

DYNAMICS OF VIOLENT LOVE—THE  
FLUCTUATING MOTHER/DAUGHTER  
RELATIONSHIP IN ASSIA DJEBAR'S *ORAN*,  
*LANGUE MORTE* AND NINA BOURAOUI'S *LA  
VOYEUSE INTERDITE*

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Maghrebian literature presents readers with portraits of extraordinary violence and beauty, which are logical results of societies in crisis in the world of the Maghreb. Both male and female writers include this violence in many different forms in their works: through their choice of words, metaphors, their use of irony, and above all through the varied narrative voices and opinions that weave their stories together.<sup>1</sup> The Maghrebian family unit, commonly perceived as a construct in which one finds tenderness and security under the effects of colonization and fundamentalism, seems to be particularly affected by this violence. It is in fact transformed by it, especially for female family members.

In *La Peur-modernité*, Fatima Mernissi makes reference to this unstable female situation: "Précaire est déjà une destinée de femme dans une société arabe vivant en paix. Vacillante est cette destinée dans une société arabe mise à feu et à sang par des forces étrangères" (9). In societies that have already been shaken by colonization and de-colonization and then present-day inner turmoil, stability among citizens and thus inside families, becomes rarer. As the battle between tradition, nationalism, globalization, and free will rage in the Maghrebian world, so too relations between parents and children in this context become battlefields. Here, the war between sexual liberty and governmental and religious authorities is fought in contemporary societies. Mernissi explains in another book, *Beyond the Veil*, that sexual repression and frustration are direct results of Maghrebian economics in crisis. They are burdened with unemployment

and poverty: "Less visible but probably more pernicious than the economic aspect is the psychological function of female oppression as an outlet for male frustration and aggression" (160). Women, being the least considered members of the society, are the first targets of men's frustrations.

The religious and societal tensions that exist in the *Umma*<sup>2</sup>, the Muslim community of believers to which all the faithful belong, but in which male members enjoy the privilege of movement outside the home, invade the familial and thus feminine domestic space. The intervention of the father/husband figure who regulates religious tradition, also regulates the economic security of the home.

The male/female dynamic seems to impassion social scientists and psychologists. Studies of male/female relations in the Maghrebian context are widespread and have been greatly researched. It seems however, that the study of relationships between women in these societies is less documented. This is a surprising lacuna when one considers the internal power struggles that women of the Maghreb experience with male members of their families. In turn, these struggles filter into their relationships with other women. This study will question this lacuna and establish that female relationships, especially those between mothers and daughters, are extremely important in the Maghrebian Algerian context and that these relations reflect not only conflict in the patriarchal rule of Algeria but also women's struggle for self-determination and social change.

According to Hossain Bendahman, in his work, *Personnalité et fonction paternelle au Maghreb*, the mother in Maghrebian society has a very positive role: she is the agent of educational and protective duties. She supervises her children's respect for tradition and manages the domestic space. She is the intermediary for her children and husband (215). However, her own behavior and overall status in life are regulated by her husband who guards the ultimate authority in the home and has the power to move back and forth between the interior space of the family and that of the Umma.

There is a serious dichotomy between the relationship of mothers and sons in the Maghreb and that of mothers and daughters. Indeed, there is a strong bond between mother and son. The son represents the mother's

reproductive success in the domestic and societal space. The son replaces the father's power over the mother and he becomes her main concern as she shares with him the instruction that he needs to succeed in the traditions of society. His relationship with her determines how much esteem and respect she will receive. Unfortunately, the daughter suffers in this construct. Less worthy than the son, she also is subjected to his power. The male child inserts himself in-between the power of the father over the mother and dominates his sisters through his mother's interventions, which may include violence if a daughter tries to defend herself from the aggressions of her brother (Bendahman, 211).

The Maghrebian mother encourages and perpetuates the male/female violence that will be, at a mature age, all too obvious to her children in the adult world. The daughter's low status in the Maghrebian family is first constructed by her own mother, who subjugates her and gives her the example of submissiveness in the presence of men. As a wife, a daughter will contend with the power of her mother-in-law who may be even stricter and more domineering with her than her own family. It is obvious that in this relational structure nurturing links between female family members are difficult, if not impossible to create.

These societal and domestic tensions felt by women in a Maghrebian society create a mother figure that is paradoxical. The mother can be courageous and tender, but is at the same time very capable of violent action and hatred for her own daughters. This ambiguous figure is widespread in the works of both male and female Maghrebian writers. Many novels include recurring scenes of physical violence, sometimes resulting in death, and psychological violence in the seclusion of young girls and their ultimate sacrifice in an arranged marriage or their own suicides.<sup>3</sup>

Assia Djebar, with *Oran, langue morte* (1997), and Nina Bouraoui with *La voyageuse interdite* (1994), explore the roles mothers play in relation with their daughters. These roles fluctuate between two types of mothers—the "mère-bourreau," or mother-executioner, a mother who exerts psychological and/or physical violence upon her daughter, and the "mère-libératrice," or the mother-liberator, who brings a freeing influence into her daughter's life. The same mother character may exhibit qualities of both of these mother types in a variety of combinations. This ever-

changing paradigm creates instability in the mother/daughter relationships and ambiguity in the texts.

In *Oran, langue morte*, the "mère-bourreau" appears several times, too many to be enumerated here. However, one poignant example of the mère-bourreau appears in the short story, "Mère et fille—3." In this story Djébar portrays the actions of a mother who, desperate to alleviate tension with her husband and with her familial space, kills her daughter. The daughter, Ourdia, has only committed the crime of drinking a soda in a café with a young man from her university. A male member of their family spies on Ourdia and reports her actions to Ourdia's father who removes her from the university and locks her in her room. Ourdia's mother, who is characterized as "Une dame silencieuse, apeurée, durcie" (Djébar 67), takes a more aggressive approach to resolving the situation and to ending the eight days of verbal abuse her husband has showered upon her. The mother commits a final act of violence toward her daughter:

Le huitième jour, au couchant, Ourdia est dressée, figure de proue à l'angle de la terrasse. La mère, silencieuse, apeurée, durcie. Ingénieuse aussi; qui se glissa tout près. D'un élan, dans un élanement, poussa, bouscula, précipita sa fille dans l'abîme— enfin dans les décombres de la maison voisine déjà détruite... (Djébar 68)

Ourdia's mother destroys her rather than keeping her prisoner. This violence could be construed as selfless if we interpret the mother as wanting to save her daughter from an impossible situation. The perceived shame of the father is visited upon and acted upon by the mother. Only by means of violence can she eradicate the cause of her problems and the familial tension.

In the same way, Nina Boutaoui's *La voyageuse interdite* studies one mother's relationship with her confined daughter and the daughter's eventual sacrifice in marriage to someone who will keep her equally confined. From the beginning of this young girl's narrative about her imprisonment at home and subsequent marriage to a stranger Fiktia, the protagonist, accuses the rest of her family as being the cause of her

sufferings. Indeed, her mother keeps her locked up and only shows remote signs of affection when preparing Fikria for marriage. We learn that Fikria's mother has been unable to produce a son for her husband and that she seeks redemption for this terrible fault through Fikria's marriage. In the fourth part of *La voyageuse interdite*, the mère-bourreau performs the act of sacrificing her daughter in marriage. Fikria is surrounded by other female members of her family and she is prepared by them for this sacrifice. Here Fikria's body is linked to food imagery. She becomes the fatted calf that will be devoured as the symbolic méchoui:

Allongé sur un lit de pommes de terre, d'ail, de persil, et d'herbes rouges, jambes en l'air, cuisses immobiles, sexes farcis, ventre béant et yeux mi-clos, graisse cirée et chair généreuse, le méchoui attend les doigts dévastateurs. (133)

Fikria's own body is transposed to the lamb meat and is not her own property, but that of her mother, the wedding guests, and her new husband. By extension the entire patriarchal system possesses her. Fikria later ironically thanks her mother for her preparation and mentions the fact that she too will have to perpetuate this same violence on her own daughters.

In the same way that the mère-bourreau has a profoundly negative effect on her daughters, the mère-libératrice brings the exact opposite to her daughter's life. Although there are fewer examples of the liberating mother in these two works, their presence is evident and their message of hope a strong one.

In *Oran, langue morte*, Assia Djebar presents portraits of this liberating mother/daughter relationship and its consequences. In the short story, "Mère et fille—1," which takes place during the first ten years following Algerian independence, Djebar explores the character of a mother who has emancipated herself from the constraints of veil and husband. The daughter describes her mother: "Je téléphone à ma mère. À quoi bon sembler émancipée, c'est elle plutôt, elle seule de nous deux, la mère qui a appris à conduire" (54). And the mother has not only learned to drive but also dyed her hair blond and taken off her veil. For the narrator, she and her mother transcend the idea of a rigid mother/

daughter construct. They are able to move physically about in freedom, which translates into the intellectual life of the daughter. She is a professor and completely in control of her space. Lack of restraint, lack of tension, and above all, joy, characterize this short story which presents the portrait of free exchange and good will between mother and daughter. This relationship is nothing like the one experienced by Fikria in *La voyageuse interdite*. No male members of the family or the community encumber these women.

There is only one real mère-libératrice for Fikria in *La voyageuse interdite* and she is not even a family member, but a Touareg maid, Ourdhia, who frees Fikria's imagination and helps her make virtual journeys that mentally free her. Ourdhia brings Fikria everything her real mother cannot and gives her more tenderness during her short stay in the household than the entire family ever has:

Toujours là pour prodiguer quelques fractions de tendresse, [...]; à travers elle je fuyais la nuit maudite, je captais l'étrange chaleur d'un long corps dont la peau craquelée aux endroits les plus tendres vaporisait sur mon visage les brumes d'une région lointaine [...]. Oui, je l'avoue, je l'ai préférée à vous! (Bourouï, 50)

Ourdhia not only brings the narrator physical and emotional comfort, but she also allows her to imagine the world outside her room and soothes the regime of sadness and austerity established by Fikria's mother and father.

Both the example of Ourdhia in *La voyageuse interdite* and the examples of liberating mothers in *Oran, langue morte*, provide readers with strong contrasts to the mother-executioners who seem so prevalent in these two works and in Maghrebian literature. Though they are few, they do exist and they question female relationships and interactions in Algeria and in other Maghrebian countries after independence. These liberating mothers cry out for justice for Maghrebian women and women everywhere and for an end to the cycle of physical and psychological violence that occurs in Maghrebian mother/daughter relationships. The drastic stance that stems from the contrasts between the two mother types reveals even deeper layers in the question of the relationship between

women and society in contemporary Algeria and women and writing in the Maghrebian world.

As we have seen, in Assia Djebar's *Oran, langue morte*, and Nina Bouraoui's *La voyageuse interdite*, the mother/daughter relationships are in a constant state of fluctuation. This construct is variable and this instability underlines a greater questioning of Algerian women's relationships with their space inside the Umma and with their relationships with other women. Nations in crisis, societies in crisis, and women of literature in crisis can all be linked in the Maghrebian context to this instability between mothers and their daughters.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a complete study of textual violence in Maghrebian literature, see Marc Gontard's book, *Violence du texte*.

<sup>2</sup>"In the seventh century Muhammed created the concept of the *Umma*, or the community of believers" (*Beyond the Veil* 17). Mernissi goes on to expand this notion of *Umma* as a delineator of sexual and societal boundaries: "Strict space boundaries divide Muslim society into two sub-universes: the universe of men (the *Umma* world of religion and power) and the universe of women, the domestic world of sexuality and the family" (*Beyond the Veil* 138).

<sup>3</sup>For further examples of this see Evelyne Accad's *L'Excisée* and Tahar Ben Jelloun's *L'enfant de sable* and *La nuit sacrée*.

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