modern urban woman but neither is their contribution idealized. They are simply seen as women who have learned to survive and their wisdom is presented as the successful strategies of survival of the powerless.\(^5\)

Like Esi, Ali, who also belongs to a younger generation of Africans and is exposed to a modern lifestyle with its syncretic values and many perplexing contradictions, is not really aware of the politics of polygamy and the responsibilities it demands of those who accept it: "How did our fathers manage? He wondered .... They, our fathers, lived in a world which was ordered to make such arrangements work" (119-120). Complicating this further are Ali's business ventures that demand extensive work-related travels, and his disposition to philander. These two vital factors gradually cut into the time Ali has with Esi after their marriage. Thus we discover Esi toward the end of the narrative facing a situation, ironically, not dissimilar to that of her former husband, Oko, at the commencement of Changes: ignored, neglected and steadily realizing the meaninglessness of her marriage to Ali. An official bonding, rather than strengthening their relationship, only goes to estrange them from each other. As Olaussen rightly points out, the issue now is not whether a woman is part of a monogamous or polygamous arrangement, but the process transforming a relationship into an institution that is marked by power politics between men and women (68). Once Ali achieves his goal of marrying Esi, the initial interest and exuberance wither quickly. Typically in the case of men who womanize and neglect their spouses, Ali attempts to compensate Esi by showering her with extravagant gifts (or bribes) and other material possessions. To the independent Esi, these ostentatious rewards symbolize the erosion of her marriage and her ideal - to enter into a sexual relation "free from the idea of female sexuality as commodity" (Olaussen 68).

Esi's empathy with ideas about individualist values, personal goals and achievements are Western imports that clash jarringly with the collective psyche of her indigenous culture. It needs to be emphasized that Esi's exclusionary view of heterosexual/polygamous relationships alone is not responsible for the failure of her second marriage. Nor is Esi's "othering" of Fusena a prime factor contributing to the failure of her second marriage as Juliana Nfah Abbenyi suggests: "By creating a void between herself and Ali's wife ... she discursively constructs Fusena as Other, as nonexistent, as an absence .... By overpersonalizing her relationship with Ali, she leaves by the wayside many people whose input, no matter how little, is necessary to
constructing a more acceptable or convenient relationship in Accra."

Perhaps Esi does see Fusena as her Other. However this observation cannot be restricted to Esi alone as Fusena could also have perceived Esi to be her Other in her struggle to grapple with the multiple problems of her marriage. Furthermore, Esi does not knowingly set out to create a barrier between herself and Fusena once she establishes a relationship with Ali. After all to acknowledge Fusena’s position as first wife in a traditional sense and nurture a relationship with her, both individuals should have displayed, ideally (if not customarily), similar commitment to the existing predicament. In Esi’s case she is in no position to take independent initiatives to interact with either Fusena or Ali’s extended family because she gets neither Ali’s support nor Fusena’s co-operation. And in a world that applies a communal ethic to most matters of life, Esi, a sole individual with little awareness of cultural requisites, is in no position to destabilize this particular status quo, and take steps independently to bond with either Fusena or Ali’s people.

Having said this, it needs to be highlighted that in starting a relationship with Ali, Esi does not for a moment pause to think of Fusena’s feelings about her affair with Ali. This attitude of Esi where she callously disregards the predicament of another woman in the pursuit of her personal desires could manifest, in feminist terms, a lack of solidarity with other women of her community. However, as Aidoo is quick to point out, “My contention as a writer and a feminist is that such women also have a right to be. It may undermine my feminist aims. Feminism for me is not about women being victims all the time. Life is a complete and moving dynamic including eating and getting eaten.”

To be fair to Esi, even though she decides independently to marry Ali, she does not go ahead with any plans without consulting the more knowledgeable Opokuya, or her maternal relatives. Importantly, although her opinions differ radically from those of her family, she consents to a marriage where there is collective participation of family members. Hence the deterioration of the relationship between Esi and Ali can be attributed to other reasons of which Ali’s disloyalty and deception are prime factors.

57 Aidoo, interview with Wilson-Tagoe, 48.
Additionally, one can also question the extent to which Fusena leads a contented life with Ali despite having all the support of her people as well as his. Perhaps, as Nfah Abbenyi suggests, a bond between the two women may have contributed to a smoother functioning of the polygamous marriage. But this does not at all guarantee a change of attitude or a deeper commitment on the part of Ali, be it within a monogamous or polygamous framework. Theoretically, according to both African and Islamic tradition, Ali should have had adequate time (and resources) for both wives and their children. Disregarding traditions, however, Ali only makes a conscientious effort to spend time with his first wife to whom he feels more deeply obligated. Moreover, despite having committed himself legally and officially to two wives, Ali brazenly continues to commit adultery. Therefore even if Esi and Fusena had bonded to make the marriage work, Ali's aberrant behaviour would have preempted the peaceful functioning of the polygamous marriage system.

Furthermore, since Esi, unlike Fusena, is less submissive and dependent, it would have been more problematic for her to have sustained a relationship with Ali, overlooking conveniently his activities outside the domestic front. In addition, as Jane Bryce and Kari Darko suggest, even though Esi is unable to refuse the imposing gift of a car “the grandest gesture of male power available”, “he is not able to buy her acquiescence” (14). It is partly due to Esi's strong personality that Ali can never aspire to have a serious commitment with her. To his worldly disposition, Fusena is a safer and less volatile option who, even if she queries his activities, will never abandon him. Ali knows this and will therefore do nothing radically transgressive to upset Fusena and the elders, or to jeopardize their marriage and their communal belonging (for example, by abandoning Fusena in the way Modou abandons Ramatoulaye). For Ali security is with Fusena and, hence, home will always be with her. In this context, George's and Scott's question to Aidoo concerning the Ali-Fusena relationship (“In contrast to Essy [sic], Fusena does just sit and wait. She eventually gets Ali back. Is this all she wants?”) becomes somewhat redundant. As Aidoo rightly replies “She [Fusena] has the security of a marriage that wasn’t about to break up. It wasn’t just that Fusena sits and waits for Ali to come back. In a way Ali never left. Essy’s flat was a place for Ali to hang loose and hang out, home was always with Fusena” (303).
One also needs to question the extent to which Opokuya, despite her admirable management of marriage, career and family, is a really "fulfilled" woman as Nfah Abbenyi implies: "Her friend Opokuya is proof that educated, career-oriented, married women can juggle the contradictions that they encounter in their daily lives ... and still be able to live fulfilling family and love lives" (60). Aidoo may not specifically point to this, but we are left with the impression that despite Opokuya's overtly happy disposition, she has many burdens, and not least of all is her relationship with her husband, Kubi, who also deceives her. Opokuya's pathetic situation becomes starkly evident when Esi displays the sleek new vehicle, a gift from Ali, of which she is now in possession. The subject of transportation has always been a particularly sore point for Opokuya, who desperately needs a vehicle to manage an otherwise busy lifestyle. In contrast Kubi possesses a car that is left most of the time in a parking lot after he gets to work, appeasing his ego and reinforcing his social status. Given this predicament, the exposure to Esi's brand new vehicle, a formidable bribe from Ali, not only crushes Opokuya but it also triggers doubts and apprehensions she has harboured for so long about her life and marriage in general:

Opokuya didn't know how to handle the information or all the unexpected and conflicting emotions it had aroused in her .... And in any case, where was her luck? What was it she had got out of life and out of marriage? Answer: a very faithful husband [ironic indeed given his uncommunicated feelings for Esi, made evident at the end of the novel]. Four fine children. Endless drudgery at work. And the state, who was her employer, paying salaries so low you were convinced the aim was to get people like her to resign .... [153-154]

Considering this problematic and very realistic predicament of Opokuya's working-class life, one may also query if Opokuya really represents, as Nfah Abbenyi claims, "an invaluable alternative" to Esi and her coterie of middle-class professional women colleagues of contemporary Africa.

Having said this, one can agree with McWilliams that Opokuya's access to a vehicle at the latter stage of the narrative is likely to improve her lifestyle and her relationship with her spouse because the new mode of transport liberates her from some of the constraints of her earlier life, and gives her greater confidence to execute her domestic and professional duties more efficiently: "Slipping outside of the patriarchal confines associated with the politics of transportation improves the
viability of her marriage by contributing to her self-confidence, personal dignity, and autonomy" (354).

Significantly, the primary female characters of Changes are myriad representations of women contributing to the complex/hybrid fabric of Africa today. If Aidoo’s position in the novel is, as George and Scott imply, “hard to locate ideologically” especially from a feminist perspective, this is because the writer avoids the pitfall of finding theoretical solutions to the complex issues facing women in multiple locations and situations. As Aidoo highlights in this interview:

> the different voices represent different sorts of possibilities for different women in the society. The situation is volatile and at root I see it as slightly more honest for me to lay out different positions without pulling everything together. The way the novel ends means that the story is not finished, as the issue is not resolved. [302]

In other words, there is no one right way of living a life with its multitude of discordant circumstances. Neither Esi’s nor Opokuya’s nor Fusena’s lifestyle is “the answer” or “invaluable alternative” to live life fulfillingly. Each of their lives presents different dimensions which are intrinsic to life in general: Fusena is financially secure and has a relatively stable lifestyle but lacks essentially the autonomy and self-reliance to which Esi and Opokuya have access. As such she has much fewer options and goals to attain. Opokuya has the security of a family and a job but is not as financially blessed as Fusena, and is therefore continuously pressured by manifold commitments; Esi has a successful career and is financially independent. However she is deprived of the love and companionship a devoted partner or a supportive family could give her. Critically, all three women are confronted with spouses whose fidelity the author questions and challenges at different moments of the narrative.

The most positive factor about Esi is that, unlike Opokuya or Fusena, she neither deceives herself nor gives in to social pressures because it is traditionally expected of a woman to do so. She would rather break her marriage vows and live separately, dealing with the accompanying consequences of marginalization and excommunication from her conservative world, than succumb to a situation that would never give her emotional fulfillment or mental peace. The transgressive acts of Esi do indeed make her “a deviant in terms of Akan culture, and an eccentric in terms of conventional middle-class behaviour” (Bryce and Darko 13). Nevertheless, Aidoo suggests that such transgressive acts are necessary to recover the historically muted
voices of African women, and to question and destabilize conventional ideas about contemporary African women who are striving to overcome the burdens that were imposed upon their female ancestors by the patriarchs of African communities. Focusing on the conclusion, Aidoo avers: "It is important for writers to be truthful to some visions that they can put to the service of their social and political commitments. But at the same time it would have been false for me to end the novel on some blissful idealistic note."

This is partly the reason why the writer, though subverting contemporary views and issues affecting the lives of African women, cannot in reality deconstruct the thematic strands of the fiction, and perhaps project a more quixotic feminist reading, as she does in the short story "She-Who-Would-Be-King" (from The Girl Who Can and Other Stories). In other words, Aidoo does not present a radical feminist reading with a definite vision for women of postcolonial times. The text, therefore, eludes categorization and manifests some pessimism about real change in the near future for African women’s empowerment. Despite this, by presenting Esi as an atypical heroine or deviant like her sororal counterpart, Sissie, Aidoo, similar to her project in Killjoy, constructs a critical site of resistance. Such sites of resistance help to challenge chauvinistic ideologies and practices, demythologize indigenous masculinist writings about the politics of gender in Africa, and disclose other possibilities and viable alternatives for women’s self-preservation and well-being. In this process, as Aidoo's works underscore, "change does not come about in one, monolithic, definitive overturning gesture - like revolution, or Esi’s divorce. It is a process of minute shifts and subtle emphases, a complex interplay of contradictory elements, constituting changes" (Darko and Bryce 14).

59 Aidoo, interview with George and Scott, 303.
Chapter 4

Nayantara Sahgal

_Fragments of a life lived a long, long time ago. Across a hundred years the woman's voice speaks to her - so clearly that she cannot believe it is not possible to pick up her pen and answer._

_Ahdaf Soueif, The Map of Love_

_Tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter until the lioness is her own hiss-<torian_

_Merle Collins, Rotten Pomerack_

4.1 Introduction

Born into one of India's most prominent political families, the Nehrus, Nayantara Sahgal (b. 1927) is a contemporary writer whose fiction, autobiography and essays reflect a broad spectrum of Indian politics woven with a multi-layered history of a nation before and after decolonization. While recourse to history is sustained in Sahgal’s texts by acts of remembering and reconstructing past events, the facts of history themselves are not always resuscitated unproblematically. The reason for this lies partly in her consciousness that there is more than one way of perceiving the world - as in the case of the Englishman’s son who gazed at the famous equestrian statue celebrating the defence of Khartoum by General Gordon, and is captivated by the image of the horse rather than the heroic figure of the rider. Like memories and identities, Sahgal perceives history to be a particular representation, a narrative construction of events that is subjective rather than objective, informed by a selective process and serving particular interests and ideological positions of those who narrate/interpret/retrieve and create it. The temporality and variability witnessed in the politically-conscious historical narrative are vital aspects Sahgal strives to come to terms with frequently in her fictional work. Thus _Mistaken Identity_, for example, illustrates the way in which the writer interrogates and decentres a

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1 I am grateful to Prof. Shirley Chew at University of Leeds for introducing me to Nayantara Sahgal and for her insightful comments on Sahgal’s texts and a vibrant body of Indian oral literature that has influenced the works of many Indian writers, from Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan to the more contemporary Sahgal, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh.

centripetal European narrative of Empire from the sometimes sardonic and sometimes
detached perspective of its protagonist who weaves together a personal narrative with the
history of pre-independence India.¹

Tracing the main arguments of the thesis, this chapter assesses how Sahgal sets out
to decentre an intrinsically palimpsestic Indian history through imaginative textual
revisionings. It strives to configure the different degrees to which the relevant texts
reconstruct and destabilize hegemonic colonialist and patriarchal versions of history in
order to produce viable counter discourses for Otherized communities on the peripheries
of Indian society. Of particular relevance will be to consider if the texts overhaul entirely
the official chronicles of history, or, if the process of overwriting the palimpsest accepts
certain historical truths (for example Gandhian philosophy) while subverting others
(imperialist/colonialist). Critically, it will help to question whether the fictional histories
reopen "a space for dialogue and discussion" which may "better instruct us as to how to
hear" and indeed to see.⁴ As pointed out in the thesis introduction, there is a need here
to evaluate how far the narratives are speaking for the marginalized in a way that is not a
myopic reconstitution of conventional patterns and practices that have in the past
silenced the histories of the subaltern classes - especially that of the colonized woman
subject who has historically faced a double (and sometimes triple) effacement because of
her colour, gender and class.⁵ In this trajectory one needs to bear in mind that speaking
for the Other (as opposed to speaking with the Other) is a complex and problematic
process that can result in the writer assuming an authoritative voice, yet again
systematically obliterating the subaltern subject and her unsung history.

It will help to outline briefly Sahgal’s perspectives on historiography and
narrativity that underscore her most important work to date, and then examine individual

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¹ Nayantara Sahgal, Mistaken Identity (New York: New Directions, 1988).
² Susheila Nasta, "Introduction: Stepping out. Reading the ‘New’ Literatures in a Postcolonial
Era," in Reading the ‘New’ Literatures in a Postcolonial Era (vol. 53 of Essays and Studies 2000),
³ Interpretations of "subaltern" and "elite" conform to Ranajit Guha’s definitions in, "On Some
Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," Selected Subaltern Studies, ed. Ranajit Guha
represents dominant groups, foreign and indigenous. The dominant indigenous groups refer to
the “biggest feudal magnates”, representing the bourgeoisie, and “native recruits to the
uppermost levels of the bureaucracy”. In classifying these groups, Guha cautions us of the need
to be aware of the heterogeneous nature of the dominant indigenous groups which could also
include members from the under classes who "acted in the interest of the other". "Subaltern"
is used synonymously with "people" or "masses" to "represent the demographic difference
between the total Indian population" and the elite.
texts relevant to the discussion here. History relies to a great degree on memory work and remembering but, as Mistaken Identity demonstrates, its construction and representation are also defined by the lacks and gaps of forgetting - "the collective amnesia", to borrow a pithy phrase from Benedict Anderson. Thus the interpretation of personal and national events in Sahgal's text varies according to the narrator's point of view that again is influenced by multifarious factors: the narrator's position and social status, his vocation, his beliefs and point of view, his biases and prejudices. It is to this point that Edward Said also arrives in his discourse of the Orient and the constructed nature of historical representation: "any and all representations ... are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions and political ambience of the representer .... [A] representation is eo ipso implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth,' which is itself a representation."\(^6\)

In both Mistaken Identity and her earlier work, Rich Like Us,\(^7\) Sahgal introduces us to narrators who are historically conscious individuals with multiple, often conflicting identities, the by-products of a nation that has been exposed to centuries of war, invasion and reconquest. Most of Sahgal's primary characters, like the writer herself, are endowed with fluid identities that often "[don't] fit comfortably into any single mould" ("Schizophrenic" 17). These identities have been shaped in the Indian subsoil by a process of assimilation resulting from diverse historical circumstances. Elucidating this cultural plurality Sahgal remarks: "A schizophrenic of this description is a migrant who may never have left his people or his soil. We are all somewhat divided selves, but I'm referring to the divisions that history and circumstance impose on the complex creatures we already are" (17).

The writer's preoccupation with the written word/text, historically dominated by men, her affinity with imaginative literature, and her profound sense of history are all in a sense reactions to the malaise of schizophrenia to which people like herself were exposed due to their unique and complex positionings: "I will forever be an outsider looking in through its windows, marvelling at the sequences and continuities" ("Schizophrenic" 19). Concurrently Sahgal emphasizes that it was not through a contrived process that she began to write "political fiction" even though her imaginative literature is inspired by an indisputable political consciousness where "personal and political fates

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\(^7\) Nayantara Sahgal, Rich Like Us (Kent: Sceptre, 1993).
inextricably bound" (19). At the same time, as she rightly affirms, she also upholds no specific ideology other than an innate aversion to colonization, political dynasties and the abuse of power.

Perhaps because Sahgal sees the individual’s fate so intrinsically bound with the nation’s life (similar to Salman Rushdie’s vision in *Midnight’s Children* or more recently Mukul Kesavan’s *Looking through Glass*), her fiction depicts events where personal circumstances of characters are linked with larger issues pertaining to the public/national sphere. Thus we find Bushan’s predicament (his mistaken identity as a Bolshevik, his imprisonment and his association with the revolutionary nationalists) entwined with the Meerut Conspiracy Case and, indirectly, the struggle for Indian independence, while Sonali’s demotion from the Ministry of Trade in *Rich Like Us* has an insidious connection with the Indian Emergency.

Similarly, as this chapter illustrates later, the *sati* manuscript of Sonali’s grandfather is not simply an individual attestation to a personal tragedy: it is incorporated as a subtext into Sonali’s narrative in order to highlight the ambivalent nature of 19th century reforms pertaining to Indian women. Critically, the lives and destinies of many of these women were enmeshed on the one hand in a complex web of tradition and customs, despite the progress (especially educational) made by the middle class elite of pre-independence India, and on the other, in the consecration of “Indian womanhood” by a new patriarchy that viewed the emergent nation in essentially dichotomized terms.

The interaction with the West propelled leaders (such as Nehru) to review the status of women in alignment with the ideas and thoughts of socially conscious “progressive” leaders of the time. Simultaneously, in opposition to this impulse to “modernize”, there was also the urgent need to counter colonialism by forging a distinct identity based on indigenous values and cultures. Partha Chatterjee points out that this attempt to reinforce a cultural identity was deeply ambivalent and contradictory as the new nationalism was both imitative of and hostile to the Western models it emulated. As Elleke Boehmer emphasizes, however much we may construe nationalism as a modern phenomenon, what needs to be reiterated is that nationalism “whether as ideology or
movement was not *sui generis*; it relied on what was available, and what was available in this case were the formations of the old dynastic state and the patriarchal family."¹⁰

Thus as Chatterjee concludes, the relative unimportance of the woman question in the early 20th century was not because it was overtaken by the more generally emotive issue of nationalism and political struggle but because the woman question was placed within an *inner space of sovereignty*, far removed from the contest with the colonial world: "Indian nationalism, in demarcating a political position opposed to colonial rule, took up the women’s question as a problem already constituted for it: namely, as a problem of Indian tradition."¹¹ While the stance taken by the neo-nationalist patriarchs can be apprehended sympathetically on the one hand (given the tenuous relations they maintained with the colonial state), it needs to be highlighted that their actions further fortified a segregated social system where women were circumscribed to the realm of domesticity and spirituality, and, in due course, relegated to the peripheries of the nationalist discourse.

Affirming her on-going commitment and capability to interleave individual concerns with male-dominated national ones, Sahgal insists: "Political and social forces shape our lives .... I believe there is a ‘poetics of engagement’ where commitment and aesthetics meet and give each other beauty and power."¹² This juxtaposing of private and public spaces is demonstrated in almost all her work, from the intimate narrative of her life during the independence struggle in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* to her later publications, *Relationship* and *Lesser Breeds*.¹³ *Relationship* is an exposition of private letters of two very public figures that ruptures their self-imposed silence for the first time. Beginning in the decade that witnessed the British preparing to quit India and chronicling personal and national events up to 1968, *Lesser Breeds* recovers the story of the 23 year old English teacher, Nurullah, to trace the histories of caste and communal prejudices embedded in Indian politics and life to this day.

This interspersion of vastly different, often mutually exclusive spheres is evident in her earlier imaginative works as well. Her first fictional work, *A Time to Be Happy*, captures moments from revolutionary India where the deepening consciousness of a colonized people led to national independence, while *This Time of Morning* depicts the period after decolonization when people are caught up in the initial euphoria of national liberation. The uneasy consciousness of growing political tensions implied earlier in *This Time of Morning*, is explored in more depth in *Storm in Chandigarh* where social and political instability are demonstrated through the separation of Punjab and Haryana along linguistic lines. In *Situation in New Delhi* the text shifts to Post-Nehru Indian history and focuses on the emergence of the Naxalites (communist extremists), partly in opposition to escalating corruption among the nation’s power elite. The above texts, written prior to *Rich Like Us*, “chart the chronological progression of India” and give voice to the fears and consternation of Indian citizens who are continuing to witness the degeneration of Indian politics since the attainment of freedom. This disheartening trend, according to Sahgal, stands in direct opposition to the ethos of early nationalists, especially Gandhi, who was committed to instill into the body politic a high degree of moral and ethical standards.

Sahgal’s retreat to India’s past in *Plans for Departure* and *Mistaken Identity* is, therefore, the outcome of her disenchantment with the realm of contemporary politics in India and the prevalent inflammatory nationalist ideologies that have exploited issues such as religious differences and parochial communal loyalties to divide the nation, dislodge its cultural plurality, and create tension for various insidious purposes. Endorsing her opposition to growing religious fundamentalism among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, she condemns in particular the “pickling” of India “in an exclusive Hindu mould and clamping it into a fixed unchanging identity”. Reflecting upon this lethal amalgam of religion and politics where “mystical dreams and blood urges” define what Indian nationalism would mean in the late 20th century, she continues:

To start conceiving of India as the cultural monopoly of Hindus, with every other culture on Indian soil seen as an imposter and outsider, would not only be a radical

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15 This text focuses on 19th century colonial India and the leadership of Tilak who, as opposed to Gandhi, incorporated violence to his strategies of resisting British imperialism.
departure from the cardinal principles that went into the making of modern India, but a misrepresentation of Indian history and an abuse of cultural memory.  

So we discover characters such as the altruistic narrator of Mistaken Identity arising from the writer’s imaginative memory to construct an alternative discourse on cultural plurality and religious tolerance, and striving to mitigate, albeit idealistically, the undesirable elements of sectarian politics.  

While Mistaken Identity dwells on the discordant communal and religious elements that have fractured the national fabric, Sahgal is also acutely sensitive in Rich Like Us to the damaging effects of globalization in contemporary India: the “volcanic upheavals” caused by free market policies, the disorientation of identities, the disintegration of time-honoured values and traditions and the widening gulf between the wealthy and the poor. Evoking indirectly the changing times of Rich Like Us, she remarks: “Few things have been more destabilizing for millions of people across the globe and for their concept of identity than this imperialism in a new garb. It axes the roots and cuts off the blood supply of ancient systems of thought, and of the oldest values known to mankind …” (“Thoughts” 9). 

Thus in Rich Like Us Sahgal steers her narrative into a modern age of market capital where the West is still viewed as the dominant culture, despite successful processes of decolonization worldwide, and “[t]he world is still seen through its cultural lenses, analysed through its modes of thought, and prescribed the remedies Europe thinks best” (“Thoughts” 9). Exploring more deeply the impact of Westernization on distant cultures, she apprehends the uneasy alliance between an imposed, alien Western agenda and religious fundamentalism, an especially topical subject since the post-September 11 developments, the fall of the Taliban regime and more recently, the accelerated procedures to build a “wall” by Zionists in the occupied West Bank under the pretext of uprooting “terrorism” (a term that is freely used today to “demonize legitimate resistance”). With remarkable clarity of vision Sahgal strove a decade ago to penetrate the reasoning behind the retreat to religious fundamentalism on the part of orthodox communities at a memorial lecture delivered at the University of Leeds: “This veritable

onslaught of a Western lifestyle may be helping to breed a nostalgia for a past that may well be mythical, but it is no less powerful on that account" (“Thoughts” 10). Consequently, in February 2002 Indian civilians in Gujarat encountered a hideous pogrom that left around 900 people, mostly Muslims, dead in communal riots. This incident can be historically linked with the destruction of the ancient Babri Mosque in 1984 which according to orthodox Hindus had been erected centuries ago by Muslim invaders in the sanctified territory of Lord Rama.20

Bearing in mind the overwhelmingly complex nature of the historical facts pertaining to Ayodhya, Sahgal metaphorically fuses the spatial and historical references of Ayodhya to the narrative of Bushan and Razia in Mistaken Identity. Despite the romance and mystery surrounding their union (which is not dissimilar to the rendition of Laila’s and Amir’s relationship in Attia Hosain’s Sunlight on a Broken Column), Sahgal highlights the volatile nature of circumstances in the imaginary world of Vijaygarh where the slightest provocation could spark off religious riots: “The grim edifice that has given Vijaygarh its name ... may have been built to commemorate some minor victory where fewer hundreds of her [Razia’s] ancestors and mine had fallen slaughtering each other ...” (52). Alternatively, the vision for Hindu-Muslim unity in a pluralist India is manifested through the wry and sardonic observations of the narrator-protagonist as well as the disconcertingly captivating features of his love interest, Razia:

The Tartar cheekbones of this face ... had ... the lidded eyes of temple sculpture .... It was this manifest racial impurity, a mix belonging to a vision of communal union, that made it unforgettable.... [49]

This vision of Mistaken Identity is inspired by the legend of the 16th century Muslim poet Kabir who was born to Hindu parents and whose works have been incorporated into Islamic, Hindu and Sikh traditions as they endorse an urgently needed religious pluralism for India’s future progress and stability (“Continuing” 45).

Bound in with Sahgal’s continuing preoccupation with India’s political and economic scenario is her commitment to grappling with the histories of Indian women, their plight in society and the diverse problems they continue to experience due to multiple reasons.

such as gender discrimination; dismal economic conditions, often aggravated by corrupt
power politics; lack of access to vital resources such as education and legal rights; and
debilitating cultural and religious mores and practices.

*Rich like Us*, for example, is a harsh critique of the two-year period of the Indian
Emergency under Indira Gandhi when "[i]dealism had degenerated to the point where
there was almost nothing left of the old dreams that [early] nationalists had for India"
("Continuing" 47). The devastating events of this period are firmly interlocked with the
situation of Indian women from different walks of life in a rapidly changing modern India.
Of particular relevance to the narrative is Sonali, the protagonist, who is forced to come
to terms with the corruption and deteriorating standards of a totalitarian male-dominated
government bureaucracy. In retrieving the history of the Emergency, the fiction
illustrates the way in which narrow nationalist ideologies of authoritarian governments
dislocated ordinary people who become prey to what Sahgal calls "dynastic
dictatorships".

In a non-radical way Sahgal’s texts divulge that women’s struggle in India is more
complicated than in the West as centuries-old traditions, religious observances and
entrenched patriarchal values are regarded with greater reverence in the subcontinent
than in either Europe or the rest of the Western world. Perceiving the issue from a Third
World perspective, she also draws attention to the multiple hardships of poverty,
malnutrition and illiteracy that women of this spatial location have to deal with on a day-
to-day basis, apart from their marginalization as women. In this rendition of Indian
women, the writer invariably addresses a range of sometimes polemical questions such as,
how relevant is it to embrace the more positive aspects of modernization even while
accepting the traditions of a composite Indian system, and to what extent has the
overpowering patriarchal version of Hinduism adversely affected the advancement of
postcolonial Indian women?

4.2 Private Self/Public Spaces: Autobiographical Practice in Prison and
Chocolate Cake
The pervasive feature of all Sahgal’s work to date, fiction and non-fiction inclusive, is the
sense of history. In any close reading of her work it is imperative to perceive how this
aspect is reflected in the text through divisive genres and intricate narrative modes such
as allegory, satire and parody. While the multiple genres (historical fiction,
semi/autobiography, biography, letters) and narrative techniques she employs probe,
interrupt and suggest alternative meanings to the subject of history, the writer also blurs the parameters demarcating "fact" and fiction, and relegates the consecrated historical scripts to narrative artifices. She thus reveals misconceptions about the facticity of archival records and destabilizes conventional notions pertaining to the validity of historical knowledge.

Sahgal interrogates the tasks undertaken by the autobiographer, the historian and the imaginative writer (especially in *Mistaken Identity* and *Rich Like Us*) by interweaving autobiographical elements (Bushan’s personal vision for a pluralist India, Sonali’s mixed identity arising from her parent’s conflicting regional allegiances, her great-grandmother’s history) with historical details (the Meerut Conspiracy Case, Gandhian salt marches, the Indian Emergency) and imaginative happenings. Thus we discover, as we did in Assia Djebar’s *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, her fictional work incorporating events from the archives, while an autobiography such as *Prison* integrates a deeply personal narrative of the author and her family with the narrative of the nation, especially the painful history of the struggle of a generation to overthrow a colonial regime and steer India’s future towards decolonization and sovereignty. As the writer reminisces in her introduction to the autobiography, this was “the air people breathed and what life was all about”, and “[t]ransforming it into a reality was a lifelong commitment” (vi). In this autobiography, (wittingly or not) Sahgal rejects normative definitions of autobiography, displaces the enunciatory site of the autonomous "I" subject and transgresses conventional boundaries to integrate a tabooed public space with the feminine script of her private life.

The author’s problematic relationship with history reaches as far back as her early childhood and is explored provocatively in her first autobiography at a time when issues such as historiography, selfhood/subjectivity, heteroglossia and deconstruction were not theorized and analyzed as they are done today:

history and geography were a mystery to me. The former, as we had to study it from a brown book called *Highroads of History*, was, I realize now, a blot on the name of history. The author had a rather lively imagination and should have written fiction instead of fact, because much of what he wrote was only fiction. The book was filled with lurid accounts of ... the valor and courage of .... British heroes in a land of vindictive natives .... Infinitely more interesting was the history I learned from my father .... India’s hoary past leap[t] to life and action. [48-49]
Not meant for "public consumption" when it was initially conceived, *Prison* captures the texture of an epoch with a "starry eyed" innocence that stands uneasily in this day and age where the success of a product is measured by its marketability and contemporaneity, and commodities are exposed to the harsh glare of a competitive global economy. Despite its uneasy positioning and its apparently unvarnished innocence and naivety, when the text was reprinted recently Sahgal decided to leave it unaltered, projecting thus a quaintly romantic vision for India that is embellished by the philosophy of Gandhi. This is further endorsed at the conclusion of the autobiography where she remarks:

> Millions of people would have been ordinary folk, living their humdrum lives unperturbed but for [Gandhi]. He had come to disturb them profoundly, to jolt them out of indifference, to awaken them to one another's suffering, and in so doing to make them reach for the stars. [234]

Integral to *Prison* (as well as to her other works) are the values instilled by Gandhian philosophy, based on a unique ideology of truth-force (*satyagraha*), non-violence (*ahimsa*) and compassion that became a revolutionary prescription for India's decolonization process.\(^{21}\) Despite the oscillating perceptions about Gandhi in recent times (from "Mahatma" to "shrewd politician"), one can concur with Akeel Bilgrami's view that Gandhi, in fact, "almost single-handedly transformed a movement conceived and promoted along [elitist] lines by the [largely upper-middle class] Congress party into a mass movement of enormous scale" (81). Eulogizing these virtues of Gandhi, in *Prison* Sahgal records Gandhi's impact on the decolonization movement with an almost religious fervour: "we are truly the children of Gandhi's India, born at a time when India was being reborn from an incarnation of darkness into one of light" (20).

The text's apparent naivety is a vital element influencing Sahgal's portrayal of characters such as Nehru and Gandhi, in particular, and the nationalist struggle, in general. As Minoli Salgado rightly suggests both Nehru and Gandhi are depicted in "Christianized" idiom that the writer had inherited from a colonial/Western education at home and abroad.\(^{22}\) Christianized syntax interwoven with nationalist rhetoric abounds in her references to Nehru and is extended to her description of him (as Shivraj) in *Situation*

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21 See Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi's Integrity: The Philosophy behind the Politics" (2001), *Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): 79-93. This is an incisive study of Gandhi's specific political strategies, integrated with moral and experiential significance for a unified Indian community.

in New Delhi later on. Note, for example, phrases such as "prison life ... was all part of the crusade" (22), "it was awe-inspiring to see a mammoth crowd moved to adoration [of Nehru]" (40) and "Will anyone ever understand the reason why Gandhi was shot, or, for that matter, Christ crucified ..." (228). In a similar vein, nationalist endeavours attain a religious dimension where political actions are transformed into prayer, and material interests are submerged by a philosophy of renunciation: "In our childhood ... we grew up believing that ostentation in any form was out of keeping with the times and with our patriotism" (53). At another level, the illustration reflects a narrative moment of remembering where the writer disrupts simplistic dualisms of public and private space, weaving matters of nationalist politics with memories of her early private life.

Among the features of Sahgal's autobiography are distinct elements that characterize most women's autobiographical practices. Some of the cultural preconditions that Georges Gusdorf and other early theorists of autobiography insist upon are indeed absent in the works of female writers such as Sahgal. One of the outstanding characteristics of the canonical autobiography that is missing in Sahgal's text is a "conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life" (Gusdorf 29). Or, as Philippe Lejeune puts it, an emphasis on the individual life of the writer "in particular the history of his personality". In other words, the kind of individualism proposed by seminal theorists such as Gusdorf and James Olney is, in fact, no nexistent in the works of many women writers and marginalized sections of the world such as colonized peoples, minority communities and other non-Western groups. In a thought-provoking essay Susan Friedman elucidates this point as follows: "Isolated individualism is an illusion .... The emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition for autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism (according to a Lacanian model every autobiography, similar

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to a mirror, is a false self)."\textsuperscript{26} Modifying Gusdorf's theory, Friedman elaborates the critical characteristic of women's writings:

Autobiography is possible when "the individual does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community ... [where] lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being. [38]

This alternative approach of interconnectedness is reflected in Sahgal's autobiography as well as it continues to oscillate between the categories of conventional autobiography that celebrates the individual, and historical narrative that embodies a wider social context, evoking an absent polyphony of other voices and experiences.

Furthermore, as an autobiography, Prison does not adhere to a strict chronological rendition of personal and national history. The narrative moves back and forth in time in a non-linear sequence, capturing moments and thoughts in a way that reminds one of the techniques employed by a traditional storyteller. Since the autobiography defies a linear narrative mode, there is also no logical development or culmination of events even though the text concludes with the tragic demise of Gandhi and records the writer's grief, deep loss and lack of direction in a "vital new capital waking to life". Commenting on her technique that resembles the stream of consciousness method, Sahgal remarks in her introduction to the first edition: "If I write haphazardly it is because I describe events as I remember them and not necessarily in the order in which they occurred. It is like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle" (9).\textsuperscript{27} Curiously, this cyclical approach with its myriad fragmentations and fractures is employed in a more conscious way by Sahgal three decades later to relate Bushan's story in Mistaken Identity. Though this method of recounting events may seem superficially to disunite the divisive episodes of the autobiography, it integrates units that are self-sustained and can be read individually or collectively.

Simultaneously, the reader needs to be aware of the lack of intimate personal details or confessional elements pertaining to the writer's self in the autobiography she constructs. By giving details of people and places essentially in relation to the larger


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picture of the nationalist struggle, Sahgal relegates her story to the periphery and, characteristically, places her Self within the macroscopic space of the nationalist movement. It is noteworthy that even within this context she sees herself as an onlooker (somewhat like the character of Bushan), rather than a subject or agent who contributes in a decisive way to the events that occur in the larger political arena:

All at once I became one of those anonymous faces outside, gazing with complete belief and affection at the man who stood before them. The little girl behind the window was on the wrong side of it. She should have been out in the garden with those others, with whom she felt a strange and sudden kinship. [40]

This distancing could be partially attributed to the fact that young Sahgal and her sisters were relocated to America by their parents at the height of the independence struggle in order that they continue their education, unhindered by the tumultuous events at home and in India generally. Partly also the narrative "un-positioning" within the conventional autobiographical space can be explained in terms of Gandhian self-sacrifice, and the writer's perceptions about collective identity (as opposed to the norms of individualism), collective participation and mythical time - all of which are intrinsically enmeshed in the rhetoric of nationalism. Thus fittingly, the writer's autobiography interlocks her personal narrative with that of her nation where the spark inspired by Gandhi not only illumined India but became "a living part" of her self.

The position Sahgal assumes in the autobiography reflects Sheila Rowbotham's perspective that given the patriarchal structures of the world we inhabit, a woman cannot "experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined as woman, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture."28 In fact Rowbotham declares that Lacan's (metaphor of the) mirror provides the "surface of cultural representation into which woman stares to form an identity" (cited in Friedman 38). Significantly, this situation need not only produce negative consequences for women's selfhood. It can also have positive impact where collective (social) solidarity paves the way for the reinforcement of women's otherwise historically non-represented identities and consciousness. That is, by presenting the Self in the collective mode, the historically excluded woman writer marks her desire not to be silenced or defeated.

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Rowbotham's suggestion that women's autobiographies reflect a double consciousness is applicable to Sahgal's text where the writer's sense of Self is manifested through her sense of the outer world. This is further confirmed by Friedman who asserts: "the self constructed in women's autobiographical writing is often based in, but not limited to, a group consciousness - an awareness of the meaning of the cultural category WOMAN for the patterns of women's individual destiny" (40-41). Rather than "efface" herself from the autobiography, Sahgal situates herself within a collective space, giving precedence to the national narrative that required such collective consciousness to mobilize mass support for the independence struggle. The writer thus indirectly stresses a collective history and collective action, strategic political tools for any resistance or rebellion, especially if it takes the form of passive resistance in a Gandhian sense. Simultaneously, this narrative positioning (and remembering) serves as a medium of symbolic interaction for it evokes memories that the writer can share with others.

While confirming with Salgado that in Prison Sahgal is preoccupied with a nation-in-the-making, it is difficult to endorse her view that the characters (including the writer herself) who people her text seem to become "an undifferentiated blur". On the contrary, even though each of the individual narratives only occupies a limited textual space, Sahgal portrays a diverse range of characters. For example, as opposed to Sahgal's self-confessed passivity, Lekha, her older sister, is presented as a feisty, fiery-spirited person. With a strong sense of storytelling woven into the writer's autobiographical practice, the text manifests a style where the writer "takes a theme or an idea or a personality, and weaves round it and him [sic] her own recollections and reflections." In this rendition noteworthy particularly are the scintillating vignettes of her erudite and yet

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29 I do not agree with Salgado that by bringing in a dual consciousness to the autobiography Sahgal is in fact being "denied by history the illusion of individualism" (66). Even though Salgado is here using a phrase of Friedman, she appears to be misquoting Friedman who in her text is addressing the subject of individualism that was a necessary precondition for the conventional Western autobiography, and pointing out in a Lacanian reading, the falseness of the mirror image, that is the "illusion of individualism", that early theorists of autobiography uphold firmly even though the illusion of the Self has been historically denied to marginalized peoples (such as women writers).

30 For a striking example of resistance literature see Rigoberta Menchú's controversial testimonial narrative. In a vastly different and magnified context of marginality (especially given her disadvantaged ethnic and class background), Rigoberta, the Quiche-speaking Indian activist from Guatemala, undertakes the mission of constructing (initially in Spanish) a personal testimony of her life and her people under a repressive Guatemalan regime in I, Rigoberta Menchú.

unassuming father, Ranajit Pandit, great-aunt Bibima who enjoyed relating stories from
the ancient epics to the precocious Pandit sisters, and Hari, the wildly imaginative waif
who makes his way into the premises of Anand Bawan, and later becomes a member of
the Indian Congress.

4.3.1 Situating the Historical Narrative: Constructing a Framework for
Mistaken Identity
With the hindsight of theoretical knowledge, we now know that the term "history" has
been subject to multiple transformations of meanings over many centuries.32 According to
Raymond Williams, in its earliest sense the term was used interchangeably to mean "an
account either of imaginative events or events supposed to be true,"33 even though by the
15th century "history" signified the predominant meaning, "organized knowledge of the
past". Definitions of history continued to be appraised even after this period and
acquired diverse interpretations especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. Meanwhile, if in
the earlier centuries the historian occupied an epistemologically privileged space between
the arts and the sciences, by the late 19th century there was growing antipathy among
philosophers such as Nietzsche and many of the fin de siècle artistes (Henrik Ibsen, André
Gide, André Malraux) and early modernists (T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound) towards the historian.
These vicissitudes have succeeded in destabilizing conventional perceptions about history
and the historian's supposedly important contribution to knowledge. With the expulsion
of history from its high rank among the sciences, it has today acquired radically new and,
sometimes, polemical definitions, establishing the notion that archival inscriptions, like
most narratives, are fictions of factual representation.34

According to antiquarian Western theories, the aim of history has been to retrieve
the past by analyzing the "truthfulness" and facticity of events. However Laurence
Lerner, for instance, asserts that "the days of positivist history, of wie es eigentlich
geschehen[ist]", that is how it actually happened, are now over. As the nature of
historical investigation was questioned by modern writers and philosophers, it became

32 Among the multiple texts written on the subject is one of the latest works by Bill Ashcroft in
Postcolonial Transformations (London & New York: Routledge, 2001). This, among other
seminal texts written by authors such as Hayden White, Dominic LaCapra, Edward Said,
Benedict Anderson, Gayatri Spivak and Partha Chatterjee, help explore the subject of
historiography in innovative and thought-provoking ways.
33 Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, rev. ed. (London:
Fontana, 1983), 119.
34 See in particular "The Burden of History," in Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse: Essays in
evident that archival records cannot give access to objective facts through a strictly scientific process because "the ideology and the verbal strategies of the historian will determine what he chooses to notice and how he describes it."35

Many contemporary theorists of historiography (such as Hayden White) affirm that historical narratives require "an irreducible and inexpungeable element of interpretation" to construct "the moving pattern of images" in the historical record which is both "too full and too sparse" (Hayden White, Tropics 51). White remarks that as opposed to the imaginative writer, the historian faces a chaos of information which he must selectively use to configure history.36 From this perspective, a historian's work can be contrasted with that of the imaginative writer who is preoccupied with both "historical" as well as "fictional" material (evident in Mistaken Identity and Rich Like Us) that are usually constructed, hypothesized and deduced.

Despite these ostensible disparities, a historian's task is a much more complex one than was perceived by hegemonic 19th century European historiography, and the discourse of the historian and of the imaginative writer often overlap and resemble each other because of similar procedures employed by both groups in constructing their narratival representations. Elaborating this further White indicates how the historian, like the imaginative writer, is compelled to make a selection of information from "the unprocessed historical record" to make his work more cohesive. The historical narrative is at once "a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative" (Tropics 51). Interpretation is vital to the historian's efforts at making his work coherent, as well as logically and aesthetically connected to his discourse. Because every written history requires a certain degree of hermeneutics and specific modes of textual representation, historical narratives can never be wholly objective or accurate representations of events of the empirical past. In brief, because the historian is placed in a situation of having to "emplot a story", histories are the result of narrative construction, reflecting elements of the mythic or "meanings of a specifically fictive kind" (White, "Introduction" 343).

While acknowledging that both genres inevitably invent and construct as they textualize the past and, therefore, history (similar to literary works) is a discourse that cannot be wholly objective, it is necessary to interrogate how relevant is any of this

knowledge to postcolonial writers such as Sahgal. Significantly, the reconstruction of history has been intrinsic to the work of a large number of postcolonial writers ranging from Chinua Achebe, J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris and Salman Rushdie to Djebar, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Michelle Cliff and Bapsi Sidhwa. Helen Tiffin defines this process of recuperation as: "The dis/mantling, de/mystification and unmasking of European authority that has been an essential political and cultural strategy towards decolonization ...." 37

Simultaneously, focusing on existing power relationships in the use of terms such as "postcolonial" and "postmodern", Tiffin indicates how the "postmodern" label is being increasingly applied hegemonically to cultures and texts outside the Western world. Because of this homogenizing tendency, she remarks that postcolonial texts are being appropriated by Euro-American literary practices. This pattern is further facilitated by certain shared features in postcolonial and postmodern works. For example, the "historicizing consciousness" or the desire to recover history (though not necessarily with similar motives) is a striking feature of both postcolonial and postmodern works. Linda Hutcheon informs us that postmodernism in fiction is characterized by "historical metafiction". While acknowledging that postmodernism evolved from the modernist movement, and that the indeterminacy of knowledge is certainly not a discovery of postmodernism, Hutcheon places the contemporary writer's preoccupation with problematizing historical knowledge within the domain of postmodernism. Elucidating further, she states that the immanent postmodernist concern with temporality and indeterminacy is not a denial of historical knowledge:

What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past ("exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination") .... This is not a "dishonest refuge from truth" but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs. 38

Conversely, Tiffin's point is that the postmodern writer is devoted more to destabilizing the authoritative basis of the master narrative while the postcolonial writer is not simply striving to dismantle hegemonic Western perceptions of history that has in

the past, by consolidating Europe as a sovereign subject, conveniently defined its colonies as Others:

To question one’s own authoritative bases as European post-modernism perceives itself as doing is different from, on the one hand, opposing another fully-fledged system on equal terms to that of Europe, and on the other, interrogating that authority with a view to erecting a systematic alternative to define a denied or outlawed self. [Tiffin 171]

It is precisely this alternative voice that Sahgal attempts to enfold in her imaginative works in rewriting India’s history. Bearing in mind and echoing the irreducibly tropological nature of historical work, in Mistaken Identity Sahgal reinvents the Meerut Conspiracy Case and links the ironically apolitical narrator-protagonist to a crucial phase in India’s decolonization process. By doing so the writer asserts the indeterminacy of historical truth, decentres the discursive privilege of Western knowledge and provides an alternative emplotment of India’s colonial history. Like history writing, this process, as Michel de Certeau and later Hutcheon affirm, is indeed a "displacing operation upon the real past, a limited and limiting attempt to understand the relations between a place, a discipline, and the construction of a text" (Hutcheon 97). Thus, strikingly, Sahgal does not wholly privilege even her reinterpretation of the master narrative, implying that the historical perspective of the narrator is only one of many provisional accounts of recent Indian history. At the same time, by assuming this position neither does the writer deny historical knowledge. After all, Mistaken Identity does illuminate a Gandhian vision that provides an effective counter discursive framework and emerges as a formidable force challenging British imperialism in the early 20th century.

While offering a counter discourse to the totalizing impulse of Western-imperialistic-modes of history-writing, to avoid rigidity of interpretation Sahgal uses syncretic narrative modes, some of which reflect ancient devices of storytelling in India. The creation of a protagonist with no real ambitions or political goals is an innovative way by which the writer introduces vastly diverse or conflicting ideas and multiple voicings that could otherwise not be sustained within the framework of a singular prose work. Another significant attribute that helps maintain the provisional nature of historical truth is the narrator’s sardonic and detached disposition that enables him to assess events in the political arena with a great degree of scepticism and ironic humour, often accompanying the subject of mimicry. Other important techniques Sahgal employs to interrogate history are parody and allegory, illustrated in the next section.
In displacing a linear narrative structure and infusing the text with devices such as storytelling (Bushan literally narrates his personal history to his cell-mates), narrative digressions (Bushan's thoughts that wander in the midst of relating a logical sequence of events, the multiple interrogations of the prisoners), as well as myths, legends and symbols, the writer parallels her prose-work with indigenous oral narratives. Through these "collisions or negotiations between the conventions of a borrowed fictional form and of the indigenous art of story-telling, between history and myth," Sahgal presents an exposition of history as a much contested topic.

4.3.2 The Narrator as Storyteller

*Mistaken Identity* is situated in the early 20th century, at a historically critical juncture when pre-independence India was perilously close to conditions that had culminated in the 1857 Mutiny. It was a time when the socio-political climate of the nation was destabilized by civil disobedience campaigns, agrarian revolts and chains of ceaseless strikes. Bound to this history despite his overt aversion to politics is Bushan, the aimless and yet historically conscious narrator. Ironically, however, nowhere in the novel does he express any desire to be linked with the revolutionary moment heralding the decolonization of British India. Though it is the Meerut Conspiracy Case around which Bushan's narrative evolves, the novel makes no explicit reference to this event. It is noteworthy that the events leading to the conspiracy case and the imprisonment of many innocent civilians occurred during the early 20th century. They were precipitated by two forceful currents that defined the political, cultural and intellectual life of the Indian subcontinent: the widespread influence of Gandhism and the spread of Marxist socialism - after the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.

These were also times of accelerating urbanization and economic depression that led to unemployment problems on a massive scale with millions of marginalized peasants stranded with no apparent source of income: in the first half of 1920 alone there were some 200 strikes in India affecting over a million workers. As the social and economic problems augmented, many Indians found the Bolshevik Revolution and the ideals behind Lenin's rise to power a more attractive way of countering class struggle than Gandhi's


philosophy of non-violence and compassion. The growing unrest, rampant poverty and unemployment were major issues the Communist Party used as springboards to gain political power. However, before the party could put its plans into operation, the colonial government arrested thirty-one so-called "conspirators" who were transported to Meerut and detained on alleged charges of sedition. As Sahgal's narrative divulges, an ironic development with regard to the Meerut Conspiracy Case was that many of the people imprisoned did not know that they were "communists" as in fact they had identified themselves as "nationalists" and "trade unionists". This incident brought the much needed publicity for the Communist Party, and the conspirators were transformed into martyrs, defended later by leaders such as Nehru.

The following section outlines the diverse strategies Sahgal employs to construct her alternative reading of history that challenges notions of narrative singularity and creates space for heteroglossia, polyphonic voicings and multi-layered, palimpsestic revisionings. *Mistaken Identity* commences in the year 1929 when Bushan, a princely heir to a little state in Rajasthan returns home having spent an unsuccessful year studying in an American college. Depicted at the threshold of the narrative is the paranoia of British imperialists over the spread of Bolshevism, an apparent threat to the Raj, already faced with insurmountable problems. The split-layered story with its synchronously paralleled narrative threads evolves from Bushan's consciousness, and the significance of his presence is evidenced not only at the level of textual content but also at the level of narrative representation and structure. Bushan is thus presented both as a historian and an imaginative writer: he explains the past, on the one hand, by selectively identifying and uncovering the "stories" of his life and his nation, and on the other, by "filling in the gaps" and "inventing" events for the purpose of coherence and representation.

The narrative mode employed by Sahgal is a special type of interior monologue that presents the character's thoughts directly without the intervention of a summarizing and selecting narrator. This explains the subjective perspectives, the apparent contradictions and friction, the prejudices and the absences in the text. The narrative method also provides Sahgal with ample liberty to oscillate between the present and the past. The use of flashbacks dispenses with linear narration and helps to sustain a sense of fragmentation, dislocation and discontinuity, intrinsic to Sahgal's project of decentering hegemonic hermeneutics. This is further consolidated by the narrator's perpetual
scepticism that undermines not only authoritative versions of Western history but also the counter-discourses paralleled as alternatives to British imperialism, and other dominant narratives of the nation. It is noteworthy, for example, the manner in which the hapless trade-unionists belittle Gandhi, a towering symbol of the times:

One of the subjects they snorted about is Gandhi. The comrades make him sound like a comma in the middle of a sentence which would read a hell of a lot faster without it. If he hadn’t called off the last civil disobedience agitation just because it turned violent, his party would be in better shape today. [69]

Interestingly also, the novel’s engaging plot with its ironic twists can be attributed to the unique personality of Bushan who is projected as an "outsider", never really comfortable in any of the locations in which he finds himself, be it Vijaygarh, America or the prison cell. Bushan is thus presented as a loner, drifting aimlessly in a universe that is fundamentally inimical to the human condition, and detached from the tumultuous events of a striking moment in Indian history.

The history of colonial India is reconstructed through Bushan’s prison experiences when he is detained for three years as a result of a complicated trial procedure, and is separated from his princely realm for the first time in life. He is thrown into a mosquito-ridden, squalid mud-barrack on charges of conspiracy and discovers himself amidst the subaltern classes of colonial India: “I hadn’t a clue why I was here. I had led the sort of life where things happen to you because someone knows your father” (21). Ill-adapted to this surrounding, Bushan finds himself alienated and is initially somewhat perplexed by the fiery conversations that develop among the prison inmates on topical political events:

It beats me why these men spend their lives planning strategies to get rid of the sovereign power. With half a mind and a scrap of real resolve we’d be rid of it. If we all spat together the sovereign power would drown. But then what? The pundits and ulemas would throw each other lifebelts and come bouncing out of the spit to boss the show. [38]

The cell that brings him into contact with ordinary people (the only exception being Bushan himself), is at one level a microcosm representing the polyphonic political voices of Indians in the early 20th century: Bhaiji and the “twins” are staunch disciples of Gandhism; Iyer and the comrades are strongly inclined toward communism, though they profess to have never been involved in any secret mission to overthrow the colonial government; and Bushan is a nonentity in the world of revolutionary politics. At another level, the crowded space of the prison also symbolizes the notion of multiplicity reflected...
not only in the heterogeneous communities of India, but also in the "measureless" expanse of Indian history, composed of many "layers" of "Indian consciousness" (Sahgal, "Continuing" 45).

Despite their divided political allegiances, the one issue over which all prisoners unite is in their realization of the urgent need to evict the British and in their open condemnation of colonial rule. Thus in a telling court drama, Iyer upbraids the government and declares courageously: "We have never conspired .... Our aims are open" (163). Underlying the bantering in Bushan's wry observations is Sahgal's faith in the early nationalists, especially in men such as Gandhi, and in general, the subaltern classes.

The writer's lucid style and perceptions about historiography help to interleave skilfully moments such as the Gandhian salt marches and the hunger strikes of the conspiracy prisoners in Lahore jail with fictive details of Bushan's narrative in order to crystallize history into a literary representation and reinforce the view that historical knowledge, similar to imaginative literature, is a constructed subject: "Our newspaper says immense crowds cheered him on and thousands joined the march .... Overnight our jail is full of Salt March prisoners ..." (98).

This historical detail is particularly relevant to the developments in the fictional plot: for the first time, the multi-layered Indian community as represented in prison, assemble in unison against colonial aggression in India. Another significant aspect is Bushan's own responses that reveal his maturity in prison. Life offers him for the first time an opportunity to connect with the Indian masses, whose deep commitment to the nationalist struggle, often neglected in dominant discourses of Indian nationalism, is celebrated in the novel.

Sahgal's method of reconstructing and reinventing history can be related to Frederic Jameson's theory of "interpretive allegory" in which a written text can be analyzed in terms of "some deeper, underlying, and more 'fundamental' narrative, of a hidden master narrative." Allegory is an important device Sahgal uses to make her critique of British imperialism. Defining the practice of allegory in relation to Jameson's theory of the master code, Stephen Slemon asserts:

As a traditional practice, allegory has always privileged doctrine and metaphysical system at the expense of "otherness" - if allegory literally means "other

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speaking”, it has historically served as a way of representing, of speaking for, the “other”, especially in the enterprise of imperialism. In the postcolonial context, allegory as a “process of signification” is employed by the writer to reconstruct conventional notions of history by interpreting individual constructions of thought against the master narrative. Hence an allegorical reading necessitates a consciousness of history. However, this is neither merely to destroy nor to redeem history but to expose the past to imaginative revisionings. As Slemon elucidates: “This mode of representation foregrounds the fact that fiction, or writing, mediates history ... that history, like fiction, requires an act of reading before it can have meaning” (160). Thus it is through the reader’s self-conscious involvement that fixed notions are destabilized and exposed to the transformative powers of the imagination.

The revisioning in Sahgal’s text of the conspiracy case and other related events through Bushan’s consciousness illustrates how authoritative positions were abused or mishandled by white supremacists who were under the illusion that they were on a civilizing mission in the colonies. The authoritativeness of the British judge for instance manifests what Spivak describes as “epistemic violence” where a colonial officer “actually engage[s] in consolidating the self of Europe by obliging the native to cathect the space of the Other on his home ground. He is worlding their own world ....” The court scenes in particular evoke deep irony in their enactment of the injustice in the British legal system. We are informed by the detainees that British law has one set of regulations for European criminals and another for Indians. Thus at the beginning of Chapter 7, Sahgal draws attention to the violent resistance of the conspiracy prisoners in Lahore over the treatment they were forced to endure in jail and in court. The court drama in Mistaken Identity attains satiric proportions, at times veering towards outright denunciation, in its description of the magistrate, a symbol of the British legal system: “Can this be the Judge? .... He steps up to the dais frisky as a Christmas fairy, frothy as eggnog. He’s ready for peace on earth ... (170-171). Such satiric exposures, underscoring the bungling of imperial operations, are contrasted strikingly with the humorous and sometimes lightly ironic or witty episodes recounting Gandhian ethics that Sahgal (but not her narrator-protagonist) sees as being humane and revitalizing. In decentring imperialist narrativizations of history and foregrounding a vivid Indian ideology, Sahgal reverses the

position of the subaltern class and represents the officious magistrate as a distant Other. These expositions also underpin heteroglossic sites in the narrative where the conflict between antagonistic forces is most concentrated.

Crucial to the narrative undertakings is Bushan’s positioning in the novel: Bushan, like Saleem Sinai in Salman Rushdie’s seminal text, *Midnight’s Children*, is writing from within a system under authoritarian rule. His attempt to rewrite history is only one version of the many possible versions of Indian history. This multiplicity is reflected in Saleem Sinai’s narrative when he realizes the problem facing his nation is that there are six hundred and thirty million versions of India, and that he as narrator does have power to alter or reinvent history: "Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality ... [211, emphasis mine]. Significantly, as opposed to Saleem Sinai who perceives himself as a child of history enmeshed with the fate of his nation, Bushan does not take upon himself this colossal responsibility. He sees himself as an outsider, a dispassionate observer who by accident gets involved in the turbulent political occurrences of pre-independence India.

Simultaneously, because Bushan is the narrator, he is also in the privileged position of selectively constructing his/story. This fractures the conventional notions of "objectivity" supposedly evident in historical knowledge, and the project of unprejudiced hermeneutics is disrupted by subjective views and thoughts. As Terence Hawkes remarks: "every perceiver’s method of perceiving can be shown to contain an inherent bias which affects what is perceived to a significant degree" (cited in Lerner 335). Critically, it is this subjectivity that gives Bushan the choice of omitting details (until later he is compelled to reveal them in court) of his involvement in the “murder” of the luckless imbecile that leads to a minor riot in Vijaygarh. Similarly, it is the impulse to create based on limited information that propels Bushan to invent a narrative about the "fallen" women to which the mythicized Razia is drawn when she is expelled from Vijaygarh.

Concurrently, as Lerner’s insightful study informs us: "if perception is not wholly objective, it does not follow that it must be wholly subjective: that would be to ignore the more complex possibility that it results from an interaction between the external world and our method of perceiving" (335). Thus the critical distancing Bushan achieves in reflecting upon the fiery arguments between the Gandhi disciples and the communist colleagues is to a great extent influenced by his impartiality concerning the events of the moment. On the other hand, like Saleem Sinai’s narrative, this distancing tends to
fragment as he recaptures his personal memories. It is therefore ironic that in Bushan's short-lived role as the prison storyteller, he needs to be frequently reminded by his avid listeners "to stick to facts" (22).

Admittedly, both Mistaken Identity and Midnight's Children are historical fictions affected by "a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance", to use a pithy phrase of Rushdie. However Rushdie's novel is a metahistory, a more self-reflexive narrative, concerned with the intricacies of writing fictional truth while Bushan's project is less self-consciously constructing, triggered off by a series of fortuitous developments.

In assessing the narrative method of Mistaken Identity, it would help to focus briefly on the non-realistic techniques of Indian oral literature that have influenced the works of contemporary Indian writers such as Sahgal, Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor. According to Vinay Dharwadker, some of the unrealistic techniques in Indian writing after 1966 have been to a great extent a reaction against the realism of the 19th century European novel. This reaction which Dharwadker refers to as "anticolonial" and "nationalistic" has led to the appropriation of "non-European models of nonrealistic representation, ranging from the modes of fantasy in Sanskrit epic and episodic narrative and Arabic frame stories, to the mode of the marvelous in the Indian folktales and mythology."46

Some of the outstanding devices of oral literature that Sahgal employs in her fiction include the omission of sequential progression of events, the cyclical pattern of occurrences and the reliance on "mythic" time as opposed to historic time. All these are techniques witnessed amply in indigenous literary forms like the puranas and folklore. Acknowledging the Indian writer's indebtedness to ancient narrative forms, Rushdie exclaims: "It is really impossible to overstress the fact that the oral narrative is the most important literary form in India". Assessing this point further, he reckons: "An oral narrative does not go from the beginning to the middle to the end of the story. It goes in great swoops, it goes in spirals or in loops, it every so often reiterates something that happened earlier to remind you, and then takes you off again ...."47 This overt formlessness however is neither chaotic nor incoherent. It is a façade for a very effective

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method of communication where the storyteller employs innovative strategies to keep her audience enthralled. Similar to the indigenous storyteller Bushan too, in recalling his memories, threads together polyphonic stories that merge synchronously the personal, historical and mythical elements of the text.

Interwoven with Sahgal’s version of history is also the Hindu concept of illusion or maya, the cyclical pattern of cosmic occurrences and the significance of myth. In a thought-provoking analysis of the impact of myth on the Indian psyche, particularly in relation to the communal tensions in Ayodhya, Neeladri Bhattacharya remarks: "We cannot dismiss such myths. We cannot counterpoise history to myth as truth to falsehood. These are different modes of knowledge, varying ways of understanding the world, ordering one’s life and defining one’s action.”

Echoing the power of mythic truth, novels such as Mistaken Identity and Rich like Us attempt to apprehend the critical moments of Indian history in terms of mythic time, where the depthless past and the temporal present are merged into an unfathomable future. From this point of view, it is significant that Bushan’s birthplace is strategically situated near the sanctified city of Ayodhya: "My parents’ country was Vijaygarh, an ancient corner of the level oblong close to Ayodhya, birthplace of Vishnu’s divine incarnations, Rama and Krishna .... No ordinary track this ... Hinduism’s heartland .... The air we breathed was sanctified by miracles”.

Ayodhya also contains a second symbolic signification in Sahgal’s narrative as it is intricately linked with the issue of communal and religious violence, explored through the relationship of Bushan and Razia. Ayodhya thus becomes a symbol not only for the miraculous occurrences of Rama’s birthplace, but also for an India torn by communal and religious strife.

The poetic descriptions in the novel interleave present realities with the enigma of a "timeless" past, especially the "Hindu reckoning": "The past is so much with us ... that no time is ever entirely past" (Sahgal, “Schizophrenic” 20). In the context of mythic time, then, the British Raj loses its overpowering impact and dwindles into a mere speck in the seamless tapestry of India’s history. By eschewing fixed notions of history and by alluding to the palimpsestic nature of archival records, Sahgal contests the presumptions

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49 According to popular Hindu belief, Ayodhya is one of the most sacred Indian sites, linked with the divine history of Vishnu and his avatara, Prince Rama whose father, King Dasharatha, ruled over this ancient city in the Gangetic plain. Ayodhya, because of its sanctified origin, has been for centuries identified with the extraordinary, the mysterious and the miraculous.
of a monocentric Western system, and is in a position to present a "positive imaginative reconstruction of reality" and "building it into the structuring principle of the fictional work of art" (Slemon 159). In doing so, she demonstrates "the possibility of narrative, and indeed ... histories, which can continually free themselves from those biases" (Tiffin 178). Sahgal's India thus embraces a pluralistic identity that is fluid, transforming and susceptible to meanings in multitude. Curiously, this decentric approach is a reflection of the Yeatsian notion of things falling apart, also inherent in the "anarchic" tradition of postmodernism.

4.3.3 Myths of Womanhood: Configuring Women's History

The discourse on gender in Mistaken Identity is worked out through Bushan's relationship with his mother and Razia, a young, working class Muslim woman with whom he falls hopelessly in love. The Mother's predicament provides the writer the opportunity to develop one of the most complex roles assigned to women in the Hindu family structure. In analyzing the woman's position in an Indian context, the writer draws attention to the rigid and exacting demands that women such as the Mother have been compelled to encounter in distinctly masculinist societies such as the Rajput world. Interlocked with the Mother's situation and to a lesser degree with that of Razia are a number of issues facing contemporary Indian women. Though these problems are diverse, of particular relevance to the text are the subordinate status of women (especially in the case of young wives of high caste families), the segregation of women through the observance of purdah, the grim consequences of being childless and the practice of polygamy.

A significant aspect in a study of the women in Sahgal's text would be to consider the position of the Rajputs of Northern India since the primary characters, Bushan and the Mother, belong to this princely class and a large area of the women's problems are linked with this patrilineal community. Commonly known as thakurs (landlords), the Rajputs assume a vital position in the system of landownership that had been in existence in India for several centuries, and that was codified by the British in the 19th century. We are informed that Bushan's father is a talukdar or a landowner who under the British land revenue settlement was given special privileges, such as rent collecting authority that significantly re-empowered his position.

At the inception of the novel, when the ageing lawyer appointed by Bushan's father to defend his son's case arrives at the barrack, Sahgal presents a crucial dialogue...
that mirrors the sociocultural system and practices that were prevalent in India in the early 20th century:

He had made his name and fortune conducting costly court battles over succession certificates to titles and property ... [of] every talukdar .... Family feuds and land cases were his soul's delight. Suits where senior and junior ranees fought each other like demented rams with locked horns for equal shares in property .... He was a tottering encyclopaedia on litigation among the landed gentry. [14]

While on the surface the passage exudes humour, at a deeper level Sahgal refers to social hierarchies and tensions that were prevalent in British India at the time. The passage reflects upon pre-colonial feudalistic patterns that British land reforms of the 19th century perpetuated for the purpose of segregating communities under the "divide and rule policy", and enhancing profit. In a deeply satirical vein Sahgal alludes to the colonizer and the Indian loyalists of the British Raj some of whom stooped to the basest activities to acquire titles and amass their benefits (Attia Hosain's Sunlight on a Broken Column presents in detail the changing circumstances of India's landowning classes under the British Raj). In Mistaken Identity, Bushan's father himself resorts to a number of such activities, one being his decision to marry for a third time in order to "extend his influence in the district and make him [self] more eligible for rajahood" (33). In a brilliant analysis of the insecurity and loss of rights accrued by the peasantry under the British land settlements, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid explain how the codifying of customs of the "dominant land owning and other rural groups" by the colonial regime had a negative impact on the status of women as well:

This froze custom into law and gave a juridical sanction to certain patriarchal practices regarding marriage, succession and adoption. Further, high caste Hindu norms in these matters, codified piece-meal as statutory Hindu law, were often privileged over customary law to the disadvantage of all Hindu women whether rural or urban.50

The outstanding gender-related issues that impact upon the main concerns of the thesis, such as the segregation and seclusion of women and the impact of polygamy on women's selfhood, are explored by Sahgal primarily through the situation of the Mother in her enclosed world of Rajputana. Through Bushan's narrative we are informed that the

warrior caste of Rajputs constitutes a system whose masculinist practices contributed in very specific ways to circumscribe women's lives. The Rajputs, like those of the upper classes of North India to which Bushan's mother belongs, even today adhere to the custom of purdah. Another important tradition among the Rajputs has been the practice of hypergamy linked with the concept of "pride and purse": the pride of heritage pressurizes the father of the bride to marry her into a social group "with status at least equal to, preferably higher than, that of his own". Dowry, a custom which often becomes a form of extortion of money and other material wealth from the bride's parents (almost always placed in a compromising position), is the only way in which a father could secure this status for his daughter. The exorbitant and unreasonable demands of the dowry system have thus been a primary cause for the practice of female infanticide among the Rajputs.

Central to the Mother's tragic life in the zenana is the position of the Hindu woman, compelled to assume many different roles to fulfill her obligations to her male counterparts in a composite patriarchal system. Of particular relevance to Mistaken Identity (as it is to other texts such as Rabindranath Tagore's Home and the World and Ruth P. Jhabvala's Nature of Passion) is the role of the Hindu woman as wife and mother. In their extensive studies of Hindu womanhood, Sudhir Kakar and Maria Mies point out that at different stages of her life, a woman in traditional Hindu society is obliged to assume specific roles that, as Spivak asserts, drain her of proper identity. Sahgal demonstrates this "role playing" through the Mother's portrayal where we are given glimpses of her childhood when she, along with her twin sister, is betrothed at the age of five to Bushan's father, and later, more graphic details of her role as a young, vulnerable wife and disillusioned mother.

52 In Tagore's novel Bimala is torn between her extreme devotion to the unscrupulous, politically active Sandip in a revolutionary India, and her "sacred" duties to her husband, Nikhil. Jhabvala's early novels (For example, Nature of Passion) disclose how traditional views of womanhood are imperiled by the onslaught of modern values and Westernization. As Lalaji realizes in an assessment of the changing situation of Indian women: " ... a woman is a woman and her duties in life [are] very different from the duties of a man .... In foreign countries this natural this God-given order had been subverted .... " Ruth P. Jhabvala, Nature of Passion ([1956]; Middlesex: Penguin, 1987), 111-112.
Since the preference for sons over daughters is widely prevalent in patriarchal Hindu society even today and since "[i]nfant slaying was old sport" according to Bushan, it is inevitable that women such as the Mother should have grown up with a profound consciousness of their gender inequality and their often unquestioned obligations to their male counterparts. This precarious situation among orthodox Hindus is clarified further by Kakar: "The ideal of womanhood incorporated by Sita is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness .... These expectations ... an Indian girl incorporates gradually into her inner world" (55). Kakar and Mies both acknowledge that it is as a young wife in her husband’s home, surrounded by frequently hostile in-laws, that the Hindu woman has her most traumatic experiences. While daughterhood and wifehood are often devalued, according to these writers it is as a mother she experiences an improvement in her social status. For the Indian woman, then, motherhood reverses her position and salvages her from insecurity, oppression, fear, and significantly, the shame and denigration associated with being childless.

The procreation of descendants (especially male), therefore, is one of the most crucial obligations of a Hindu couple so that we discover Bushan’s parents, the Mother in particular, making epic expeditions to sacred places throughout the subcontinent. In her delineation of this perennial problem facing Hindu women, Sahgal places the Mother in an almost timeless zone where she is seen traversing across legendary expanses of territory, worshipping every known deity in the pantheon in the hope of a son (23).

The Aryan Hindu patriarchy views womanhood in terms of the woman’s ability to conceive and procreate baby boys. According to the code of Manu, a woman who is unable to produce a male heir, could give her husband a valid reason for taking another wife in the 11th year of their marriage.55 These threatening circumstances drive the Mother to take almost superhuman measures to produce a male heir, the only avenue through which she could redeem herself from “dishonour” and vilification. As Sahgal demonstrates perceptively, pregnancy and imminent motherhood alone do not rescue her from the misery she faces as a young wife. Ironic though it may seem it is the son, a

54 In The Endangered Sex Miller indicates that among the reasons why Rajput families have preferred sons over daughters are the question of inheritance (together with the transmission of family name and property), and the indispensable practice of ancestral (sraddha) rites for the father after his death that can only be executed by a son (163).
55 Max Mueller cited in Mies, Indian Women and Patriarchy, 42.
symbol of the patriarchy, who becomes the redeeming factor, "the major medium of self-expression" for the mother.  

While it is true that the birth of a son could dramatically change the status of a mother, Sahgal does not set out to idealize the role of motherhood. As Bushan's narrative reveals, the ranee's joy in having achieved the state of motherhood is only short-lived, overshadowed by other disconcerting developments, especially in her relationship with her husband. Belonging to a system that practises polygamy, the Mother is eventually coerced into the subordinate position of senior ranee and circumscribed further by the rajah's callous dismissal of her, with the arrival of the younger ranees. It is to this precarious position of Indian womanhood that Spivak alludes in a seminal essay that thought-provokingly examines woman as subaltern:

My point is, of course, that ... the figure of the woman, moving from clan to clan, and family to family as daughter/sister and wife/mother, syntaxes patriarchal continuity even as she is herself drained of proper identity. In this particular area, the continuity of community or history, for subaltern and historian alike, is produced on (I intend the copulative metaphor-philosophically and sexually) the dissimulation of her discontinuity, on the repeated emptying of her meaning as instrument. ["Subaltern" 220]

At the outset of Mistaken Identity we are informed that Bushan's unorthodox attitudes that contradict the chivalric Rajput code and its inherent notions of ideal manliness, have distanced him from an ambitious father who had little time for his wife and son. The one outstanding, ironic reference to Bushan's Rajput valour occurs when Bushan hesitantly divulges in the latter stages of the novel, his "worthless" mission in having killed the bazaar imbecile in a passionate fit of jealousy: "I had driven into his flesh with inspired accuracy or, if there is such a thing, hereditary aim, until it found its mark, and then cleanly withdrawn it [emphasis mine]" (169). The omission of detail pertaining to his personal history (until the reference to the knife is made in court) could be due primarily to his general aversion to violence and to which he eventually succumbs in a moment of irrationality. It is then Bushan's non-conformist and sensitive approach to life, as opposed to the values of his Rajput heritage, that contribute largely to the affection that grows between Mother and son.

The narrator's susceptibility to his mother's predicament makes him respond with deep feeling to the harrowing experiences of her life. Restoring specific moments of his past, Bushan recalls the Mother's repressed life in the zenana in the context of the Rajput world. We are thus introduced to a hierarchical social system that sustained barriers and divisions not only between Hindus and Muslims, but also between the landed class and the peasants as well as between men and women generally: "Until I was seven I lived in Mother's apartment in the zenana. High walls blocked it off ..., and every house all over the estate, Hindu or Muslim, mud or marble, was subdivided like it into male and female" (25).

Sahgal's reference to the ranee's tragic predicament as a child-bride is linked intimately with the patriarchal ideals of the traditional Rajput world. To conservative Hindu parents to give a daughter in marriage at the "proper" age (traditionally between the ages of twelve and eighteen) has been a crucial social obligation (Kakar 60). Under these circumstances, it is with profound irony that Bushan questions the motives behind the liberal attitude of his father, an orthodox Rajput, to the Age of Consent Bill. Interlocked with these issues are references to the hypergamous marriage system in North India, a contributing factor to the brutal practice of female infanticide. The disposal or neglect of girl children has been so rampant in Rajputana that the death of the Mother's twin remains a mystery to Bushan: "Then one of them had died. Which one, when, of what, the chronicle didn't say. Whoever wrote it, skipped the details" (64). Elsewhere in the text Bushan questions the depraved acts of a system where the birth of some children is inexorably bound with the death of others, where the survival of sons feeds on the demise of daughters (123). Indirectly, in dealing with hypergamy Sahgal also draws attention to the practice of dowry in India. Her discussion of the practices of hypergamy and dowry within a patrilineal and patrilocal system foregrounds the Indian woman's strategic position as a "symbolic object of exchange" for the reinforcement of such notions as class/caste solidarity, consolidation of power structures based on gender identities/roles and territorial and other claims (Spivak, "Subaltern" 217).

Linked with the Mother's position is the subject of purdah and spatial segregation, introduced in the text by symbols such as high walls, carriage curtains, shrouds and burqas. Though not stated explicitly, it is through the Mother's life style that we are first given an impression of the practice of purdah in the patrilineal Rajput community. The ideology of this martial race insists on the protection and the guarding of women at all times, apparently for fear of infidelity. For the dominant Rajputs, sex segregation has
also been an important way of life by which they could exercise authority over women. Under the circumstances, it is significant that the Mother finds herself in an oppressed environment where her only companions (apart from Bushan) are her maid servants, the "captive geese who have been fed and tranquilized into docility".

This brings us next to a complex view of Hindu womanhood which, contrary to common belief, is not merely one of infinite passivity and patience. Ideologies of womanhood like most other ideologies are determined by social imperatives that often lead to reductive analyses about women as a homogenizing group. Kumkum Sangari elaborates this eloquently as follows:

female-ness is not an essential quality. It is constantly made, and redistributed; one has to be able to see the formation of female-ness in each and every form at a given moment or in later interpretations, and see what it is composed of, what its social correlates are, what its ideological potentials are, what its freedoms may be.  

What is critical to observe here, as Rajeswari S. Rajan emphasizes, is "the political process by which such representation becomes naturalized and ultimately coercive in structuring women’s self-representation" (129). Ideologies of womanhood can thus be affected by a range of social imperatives that include, among others, patriarchal practices, cultural and religious mores, colonialism, capitalism and effects of modernization/globalization.

As Anita Desai observes there exists in India around the ideology of womanhood "a huge body of mythology". One aspect of this mythology defines womanhood in terms of the principle of duality, often unequivocally incorporated into the traditional life of women to illustrate what is acceptable by patriarchal standards. As the "ideal" woman she is symbolized by mythico-religious figures such as Sita, the chaste and self-sacrificing wife of Rama, the unswervingly devoted Savitri and austere Parvati. In contrast, goddesses Durga and Kali epitomize the more active spirit and explosive potentials such as assertiveness and aggression, erupting often from suppressed emotions. Redefining patriarchal interpretations of myths, feminist critic, Emily Kearns, suggests that because Hindu goddesses (like Kali, Durga and Parvati) are "differing expressions of the same reality", the qualities associated with them are not monoliths but are often ambivalent,

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contradictory and even interchangeable. Thus, for example, even though Kali is *normally* portrayed in a negative light, as being fierce and aggressive, she has the capacity to be gentle and compassionate.\(^9\) In both instances what is unambiguous is that she is *in control* and she *can* be "an instrument of social change".\(^6\) Despite this syncretist and potentially "progressive" tendency, Hindu goddesses have continued to be associated with certain normative characteristics, and while Sita and Parvati even today epitomize "ideal" womanhood, neither Durga nor Kali is considered to personify qualities of the good wife.

It is imperative to emphasize that because men have been for a long time the disseminators of myths and ideologies in dominantly patriarchal cultures, *they* have been responsible for creating such essentialist notions of womanhood that have suppressed women's potentialities and deprived them of agential participation. Almost always these social constructs have placed women in positions of Otherness through the perpetuation of stereotypical roles like the passive wife, selfless mother and compliant daughter-in-law. From this point of view, when women aspire towards the dominant standards imposed by the Sita myth, for example, they are invariably conforming to phallocentric ideals that transform such mythic figures into symbols of model women. Deviations of any sort from what is traditionally accepted (Bimala's renunciation of domestic duties or rejection of devotion to her husband in Tagore's fiction, or Kanta's "strange" *modern* ways that dissuade her from submitting to the whims and conventions of conservative society in Jhabvala's *The Nature of Passion*) would therefore be considered transgressions, defying patriarchal ideals of womanhood.

In orthodox Hindu societies such as the Rajput world, such mythico-religious ideology has assisted in reinforcing patriarchal norms. Women are thus encouraged to believe that they could increase their *sakti* (energy/power) and attain divine blessings by being devoted to their spouses, practising abstinence and observing ascetic activity.\(^6\) This aspect of womanhood is of particular relevance to the understanding of the Mother in

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\(^6\) Similarly, as opposed to the Valmiki *Ramayana*, in the Shakta version of Rama's story, Sita as incarnation of the Shakta concept of Devi does not hesitate to kill the many-headed Ravana as the all-powerful goddess. See Romila Thapar, "A Historical Perspective of the Story of Rama," in *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal, 141-163.

\(^6\) According to Hindu cosmology *sakti*, essentially a female principle, is part of every individual at birth and can be increased or reduced by the kind of life a person leads. See Susan Wadley, "Women and the Hindu Tradition," in *Women in Indian Society*, ed. Rehana Ghadially, 25.
Mistaken Identity for it is this ideal image that she strives to attain in her early role as a young wife.

Contrasted with her fettered self in other scenes are the pujas she performs for Shiva. As sakti in control of her sexuality during the Shiva puja, Bushan’s mother is “active” (in patriarchal terms the “active” self can also be interpreted as being potentially “destructive”). Her carnivalesque participation in these religious rituals is a symbolic expression of her devotion, defiance as well as repressed sexuality, “the greenish light of unfulfilled desire”: “... she danced herself into a frenzy ... at the Shiva puja ... like a drunk, a woman possessed, hair flying, sari slipping, a woman in flames” (27).

In a Bakhtian reading, the above scene can be dialogically linked with the life in the bazaar where the beggars’ Rabelaisian conviviality manifests itself at night to the rhythms of Krishna’s Divine Orchestra.62 Thus Sahgal reveals the raptures and frustrations of those in the margins of society, conceived to be a part of the Potter’s frolic: “The royally maimed and mutilated among them led the dance .... They went into misshapen ecstasies, fell on each other in random copulation as bazaar dogs did...” (28). The Mother’s transformed personality is a striking manifestation of the nuances embedded in the notion of Hindu womanhood: she has the potential to be benevolent and fertile, a symbol of “ideal” Vedic womanhood; she could also be “aggressive” like Kali, the blood-thirsty and independently-minded manifestation of the revered Mother Goddess, one of Hinduism’s supreme deities. Thus her superhuman struggles attain mythic proportions as she is connected with the vast scale of the subcontinent: “I see Mother on her journey crossing endless rivers that flow down valleys to the sea ...” (156).

Given this potential to be “active”, the Mother ultimately defies traditions and abandons her husband for another man, despite her knowledge that her decision to liberate herself from the stifling conditions of her world would never be forgiven by a community that would not accept the scandalous liaison between “an illiterate ranee and her communist lover”. The fact that she sheds her prescribed role as a true pativrata, rejects the system to which she belongs and accepts a man who is neither of her caste nor religion, are all conditions that contribute to the deconstruction and redefinition of

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62 See Sue Vice, Introducing Bakhtin (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 149-199, for an in-depth study of the relation between the carnival’s pageantry, the “language of artistic images” and the concretely sensual, or conversely, the grotesque. See also the chapter, "Carnival Ambivalence," in The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov, ed. Pam Morris (London & New York: Edward Arnold, 1994), 194-244.
orthodox Hindu feminine identity. In renouncing the role of the virtuous wife and thereby consciously transgressing Brahminical laws, the Mother also emancipates herself from the patriarchal obligations of her world. The scene can also be interpreted as a Rabelaisian manifestation of victory over oppressive circumstances threatening human life. Through this deconstruction Sahgal highlights that positive transgressive acts are imperative for women's happiness and self-preservation in society. Suppressed for a greater part of her life, this defiance is her way of speaking for herself and making a striking entry into a phallocentric history. 63

Given the conditions of the Rajput world where women are compelled to advocate traditions such as purdah and arranged marriages, the Mother's decision to embrace a man whom she hardly knows appears romantic and unrealistic. It can be viewed in terms of what Dharwadker calls "the strategies of antirealistic representation". To cite Bushan: "I can't say any of it surprises me .... As I said, this is the Ganges heartland where we breathe the air of miracles" (194). The Mother's apparently happier destiny at the end of the prose-fiction can be translated as a mythic manifestation of the victory of the human spirit over forces inimical to self-extension. This antirealist strain extends to Bushan's life as well when he falls in love again, this time with Yusuf's sprightly daughter (coincidentally, like Razia she is also a Muslim), as he gazes at Vijaygarh from the bazaar balcony with his characteristic detachment, and observes the transformation of his birthplace into a politically active state. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that Sahgal's use of romance and melodrama in a politically conscious novel also reflects elements of the popular themes of Bombay cinema. 64

In comparison with the fascinating study of the Mother, Sahgal's portrayal of Razia appears less convincing even though her relationship with Bushan is a realistic rendition of existing cross-cultural unions in a multifaceted India. Similar to the Mother, she is also described as belonging to the fringes of society. However, she emerges from the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. The daughter of an impoverished school master, she lives in a decrepit Muslim neighbourhood, said to be in constant dispute with the Hindus of Vijaygarh. Against this backdrop of intense religious disharmony, Sahgal develops the

64 For example, S. Sriram's film Bombay (1994/1995), based on the ethnoreligious riots of 1992-1993, is strongly reminiscent of the sub-text of Bushan and Razia, and conveys unambiguously the urgent need for cultural plurality in multi-cultural India.

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young lovers’ relationship and, ironically, it is in this very landscape that their love for each other is discovered, resulting in religious riots and their eventual separation.

Sahgal’s objective in developing this subtext is to highlight existing communal tensions in India and express, through Bushan, the urgent need for ethno-religious harmony. Her staunch views on the need for religious harmony are conveyed through the innocuous utterances of Bushan that create an uproar at a pro-Khilafat assembly: “In the mosque of my creation, Om flowed calm as a horizon along the muezzin’s call to prayer” (118-119). A similar pattern of thought is reinforced elsewhere by the writer who proclaims: “The kind of history that India has gone through, waves of invasion, conquest and occupation, and through that the criss-crossing of races, the cross-fertilisation of ideas, religions, languages - there is no such thing as a pure strain there” (“Continuing” 46). Thus we find Bushan falling in love with Razia because of her face, which is “the future of communal harmony”.

While acknowledging that Sahgal is able to convey her innate political beliefs for a united India through the character of the quixotic Bushan, the depiction of Razia is more problematic, partly due to the story-line and the narrative technique employed by the writer. Unlike the Mother, Razia is not given an opportunity to express herself. What is troubling about her portrayal is that, as opposed to the Mother who finds herself circumscribed in a philosophy of self-denial, Razia does not give us the impression that she is victimized. And yet, this is contrary to what the narrator (and perhaps even the writer?) want(s) the reader to believe. Whenever the issue of purdah is mentioned, we are only given Bushan’s attitude to the veil that is (justifiably) conditioned by what he has witnessed in his mother’s life. Although for Bushan the purdah (as a dress code) appears a deathly shroud, for Razia the observance of purdah does not seem to be a problem as it neither inhibits her thoughts nor curtails her actions. Thus we find Bushan telling himself: “This girl was never sad and never still. She flitted about like truant light” (50), which implies that wearing the burqa does not necessarily delimit action or smother the freedom of mind and spirit - as so many veiled women show. Such contradictions could be explained in terms of Bushan’s position as a subjective narrator who is influenced by his individual experiences in life and prejudicial views and biases on particular issues. Nevertheless, in not having provided an alternative means of imparting information about Razia’s life (after all problems of purdah and sex segregation are serious concerns of the novel), this aspect of the narrative remains inadequately developed.
Given the rigid and unfair standards of his world, Bushan imagines and assumes Razia to have succumbed to the pressures of society, accepted the precarious identity of a "fallen woman" and renounced her sense of Self. Contrary to his apprehensions, however, he is informed that Razia has had the "incredible kismet" of meeting a man (coincidentally the Turkish diplomat whom Bushan encounters at the outset) who, impressed by her fiery spirit and courage in revealing her face, decided to marry her.65 This narrative sequence is again unconvincing, leaving several questions unanswered. Issues such as the general predicament of the so-called "fallen women", who under normal circumstances do not have the "luck" of meeting liberal and beneficent men, and the complex consequences facing women who renounce the custom of purdah (note, for example, the situation of women in Algeria discussed earlier in the thesis, or the fate encountered by unveiled women in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime) in an orthodox Indian society are only referred to superficially.66 While appreciating the antirealism in these episodes, Razia’s fortune in having found the seemingly ideal partner appears (especially in the context of current global happenings) a much too simplistic explanation.

Despite these elements of fantasy, the fiction on the whole is sensitively depicted, and the reader may translate the end as an attempt by the writer to conclude the text on a lighter note of hope, reflecting the narrator’s personality and disposition. Concurrently Mistaken Identity exemplifies some of the non-radical thoughts on womanhood Sahgal delineates in “My Continuing Character is India”: though the ranee’s action and perhaps even Razia’s would be considered anomalous by orthodox Indian standards of the early 20th century, the women of Sahgal’s novels usually attempt to surmount impediments not in "the radical sort of way recognized as struggle in the West". She emphasizes their inner strength and attempts to resolve problems without really abandoning conventions or the more positive aspects of tradition: Sahgal recognizes this as an alternative to the

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65 By making the diplomat Turkish, Sahgal underscores the transitions and reforms that shaped Turkey after the abolition of the Caliphate. In an effort to establish a modern nation-state, Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey, set up a secular democratic government in 1923. As Bushan’s narrative reveals, it was also during Atatürk’s regime that reforms were launched to give Turkish women equal rights and opportunities. Conversely, what Bushan omits to tell the reader is that there were many Turkish Muslims who felt that the radically Westernizing reforms (such as banning the Arabic script, denouncing traditional clothing like the fez) were systematically destroying the connection Turkish people had with their illustrious past.

66 These developments can be contrasted with the harassment and widespread discrimination facing veiled (Muslim) women in nations such as the United States, France, Italy and Australia in the post 9/11 global scenario.
Western approach where women's issues are confronted with more blazing vocality and action.

4.4.1 Hegemonic National Narratives/Peripheral Women's Histories

*Rich Like Us* is set in the space of post-Independence India, between June 1975 and March 1977, when Indians were faced with daunting new problems under the oppressive conditions of the Emergency during Indira Gandhi's regime. Though not mentioned by name in the novel, Indira is symbolically represented as a female subject-in-power, alluded to by such names as Supremo, Mother Tsar and Madam. In an ironic reversal of events, characteristics such as political aggression, authoritarian forms of rule and general corruption, normally associated with *male* leadership, are attributed in the text to the regime of an influential woman leader, and illustrated fundamentally through the disquieting developments of the Emergency.67

As disclosed in *Rich Like Us*, there is scarcely any evidence in Indira Gandhi's style of government of the traditionally upheld "feminine" Indian values, most of which encourage women to take on pacifist roles. Instead, we witness in her leadership attributes and attitudes symbolizing orthodox "masculine" values that reflect the ambivalent, patriarchal, mythico-religious ideology on womanhood discussed earlier. What the reader learns from the novel is that although Indira, a woman, assumed a leadership position in a male-dominated Indian government, her arbitrary policies and decisions hardly helped to raise the status of Indian women. The damage caused to women during the Emergency is captured vividly through Sahgal's portrayal of her protagonist Sonali, a senior officer in the Indian Civil Service (ICS).68

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67 In a thought provoking study Rajan shows how, as a woman leader, Indira sought to identify herself with her nation as "India is Indira and Indira is India" (Analogously, in Tagore’s *Home and the World*, Bimala, by committing herself to the *Swadeshi* movement, sees herself metamorphosed into goddess/Bengal/India: "In this great day the men of the country should realize its goddess in its womanhood ..." [32-33]). Referring to Nandy's explanation of the Indian woman leader in terms of an "Indian Consciousness", syncretizing male and female attributes, she problematizes the duality inherent in the Indian notion of female leadership: that is, the private self which is almost always gendered female and the public figure "scrupulously represented in non-sexist 'neutral' terms". It is partly this mystification of women's roles that has spurred writers such as Sahgal and Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* to address Indira in ironic abstract terms as Madam/Supremo and Sovereign/Widow.

68 Rouaq Jahan, for instance, queries as to why women leaders like Indira Gandhi refrained from using the subject of women's liberation "as a major plank of their political programme". She suggests that it could have been politically naive to have raised "an issue that would challenge deep-seated religious, cultural values which could [have] backfire[d] and undermine[d] even their own political status." See Rouaq Jahan, "Women in South Asian Politics," *Third World Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1987): 855-856.
Reviewing this aspect where women leaders emulate their male counterparts, especially in the postcolonial situation, feminist anthropologist Rhoda Reddock perceives astutely that

[m]any women achieve positions of leadership but by then have so imbibed the male-oriented values of the organization that little difference is visible between their approaches and those of men .... They can be even more oppressive than the men to whom 'power' is not such a novel experience. [Cited in Rajan 108]

Tracing feminist opposition to such individualism, Rajan explains that this internalizing of male values has been a necessary prerequisite for women to achieve successful leadership positions in inherently patriarchal systems (105). She also observes that although such individualism has not been receptive to the problems of women, it has saved some of them from "embracing a form of abjectness in reaction to dominance".

Even though Indira was elected democratically as India's Prime Minister in 1966 with the support of the old guard of the Congress Party, she soon became unpopular. Outstanding reasons that contributed to a fracture within the Congress included her style of government that pre-empted dissent from her cabinet and her dictatorial political stance that later became a threat to senior party members. Further, as Sahgal illustrates in her narrative, blatant corruption in government, sharp disparities between the affluent and the poor, the spread of communalism and, critically, the growing "unofficial" power of her younger son culminated in widespread national disenchantment with her style of leadership. In June 1975, she arbitrarily imposed a state of emergency in India as a means of suppressing political opposition. This led to the infamous two-year "dictatorship" that suspended civil liberties, prohibited dissension from political parties and restricted the freedom of the press. It is this period of the Emergency that Sahgal reconfigures in Rich Like Us.

However, in Rich Like Us the writer is not only exposing and critiquing the deep cracks in the edifice of democracy that symbolizes, in Frantz Fanon's terminology, "the process of retrogression", so prejudicial to national progress and unity.69 She also demonstrates how the creation of a repressive national identity and policies pertaining to the nation's economy, such as "crony capitalism", succeeded in victimizing the less

privileged and relegating them to the peripheries of a larger neocolonialist agenda.\textsuperscript{70} At another level, the novel interlocks the discourse of postcolonial Indian politics with the writer's criticism of the exploitative practices of an orthodox, masculinist system that continues to thwart the advancement and jeopardize the futures of contemporary Indian women.

In an essay dealing with theories of power and subjectivity, Elizabeth Grosz points out that a "feminist" consciousness "function[s] in two directions if it is to effectively challenge patriarchal knowledges."\textsuperscript{71} The first concerns a "reactive" project where the writer/ritic contests "prevailing social, political, and theoretical relations". Linked with this is a second objective, defined by Grosz as a "constructive" project, of exploring alternatives which could replace existing systems, or create space for new possibilities for women. One way in which a writer carries out this constructive project is to decentre or deconstruct orthodox patriarchal assumptions that have always in the past had the privileged vantage-point. By doing so, the writer could effectively counter prevailing phallocentric ideologies, cut through, as Meena Alexander suggests, "that subtle and pernicious fabric" sanctioned by dominant masculinist agendas, and bring women into more central positions of disquisition.\textsuperscript{72}

Applying such a theoretical framework to Rich Like Us, we could say that Sahgal is involved in a "reactive" project where there is "active critical engagement" with existing systems and values. At the same time it is noteworthy that because the fiction is situated within the sharply specific space of an authoritarian regime, it is more concerned with exploring the dynamics of struggle within the ideological, rather than with recovering alternatives to make a radical feminist assertion. Characteristically, in Rich Like Us, this

\textsuperscript{70} The most urgent problems confronting Indira on being elected Prime Minister were the recognition of the need to abolish poverty and reduce economic inequality and unemployment. However, as Wolpert explains:

India's most difficult and age-old problem was not to be solved in a year or two or even ten .... The very government officials empowered to enforce the "tough" new laws were those same landed interests who would suffer most from strict enforcement. Similarly, harsh taxes on industrial profits and urban income or wealth continued to be unscrupulously evaded by leading urban backers of the Congress Party. Nor would nepotism, one of India's oldest traditions, be eliminated any more swiftly than poverty. \[394\]

Indian capitalists, therefore, felt no threat to their businesses from Indira's Raj, "a uniquely Indian syncretism of socialism and capitalism, of state-supported free enterprise."


struggle is not restricted to the women's world as the writer's preoccupation with the situation of women is "inextricably bound" with the fate of the nation. Concurrently, while Sahgal apprehends the world of power and captures its complex nuances, she does not take it upon herself to identify or offer counter discourses that could function as viable strategies of resistance. Rather, she seems to imply that specific moments like the Emergency with its oppressive authoritarian ideals cannot be dislodged overnight to restore the more positive forces of the land and its people that made the dream of liberation a reality. As the novel reveals, despite acts of resistance, the machinations of the power elite continue to thrive, overshadowing and determining the destinies of those in the margins of society.

4.4.2 The Indian Emergency: A Pitfall of National Consciousness?
The struggle for justice and the ideals of democracy during the Emergency are examined in the fiction through Sonali, Rose, the amiable Cockney memsahib, and others on the peripheries of their world, such as the handless and crippled beggar and the altruistic Kishori Lal, mistakenly identified and imprisoned for being a Hindu extremist, conspiring to overthrow the government. Sahgal unravels the personal histories of Sonali and Rose by opening the novel with a scene in the affluent residence of the now incapacitated Ram. Dev, Ram's son (and Rose's stepson) is negotiating a dubious deal with a foreign representative of market capitalism for the establishment of a "fizzy drink" factory. The only voice of dissent to this apparently questionable business venture is that of Rose whose innocuous utterances in a state of inebriation and robust honesty cut through the cant and hypocrisies of power wielders, posing a vital threat to Dev's insidious future undertakings. These events lead to the developments in Chapter 2 when the third person narrative voice shifts to the first, focusing on Sonali's personal history, her growing consciousness of the ominous developments pertaining to the Emergency and the threat she poses to those high officials in government representing authority and power.

Rich Like Us represents Sonali as the "new woman", a product of postcolonial times. She is portrayed as a Western-educated, middle-class career woman, unmarried and economically independent. Sonali's personality exudes both a liberated outlook as well as a distinct "Indian" identity: "I couldn't understand why we had to keep cutting and pasting Western concepts together ... as if Europe were the centre of the universe" (113). This "Indianness", to cite Rajan, is "the sense of possessing a pan-Indian identity that escapes regional, communal, or linguistic specificities, but does not thereby become
'westernized’” (130). Sonali’s partiality towards a pan-Indian consciousness is apparent in her relationship with her parents as well who constantly clash over their regional specificities. Predisposed to her father’s Southern values and critical of her mother’s narrow regional allegiances, it is therefore with a certain degree of trepidation that Sonali convinces her father of her desire to be delivered from “suitable boys” and marriage in order to pursue studies abroad.

As we discover, Sonali’s Indian identity is also reflected in the respect she has for Gandhian values which enables her in later life to make the more acceptable decisions, based on her ability to distinguish between “good” and “evil”, and to follow a course of action guided by the precepts of non-violence and compassion. Conversely, Kachru, her partner during her studies in Oxford, though quick to deride Gandhi as “God’s gift to the capitalists if ever there was one” (113), is ironically unable to adhere to his Marxist education after his return to India. Enticed by the prospects of emergent capitalist enterprises in an outwardly socialist India, and exposed to the new opportunities under the Emergency, he plunges himself into “the thinly disguised masquerade” of the new regime. Contrasted with Kachru’s career progress during the Emergency is Sonali’s predicament in the ICS. Unaware that senior officials in her ministry are involved in the Happyola affair, Sonali dismisses the representative who arrives to finalize the deal, considering his proposal unimportant for the present economic needs of her nation. As Sonali envisions later, because of the new liberal economic policies that have entrenched themselves in the Third World, “dependent” nations such as India have invariably renewed ties with centres of power in the West, and made way for the revival of hegemonic practices in the new empire of global economy.

Shaken for the first time by the inequities of a system that demotes her for obstructing corrupt bureaucratic procedures, she gradually comes to grips with the overwhelming realities of the time. Despite an innate sense of complicity, she now acknowledges unhesitatingly that the negative forces endangering her life have always been there, even though she has been oblivious to them. Her current predicament also awakens her to a consciousness of other traumatizing images from the peripheries of the nation: burning brides, victims of a pernicious dowry system; suffering peasants, murdered for demanding their share of the harvest; and agitating masses striving to preserve a crumbling democracy, the benefits of which would be reaped by the complacent affluent classes of society. In critiquing the apathy of those in the “steel frame” of the ICS, Sonali also censures her privileged and “enlightened” middle-class
kinsmen: "We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for family rule. And we were involved in a conspiracy of silence ..." (29). As she apprehends, the only response of resistance arises from the teeming bazaars of the old city, the home of thousands of ordinary civilians.

In reviewing the Emergency, Sonali focuses on other insidious activities such as the programmes of mass sterilization and the demolition of urban slums that dispersed and dislocated multitudes of rioting masses. Deeply critical of the "political manoeuvres and surprises" during the Indira Gandhi regime, Sahgal expressed her disapproval through her journalism as well, hoping that this would in some way awaken the dormant consciousness of the middle-class to the realities of the time. In "The Vanished Art of Government", an article that appeared in October 1974, she proclaims derisively that those who fail to govern must also resort to theatre, and "where there is no bread, circuses must suffice". 73

This aspect of theatricality is exemplified in the novel through the parodying of the odious vasectomy programmes, drafted ambitiously to counter population explosion and poverty in India. The Emergency "circus" is illustrated vividly in the satirical exposition of the "New Entrepreneur wives" gathering. While drawing attention to the severely stratified social hierarchies, the episode highlights the predicament of the subordinate classes who were treated as chattels and compelled to submit to the dictates of a brutally callous local elite. This scene also demonstrates the subversive power of the comic to accentuate the obtuseness and lack of vision of new leaders who have attempted to redefine nationalism and thereby reintroduced neo-imperialism to the postcolonial epoch.

The incongruous policies proposed by the nationalist bourgeoisie draw attention to their failure to speak for a large section of Indians. The type of nationalism the Emergency conceives, therefore, privileges only a small minority of people who because of their access to wealth, power, a Western education and other resources, feel they could, under the guise of a spurious national consciousness, blatantly exercise power over the less privileged. What the above illustration succeeds in exposing is the re-emergence of hegemonic power structures in the postcolonial state. Diverging slightly from old forms of colonialism, the internal dynamics of power relations between the colonizer and the indigenous class are replaced in the neocolonial state by those between the official nationalist bourgeoisie and the poorer classes, and between the First World and Third World. As a result, the highly politicized slogan for "social transformation" within a

73 Jasbir Jain, Noyantara Sahgal (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1978), 129.
strictly nationalist framework never really transpires under the authoritarian regime of the Emergency.

As the atrocities escalate, history is revisioned through Sonali’s consciousness and other episodes of flashback to reflect alternative forms of nationalism, symbolized by the ideologies of Gandhi, and in particular, his protégé Nehru (father of Indira Gandhi/maternal uncle of Sahgal) who strove to bridge a nationalism of the people and an internationalism based on Western science, technology and economic progress. Interlocked with present happenings, such journeys into the past, both at a national and personal level, refuse to be "silenced or ignored", and provide “a take-off point for a questioning at many levels”.74

4.4.3 Authoritarian Regimes, Oppressive Ideologies and the Struggles and Survival of Women
To a discussion of gender in Rich Like Us, it would be of particular relevance to examine the extent to which women’s marginal positions were redressed, almost thirty years after Indian independence. Indeed there have been positive changes, and this is reflected in the circumstances encountered by some of the women characters in Sahgal’s post-independence novels that include The Day in Shadow, A Situation in New Delhi and Rich Like Us.75 Though the women of these fictional works represent only a minority of Indians who belong to the elite class, they are, as opposed to women like the illiterate ranee of Mistaken Identity, educated and independent, with some like Devi (A Situation in New Delhi) and Sonali holding high ranks in the state bureaucracy. Interestingly, Sahgal’s protagonists no longer wholly represent the Hindu patriarchal ideals of pativrata, emerging from circumstances such as broken marriages, widowhood or unmarried status: Simrit (The Day in Shadow), a writer and journalist, is a single parent burdened with a crippling financial settlement; Devi, a minister in the Indian government, is a widow, and in a relationship with an English writer; while Sonali, a senior government official, transgressing the conventional expectations of Indian womanhood, is happily unmarried.

While recognizing that the progress of these contemporary middle-class Indian women has “resulted in gains for women through better laws and increased opportunities,” it is vital to note that the basic indices pertaining to women’s status such

as literacy, wealth, employment and physical safety have not improved significantly (Rajan 105). Thus we find Sonali, Rose, Mona (Ram’s first wife) and Nishi (Dev’s wife) still caught up to different degrees in the stifling conditions of their patriarchal world, even though the specific domain of power now rests in the hands of politicians and unscrupulous capitalists.

Focusing briefly on the revolutionary 1930s and 1940s of Indian politics, it may be pointed out that when women participated in Gandhi’s feminized satyagraha movement, they set a historic precedent by entering into a public and political sphere from their prescribed domestic space.76 This transposition into a vastly different world would have given them a new consciousness of their value, their impact on the larger society, and their status as autonomous people, despite prevailing views about Indian womanhood. Admittedly Gandhi’s views on women’s emancipation were deeply ambivalent as well as contradictory.77 Nevertheless, as Kumari Jayawardena asserts, conscious of the powerful, positive role women could take on in implementing the policies of active, non-violent resistance, Gandhi encouraged them to participate in nationalist politics, claiming that women (as opposed to men) have greater ability to endure sacrifice and suffering. Thus many Indian women actively advocated satyagraha as a means of countering Western hegemony.

While women were indeed brought into the forefront of revolutionary politics under Gandhi’s leadership, this development was largely restricted to a specific historical condition. After independence, therefore, women were thrust back to their all too familiar roles within the domestic sphere, and their positions and problems were once more ghettoized with the focus of leaders shifting to other macropolitical concerns.

It would help here to interrogate to what extent the women of Rich Like Us are portrayed as marginalized figures who encounter situations that prevent them from transcending the many levels of oppression threatening their lives and determining their destinies. Sonali for instance, because of her refusal to toe the line of powerful

76 For literary illustrations of this point see works such as Kanthapura, Waiting for the Mahatma, and Ruth P. Jhabvala’s Esmond in India ([1958]; London: John Murray, 2004).
77 Women’s participation in Gandhi’s satyagraha movement only brought them a limited kind of freedom and power. Ketu Katrak points out that this “was not the kind of power that challenged the deeply entrenched patriarchal structure of Indian society.” According to Kumari Jayawardena, Gandhi’s perception of women’s equality “was located within a religious sense of the word and within the patriarchal system” (95). See Ketu Katrak, “Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Postcolonial Women’s Text,” Modern Fiction Studies 35, no. 1 (1989): 168; and Kumari Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World (London: Zed, 1986), 95.
politicians, is victimized by the workings of an impersonal bureaucratic rule of law that
gives no consideration to her defence. While this incident illustrates her strength of
character, her resolution to give up her career with no attempt to resist the forces that
strive to eliminate her from the service, does place her in a compromising position. One
could argue that the conditions of the Emergency may not have given Sonali the
opportunity to express her opposition, after all a crucial development of the time was the
strict prohibition of all forms of resistance. However, we cannot deny the fact that in her
decision to resign from her profession she manifests attitudes of her middle-class
colleagues whose passive acceptance of an iniquitous system was observed critically by
Sonali earlier in the novel.

Another disconcerting development in the plot concerns the phase after the
protagonist’s resignation from the ICS when she is shown to take no substantial course of
action to appease her troubled conscience. Thus, even the assignment of collecting
research material on Indian history is virtually thrust upon Sonali by Marcella in whom she
has little faith. As Harveen Mann notes, there is a certain ambiguity in Sahgal’s
description of the protagonist, especially at the conclusion when she decides to work with
the ambitious and unscrupulous Marcella. Defining Marcella and Brian as “handicraft and
artifact exporters”, Mann construes their new project to amass information regarding the
Indian Mughal era as a re-enactment of colonialist practices through “the selling of India to
England” (a parallel situation is evidenced in Jhabvala’s texts, such as *Esmond in India*,
where the writer alludes to and questions the dubious undertakings of Europeans who
travel to India under various pretexts). Problematizing Sonali’s eulogy of Marcella: “a
translucence about her ... belied her strength .... So was the civilization that had
produced her ...” (264), Mann identifies an underlying colonial tenor resonating right
through the text. It is indeed discomfiting to note that the strong-willed protagonist
should end up working with a woman, described in earlier episodes as a “husband-hunter”
and an “enchantress” of men. Hence Marcella’s dramatic appearance at the conclusion of
the text, ironically substituting the heroine’s close friend, Rose, is indeed distracting.
Instead of being a positive force, in this situation, Marcella’s sisterly bonding with Sonali
is as problematic as patriarchy for one is unaware of the motives spurring Marcella to
recruit Sonali in her financial ventures in the subcontinent.

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These narrative developments reflect a thread of inconsistency with Sonali’s earlier nationalist stance and Rose’s reminiscences about her deteriorating marriage, a consequence of Marcella’s intrusion into her private world. One way of interpreting such contradictions and ambivalences would be to parallel Sonali with her middle-class colleagues whose exposure to an often conflicting East-West encounter has lead to an inevitable acknowledgement of their dividedness. Critics such as Mann attribute these ambiguities to Sahgal’s own position within a bourgeois, male-dominated nationalist framework, where her perceptions on feminism are “undercut by her (masculinist) nationalist orientation, [and] her nationalism [is] compromised by her Eurocentricism” (104). Another way of regarding the issue would be to interrogate if such inconsistencies arising from hybrid experiences are knowingly inserted into the text by Sahgal to underscore the failure of India’s elite leadership to uproot corruption from within the system and imply, thereby, the impotency of the privileged to be initiators and leaders of a positively transforming postcolonial India.

While the revolutionary nature of historical events in Mistaken Identity paves the way for overt rebellion by the women of the novel, given the sinister nature of the Emergency and related occurrences in Rich Like Us, the struggles of the victims are internalized and disclosed through their consciousnesses. Because resistance and revolution are thwarted by the politics of an authoritarian regime, the novel recognizes that there is little scope for women to assert themselves within such a system.

4.4.4 Muting Voices in the Discourse of Sati
The structure of Rich Like Us encompasses two strands of consciousness linked with the main characters, Sonali and Rose. The narrative techniques of these strands that appear alternatingly, vary considerably. Sonali’s version in the first person voice expresses her individual fears and concerns about her nation’s destiny, while her friend Rose’s account, focusing to a large extent on how patriarchal values shackle the freedom of women, is unravelled through a third person narrative voice. This split narrative merges at points when the two women, victimized by the masculinist worlds they inhabit, seek refuge in each other’s camaraderie.

The discriminations and inequities confronting women in the private/domestic space are reflected primarily through the abject positions of Ram’s wives: the suffering and yet devoted Mona, and Rose, the junior wife. Emerging from an English working class family on the fringes of society, Rose in India, as Chew elaborates, is "part of the British
Raj, installed as a wife in a Hindu household yet an intruder, arrived in India, in Cythera, and still never to arrive."79 Still, after the initial romance of entering "an emotional labyrinth" and assuming the role of a Hindu wife, Rose is overcome by fear, remorse and uncertainty at her realization that she is caught between two vastly disparate worlds.80 The situation is complicated by the many predicaments she confronts as a junior wife of Ram, as well as a woman incapable of bearing children: "Without a child of her own Rose would never be mistress of the house, not even half of it. She would pass through this family, this frightening, unshakeable permanence, leaving not the shadowiest imprint of her own on it" (71).

In Sahgal's depiction of Rose, in particular, a concept that resonates right through the novel is sati. The term sati, while signifying the role of a pativrata in Hinduism, is also applied commonly to the act of self-immolation by a Hindu widow.81 The reference to sati in Rich Like Us is both literal, as recorded in Sonali's grandfather's manuscript of his mother's tragic death, and metaphorical, as in the case of Mona's attempted suicide and Rose's violent death at the end of the novel. In all these episodes sati represents extreme forms of sacrifice women were compelled to undertake in orthodox Hindu communities, frequently for the advancement of men. This includes Sonali's grandfather as well who despite having denounced the ritual, does benefit from the death of his mother.

The patriarchal ideology of women as satis is invoked through the narratives of Rose and Mona, as well as through the grim history of Sonali's great-grandmother. The ideology of sati is further reinforced by age-old patriarchal myths and symbols that are recalled at various moments in the women's narratives. The myth that makes the deepest

80 The way India has posed contradictions for non-Indian women and the complicated oriental reaction to the complex traditions of Indian life are themes that have been dealt with by a range of writers from E. M. Forster (Passage to India) and Paul Scott (The Jewel in the Crown) to Ruth P. Jhabvala (A Backward Place, Esmond in India and Heat and Dust).
81 Lindsey Harlan states that sati is a process initiated at the moment of a traditional Hindu marriage when the bride commences her duties as a pativrata. Because there is a parallel in the fire symbolism of the Hindu marriage ritual and the ultimate sati cremation, in circumambulating the funeral pyre the bride is transformed into a wife who can then aspire to be a sati. According to Hindu ideology "the transcendent powers a sati wields are thought not merely the consequence of the act of dying; they are the result of her successful development of pativrata character." Dying as a sati is considered the ultimate sacrifice for divine salvation, the sacrifice of a life dedicated to domestic duty. See Lindsay Harlan, Religion and Rajput Women (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 118.
impression in the text concerns Sita in the Ramayana. Sita, for all her devotion to Rama, in having led fourteen years of her life in voluntary exile and proven her chastity in the ordeal by fire, is nevertheless unable to convince Rama of her purity, so that overcome by grief, she is driven to seek death. Despite such prosaic injustices, as Keshav, Sonali's father muses disenchantedly, the greatness of the ancient epic remains unquestioned and "We revere the Ramayana and worship a man who turned his wife out alone and pregnant into the forest" (67). 82

The subject of sati is revived midway in the novel through Sonali's examination of an old manuscript written by her grandfather that is, according to Chew, an attempt paralleling the protagonist's personal efforts to seek answers to the inconceivable happenings of her world (54). Her discovery of her grandfather's manuscript takes her back to pre-independence India under the hegemony of the British Raj, and acquaints her with historic moments of that epoch that includes the contentious debate about sati, graphically demonstrated in two accounts of widow-burnings in 19th century India and the terrifying narrative of Sonali's great-grandmother's ordeal after her husband's death.

Central to the manuscript is Sonali's great-grandfather's "progressive" views on sati which the writer of the manuscript describes as "odd" because they conflict with the conventional attitudes upheld by British officials, Hindu Reformists as well as ordinary Hindus. According to the great-grandfather's point of view the reforms pertaining to sati, initiated by colonial officers, to a large extent only partially modernized existing legislation because the laws against sati, shaped in accordance with Brahminical scriptures, were ambivalent, not absolute. His arguments that mirror contemporary theoretical debates on sati, confirm the view that by equating religious texts and archaic traditions with legislation, British administrators invariably reconstituted this dehumanizing rite during the colonial period:

[D]id violent acts of ancient origin, rooted in mythology, stop because Lord Bentinck sitting in Fort William, Calcutta, signed a statute, or because the reformers among us wished them to, my father demanded. 'The custom of sati was old,' I heard him say, 'when the first century was in the distant future.' [132] 83

82 For a comprehensive historical analysis of the multiple versions of the Ramakatha, the story of Rama, see Thapar's essay.
83 While acknowledging the contribution British imperialists made to improve certain aspects of Indian women's lives, Lata Mani points out that because the British sought to establish a religious basis for the practice of sati, the ritual was reconstituted during colonial rule. This
Even while expressing his admiration for British law, the great-grandfather, a lawyer by profession, is quick to censure the manner in which regulations against sati were applied. Attentive to underlying motives of British reform policies, he observes that British interest in reforms was not merely spurred by moral concerns, but by other matters such as the desire to consolidate claims to a supposedly civilizing mission, vital to the furtherance of imperialism.

As critics such as Lata Mani and Rajan argue, because the British, with their native collaborators such as the pundits (who helped them interpret the scriptures) and the reformists, gave centrality to Brahminic scriptures for various reasons, the debate on sati became a less secular discourse, increasingly confined to “religious” reasoning. Furthermore, the Brahminic texts were ineluctably interwoven with traditions that had been in existence for centuries and had entrenched themselves as “a timeless, structuring principle of Indian society”. Women thus conveniently came to represent “tradition”, “whether viewed as the weak, deluded creatures who must be reformed through legislation and education, or the valiant keepers of tradition who must be protected from the first and be permitted only certain kinds of instruction” (Mani 118).

What is critical to a gendered discourse of sati is that in all these debates the central arguments were based not on the sufferings of women who should have logically been the subjects, but on the scriptures and their varying versions. As Mani asserts perceptively “women become sites upon which various versions of scripture/tradition/law are elaborated and contested” so that the widow herself is relegated to the margins of the discourse and is dispossessed of her voice and self-representation. This privileges men to appropriate women’s voices so that they (men) could inscribe their individual meanings (colonialist/patriarchal) to the mental, emotional, and bodily experiences of the silenced subaltern subject. Thus in a revealing moment, reviewing Bentinck’s recommendation of the abolition of sati on the basis of “reason and reason alone”, Sonali’s great-grandfather remarks: “Doesn’t that amaze you, John? It is not because it is a monstrous inhuman act which prevents a decent man from sleeping at night, that Lord Bentinck finally put pen to development “produced the 1813 regulation which defined sati as legal providing it met certain criteria, chief among which was that it be a voluntary act” (emphasis mine). See Lata Mani, “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,” in Recasting Women, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 94.

84 Both British colonial officers and Hindu reformists privileged the Brahminic scriptures in debating and formulating sati preventive regulations because they feared that if they ignored the scriptures, so intrinsic to the Hindu way of life, it would create indigenous outrage.
paper, but because sweet reason finally prevailed” (136). Albeit through the voice of a man, what Sahgal attempts to highlight here is that because of this muting of “voice-consciousness” through acts of violence (such as sati and bride-burning), women are made powerless to articulate and thus re-write themselves into a phallocentric history.

Significantly also, there is hardly any evidence in the accounts of colonial officers (or the Hindu reformers) of references to the rights of women as individuals (except as Mani points out “insofar as it is posed indirectly in the context of the widow’s will”) in formulating the sati preventive laws. The image of the victim is almost always in abstract terms, depicted as a goddess or heroine, embracing resolutely the raging flames of her husband’s pyre, and making the ultimate sacrifice of the mythico-religious pativrata ideals. Thus, Mani concludes: “the portrayal of the immolated widow as heroine merely rewrites her as victim of an higher order: not of man but of God (or religion). This representation of the widow makes her particularly susceptible to discourses of salvation” (117).

The occasionally heated discussions between the great-grandfather and his British friend, Mr. Timmons, gradually pave the way for an account of the writer’s (Sonali’s grandfather’s) personal involvement in the profoundly disturbing narrative of his mother and her submission to the socially-sanctioned ritual of sati. A striking feature in the textual analysis of the manuscript is the writer’s ambivalence towards what he sees as modern and conventional. Even though a cursory reading of the text gives the impression that the writer’s attitude towards the subject is “progressive”, a deeper examination manifests his self-confessed orthodox beliefs and masculinist biases, “the subterranean layers of ourselves we cannot escape”.

For example, in contrast with the portrayal of his father, we hardly hear the mother’s voice or sentiments in the grandfather’s text. She is depicted as a “personification of an image” rather than a “person”, “touched by a special mystery”, more divine than human. This sense of mystique that the writer builds around his mother’s sexual difference is influenced by the attitudes and conventions of a male-dominated milieu. It is therefore with deep bitterness Sonali realizes that the glorification of her great-grandmother’s death by the building of “a shrine on the guilt-soaked spot” and the commemoration of her “martyrdom” was an insidious way in which the practice was immortalized and made easily accessible to other women of the village (252-253).
And yet, critically, underlying the ideological reasons for the practice of sati are implicit references to financial and other material interests of the dead man's relatives. This angle of the narrative rekindles questions regarding the effectiveness of laws of 19th-century colonial India for the protection of women, especially in relation to property rights and inheritance: "She was entitled only to maintenance by her husband's family. Everything he possessed passed to his brother until I came of age in two years' time" (146). Patrilineal Aryan Hindus excluded women from the right to inheritance with the object of extending the patrimony to male descendants. It was also in the interest of Brahminic lawgivers to actively discourage widow remarriage and a widow's right to inheritance, often under the pretext of safeguarding religious traditions.  

The fact that Sonali's great-grandmother's precarious status as a widow precludes her from having access to legal rights is critical to Sahgal's discourse of sati and the crux of the thesis in general: it highlights, not only through the great-grandmother's portrayal, but also through Rose's predicament at the end when she is left at the mercy of her cruel step-son, the need for urgent re-evaluation of legal rights pertaining to women. What one learns from the sati discourse is that the rigid sociocultural and legal processes within civil society have not adequately considered the rights of women as individuals, so that we find women like the great-grandmother and Rose in Rich Like Us, and Simrit in The Day in Shadow, overwhelmed by complicated legislation that was supposedly framed to safeguard their welfare. Ironically on the other hand, according to Spivak, it is because there were laws in Bengal to protect widow inheritance that there was a marked prevalence of satis in the 18th and early-19th centuries. Here, having laws to protect women's rights was invariably seen as a threat to the sustenance of patrilineal systems. Hence the rampant practice of sati in Bengal. What becomes strikingly evident at the end of the sati discourse is that despite Sonali's great-grandfather's position as an eminent lawyer and his awareness of the prevalence of the practice of sati in his village, he

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85 Mies indicates that there were some ancient Indian institutions of law that gave the widow right to inheritance of the patrimony, under certain conditions. Despite this, the right to the husband's share was nowhere, not even among liberal lawgivers, an unconditional one. The question remains whether the widow was in a position at all to make use of her inheritance rights. Furthermore, despite regulations that have been passed since the 19th century to strengthen women's inheritance rights, laws are continued to be exploited because they contain easily exploitable clauses. Hence even today widows do not have unlimited power of disposal over the share they inherit from the undivided joint family property. See Mies, Indian Women and Patriarchy, 55-64.

himself does not take adequate measures to protect his wife from being victimized after his death by illness.

Among the unanswered/unanswerable questions at the end of the terrifying account of sati are how stable the mother's emotional and mental state would have been in those precious last moments of her life, and how willing she was to become a sati. There is a strong sense of the possibility that she may have been coerced into performing the harrowing ritual, even though it is never explicitly articulated. The writer's anguish and guilt in his realization that he was the phoenix rising from his mother's ashes are juxtaposed grippingly with his mother's agony in the fire: "I saw her fling her arms wildly in the air, then wrap them about her breasts before she subsided like a wax doll into the flames" (149), and his loss of faith in his religion.

The mother's silence and the marginal role assigned to her in the discourse of sati illustrate further the point Mani and Spivak raise in their brilliant essays, about the difficulty of reconstructing a counter-narrative on sati when one "never encounters the testimony of women's voice-consciousness" (Spivak, "Subaltern" 93). Here silence or muteness becomes an index to the powers of colonial and patriarchal systems to impose their own meanings on the Other, in this instance represented by the sexed subaltern subject, who encounters a double oppression as a result of racial and sexual differences. It is indeed difficult to rewrite a comprehensive discourse on sati because there is "no independent access to the mental or subjective states of widows outside of these overdetermined colonial representations of them" (Mani 97). Thus in a revealing moment in the narrative, Rose in contemplating Sita's destiny, asks the crucial question: "how voluntary are voluntary deaths, and was it bliss hereafter or earthly hell that drove satis to climb their husbands' funeral pyres and be burned alive?" (75). It is this absence of the woman's voice that has led to powerful critical reconstructions by Mani, of the Indian woman's position as a victim who needed to be constantly protected from the Hindu male by British imperialists, and by Spivak, of indigenous patriarchal assumptions about her "free will".

The ideals of Vedic womanhood are represented most strikingly in the present by Mona who is also confined to the hierarchical ordering of Hindu patriarchy and forced to accept and live with her husband's infidelity. It is noteworthy that Mona's attempt at self-immolation, in reaction to the oppressive circumstances in the domestic sphere, coincides with the resistance activities of Indians against colonial domination in the public sphere. Her attempted suicide is also symbolic of the myth of Sita who appeals fervently
to Earth Mother “to open up and receive her” when she realizes that Rama is still seeking proof of her fidelity (75). Myth and reality are thus interspersed so that Mona’s “private insurrection”, as Chew defines it, is juxta posed with the nationalism of men like Lalaji, spurred into activity by Gandhi’s moving speech on that historic day in August 1942, to “[t]ake a pledge … that you will no longer rest till freedom is achieved” (126).

Rose’s fate at the conclusion of the novel is another problematic strand in the narrative. Even though Rose feels “angry, bitter and wronged” (at first, by Ram’s confession of his marriage to Mona after he had established a relationship with Rose, and later, by his so-called intellectual affection for Marcella), and is aware she could leave Ram if she so desired, Rose takes no initiative to make Ram aware at least of her dissatisfaction with his actions and attitudes (here, her working class origins join forces with her second class status in India - in England, women’s emancipation is clearer in middle-class situations). Instead, she embraces the orthodox role of the stoic Hindu wife with hardly any questioning, and reconciles herself with increasing passivity to Ram’s blatant philandering until, in the end, she succumbs to the brutal assaults of her step-son’s accomplices. In having married Ram and complied with the dictates of a rigid patriarchal order, Rose not only loses her selfhood and autonomy, but also her voice to express herself and demand her rights as a woman and wife.

Sahgal’s description of Rose in Hindu terminology as a “modern-day sati” (“Continuing” 44) can be juxtaposed with the narrative’s unequivocal description of Rose as contemporary Sita. Rose’s stoic resignation and her ability to endure suffering are indeed reflections of the characteristics that go to make a good satyagrahi in distinctly Gandhian terms. One must be alerted here, however, to the danger in paralleling such essentially glorified, patriarchal legends with reality as they have a way of ahistoricizing persisting women-related issues to the effect that these issues lose their immediacy and decline into insignificance. Furthermore, such socially constructed myths sanction gender discriminations, reinforcing notions of female inferiority and men’s power over women’s sexuality.

In the portrayal of Rose, Mona and Sonali’s great-grandmother, we are presented with versions of the virtuous Vedic woman, victim of the most ancient power-structure - that is the orthodox patriarchy. They are not however examples of the “new woman” Sahgal was striving to create in her novels. They do not, as the writer proclaims in an interview, “walk out and find a life for themselves,” as the women characters of Mistaken Identity do. In an earlier interview, Sahgal describes Simrit, the heroine of The Day in
Shadow, as "a passive creature to whom things happen .... Simrit is not an individual - she is culture, tradition, a patient enduring passivity." Yet even Simrit, as opposed to Rose or Mona, does not continue to endure her oppressive marriage when it becomes unbearable. Thus, we find her courageously walking out of the shadows of her marriage to find happiness elsewhere, despite facing innumerable domestic, financial and legal problems. While their ability to withstand difficulties reveals their inner strength, the women of Rich Like Us continue to endure systematic subordination due to their very personalities as much as to prevalent political and social conditions.

Notwithstanding the collisions, ambivalences and inconsistencies, Rich Like Us is a striking illustration of the postcolonial woman writer's efforts to rewrite a specific moment in recent history, trace the enduring effects of a colonial past and document and critique the structures of oppression in the postcolonial space. As in her other fictional histories, it is also a personal quest to recuperate and revision the national narrative by the writer who had witnessed as a child the tumultuous phases of the decolonization process to which her parents, maternal relatives and other patriotic Indians had dedicated a greater part of their adult life.

Juxtaposed with the political and domestic crises of the present and other harsh realities of the past is Sonali's retreat into a momentous chapter in Indian history, when India "ceased to be a legend about which tales could be spun with little relation to the facts" (265). The almost nostalgic recollections of past glories are reflected sporadically in the little acts of heroism in the present, such as in the defiance of Rose's beggar who "undaunted by his armlessness, slipping and slithering from his tormentor's grasp," attempts to resist the violence of the time. Nevertheless, such attempts at resistance are rendered ineffective in an environment where those who are ghettoized continue to be intimidated by the machinations and manoeuvrings of a totalitarian regime. At a cursory glance the images of resistance may appear to reinforce the notion that "the spirit of India is too powerful to be overwhelmed by such fiery trials". However we are left with the impression that this spirit has not yet surfaced in a work such as Rich Like Us to produce viable alternatives that could destabilize and challenge more assertively hegemonic structures, antiquated ideologies and stultifying cultural and religious mores, all of which have been historically inimical to women's progress and empowerment in

society. In brief, while the narrative traces forcefully the impact of patriarchal continuities, fundamental to the initial stages of a feminist discourse, it does not make any significant challenges (either through its narrative of nationalism or its narrative of gender) to prevalent ideologies and cultural practices reconstructed in the fictional history. Because these "transgressions or survival strategies do not prefigure larger systemic transformations", as Janaki Nair explains in an assessment of women's subjectivities and agency in Indian feminist historiography, they "remain cultural and historical curiosities, doing little to address the more persistent continuities of patriarchy and its ability to recast itself along with evolving forms of [political,] social and economic power."^89

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Chapter 5

Attia Hosain

Quitely, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself... bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion.

Tsitsi Dangarembga, Nervous Conditions

...he kept thinking to himself, staring at the map on the wall, there will be changes in the cartographer's view of the Horn of Africa. And so, with his felt pen, using his own body, he redrew the map of the Somali-speaking territories...

Nuruddin Farah, Maps

5.1 Introduction

Journalist, novelist and short storywriter, Attia Hosain (1913-1998), was born in Lucknow of pre-Partition India to an aristocratic landholding (taluqdari) family. One of the first women of her privileged, conservative background to attain a university education, Hosain’s works mirror both the influence of a Western liberal education and her early exposure to Arabic, Persian and Urdu which familiarized her with the courtly culture of precolonial Mughal India. Like many of the younger members of the Indian elite classes, Hosain was attracted to the ideals of the Indian National Congress for an undivided India, and to the Progressive Writers’ Association that espoused a leftist manifesto “argu[ing] against obscurantism in religion and tradition, identifying the repression of women as an obstacle to progress.”1 The Progressive Writers’ Association was a radical movement that emerged in the years of India’s struggle for independence and, critically, the movement and its ethos inspired the work of many young, highly talented artistes such as the two contemporary Muslim women writers, Hosain and Ismat Chughtai.2

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1 Maya Jaggi, “The Indian Subcontinent,” in Bloomsbury Guide to Women’s Literature, ed. Claire Buck (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 223. See also The Literary Estate of Attia Hosain (LEAH) 2004 at www.harappa.com/attia for a detailed account of Hosain’s connection with the leading political intelligentsia of pre-Partition India. This site provides valuable insights into Hosain’s past and the courtly culture of India’s Muslim aristocracy.

2 Due to the complex constraints imposed by texts-in-translation, some of which I have outlined in the Introduction, and due to my limited access to Urdu, the medium in which...
Disillusioned, after the bloody civil unrest, by the ideology of a separate homeland for India's Muslims who had lived for centuries in a vibrant cross-cultural milieu in pre-Partition India, Hosain chose to make London her home rather than remain in India or the newly-formed Pakistan after India attained independence. Together with writers such as Assia Djebar and Bapsi Sidhwa, a Parsi Zoroastrian of Pakistani origin, Hosain has since attained a diasporic identity, even though Hosain's compositions, like Djebar's imaginative works, are incisively etched with impressions of her motherland and a particular moment of Indian history from which she derived much inspiration for her short stories and novel. By reliving this moment through imaginative revisionings, in both her major works Hosain strives to recover the narratives of those in the margins of official history, and chronicles a period of manifold transitions when along with "the raising of flags and celebrations [of Independence] came the enforced migrations of more millions than ever before, of massacres and infinite loss." Simultaneously, her two works, a collection of short stories entitled Phoenix Fled and Other Stories, and the novel, Sunlight on a Broken Column, are testimonies to the rapidly disintegrating courtly culture and the decadence of an old feudal order in Lucknow.

As illustrated in this chapter, Hosain's works are not counter-narratives or deconstructed readings, if by this we mean a significant decentring or an overwriting.

Chughtai narrates her stories, I will not discuss Chughtai's work in detail here. Nevertheless, because Hosain and Chughtai are contemporaries who were concerned with issues pertaining to Indian Muslim women, I will, as appropriate, refer to Chughtai's work to facilitate a more comprehensive comparative approach.

The term "diasporic" needs some qualification as Hosain has expressed her dissatisfaction with the term at different moments in her life. By "diaspora" I do not mean that Hosain in her work sets out to discuss issues of ambivalence, hybridity and the "in-betweeness" of experience, intrinsic to any discussion of diasporic conditions. Hosain has never wished to be identified as a writer in exile and affirms categorically: "I am rooted in India. My branches may be spread all around, but my roots are firmly planted in the earth" (citation from an interview conducted by Nilufer Bharucha in June 1997, entitled "In Conversation with Attia Hosain," 3-5). This is endorsed further in a letter to Muneeza Shamsie (published in Dawn, 23 Sept. 1988) available at www.litencyc.com. Yet, the fact remains that for nearly 50 years the writer has lived and worked in Britain, and it is from this angle I refer to her position as a diasporic. As Lakshmi Holmström points out, although Hosain never got over her sense of personal loss in leaving Lucknow, "she was conscious of being at the beginning of the formation of an Asian diaspora" (see above website).


(as witnessed in Djebar's *Fantasia*) of the palimpsestic master narrative of Indian history with the intention of disclosing an *oppositional* politics. Rather, they are multifaceted texts that use narrative *revisionings* to conflate a spectrum of political and social, public and private concerns in the period immediately preceding Indian independence and the partition of the subcontinent. They signify alternative, minoritized perspectives (of women, students, urban poor and peasants) which transcend the boundaries of institutionalized histories. These multiple views embody the contesting strands in the disquisitions of decolonization, nationalism and Partition, and the divisive, marginalized experiences of women and children in particular, during the post-independence communal riots and the mass exodus of people as refugees or evacuees from one location of India's sprawling landscape to another terribly alienating one. *Sunlight*, in particular, becomes at once a remembering of a nation's birth into independence through a painful process of struggle and resistance, and a testimony to the gendered subaltern subject who transgresses the boundaries of conservative society to assert her subject-position.

A striking feature that Hosain's works share with writings of the other authors represented in the thesis is the propensity to reconfigure official history from a feminine perspective while setting out *synchronously* to recuperate multiple feminine experiences and the stifled voices of women in the *zenana* (women's quarters). It is noteworthy that the works of writers such as Hosain and Chughtai are focused precisely on the situation of Indian (Muslim) women within the confined space of the *zenana*, dominated by a rigid patriarchal code of ethics and an overpowering extended family. Texts such as *Sunlight* and "Time is Unredeemable" from *Phoenix*, and Chughtai's *The Crooked Line* and "The Veil" from *The Quilt and Other Stories* are deeply preoccupied with the dynamics of a nascent female identity in the circumscribed realm of the inner courtyard that is marked by a strong female presence. Critically, these expositions do not isolate gender concerns from other outstanding social and political realities that are linked intrinsically with class, race, ethnicity and religion.

Even though the less privileged strata of Indian society are not Hosain's primary focus either in *Sunlight* or in *Phoenix* (in contrast, as "The Veil" demonstrates, 

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Chughtai’s concerns are intricately woven with those of the under classes of Muslim India), in both her works, she interlocks the gendered subject of woman with the marginalized classes of Indian society. By representing people from the peripheries of society, Hosain retrieves the under-represented narratives of the Indian subaltern classes. In Sunlight we find ample references to maidservants, cooks and other domestic helps who work in the houses of the more privileged families, and the peasants who till the lands of the taluqdars and other landlords for their most basic subsistence. With a discerning eye, Hosain’s narratives reveal the sorrows and anxieties, the little pleasures, the drudgery and hopeless routines of those in the margins of society.

Some of the most memorable characters in this category can be found in the kaleidoscopic vignettes that contribute to Phoenix: the opium-inspired Kalloo who works in his master’s house for innumerable years despite earning a paltry wage, the luckless Haseena who is given in marriage to the decrepit cook, and later confronts a pitiable fate as a prostitute in “The Street of the Moon”; the sixteen year old Bano of “Time is Unredeemable” who is callously married off to a reluctant young man before his departure to England, and has to lead a sequestered life thereafter; and the proud, one-time dacoit of “White Leopard” who is respected by all who know him (including the narrator) for his wisdom and curious sense of justice, based on the notion of izzat or honour - even if this refers to the honour of bandits.

One of the most attractive portraits in Sunlight is that of Nandi, a dauntless maidservant working in the ancestral taluqdari mansion, and in turbulent times, a friend to Laila, the narrator-protagonist of the text. Nandi, like Ayah of Sidhwa’s Ice-Candy-Man,7 represents the minoritized individual (that is, woman) in a marginalized class who is exposed to precarious situations because of her subordinate/subaltern status, determined by her gender and class identities. She is exploited and abused not only by the men of her own class (her father, Ghulam Ali) but also others of the more privileged classes (Mohsin Bhai) - as she discloses in a moment of blazing anger against Mohsin who offends her in public: “A slut? A wanton? And who are you to say it who would have made me one had I let you?” (28). Significantly, her experiences recount some of the most blatant injustices women have had to endure historically, because of their second-class citizenship in society. As Nandi later informs Laila with a curious feminist wisdom born from bitter experiences: “A man’s love is no different from an

animal's. He takes what he can get, because he is not the one who has to bear the consequences. It is the injustice of the gods that a woman alone must be fearful" (227).

Moving beyond the rigid barriers defining the lifestyle of feudal landlords, the texts thus deal with a vast gallery of characters whose humdrum lives shed light on manifold social realities that include child-labour, the plight of child-brides, the exploitation of poorer classes, and significantly, the debilitating consequences of upholding traditions such as purdah (sex/gender segregation and seclusion of women), and the implications of izzat and sharam (honour and shame), especially for those on the peripheries of their worlds. In apprehending the problems of the marginalized, Hosain also criticizes the Indian elite classes whose indifference, apathy and sometimes callous dispositions have had negative consequences for the impoverished sections of Indian society (see, for example, Hosain's critique of Naseema Begum in "The Daughter-in-Law" of Phoenix).

At the same time, given the narrator's divided allegiances and ambivalent loyalties, the plight of the less-privileged classes in Sunlight is only one of her many concerns. Understandably, the text focuses on the predicament of women in Laila's own landholding class and household, and on the turbulent events shaping the future of India at a critical juncture in postcolonial history. The novel, thus, interrogates official history pertaining to India's struggle for decolonization, compels an alternative reading that conflates myriad, polyphonic perspectives, and dismantles the viability of a hegemonic two-nation theory. Simultaneously, at the core of the text is the writer's deep preoccupation with what Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin describe as "the futility and tragedy of demarcating boundaries, and the impossibility of dividing homes and hearts," in a compelling study of women's testimonies in Partition history. 8

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Even though Hosain's prose is generally considered to be mellower, more elliptical and subtler in style when juxtaposed with Chughtai's unconventionally daring and seemingly artless narratives, 9 both writers, in dealing with the situation of women

9 Chughtai's English translator, Tahira Naqvi, remarks that Chughtai is one of Urdu's most outspoken writers whose work "cuts to the core of the female psyche, exposing it layer by layer in her searing, candid style as no other writer of the Indian subcontinent, male or female, has done before or since." See Naqvi's introduction to The Crooked Line, vii.
deprived and oppressed by multiple factors in a colonized nation-in-transition, colour
their texts with flashes of humour, wit and satirical observations about an array of
characters from varying class structures and social locations (for example, Chughtai’s
"Sacred Duty" from Quilt and "Roots" reveal in a lightly satirical tone post-
independence Hindu/Muslim rivalry; similarly, in "The Quilt" humour is an important
ingredient colouring the tabooed subject of lesbianism that is examined through the
guileless eyes of a young narrator;¹⁰ and in Sunlight Hosain frequently uses satire to
portray the decadence of upper class Indians, such as the Muslim taluqdars of
Lucknow).

Hosain’s writing, especially Sunlight, is crafted out of a rich Urdu storytelling
tradition. Her sometimes lyrical and ornately descriptive prose texts mirror elements
of Persian/Urdu literary traditions and mannerisms she learnt as a child in her
mother’s domain (Hosain, “Deep” 19).¹¹ This, at times, causes her writing to lose a
"tightness of texture" to which K. R. S. Iyengar, and, earlier on, Meenakshi Mukherjee
draw attention in their studies of Sunlight.¹² As Iyengar rightly points out, the method
Hosain employs especially in her novel manifests less dramatic action and "more a
sweeping sense of drama" (464).

At the same time, contrary to Anita Desai’s view on Hosain’s technique - that
her narrative style does not represent the bare simplicity of modern prose - especially
in Phoenix one witnesses the precision and crispness with which Hosain interweaves
thoughts and ideas to produce the desired effect of conciseness. "The First Party" is a
succinctly rendered account of a young woman’s entrance into a seemingly hostile new
world, having lived all her life in "the sanctuary of the walled home from which
marriage had promised an adventurous escape" (Phoenix 22). Similarly, in "After the
Storm" Hosain relives the horror, the anguish and other shocking developments of
Partition with lucidity and terseness of texture:

I wanted to lay my ghosts of imagined horror, and hear her tell me what
actually happened.

¹⁰ Chughtai, Quilt, 20-38, 7-19. See also Chughtai’s short story about the horrors of
Partition, "Roots," trans. Vishwamitter Adil and Alok Bhalla, in Stories about the Partition
¹¹ See also Anita Desai, “Introduction,” in Sunlight, x.
¹² K. R. S. Iyengar, Indian Writing in English ([1985]; New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1999);
Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Twice Born Fiction: Theories and Techniques of the Indian Novel
in English (New Delhi: Heinemann, 1971). I will return to Mukherjee’s commentary later in
the text.

227
"The police brought me. I was at the railway station. Then they took me to a place where there were lots of women and children. I ran away from them."

... Her mind refused to fill the gap between the refugee camp and her adoption. "What happened to your mother?"
Her voice was self-detached - a child telling a fairy story. "I don't know. I was with Chand Bibi ...

... Where was your mother?
"At home. They said the house was full of blood. They said Chand Bibi kept on fighting until her arm was cut off."
"Who said?"
"Some people - I ran into the fields ... [Phoenix 81-82]

The above illustration retrieves the traumatic experiences of a little girl during the outbreak of civil riots between Hindus and Muslims following Partition. By focusing on the orphan's persistent engagement with the making of flower garlands that no one else cared to thread, Hosain introduces a diversion that thwarts the narration of a horrific tale, and reveals in a deceptively simple language the girl's subconscious desire to detach herself from events that shatter her world irreparably.

Hosain's technique in this story can be paralleled with the equally powerful and yet descriptive style in "Phoenix Fled", another account uncovering the lurking violence in post-Partition events:

When the dread moment was upon them naked of their disguising hopes, they remembered only the urgency of their frenzied need to escape. Terror silenced the women's wails, tore their thoughts from possessions left behind; it smothered the children's whimpering ...." [14]

This episode reminds one of the horrific experiences encountered by the protagonist of Sunlight when she and her child are displaced in the Partition mayhem, and are forced to witness "hate-blinded revengeful" Hindu mobs targeting Muslim homes. Though passionately opposed to the extreme strands of Indian nationalism espoused by some nationalist leaders in the post-independence phase, Hosain chronicles the sinister events of Partition with subdued criticism that slides neither into bitterness nor cynicism.

The sections that follow will strive to ascertain how Hosain in Sunlight (like Sidhwa in Ice-Candy-Man) recovers a feminine memory to offer an alternative vision which is set against official versions of Indian historiography. In this recuperative act, while the text extols the nationalists' struggle for India's decolonization, it also questions and displaces the rhetoric of parochial nationalism, sectarian politics and a
two-nation theory that culminated in the splitting of the subcontinent, civil dissension and a mass humanitarian tragedy. Simultaneously, since Hosain's novel also broaches problems of spatial stratification, women's seclusion, and their struggle for selfhood, themes reverberating across many of the texts discussed in the thesis, they will be addressed in relation to purdah, an antiquated practice defining the lives of those who represent Sunlight.

5.2.1 Recovering Feminine Histories in Partition Narratives
Sunlight is a four-part novel that reconstructs through an exercise of memory and catharsis Laila's personal narrative (Laila is 15 at the commencement, and 35 at the end of the novel), located in the period of India's struggle for decolonization. Situated roughly in the historical epoch between 1932 and 1952, when revolutionary India had attained independence after a formidable struggle against British imperialism and was partitioned by parochial communal politics, Hosain's historical fiction recounts these landmark political developments together with important references to the dismantling of an old feudal order. The text divulges that the challenge to an externally imposed imperialist system also disrupted internal power bases of an oligarchic social structure that had perpetuated for centuries a rigidly stratified class (and caste) system in India.

Hosain's novel employs an appropriate choice of genre (bildungsroman) to question hegemonic histories, and a legitimate textual space for the recuperation and disclosure of Laila's autobiographical narrative. The narrator, a young, orphaned Muslim woman from a deeply conservative, feudal family, constructs her story primarily from an enclosed private sphere. This sphere demarcates the stultifying boundaries of the inner courtyard by which many of Laila's female relatives are circumscribed, complying with the rigid codes of purdah. Critically, the text provides a site of resistance and transgression for the narrator who renounces defiantly the prescribed private space, while overcoming centuries-old inhibitions of her foremothers and appropriating a tabooed outer space to reconstruct the long oppressed personal histories of women in the zenana.

13 In fact, when C. Day Lewis was appointed to edit Sunlight for the publishers, Chatto, a comment he made about the text was that it was "very autobiographical". In reminiscing about this and another incident, where she was requested to write an autobiography, Hosain remarks that it would have been difficult for her to have written a conventional autobiography with sincere truth telling, without exposing the lives of others. See her interview at www.harappa.com/attia
Significantly, textual revisioning transpires primarily through a dialogue between these two distinctly different worlds, the private and the public. Laila's narrative (evoking the writers personal life) takes her on a journey beyond the personal to the political, disrupting, in the process, hegemonic master discourses of colonialist and nationalist history and awakening the narrator's consciousness to the very real possibility of gaining autonomy from the confining structures of her patriarchal world.

Indeed, Hosain is not the only writer to document through imaginative revisionings the violence and the futility of redrawing the boundaries of the subcontinent by the separatist ideology of Partition. The Pakistani writer Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories (in Urdu) and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (in English) are, for example, striking illustrations of Partition literature.\(^{14}\) These texts capture vividly the catastrophic consequences of being suddenly dislocated and made destitute by a bloody Partition over ineluctable differences between Hindus and Indian Muslims, in which around a million people perished and over ten million were displaced. At the same time, neither of these writers has committed his fictional histories to explore the socially and sexually oppressed and exploited predicaments of women, even though Manto, for instance, does broach the issues of women's subordination, rape and the silencing of women in an undeniably masculinist voice.\(^{15}\)

Other than Hosain, one of the few women writers in English to examine in-depth the subject of Partition as it affected women is Sidhwa, in her powerful rendition of Shanta (generically identified as Ayah by her class and labour position), the young Hindu woman hired to take care of 10-year old Lenny, the insightful, Parsi


narrator of *Ice-Candy-Man*. In comparison with Sidhwa’s text which is concerned with the events of the gory Partition saga as it impacted upon her diverse characters directly, Hosain uses the highly charged pre-independence and Partition histories more obliquely, counterpoising Laila’s emergence out of a radically segregated, patriarchal system with India’s emergence into independent statehood. Additionally, as in Sahgal’s writings, there is in Hosain’s work a tendency to transcend temporal space and other specificities (a striking example is “Phoenix Fled” where the memories of the old woman remain a blur, conflating events of a turbulent present with a fleeting colonial past) that place her stories in a timeless space, giving her texts a mythic dimension. This timeless quality and the tendency to narrate events sometimes elliptically, and at others, in a cyclical pattern, unfold a pluralist vision with conflicting perspectives and realities that reflect the impact of a vibrant Urdu oral tradition.

On the subject of Partition, Gayanendra Pandey and Huma Ibrahim have pointed out that the violence of this period in history is often taken for granted with the assumption that the intricacies of the tragedy need no investigation. Furthermore, as Ibrahim rightly observes, “no literary critic has so far engaged the theoretical aspects of the violence. There is little theoretical analysis of how Pakistanis and Indians looked for new meanings in the new context that emerged out of a desire for decolonization, or of how the desire for decolonization was fragmented” by brutalities of inexpressible proportions among the formerly colonized (299-300).

While it is perhaps useful (and relatively easier?) to be critical and question why something was not conceived the way it should have been to appease our theoretical beliefs and leanings, or how history should have been conceived to make a

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16 Recently, Shauna (Singh) Baldwin has given a Sikh perspective of the Partition in narrating the stories of Roop and Satya, two wives of an affluent landlord, based in a Punjab seething with communal violence. See *What the Body Remembers* (London: Anchor, 1999).


viable feminist impact within the framework of an oppositional politics," to Hosain, one of the foremost writers to courageously articulate the experiences of India’s Partition from a woman’s perspective, the difficulty would have been to literally write about and communicate a deeply sensitive issue which many found it problematic to recall in the first instance - that is, the tragedy of a collective trauma that culminated in the loss of home, family, self, and the subjugation of voice-consciousness. As Menon and Bhasin who conducted extensive research into women’s experiences during this period remark: "For both men and women the trauma of Partition violence was difficult to articulate and this often made for a hesitant, disjointed or sometimes even 'wordless' telling" (55). Citing Veena Das and Ashis Nandy, they reveal:

Yet, as their accounts themselves indicate, the gendered nature of the experience of violence engendered its telling in specific ways. At least some part of this difference must lie in the fact that women ... were not only objects of, but also witness to, violence. Because they "retained the memory of loot, rape and plunder" in their bodies they remember it differently. [55]

In contrast, the versions of men, even if they are ambivalent or occasionally distressed, tend to remain more “coherent” and are intrinsically linked to logic of the master narrative. In this regard, the woman writer may find it a colossal responsibility to recall, to speak the unspeakable, or to textually inscribe private horrors and trauma for public consumption. Writing personal histories or autobiographies can be an overwhelming exercise where the author cannot be expected in reality to practice detachment and remain completely faithful to past happenings. The decision to go public is therefore a particularly charged one for women. In this context the reader must be prepared to encounter silences, obscurities and even inconsistencies and contradictions which place additional pressure on questions of “truth” and “authenticity”.

In his study of fictional and non-fictional Partition literature Jason Francesco also broaches Partition history and inquires how one is to relive a tragedy when an overwhelming number of stories went unrecorded and non-verbalized. Many of the testimonies and memories of women caught in the turmoil of the time began to be

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19 I refer generally to critics who have been unsympathetic to the works of women writers such as Hosain and Sidhwa.

compiled in a systematic way as late as the 1990s and access to "authentic" information prior to this period would have been circuitous, through scattered accounts of largely undocumented oral histories, testimonies and memory work. Even the more recent attempts at revisioning Partition history from a gendered subaltern perspective occur only in the first half of the 1990s in the essays of writers such as Urvashi Butalia, Pandey, Menon and Bhasin.21

Bearing in mind these parameters, what Hosain strives to achieve in her work is to restore women to history while acknowledging the problematic of constructing a complete (without omissions), objective, straightforward account of India’s past to which she is intrinsically bound. To aspire to do otherwise, that is, to retrieve and redeem intact the unity of life or Self across time by a memory that is often fallible is indeed a near-impossible task. Additionally, as outlined in earlier chapters, there is also the issue of selective documentation that can be an obstruction to autobiography. What cannot be overemphasized in the end is that Hosain’s account is a story, constructed as fiction, not a documentary preoccupied with the facticity of past history. To tell her story Hosain introduces a narrator who ruptures the pact between the textual and referential "I" and presents alternative perspectives of patriarchal and colonialist narratives that are synchronously and dialectically recalled to make sense of an otherwise disquieting past. Rather than critiquing Sunlight for its loosely woven structure or its nostalgic sentiments that reflect the author’s own ambivalent attitude to a particular past, it would help to see its significance as, and here I cite Susheila Nasta, an early and brave effort “to discover a narrative poetics by which to open up the unresolved discontinuities of a painful past through the filters of memory, which can both double and fracture, restrict as well as liberate, perception” (40).

5.2.2 Between Two Worlds: Overcoming the Barriers of Purdah
The Persian term purdah literally means “curtain”, separating two rooms or two specified areas. The term also incorporates the idea of concealment of women’s bodies and their physical separation from the world occupied by men (that is, the public, political or global sphere). Contrary to conventional views, purdah does not refer only to the veil, the burqa or chador that is intrinsic to the conventional garments of both Hindu and Muslim Indian women. Significant also is the symbolic

21 See footnote 18 of Menon’s and Bhasin’s introductory essay in Borders and Boundaries for a comprehensive list of recent revisionist work on the subject.
function of *purdah* in India, Pakistan and other parts of the world for a comprehensive system of behavioral codes within patriarchal milieux that in some situations have paved the way for the most radical form of gender/sex segregation and seclusion of women. The symbols Hosain uses to illustrate this segregation in *Sunlight* appear in the form of secluded *zenanas*, countless corridors and courtyards, screened interiors and high walls. Similar metaphors are also used by Sahgal in *Mistaken Identity*, Chughtai in *The Quilt* (especially "The Veil" and "The Wedding Shroud"), the collection of short stories by a group of dynamic Indian women writers, appropriately titled *The Inner Courtyard* (note in particular Vishwaspriya Iyengar’s "The Library Girl"), and Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli*.

As we learn from all these texts, the rigidly stratified lifestyle of *purdah* in India is evidenced in both Muslim and Hindu communities, while the dress code and the extent of body concealment for the women of these communities varied according to myriad interlocking factors such as (the often misogynous) patriarchal and cultural strictures, religious convictions, class leanings and personal choice. Nilufer Bharucha in her study of Parsi fiction in English attests to the existence of *purdah* (albeit to a much lesser degree) in Indian Parsi communities as well. She states: "Parsi women have not been rigorously subjected to the regimen of the purdah, but they share the limited and reductive world of their Hindu and Muslim sisters in India.”

Historically, *purdah* in India was observed by privileged women of royal families (Mughals and Rajputs for instance), the aristocracy (*taluqdars* and other wealthy landlords), upper castes and affluent trading communities.24 As disclosed in *Sunlight*, however, the practice was not limited to these dominant communities alone as women of the under classes (for example, Hakiman Bua and Nandi in Hosain’s text) also strove to follow, or were influenced, by the rituals of seclusion and separation at a time when patriarchal norms and ideals governed most Indian communities. As one critic points out "[t]his 'separation', apart from its functional use, was the insignia of respectability and only those families lower down in the social scale, which had no

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24 Normally, the term *burqa* describes the dress worn by Muslims in South Asia while *chador* or *dupatta* are general terms defining the veiled garments of Indian women. *Hijab*, on the other hand, is the commonly used global term for the dress of women in Islamic communities.
choice but to discard even the last shred of respectability, did so.”25 Because of the notion of respectability associated with the practice, as Sunlight demonstrates, even the maidservants of Ashiana observe purdah in the presence of the former courtesan, Mushtari Bai, as she falls into a group that was generally vilified and considered disreputable by conservative society, irrespective of class affiliations (64).26

According to some historians and analysts of Indian history and culture, there was apparently a greater prevalence of purdah observance in India during the Mughal era than in any period prior to this time. This observation is taken for granted by certain critics who erroneously links the notion of purdah with Islamic culture and an exclusive Indian Muslim community27 (Maria Mies, A. S. Altekar and Sudhir Kakar cite widely from Manu and the Brahminical laws to show the extent to which orthodox Hindu ideology controlled the movements of Hindu women and imposed women’s seclusion, long before the advent of Muslim culture to India).28 No doubt, as M. Mujeeb points out, the issue whether “the seclusion of women ... had a Muslim or non-Muslim origin, has been a subject of rather heated discussion.”29 While associating the origins of the practice with a Muslim presence in India, Mujeeb proclaims that over time more and more women of the upper classes (irrespective of religion and


26 The precarious predicament encountered by courtesans and prostitutes is illustrated by Sidhwa in her account of Ayah’s fate, and the cumulative fate of many such women in the margins of society who faced rape, torture, abduction, forceful conversions and dispossession in the wake of a blood-drenched Partition.

27 Sarla Palkar, for instance, asserts that Islam has sanctioned purdah, without specifying what she means by purdah (the term after all has multiple implications). In constructing this reductive analysis, Palkar makes certain essentialisms about Muslims in general and fails to contextualize the community to which she refers. It is noteworthy that even within a narrowly defined Indian context there is an array of disparate factors (regional, political, cultural, linguistic, class and, in the case of Hindus, caste) operating in complex ways to distinguish one community from another, even though they may all be sharing the same religious faith. See Sarla Palkar, “Beyond Purdah: Sunlight on a Broken Column,” in Margins of Erasure, ed. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin, esp. 107-108.


235
ethnicity), followed by the lower classes, adhered to *purdah* as a symbol of respectability.

In her exposé of *purdah* in the Indian subcontinent, Jasbir Jain locates certain social factors that contributed to the prevalence of the practice amongst Hindus and Muslims in India. Some of these factors clarify and contextualize the situation of women inhabiting Laila's narrative as well. Jain draws attention to "the rewards and punishments associated with obedience and defiance," and informs the reader, in alignment with Hosain's views, that "'[p]urdah often talked about as modesty, 'izzat', 'laaj', 'sharam', is symbolic of conformity, while the concept of independence, freedom and self are all relegated to a world outside it'" (3).

While citing Shahida Lateef's research on the status and rights of Indian women, Jain also refers to the amorphous Qur'anic verse from *sura* Nur which the thesis examines in the chapter on Djebar. To recapture briefly, though the Qur'an alludes to some sort of modest attire that some Muslims define as "veiling" for women, this reference does not impose spatial restriction that could, indeed, obstruct women's entry into public life. Because of the ambivalence attached to the Qur'anic pronouncement about women's dress and social responsibilities, women of early Islamic cultures assumed roles that were diverse as well as conflicting. Thus, for instance, though Mujeeb states that Turkish women in *burqas* rode on horseback - to support his argument that women's seclusion was prevalent in early Muslim societies - countering his view is that of European women travelers who felt that "the premodern veiled women of polygamous harems [such as those in Turkey] were both sexually and economically freer than their European contemporaries."31

While pre-Islamic Arab patriarchal cultural traditions had some impact on the practice of veiling and sex segregation in early Muslim societies, another factor that contributed to women's seclusion was the way Islam evolved worldwide after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. Supporting this view, Tayyibah Taylor remarks: "as Islam spread to cultures that were rigidly monarchical or patriarchal in structure, the interpretation and practice of Islam assumed an androcentric perspective. Women

became marginalized in jurisprudence, in public space and in the minds of believers," and in the process, their status in society became less defined, more contradictory. The ambivalent status of women in Muslim societies is manifested in Hosain's text through Laila, and especially Aunt Abida, a woman who rigorously observes the norms of purdah, and yet, is educated, well-informed and in a position to take on her father's estate and business outside the confines of purdah, when he falls ill.

Conversely, Islam does not entertain a caste system that would impose seclusion for women of the higher castes in their relations with lower caste members, as in the case of some Hindu cultures. So we find Laila, like Lenny in Ice-Candy-Man, mingling freely with Nandi and others domestics who work in the feudal house of Baba Jan. Furthermore, the religion does not encourage a stringent hierarchy among family members that would enforce purdah on some women (for example, wives and daughters-in-law of Rajput families in North India). In contrast, as Laila's descriptions of life at Ashiana inform us, Muslims practise purdah vis-à-vis outsiders, and not within the family. According to Lateef this differentiation stems from "Hindu marital taboos within kin groups and the Muslim encouragement of such ties." Lateef's view is that purdah among Indian Muslims is "less affected by religious considerations than by regional ones" and, indeed, the control the patriarchal family and community exercise over women generally (Sunlight 257-258). Whatever the circumstances leading to the practice, they had ultimately deleterious consequences for Muslim as well as Hindu women, hindering - as it does for the many women of Laila's own class - their autonomy, selfhood and progress in society.

It is noteworthy that Hosain opens Sunlight with an important reference to the disintegration of the practice of purdah through specific events that transpire at Baba Jan's feudal mansion at a crucial juncture in Indian history. Critically, the transitions that occur in a macroscopic national space are entwined with the changing

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33 In Sita's Daughters, Leigh Minturn explains how purdah observance in Rajput families curtailed "interaction of wives with their husbands and other members of their husband's household" to ensure hierarchical relations (quoted in Jain, "Erasing the Margins" 5).
circumstances at Ashiana, the ancestral home of the narrator. The first sentence of
the text attests to this alteration of lifestyle as Hosain draws Aunt Abida out of the
zenana and into the outer house, dominated by the presence of the old patriarch, Baba
Jan, who remains bedridden with a lingering illness: "The day my aunt Abida moved
from the zenana into the guest-room off the corridor that led to the men’s wing of the
house, within call of her father’s room, we knew Baba Jan had not much longer to
live" (14).

In Hosain’s novel, Baba Jan’s daughters, Abida and Majida, experience the most
radical form of seclusion of those who belong to the landed classes. This is symbolized
structurally in the layout of Ashiana that is split into two by corridors and doors,
separating the zenana from the mardana. It is also symbolized by other details such as
the discreet movements of the female members of the house, their silences, and the
fears of even the very young, such as the fifteen-year old Laila and her cousin, Zahra.
It is ironic that the situation of the women at Ashiana is not much different from that
of the servants who manage the household even though, theoretically, the women
represent the privileged upper classes of Indian society. By adhering to a strict code
of purdah that circumscribes them to an easily controllable domestic terrain, these
women have been eliminated from communal/national life, with little access to and
knowledge of power, visibility and mobility.

Indeed with the death of Baba Jan and the take-over of the ancestral house by
Uncle Hamid, there are some positive changes at Ashiana that give the women
relatively more freedom and space to manoeuvre around the barriers of purdah: "it
was as if tight hands had been loosened which had tied together those who had lived
under the power of his [Baba Jan’s] will and authority” (112). However, the changes
one witnesses at this stage are marginal because Baba Jan’s son, though having lived
abroad and been exposed to a Western liberal education, is still essentially
patriarchal, unable to discard his conservative outlook and centuries-old familial
habits. Very much in the mould of the British colonialists whose
paternalist/imperialist attitudes gave them a contorted vision about their inherent
right to dominate the lives of colonized Indians, Hamid is an authoritative figure who
dominate everybody who comes under his care.

Even Aunt Saira, his wife, though Westernized and superficially out of purdah,
is under the tyrannical sway of Hamid, devoting her life to aimless pursuits. As Kemal
and Saleem, Uncle Hamid’s sons observe rightly, these are women “whose minds
remained smothered in the burqas they had outwardly discarded, and men who met
women socially but mentally relegated them all to harems and zenanas” (207). Positioning herself as a recluse in the home of her patronizing uncle, Laila perceives her relationship with the Hamids and their coterie of friends as an uncomplicated one, “nothing deeper than its outward forms”. At the same time, as the much-loved Aunt Abida leaves Ashiana after her marriage, and Laila becomes increasingly alienated in her ancestral abode, her outwardly acquiescent disposition begins to falter: “Inside me, however, a core of intolerance hardened against the hollowness of the ideas of progress and benevolence preached by my aunt and her companions. Rebellion began to feed upon my thoughts but found no outlet” as yet (138).

As for the complex portrait of Abida, even though she is constrained by the rituals of purdah, she maintains an ambivalent position at Ashiana for she is neither illiterate nor deprived of an education like many of the other women in the zenana. She is an erudite woman with knowledge of Persian poetry and Arabic theology, and possessing a refined sensibility (note parallels with Hosain’s own mother). This gives her the power to safeguard her niece, Laila, and support her in her decision to further her education outside Ashiana, despite strong opposition from senior family members. Given the contradictions in Aunt Abida’s status, she seems to be neither deterred by Mohsin Bhai’s chauvinism nor affected by Uncle Hamid’s overpowering paternalism. The predicaments to which she is eventually exposed after marriage are, therefore, to an extent a result of her own actions and personal convictions about notions of honour, loyalty and duty, conditioned for years by the patriarchal strictures of a system from which she is unable to extricate herself. Admirably, she does not allow her personal sentiments to get in the way of Laila’s education, even though she is greatly disappointed to learn later of her niece’s relationship with the impoverished Ameer. At the same time, Aunt Abida suffers the most under the care of Uncle Hamid when she (like Laila’s cousin, Zahra) is quickly given in marriage to an incompatible relative and compelled to move out of Ashiana, complying with rigid matrimonial strictures of patriarchal Indian cultures.

While Laila herself is not overtly restrained by the norms of purdah (because of her late father’s request to see her educated), she too is constrained by the invisible barriers of a system that determine her activities outside the domestic realm. It is not until the end of the novel - especially in Part Four - that we see Laila defying these obstacles as she charts out a new life for herself through a lengthy and painful process of self-reflection that leads, inevitably, to separations from those whom she loves.
most (Aunt Abida is a case in point), and adjustments to new and, sometimes, overwhelmingly unfamiliar and difficult circumstances.

In Hosain's rendition of Laila's and Ameer's relationship, there are specific references to the norms of purdah that discouraged women from mingling freely with men, and choosing their individual partners. By starting a relationship with someone who neither belongs to her family's circuit of friends nor has similar class links, Laila transgresses the boundaries regulating the practice and subverts the stultifying morality of the affluent landholding classes.

An interesting feature of Sunlight is the way in which Hosain interweaves the trope of purdah with elements of Urdu/Persian ghazals and their characteristic references to romance, enigma and innuendoes. The inaccessibility and the difficulty of communication between lovers, because of the norms governing purdah are familiar themes of Urdu poetry, reflected in Hosain's narrative method as well. According to Mujeeb's study, conceptions of love in Urdu/Persian poetry of the 19th century was an already established tradition, and one of its unique features is "the organic assimilation of sacred and profane love in a wealth of symbols" (144). Concurrently, the beloved in this poetic tradition is something of an enigma because the poet expressed lyrically love that could not lead to courtship and marriage: "To be married was the right of the 'free' .... Traditional ideas of honour required that free women [sic] should be kept out of sight, and they had to be kept out of sight in literature also" (144). The love that the poet describes, therefore, could not manifest itself at home but in some peripheral space - such as the salon of a courtesan. This marginalized sphere is described vividly in Sidhwa's rendition of Hira Mandi, the red light district of Lenny's Lahore to which Ayah as a glamorous courtesan is confined after her abduction by Ice-Candy-Man. Given the hostile attitude of dominant orthodox cultures towards love and courtship, Laila is faced with the dilemma of having to accede to the ideals of izzat, while pursuing concurrently her feelings and sentiments that reject conventional boundaries. By doing so, she strives to nurture a relationship that is considered "profane" by all her older relatives, including her much-loved Aunt Abida. However, because she firmly believes that the man she marries should be the man she loves, she courageously takes many risks, and by doing so, exposes herself to criticism that tarnishes not only her reputation but also that of her respected taluqdari family. To avoid chastisement and being considered "immoral", Laila, similar to the traditional poet, is compelled to keep her relationship
with Ameer a well-guarded secret. The following illustration from Chapter Thirteen demonstrates this point succinctly:

Until Ameer came the days were tense waiting for him and after he came they were strained with pretence. Each word and look and action had to be watched in case it betrayed how we felt for each other. Through every stretched-out hour of the day I waited for those moments when my thoughts would assume shape, sound, and touch. [238]

Their encounters and dialogues, and their affection for each other (reminiscent of Bushan’s relationship with Razia in Mistaken Identity) are couched in a poetic idiom of romance, innuendoes and indirections, found in the love lyrics of traditional ghazals that were composed in the Mughal courts of yesteryear.

Simultaneously, when Laila does eventually confide in the one person whom she dearly respects, she is deeply perturbed to discover that her aunt disapproves of Ameer because he neither belongs to their aristocratic social stratum nor has the financial capacity to secure Laila’s accustomed lifestyle. Though the narrator herself is unruffled by Ameer’s unfortunate predicament, she is nevertheless ostracized by her aunt (and other relatives) for making a decision that defies the notions of duty and sullies the family honour.

Weighed down by the oppressive norms of a life in purdah, Aunt Abida’s attitude crushes Laila who yearns to liberate herself from the shackles of frustrating traditions. The aunt sees herself resolutely in relation to her family and her status in society. Extracted from this social positioning, she (unlike Laila) has neither an individual identity, nor any personal goals to attain or aspire towards. Thus at the end of the text Laila discovers her aunt in pitiable circumstances, clinging stoically to a set of antiquated values in her husband’s ancestral abode, surrounded by women who are too ignorant and vulgar for her refined sensibility: "They resented the sensitiveness of a character beyond their reach and understanding .... I was disillusioned in my hopes of an escape into peace, but I suffered more because of Aunt Abida’s acceptance of her life - and her silence" (251-252).

Hosain’s symbolic title, the “broken column”, reflects an awe-inspiring great Mughal past, a past that witnessed the consolidation of a nation (especially under Mughal emperors such as Akbar and Shah Jahan), undermined by religions, classes and
Historically, it is also a period that paid much homage to art and architecture, to poetry, song and literature. The “sunlight” itself could be a metaphor for the fleeting magnificence of this past that in Hosain’s text leaves an indelible impression on certain communities, especially the Muslim taluqdar of Lucknow (230).

At another level, the sunlight could be the moment heralding a more fruitful time, especially for the women of the zenana as they earnestly embrace education, politics and freedom to pursue their individual goals outside the domestic sphere. These imminent changes are continually juxtaposed with the looming presence of a potent past that “never disappears. It does not even become transformed into a ghost. Concrete, physical, palpable …” (Desai, “Introduction” v). As Anita Desai emphasizes, Hosain’s novel and short stories “are monuments to that past: the history of North India before Partition.” While this is true in one sense, in Sunlight, as in Hosain’s short fiction, the writer is taking a step further into post-independence India, especially in the last section of her novel, and, as indicated earlier, in stories such as “Phoenix Fled” that are shocking testimonies to the horrors of Partition.

In fact, Hosain’s inability to come to terms with a divided India, and a separate imagined state for the Indian Muslims is echoed throughout Sunlight via the narrative voice of Laila. In a profoundly personal essay written prior to her death, Hosain focuses on the problematic issue of Partition, and reconfirms that this unprecedented chapter of Indian history impelled her to leave India at the time of independence and settle down with her family in England: “My mind could not accept the division of India, nor could I have belief in the logistics and legalities which subsumed the ideals of freedom and Independence” ("Deep" 22). 37

The term “great” needs to be qualified for as much as the Mughals set out to unify a divisive India, syncretize its religions, and transport the architectural and artistic splendour of an inherent Persian culture to a rustic Indian scenario, they were by no means always prudent or pragmatic. As Percival Spear puts it succinctly: “The Mughals preferred a garden to a canal and their officers a tomb to a well. So the great opportunity of spending the concentrated national surplus on productive work was lost; India was the scene of much economic activity but little economic progress.” See Percival Spear, A History of India: From the Sixteenth Century to the Twentieth Century, Vol. 2 ([1965]; London: Penguin, 1990), 47.

On a separate note it can be added that it is ironic that Hosain should have opted to make the imperial state “the neutral area” where she could meet “those from whom we were now divided by borders of nationality and an artificially nurtured hostility” ("Deep" 23). After all it is also this “neutral” nation that created India’s violent colonial legacy and was strategically responsible (via a “divide and rule” policy) for re-mapping the cartography of India and for the devastating events following Partition. It is somewhat disconcerting that Hosain makes no reference at all to the complicity of British imperialists in the events following India’s independence, and instead speaks of the respect she has for a country that
5.2.3 **Revisioned Transitional Histories, Divisive Nationalisms and Configurations of Agency**

At many levels Hosain's fictional history, set in the rapidly transforming India of the 1940s, reflects transitions, fractures in existing social and political systems, and disintegration of time-honoured traditions and customs. Symbolically, some of these transformations are manifested in Laila's individual narrative as well, as she literally steps out of the *zenana* to continue her education and witness in person the emergence of an independent India. Significantly, though she belongs to a class of landholders who had access to many privileges, Laila herself earnestly awaits these transitions (one is reminded here of Hosain's loyalties to the socialist ideals of the Progressive Writers' Association). She sincerely believes that these changes will pave the way for a more just social system where affluent landlords are prevented from exploiting their less fortunate tenants, and Indians, as an oppressed nation of people, are protected from the imperialist agenda of a colonizing West. Indeed, the momentous historical vicissitudes do not transpire the way Laila wistfully imagines or anticipates: "I recognized my dreams had always been of change without chaos, of birth without pain" (278). Indian nationalists were able to establish a viable decolonization process for Indian independence only through revolutionary activism. Similarly, as the novel divulges, it was only by introducing radical legal measures for the abolition of feudal landholding practices that the landed classes were made to accept *constitutionally* they no longer had the customary privileges of their predecessors.

Laila's narrative, as opposed to official archives, relives a national memory from the margins of a feminized space. Her perspective attempts to uncover an alternative history that reflects the views of the oppressed and the disempowered. The exercise of reviewing homogenized nationalist history in order to recuperate a peripheral account resembles the task of the historiographer who, while encoding an alternative subaltern viewpoint, constructs a theory of consciousness and change that is not merely transitional but revisioned as well (Spivak, "Subaltern" 197). Simultaneously, this new historiography attempts to fill the gaps, voids and incongruities in the homogenized archival records (both colonial and indigenous) by shedding light on the testimonies of the subaltern classes. These subaltern classes

*had given her “not just physical refuge but had an ideology of human rights and civil liberties.”*
included, in particular, the urban poor and the peasants who had initiated a consciousness of Indian nationalism, long before the nationalist bourgeoisie displayed interest in a decolonizing movement. As Spivak highlights "[t]he most significant outcome of this revision or shift in perspective is that the agency of change is located in the insurgent or the "subaltern" ("Subaltern" 197). Conversely, this historiography is in some ways not unlike other dominant historical chronicles: it thrusts to the periphery the female (sexed) subaltern subject, that is "the figure of the woman, moving from clan to clan, and family to family as daughter/sister and wife/mother, syntax[ing] patriarchal continuity even as she is herself drained of proper identity" ("Subaltern" 220).

By awakening the reader's consciousness to feminized readings of phallocentric colonial histories, writers such as Hosain, Sahgal, Aidoo and Djebar have in unique ways attempted to recover textually female subjectivity, and restore to the blank page the collective memory of women. In doing so, they acknowledge that the nation's history does not belong to one group or another and endorse Edward Said's astute observation that one cannot employ an exclusivist position to write the history of a nation for it is difficult, if not impossible, to "extricate subaltern from elite histories, they are different but overlapping and curiously interdependent territories."39

The comments on Hosain's text in the sections that follow are developed within the parameters imposed by the historical circumstances of early 20th century India, and the competing ideologies and cultural clusters related to the narrator's individual position and location. A study of any postcolonial work needs to bear in mind these sociohistorical determinants that help contextualize the text and preempt the analysis from slipping into "inauthenticity" or an essentialized, reductive reading. Thus when the thesis refers to the narrator as a female "subaltern" subject, or the text as an

38 These marginalized classes were responsible in the earliest phase of colonial history for shaping India's decolonization process by actively participating in resistance movements and struggles such as the Sepoy war of 1857 and the peasant revolts, especially during the 19th and early 20th century colonial India (for example, the 1919-1922 Awadh peasant movement). This nationalist consciousness on the part of the subalterns paved the way for a large-scale national movement in the mid 20th century that was invariably led by the Indian elite classes. The histories of the subalterns are therefore the counter-hegemonic narratives of official records that reveal only a few men (such as Gandhi and Nehru) to be the true heroes of India's independence struggle.

alternative assessment of hegemonic archival records, informed by the individual and collective memories of characters that constitute Sunlight, these definitions are used in specific contexts. The sections take into consideration the intersecting histories of race, class, gender and colonialism impacting upon and defining the protagonist’s personal narrative and the narrative of the nation she strives to recuperate.

It is a narrative that reveals to us a profoundly ambivalent personal history of a young woman on the peripheries of a once-affluent, but still circumscribed, male-dominated world. On the one hand, as pointed out earlier, the narrative chronicles the dismal conditions of women whose lives have been shaped and exploited by the stultifying norms of orthodox patriarchies. On the other, it records with a deep and uneasy consciousness the unashamedly decadent lifestyles and idle pursuits of those who belong to the protagonist's own social class and environment. Starkly critical of the privileges to which only the landholding classes have access, the narrator questions the extent to which these dominant groups have bartered away their political rights and, in the process, betrayed the subaltern classes by acting in the interest of British imperialists and making possible the century-long Pax Britannica. As Saleem in Sunlight attempts to point out to his taluqdari father “What do those privileges amount to today? .... They were given by the British as the price of loyalty, and as people become more politically educated they must question these rights” (231).

Sunlight is situated at the historical moment that witnessed the disintegration of a feudal landholding system and the consolidation of a deeply dissonant and yet collective Indian national consciousness. The system of landholding that was in existence when the British colonialists established themselves in Bengal in the 19th century was known as zamindari. The zamindars were a powerful landholding class who operated as the intermediaries between the existing colonial administration (in the Mughal era they were the aristocratic Mughal lords in the service of the emperor), and smaller zamindars and peasant tillers. The Oudh (Awadh) taluqdars of Lucknow, the Muslim landed barons to whom Hosain refers in Sunlight, were also an aristocratic class with large landholdings in many areas of Lucknow district.

It is notable however that during the Mughal period this aristocratic class was not allowed to own land, that is, it did not have a hereditary right over landholdings: the land assignments were for life only and the next generation had to start from the bottom with an official appointment. Aware of this predicament, Mughal landlords got accustomed to a life of heavy spending (as reflected in their architecturally worthy public works) since nothing could be saved or passed on to their immediate families.
As Percival Spear affirms in his explication of these subtle differentials: "[t]he Mughal nobility was an official aristocracy which was hereditary as a class but not as individuals, which was landholding but not feudal" (41-42).

Under the precolonial land revenue system the peasants had some rights that enabled them to use the land - as long as they were in a position to cultivate it, leave the estate for another if the landlord was unduly rapacious, and by and large, the system of revenue collection was fairer in the Mughal period than in other times. It is noteworthy that in precolonial times the landholding classes of India maintained close contact with the peasant tillers who traditionally worked in the estates of their aristocratic masters. This ancient connection between the landlord and the peasant was dismantled irreparably when the British revised landholding policies of the time in an attempt to increase revenue collections, needed to sustain the colonial administration and its officers.

Furthermore, in the particular case of Oudh to which Hosain alludes in her text (in fact Laila’s relatives reside in the once prosperous capital of Oudh, Lucknow, reputed for its legendary courts, and later, a strategic location of the 1857 Mutiny and civil rebellion), the province was brought under direct British rule in order to rescue it from the residual "effects of misrule and anarchy". By doing so, some taluqdars of the province were raised to the position of "natural leaders" of the people and given access to the rights of the landholding gentry of Britain (Pandey 234). In this process the British land settlement eradicated the rights of the peasantry and made their lot insecure and vulnerable to the manoeuvrings of unscrupulous landlords. Gaping rifts between the rich and poor widened under the new regulations of private ownership. The British colonialists thus created a new class of urban elite (represented in the text by Uncle Hamid and his colleagues such as the Agarwals and Wadias) who were loyal to the British Raj and imitative of Western standards and values. Significantly also, many of the indigenous elite were now Hindus while the old Muslim governing classes, as Aunt Saira observes, slowly lost their bases with declining fortunes and displaced.

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41 Existing landholding systems were radically disrupted under Lord Cornwallis’s Permanent Zamindari Settlement of 1793 and later, by Dalhousie, who introduced a hitherto unheard private property policy through a doctrine of lapse that dispossessed and dislocated many of the former landholding classes all over Northern and Western India.
estates: "She had clothed herself in remembered assurances of power and privilege ... but there was no one to make her see the nakedness of her illusions ..." (275).

It is pertinent to point out here that whereas the bulk of the new urban elite were close allies of the colonialists, the pre-1857 landlords (such as Baba Jan and his colleagues) were, in equal measure, openly antagonistic towards the imperialist regime: "From childhood they had been made to wear coarse hand-spun cloth and to hate all things foreign' (Sunlight 36). These attitudinal transitions as well as the new alliance between the indigenous elite and the colonialists are made amply visible at different moments of Hosain's text, such as in the instance when the provincial landlords of Oudh host a reception in honour of the English Viceroy, and Zahra persuades Laila to attend the occasion for which the protagonist has little regard or respect (146).

With all these turbulent transitions and the emergence of a new class of moneyed men, the narrator captures the gradual erosion of a Mughal way of life that had made much impact on the Northern and Western landscapes of India. The first section of Part Four captures, with a deep sense of nostalgia, the disintegration of a bygone era represented by Hasanpur and Ashiana. Though Laila herself is much against the rigidly stratified class system with its decadent and feudalist culture, she is saddened to see the diminishing grandeur of her childhood home to which only she could relate because her "most private emotions were contained by this house, as much a part of its structure as its every brick and beam" (272). Juxtaposing effectively her adolescent life at Ashiana, filled with relatives and domestics, with the nameless strangers occupying the residence in post-Partition India, Laila depicts the downside of losing a courtly culture in the mundane process of reinforcing and unifying a nation after violent dismemberment:

There were strangers living in the rooms once so private and guarded, strangers who were names in Government files balancing Saleem's name against theirs - he labelled 'evacuees', they 'refugees'. Their presence here, and Saleem's in their erstwhile homeland, was part of a statistical calculation in the bargaining of bureaucrats and politicians, in which millions of uprooted human beings became just numerical figures. [272]

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It is striking the manner in which Hosain reminisces nostalgically the loss of a past culture while synchronously acknowledging the need for the dissolution of a decadent aristocratic class, and critiquing in her characteristically elliptical style the division of India that resulted in "infinite loss" and "human Heartache":

Hundreds of thousands of families were faced with the necessity of changing habits of mind and living conditioned by centuries .... Faced by prospects of poverty, by the actual loss of privilege, there were many who lost their balance of mind when their world cracked apart. [277]

Concurrently, Spear's general remarks about the emergent new class of urban elite is applicable specifically to Hosain's text: "[t]here was a lack of such patronage of religion and art as even the late government had practised, a rush of wealth and disregard for piety which all lovers of the old world deplored" (99). Representing the nouveaux riches is Agarwal, a friend of Uncle Hamid, whose unflagging devotion to the acquisition of wealth is observed disapprovingly by Laila: "Agarwal's business prospered with the war. His water diviner's keen sense for potential wealth became sharper; and he missed no opportunity of making more and more money" (291). The jarring clash of two ways of life is captured with remarkable sensitivity in the following scene where Laila witnesses the beauty of Lucknow and the remnants of a Mughal past being submerged by the more immediate concerns of the present, hurtling towards industrialization: "The orchards and gardens of the Raja of Bhimnagar's house, which he [Agarwal] had bought, much to my uncle Hamid's regret, were merely so much valuable space. He cut down trees, dug up lawns, filled up ponds and built sheds and godowns for a small factory ..." (291-292). Section IV is particularly focused on these glaring transitions as Laila, who is now widowed, returns to Ashiana fourteen years after her marriage to Ameer and two years after Indian independence.

In the final part of this récit-souvenir, Laila is able to empathize better with the anguish and remorse of people such as Uncle Hamid who witness the collapse of an old feudal order, and are compelled to embrace national politics while adjusting to an overwhelming complex of new realities: the loss of centuries-old privileges; the crumbling of time-honoured Muslim traditions; the departure of British imperialists after Indian independence; the emergence of a new rich bourgeoisie; the transformation of courtly Mughal cities into urban centres; the escalation of Hindu-dominated states; the competing ideologies of the National Congress, Muslim League, the socialists, the communists; and indeed, the cataclysmic impact of communal
dissension that "spiralled across the county from the East to the West to the North" (282-283). Simultaneously, Hosain juxtaposes Laila's restrained sentiments with that of her Aunt Saira who is shattered when one of her sons, Saleem, crosses frontiers and establishes himself in the new nation-state of Pakistan, and the other, under dire circumstances, sells the ancestral mansion. Though Laila herself is deeply anguished to see Ashiana fall to wrack and ruin, she confronts "the disintegrating reality" with remarkable courage. Her aunt, on the other hand, is devastated with the new realities of her disintegrating world when her class is destabilized, and her community, the Muslims, attain minority status in a now Hindu-dominated India.

Similar to the fears of many landholding classes, Laila realizes that she will no longer have access to the privileges of her class and perceives how overnight people lost their humanity and were transformed into mere tokens, representing an ideology, a religion, a caste, by the jingoistic ideals of nationalism and Partition. The turn of events has catastrophic repercussions, especially for oppressed, marginal groups (as young Lenny sums up the situation succinctly: "Hari and Moti-the-sweeper and his wife Muccho, and their untouchable daughter Papoo, become ever more untouchable as they are entrenched deeper in their low Hindu caste. While the Sharmas and the Daulatrams, Brahmins like Nehru, are dehumanized by their lofty caste and caste-marks" [Ice-Candy-Man 93]). The effect of the massive psycho-social political transitions, triggered by the growing animosity and dissension between Hindus and Muslims, are witnessed at every level of society from the highest to the lowest (including the colonizer who begins to differentiate between the English and the Anglo-Indian):

I had known the fear of violence, murder, rape and mutilation, as hate-blinded revengeful men had streamed over the border ... the terror would not have been greater than waiting with my child for the beasts that had been men. I had shared the fear of those others who had fled from ... the fear of the fiery markings that branded Muslim homes. [304]

And yet, we do not see Laila being submerged by her grief over these devastating post-Partition events, partly because she has already endured the painful effects of being uprooted from privileged circumstances. She learns to accept resiliently her precarious new position as a widowed Muslim woman with a child and no support from her family at a tumultuous moment of history.
The turbulent events of Partition inform her that attitudes such as tolerance and compassion are not specific to any one group of people or community. Just as such positive qualities are visible in people on both sides of the divide (as in the case of Sita, a Hindu colleague, who protects Laila and her daughter when Muslims who opted to remain in India are targeted by rioting mobs), "hate-blinded men" are there in all narratives of the nation. Perhaps this unique vision encourages Laila to remain in her land of birth even when the ideological underpinnings of Partition persuade her (as it did other Muslims) to cross the borders to Pakistan and renounce her Indian identity.

Through Laila's fictionalized history, Hosain draws attention to the inextricably bound issues of gender and nation that have inspired the writings of Third World women/women-of-colour, from African and Caribbean writers such as Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, Michelle Cliff and Oliver Senior to Bengali writer, Mahasweta Devi, or the highly political Pakistani poets, Kishwar Naheed and Fahmida Riaz who have spoken candidly against successive postcolonial regimes that have shattered women's civic rights and obstructed their progress in contemporary Pakistan. An important preoccupation in Sunlight is Hosain's sentiments about the splitting up and redrawing of national boundaries in the Indian subcontinent, an imagined community with one of the oldest civilizations in the world. While, on the one hand, the writer takes issue the male nationalist's desire to redefine and fracture a nation (without having adequately considered the repercussions of such a venture), Laila's uncertain future at the end of the Partition saga (paralleling Ayah's precarious predicament as she crosses borders from newly-formed Pakistan to her original home in Amritsar in Ice-Candy-Man) affirms categorically that "women cannot legitimately lay claim to a national territory or to their own national mythology and history". Hence, as Elleke Boehmer emphasizes "the lap of the Mother Nation may not be as soft and capacious for women as it is for men" (5-6). Simultaneously, as texts such as Sunlight, Ice-Candy-Man and Buchi Emecheta's Destination Biafra exemplify, neither do the ideals of nationalism address all individuals equally or equitably because "distinctions and discriminations

are made along gendered (and also class and racial) lines”, and nationalist discourse relies heavily on gendered languages to imagine itself even though national ideals may outwardly project a feminine countenance (Boehmer 6). That the concept of the mother nation has radically different implications for women is consistently reinforced in the works of Third World women as opposed to their male counterparts whose idealization of the "motherland" as a revered iconic symbol and conflation of the African mother with "Mother Africa" are, according to Mariama Bâ, something women can "no longer accept".46

The myriad views and competing ideologies of Indians which Hosain resuscitates in her text, bind together dissonant strands of a complex political struggle that envisaged, ironically, a divided India at the point of independence. The narrative divulges the way in which the rhetoric of nationalist discourse spurred more and more younger men and women (such as Saleem, Nita and Laila’s poorer relations, Asad and Zahid) to rebel against the political affiliations of their older relatives. Saleem, as opposed to his brother Kemal (whose views for a united India align with that of Laila and Asad), is politically more reactionary, and greatly in favour of reconfiguring the cartography of India with a view to securing the future of Muslims, India’s largest minority group. Acutely wary of political intrigues within the Hindu-dominated Congress party and the sinister undercurrents of sectarian/separatist politics, he remarks: "I believe the Congress has a strong anti-Muslim element in it against which the Muslims must organize. The danger is great because it is hidden, like an iceberg,” and quips cynically, "[t]he majority of Hindus have not forgotten or forgiven the Muslims for having ruled over them for hundreds of years” (233, 234). He is also encouraged in this mission by his wife Nadira and her family who see better future prospects for Muslims in a new Muslim state that only the ideology of Partition could have accommodated.

Yet, even though the narrator’s (and the author’s) position with regard to India’s status after independence coincide with the views of those who opposed a divided homeland, what one witnesses with the rapid escalation of hostility between Muslims and Hindus is the configuration of a counter-discourse endorsing Partition.

Whatever resentment Hindus and Muslims harboured against each other before 1947, it becomes glaringly obvious at the point of decolonization. Inevitably these communal and religious disparities have been responsible primarily for the violence following Partition, and the fragile relations India has continued to maintain with Pakistan up to date. These extreme strands of nationalist consciousness nullify the sublimity of a historic struggle for autonomy, instilling it instead with ambivalence, incongruities and gaping contradictions.

It is noteworthy that of all the characters in Sunlight, Laila appears to hold the most balanced views even though her position may also be critiqued by some for showing no commitment to any one cause. As Laila herself apprehends in a moment of self-reflexivity, "I felt I lived in two worlds; an observer in an outside world [alienated from her immediate relatives to whom she cannot relate], and solitary in my own" (124). And yet her disposition is such that when hundreds of thousands of landholders are forced to change dissolute "habits of mind and living conditioned by centuries" (277), she is pained to see the cherished values of an old way of life fall apart: "[l]ike death and all dissolution it was an end easier to accept with the mind than as a fact".

In diverse ways Laila is presented as a stark foil to her cousin Zahra at one extreme, and her politically committed friend, Nita, at the other. From Nita she receives her first lessons about the revolutionary struggle for India’s decolonization. Though a friend, Nita continues to deride Laila for her inactivism that she (Nita) attributes to the complacency of the affluent upper classes: "I'm afraid I cannot afford such abstract ideals. My education has to help me ... have ... a definite plan" (125). Laila, on the other hand, is not in a position to defend her class for which she has very little regard. Similarly, unlike Nadira, she is unable to defend her Islamic faith because "[h]er visions of the greatness of the Islamic world in the past was blurred for me by its decadence in the present" (125). Conversely, she is touched by the relationship Joan, an Anglo-Indian colleague, has with her mother, even though Laila, like her friends at college, is repelled by Joan’s unflinching faith in the British Empire. Thus, endorsing neither Nita’s radical non-elitist Hindu nationalism, nor Uncle Hamid’s feudalist mind-set, nor Saleem’s Muslim separatism and pro-Partition stance, Laila is portrayed as a character with a largeness and generosity of vision that is not evident in the other characters making up Hosain’s novel.

It needs to be interrogated as to what provokes Laila to do things differently from others such as Aunt Abida, Zahra or even the Westernized Sita Altarwal. Indeed one of the crucial factors which Hosain pinpoints during a rare flare up between Laila
and Mohsin is her exposure to a colonial education and Western culture (23) to which Zahra also draws attention later: "I suppose you’re going to find a husband for yourself? Maybe you’ll marry someone for love like Englishwomen do .... Your head is stuffed with funny ideas" (30). This observation, no doubt, is in some ways linked with the Western bourgeois notions of individuality and freedom that Anuradha Needham highlights in her essay (105). Simultaneously, as illustrated before, other intersecting factors such as Laila’s personality (her complex sense of belonging that at once locates her within and outside her world, her ambivalent loyalties to her family), her alienating (and yet independent) status as an orphaned young woman in a male-dominated Muslim household, and her initiatives to recuperate a marginalized personal history, have all helped to shape her views and guide her in the alternative decisions she makes to assert her subjectivity and agential position. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson also refer to these intersecting determinants in their discussion of how the marginalized (woman) subject sets out to construct a "voice, history and a future" by using autobiography as a medium of resistance:

One cannot easily sever, separate out, or subsume under one another the strands of multiple determinations. For instance, colonial regimes needed and global economies continue to need ‘classes’ as well as ‘races’ in order to achieve their goals. And class identifications call particular women to specific psychological and cultural itineraries that may collide and/or converge with itineraries of race and nation.48

In the light of these observations, the decision Laila ultimately makes as regards the choice of a partner is a critical one as it signifies a step towards an independent, autonomous life that takes her out of the zenana and releases her symbolically into the sunlight of the outer world. Conversely, the resolution she makes by defying the sanctified cultural norms of her conservative world and by rebelling against the traditional notions of izzat and sharam, is more of a personal statement than a public

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47 It is noteworthy that Uncle Hamid (like the younger family members) has also acquired similar Western values through access to a colonial education: "... he admired Western forms of behaviour. His relations no longer expected him to conform to traditional patterns ..." (86). Nevertheless, because of numerous intersecting (mythico-religious, cultural and class) factors related to his conservative upbringing in a rigidly dominant patriarchy, he is unable to approve the decisions Laila makes, especially her decision to marry a man of her choice or, for that matter, accede to his sons’ oppositional political commitments.

one. From a broader perspective (given the highly specific context of Indian nationalism to which the novel refers), such a resolution may have little impact on the more serious affairs of public life. Nevertheless, to a discourse of gender and feminism, this is a vital step forward, because the narrator transgresses the patriarchal class aspirations of her world, and by this defiance, succeeds in asserting her rights as an individual Muslim woman and configures a future for herself based on personal choice and will.

In summing up, the following section returns briefly to Part Four of Sunlight as it has been critiqued by some scholars to be structurally weak and superfluous to the narrative developments of the text. The final part, rather than being "extraneous" or discontinuous, is in fact crucial to the narrative thread of the fiction as it helps to interweave via an irreparably transformed Ashiana the previously polarized domestic and public spheres. Significant to this last section is Hosain's intention to conflate the personal history of Laila with the narrative of the nation. From this point of view, Mukherjee's question: "The trouble lies in the confusion of purpose. Does the novelist intend to present from Laila's point of view a picture of men and manners in a particular period of Indian history, or does she intend to present one individual's groping towards self-realization?" (53), seems redundant; after all, throughout the fictional history, what Hosain has strived to achieve is a cohesion of the personal and the national narratives, one inseparable from the other. Interestingly, each of the chapters in Part Four relates to the domestic interiors of the disintegrating Ashiana (Uncle Hamid's study, the dining room, the pantry and so on), and as Laila enters the different sections of the dilapidated, ghostly mansion for one last time, individual spaces in the house recuperate individual narratives, and rekindle memories that bind the personal/familial history with the historical narrative of a nation's struggle for independence, sovereignty, and redefinition of cartography. In this sense, Antoinette Burton is right in suggesting that Ashiana is an archive filled with stories, or a storage space from which the past can be gleaned through images, smells and voices. More importantly, Burton notes: "Like all private spaces, Ashiana's are never simply or self-evidently interior but are continually open onto the public, the national, and the historical, helping not just to reflect these domains but to produce them as well."49

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It is also in this final section that the writer presents Laila as a more mature woman in control of her life, and with a "keen and consistent" political sensibility (Burton 132). Here one can agree with Sarla Palkar that Laila's quest for autonomy and self-contentment does not end with her marriage to Ameer: "What the novel demonstrates is that the subjection - for a person or for a nation - is a painful process and it does not come without suffering or some sort of loss" (115). Additionally, the case-history method to which Mukherjee refers gives the narrator time and space to acquire deeper wisdom and insight to grapple with the new challenges of life. The knowledge she gains thus enables her to be constructively self-critical: "In the beginning I blamed my elders because it was their world and its values that had broken into ours" (315), and to acknowledge courageously: "I ... knew I was my own prisoner and could release myself" (319).

Reflecting upon the narrative developments from this angle, one may disagree with Mukherjee about the concluding events of the text as well, even though she is right in pointing out that there is here a great degree of nostalgia that some may consider excessive. Mukherjee suggests that Laila's decision to unite with Asad is symbolic of "a final submission to traditional values". Contrary to this view, if one were to reassess Laila's sentiments, it is evident that she makes every effort to release herself from "self-pity, through the negation of despair, into a recognition of struggle and positive acceptance" (317). Despite the nostalgia and empathy with a "lost culture", for Laila, there is absolutely no question about retreating to the old order of which she has been critical all along. We may wish to ask, what one expects a person in Laila's predicament to do after the many difficulties she experiences on the personal front (excommunication from her family, death of her husband) as well as on the national (decolonization) and communal (Partition) fronts. As the narrative divulges, she has endured her fair share of despair living and moving through "an endless tunnel with no exit". So revisiting Ashiana before it is sold to strangers, in a way, gives her the opportunity to reassess the past, re-evaluate her life and put things into some meaningful perspective. This re-negotiation, while relieving her from the long-internalized barriers of purdah and the burdens of bitterness, devastation and self-imposed solitude, creates a way for her to chart a new life and anticipate a more promising future. Perhaps she may enter this new phase with Asad, a man who has always been a friend and soul-mate. However, this "positive acceptance" of Asad negates neither her newly-found confidence nor her more constructive resolutions for the future. In this sense, her "relationship" with Asad is not a step back in the
struggles she has endured for her self-evolution. Every action transpires after much contemplation, born of a desire to transform positively with the vicissitudes of time. Significantly, the decisions are now neither made for her nor are her actions and mind “crippled” by centuries-old traditions that shaped her life as a child and an adolescent.

Whatever the views each of the characters in Hosain’s text uphold, they confirm the divisive images and dissonant ideologies of an emergent nationalism that is transient, ambivalent and deeply contradictory. Because of the discordant nature of these ideas and images in the construction of the “imagined community”, Hosain’s text discloses that there is no hegemonic definition one can attribute to what and who constitutes the nation. This is despite the fact that narratives of the nation aspire to establish a collective history and memory, “fetishizing the pretext of protecting its citizenry ... and extending this logic to the separation of ‘pure’ identities.”50 The nation thus becomes a socially and politically charged concept in Sunlight (as in other historical narratives): it includes as much as it excludes selectively: “There were strangers living in the rooms ... strangers who were names in the Government files balancing Saleem’s name against theirs - he labelled ‘evacuee’, they ‘refugees’” (272); it fabricates myths to assert a dominant position or submerges historical facts to oppress minoritized subaltern status; it campaigns for certain “truths” to be revealed repeatedly even as it violently and strategically suppresses other more vital historical realities; it can thus misinform or - to use a term of George Orwell - “doublethink” and conceal criminal acts by a veneer of self-justification.51 It can also silence Otherized identities and histories, or trigger off atrocities and cause bloody disruptions through the violence of unscrupulous demagogues and aggressive ideologues.

In the case of postcolonial Indian history to which Sunlight alludes, emergent ideas about nation formation led to such profound divisions within the two main religious communities at the point of independence that any thought of a united nation became a dauntingly elusive ideal. To this irreparably marred relationship between Muslims and Hindus Jinnah himself draws attention in his 1940 Lahore Resolution where he asserts: “it is a dream that Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common

nationality, and this misconception of one Indian nation has gone far beyond the limits ...
" (cited in Menon and Bhasin 5). In this context Said's perspicacious question - "Was
the radical energy that propelled Algerians and Indians into mass insurrection finally
contained and extinguished by independence?" - becomes strikingly rhetorical for, as
he quite rightly points out, "nationalism was only one of the aspects of resistance, and
not the most interesting or enduring one." So Laila reminisces ironically that with
decolonization came "the partition of the country, and the people of India and
Pakistan celebrated Independence in the midst of bloody migrations from one to
another" (283).

What is noteworthy and intrinsic to a discourse of the culturally- and
historically-constituted modern nationalisms is its Janus-faced character that preempts
any settled definition of the national narrative, glossing it instead with "doubleness"
of meaning. Homi Bhabha thus proclaims that the nation is "internally marked by
cultural difference, and heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic
authorities, and tense cultural locations" even though narratives of the nation
espouse a philosophy that strives towards a quixotic homogenized definition.

In these circumstances one becomes increasingly conscious of "the cultural
temporality of the nation" where social realities bound in the myths of time are not
static but in a continual state of flux (in Sunlight Hosain develops this in describing
the changing fortunes of India's feudal landlords). The situation is further complicated if,
as Said suggests, one "leave[s] the historical world for the metaphysics of essences like
negritude, Irishness, Islam, or Catholicism ... [where one is likely] to abandon history
for essentializations that have the power to turn human beings against each other"
(Culture 276). Such essentializations can create a fraternity or - to use a pithy phrase
of Benedict Anderson - "horizontal comradeship" that has the potential to make
millions of people "not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited
imaginings." Another fundamental paradox (as epitomized by Uncle Hamid and his
class) is that the narrative of the modern nation continues to mediate between the
modernity it proposes to identify with and the antiquated ambivalences it seeks to
embrace simultaneously. This propels Anderson to query eloquently in his influential

53 Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in
theses on the modern nation: "[b]ut why do nations celebrate their hoariness, not their astonishing youth?" (cited in Bhabha 293).

The phenomena discussed above are witnessed not only in the history of India’s Partition and the creation of West and East Pakistan (Bangladesh) - when millions of displaced and dispossessed Indians lost their centuries-old identities within a matter of days, or hours - but also in the disconcerting events of the 21st century (such as the divided stateless predicament of Kashmir, the brutal military occupation of Palestine, the on-going civil strife in Sri Lanka) when much crimes have been committed against innocent peoples in ideological battles over the question of what and who constitutes the nation.

It needs to be stressed that though many nations have officially regained their sovereignty through the successful execution of nationalist struggles, the process towards nation-formation has never been completed or concluded: “the nation (and its traditions) is constantly being recreated: contested, fractured, elaborated, redistributed, and rewritten, as new resolutions are negotiated or, as is more often the case, effected. Its closures, therefore … are never complete, never total.” As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita sum up in their eloquent introduction to Indian women’s writings, given the high Romanticism and the rhetoric of nationalist discourses (which leaders of emergent nationalisms employed strategically and vociferously), the resolutions they propose and advocate are those that were contested and “in fact, often shaped by the very disjunctures they sought to avoid, the very resistances they strove to contain” (53). An outstanding reason for this particular contradiction lies in the inconsistent strategies employed by the nationalist bourgeoisie after independence who bartered away “social consciousness” (as defined by Frantz Fanon) in emulating the authoritative models of government initiated by their imperialist predecessors. In doing so, they created a nationalism that promised “not liberation but an extension of imperialism” (Said, Culture 323). To the ironic contradictions embedded in the narrative of the nation and the collapse of utopian visions the narrator of Sunlight returns in the recuperative act of reliving the double history of the Self-as-subject and the nation-in-transition:

In my seclusion the urgency of the years of change and turmoil was made real through Asad. We had dreamed when we were young of Independence; he was now part of it with all its undreamt-of reality - its triumphs and defeats, its violent aftermath, the breaking-up of our social order, and the slow emergence of another. [318]

As Hosain articulates through narrative revisionings, the dismantling of an old feudal order and the process towards decolonization will not necessarily usher in a better or more just system for India or Pakistan (or any other nation, in this age of rapid globalization) unless there is sincere commitment to the rebuilding of the nation where tolerance and acceptance of the heterogeneous groups representing the nation take high priority. Equally important to the survival of modern nation-states and the harmonious co-existence of various groups constituting these states is good governance that springs from a constitution that guarantees fundamental civic rights and equal dignity (of race, language, class and sex) to all citizens without prejudice or discrimination.
Chapter 6

Epilogue:
Becoming a Presence

Condemn me!
For spending my life,
For the purity of tomorrow's dream ...
Kishwar Naheed, The Distance of a Shout

The voice, the voice, the voice,
Only the voice remains-
Why should I stop?
Forugh Farrokhzad, Another Birth

Traversing nations, geographical borders, and cultural locations, and underscoring the multiple categories of race, class, gender, religion and ethnicity that intersect in complex ways to represent the oppressed Self and Otherized identities, this study has explored the works of a group of women writers from Muslim and non-Muslim cultures in the postcolonial world space. The selected writings are examples of texts that strive to unveil the discrepancies and contradictions embedded in the historian's task of factually inscribing a knowable past. Works of authors such as Assia Djebar and Nayantara Sahgal are attempts at decentring and deconstructing official historical chronicles with a view to demonstrating the difficulty of knowing the intentions of people in the past, and therefore, the difficulty of capturing textually "history's inner directedness". In a Derridean sense, deconstructionist historical consciousness is a discourse subject to other discourses, a discourse that recognizes history as a cultural practice, where meanings are constituted through human interventions that are often non-objective and non-value-neutral.

One of the primary objectives of the thesis has been to configure the diverse processes through which the woman writer retrieves and dismantles totalizing, monolithic perceptions of history, demystifies the past, and imagines, invents and rewrites a different collective personal history for the manifold characters, representing individual texts. Concurrently, it explores several other strands relevant to a discourse of Third

World feminism. As the separate chapters disclose, while the writers do not pursue a feminist agenda with equal commitment or interest, given their preoccupation with myriad issues transcending gender and sexual discrimination, they are, nevertheless, profoundly sensitive to the multiple problems thwarting the advancement and self-preservation of women in different locations of the developing world. Put in another way, even though gender is a vital category, it is not the only, or even the primary locus of oppression for women of this world space. Consolidating this point, Marie Savane affirms: "For although the oppression of women is universal in nature ... [i]t is time to move beyond simple truisms about the situation of women to a more profound analysis of the mechanisms perpetuating the subordination of women in society ...."²

The works of writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Djebar, Mariama Bâ and Sahgal do see feminism in a specific light, as a philosophy and a movement foregrounding social justice not only for women, but their entire communities in which they are equal partners, and probing simultaneously the divisive issues of racism, (neo)colonialism and economic exploitation in an age of fast-paced globalization. As Donna Haraway states articulately:

There is nothing about "being" female that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.³

Third World women writers continue to assess gender discrimination, sexism and patriarchal dominance in relation to larger political and economic issues of varying geographical entities to which they are linked (even though Attia Hosain led a part of her adult life after India’s partition in England, and Djebar has lived a significant part of her life in France). Therefore, even though sexual egalitarianism and preoccupations with women’s marginalization and empowerment have been at the centre of all feminist

² Marie Savane was the first President of the Association of African Women Organized for Research and Development (AAWORD). See her article, "Another Development with Women," Development Dialogue 1, no. 2 (1982): 5.
debates (in Europe and North America in particular), to what extent these factors are defining criteria for Third World feminists remain somewhat inconclusive.

The complex interplay of varying categories in the works of these women do not necessarily make their “feminist concerns” explicit (in the Western sense), or their propositions and alternatives to patriarchal systems, values and practices less “radical”. Readers who are not attuned to a Third World feminist praxis may misread Third World feminisms to be not as vocal (or involved) as Western feminisms about issues related to “women’s oppression” and “women’s disempowerment” as Third World feminisms link gender with other disparate social realities.

Despite the degree of focus on women’s issues, a text that is considered “feminist” needs to be critically engaged with existing power structures whereby social, political and theoretical relations are probed, contested, subverted, revisioned. Furthermore, as this study has demonstrated, a feminist approach to literature needs to explore underlying ideologies shaping apparently “truthful” or "honest" accounts of reality: “As feminists we have to be constantly alerted to what reality is being constructed, and how representations are achieving this construction.”

Simultaneously, the reader must apprehend that simply placing women at the centre of a text or discourse does not automatically grant that work feminist status, for the intentions of the writer may well lie elsewhere. Rosalind Coward is therefore right in suggesting that

[i]t is just not possible to say that women-centred writings have any necessary relationship to feminism .... The Mills and Boon romantic novels are written by, read by, marketed for, and are all about women. Yet nothing could be further from the aims of feminism than these fantasies based on the sexual, racial, and class submission which so frequently characterize these novels. [230]

As demonstrated in this study, the social context of the text, the author’s writing practice and strategies, inherent ideologies and their mode of functioning are all critical for the configuration of a theoretical framework for feminist texts. While acknowledging the importance of textual and linguistics analyses, feminist critic Deborah McDowell underscores a contextual approach, especially for black feminist literature as it “exposes

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the conditions under which literature is produced, published, and reviewed." Elaborating further Barbara Smith reminisces that for far too long the existence of black women (or women-of-colour), their experiences and culture, and "the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these [have been] in the 'real world' of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown." Hence a Third World postcolonial feminist praxis in literature must seek to address the very predicaments that are specific to the geopolitical entities falling under the rubric "Third World". These include the mutually inclusive categories of sexual politics, subtleties of racial and religious politics, ramifications of corporate globalization and ensuing economic hardship for the marginalized sections of society.

What Smith sums up in regard to a consistent black feminist criticism is applicable in general to the writings of most women-of-colour and indeed to the prismatic field of contemporary postcolonial feminist discourse. To understand the ethos of Third World feminism, first, one must be willing to accept that there exists such a category which recognizes the identities of postcolonial women. The reader or critic should also be able to acknowledge that women-of-colour constitute an identifiable literary tradition and a verifiable historical tradition. Additionally, in exploring the works of these postcolonial women, the reader must be sensitive and responsive to the often daring feminine/feminist spirit that works in complex ways to subvert, destabilize and deconstruct phallocentric ideologies, patriarchal/colonialist practices and traditions and totalizing imperialist histories. Postcolonial women's literature thus sets out to dismantle canonical literary conventions and produce a viable hybridity that in Françoise Lionnet’s words reflect "the double consciousness of the postcolonial, bilingual, and bicultural writer who lives and writes across the margins of different traditions and cultural universes." In the process,

many of the texts revision monolithic historical knowledge and construct works of literature that have positive emancipatory potential for women's self-evolution and sustenance in today's world.

By reading and assessing women's writings across cultures, this study has attempted to grapple with multifarious issues, including similar patterns of oppression, contributing to women's marginalization and disempowerment in manifold locations of the Third World. While entrenched religious and cultural rituals (sati, purdah) and legislature (Shari'ah, code of Manu) have contributed their share to define what "womanhood" should be and how women should perform in various cultures, other factors have operated negatively to marginalize and oppress women. Stifling conditions of postcolonial Algerian politics and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism; the imposition of Christianity and the impact of (neo)colonial, patriarchal structures on women's life in various parts of North and West Africa; the rigid application of orthodox Hindu scriptures on the identities and movements of Indian (Hindu) women; and the oppressive attitudes and values of the Indian upper classes are some critical concerns the writers broach to emphasize problems that have systematically restricted women to the margins of a hegemonic neo-imperial phallocentric universe.

While analyzing diverse conditions of specific postcolonial societies in the developing world (a necessary undertaking for contextualizing individual texts), the thesis has highlighted the varying risks women have taken and the price they have paid for transgressing cultural taboos against speaking out, subverting conventional beliefs and practices, and following individual goals and pursuits that flout the norms and perceptions of conservative society. Integral to this study have been the strategies women writers have employed to break the silence and violate societal standards without indeed "forfeiting the chance to be heard." Often postcolonial writers (both male and female) have been motivated to tell their stories (or the stories of other marginalized subjects of history) even at the risk of facing exile and vitriolic criticism, as in the case of Assia Djebar or Indian writer-turned-activist Arundhati Roy, or experiencing solitary confinement, like Wole Soyinka, who suffered a two-year imprisonment for protesting against the senseless Biafran War. In extreme cases, postcolonial writers have also faced

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death threats (Salman Rushdie and Bangladeshi writer Tasleema Nasreen\(^9\)) and execution, as in the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa who was hanged in 1995 for speaking out against the ecological damage caused to the Niger delta by 37 years of drilling in the region by Shell Oil.

Daunting as the task may be to weave together historical memory with its gaps, fractures and silences, many women have courageously set out to recuperate histories which they know they cannot possess in entirety, even in instances where the writers (for example Hosain and Sahgal) have been part of a history they are aiming to reconstruct. In the case of Djebar’s texts that focus on women’s participation in the Algerian war of independence, or Bapsi Sidhwa’s effort to textually inscribe the traumatic experiences of women in the wake of India’s Partition, a critical problem has been to resuscitate memories of trauma that are never completely knowable. Yet, despite the silences, the indirections and “inauthenticity” of documentation, *Ice-Candy-Man*, for example, chronicles in vivid detail a gruesome chapter of Indian subcontinental history that is etched incisively in the collective memory of both India and Pakistan.

As noted, many postcolonial women writers use narrative strategies such as evasion, metaphoricity, digressions, flashbacks, choric/communal expressions and silences to articulate textually the traumatic histories of women.\(^{10}\) As Djebar points out in the Algerian/Arab context, “rape” and other physical traumas are taboo subjects that are unspeakable and untranslatable, not only because of the damaging psychological effects experienced by victims who attempt to tell their stories of oppression, but also because of the implicit threats they encounter within patriarchal systems that define and control notions of ideal womanhood, bound up with antiquated ideas about honour, shame and

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\(^9\) Even though Taslima Nasreen has been vocal in her views about patriarchy and fundamentalism, as Khushi Kabir, activist and chairperson of the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) observes, Nasreen is not the vanguard of a women’s movement in Bangladesh, as Western media critics often portray. Furthermore, the controversial writer is not the only woman confronted with problems of fundamentalism in Bangladesh. Nor is fundamentalism the only issue thwarting the progress of women in the developing world. For further details, access [http://www.greenleft.org.au/back/1995/188/188p19.htm](http://www.greenleft.org.au/back/1995/188/188p19.htm).

\(^{10}\) For a thought-provoking account of how feminist texts recounting trauma can counter “narrative determinism” by engaging in strategies that can stand as “alternative structures of narrative”, see “Life after Rape: Narrative, Rape and Feminism,” in *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, Rajeswari S. Rajan (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 64-82.
women's purity. Such predicaments make the writer's task of restoring the collective history of women in decolonization a formidable one.

Rewritten hegemonic histories when dismantled or deconstructed do help to recover marginalized narratives. But these are narratives not always intact; narratives rekindled from a "craggy memory" etched with "mutilating" silences. At times, they may not even sustain a logical flow or attain cohesive restoration or homogenized representations from the peripheries. As Gayatri Spivak discloses, in such narratives there are too many "silences between bits of language ... silence filled with nothing but noise" that interrogate the authenticity of any historical narrative. Critically, these narratives also foreground feminine experiences of solidarity, valour, loss, tears and heartache which in this situation connote both "reality and its subjective apprehension - the experience of women in the past and of women historians [or writers] who can recognize something of themselves in their foremothers."

The interlacing of or the "continuum" between informal conversational tones, vernacular languages (of the formerly enslaved Africans or indentured labourers in the Caribbean), dialects such as Creole or patois, and an array of different (Standard) "Englishes" (African English, Indian English, Jamaican English and so on), underpin among other factors the dynamic impact of oral narrative strategies on the rewritings of women from the developing world. In Djebar's texts the continuum is attained through the fusion of French with indigenous oral patterns and tonalities from Arabic and Berber: "The muzzled sounds of oral languages behind my French, muted languages on its margins,

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13 I am indebted to Joan Scott for her illuminating study of "experience" in "The Evidence of Experience". This essay interrogates provocatively the argument that experience, often regarded as the origin of knowledge, "is an 'irreducible' ground for history". See Critical Inquiry 17 (Summer 1991): 786; 773-797.
14 "Language continuum" refers here specifically to the span of language forms evident in the Caribbean. They include not only the ancestral language of the Native Americans and the imperial languages of the colonizers (English, French, Spanish, Dutch) but also the adaptation of these languages in the form of Creole. Complex historical circumstances contributed to the emergence of various forms of Creoles that "developed out of the fusion of European languages with the imported languages of the enslaved Africans and indentured workers." See Claire Buck, Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992), 719.
placed outside the realm of writing ... resurface within my French ...."\(^\text{15}\) By inscribing thus oral textures and cultural expressions into her French oeuvre, in *Fantasia* Djebar creates a palimpsest that endorses a history of multilingualism or polyglossia in the Maghreb, and reflects a syncretism where Standard French is Arabicized in uniquely innovative ways. Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis surmises that such informal tones "can function as a buffer to screen out uncomfortable emotions that accompany painful experiences."\(^\text{16}\) Furthermore, as Etter-Lewis continues, "conversation acts as a magnifying glass through which details can be highlighted .... On the whole, oral narrative style is significant in revealing the meaning of words and phrases beyond the printed page ... [allowing] us to 'read between the lines', where deep-seated feelings are hidden and disguised" (47).

Elaborating the impact of overlapping linguistic codes (Standard English, Jamaican Creole etc.) on her formal writing, Caribbean writer Michelle Cliff elucidates how recourse to Creole, the commonly used language of communication in Jamaica, has helped her retrace the African part of her being and express eloquently,

> a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. On a past bleached from our minds. It means finding the artforms of those of our ancestors and speaking the patois forbidden us. [See Lionnet, “Mangoes” 327]

Such syncretic patterns (of merging disparate languages, dialects and cultures) in hybrid postcolonial texts, such as *Our Sister Killjoy*, communicate with powerful effect intimate thoughts and emotional experiences of those on the borders of colonial and neo-colonial societies.\(^\text{17}\) Aidoo’s Sissy defines the hybrid language of postcolonial writers as a liberating “secret language”, a historically forbidden mode of communication that dares

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\(^{17}\) Olive Senior expresses a similar viewpoint in defining her ingenious narrative style that conflates different speech codes and transforms the colloquial cadences of Jamaican vernacular into a legitimate linguistic vehicle for modern fiction: “… I am more and more concerned that my characters should speak directly to the reader and therefore I am dealing almost purely in narrative, in letting people tell their own story.” See Anna Rutherford, "Olive Senior Interview", *Kunapipi* V111, no. 2, 1986, 19.
to subvert existing norms of fiction writing and dismantle the hegemony of Standard English.

In provocative ways the modern Scheherazades of postcolonial societies also appropriate themes and devices from feminized crafts such as weaving; Arabic ritual laments, ululations of wedding ceremonies and funeral threnodies; dream interpretation and communes with spirits; basketry and so on to make their works distinctly hybrid. As illustrated earlier, many women writers transgress traditional norms of written literature and excavate beneath the linguistic surface so as to communicate the strength of individual words to revive a forgotten cultural matrix. Reappropriating archival materials pertaining to various colonized nations, these writers embark on an archaeological expedition "digging underneath the colonial process of subject formation" to recover the suppressed histories of those who are colonized and buried under the patriarchal myths of womanhood. In the Caribbean context, Lionnet identifies the following cultural strands that have resulted in the cultural creolization of Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean literature:

the European and the African influences [or Indian or any other minoritized culture], braided together, the experiences of dispossession that is characteristic of slave societies, and the concomitant need to question the tenets of Western humanism." ["Mangoes" 329]

In the Martinican poet Edouard Glissant's words, métissage is another term defining the practice of cultural creolization that celebrates hybridity and multivalency, or as Grace Nichols demonstrates, diversity and cross-fertilization of languages and cultures in the postcolonial space:

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18 See Djebar's "Forbidden Gaze"; and Greg Sarris' stimulating article, "'What I'm Talking about When I'm Talking about My Baskets': Conversations with Mabel McKay," in De/Colonizing the Subject, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 20-33. For literary representations see, for example, Erna Brodber's Myal (London: New Beacon Books, 1988); and Olive Senior's The Arrival of the Snake-Woman and Other Stories (Essex: Longman, 1989).

19 See for example Michelle Cliff's Abeng (New York: Penguin/Plume, 1984); Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions ([1988]; London: The Women's Press, 1994); Senior's Arrival of the Snake-Woman and Other Stories. Shifting effortlessly between the present and the past, many of these compelling narratives revision the shattering history of black people: of slavery, colonialism, the impact of the missionaries and Christianity, processes of assimilation, the loss of ancient African crafts and knowledges, and the fragmentation of the Other in a state of subordination and deprivation.
I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
From the root of the old one
A new one has sprung\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Métissage} can also inspire "revalorization of oral traditions and reevaluation of Western concepts" with a view to recovering and revisioning occulted histories and exposing crippling ideological distortions of archival records that can "transform our understanding of ourselves".\textsuperscript{21} Orality thus enables the postcolonial woman writer to access and revision dominant histories, distorted and encoded as inferior by totalizing Western/patriarchal historiography.

Deviant strands of women's fiction, for example, feminine autobiography as discussed in Chapter 4, are portent textual tools that assist in fracturing hegemonic colonialisist discourses and Western norms of textual Self-representation. These fractures occur when writers renounce a single authoritative voice in favour of more egalitarian communal polyphonic perspectives, often from the margins of dominant cultures (if we recall, in \textit{Far from Madina} this rupture is caused by the presence of the rawiyat). Such multiple voice-consciousness help challenge the hallowed category of singular authorship and subsume the views of an omniscient narrator.\textsuperscript{22} In the case of the myriad voices Djebar weaves into \textit{Fantasia}, they are the testimonies of women who "can't read or write", invisible, illiterate peasants whose life-experiences the writer attempts to transcribe as "a temporary story-teller". As exemplified in the autobiographical works of Sahgal and Hosain, alternative strategies of representing the Self that destabilize the "conditions and limits" of Western autobiography, propose new parameters for the

\textsuperscript{20}See Grace Nichols, \textit{The Fat Black Woman's Poems} (London: Virago, 1984), 64.
\textsuperscript{21}Françoise Lionnet, \textit{Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self Portraiture} (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 4-5.
\textsuperscript{22}However one needs to acknowledge, as John Beverly does, that "[I]here is a great difference between having someone like Rigoberta Menchú tell the story of her people and having it told, however well, by someone like, say, the Nobel Prize-winning Guatemalan novelist Miguel Angel Asturias " (17). Apart from the obvious reason of not being a part of the experience that is being transcribed, the erasure of authorial presence in the testimonial narrative "makes possible a different kind of complicity ... between narrator and reader" which "obligates an ironic distancing on the part of both novelist and reader from the fate of the protagonist". Other intrusive factors include contradictions of race, class, sex and age, as well as ideological intent and biases that frame the narrative's production. See John Beverley, "The Margin at the Centre: On \textit{Testimonio} (Testimonial Narrative)," \textit{Modern Fiction Studies} 35, no. 1 (1989): 11-28.
definition of literary conventions and genres, staking out a textual space for multiple representations and multi-dimensional views on decolonization, nationalism and nation-building. In the process, as Caren Kaplan affirms in an assessment of women's resistance literature: "The essential categories of autobiography, especially as adopted by Western feminism in the last twenty years - the revelation of individuality, the chronological unfolding of a life, reflections and confessions, the recovery and assertion of suppressed identity - are utilized, reworked, and even abandoned.²³ Women's autobiographical texts inscribe a vision of new possibilities with a profound understanding of the divisive factors of race, ethnicity and class, as well as family ties and communal bonding. The fictional histories of women demand of its readers a consciousness and sensitivity to disparate palimpsestic histories, multilayered life-stories and culture-specific details of postcolonial societies that subvert totalizing European imperialist disquisitions and restrictive Western autobiographical praxis.

It needs to be emphasized, finally, that women writers cannot lay exclusive claim to the dynamic textual strategies they employ in their works as many postcolonial male writers have also used in their literature strategies of indigenous orature. In seminal works such as Things Fall Apart and No Longer at Ease, Chinua Achebe skillfully intersperses indigenous tropes, metaphors, proverbs and rituals to give the reader a sense of Igbo cosmology and the restless dynamism of the Igbo world that rejects extremisms and Manichaean oppositions.²⁴ The writer is thus able to channel a spiritual force to the aesthetic experience of crafting the text, harmonize the feminine with the masculine principle, and accentuate the dynamism and flexibility that distinguish Igbo ethos from the monocentric ideology of European colonialism. In In the Castle of My Skin George Lamming experiments with multiple narrative techniques, interspersing autobiography with third person narrative voices, drama with reportage and devices from journal writings. Similarly, in their fiction Raja Rao, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Salman Rushdie and Mukul Kesavan subvert linear narrative forms and are inspired to a great degree by the storytelling techniques of indigenous orature: rejecting chronological narration and the hegemony of a singular "authentic" voice, in texts such as Kanthapura, Petals of Blood, Midnight's Children and Looking Through Glass the authors illustrate patterns of cyclical

narration which give the writers freedom to move through time and space, to digress, to intersperse multi-layered stories and polyphonic viewpoints. As Rushdie divulges in *Imaginary Homelands*, haunted by the sense of loss, the writer as an exile "will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; ... we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (10).

At the same time, writings of postcolonial women (in particular, of the developing world) differ from that of their male counterparts, not only in regard to the experiences they communicate in their efforts to make visible processes of subject-construction, but also in the case of the more vocal feminist writers, in regard to their determined initiatives to focus and grapple with a complex web of issues related to gender inequities, sexual discrimination and women's disempowerment. A key factor that distinguishes women's experiences from those of their male compatriots relates to their double and sometimes triple oppression (see for example, Buchi Emecheta's *Head above Water*, Mahasweta Devi's *Imaginary Maps*, Ismat Chughtai's *The Quilt and Other Stories* and Bessie Head's *A Woman Alone*) resulting from the historically variable categories of race, gender, class and caste/tribal allegiances. As we discovered, the searing multi-faceted testimonies of women give us vivid insights into distinctly feminine experiences (for example, women's perspectives on war and the futile conditions women have had to encounter in the aftermath of various struggles), even though on the surface the writers may depict issues that are historically male-centered.

The exploration of issues outside the historically feminized space of domesticity and bold literary forays into male-dominated public areas have given postcolonial women the opportunity to reconsider simplistic dualisms (private/public, local/global), and thereby, redefine notions of space and women's transforming social roles and identities. Such transformations and disruption of polarities are a part of today's hybrid, transnational cultures, where conditions of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space have been accelerated by global capitalism. Critically, the blurring of

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26 For a study of how globalization has disrupted the gendered mapping of global as masculine space and local as feminine space, see Carla Freeman, "Is Local: Global as Feminine: Masculine? Rethinking the Gender of Globalization," *Signs* 26, no. 41 (2001): 1007-1037.
spheres is evidenced in the hands of women writers rather than their male counterparts because of women's fluid identification with the Other and, therefore, the continual crossing of Self and Other in their imaginative works. In such literature there is a greater willingness to unmask histories in which women have participated and not attained sufficient recognition.

While challenging debilitating geographical, socio-political and religious barriers that have constrained women's movements and activities to a domesticized sphere, women writers continue to interrogate and destabilize essentializing universal stereotypes (chaste virgin, veiled woman and so on), and confining (more rigid and less varied than men's) social roles. Feminine histories are thus profoundly moving records of the impact of patriarchies and their value systems and practices upon the lives of women and, importantly, the locus that provides valuable insights into women's individual and collective experiences.

Taking Scott's cue, we must be cautious to avoid the pitfalls of essentializing "women's experiences" whether these experiences relate to the concerns of Western feminists or Third World feminists. As Scott insists "[s]ubjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within anyone of them, multiple meanings possible for the concepts they deploy" (793). Indeed subjects can experience agency as much as they can encounter subjugation and oppression depending on specific circumstances, as many of the texts in the thesis attest. That is, they are not "unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them (Scott 793, emphasis mine). Such consciousness about the risks of essentializing can reduce the possibilities of reductive analyses where women are situated as an always already constituted group "one which has been labeled 'powerless,' 'exploited,' 'sexually harassed' etc". 27

By assuming the role of the writer and gaining access to a historically phallocentric language and the blank page of the text, postcolonial women have attained a strategic position to articulate women's experiences and perspectives, inscribed inadequately in the literature of most male authors. Throughout most of her past history, the woman

writer was compelled to "Tell the Truth but tell it slant", to quote Emily Dickinson. By violating existing paradigms, by "seizing" a previously male-dominated language, and shaping and crafting this language to give it literary weight, the contemporary woman writer has carved out for herself a place in literary history, and attained a freedom to reinforce a feminine aesthetic and encode her text with a woman’s vision. This process towards revisionary transformation has helped reduce the historically debilitating silences in the woman’s world, and address sexist omissions and oversights in the fiction of male writers, and ruptures and inconsistencies in the master narratives.

In women’s textual inscriptions the readers are thus taken on a journey of Self-discovery where the silent Other of sex, language and culture is made visible and given a critical voice-consciousness:

... I am the cry, stretched out into resonant blind flight; the white procession of ghost-grandmothers behind me becomes an army propelling me on; words of the quavering, lost language rise up ....

With poetic eloquence Djebar inscribes the process of writing and discovering oneself as a craft encompassing immense possibilities that embraces paradoxically moments of sadness, despair and death, as well as moments of defiance, exhilaration, rebirth and reconciliation. From this point of view, Lionnet is right in suggesting that "Writing is the act of self-emancipation which allows the narrator to reach autonomy, despite her painful bleeding...." Significantly, the pain of writing and the journey towards self-emancipation are analogous with the pain of resistance and revolutionary struggle for decolonization, independence and justice; for the preservation of the dead and the living, of the absent and the disempowered.

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279


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286


