The Other Tongue of a Thousand Tongues:
Examining Cixous’s ‘écriture féminine’ in Djebar’s L’Amour, la fantasia
and El Saadawi’s Innocence of the Devil

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Introduction: Theoretical Framework of *écriture féminine*

In her influential essay, “Sorties,” Hélène Cixous posits the idea of *écriture féminine* as a transformative writing style with the political power to weave feminine desire and sexuality into language and thus to break free from traditional phallocentric thought. Though she does not limit the concept of *écriture féminine* to women writers, Cixous emphasizes women’s troubled relationship to language and the ways in which language that inscribes feminine desire can challenge systems of oppression. Critics such as Ann Rosalind Jones have challenged *écriture féminine*, asserting that it paradoxically paints a monolithic portrait of female sexuality that does not account for differences in race, class, and culture (Jones, 253). In light of these critiques, how might *écriture féminine* still serve as a valuable theoretical framework with political potential? This essay uses Cixous’s “Sorties” as a theoretical framework of analysis for Assia Djebar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia* and Nawal El Saadawi’s *Innocence of the Devil*, two texts which also serve to illuminate both the useful and the problematic aspects of *écriture féminine*.

Before discussing the critical tenets, critiques, and potential of Cixous’s *écriture féminine*, it is important to understand the political and philosophical environment in which Cixous developed these ideas. Perhaps most critically, Cixous wrote in the wake of Beauvoir’s highly influential work, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, which laid a groundwork for understanding women’s oppression. While Beauvoir’s examination of woman as Other exposes the myriad ways in which man sets himself up as an active subject and treats woman as the passive Other, her work remains largely untroubled by larger questions about “whether language can ever give a transparent and truthful representation of experience” (Weil, 156). The movement towards *écriture féminine* demonstrates a shift from a mere identification of women’s subjugation to a concern for the capacity of language to represent women’s oppression and experience.
This preoccupation with language grew in part out of Derrida’s deconstructionist conception of *différance*, which asserts that meaning is generated through “the potentially endless process of referring to other, absent signifiers” (Moi, 106). In his examination of Rousseau’s writing, Derrida illustrates “l’absence du référent ou du signifié transcendantal” and states that “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (Derrida, 227). In asserting that meaning is not absolute but produced through an endless self-referential process, Derrida provides a toolkit for breaking down the binary oppositions that organize patriarchal discourse or, as he terms it, phallogocentrism. Furthermore, by deconstructing the opposition of speech and writing, Derrida links writing instead to the idea of *différance* through its endless play of signifiers (Weil, 165-166). Thus, Derrida not only provides the tools for a critique of dualities such as male/female, but also imbues writing with the power to break down the binary oppositions that organize Western thought (Moi, 107). Cixous’s conception of *écriture féminine* clearly expands on the Derridean notion that writing is a space for *différance* and for the breakdown of patriarchal discourse (Weil, 131).

*Écriture féminine*’s investment in the role of the signifier and in the power of language grew not only out of deconstruction, but also out of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In particular, Lacan’s readings of Freud emphasize the signifying value of the phallus, which determines its gendered subjects through the symbolic order of language: “Only by accepting the

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1. *Différance* can be translated as either difference or deferral in English, emphasizing the infinite play of signifiers (Selden, 165).
2. “the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified” (Derrida, 158).
3. Gayatri Spivak offers two translations of this phrase: “There is nothing outside of the text” and “There is no outside-text” (Derrida, 158). Some critics have pointed to the fact that, while the former may sound more correct in English, the latter is more true to Derrida’s intentions; to say that there is nothing outside of the text is to “[maintain] the inside/outside opposition that the statement in fact aims to overturn” (Leitch, 1682).
4. Derrida expands upon the idea of phallocentrism to develop that of phallogocentrism. Phallocentrism is an attitude of ethos “centred on the phallus, esp. as the symbol of male dominance and authority; dominated by male attitudes or cultural outlook, man-centred” (OED). Phallogocentrism, however, is “a structure or style of thought, speech, or writing (often considered as typical of traditional western philosophy, culture, or literature), deconstructed as expressing male attitudes and reinforcing male dominance; phallocentrism implicitly communicated in or through language.”
exclusions…imposed by the Law of the Father can the child enter into the gendered space assigned to it by the linguistic order” (Weil, 131). Lacan asserts that we do not determine language; language determines us in that our unconscious is structured like a language (Lacan, 20-21). Language is an alienating force in that it mediates each subjects’ identity and experience through a series of self-referential signifiers that do not directly represent reality. Language is a powerful and potentially oppressive force in shaping our identities, and Cixous takes this idea and uses it to further explore the particular alienation that women experience in relation to language (Weil, 158).

While other strands of feminism in the United States and Britain have focused on critiquing male assumptions and promoting women’s writing as a representation of female experience, French feminists such as Cixous have taken a different approach, pushing for a radical form of écriture that would “[subvert] the concepts, assumptions, and structures of patriarchal discourse” (Culler, 128). Though écriture féminine is generally considered a literary rather than a political movement (and is often criticized for this very reason), it emerged as a radical questioning of the status quo that reflected the link between the personal and the political that arose in the wake of May 1968 (Weil, 157). Indeed, Cixous herself founded a women’s studies program at Vincennes, an experimental branch of the Sorbonne where many influential philosophers and writers (herself included) would later teach (Leitch, 1939). Building on existing feminist, deconstructionist, and psychoanalytic frameworks in a politically-charged environment, écriture féminine critically examines and breaks down Western phallocentric logic to encourage a fluid, rebellious writing rooted in feminine desire—a writing that has been criticized for its inherent paradoxes, contradictions, and refusal to conform to any clear category.

Attempts to define Cixous’s conception of écriture féminine sometimes seem bound for
failure from the outset. After all, how to define a feminist theorist who rejects being called either a feminist or a theorist, and who, like Socrates, “claims to know only that she does not know”? (Leitch, 1938). Nevertheless, Cixous does outline certain tenets and general characteristics of *écriture féminine* that separate it from other writing. First of all, it subverts the phallocentric oppositions that limit Western language and silence women’s voices. Cixous begins “Sorties”\(^5\) with a series of hierarchical oppositions—*Activité/Passivité, Culture/Nature, Père/Mère, Logos/Pathos*\(^6\)—all ultimately linking back to the couple: man/woman (Cixous, 116). Cixous asserts that Western thought has sought to explain sexual difference through the opposition of activity/passivity—an opposition in which woman is always relegated to the passive role (Cixous, 117). Grounding her understanding of the harmful effects of hierarchical dualities in her childhood in Algeria, Cixous seeks to dismantle these oppositions that base desire upon inequality: “…la différence *sexuelle* avec une *égalité* de force ne produit donc pas le mouvement du désir. C’est l’*inégalité* qui déclenche le désir, comme un désir – d’appropriation”\(^7\) (Cixous, 145). Cixous thus seeks to create a space for a new, feminine language that will subvert these patriarchal structures that ground desire in opposition, inequality and possession (Moi, 105).

By grounding desire in the female body as a source of alternative discourse outside of the phal(logo)centric system, *écriture féminine* emerges as a new, alternative type of writing in which women’s diffuse sexuality can finally be expressed. Cixous, however, cautions against a simplistic reading of her text that would make it appear as if she is merely encouraging women to write from the body; it is not the female sex of the author that is most important, but, as Toril

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\(^5\) The title “Sorties” appears in Betsy Wing’s translation as “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays,” revealing the multiple different connotations and possible translations of the French title.

\(^6\) Activity/Passivity, Culture/Nature, Father/Mother, Logos/Pathos (Cixous, 63). All page numbers refer to the French edition of the novel indicated in the bibliography, unless the quotation itself is in English, in which case they refer to Dorothy S. Blair’s English translation.

\(^7\) “…the sexual difference with an equality of force does not produce the movement of desire. It is inequality that triggers desire, as a desire – for appropriation” (Cixous, 79).
Moi calls it, “the ‘sex’ of the writing he or she produces”\(^8\) (108). Rather than specifically privileging the female, she reclaims “l’autre bisexualité”—a bisexuality\(^9\) that has little to do with the hermaphroditic concept of two united halves, but rather one that rejects phallocentric castration imagery and encourages “…la multiplication des effets d’inscription du désir, sur toutes les parties de mon corps et de l’autre corps…[C]ette bisexualité…n’annule pas les différences, mais les anime, les poursuit, les ajoute…”\(^10\) (Cixous, 156). Though Cixous does not limit this bisexuality to women, she does suggest that it is women who seem most likely to be bisexual due to the historic and cultural investments they have in overturning phallocentric notions of rigid and monolithic sexuality (Cixous, 156-157). The bisexual fluidity of female sexuality creates an alternative libidinal economy in which she does not fear castration as the man does:

*S’il y a un « propre » de la femme, c’est paradoxalement sa capacité de se dé-proprier sans calcul : corps sans fin, sans « bout », sans « parties » principales…Son écriture ne peut pas aussi que se poursuivre, sans jamais inscrire ou discerner de contours, osant ces traversées vertigineuses d’autres, éphémères et passionnés séjours en lui, elle, eux, qu’habite le temps de les regarder au plus près de l’inconscient dès leur lever, de les aimer au plus près de la pulsion, et ensuite plus loin, toute imprégnée de ces brèves identificatoires embrassades, elle va, et passe à l’infini…Elle laisse parler l’autre langue à mille langues…*\(^11\) (Cixous, 162).

Because of the fluidity of the female body, which does not (unlike the male body) organize its sexuality around a single sex organ, *écriture féminine* does not attempt to draw boundaries and

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\(^8\) Cixous’s extensive work on male modernists such as Kleist, Joyce and Genet attests to this (Rooney, 164).

\(^9\) The Oxford English Dictionary online defines bisexual as 1) “having both sexes in the same individual” and 2) “sexually attracted to individuals of both sexes.” Here Cixous is referring to the former, currently less common definition.

\(^10\) “…the multiplication of the effects of desire’s inscription on every part of the body and the other body…[T]his bisexuality…does not annihilate differences but cheers them on, pursues them, adds more…” (Cixous, 85).

\(^11\) “If there is a self proper to woman, paradoxically it is her capacity to de-propriate herself without self-interest: endless body, without ‘end,’ without principal ‘parts’…[H]er writing also can only go on and on, without ever inscribing or distinguishing contours, daring these dizzying passages in other, fleeting and passionate dwellings within him, within the hims and hers whom she inhabits just long enough to watch them, as close as possible to the unconscious from the moment they arise; to love them, as close as possible to instinctual drives, and then, further, all filled with these brief identifying hugs and kisses…She lets the other tongue of a thousand tongues speak…” (Cixous, 87-88).
contours, but to explore the Other because she too is Other, constantly inside and outside of herself, testing the very notions of boundaries and borders.

The consequences of this fluidity are far-reaching and work to destabilize the same opposition of speech and writing that Derrida too deconstructs. *Écriture féminine* is “un privilège de la voix: écriture et voix se tressent, se trament et en s’échangeant, continuité de l’écriture/rythme de la voix, se coupent le souffle, font haleter le texte…”

Speech and writing blend together, interlocking with no clear boundaries between them (Cixous, 170). As with writing, speech is never linear or easy to classify, but bursts forth from the body; the body itself becomes a part of verbal expression, which in turn becomes a part of written language, creating a direct connection between the body and writing (Cixous, 170-171). Indeed, this emphasis on the spoken word and on alternative forms of expression beyond (and incorporated into) the written word may help to elucidate Cixous’s own writing style, which refuses to conform to standard rules of grammar and structure, leading to “experiments with prose that break normal syntax, effacing borders between subject/verb and active/passive” (Weil, 165).

Yet Cixous’s unorthodox writing style and refusal to clearly define *écriture féminine* have attracted much criticism from feminists and literary critics alike—criticism that needs to be addressed if the notion of *écriture féminine* is to retain any productive political or linguistic power. *Écriture féminine* is often viewed as essentializing women’s experiences in its discussion of the female body; Jones asks, “Is women’s sexuality so monolithic that a notion of a shared, typical femininity does justice to it? What about variations in class, in race, and in culture among women?” (Jones, 253). Indeed, one of the most prevalent critiques of *écriture féminine* is its inability to account for the complex and intersectional experiences of gender, race, class, and

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12 “[a] privilege of voice: writing and voice are entwined and interwoven and writing’s continuity/voice’s rhythm take each other’s breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp…” (Cixous, 92).
sexual preference (Weil, 129). Furthermore, some critics also see it as ultimately damaging to
effective political action because of its overemphasis on theory and discourse (Jones, 253). As

Djebar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia* and El Saadawi’s *Innocence of the Devil* become useful
texts in answering this question in part because both writers engage in feminist projects: writing
women’s perspectives and desires in the phallogocentric contexts of patriarchy and colonization.
Furthermore, both Djebar and El Saadawi remain preoccupied with language and its ability to
represent experience in different cultural contexts; both writers live in exile from their countries
of origin and often serve as the sole representatives of Algerian and Egyptian women for
Western academics and feminists. Clearly influenced by their own lives and politics, their works
reflect an intense preoccupation with women’s relationship to both their own bodies and to
language itself. Cixous provides a critical framework through which to explore these
relationships, while in turn Djebar and El Saadawi create a useful lens through which to examine
both the problematic and the productive aspects of *écriture féminine*13. In very different ways,
both texts embody *écriture féminine* by dismantling phallocentric, hierarchical oppositions and
by self-consciously reflecting on the representational limits of language and pushing beyond
them through the inclusion of metalanguages; in doing so, Djebar and El Saadawi also
complicate Cixous’s notions of fluid subjectivity and the significance of *voix*, revealing how
these notions change in different cultural and historical contexts. Finally, both texts serve as
productive commentaries on the Cixousian *feminin*; El Saadawi illustrates the potential of this
controversial aspect of *écriture féminine* while Djebar questions its political viability. Through

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13 As a clarification, these authors were not selected because they are women writers, but because they wade through
complex issues of language, representation, oppression, and female experience. The distinction between women’s
writing (*écriture des femmes*) and feminine writing (*écriture féminine*) will be explored in Part III: Writing the
Female, Writing the Feminine.
the lens of El Saadawi and Djebar, *écriture féminine* emerges as both a problematic and powerful theoretical tool in imagining future challenges to phallocentric discourse.

**Part I: Complicating the Other, Problematizing Subjectivities**

*Or écrite c’est travailler; être travaillé; (dans) l’entre, interroger, (se laisser interroger) le procès du même et de l’autre sans lequel nul n’est vivant; défaire le travail de la mort, en voulant l’ensemble de l’un-avec-l’autre, dynamisé à l’infini par un incessant échange de l’un entre l’autre ne se connaissant et se recommençant qu’à partir du plus lointain – de soi, de l’autre, de l’autre en moi. Parcours multiplicateur à milliers de transformations.*

—Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune née*, p. 159

Rejecting the phallocentric, hierarchical dualities as the conditions under which most writing is produced, Cixous’s *écriture féminine* remains deeply rooted in subverting these seemingly rigid dualities to engage in a constant exchange with and exploration of the Other. Rather than merely inverting the destructive masculine order, *écriture féminine* “domine le dominateur pour détruire l’espace de la domination,”

breaking down hierarchies not to rebuild them but to critique that phallocentric mode of thinking altogether (Cixous, 217). Both Djebar and El Saadawi engage with the Cixousian project in that they both write to move beyond the discourse of dominator/dominated and into a ceaseless exchange with the Other. El Saadawi subverts hierarchical thought through her critique of the fictional asylum’s power structures and religion, whereas Djebar complicates phallocentric oppositions through her refusal to use simple dualities in describing her past and Algerian history. Yet *Innocence of the Devil* more clearly complicates the opposition of Self and Other and embodies Cixous’s vision of a plural subjectivity, while *L’Amour, la fantasia* maintains a clearer separation between subjects;

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14 “Writing is working; being worked; questioning (in) the between (letting oneself be questioned) of same and of other without which nothing lives; undoing death’s work by willing the togetherness of one-another, infinitely charged with a ceaseless exchange of one with another—not knowing one another and beginning again only from what is most distant, from self, from other, from the other within. A course that multiplies transformations by the thousands” (Cixous, 86).

15 “dominates the dominator to destroy the space of domination” (Cixous, 116).
ultimately, this serves not only to reveal the different narrative styles that can exemplify écriture féminine, but also to critically examine how Cixous problematizes identity and difference.

El Saadawi constructs a series of binary oppositions only to ultimately reveal their instability. The asylum’s authority stems from a series of hierarchical oppositions: sane/insane, good/evil, active/passive. The authoritarian hierarchy of the asylum imposes itself on unruly Ganat from the moment the Director admits her; from the narrative’s opening moments, it is clear that the asylum depends upon a strict delineation between the subjective and “insane” experience of the asylum’s residents and the objective, “sane” discourse of its staff. When Ganat initially tests this boundary, recognizing the Head Nurse as Narguiss, her childhood friend, the Head Nurse further emphasizes the strict barrier between them by affirming her identity solely as an authority figure: “I am the Head Nurse” (El Saadawi, 11). And yet already she betrays the shaky foundation upon which this duality rests, giving “a nervous shake of her veiled head as though refuting something” (El Saadawi, 11). Her power depends upon the denial of a reality beyond the dualities of the asylum’s power structures. By choosing a space that is founded upon the silencing and oppression of those who are labeled insane by those who deem themselves sane, El Saadawi creates a seemingly rigid world that mirrors phallocentric conceptions of power; however, she builds this world precisely to break it down, creating a narrative that depends upon the destabilization of seemingly rigid dualities.

This breakdown occurs in part through the Head Nurse’s transformation into Narguiss. While the Head Nurse remains determined to hide the other parts of her identity at the beginning of the narrative, she ultimately reveals both her past experiences and her present gendered oppression in the confines of the asylum; in trying to separate herself from the female asylum residents’ suffering, she masks the sexual objectification and abuse that she experiences at the
hands of the Director (El Saadawi, 50). Like the other female asylum residents, the Head Nurse
must ultimately confront her past and present struggles in a misogynistic society; if one of the
asylum’s authority figures begins to question her own identity due to gendered oppression and
sexual abuse, then what separates her from the other female asylum residents? The authoritarian
hierarchy of sane/insane is itself called into question; is insanity merely the label that the
oppressors use to silence the suffering of the oppressed? When the Head Nurse rejects the
Director’s abuse and he struggles to hold onto power by hitting her, the entire asylum is called
into question: “The body of the Director went round with the earth…The sky had collapsed on
the earth…The Pyramid of Khoufou stood on its tip with its base facing upwards” (El Saadawi,
172-173). As the pyramid is a symbol of the Pharaoh’s God-like power, its inversion represents
an undermining of traditional Egyptian power structures (Chevalier, 792). Furthermore, the
image of the inverted pyramid in particular is significant because it represents spiritual
development, and thus points to a new realm beyond the immediate reality of the asylum
(Chevalier, 791). In choosing the pyramid’s inversion as a way of expressing a change of power
dynamics, El Saadawi perhaps points to a spiritual world beyond or outside of phallogocentrism.
Indeed, this change of power is not a mere inversion in which the asylum’s residents want to take
phallocentric power for themselves; instead, it signals a new freedom for residents like Narguiss
in which, beyond the “film of unshed tears” in her eyes there is “a new gleam, like the eyes of
another woman, happy to be free” (El Saadawi, 174). Even as she begins to feel a new sense of
freedom, Narguiss does not rise up against the Director to try and punish him; likewise, the
asylum’s residents do not rise up to oppress the Director but rather reject this conception of
power altogether. As with Cixous, the destabilization of hierarchies does not lead to their
inversion, but rather to a reexamination of power dynamics in which domination depends upon an unstable submission for its authority.

*Innocence of the Devil* employs a Cixousian subversion of hierarchical oppositions first and foremost to critique religion. Nowhere does El Saadawi so strongly evoke this subversive questioning of authority as she does theologically through the roles of God and Eblis\(^\text{16}\) in the asylum. While it remains unclear whether these characters are meant to literally embody their religious counterparts, El Saadawi’s use of these names clearly imbues them with symbolic significance that inevitably critiques religious power structures. The personification and intense corporeality of these two characters complicates the notion of higher knowledge and authority and subverts the dichotomy between good and evil; as residents of the asylum, they too are suspected of madness and are subjected to the harsh treatment of the Director. God’s constant attempts to exercise authority over Eblis only further undermines the power of both, culminating in their fistfight among the asylum’s other residents (El Saadawi, 65). While their physical fight seems to bring them to the same plane of human pettiness, other instances of physicality further emphasize God’s role as aggressor and the Devil’s role as victim. Nefissa’s memories reveal that Eblis may be her younger brother, and that the name Eblis may have merely stuck with him from his schooldays with Sheikh Masoud. Far from devilish, however, Eblis is depicted as gentle and pitiful, relying on Nefissa throughout his childhood to “[wind] her arms around him until morning” and comfort him (El Saadawi, 72). Through Nefissa’s memories, El Saadawi creates a narrative strongly sympathetic to Eblis. At the same time, she portrays God in an increasingly cruder and more shocking corporeality. The split narrative perspective during God’s rape of

\(^{16}\) In Fedwa Malti-Douglas’s introduction to *Innocence of the Devil*, she indicates that “Iblîs is the name of the Devil or Satan in the Muslim tradition.” It is clear that Eblis symbolically refers to the Devil in some capacity; whether or not Eblis is supposed to be the direct embodiment of the devil, however, remains more ambiguous (Malti-Douglas, 119).
Nefissa leaves no doubt as to his disturbingly human qualities: “…[i]n his clothes was the smell of sweat. Did God sweat like human beings?” (El Saadawi, 83). God feels the thrill of sexually dominating her as the submissive tone of her praying voice “[flows] down into his blood like a wave of heat” (El Saadawi, 83). Not only are both religious figures brought down to a human plane, but God/Devil can no longer be transposed onto good/evil if God is a violent rapist and the Devil is merely an unfortunate outcast and a lonely younger brother.

Ultimately, the breakdown of this hierarchy reveals that religion itself can become a destructive ideology that upholds patriarchy; like El Saadawi’s asylum, religion itself can come to depend upon suspiciously tenuous hierarchies that are founded on domination and oppression. God’s power depends upon Eblis’s presence, and God is depicted as an instigator who must ensure his own power by urging the Devil to tempt others:

– Get up I tell you. Go and whisper in people’s ears, boy.
– And if I don’t whisper what will happen? Why not let everybody go to heaven?
– Then for whom will I have created Hell, you ass? (El Saadawi, 65).

The Devil exists only as a complement to affirm God’s goodness, and indeed God wants the Devil to coax people into sin to assure his power and sovereignty. God’s existence relies on his dual existence with Eblis, as is clearly proven when God, frightened and remorseful, discovers Eblis’s death and calls out “Eblis?!?” and “Do not go away!” (El Saadawi, 228-229). Just as the asylum’s hierarchy breaks down, revealing its monopoly on knowledge to be mere manipulation, so does the hierarchy of good and evil between God and the devil, for God confesses that his knowledge has been little more than a self-serving game: “I am responsible for our defeat, my son! He who has authority is responsible…He who is responsible for what happens is made out to be innocent” (El Saadawi, 230). El Saadawi shows what religion can be at its worst in a misogynistic society: a constantly self-justifying power structure used to produce knowledge
with the power to condemn—a false knowledge that the female prisoners must escape in order to form their own truths. As the call of “Innocent! Innocent!” rings throughout the novel’s final pages, a regretful, dying God is left to reexamine his own complicity within a tyrannical patriarchal system. So too does El Saadawi reexamine religion’s complicity with the dualistic, misogynistic production of knowledge that Cixous too denounces. Yet, like Cixous, El Saadawi refuses to maintain this duality by merely reversing the terms upon which it depends; she destabilizes the power structure built up between God and the Devil, pulling the rug out from under it without providing a comparable structure in its place. The Devil never steps into God’s shoes; instead, both die at the end of the novel, creating an ambiguous and chaotic world in which society is no longer able to organize itself through traditional religious hierarchies.

While El Saadawi exploits the surreal space of the asylum to question dualistic thought, Djebar attempts to locate both her own and other Algerian women’s narratives in both present and historical realities divided and ruled by oppositions. Djebar foregrounds the colonial, gendered and linguistic hierarchies that shape Algerian women’s lives, remaining aware of the othering force of colonization and the ways in which this formed her own childhood: “…mon œil reste fasciné par le rivage des « Autres »” (Djebar, 38). Though Djebar details the concrete power inherent in the tensions between French/Arab(ic) and colonizer/colonized, she does not allow those hierarchical oppositions to remain static and instead reveals their cracks, the ambiguous tensions that cause them to break down. Cherifa describes how, after the French imprison her, it is the gourmiers who torment her most, until one Arab soldier shouts to another “Laisse-la donc! Regarde les Français; à peine s’ils osent lui parler, malgré son âge, et toi, alors

17 “For me, the French are still ‘the Others’, and I am still hypnotized by their shores” (Djebar, 23).
18 Arab soldiers enlisted with the French army.
qu’elle est ta compatriote, tu cherches à l’exciter!”19 (Djebar, 191-192). Cherifa must struggle with complex layers of oppression and cannot merely depend upon her countrymen to defend her amidst the French military. Furthermore, the French soldiers normally endowed with the most power and authority tend to lose the power of their gaze among Algerian women. Though they clearly exercise concrete power over Algerian women’s bodies, the French soldiers are incapable of penetrating the women’s sense of modesty as other Arab men might: “Le passant, puisqu’il est Français, Européen, chrétien, s’il regarde, a-t-il vraiment un regard?”20 (Djebar, 179). While the male gaze is usually one of power, the French male gaze paradoxically loses its power. Conversely, it is frequently matrons and members of Djebar’s community that directly limit her and exercise power over her; the voyeuses remain veiled spies even in all-female spaces, expressing their own frustrations by imposing the veil on others (Djebar, 287). Though Djebar’s reality is in many senses one of absolute power, this power cannot merely be expressed in absolute terms.

While Djebar’s characters tease out the tensions inherent in binary categories of identity, it is above all Djebar’s self-conscious use of language that seriously challenges these assumptions and ultimately seeks to include the Other in her discourse. In raising the silenced voices of Algerian women and in recovering her own voice, she must engage in a ceaseless exchange between French and Arabic. Though French could potentially be viewed as the language of power in an Algerian context, Djebar nuances this notion by revealing its emptiness and weakness in many situations. Though her father’s status as a teacher in a French school gives her access to the written word and places her in a privileged position, it distances her both from

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19 “Just leave her alone! Look at the Frenchmen; they hardly dare speak to her, young as she is, and you, her compatriot, you’re trying to provoke her!” (Djebar, 134).
20 “Normal modesty is no longer necessary. If the passer-by does look, since he’s a Frenchman, a European, a Christian, can he really see anything?” (Djebar 125).
her own community and from her French classmates; this distance clearly continues to affect her, as she must write about her and her Algerian ancestors’ pasts in French, in part because that is her only option (Djebar, 253-254). The language that is at once her opportunity and her access to power simultaneously condemns her, causing her to distance herself from her own emotions: “…[D]ès mon adolescence, j’expérimentai une sorte d’aphasie amoureuse: les mots écrits, les mots appris, faisaient retrait devant moi, dès que tentait de s’exprimer le moindre élan de mon cœur”21 (Djebar, 183). French may liberate her to pursue knowledge at school, but it does little to help her express her emotions. Ostentatious displays of love in the French language, such as that of Marie-Louise and her constant moans of “pilou chéri” to her French husband, leave Djebar cold and well aware that in French “pas un moindre de ses mots d’amour ne [lui] serait réservé”22 (Djebar, 43-44). While the French language leaves her with no way to express her own desire, her dialect of Berber creates an intimacy that allows for the possibility of love. With a friend or lover who is “langé des mêmes bruits originels,”23 Djebar finally finds her voice and her body finds a way to interact with another body: “Enfin, la voix renvoie à la voix et le corps peut s’approcher du corps”24 (Djebar, 184). Only through the language of her ancestors and her early childhood can she experience this sort of openness and desire in which voice meets voice and body meets body.

While the boundaries between her different linguistic registers may seem very clear, the complex relationship between Djebar’s different languages ultimately serves to further break down the dichotomies between them. While she writes in French and it thus becomes the

21 “…From the time of my adolescence I experienced a kind of aphasia in matters of love: the written words, the words I had learned, retreated before me as soon as the slightest heart-felt emotion sought for expression” (Djebar, 128).
22 “not a single one of its terms of endearment would be destines for [her] use” (Djebar, 27).
23 “swaddled in the same indigenous sounds” (Djebar, 129).
24 “At last, voice answers to voice and body can approach body” (Djebar, 129).
language of the Self, she uses it primarily to give voice to those who have historically been othered. Djebar gives voice to the stories of the oppressed using the oppressor’s language; yet, perhaps most importantly, Djebar does not merely privilege Algerian voices only to marginalize and other the French perspective. Oppressor/oppressed and Self/Other become false dichotomies as Djebar works Arabic words and expressions into her French text. Not content merely to translate every word into French, Djebar includes multiple words and expressions in Arabic that render her text in part inaccessible to the French reader; only the reader who is well-versed in French and in Arabic can fully comprehend the nuances of her story. In describing the setting where her grandmother’s ritual trance takes place, she includes many Arabic terms in her French text without explaining any of their exact meanings to the francophone reader: *haïk, kanoun, mejnoun, chikhat* (Djebar, 205-206). In partially excluding the non-Arabic speaker, Djebar places many French readers in the position of the Other. In part due to Djebar’s position as a writer between cultures, the Other can simultaneously refer to the Algerian women (who have been traditionally othered) as well as to the dominant French culture; Djebar declares herself an outsider in both cultures, approaching each one as she holds them both at arm’s length in different contexts.

This ceaseless exchange between Self and Other further intensifies in the eyewitness accounts and first-person narratives that Djebar chooses to construct in her retellings. Particularly in Part III, “Les Voix ensevelies,” Djebar clearly remains committed to giving voice to Algerian women’s stories since, as one of them states in her narrative, “Hélas! nous sommes des analphabètes. Nous ne laissons pas de récits de ce que nous avons enduré et vécu!”25 (Djebar, 212). However, in bringing to light the atrocities of French colonization, she not only looks to

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25 “Alas! We can’t read or write. We don’t leave any accounts of what we lived through and all we suffered!” (Djebar, 148)
the first-person narratives of her Algerian compatriots, but also to the first-hand accounts of
French military officers and soldiers. In describing the Muslim tribes burnt alive in caves by the
French army, she cites the account of an unknown Spanish soldier fighting for the French:
“Quelle plume saurait rendre ce tableau? Voir, au milieu de la nuit, à la faveur de la lune, un
corps de troupes françaises occupé à entretenir un feu infernal! Entendre les sourds
gémissements des hommes, des femmes, des enfants et des animaux…”26 (Djebar, 103). He
expresses the impossibility of describing such a scene, and yet the firsthand horror of this
nonetheless complicit Spaniard helps Djebar to describe the indescribable. Djebar digs deeper,
seeks horrific accounts that are not rendered more palatable by the seeming sympathy of their
narrators; the most ruthlessly detailed and merciless accounts of this military operation were kept
by the lieutenant colonel who organized it, Aimable Pélissier27. His eyewitness account becomes
integrated into Djebar’s text as she reaches out to this cruel Other to intervene in his narrative
and to include lost voices: “[Pélissier]…me tend son rapport et je reçois ce palimpseste pour y
inscrire à mon tour la passion calcinée des ancêtres”28 (Djebar, 115). This account of French
military domination serves as a palimpsest for Djebar; even as it may trouble her, she uses it as a
text that she rewrites in order to create a space for herself and for her Algerian sisters. Between
France and Algeria, French and Arabic, colonizer and colonized, L’Amour, la fantasia emerges
as a challenge to categorization and hierarchical rigidity.

In L’Amour, la fantasia, these multiple perspectives and narratives become a collection of
subjectivities that, when taken together, generate a multiplicity of voices that nonetheless seem

26 “What pen could do justice to this scene? To see, in the middle of the night, by moonlight, a body of French
soldiers, busy keeping that hellfire alight! To hear the muffled groans of men, women, children, beasts…” (Djebar,
71).
27 Ironically, the lieutenant’s first name, Aimable, translates to “lovable.”
28 “[Pélissier]…hands me his report and I accept this palimpsest on which I now inscribe the charred passion of my
ancestors” (Djebar, 79).
to exist as a series of individual narratives. Djebar’s approach complicates Cixous’s vision of a “de-propriation” and a “depersonalization” that “[breaks] the rigid law of individuation” (Cixous, 96). While Djebar resurrects voices from the past and enters into a complex dialogue with them as she transcribes them into French, she nonetheless puts forth each narrative as its own outcry, its own testimony. Indeed, El Saadawi’s narrative approach to subjectivity seems perhaps to more directly embody the exploration that Cixous envisions when she asks, “Qu’advient-il du sujet, du pronom personnel, de ses possessifs lorsqu’osant gaiement ses métamorphoses…elle fait soudain circuler une autre façon de connaître, de produire, de communiquer…?” 29 (Cixous, 178). Cixous imagines what might happen to subjectivity if the line between Self and Other were truly blurred.

El Saadawi’s radical narrative style seems to throw subjectivity itself into question, embodying a Cixousian idea of fluid and exploratory subjectivities. While Malti-Douglas identifies El Saadawi’s narrator as “the least problematic of the text’s literary properties,” the cautiously removed third-person narrator is not simply omniscient, but rather seems to move in and out of each character’s consciousness as if possessing them (Malti-Douglas, 119). Each experience undergone in the asylum echoes a past one in an infinite series of references; few boundaries exist between past and present, memory and reality. As Ganat is forced to endure an injection, her oppressive school memories interfere with reality as the Head Nurse appears to be “wearing the face of the Headmistress” (El Saadawi, 26). The reader remains only dimly aware of a clear plotline and, like Ganat, experiences reality through the detached feeling of “a single throbbing cell which [clings] to the inner surface of [the] scalp and [continues] to follow what [is] going on” (El Saadawi, 27). This slippage between memory and reality contributes to the

29 “What happens to the subject, to the personal pronoun, to its possessives when, suddenly, gaily daring her metamorphoses…she makes another way of knowing circulate?” (Cixous, 96).
slippage between different subjects; chapters begin with pronouns whose identities are not
revealed until pages later (El Saadawi, 104). God’s and Eblis’s characters in particular become
intimately entangled with one another such that the reader cannot clearly delineate between
them. The fifth chapter, for example, refers to an ambiguous male figure curled up around a tree;
through the male pronoun, the narrator seems perhaps to evoke Eblis, who was curled up around
a tree in a previous chapter (El Saadawi, 8-9, 52). Yet he is then described as God usually is,
“wearing a big turban with a feather at the top” (El Saadawi, 54). The constant repetition of “he”
with little clarification blends their two perspectives together and frequently leaves the reader
unable to clearly differentiate between them. El Saadawi’s experimental narrative plays with the
very idea of subjectivity as the narrator dips in and out of each character’s consciousness with no
clear transition. *Innocence of the Devil* complicates the notion of isolated individuals through its
narrative voice that defies linearity and causality, becoming fluid and collective.

While *L’Amour, la fantasia* unfolds across different spaces, time periods, and
experiences, Djebar maintains more rigid boundaries between different narratives. Whereas
Cixous finds subversive potential in breaking down the duality of identity/difference, Djebar puts
more emphasis on fixed identity in the Algerian women’s rebellious narratives, which she
incorporates through a series of *voix* in Part III (Cixous, 80). Yet Djebar’s narrative must be
viewed in the context of a cultural tradition in which the collective female voice is far less
subversive than that of the individual. Djebar describes family gatherings in which mothers and
daughters discuss their domestic strife through the collective voice, but never directly:

Jamais le « je » de la première personne ne sera utilisé: la voix a déposé, en
formules stéréotypes, sa charge de rancune et de râles échardant la gorge. Chaque
femme, écorchée au-dedans, s’est apaisée dans l’écoute collective. De même pour
la gaieté, ou le bonheur – qu’il s’agit de faire deviner ; la litote, le proverbe,
jusqu’aux signes énigmes ou à la fable transmise, toutes les mises en scène
verbales se déroulent pour égrener le sort, ou le conjurer, mais jamais le mettre à
Djebar’s community allows for a certain collective expression of emotions that creates a support system while simultaneously denying a direct, personal narrative. Impersonal expressions such as proverbs allow the collective experience of emotions to exist through a series of stereotypes and well-worn phrases that do not pose a real threat to the established order, but rather allow intense emotion to be safely integrated into society. Though it can clearly also be a source of strength, the collective expression also becomes a danger to individual identity. While Djebar undoubtedly creates a collection of different voices, she allows her female characters to emerge as individual subjects reclaiming the “I” that they have been denied. Indeed, Djebar’s works have even been described as “le parcours de la femme arabe vers la conquête et l’expression du Je”31 (Clerc, 79). In a context where it seems forbidden for women to openly declare their own subjectivity, Djebar not only proclaims her own voice, but also transcribes the voices of others who have been silenced.

In Djebar’s narrative, women cannot easily speak of their individual needs and desires within their own communities; furthermore, they must endure the further silencing of French colonizers. Declaring subjectivity rather than merely remaining a part of the collective female voice becomes a clear transgression with very real consequences. Nowhere does this individuality shine through more clearly than in Cherifa’s narrative, in which reactionary possessives directly create a space for her subjectivity within the prison of her colonial reality:

– Que faisais-tu dans les montagnes?
– Je combattais !

30 “The ‘I’ of the first person is never used; the time-honoured phraseology discharges the burden of rancor and râles that rasp the throat. In speaking to the listening group every woman finds relief from her deep inner hurt. Similarly they are made to guess at causes for merriment or happiness; by means of understatement, proverbs, even riddles or traditional fables, handed down from generation to generation, the women dramatize their fate, or exorcize it, but never expose it directly” (Djebar, 155).
31 “the journey of the Arab woman towards the conquest and expression of I” (translation mine).
– Et pourquoi?
– Pour ma foi et mes idées!
– Et maintenant, puisque tu te retrouves prisonnière?
– Je suis prisonnière, et après?
– Qu’as-tu gagné?
– J’ai gagné le bien de mes compatriotes et le bien pour moi-même!...Ma conscience est avec moi!32 (Djebar, 199).

The symmetrical repetitive dialogue and the constant repetition of “je” emphasize her reactionary anger rooted in her cultural identity. The Self actively rejects the Other and refuses to allow boundaries to blur; Cherifa does not recognize French authority and has been brought up “selon la parole arabe”33 (Djebar, 191). Enduring torture at the hands of the French army, Cherifa’s direct declarations of “je” and “moi-même” starkly refute the enemy soldiers’ attempts to use her as an expendable source of information that they can extract through torture. In this context, then, the individual voice and the insistence on the possessive are the only structures in place that create a space for Cherifa’s identity.

Djebar articulates a grounded, historical context where Algerian women’s subjectivities are erased and in which a declaration of “je” creates a space for female experience and identity. Cixous, however, asserts that “[l]’opposition propre/non propre (la valorisation du propre), organise l’opposition identité/différence”34 (Cixous, 146). It is clear that Cixous is suspicious of affirming identity and difference because of the role they play in patriarchal and hierarchical modes of thinking. While Djebar’s use of language and inclusion of Algerian and French perspectives in her text clearly demonstrate a complication of hierarchical thought, her insistence on the subversive potential of individual Algerian women’s identities complicates Cixous’s

32 ‘What were you doing in the mountains?’ ‘I was fighting!’ ‘Why were you fighting?’ ‘For what I believe in, for my ideas!’ ‘And now, seeing you’re a prisoner?’ ‘I’m a prisoner, so what!’ ‘What have you gained?’ ‘I’ve gained the respect of my compatriots and my own self-respect!...My conscience is clear!’ (Djebar, 139-140).
33 “according to the Arab word” (Djebar, 134).
34 “The opposition…mine/not mine (the valorization of the selfsame), organizes the opposition identity/difference” (Cixous, 80).
notion of fluid subjectivity as necessarily subversive and liberating. Furthermore, Djebar maintains the boundaries between her own voice as author and the narrative voices of other Algerian women; she does not allow all parts of her work to lapse into a collective expression of grief. Even in her solidarity, Djebar recognizes the cultural and linguistic divisions inherent in her project: “Mots torches qui éclairent mes compagnes, mes complices ; d’elles, définitivement, ils me séparent. Et sous leur poids, je m’expatrie”\(^{35}\) (Djebar, 203). Despite the incorporation of other narratives into her work, Djebar must ultimately confront the fact that her words can only help illuminate other women’s experiences but can never fully convey them; the subtle violence of representation holds Djebar at a distance—a distance that she faces directly and that causes her to actively separate herself from the homeland that she is simultaneously seeking to describe and hold close. Her words bring about her exile.

Cixous attempts to break down hierarchical oppositions, working towards a new type of language that blurs the boundaries between subjectivities—a blurring that is exemplified through El Saadawi’s plot and narrative structure. While Djebar intensely questions a binary system’s ability to represent lived experience and linguistic difference, her text also calls Cixous’s vision of subjectivity into question. To what extent is defined subjectivity—along with concrete identity and difference—necessary in representing the lived experiences of the oppressed? While both El Saadawi and Djebar elucidate the multiplicity of narrative techniques possible within Cixous’s seemingly indefinable *écriture féminine*, Djebar pushes the reader to reconsider the usefulness of fluid subjectivity in a historical context. In their representations of both historical and fictional subjects whose experiences defy phallocentric, oppositional language, both writers must also self-consciously examine writing and its representational capacity.

\(^{35}\) “Torch-words which light up my women-companions, my accomplices; these words divide me from them once and for all. And weigh me down as I leave my native land” (Djebar, 142).
Voix! c’est aussi se lancer, cet épanchement, dont il ne revient rien. Exclamation, cri, essoufflement, hurlement, toux, vomissement, musique. Elle part. Elle perd. Et c’est ainsi qu’elle écrit, comme on lance la voix, en avant, dans le vide. Elle s’éloigne, elle avance, ne se retourne pas sur ses traces pour les examiner. Ne se regarde pas. Course casse-cou.36

—Hélène Cixous, La Jeune née, p. 173

While still functioning within the representational framework of the written word, écriture féminine privileges voice and alternative forms of expression as a means of transgressing phallocentric limits. Cixous seeks to write the power of voice into her text, refusing to allow her writing to remain static and instead rendering it dynamic, transformative, fluid like the spoken word (Cixous, 170). Both Djebar and El Saadawi incorporate other languages beyond writing into their written texts, simultaneously revealing the inadequacy of the written word and pushing its representational limits. Both texts point to oral expression, music, and dance as metalanguages expressing that which normal language cannot, creating a constant tension between the spoken and the written that serves as a commentary on the representational limits of the written word. However, both writers also problematize the relationship that Cixous describes between voix and rebellion; Innocence of the Devil privileges the subversive potential of Arabic script and points out the futility of verbal protest, while L’Amour, la fantasia highlights the importance of silence in expressing female desire.

In L’Amour, la fantasia, oral forms of expression are an intimate part of the woman’s world; in specific contexts, women can harness the power of verbal expression to make their suffering and needs heard. Because of its role in Islam, music and chanting become an integral

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36 “Voice! That, too, is launching forth and effusion without return. Exclamation, cry, breathlessness, yell, cough, vomit, music. Voice leaves. Voice loses. She leaves. She loses. And that is how she writes, as one throws a voice—forward, into the void. She goes away, she goes forward, doesn’t turn back to look at her tracks. Pays no attention to herself. Running breakneck” (Cixous, 94).
part of everyday religious life, through the “chants des dévotes” every Friday during Islamic holidays (Djebab, 169). Older women’s voices become the earthly link to divinity: “L’initiation religieuse ne peut être que sonore…L’émotion…n’est provoquée que par la musique, que par la voix corrodée des dévotes invoquant la divinité” (Djebab, 239). Music and voices—and especially women’s voices—become a crucial aspect of Islam through which the younger generation learns religious traditions. Voice is the primary form of expression associated with women, before writing: “Dans nos villes, la première réalité-femme est la voix, un dard s’envolant dans l’espace, une flèche qui s’alanguit avant la chute ; puis vient l’écriture…” (Djebab, 255). The primacy of voix that Cixous emphasizes is confirmed through Djebab’s intense link between woman and the spoken word; at the same time, verbal expression is the limited realm to which women are often traditionally relegated, lacking access to the written word.

The spoken word, however, cannot merely be confined to the traditional, for its tremendously subversive power is apparent even within a religious context; Djebab’s aunt recounts to her the tale of the prophet Mohammad, yet always concludes the tale by emphasizing the importance of his first wife: “…la première des musulmanes et des musulmans était une femme, peut-être même avant le Prophète lui-même, qu’Allah l’ait en sauvegarde! Une femme avait adhéré à la foi islamique, historiquement la première « par amour conjugal »” (Djebab, 243). This transgressive renarration of the foundation of Islam not only allows a place for explicit sexuality that shocks the young Djebab, but also gives women a founding role in Islam.

37 “pious women chanting” (Djebab, 169).
38 “A young girl’s introduction to religious observance itself can only be through sound…Any emotion…will be inspired by music, by the word voices of the female worshippers calling on the divine presence” (Djebab, 169).
39 “In our towns, the first woman-reality is the voice, a dart which flies off into space, an arrow which slowly falls to earth; next comes writing…” (Djebab, 180).
40 “…the very first Muslim, perhaps even before the Prophet himself, may Allah preserve him! was a woman. A woman was historically first to adhere to the Islamic faith, out of conjugal love” (Djebab, 172).
Islamic tales and traditions are transmitted not only through the pious chants of women at the mosque, but also through these women’s individual versions of religious stories—stories in which they sometimes rebelliously inscribe an alternative, anti-patriarchal perspective.

In *Innocence of the Devil*, the spoken word also becomes a space to overturn the established patriarchal order. Just as in Djebar’s work, it is clear that language is first and foremost used to silence women in a religious context; the repetition of “Fallen woman. Whore” is embedded in Ganat’s consciousness, and “fallen” is necessarily a gendered adjective: “Fall, present. Fallen, past participle. She has fallen, third person, feminine” (El Saadawi, 31). Yet, like Djebar, El Saadawi refuses to allow language to merely oppress; instead, her characters reappropriate language to rebel against phallocentric discourse. Ganat eventually takes the patriarchal rhetoric of the fallen woman and uses it against her unfaithful husband, catching him after his infidelity and telling him “You’ve fallen. Low” (El Saadawi, 58). Ganat not only speaks back to her husband, Zakaria, claiming her own voice and denouncing his behavior, but also recasts patriarchal language for her own purposes, turning the standard linguistic use of the term “fallen” on its head: “In the language there was no masculine plural. It was not used…Adam was not described as a fallen man. A man only fell in a test, or in the elections…” (El Saadawi, 58). By using this adjective to describe a man in this specifically moral context, El Saadawi asserts Adam’s guilt in the Garden of Eden, reframing religious texts that condemn women as the sinful descendents of Eve while leaving Adam blameless. Furthermore, this language manifests itself in a drastic change in gender roles. When Ganat later confronts Zakaria by calling him “Fallen man. Whore of a man,” he suddenly feels “like kissing her hand, asking for forgiveness,” exemplifying a submissiveness that is usually reserved for women (El Saadawi, 167-168). El Saadawi certainly emphasizes the patriarchal, phallocentric language that can stifle women’s
voices, and yet she also imbues her characters with the agency to hurl this language back on their oppressors through spoken rebellion.

In both texts, oral expression is intimately linked to women’s lives. Throughout her childhood, Djebar experiences the power of oral expression as a specifically gendered one, in part because of the oral tradition of storytelling through which future generations learn about past ones, but also because these stories preserve a truth that is lost in the official historical record—a truth that must continually be passed on so that future generations do not lose sight of it. Indeed, Djebar remains acutely aware of the biases and limitations inherent in the archival record:

“comme si « archives » signifiait empreinte de la réalité!”41 (Djebar, 251). The “chuchotements” that Djebar evokes in Part III, “Les Voix ensevelies,” are the whispers of women storytellers as they carry this thread of truth on from one generation to the next. Yet this “chaîne de souvenirs” passed on through storytelling is both a blessing and a curse, grounding women’s present realities in the experiences of those before them and also placing the burden of memory upon them: “…n’est-elle pas justement « chaine » qui entrave autant qu’elle enracine ?”42 (Djebar, 252). As it is a source of truth in a patriarchal and colonial context, storytelling is both necessary for survival and a great burden.

The oral tradition is thus a space for women’s histories with all of their enriching and troubling complexities. Yet other forms of oral and physical expression become more obvious outlets through which to express grief and suffering. Djebar describes the ceremony in which her maternal grandmother goes into a ritualistic trance that seems to be the sole means through which she can momentarily both express and break free from “toutes les voix du passé”43

41 “as if archives guaranteed the imprint of reality!” (Djebar, 177).
42 “...is it not indeed a ‘chain’, for do not memories fetter us as well as forming our roots?” (Djebar, 178).
43 “all the voices of the past” (Djebar, 145).
(Djebar, 207). Through this specific ceremony in a collective women’s space, Djebar’s grandmother steps out of her role as stoic matriarch to gather strength and protest:

L’aïeule, habituellement, était la seule des femmes à ne jamais se plaindre; elle ne prononçait les formules de soumission que du bout des lèvres, avec un dédain condescendant; or, par cette liturgie somptueuse ou dérisoire, qu’elle déclenchait régulièrement, elle semblait protester à sa manière…Mais quand elle dansait, elle redevenait reine de la ville, indubitablement. Dans cet antre de musiques et de sauvagerie, elle puisait, sous les yeux de nous tous rassemblés, sa force quotidienne44 (Djebar, 208).

This ritual seems to mentally allow her, at least momentarily, to become queen again, to return to a matriarchal space that has song since been forbidden in the harshness of her everyday reality. This alternative form of expression becomes a ritualistic manner of expressing frustration and gathering the strength to carry on; indeed, it is perhaps the only way that this matriarch is able to truly express herself, through an almost otherworldly frenzy. Her body becomes a Cixousian site of resistance that hurls forth voice into the emptiness, calling forth past suffering while simultaneously creating a new space for self-expression (Cixous, 137). While Djebar loved watching this spectacle as a child and continually attempts to understand her grandmother’s trancelike state for the rest of her life, she recalls that her male cousin was afraid of this spectacle that reached out only to other women in its expression of both collective and individual suffering (Djebar, 206).

In Innocence of the Devil, oral expression becomes a space in which women find a comforting outlet for their collective grief and it is thus endowed with the emotional power to communicate across generations just as it is in L’Amour, la fantasia. El Saadawi inserts repetitive phrases of dialogue that appear in multiple characters’ memories, revealing not only

44 …The matriarch was normally the one of the women who never complained; she condescended to mouth the formulas of submission disdainfully; but this extravagant or derisory ceremonial which she regularly organized was her own way of protesting…But when she danced, she became indubitably queen of the city. Cocooned in that primitive music, she drew her daily strength before our very eyes (Djebar, 145).
the individual importance but also the communal value of certain oral traditions. Ganat’s mother’s gentle words—“Hou, hou, sleep my sweet, sleep”—constantly recur in her memories as a source of comfort (El Saadawi, 28, 30). These same consoling, maternal words reappear when Narguiss recalls the terror she felt during menstruation as a younger woman, and Ganat hears them repeatedly when she is eventually carried away from the asylum in a coffin at the novel’s close (El Saadawi, 121, 213-214). Maternal affection manifests itself in brief, repetitive lines of dialogue that echo back through Ganat’s and Narguiss’s memories, comforting them in the harsh reality of the asylum. Grief becomes an even stronger tie among women through the repetition of “O Zahra, mother of justice and mercy,” echoing Nefissa’s mother’s grief when her son (revealed to be Eblis) is taken away to join the National Service (El Saadawi, 69, 77-78).

Ululating cries of lamentation come to manifest the ever-present suffering and grief among women; first these cries appear as a traditional means of expressing collective grief when a group of mothers protest the loss of their sons to the army: “A long line of women marched behind her slapping their faces with the palms of their hands, and screaming out loud in a voice that rose to the heavens: Yahou – yahou – yahou” (El Saadawi, 74). The sixth chapter closes with the echo of “yahoua,” a cry that simultaneously evokes Nefissa’s mother’s grief and expresses Nefissa’s terror as God rapes her (El Saadawi, 68, 84). These cries become the language of collective suffering, emphasizing the significance of this tradition as an outlet for pain and grief.

Yet the call of “yahou” that gives way to that of “yahoua” is not only a traditional expression of emotion. As they lament their present realities, this call unites the pained generations of women subjugated under patriarchal monotheism and calls out to a new, perhaps more merciful God; Nefissa’s grandmother utters this call “…as though she were turning to a
God called Yahoua, asking him to come to her help, to save her, to witness her state” (El Saadawi, 98-99). Indeed, “Yahoua” is the Arabic pronunciation of Jehovah, the proper name of God in the Hebrew Bible, meaning that these women are taking a cultural tradition and bending it to call out to a new God (El Saadawi, 74). Thus, while speech remains a traditional way to express grief, it is also a subversive space that women use to defy tradition and proclaim their own needs and desires. Both Djebar and El Saadawi show how women reappropriate certain traditions to express themselves, and emphasize the spoken word as a space in which women can finally manipulate language to express their own desires.

Though the spoken word is intimately linked to women’s personal expression, it is also a domain in large part forbidden to them. While Djebar recognizes the importance and significance of sound, music, and the spoken word, she also makes it clear that it is a serious cultural taboo for women to raise their voices outside of specific culturally and religiously accepted contexts; the guiltiest and most unapologetically despised of all women is “la femme qui crie”45 (Djebar, 284). Any woman who dares loudly and directly manifest her emotion or suffering rather than funneling it into culturally-accepted forms of expression is scorned and silenced in the community: “La seule qui se marginalisait d’emblée était celle qui « criait »…celle dont la plainte contre le sort ne s’abîmait ni dans la prière, ni dans le murmure des diseuses, mais s’élevait nue, improvisée, en protestation franchissant les murs”46 (Djebar, 285). Women speaking out are tolerated only insofar as their complaints remain quiet and cloistered; beyond that, they are utterly marginalized for daring to proclaim their own desires. Thus, Djebar’s narrative simultaneously recognizes the emotional intensity and representational power of

45 “the woman who raises her voice” (Djebar, 203).
46 “The only one who put herself straight away beyond the pale was the ‘loud-mouthed woman’...the one who railed aloud against fate instead of keeping her protests within four walls, instead of sublimating her grievances in prayer or in the whispered confidences of the story-tellers” (Djebar, 203).
culturally-accepted forms of expression while also decrying them and recognizing their role in keeping women quiet, in giving them limited, prescribed outlets to express their suffering while forbidding them to discuss it more openly. It is precisely this silencing that imbues *L’Amour, la fantasia* with such subversive power; for through “les voix ensevelies”\(^\text{47}\) she provides an outlet in which Algerian women’s oral accounts of violence and resistance are finally disinterred and recast in writing. Ultimately, Djebar seeks to imbue her written text with the collective cultural oral traditions that shaped her childhood while also including rebellious declarations that were generally forbidden to her and other Algerian women. Djebar’s written words must thus incorporate and negotiate the boundaries with the spoken word in order to express that which has been historically silenced.

El Saadawi explicitly describes and denounces the institutional silencing of women’s voices, a silencing that ultimately makes their expression all the more urgent. The schoolroom is not only a place where girls are barred from writing, but in which they are taught not to ask questions or answer back; Eblis too is taught that “the male rules over the female, boy, and that the female submits to the male” (El Saadawi, 134). When Narguiss pleadingly asks God why there was no blood on her wedding night despite her virginity, he retorts, “You dare to answer me, you brazen girl?...Shut your mouth, and not one more word” (El Saadawi, 47). Thus, women must create a space for themselves within (and beyond) certain accepted traditions because their self-expression is traditionally limited to specific contexts and they are not permitted to question the patriarchal order. Like Djebar, El Saadawi then seeks to incorporate the strength and emotion of the spoken word into her written text; the spoken word has subversive power and potential.

\(^{47}\) The title of Part III, “Les Voix ensevelies,” has been translated as “Voices from the Past” by Dorothy S. Blair; however, it could more literally be translated as “buried,” “hidden,” or “shrouded” voices, indicating the work Djebar is doing to unearth narratives that were previously hidden away.
but it is not enough when women are barred from writing. The two must work together so that “écriture et voix se tressent, se trament…”48 (Cixous, 170).

El Saadawi accomplishes this in part through Ganat’s poetry, which intimately links writing and voice, exemplifying the Cixousian writing process. Cixous emphasizes that écriture féminine bursts forth into the void as voice does, in a rebellious outpouring that is more spontaneous than writing: “Et c’est ainsi qu’elle écrit, comme on lance la voix, en avant, dans le vide”49 (Cixous, 173). For Ganat, poetry allows her to denounce oppressive phallocentric logic while asserting the power of her own voice, and it exists within the text as primarily verbal rather than written. After her condemnation and presumed death (as she departs the asylum in a coffin), her consciousness channels maternal love and her poetry manifests itself as “a voice like whispering, like a soft breeze, like the voice of her mother singing her to sleep as she rocked in the cradle…” (El Saadawi, 212). Her poetry is intimately linked to the maternal comfort she feels in her body, bursting forth to rebel against her corporeal limitations and to create a space for her voice even in death. Ganat’s poetry arises in moments when her voice most needs to be heard, making her feel safer and more comfortable.

Indeed, she not only provides herself with strength and comfort, but also directly declares her subjectivity and rejects the phallogocentrism of religion that denies her a voice: “I am Ganat… / I am a flower. / Flowers rarely blossom in the desert. / You who fight against history and put out the light. / You who are only yourself when you talk in riddles. / So that when you are clear, your words turn to nonsense” (El Saadawi, 212). Apart from putting forth her own voice as one of authority, independence, and beauty, Ganat emphasizes the appropriation and misuse of language in the asylum and in patriarchal society as a whole. She reveals patriarchy’s

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48 “writing and voice are intertwined and interwoven” (Cixous, 92).
49 “And that is how she writes, as one throws a voice—forward, into the void” (Cixous, 94).
monopoly on language to be a false one, such that, when forced to be clear, language fails and can no longer uphold the oppressive hierarchy; in order to be powerful, patriarchy must speak in riddles and spin the truth. Ganat’s poetry thus functions as a metatext reflecting on the experimental narrative as a whole; just as Ganat’s poetry seeks to create a voice for herself in a patriarchal world, El Saadawi’s poetic prose subverts traditional narrative structure to create a space for marginalized experiences in written Arabic.

Cixous’s ideals of privileging voice within writing, however, are also complicated through the potential of written and literary Arabic to subvert its own patriarchal traditions. Rather than écriture féminine bursting forth from voix as Cixous describes, the transformation of écriture itself precedes speech. When Ganat’s grandmother writes Abdil Illah rather than Abdillat, misplacing the two dots to make the word feminine, she transforms part of her husband’s name from the Islamic God to a pre-Islamic goddess, thus shifting from a monotheistic, patriarchal Islamic tradition to an earlier, polytheistic matriarchal one (El Saadawi, 200). “The two dots, you she-ass!” her husband quickly corrects her, maintaining the patriarchal religious authority that his name evokes (El Saadawi, 201). Later, when Ganat makes the same mistake in school, “[it is] as though the world had been overturned” (El Saadawi, 203). By rendering this strictly masculine word feminine in the very act of forming the Arabic script, El Saadawi challenges the distinction between male and female deities, which becomes “as arbitrary…as the presence or absence of dots on a consonant” (Malti-Douglas, 125). So too does she challenge the notion that a subversive text must privilege voice. Even voices in the text revert to formal language to more forcefully assert authority, such as Narguiss’s pronouncement to the Director in literary Arabic that female homosexuality is not mentioned in the Quran (Malti-Douglas, 133). By using literary Arabic rather than Egyptian dialect, Narguiss asserts her
own superior knowledge over the Director (Malti-Douglas, 133). El Saadawi uses Arabic script to the advantage of the oppressed, brandishing *écriture* as a weapon in its own right despite (and because of) women’s lack of access to the written word.

While El Saadawi critiques Cixous’s primal notion of *voix* and reclaims the traditionally religious space of written Arabic, Djebar confronts the trying task of incorporating Algerian oral narratives into written French. Though she must write in French, she is constantly aware of its representational limits: “Ta voix s’est prise au piège; mon parler français la déguise sans l’habiller. A peine si je frôle l’ombre de ton pas!”50 (Djebar, 202). Her language becomes an unwitting trap, fixing these women’s voices in writing and yet succeeding in representing only a small part of their original content. In French, Djebar represents—seeks to represent, needs to represent—her Algerian sisters, yet inevitably must confront the limits built into the language of the colonizer that is fraught with the violence and expropriation of previous French narratives: “Le mot lui-même, ornement pour les officiers qui le brandissent comme ils porteraient un œillet à la boutonnière, le mot deviendra l’arme par excellence”51 (Djebar, 67). Words become another false badge of honor through which the French military officers veil their violence; how then, to harness this language in favor of Algerian women?

When viewed through the lens of *écriture féminine*, however, these very limitations paradoxically become Djebar’s strength. Despite the endless tensions and constraints inherent in her project, Djebar believes in the power and necessity of unearthing buried voices and bringing them to light: “Écrire en langue étrangère, hors de l’oralité des deux langues de ma région natale…écrite m’a ramenée aux cris des femmes sourdement révoltées de mon enfance, à ma

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50 “I have captured your voice; disguised it with my French without clothing it. I barely brush the shadow of your footstep!” (Djebar, 142).
51 “And words themselves become a decoration, flaunted by officers like the carnations they wear in their buttonholes; words will become their most effective weapons” (Djebar, 45).
seule origine. Écrire ne tue pas la voix, mais la réveille, surtout pour ressusciter tant de sœurs disparues”52 (Djebar, 285). In part because the declaration of “je” has been barred from the oral tradition, writing is endowed with a greater ability to represent the silences of her childhood, and does not kill voice through its rigidity but rather reawakens it. Writing in a foreign language enables Djebar to distance herself from the languages of her childhood while also expressing silenced voices. French does not reinforce this silence, but breaks it, bringing painful truths to light:

Tenter l’autobiographie par les seuls mots français, c’est, sous le lent scalpel de l’autopsie à vif, montrer plus que sa peau. Sa chair se desquame, semble-t-il, en lambeaux du parler d’enfance qui ne s’écrit plus. Les blessures s’ouvrent, les veines pleurent, coule le sang de soi et des autres, qui n’a jamais séché53 (Djebar, 224).

By using the metaphor of vivisection to describe writing in French, Djebar emphasizes the violence of this act; Djebar highlights the extremely personal, psychological and even pathological nature of her relationship to her past. Yet she evokes violence not only to point to the inherent violence of representation, but to show the violence of revealing the truth, of peeling back the skin to reveal old wounds. Paradoxically, the violence of the French language actually comes to aid her in her representation, despite her troubled relationship with it.

Indeed, it is perhaps because of her more troubled relationship to the French language that Djebar’s writing comes to exemplify the complex relationship between writing and voice that characterizes écriture féminine. Out of necessity, Djebar writes in French to represent the silenced voices of her childhood that could not be represented through the oral traditions of

52 “Writing in a foreign language, not in either of the tongues of my native country…writing has brought me to the cries of the women silently rebelling in my youth, to my own true origins. Writing does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters” (Djebar, 204).
53 To attempt an autobiography using French words alone is to lend oneself to the vivisector’s scalpel, revealing what lies beneath the skin. The flesh flakes off and with it, seemingly, the last shreds of the unwritten language of my childhood. Wounds are reopened, veins weep, one’s own blood flows and that of others, which ahs never been dried (Djebar, 156).
Arabic and Tamazight; in order to overcome the French language’s representational limits, however, Djebar harnesses the subversive power and importance of oral traditions to move beyond these limits and push the very boundaries of the French language. This ceaseless engagement between the spoken and the written word continually underlies Djebar’s text, and culminates in the creation of languages with the power to express that which normal language cannot. Music and song become metalanguages\textsuperscript{54} through which Djebar self-consciously reflects upon the representational limits of her written language while simultaneously pushing these very same limits.

The \textit{voix} of different Algerian women, along with her own, cannot simply be translated and transcribed; mere words seem incapable of telling these women’s stories and Djebar flounders to represent them in the written word alone: “Je ne m’avance ni en diseuse, ni en scripteuse. Sur l’aire de la dépossession, je voudrais pouvoir chanter”\textsuperscript{55} (Djebar, 202). Djebar evokes something beyond mere writing to help her in her project. Djebar’s awareness of the limitations of her writing push her to include verbal metalanguages in order to more fully convey the \textit{voix} in her text that French language alone cannot: \textit{clameur, murmures, chuchotements, conciliabules, soliloque}\textsuperscript{56}. Indeed, it seems as important for the reader to \textit{hear} these stories as it is to read them; it is not only an oral metalanguage, but a distinctly aural one that, as Cixous states, rends the text with cries. Cherifa’s mourning cries for her brother lying dead and unburied bursts forth and her unstoppable voice comes to represent the cry of all women and girls torn apart by war:

\textsuperscript{54} A metalanguage is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary online as “A language or set of terms used for the description or analysis of another language.”

\textsuperscript{55} “I do not claim here to be either a story-teller or a scribe. On the territory of dispossession, I would that I could sing” (Djebar, 142).

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{clamour, murmurs, whispers, dialogues, soliloquy} (Djebar, v).

Cherifa’s howl of mourning cannot be differentiated from the mourning cries of other Algerian women and girls; her cry of protest becomes another language through which to express generations of women forced to face unfathomable grief without crying, forced to endure endless torture without speaking. By evoking clameur and stridence, Djebar emphasizes the collective expression of grief as a bursting forth of voices’ rhythmic vibrations, a violent musical harmony. The rhythmic intensity of this ghostly mourning music manifests itself in the murmures of the fugitive Aïcha, whose “antienne incohérente ou monologue de magicienne” 58 Jennet tries desperately to drown out through the pounding of her mortar and pestle grinding garlic and coriander (Djebar, 218). The percussion of the grinding coupled with Aïcha’s disjointed murmurs become a secret chorus calling out against their struggle, a song that must nevertheless efface itself and blend in with everyday life so as to keep Aïcha hidden. Music comes to express collective suffering and protest that the different narrative voix cannot; Djebar’s desire to sing their stories rather than write them manifests itself in a Cixousian bursting forth of voix, cri and musique (Cixous, 173).

Through Narguiss’s childhood feelings of love for Ganat, El Saadawi too explores other languages with the potential to better represent her characters’ desires; in this case, Narguiss understands “the language of doves even though she had not yet learnt to write” (El Saadawi,
127). She evokes a language beyond the human realm in her communication with Ganat, suggesting that human language is as yet incapable of representing their relationship. Cooing to doves and whispering to butterflies enables Narguiss to express herself to Ganat. This seemingly nonsensical form of speech eventually causes Narguiss’s parents to forbid her from visiting Ganat. Perhaps her parents have cause to restrict her, for it seems that this new language causes Narguiss to fantasize about frolicking with Ganat “like butterflies,” finally allowing their romantic desires to express themselves freely and physically (El Saadawi, 127). This language becomes the language of the body, allowing her to feel pleasure without the guilt of worrying about her honor: “…in the joy of being together they would forget what was the most precious possession of a girl” (El Saadawi, 127). Through this language, she forges a new space in which she no longer lives in fear of losing her hymen and thus her value as a woman. Like Cixous, El Saadawi creates a new type of speech that depends upon the body, rather than upon phallocentric logic, for its expression: “…elle ne « parle » pas, elle lance dans l’air son corps tremblant, elle se lâche, elle vole, c’est toute entière qu’elle passe dans sa voix, c’est avec son corps qu’elle soutient vitalemment le « logique » de son discours”59 (Cixous, 170). Ganat’s relationship to language comes to exemplify the physicality of Cixousian speech; Ganat’s whole body becomes the root of her self-expression, such that she must express herself by imagining herself flying away with her friend. Indeed, flight becomes an important image for both Cixous and El Saadawi, as it represents the possibility of the body moving beyond its usual corporeal limits and into new and more powerful forms of expression.

El Saadawi deepens this link between the body and self-expression through dance, the language of the body, and its role in weaving women’s desires into her narrative. For Narguiss,
dance is intimately linked to her love for Ganat, and her beating heart itself becomes the rhythm that urges her to move her body: “Under her ribs she could feel the beating of her heart. Deep down inside her was a melody which throbbed like a rhythmic dance. The ears of corn in the fields danced under the sun with the same rhythm…” (El Saadawi, 125). The rhythm that she feels she must follow is rooted in her own body; feeling this melody, she wants to leap out of her window and run away with Ganat (El Saadawi, 125). Dance also becomes a symbol of power and rebellion through Nefissa’s aunt Zanouba, known as Aunt Zanouba El Alma; the translator’s footnote indicates that, in Arabic, El Alma not only means “woman dancer” but also “the one who knows, who has a vast and deep knowledge of things,” emphasizing the link between knowledge, power, and the female body inherent in dance (El Saadawi, 177). Nefissa wishes not only to draw on her aunt Zanouba’s pride and knowledge, but also to “be able to move her arms and legs in the air, to create her own dance and not that of her aunt Zanouba…She wanted to be Nefissa the greatest of Alimas, radiating in the sky like the morning star, leaving her own stamp on the world” (El Saadawi, 183). Dancing is not only a matter of tradition, for Nefissa does not merely want to imitate her aunt; through dance, she seeks to create an identity for herself, to use the rhythm of her body to leave her own mark on the world. She weaves Aunt Zanouba’s powerful refrain of “Like a fire, my love! A burning fire!” throughout Nefissa’s narrative, emphasizing the intense yearning that dance comes to represent (El Saadawi, 177, 178, 181, 186, 188). Dance thus functions as a metalanguage through which El Saadawi explores women’s need to express their own physical, sexual, and personal desires—desires that can only partially be conveyed through the written word.

El Saadawi’s metalanguage of dance creates a space for feminine desire within her own text that pushes the boundaries of what the written word alone can express, while Djebar uses
**fantasia** as a musical metalanguage that further evokes both the power and the limitations of French language. This term is evoked not only in the title, but also in the epigraph of Part III through Beethoven’s opus 27, Sonatas 1 and 2: “*Quasi una fantasia*…” (Djebar, 159). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *fantasia* generally means “a composition in a style in which form is subservient to fancy”; Djebar not only casts this part of her novel as an experimental section subject to her own whims rather than to traditional narrative form but also likens it to improvisational music. Indeed, this part of the text is even divided into five distinct movements which are concluded with sections entitled “finale” and “air de nay”60 (Djebar, 305, 313).

Djebar’s literary melding of voice and music embodies this freeform *fantasia*. This word, however, evokes more than simply music; in the context of North Africa, it is derived from the Arabic *fantaziya* meaning “ostentatious,” and is defined as “a set of virtuoso movements on horseback executed at a gallop, accompanied by loud cries and culminating in rifle shots” (Djebar, xviii). Towards the novel’s end, Djebar evokes this equestrian ceremony through Fromentin’s description of a woman who is trampled to death by a spurned lover on horseback, causing her to ask, “Est-ce qu’inévitablement, toute histoire d’amour ne peut être évoquée sur ces lieux, autrement que par son issue tragique?”61 (Djebar, 311). Indeed, as paired with *l’amour* in the novel’s title, *la fantasia* becomes a part of Djebar’s musical metalanguage that simultaneously expresses both the collective outcry of her Algerian sisters as well as the violence that these subversive voices are inevitably met with: “Oui, malgré le tumulte des miens alentour, j’entends déjà, avant même qu’il s’élève et transperce le ciel dur, j’entends le cri de la mort dans la fantasia”62 (Djebar, 314). The *fantasia* becomes a metalanguage through which Djebar

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60 A nay is “a very old type of flute” (Djebar, ix).
61 “Can no love story ever be evoked in these regions except by its tragic consequences?” (Djebar, 225).
62 “Yes, in spite of the tumult of my people all around, I already hear, even before it arises and pierces the harsh sky, I hear the death cry in the *Fantasia*” (Djebar, 227).
expresses both the burden and power of her own cultural memory as expressed in the French language; even as the cries of her Algerian sisters are finally heard, they are inherently accompanied by both the violence of their own cultural silencing and the impossibility of their precise representation in the language of the colonizer; the fantasia is freeform music and voice bursting forth from the text, as well as the text’s inherent limits.

Yet while this musical metaphor functions as a Cixousian metalanguage that tests the boundaries of the traditional text, Djebar also challenges Cixous’s conception of voix through her use of silence and aphasia. The idea that speech and self-expression are necessarily liberating becomes complicated in an Algerian context, as families resist the effusive tendency of the French language to destroy traditions of modesty in matters concerning love. Marie-Louise’s ostentatious displays of affection towards her French husband startle Djebar and fill her with the feeling that love should not be so openly expressed:

Je crus ressentir d’emblée, très tôt, trop tôt, que l’amourette, que l’amour ne doivent pas, par des mots de clinquant, par une tendresse voyante de ferblanterie, donner prise au spectacle, susciter l’envie de celles qui seront frustrées… Je décidai que l’amour résidait nécessairement ailleurs, au-delà des mots et des gestes publics63 (Djebar, 43).

Using words as a tool to flaunt love in front of Djebar and her cloistered sisters, Marie-Louise abuses language and helps to forever estrange Djebar from intimacy in French. The showy and seemingly superficial romance expressed in the French language does not enchant Djebar as a child, but repels her. In “Stepmother Tongue: ‘Feminine Writing’ in Assia Djebar’s Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade,” Soheila Ghaussy states that silence can be read as “a rebellion in which the female Arab speaker refuses to use the specific discourse of the French colonizer…by retreating

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63 “I seemed to feel, as soon as I hard it – all too soon – that a love affair, that love itself ought not to five rise to merertricious words, ostentatious demonstrations of affection, so making a spectacle of oneself and arousing envy in frustrated women…I decided that love must necessarily reside elsewhere and not in public words and gestures” (Djebar, 27).
to silence, to the traditions of her own cultural background, in which love is not verbalized” (Ghaussy, 461). While enforced silence can clearly become a tool of patriarchal oppression, silence that women choose for themselves can become a powerful weapon against French colonizers. Djebar realizes from a young age that silence will become critical in expressing her own romantic desires: “Entre l’homme et moi, un refus de langue se coagulait, devenait point de départ et point d’arrivée à la fois”

64 (Djebar, 182). Silence thus in a sense becomes a way for Djebar to experience love, a resistance to the superficiality of French to which she has never felt connected. Thus, while Cixous posits the primal power of voix, Djebar nuances this notion, stating that well-placed silence can preserve her own vision of love and sexuality while also resisting the domination of the colonial language.

Similarly, El Saadawi complicates the idea of voix as liberating because of her recurring emphasis on the powerlessness of verbally expressing pain and protest. She constantly transforms omnipresent screams of protest in the text into mere background noise, revealing the limited potential of even the loudest and most vehement protest: “One scream amidst a million voices, fusing…so that the million voices became like one continuous, drawn-out scream that died in the night” (El Saadawi, 86). The scream does not mount as any real threat to power, but is a cry heard constantly in each character’s conscience, so much so that it dies out and is never truly heard. Indeed, screams and suffering seem to form such an integral part of every generation’s experience that they lose their subversive power, becoming “[a] single, long scream that [goes] on interminably in [Ganat’s] ears, like water dropping down a waterfall. Like the millions of voices which [create] the silence of the night” (El Saadawi, 97). This monolithic and endless protest seems to die out in its own regularity, becoming the very silence that it seeks to

64 “Between the man and me, refusal of speech became both the starting point and the end point of our relationship” (Djebar, 127).
El Saadawi complicates the notion that a throwing forth of *voix* is an effective source of women’s protest, for this protest may fall on deaf ears and become little more than white noise—as has been the case for so many women who have dared to speak out and who have either been forcefully silenced or ignored.

Both Djebar and El Saadawi explore a Cixousian melding of writing and voice through the role of music, rhythm, and dance in their texts. Djebar uses these devices to challenge her own use of the French language and to aid her in representing that which will ultimately never be fully represented in French. Through the French *jeu de mots* of “l’amour, ses cris (s’écrit),” Djebar reveals the incessant exchange between spoken and written that drives her project (Djebar, 299). The metalanguage of music and *fantasia* become a new medium through which Djebar interweaves voice and writing that “…font haleter le texte ou le composent de suspens, de silences, l’aphonisent ou le déchirent de cris”65 (Cixous, 170). Similarly, this tension between the spoken and the written word manifests itself in El Saadawi’s narrative through the need to write desire into her text by using more than just written language. At the same time, El Saadawi challenges Cixous’s direct link between *voix* and *écriture* by creating a subversive space within Arabic script itself. Finally, both El Saadawi and Djebar question whether *voix* is always the most powerful form of expression, as Djebar links it to the superficiality of the French language and El Saadawi shows that, after generations of silenced protest, oral expression can become a repetitive and frustrating medium that can seem powerless. The complex questions of power, rebellion, and representation in these texts provides a productive critique of Cixousian *écriture*.

**Part III: Writing the Female, Writing the Feminine**

*Sa libido est cosmique, comme son inconscient est mondial ; son écriture ne peut pas aussi que se poursuivre, sans jamais inscrire ou discerner de contours... Elle seule ose et veut connaître du*

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65 “…make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries” (Cixous, 92).
It is clear that both El Saadawi and Djebar seek to represent previously unrepresented experiences and desires in their texts, and that both authors remain preoccupied with the representational limits and possibilities posed by *écriture*. Like Cixous, both authors seek to put *écriture* at the service of writing beyond a traditional phal(logo)centric framework in narratives that foreground women’s experiences. Yet even as they write women’s experiences, do El Saadawi and Djebar have the same vision of the féminin as does Cixous?

Perhaps the most problematic and oft-criticized aspect of Cixous’s *écriture féminine* is the relationship she envisions between women and the féminin. Cixous undoubtedly roots *écriture féminine* in women’s bodies through her assertions about a bisexual female sexuality and libidinal economy that fundamentally challenge a phallocentric vision of the body; the “avant-langage” of *écriture féminine* is intimately tied to women’s sexual and maternal drives, which gives women the “don d’altérabilité” that is not possible with male sexuality that gravitates “autour du pénis, engendrant ce corps…centralisé” 67 (Cixous, 162). The decentralized female body becomes a primal source from which women write: “En vérité, elle matérialise...”

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66 Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide: her writing also can only go on and on, without her ever inscribing or distinguishing contours...She alone dares and wants to know from within where she, the one excluded, has never ceased to hear what-comes-before-language reverberating. She lets the other tongue of a thousand tongues speak—the tongue, sound without barrier or death. She refuses life nothing: Her tongue doesn’t hold back but holds forth, doesn’t keep in but keeps on enabling. Where the wonder of being several and the turmoil is expressed, she does not protect herself against these unknown feminines; she surprises herself at seeing, being, pleasuring in her gift of changeability. I am spacious singing Flesh; onto which is grafted no one knows which I—which masculine or feminine, more or less human but above all living, because changing I (Cixous, 88).

67 “around the penis, engendering this centralized body” (Cixous, 87).
charnellement ce qu’elle pense, elle le signifie avec son corps”68 (Cixous, 170). The female body itself becomes a signifier for anti-phallocentric discourse. The body becomes a source of women’s writing, and it is also through writing that women are able to reclaim and truly inhabit their bodies and experience sexual desires, which they have learned to despise in a patriarchal world: “Écrire, acte, qui non seulement « réalisera » le rapport dé-censuré de la femme à sa sexualité, à son être-femme, lui rendant accès à ses propres forces…”69 (Cixous, 179). Writing both comes from her body and reinforces her relationship to her sexuality. It is through writing that she gains back her true strength and ceases to see herself from the sole perspective of the oppressive masculine world order.

Given the very strong tie that Cixous creates between writing and the body, it may seem that she is categorizing écriture féminine as women’s writing; after all, she even directly asserts that “aujourd’hui, l’écriture est aux femmes”70 because of the link between femininity and bisexuality in which woman accepts the Other (Cixous, 158). Perhaps most controversially, Cixous points to a seemingly precultural drive for motherhood that is strongly linked to a woman’s drive to write: “…la femme n’est jamais loin de la « mère » (que j’entends hors-rôle, la « mère » comme non-nom, et comme source des biens)...Elle écrit à l’encre blanche”71 (Cixous, 173). While Cixous makes sure to qualify her use of “mother” as one that exists outside the traditional oppressive cultural role which it has become, she nevertheless evokes a maternal essence inherent to women that has troubled many critics. Jones asserts that it is problematic to

68 “Really she makes what she thinks materialize carnally, she conveys meaning with her body” (Cixous, 92).
69 “To write – the act that will ‘realize’ the un-censored relationship of woman to her sexuality, to her woman-being giving her back access to her own forces…” (Cixous, 97).
70 “…today, writing is woman’s” (Cixous, 85).
71 “Woman is never far from the ‘mother’ (I do not mean the role but the ‘mother’ as no-name and as source of goods)...She writes with white ink” (Cixous, 94).
use the female body as a source of resistance, as it ultimately ends up paradoxically essentializing the female body and experience rather than creating new possibilities:

…[T]he female body hardly seems the best site to launch an attack on the forces that have alienated us from what our sexuality might become. For if we argue for an innate, precultural femininity, where does that position (though in content it obviously diverges from masculinist dogma) leave us in relation to earlier theories about women’s “nature”? …[W]hen she speaks of a drive toward gestation, I begin to hear echoes of the coercive glorification of motherhood that has plagued women for centuries (Jones, 255).

Jones is not alone in denouncing Cixous’s vision of a “precultural femininity” that seems to treat the female unconscious as an other-oriented monolith. Furthermore, Jones asserts that using féminité to point to the power of women’s difference participates in the same binary opposition of male/female that already others women (Jones, 255).

It would be an oversimplification, however, to state that Cixous is merely writing the opposition of masculine/feminine onto the opposition of male/female, and despite her strong link between the female body and écriture, she is careful to define écriture féminine not merely as woman’s writing, but as a source of potential resistance rooted in feminine difference that is accessible regardless of gender:

J’ai soin ici d’employer les qualifications de la différence sexuelle, afin d’éviter la confusion homme/masculin, femme/féminin : car il y a des hommes qui ne refoulent pas leur féminité, des femmes qui inscrivent plus ou moins fortement leur masculinité. La différence ne se distribue pas, bien sûr, à partir des « sexes » déterminés socialement72 (Cixous, 148).

In this passage, Cixous denounces a feminine that inherently belongs to the female sex; instead, féminité comes to embody an expression of difference regardless of gender. While Cixous may imbue woman’s coming to writing through her body with a special significance given the

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72 I make a point of using the qualifiers of sexual difference here to avoid the confusion man/masculine, woman/feminine: for there are some men who do not repress their femininity, some women who, more or less strongly, inscribe their masculinity. Difference is not distributed, of course, on the basis of socially determined “sexes” (Cixous, 81).
oppressive distance that woman experiences in relation to her own body, she does not characterize *écriture féminine* as woman’s writing, but rather as writing with a specific commitment to breaking down phallocentric thought patterns; indeed, Cixous qualifies her assertion that “*l’écriture est aux femmes*” by adding that she is not making a call to arms, but rather pointing to how woman’s libidinal economy “*admet qu’il y ait de l’autre*”73 (Cixous, 158). In short, her characterization of *écriture* as *féminine* does not merely write *féminin* onto *femme*, does not merely conflate ‘feminine’ with ‘female.’ Instead, it points to the possibility of embracing difference: “…il n’est pas d’invention possible…sans qu’en le sujet inventeur il y ait en abondance de l’autre, du divers, personnes-détachées, personnes-pensées, peuples issus de l’inconscient, et dans chaque désert soudain animé, surgissent de moi qu’on ne se connaissait pas”74 (Cixous, 154). Allowing oneself to explore and be explored by the Others within oneself is what allows for the emergence of *écriture féminine*. Anyone who can truly embrace and explore the Other has access to *écriture féminine*; the idea of a female essence may serve as a powerful metaphor when imagining a resistance to phallocentrism based on a new vision of subjectivity, but Cixous self-consciously points to *écriture féminine* as a productive source of resistance for writers of all genders, rather than as the direct product of women writers.

For many critics, Cixous is a self-contradictory writer, though this characterization does not necessarily preclude the usefulness of her theoretical framework. Toril Moi recognizes the tensions between the female and the feminine at work when she states that Cixous’s “deconstructive view of textuality is countered and undermined by an equally passionate presentation of writing as a female essence” (Moi, 126). Given that Cixous constructs a very

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73 “admits there is an other” (Cixous, 85).
74 “…there is no invention possible…without there being in the inventing subject an abundance of the other, of variety: separate people, thought-/people, whole populations issuing from the unconscious, and in each suddenly animated desert, the springing up of selves one didn’t know” (Cixous, 84).
specific vision of the féminin as a source of rebellion that is both rooted in and moves beyond women’s bodies, how can the reader use écriture féminine as a productive theoretical framework in understanding subversive autobiographical, historical, and theological works such as those of Djebar and El Saadawi? Like Cixous, El Saadawi grounds her resistance of the phallocentric system in female bodies and experiences through the suffering of the female asylum residents; however, through the role of Eblis, El Saadawi reinforces a Cixousian féminin that moves beyond gender to appreciate a broader resistance rooted in difference from the phallocentric order. In a sense, El Saadawi helps the reader sift through the paradoxical nature of écriture féminine to appreciate the subversive texts that Cixous envisions in “Sorties.” Djebar, however, challenges the political viability of the Cixousian féminin; while she posits an écriture des femmes that nonetheless shares many commonalities with écriture féminine through its relationship between language and the body, Djebar urges the reader to consider whether the féminin, so rooted in an imaginary future, can serve as a useful tool in understanding a troubled past.

Though El Saadawi ultimately breaks down the hierarchies in the asylum between God/Eblis and sane/insane, she may at first glance appear to keep the hierarchical couple intact: man/woman. After all, the abusive Director and the male attendants in the asylum, as well as the countless oppressive male figures from the female asylum residents’ past, seem to inscribe male/female onto oppressor/oppressed. Through Ganat’s rebellious poetry and denunciation of her unfaithful husband as well as Nefissa’s rejection of patriarchal values after her rape, El Saadawi undoubtedly roots the subversion of phallogocentrism in women’s oppression; as they are the most direct targets of patriarchal oppression, their suffering and rebellion are foregrounded.
Yet the relationship between the féminin and women’s bodies and experiences is not a simple one, and it would be a misrepresentation of both El Saadawi’s and Cixous’s work to so directly link écriture féminine with women’s experiences. The transformation from the Head Nurse to Narguiss clarifies the distinction between the female and the more nuanced Cixousian féminin. At the beginning of the novel, the Head Nurse symbolizes woman’s complicity with the phallocentric order; she accesses power that most women cannot and carries out the Director’s orders without fail. The Head Nurse has lost her connection to and control over her own body ever since her adolescence, when she learned to erase herself under the male gaze. Her body exists as an apology for itself, a self-effacing entity constantly aware of its inherent sinfulness in a phallocentric world: “If anyone did happen to spot her she shook her head several times as though apologising for being in the world. She smiled timidly to excuse herself for a situation which had been forced upon her, for her body, which should have been invisible…” (El Saadawi, 114). Her body exists as a damaged shell that she must constantly deny, exemplifying how women come to become disgusted by their own bodies in a patriarchal society: “son corps même, elle n’a pu l’habiter”75 (Cixous, 124). Indeed, she must starkly separate her conscious from her unconscious mind and repress her unconscious drives in order to survive in a misogynistic society: “Her hidden mind went to sleep when she walked and her visible mind became separated from her body”76 (El Saadawi, 112). The Head Nurse is the woman who lives only as a reflection of the masculine order, denying any space for her feminine drives as she remains complicit in oppressing other women in the asylum. Her womanhood neither guarantees her own liberation, nor does it promise solidarity with the other women in the asylum; her body is a burden and she lives in fear of her alarming past and abusive present reality with the Director.

75 “She has not been able to live in…her own body” (Cixous, 68).
76 The translator’s footnotes indicate that hidden mind refers to the unconscious mind and visible mind refers to the conscious mind (El Saadawi, 112).
Yet the Head Nurse does not long remain in her role as submissive accomplice to and victim of the Director. She moves beyond it and rejects the Director’s abuse, declaring a space for her lesbian desire and, in doing so, reclaiming her identity as Narguiss. This transition marks her transformation from female to the Cixousian féminin; as a female, she can choose either to reinforce phallocentric power or move beyond it and work towards something greater, but when she commits herself to creating a new space for desire that defies masculine hierarchical thought and embraces the Other within herself, she enters the realm of the subversive féminin. Whereas the Head Nurse used to reject her unconscious mind, which would have posed a danger to her patriarchal reality, she comes to reclaim these desires when she again recognizes herself as Narguiss with an identity outside of the asylum. She realizes that the medal of honor that she has always been so proud of is nothing more than proof that she is “[a]ble to make others happy but incapable of bringing happiness to herself” (El Saadawi, 111). To combat this, she decisively tells the Director “My name is Narguiss, not girl…From now onwards” and asserts that she “[hates] all men” and loves women (El Saadawi, 171-172). This emphatic declaration of her homosexuality makes it clear that she is learning to reclaim the unconscious desires that she has always denied; her commitment to move beyond phallocentrism and embrace the Others within her is what brings her into the realm of the féminin. Her female experience serves as a catalyst rather than a prerequisite for the féminin.

Through Narguiss, El Saadawi makes it clear that women too can be part of the patriarchal system and that ‘subversive’ is not merely synonymous with ‘female’; one could still, however, assert that Narguiss’s transformation occurs because she is a woman, and thus that the féminin is reserved for women in Innocence of the Devil. To avoid this reductive approach and to more fully understand the Cixousian féminin, it is important to examine how El Saadawi uses
Eblis to imagine what could be if men too were able to open themselves to an interplay with the Other. 77 Though the figure of the devil cannot be said to be clearly representative of man, he is represented as distinctly male through both the pronouns employed to describe him as well as the accounts of his schooldays. Ever since he learns what the word “male” means in school, Eblis struggles to comprehend the great cultural power allotted to him because of his genitals: “It was just a piece of flesh hanging down below his belly, and from which the stream of his urine flowed out. Yet the eyes of the boys in school gleamed with pride when they looked at it” (El Saadawi, 135). While Eblis does not initially share in the societal importance attached to his status as a male, he soon learns that in order to be a man in society he too must learn to assert his subjectivity—a subjectivity that gravitates around the phallus itself; he begins to imitate his father and tells his mother “I…I…I am greater, greater…” (El Saadawi, 136-137). As the translator points out, the same word is used for “bigger” and “greater,” such that his assertion of greatness is equated with his fellow schoolboys’ obsession with penis size (El Saadawi, 137). Yet the faltering nature of this declaration mirrors his own uncertainty with this value system which, though taught to him at school, never truly becomes ingrained in him.

Instead, Eblis rebels against Sheikh Masoud and uses Quranic verse to undermine theological and societal power structures. In school, he is asked to recite the verse of Eblis78 from the Quran and adds his own denunciation of corrupt power to a holy text: “And they all bowed down and worshipped the corrupt viceroy, all except Eblis” (El Saadawi, 145). Eblis’s impertinence is met with the harsh response of “You dare to answer back, boy?”—a reply that is

77 As indicated in a previous footnote, it is never clear if Eblis and God are meant to directly represent their theological counterparts, but their names clearly make them theologically significant. It might further seem problematic to the reader that Eblis is linked with the féminin; after all, labeling women as “fallen” and linking them to the original sin is what causes many women to be spat on in the first place. However, Eblis is anthropomorphized and depicted in a positive light, so I believe that this view is too simplistic for El Saadawi’s narrative.

78 In passages such as this, it is clear that, while Eblis to some degree represents the Devil, he too is a man—Nefissa’s younger brother; El Saadawi constantly troubles any clear separation between Eblis as the Devil and Eblis as man.
usually reserved for women who dare to express themselves (El Saadawi, 145). Indeed, Eblis is frequently compared to women when he is insulted by Sheikh Masoud, the Director, and the General. In school, he is told to stop “weeping like a woman” and to learn masculine stoicism (El Saadawi, 136). His resistance to traditional masculinity causes him to be persecuted. It is in part because of his resistance to the General’s misogyny that he is labeled as insane and condemned to the asylum. When the General insults Eblis’s mother, Eblis resists him, and is thus labeled mad:

– You son of a mara.
– My mother was worth twenty men.

He lifted his head in the same way as his mother did and stiffened the muscles of his back. The Director stared at him with wide-open eyes, then brought his mouth close up to the General’s ear and whispered.
– Inherited madness, sir! (El Saadawi, 147).

Mara, which means woman, is used as an insult; yet rather than accepting it as such, he asserts his mother’s worth and even draws strength and pride by imitating her posture (El Saadawi, 147). The Director’s assertion of “inherited madness” ties Eblis’s insanity back to his mother, revealing the extent to which madness becomes gendered in El Saadawi’s narrative; like the other women, Eblis refuses to accept normalized misogyny and is thus labeled “insane”—a label which continually serves to stifle rebellious voices. El Saadawi creates a vision of Eblis “…as an innocent victim of the patriarchal religious structure” (Malti-Douglas, 138). Thus, the hierarchies of the asylum do not simply write oppressor/oppressed onto male/female; Eblis as a male figure is under the Director’s power and must also endure God’s manipulation and harassment,⁷⁹ thus becoming oppressed and fighting back much as his female comrades do.

Furthermore, Eblis shares the importance of metalanguages with the other female asylum residents, for he too must seek new ways to communicate his own desires. He finds an outlet for

⁷⁹ See “Part I: Complicating the Other, Problematizing Subjectivities” for a more complete description of the relationship between God and Eblis in the asylum.
subversive self-expression in the metalanguage of poetry. Though this language is undoubtedly linked to other female characters such as Ganat and Nefissa, it also becomes closely tied to his experience as it allows him to finally declare his humanity: “I am not a devil, Ganat. / I am not Satan / And I’m not an angel. / My mother is sad. And my sister is Nefissa. / I am human / Just like you / And my heart is open” (El Saadawi, 218). Eblis recites this poem soon before his own death, as the final declaration of how he would like others to understand him after a lifetime of being misunderstood. Eblis defines his own humanity as stemming from an open heart; poetry allows him to express an openness to desire that other forms of language have restricted throughout his life. Thus, Eblis’s relationship to writing parallels Ganat’s; both write to redefine their own realities and to move beyond the gendered hierarchies that have ruled their lives. By emphasizing his own humanity as “human” outside of gendered terms, Eblis emphasizes that resistance—though undoubtedly linked to gendered experience—also exists beyond one’s gender, arising from a larger understanding of and refusal to accept the limitations of phallocentric thought.

Thus, *Innocence of the Devil* elucidates Cixous’s seemingly contradictory relationship between the female and the *féminin* by creating a narrative in which female bodies are a source of power and resistance linked to writing, and yet subversive writing is not restricted to female bodies and experiences; rather, male figures can come to recognize and appreciate their own difference from the phallocentric order and harness the power of the written word to envision something beyond their oppressive reality. While Cixous grounds the *féminin* in woman’s subconscious drives and bodily experiences, she opens it to imagine a whole new set of possibilities, with *écriture féminine* available to anyone interested in moving beyond traditional hierarchies to embrace the Other. Similarly, El Saadawi roots her narrative in the very real
oppression that women suffer in a misogynistic world, and yet her inclusion of and elaboration upon Eblis as a male ally elucidates how a language so intimately related to the female can open itself up to the potential of the féminin. What El Saadawi imagines is not a world in which women’s voices are heard, for women can be as patriarchal as the Head Nurse initially is; instead, El Saadawi shows us an imaginary space which is subverted through the power of an unrestricted féminin, when the other language of a thousand tongues can finally emerge so strongly that it breaks down the established order. Indeed, *Innocence of the Devil* could be viewed as a theoretical imagining of the Cixousian féminin as it challenges the phallocentric space of the make-believe asylum.

The power of the féminin is thus clear in El Saadawi’s literary universe. Does its revolutionary potential hold up in the historical and autobiographical context of Djebar’s work? Indeed, *L’Amour, la fantasia* explicitly links the female body with new language that expresses something beyond what other languages are capable of representing. As has already been shown, Djebar emphasizes the importance of the body as an alternative form of expression through her use of dance as a metalanguage; however, she goes further, explicitly stating that the language inherent in Algerian women’s bodies becomes a fourth language apart from French, Arabic, and Libyco-Berber:

La quatrième langue, pour toutes, jeunes ou vieilles, cloîtrées ou à demi émancipées, demeure celle du corps que le regard des voisins, des cousins, prétend rendre sourd et aveugle, puisqu’ils ne peuvent plus tout à fait l’incarcérer ; le corps qui, dans les transes, les danses ou les vociférations, par accès d’espoir ou de désespoir, s’insurge, cherche en analphabète la destination, sur quel rivage, de son message d’amour\(^8^0\) (Djebar, 254-255).

\(^8^0\) The fourth language, for all females, young or old, cloistered or half-emancipated, remains that of the body; the body which male neighbours’ and cousins’ eyes require to be deaf and blind, since they cannot completely incarcerate it; the body which, in trances, dances or vociferations, in fits of hope or despair, rebels, and unable to read or write, seeks some unknown shore as destination for its message of love (Djebar, 250).
While the woman’s body may be imprisoned and essentially rendered invisible by the surrounding societal constraints, it is not truly effaced but rather becomes a new language through which women fight to represent their own desires. Djebar defines this language of desire as a direct result of the female body as it exists within a specific historical and societal context; like El Saadawi, she emphasizes the Cixousian idea of woman coming to writing as a process of relearning her body and experiencing it anew. This “message d’amour,” the expression of a forbidden inner love, echoes Cixous’s vision of woman as daring enough to want to “connaître du dedans”\(^8^1\); like Cixous, Djebar grounds \textit{écriture} in woman’s as yet unexpressed desires (Cixous, 162).

Indeed, Djebar goes so far as to characterize both the act of writing Arabic and the Arabic script itself as female. Djebar’s erotic characterization of a woman writing Arabic calligraphy mirrors the strong erotic link that Cixous creates between female bisexuality and \textit{écriture}:

“Inscrite partout en luxe de dorures, jusqu’à nettoyer autour d’elle toute autre image animale ou végétale, l’écriture, se mirant en elle-même par ses courbes, se perçoit femme…”\(^8^2\) (Djebar, 255). She personifies the Arabic script not only by describing how it sees itself as if looking in a mirror, but also in stating that its own reflection is clearly that of a woman; the curves of this \textit{écriture} mirror the curves of the female body. It is as if, in tracing the lines of calligraphy, the woman is transcribing her own body onto the page: “Quand la main écrit, lente posture du bras, précautionneuse pliure du flanc en avant ou sur le côté, le corps accroupi se balance comme dans un acte d’amour”\(^8^3\) (Djebar, 255). While the act of writing might traditionally be linked with

\(^8^1\) “know from within” (Cixous, 88).

\(^8^2\) “Writing: everywhere, a wealth of burnished gold and in its vicinity there is no place for other imagery from either animal or vegetable kingdom; it looks in the mirror of its scrolls and curlicues and sees itself as a woman…” (Djebar, 181).

\(^8^3\) “When the hand writes, slow positioning of the arm, carefully bending forward or leaning to one side, crouching, swaying to and fro, as in an act of love” (Djebar, 180).
mental rather than physical work, here Djebar emphasizes its physicality through the tense, almost sexual positioning of the woman’s arms and legs. In this sense, writing becomes almost literally a language of the body—but only in Arabic, for the aphasia of love that Djebar experiences in French prevents the same sensual closeness from occurring. The erotic relationship between the woman writer and Arabic écriture is evident both in Djebar’s description of the act of writing as well as in her characterization of the writing itself.

Yet while El Saadawi grounds écriture in woman’s bodies while simultaneously opening it up to Eblis in the broader, more inclusionary sense of the Cixousian féminin, Djebar in part closes her narrative to men, remaining committed to the project of specifically including women’s marginalized and stifled experiences. While men are important to her narrative in their roles in the Algerian War of Independence and in their personal relationships with women, their voices are not emphasized as sites of resistance. Though Djebar provides momentary glimpses of men writing against the patriarchal tradition—for instance, when her father addresses a letter to her mother—she is committed to specifically representing women’s voices (Djebar, 57-58).

Grounded, historical female experience serves not only as the basis for Algerian women’s language of the body, but also for Djebar’s narrative on the whole, for it is in part through the inclusion of lost and silenced female narratives from the past that Djebar rewrites history.

To borrow and build on the terminology used by Priscilla Ringrose in Assia Djebar: In Dialogue with Feminisms, Djebar’s narrative perhaps seeks to create an écriture des femmes rather than an écriture féminine; her interests are not in redefining the feminine or using women’s experience as a jumping-off point to imagine productive difference, but rather to directly represent women’s voices and to confront the multifarious problems posed by linguistic representation. Ringrose explains the difference in Djebar’s and Cixous’s approaches as in part a
temporal one: “Djebar looks back in time to locate her écriture des femmes whereas Cixous looks both to the future…and to the past” (Ringrose, 127). Djebar looks to historical sources and texts as a palimpsest onto which she inscribes the voix of those who could not write their stories or, in any case, whose stories would have been considered entirely unimportant when sifted through the censorship of colonial and patriarchal domination.

The haunting image of the mutilated hand Djebar evokes in the final pages of her novel perhaps serves as the best metaphor for her attempt to reach back to past centuries of silence and brutality to express painful experiences and memories. In Eugène Fromentin’s firsthand accounts of Algeria, he describes the alarming moment when he finds an anonymous Algerian woman’s severed hand lying on the ground, picks it up, and, horrified, flings it back to the earth; Djebar must now attempt to seize “cette main vivante, main de la mutilation et du souvenir” in order to “lui faire porter le ṣ qalam” (Djebar, 314). In trying to place a writing instrument back in this anonymous woman’s hand, Djebar is trying to recuperate a lost past, a past that is forgotten and erased because most of those women who could tell the truth now lie dead. Reaching back to the hand of a woman who was brutally mutilated serves as a metaphor for her painstaking reach back into women’s memories to unearth the unspoken: “…j’entre dans les demeures de village où les diseuses se rappellent la cavalcade d’hier puis, le corps emmitouflé, font semblant à nouveau de dormir” (Djebar, 314). Djebar focuses on the process of catching and attempting to transcribe these moments when women tell their stories before again lapsing into silence. Thus, Djebar remains specifically occupied with an écriture des femmes rooted in women’s experiences and memories (Djebar, 144).

84 “this living hand, hand of mutilation and of memory” (Djebar, 226).
85 “bring it the qalam” (Djebar, 226). Qalam is a type of Arabic pen used for calligraphy.
86 “I enter the village homes where the muffled women retell their stories of the cavalcades of a more recent past, before they seem to lapse once more into sleep” (Djebar, 226).
Cixous, on the other hand, evokes the past to understand women’s present situation, but constructs the féminin primarily in relation to a hypothetical future, as an imperfect term whose meaning would change in exciting new ways should people experience real sexual liberation:

…[I]maginons une libération réelle de la sexualité c’est-à-dire une transformation du rapport de chacun à son corps (– et à l’autre corps)... Alors la « féminité », la « masculinité », inscriraient tout autrement leurs effets de différence, leur économie, leurs rapports à la dépense, au manque, au don. Ce qui apparaît comme « féminin » ou « masculin » aujourd’hui ne reviendrait plus au même87 (Cixous, 153).

In inviting us to imagine what could be, Cixous also urges us to rethink masculinity and femininity; were all men and women to change their relationships to their own bodies and to the Other, current conceptions of masculinity and femininity would change altogether, no longer able to be “agencée dans l’opposition encore dominante maintenant”88 (Cixous, 153). As our societal systems of signification changed, so too would the gendered oppositions in which we now remain trapped. When El Saadawi changes the asylum’s reality and experiments with what would happen if its inhabitants started using language differently, she opens up this imaginary féminin to question the construction of gendered oppositions. Certainly, a part of El Saadawi’s theological critique works to represent women’s experiences and create a space for their desire in a world that has previously shut it out; Djebar, on the other hand, does not spring forward into an ideal, imaginary future but rather remains firmly committed to unearthing “les inscriptions des témoins qu’on oublie”89 (Djebar, 144). While Cixous frames écriture féminine as a series of “sorties” to escape from phallocentric thought, Djebar does not seek a way out, and instead

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87 …[L]et us imagine a real liberation of sexuality, that is to say, a transformation of each one’s relationship to his or her body (and to the other body)... Then ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ would inscribe quite differently their effects of difference, their economy, their relationship to expenditure, to lack to the gift. What today appears to be ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ would no longer amount to the same thing (Cixous, 83).
88 “organized with the opposition that remains dominant” (Cixous, 83).
89 “the epigraphs left by long-forgotten witnesses” (Djebar, 100).
painstakingly uncovers a past that she is both forever connected to and exiled from through her *écriture des femmes*.

This past/future divide also reveals further fundamental ways in which Djebbar and Cixous differently draw on the feminine and the female for inspiration. While Cixous looks forward to a hypothetical future *féminin* that is rooted in the reclaiming of a pre-cultural, subconscious notion of femininity, Djebbar looks both to Arabic and far back into a distant past to Tamazight for a vision of matriarchal power. Djebbar in part turns to the language of her own mother—Arabic—as a source of maternal strength that she has previously been denied: “En fait je recherche, comme un lait dont on m’aurait autrefois écartée, la pléthore amoureuse de la langue de ma mère”90 (Djebbar, 92). The maternal power of Arabic in Djebbar’s discourse strongly evokes Cixous’s maternal discourse surrounding *écriture féminine*; both writers use breast milk as a metaphor for women’s relationship to language, with Djebbar nourishing herself from the milk of her mother tongue and Cixous characterizing *écriture féminine* as literally in white ink because of its relationship to subconscious maternal drives. Yet here it is important to separate the autobiographical significance of Djebbar’s mother’s language from Cixous’s evocation of the subconscious power of the feminine; Djebbar quite literally refers to the language of her mother and thus remains committed to memory and lived experience, while Cixous carries her speculation into the realm of the female subconscious.

Djebbar goes one step beyond describing Arabic as her mother tongue to explore Tamazight, her grandmother’s tongue, as an idealized maternal language. Djebbar characterizes this language as the one that women speak “…quand nous imaginons retrouver les plus

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90 “And now I too seek out the rich vocabulary of love of my mother tongue – milk of which I had been previously deprived” (Djebbar, 62).
anciennes de nos idoles mères”91 (Djebar, 254). For Djebar, Tamazight represents a return to a
time not only before French colonization, but before Arab colonization and Islam as well; this
language evokes the existence of pre-Islamic goddesses, calling forth a time when patriarchal
thought was not yet ingrained into nearly every aspect of language and society. For, indeed, the
Tuaregs who spoke Libyco-Berber were a matriarchal society in which women were the keepers
of the written word (Ringrose, 134). By harkening back to a language of the pre-colonial past
and imagining a return to her “idoles mères,” Djebar asserts the generative power of this
matriarchal tongue; interestingly enough, while she imagines a language more capable of
conveying her écriture des femmes because of its matriarchal value, she still pulls this
inspirational ideal from a concrete past, albeit a distant and perhaps idealized one. Ringrose
affirms this fundamental difference between Cixous’s and Djebar’s work: “Cixous’s écriture is
located on the boundaries of the conscious and the unconscious, in between the Symbolic and the
Imaginary, whereas Djebar’s écriture appears to be located firmly in historic/symbolic time”
(Ringrose, 128).

These profound differences between Cixous and Djebar mirror larger critiques of écriture
féminine’s ability to function as a politically viable feminist framework. While Jones does argue
that “we need the theoretical depth and polemical energy of féminité as an alternative idea,” she
questions its practical ability to unite women in feminist struggle: “…a historically responsive
and powerful unity among women will come from our ongoing, shared practice, our experience
in and against the material world” (Jones, 258, emphasis mine). Djebar’s and El Saadawi’s
representations of these shared women’s experiences reveal both the limits and the strengths of
Cixous; while Cixous’s imaginary féminin may indeed have very real limits in relation to a
historical and distinctly female project like Djebar’s, écriture féminine serves as a powerful call

91 “[to take us] back to the pagan idols – mother-gods – of pre-Islamic Mecca”(Djebar, 180).
for new ways of representing oppressed voices and for imagining what a future might look like if, like Eblis, men too accepted their own femininity and worked to produce discourse beyond that of the patriarchy. El Saadawi in particular is effective in challenging Jones’s assertion that the body is an inherently problematic source of new discourse; *Innocence of the Devil* demonstrates how *écriture féminine* can in part remain grounded in women’s bodies without becoming the problematic byproduct of a monolithic gendered essence. Perhaps with the collective theoretical potential and challenges so far raised in this discussion, it is with a clearer understanding that we can finally reexamine the question so honestly and directly posed by Kari Weil in her discussion of *écriture féminine*: “What is feminist about French feminism?” (Weil, 168).

**Conclusion: Implications for *écriture féminine***

Ultimately, both *L’Amour, la fantasia* and *Innocence of the Devil* may seem much more obviously feminist than “Sorties”\(^92\); in challenging patriarchy and colonization in different contexts, Djebar and El Saadawi confront concrete gendered oppression while simultaneously exploring the theoretical underpinnings of linguistic representation and subjectivity. Through the complexity of their feminist projects, both Djebar and El Saadawi challenge fundamental aspects of *écriture féminine* while still showing the usefulness of this theoretical framework; after all, Cixous provides a powerful toolkit for understanding and moving beyond phallogocentrism.

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\(^92\) While Cixous has rejected the label of “feminist,” her works are constantly discussed under the label of feminist literary theory and French feminism; whether or not she claims this label, others have claimed it for her because of the subversive power of her work and thus I use it self-consciously here.
Indeed, Cixous helps the reader to unpack some of the most subversive aspects of Djebar’s and El Saadawi’s texts. First of all, using Cixous’s critique of the Self/Other hierarchy allows for a more nuanced understanding of both Djebar’s and El Saadawi’s texts. It is perhaps most easily through Cixous that Djebar’s willingness to explore the French Other’s perspective emerges as a productive and subversive discourse rather than as a straightforward denunciation of the colonial project; similarly, Cixous’s examination of Self/Other and subjectivity allows El Saadawi’s narrative to be read as an intentional critique of hierarchical thought that breaks down rigid boundaries between subjects to imagine new possibilities. Secondly, the Cixousian relationship between language, voix, and the body serves as a helpful foundation through which to examine the central role of metalanguages in both texts; Cixous’s framework allows the reader to appreciate dance, song, and chants in these texts not merely as cultural traditions or rituals, but also as forms of expression that are capable of moving beyond the representational limits of the written word.

Yet while Cixous provides a helpful framework through which to tease out some of the most subversive aspects of these texts, both Djebar and El Saadawi also challenge the universality of Cixous’s assumptions. In some respects, both Innocence of the Devil and L’Amour, la fantasia affirm Jones’s assertion that écriture féminine may indeed be too monolithic to address specificities across culture, race, and class. Djebar’s vision of identity and emphasis on the “I” question Cixous’s ideas of a feminine fluidity of subjectivity in the historical context of Algeria. In a situation where collective expression is the only outlet through which women can make themselves heard, and in which this outlet becomes a way to control women’s suffering and channel it into a socially acceptable form, it clearly does not follow that a fluidity of subjectivity and a denial of the “I” will be a liberating project. Though El Saadawi does seem
to affirm Cixous’s vision of fluid subjectivity, she and Djebar both reveal a more nuanced understanding of *voix* and *écriture* than that posited by Cixous. Both the importance of silence in *L’Amour, la fantasia* and the subversive potential of the Arabic script in *Innocence of the Devil* problematize Cixous’s assertions about the privilege of *voix*; the power of *voix* becomes tenuous in contexts where women are relegated to specific forms of speech rather than writing. While Cixous’s awareness of the power of new languages helps to shed light on the importance of metalanguages in representing the *féminin*, her comments on the primary role of *voix* do not account for the gendered power dynamics present in different forms of expression across cultures. Djebar and El Saadawi both nuance the role of oral expression in North Africa, showing how other forms of expression can become more powerful and subversive than speech. Sometimes intentional writing or well-placed silences may effectively prove to be better resistance strategies than a visceral bursting forth of *voix*.

Finally, it is perhaps most of all Cixous’s imaginary *féminin* that has caused critics to question whether her project can prove useful to feminist thought at all. Clearly, Djebar challenges the usefulness of this idea in a historical and semi-autobiographical context; at the same time, this reading of Djebar should complicate the idea of *écriture féminine* without condemning it to a meaningless utopian ideal. While certain projects, like Djebar’s, clearly demand a space for representing female experience, the constantly-evolving feminist project must continually make room for new identities and new ways of thinking that are capable of working against the phallogocentric order; El Saadawi’s exploration of the Cixousian *féminin* points to the potential for productive solidarity and inclusion in *écriture féminine*. After all, at a time when more radical feminists are becoming increasingly skeptical of the mere inclusion of women and are rather asserting the need to more directly challenge the status quo, Cixous
provides a framework to critique patriarchal thought altogether rather than merely trying to incorporate women into the phallocentric system. Perhaps so many critics remain skeptical of Cixous’s paradoxical vision of the féminin because it can be hard to imagine a feminist ideal that is not only rooted in women’s experience, but that also includes a wider range of productive difference that can challenge the established order. If the feminist movement, however, is to remain both politically and theoretically viable, it must evolve to meet the needs not only of cisgender women, but also of transgender men and women, the queer community, and cisgender men who are committed to combating dominant discourse. If Cixous’s écriture féminine can be simultaneously understood as both partially rooted in women’s experiences as well as open to the larger community, it could potentially urge the feminist movement to become both more radical in its approach and more inclusive in its aims.

Perhaps it is Cixous’s dense language and wordplay that is a barrier for feminists trying to concretely understand her work. And yet, is her paradoxical language a weakness in her work, or is it perhaps a strength in that it exemplifies Cixous’s attempts to unapologetically speak “the other tongue of a thousand tongues”? (Cixous, 88). Isn’t the “impossible logic” of écriture féminine in part a further rejection of the traditional phallocentric ideals of Western philosophy? (Leitch, 1941). Indeed, some critics certainly find her contradictions deliberate: “…Her central images create a dense web of signifiers that offers no obvious edge to seize hold of for the analytically minded critic…Moreover, the texts themselves make it abundantly clear that this resistance to analysis is entirely intentional” (Moi, 103). Indeed, even as she uses the term écriture féminine, Cixous remains skeptical of herself and aware of the binary that this term implies. Furthermore, she demonstrates a willingness to continually evolve and reexamine her own work since she has since declared her dislike of the term écriture féminine for the same
reason that she has rejected the label of feminist: terms such as these will inherently leave us
locked in the binary of masculine/feminine\(^93\) (Moi, 108).

Labeling Cixous a postfeminist and calling \textit{écriture féminine} a mere literary movement
undermines the serious political implications of her project; it is in revisiting Cixous’s work in
conjunction with other feminist and literary scholarship that both the strengths and weaknesses
of \textit{écriture féminine} will emerge. In light of both the problems and the potential of \textit{écriture
féminine} as revealed through Djebar’s \textit{L’Amour, la fantasia} and El Saadawi’s \textit{Innocence of the
Devil}, readers can view \textit{écriture féminine} as an imperative for future change rather than as a
description of the past or present. Through this reading of Cixous, we can perhaps better
understand the playfully imaginary and yet deeply powerful space that \textit{écriture féminine} could
create:

Impossible à présent de définir une pratique féminine de l’écriture, d’une
impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais théoriser cette pratique,
l’enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu’elle n’existe pas. Mais elle excédera
toujours le discours qui régit le système phallocentrique ; elle a et aura lieu
ailleurs que dans les territoires subordonnés à la domination philosophique-théorique\(^94\) (Cixous, 169-170).

Cixous herself is acutely aware that \textit{écriture féminine} cannot be clearly defined, and that any
attempt to categorize it would be to submit it to the rigid logic of the phallocentric system. In
writing “Sorties,” she clearly knew that \textit{écriture féminine} would be subjected to the Procrustean
bed of existing feminist and literary thought. Nevertheless, she points to new territories to be
explored and urges the reader to imagine her vision of \textit{écriture} that defies all attempts at
definition. In order to best understand Cixous’s theoretical power, we should continue to expand

\(^93\) Cixous later revised the term \textit{écriture féminine} to be either “writing said to be feminine” or “decipherable libidinal
femininity which can be read in writing produced by a male or a female” (Moi, 108).

\(^94\) “At the present time, defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue;
for this practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist. But it
will always exceed the discourse governing the phallocentric system; it takes place and will take place other than in
the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination” (Cixous, 92).
upon and critique *écriture féminine* in new cultural contexts that will allow it to emerge as a productive call to imagination and action—a call that has yet to be largely realized.

**Bibliography**


