Diverging Femininities in the Resistance Narratives of Algeria and Palestine

by Farah Channaa

Sahar Khalifeh’s *Wild Thorns (Al-Subbar)* (1941) and Assia Djebar’s *Children of the New World (Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde)* (1962) are both novels concerned with rewriting the history of the occupation of Palestine and Algeria respectively. Each work dedicates itself to exposing the details of life under occupation and popular involvement in military experiences and civil resistance. *Wild Thorns* is set in a small alleyway town in the West Bank city of Nablus less than a decade after the July 1967 Arab defeat by Israeli forces, an event commonly referred to by Arabs as *Al-Naksa*. Set in the small northern Algeria town of Blida, *Children of the New*...
similarly recounts the mood of Algeria’s war of liberation from French colonialism (1954-62) through a depiction of the events of May 24, 1956, a significant day in the early years of the Algerian struggle. Both Wild Thorns and Children of the New World give voice to the diverse roles women played in resistance, many of which were overlooked or silenced by the dominant national resistance narratives being formulated at the time, yet each work frames women’s contribution to resistance in a different way.4

As women authors writing about traditionally male-coded topics like resistance and war, both Khalifeh and Djebar earned reputations as transgressors of sacred values among their countrymen for trying to interpret women’s contribution to resistance action in settings where women were still being regarded as second hand participants in the war experience. While Djebar focuses on rewriting the history of Algeria’s occupation to include the viewpoint of the women involved, Khalifeh is concerned with reproducing the harsh effects of life under occupation, emphasizing the viewpoint of Palestinian laborers working in Israel and portraying women almost exclusively as mothers, wives and passive sustainers of culture in a national struggle underscored by active male sacrifice.

Khalifeh’s Wild Thorns showcases the lives of Palestinian men as workers, prisoners, freedom fighters, and regulars on “the street.” The novel’s linear narrative is recounted by an omniscient third person narrator and begins with the return of its main character, Usama, to Palestine after years as a migrant laborer in the Arabian Gulf, then ends with his death during an armed clash with an Israeli soldier. Overwhelmed by feelings of alienation and convinced that his own people have abandoned the cause of liberation, Usama embarks upon a mission to blow up a bus carrying both Israeli and Palestinian laborers to work in Israeli factories.6

Within this nexus of themes, Khalifeh records the events unfolding around her, offering the reader “a panoramic view of the social scene as well as the entangled embrace of current political and cultural issues…[that] reflect general trends of politics and ideological thinking on the West Bank” (Siddiq 1986, 145). The society Khalifeh portrays is one both struggling to

---

4 Henceforth, Wild Thorns will be referred to in text citations as WT to denote the English translation, or AS to denote the original Arabic, Al-Subbar, to allow the bilingual reader to compare the two texts. Also, Children of the New World will be referred to as Ch to denote the English translation or LE to denote the original French, Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde.

5 Assia Djebar wrote Children of the New World while in self-exile in Morocco following a stint in Tunisia, returning to Algeria only after its independence in 1962. Although Sahar Khalifeh wrote her novel while residing in Palestine, she is widely viewed among Palestinians as a secondary source on the resistance since, as a woman, she was not involved in armed military resistance and thus unable to reflect knowledgeably on the lived experience of being a fighter.

adjust to the devastating outcomes of Al-Naksa and one grieving the loss of a pan-Arab security, which had served as the Palestinian mainstay in the period before 1967. Through her portrayal of an increasingly disheartened Palestinian society, Khalifeh calls attention to the systematic expunction of Palestinians from Israeli political and public life following Israel’s 1967 victory over Egypt, Jordan and Syria, particularly the near complete disappearance of Palestinian cultural and social expression (Bresheeth 2003) from Israeli public space. Against this backdrop, Khalifeh presents Palestinian nationalism as it steps into the vacuum produced by Israeli policy, where guerrilla warfare takes center stage as the sole channel of resistance for Palestinian men. As the narrator of Wild Thorns explains, “Usama [central male character] firmly believed that there was no longer more than one dimension to the picture, not after the 1967 defeat and the occupation that followed” (WT 88/ AS 75). Usama’s suicide mission thus comes to symbolize a “radical shift in frame, as, refusing to ‘swallow the rhetoric’ [of pan-Arabism] transmitted over the radio, the character decides that liberation [can] only be achieved through guerrilla warfare” (Nassar 1997, 138). Inasmuch as guerilla tactics become emblematic of a uniquely Palestinian identity, Khalifeh draws out this landscape as one in which Palestinian women take on an essential yet supportive role as mothers and reproducers of the resistance.

Assia Djebar, on the other hand, seeks to rewrite the history of Algeria’s anticolonial struggle to include the Algerian women who participated in resistance efforts. Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde (hereafter Les Enfants) begins with the old woman Lla Aicha’s death in a bomb attack in the courtyard of her house on May 24, 1956, and ends with a depiction of the

---

7 Before 1967, the supranational identity characterizing the era was Pan-Arabism. Reacting to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, an army was assembled by the Arab League consisting primarily of forces from Transjordan, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Iraq, and sent to liberate Palestine from Israeli forces. The war itself was lost, but the Palestinians still held confidence in the Pan-Arab brotherhood of nations. Under Egyptian President Gamal ‘Abdel Nasser (1952), Arab nationalism and, hence, Pan-Arabism took an more radical form, became closely aligned with state socialism and rested upon the liberation of Palestine as the ultimate symbol the ideology’s success.

8 Khalifeh captures Palestinian cynicism by replicating the radio broadcasts praising Arab nationalism and different characters’ reactions to those broadcasts. Listening to the radio, the character Adel sarcastically reflects, “An entire nation’s drowning while the radio goes on spewing out songs of hope and fervor, freedom, rebirth, and the happiness of man…a man in an auditorium mouthing the glories of Arab nationhood” (WT 61/ AS 57).

9 In a statement to the Sunday Times on June 15, 1969, Golda Meir, then Prime Minister of Israel, declared, “There is no such thing as a Palestinian people. It is not as if we came and threw them out and took their country. They didn’t exist” (Baker, Zionist Quotes).

10 As Nassar (1997) notes in his essay on the June 1967 war, “Israel’s designed strangulation of Palestinian political expression reached the whole sphere of political and cultural life. At the political level, all modes of conventional political participation were blocked. Political parties were banned, elections were halted, and all forms of political activity were made illegal and punished severely. Cultural strangulation, on the other hand, was manifested in restrictions on freedom of expression, repression of education, suppression of art and literature, and the curtailment of symbolic national expression” (1997, 139).
mountain battle between Algerian rebels and the French army. Within the span of twenty-four hours on May 24, 1956, the novel’s characters cross paths either in the center of town, called place d’arme, in one of the character’s homes, or in battle on the mountain. Like Khalifeh, Djebbar foregrounds the historical moment of revolution and resistance in the setting of her novel (Nagy-Zekmi 2002, 1), hence Les Enfants is set in Bilda, Algeria—one of the earliest French stations to incur attacks from Algerian resistance forces in 1954 (Zimra 2005, 202). The Algerian revolutionary movement, or Front de Libération Nationale (hereafter FLN), having been solidified just two years before the events in Bilda, urged Algerians of all social classes to join the armed resistance movement (Ruedy 1989, 159) and, by late 1956, had managed not only to recruit hundreds of thousands of Algerians but also to organize an extensive system of underground nationalist institutions (Ruedy 1989, 163) despite a constant threat of “torture, mass arrests, destructive…military sweeps through the countryside, and collective punishment of communities where attacks or sabotage had occurred” (Ruedy 1989, 163) by the French.

Djebbar’s choice of female characters range from traditional housewives like Amna and Cherifa to educated, more seemingly ‘modern’ women like Lila, Salima, and Hassiba. The range of female perspectives reveals Djebbar’s interest in conveying the belief that, regardless of educational background or social positioning, all Algerian women are doubly oppressed by French colonial infrastructure on the one hand and the dominating patriarchal order of Algerian traditional norms on the other. By somehow transgressing the patriarchal rules of either or both of these patriarchal institutions, Djebbar’s female characters all contribute to what Djebbar sees as the more fundamental revolution of undoing patriarchal norms and, in doing so, beginning the process of “forge[ing] a gendered identity” (Ghazoul 2007, 120). By interweaving the domestic problems of married couples with the aims and realities of the resistance movement, Djebbar exposes the reinforcing relationship between the internal dynamics of the patriarchal Algerian household, the masculinist principles of the Algerian resistance movement and a racially charged French colonialism with aims to subjugate Algerian women and men through a systematic regime of feminization and eroticization. Thus Djebbar’s female characters convey her interrelated views on feminism and political resistance by taking various bold stances with regard to the patriarchal household in particular and, by extension, the revolution itself.

In moving beyond the traditional roles Algerian women play in spatial and intellectual spheres, Djebbar develops a set of diverse, believable women characters through which the “secret world” of women’s participation in the public sphere of political resistance and the private sphere of domestic gender propriety can be explored. By bringing to light the private
conversations, opinions, choices, and feelings of these women, Djebar transports them from their static association with the domestic sphere into the mainstream effort of resistance and national redefinition—a feature of Les Enfants which sets the work drastically apart from Wild Thorns and which many critics attribute to Djebar’s French acculturation and cosmopolitan life experience.

Djebar uses Les Enfants to confront the masculinist biases of Algerian culture as an insider, yet she endures significant criticism even today for performing that confrontation in the French language. Djebar’s French education played an important role in her evolution as a writer and was still largely atypical for Algerian girls during that period, setting her apart almost inherently from mainstream Algerian thought at the time. Despite Djebar’s undeniable support of the Algerian revolution, “she was still praised (and marketed) as an exceptional product of French universities and French acculturation” (Zimra 1992, 205). Due to her francophone training and popular reception within French colonial circles, Djebar was regarded as suspect by most Algerians for spending the war period away from her native country and for her perceived inability to dissimilate from French culture, language and values. Unlike Khalifeh, whose loyalty to the Palestinian cause went largely unquestioned by other Palestinians on account of her Arabic language authorship and her life-long Muslim credentials for yielding to codes of Islamic gender propriety, Djebar struggled to prove herself as an ‘authentic’ Algerian. Although French acculturation gave Djebar access to the traditionally male-coded spheres of public space and popular writing, she attempted to compensate for her inauthenticity by using her unique life experience to “[annex] space for all Algerian women” (Mortimer 1997, 150).

12 It should be noted that although Djebar’s French acculturation was liberating, many critics claim that it also inevitably albeit unintentionally “encouraged alienation” (Mortimer 1997, 155). These critics argue that the maturation of the female characters in Les Enfants can be looked upon as Djebar’s own process of self-validation. Mortimer, for example, asserts that, “Djebar’s experience…is distinctly gendered. She came to believe that the process of Western acculturation, resulting in her mastery of the colonizer’s language and access to public space, excluded her from most, if not all, aspect of the traditional woman’s world” (Mortimer 1997, 102). Mortimer further argues that this emotion of exclusion motivated Djebar’s attempt to reconnect with the world of Algerian women, thus Djebar’s effort to depict the collective experience of Algerian women compels her toward an autobiographical style. Although Les Enfants is not as straightforwardly autobiographical as L’amour, la Fantasia, it is not devoid of autobiographical elements and can be viewed as a representation of Djebar’s “imaginary homecoming” (Zimra 2005, 206). In Les Enfants, for example, we learn that Lila’s father, Rachid, challenges his own father’s wishes and decides to send his daughter to a colonial school. “Times are changing” he asserts “and even girls need to be properly prepared” (CHA29/LE 206). The relationship between Lila and her father in Les Enfants “bears more than an accidental resemblance to Djebar’s own circumstances” (Zimra 2005, 209). The insertion of autobiographical hints in the text is conveys the author’s attempt at (re)inclusion in her society. Mortimer (1997) explains that this recurring phenomenon in Djebar’s work serves two primary purposes, one of which traces her personal journey back “to the cherished maternal world of her past, where she seeks healing and reconciliation for a self fragmented by the colonial experience” (1997, 103).
In attempting to draw out the differences between Djebar and Khalifeh in terms of each one’s personal relationship to the cultural and political context about which each one wrote, I suggest at the outset that it is difficult for women writers of the global South to carve out feminist niches within dominant nationalist narratives in periods of resistance without also being forced into a confrontation with the masculinist norms which underscore that resistance. As Ranjoo Seodu Herr (2005) explains, “…nationalism is invariably conceived in androcentric terms, as an effort to revive the injured dignity of an emasculated nation that has been degraded by penetration, occupation, and cultural domination of a foreign aggressor” (2005, 137). In moving beyond the masculinist language of the Algerian and Palestinian nationalist narratives, Les Enfants and Wild Thorns suggest two very distinct frameworks for conceptualizing the new nation and women’s role in bringing that new nation to life.

Palestinian Resistance: Women Reproduce the Nation
The Palestinian national resistance narrative praises the reproductive capacity of mothers and regards it as the utmost expression of femininity, such that “the specificity of Palestinian women’s bodies is significant in [PLO publications] only when reproduction is considered” (Massad 1995, 475). Julie Peteet (1997) adds that, in Palestine, “[g]enerativity and femininity are inextricably intertwined; birthing and mothering are pivotal, registering femininity and female social adulthood” (1997, 106). The emphasis on reproduction in the national resistance narrative of Palestinians is easily drawn from the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (hereafter PLO) publications, as well as the everyday discourses of Palestinian popular culture. The Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (hereafter UNLU) and PLO published a series of communiqués during the first Intifada (1987-1993), all offering evidence of the Palestinian resistance narrative’s long-held view of women as reproducers of the virile nation. Communiqué No. 5 of the UNLU13, for example, describes mothers as “the soil” upon which “manhood, respect, and dignity grow” (in Massad 1995, 472). This metaphorical description implies that the fruit of the nation is male and directs women’s participation in the nationalist movement toward the domestic sphere and away from its public face of armed resistance. UNLU Communiqué No. 5 variously congratulates the “the mother of the martyr and her celebratory ululations, for she has ululated twice, the day her son went to fight and was martyred, and the day the state was declared” (in Massad 1995, 474), thus reinforcing the integral bond between motherhood, male martyrdom and the nation. Indeed by emphasizing Palestinian women’s role as “mother of the martyr,” the

---

13 UNLU Communiqué No. 5 is titled Intifada Min Khilal Beyanat al Qiyada al Watanîyya al Muwahhada (Massad 1995).
Palestinian national narrative buttresses the reproductive aspect of femininity to the extent that it eclipses all other channels of women's involvement in the nation's self-definition and self-determination.

Mainstream interpretations of the Palestinian resistance narrative holds that its “nationalism contain[s] a pronatalist policy using population growth and demographic pressure as an instrument through which to achieve liberation” (Amireh 2003, 756). Although the movement’s publications following the first Intifada fail to highlight population growth as an explicit national objective, earlier Palestinian nationalist discourses of the 1960s and 70s regarded fertility as an important weapon against usurpation by Israeli infrastructure and culture (Amireh 2003, 755). As the popular Palestinian saying goes, “The Israelis beat us at the borders but we beat them in the bedrooms” (in Yuval-Davis 1997, 31). Feeling a mounting pressure to compete with Israel in terms of bodies and numbers, Palestinians continued to escalate the role of motherhood and reproduction in the struggle for liberation and hence the mother became embedded in nationalist and literary narratives as a metaphor for the land itself. As Amireh (2003) explains, “The Palestinian national narrative is undeniably erotic and male. In it, as in the case of other nationalist narratives, Palestine is metaphorized as a woman. The dependence of the Palestinian society on mother earth no doubt encourages the use of such a metaphor” (2003, 750). Thus the emphasis on reproduction can be symbolically understood as a metaphor for the female-coded land’s readiness to be (re)possessed by the virile (and ideally male) next generation of resistance fighters. According to this metaphorical scheme, Palestinian men risk the dual injury of lost virility, in the case of being unable to repossess the female-coded land, and of being feminized alongside the land, as it remains subjected to a male-coded Israeli occupation.

The loss of Palestinian masculinity emerged as a recurring theme in Palestinian popular discourse in the early years of the resistance movement and has steadily evolved as an imminent threat to the collective body politic which, as Amal Amireh (2003) put it, could only

14 Mahmoud Darwish’s poem, Identity Card, also illustrates the central place of family and reproduction in Palestinian resistance discourse: “Write down: I am an Arab; My I.D. number is 50,000; My children, eight; And the ninth is due next summer; Does that anger you?” Further, Israel itself has emphasized the importance of a demographic majority in its own policymaking and rhetorical practice since the early 1950s.

15 Khalifeh exemplifies the Palestinian fear of lost masculinity in Abu Saber’s list of demands following a serious injury in the Israeli factory where he works. Bleeding profusely on his way back to a Nablus hospital, Abu Saber repeatedly asks fellow Palestinian workers Adel and Zuhdi to tell him one of the tales of the legendary Arab hero, Abu Zayd. Suha Sabbagh (1989) argues that:

Abu Saber’s first priority is to regain a sense of dignity…as he desperately tries to escape into a past in which he could take pride in his Arab identity over a present that places him beyond the pale of thinghood…Abu Saber’s attempt to recapture the past becomes an abortive attempt to reject the slave consciousness imposed on the deepest recesses of his being by what he perceives to be as sources of authority (1989, 72).
“consolidat[e] itself in defeat” (751). The Palestinian resistance narrative uses a masculinist discourse to rewrite men’s sacrificially battered bodies as a commentary on sacrifice and honor and, in doing so, transforms notions of collective defeat into a collective victory for the nation. An example of the heroics of men’s bodily sacrifice is found in the ULNU’s Communiqué No. 24, which reads, “Gaza’s sons went out of their den confronting with their bodies the occupier’s machines” (in Massad 1995, 479), or as Julie Peteet (1994) puts it, “To the Palestinian, the battered body, with its bruises and broken limbs, is the symbolic embodiment of…their determination to resist and to struggle for national independence…a representation created with the intent of humiliating has been reversed into one of honor, manhood, and moral superiority” (1994, 38). The resistance narrative, by transforming the defeat of individual men into collective victories through a reiteration of Islamic scriptural metaphors, attempts to mobilize the nation toward its own liberation. Within this frame, Palestinian women attain their highest symbolic value as mothers by reproducing a nation of male martyrs for the national liberation project.

Algerian Resistance: Sexual Modesty, Female Honor

Whereas the Palestinian resistance narrative casts women’s discursive value almost exclusively in terms of its reproductive capacity, the Algerian national resistance narrative reinscribes femininity toward a different end. Although the attainment of motherhood is similarly framed in Algerian resistance discourse as a symbolic event in the lives of women, maternity is primarily regarded as the fulfillment of a wife’s Islamic duty and evidence of her sexual modesty and purity, rather than as an instrument for enhancing the nation’s demographic and sacrificial war strategy. In other words, the discourse of Algerian resistance conveys a more narrow interest in the societal conduct of women as indicative of women’s solidarity with the

16 For further discussion of the Palestinian narrative’s casting of defeat as victory, see Khalidi (1997).

17 Khalifeh’s work also transforms Israel’s regular imprisonment of Palestinian men into a commentary on honor. Basil, the youngest child in the Al-Karmi family, is imprisoned for spitting in the face of an Israeli soldier after publicly displaying his patriotic sentiments. Through this humiliation, Basil gains the respect of his people and fellow prisoners, as one prisoner exclaims, “Congratulations, you can take it! And more! You are a man now…May you live to get the same again, Basil…Hold your head up high and never let it fall! Prison’s for men, Abu Al-Izz (Father of Glory)!” (IFT 114-5 / AS 96).

18 The Shaheed, or martyr, is held as the quintessential masculine form in its willingness to embrace complete physical annihilation for the cause of liberation. As Linda Pitcher (1998) explains:

His [the martyr’s] experience and perception of the occupation fundamentally alters the relationship of his body to the world…. His body…becomes a vehicle, an expressive articulation of … [a] psychic integrity, a self less vulnerable to the [feminization process of the] occupier. Long before his death, the martyr has yielded the impermanence of his body to the struggle of autonomous identity” (1998, 21).
resistance movement, and is less fixated on the act of child bearing itself. Still, FLN documents return time and again to an emphasis on sexual purity and modesty as conduits for patriarchal honor. As Samira Haj (1992) notes:

The woman’s maternal role is reinforced by the manner in which female sexuality is viewed…female sexuality in Middle Eastern societies is defined and controlled by the corporate body of the clan—that is, the extended family…Women are taught early that their sexuality does not belong to them, it is not theirs to give or withhold; it is the inalienable, permanent property of the extended family. As a result, sexual purity and lineage honor are seen as inseparable (1992, 764).

In order to preserve an Islamic social order, the FLN imposed strict regulations on veiling and sex-segregation to refine and in some sense re-codify female sexuality toward the collective goal of dismantling French colonial infrastructure. Haj (1992) attributes this trend to popular views which regard female sexuality as a potential disturbance to the Muslim societal order, noting that, “[t]o protect the Muslim Umma (community) from Fitna (chaos) and Kaid (disorder), female power and female sexuality have to be contained and neutralized through legal and other institutional measures (sex-segregation, veiling)” (1992, 764). The Algerian resistance narrative emphasizes certain masculinist principles as a way to demarcate Algerian cultural identity from French colonial influence, and religiously sanctioned female behavior was situated at the center of this effort to distinguish. As in the Palestinian case, the FLN sought to mainstream Algerian women’s performance of sexuality in such a way that would ultimately reaffirm Algerian patriarchal honor and religious piety and, by extension, a collective, ultimately masculine, Algerian resistance movement. As John Ruedy (1989) describes it:

FLN cells during the war…set themselves up as guardians of male-female propriety. Amidst the euphoria of liberation during the summer of 1962, FLN

---

19 FLN reactions to a 1959 colonial ordinance setting a minimum age for marriage demonstrate the instrumentality of Islamic principles for demarcating Algerian identity (Lazreg 1990, 767). The FLN condemned the ordinance, stating: “So, some Frenchmen who are also Christians…have deliberately dared tamper with the Quran…and impose with the sword of the secular law of France on the Muslims of Algeria in their most sacred status” (in Lazreg 1990, 767). The colonial marriage law interrupted Islamic marriage practices to some degree and ultimately undermined the social and institutional controls on female sexuality, as:

The family, the realm of the father’s authority over his wife and children, was to remain intact in order for the FLN’s claim to represent Algerian society to be valid. It was Algerian’s separate identity from France that gave the anticolonial struggle legitimacy. The ordinance was an attempt at blurring, perhaps even erasing, that separateness by giving individuals the right to question native family values (Lazreg 1990, 768-9).

In this sense, the secular marriage law compromised the efficacy of the FLN’s mission and caused the FLN to secure Islamic family values through an emphasis on the sexual control of women.
militants roamed the street intimidating single women. A woman accompanied in public by a man other than a relative was liable to be hurried off to a forced marriage or jailed if she refused (1989, 229).

The FLN’s imposition of such strict regulations on Algerian women’s bodies and performance of sexuality was intended to counteract French efforts to convert Algerian women to French culture. As Franz Fanon (1970) explains in his renowned essay, Algeria Unveiled, the French colonial view of Algerian women was often acted out as a highly sexualized fantasy, underscored by a desire to possess (read: rape) by “Unveiling this woman [to reveal] her beauty; it is baring her secret, breaking her resistance, making her available for adventure…. There is in it the will to bring this woman within his reach, to make her a possible object of possession” (Fanon 1970, 29). Indeed the French strategy of luring Algerian women away from Islamic practices and toward French ones allowed for a subtle infiltration of Algerian life by denying the Algerian man his spiritual, political and cultural domination over Algerian women.

Khalifeh: Politicizing Motherhood, Normalizing Sacrifice

Unlike Les Enfants, Wild Thorns pays little attention to the distinction between the resistance narrative and its implications for feminist thought, perhaps reflecting Palestinian women’s internalization of and support for the official discourse. As the rhetoric of many Palestinian women’s organizations like the General Women’s Palestinian Union (GWPU) suggest, Palestinian women have tended to associate their reproductive role with great cultural integrity and honor. Slogans like the GWPU’s “Woman makes up half of society and gives birth to the other half,” (in Amireh 2003, 765) convey Palestinian women’s sense of gratification from reproduction within the context of male oriented national resistance (Amireh 2003, 765). Amal Amireh (2003) sees Khalifeh’s inability to liberate her characters from the masculine sway of mainstream resistance discourse as a “…reproduction of some of the fundamental patriarchal metaphors of the hegemonic national narrative…[which] recycle a nationalist patriarchal ideology regarding women’s bodies and sexuality (2003, 765). Many critics similarly accuse Khalifeh’s narrative of being incapable of breaking away from the

21 On the obstacles facing Palestinian women’s efforts to develop a feminist discourse separate from the nationalist struggle, see Rita Gacaman and Penny Johnson, “Palestinian Women: Building Barricades and Breaking Barriers,” Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation, eds. Zachary Lochman and Joel Beinin, Boston: South End Press. (1989)
22 For more information on the development of a feminist consciousness in Palestine after the 1967 defeat and since the development of the modern Palestinian national movement, see Jad Islah, “From Salons to Popular Committees: Palestinian Women 1919-89,” The Israel/Palestine Question: A Reader, ed. Ian Pappe, London: Routledge. (1999)
patriarchal structure of Palestinian society and its resistance narrative. This essay argues that Khalifeh does draw out an intentional formula for feminist thought in *Wild Thorns*, following Deniz Kandiyoti’s (1987) point that it is critical to consider different modes of femininity at work in various contexts, which “...have a direct bearing on the shaping of what we might imprecisely label a feminist consciousness” (1987, 324). As Palestinian women became further embedded within the rhetorical tropes of reproduction and maternity, a new channel was opened through which women could assert themselves into the male public sphere as activists and mothers (Peteet 1997, 105). Palestinian women entered actively into mainstream resistance discourse by redefining motherhood as a political practice, and embraced the sacrifice of male children in battle as the ultimate maternal service to the nation.

The female characters of *Wild Thorns* who step out of their prescribed roles as mothers and engage in armed struggle with the resistance are highly masculinized and ascribed a marginal importance at best. Lina, for example, a character who joins Usama in blowing up a bus carrying laborers to Israel, is described as a “boyish-looking girl” (*WT* 58/*AS* 55), somehow equating her androgynous physical appearance with a militant, masculine outlook. Other nameless female characters include a middle-aged guerrilla caught smuggling a coded message in her arm cast, who is described by the narrator as having a “deep voice” (*WT* 22/*AS* 23). As she accompanies the main character, Usama, in his taxi ride back home after the bombing, the reader surmises that Lina has neither witnessed nor actually participated in armed activity, but merely accompanied Usama as he carried out his attack on the bus of laborers, as if to say that to make Lina part of the attack would be to push the metaphor too far outside the reader’s frame of comprehension.

---

23 Although *Wild Thorns* focuses particularly on men, Khalifeh’s subsequent novel, *ʻAbbād al-Shams* [*The Sunflower*], is a woman-focused follow-up to *Wild Thorns*. In it, Khalifeh explores the difficulties *Wild Thorns*’ female characters faced in losing their husbands. Significantly, *ʻAbbād al-Shams* has not been translated into English.

24 In her 1970 field study about the various roles mothers play in the refugee camps of Lebanon, Julie Peteet (1997) is asked repetitively by the mothers she interviewed how many children she wished to have. When she answers that she wants only two children, the women are baffled. They question how she will go on living if her children died. Peteet explains that the responses of these women “point starkly to the ever-present possibility of death with which mothers in the refugee camps lived” (1997, 125).

25 “We Palestinian women, we have batin ʻaskari [military womb]” for example, is a popular metaphor Palestinian women use to emphasize their reproductive duty (in Peteet 1997, 114). Similarly, “We Palestinian women, we give birth to them, we bring them up, and we bury them for the revolution” speaks to the pride women associate with reproducing the nation of male warriors.

26 The English translation of ʻāreed provided by Trevor LaGassick and Elizabeth Fernea of is “firm,” yet I submit that it means “deep” and hence prefer my own translation above, as it points to the widely held norm in Arab culture that soft and low voices in women indicate a high level of femininity.
Djebbar: Mobilizing Pleasure, Disprivileging Motherhood

Unlike *Wild Thorns*, *Les Enfants* deconstructs the Algerian narrative’s view of female sexuality and women’s maternal role. Whereas Khalifeh politicizes reproduction and motherhood and in some sense reproduces a gender binary with *Wild Thorns* by drafting female characters exclusively within the traditional gender norms of Palestinian culture, *Les Enfants* confronts the traditionalist picture of FLN rhetoric by alluding to women’s pursuit of sexual pleasure through the narratives of several female characters. Through an intimate discovery of their bodies, Djebbar’s female characters physically and emotionally transgress both the boundaries of their former lives as wives (but interestingly not as mothers) and the limitations placed on them by the resistance ideologies of the time. As Winifred Woodhull (1993) notes, Djebbar’s exposition of the lives of Algerian women is “a point of take off. A combat zone. A restoration of body. Bodies of new women in spite of new barriers” (1993, xxii). Djebbar’s literary illustration of the work’s leading female character, Cherifa, as she discovers her own body in and through its experiences of sexual desire, comes up against the FLN’s push for sexual modesty and its rigorous orthodoxy with regard to sexual practice and female propriety. Through Cherifa’s physical liberation, Djebbar openly confronts the resistance’s stance on female conduct while moving into deeper questions regarding its orthodox notions of marriage, sex, love and duty:

He moved toward her. He touched her. Cherifa didn’t understand…. He, her husband? He, who was more of a stranger than a husband to her. She refused. Those caresses, that accelerated breath; no, she said, no! Her entire being, her whole body, was saying no to that blinded intimacy he was trying to stir up within her with words that he meant to be tender but that she found insulting. No! …she had known from the beginning that she didn’t love this man. She had also known how to erase from her spirit any memory of their furtive nocturnal contacts – her ‘duty as a wife,’ as they say (*Ch* 13/*LE* 31-2).

In contrast to the warm, lavish welcome that Zuhdi receives from his wife in *Wild Thorns*, Cherifa meets her husband’s lust with disgust and physical revulsion. Having realized that her sense of marital duty as a Muslim is insufficient to justify her sexual dissatisfaction, Cherifa refuses her husband sexually and refuses to grant him children during their three years of marriage (*Ch* 11/*LE* 28), thereby challenging the FLN’s entire working concept of female duty in marriage. Cherifa then enters a second marriage with Youssef, which grows into a marriage of equals. Cherifa’s forsaking of the maternal role for greater sexual and intellectual satisfaction is portrayed as both a personal reclamation of her own body
and a throwing off of the gender norms which obstruct her pursuit of individual happiness. Cherifa’s satisfaction at having refused the man who could not please her is celebrated, as “…a feeling of having faced an enemy at last, if only for an instant, and of having been able to stand up” (C14/L33). Cherifa’s episode is perhaps most notable for its portrayal of a sympathetic male character, Youssef, who expresses regret after forcing his sister to marry a man she does not love:

[Youssef] knows but wants to forget, for he feels responsible – responsible for the unhappiness of a young woman who wouldn’t stop crying on her wedding day and throughout the months that followed… Youssef could only lower his eyes, turn his head away, and crush the remorse in his heart. …When Cherifa told [Youssef] about herself and her first husband…he understood his sister and remembered. In the deep waters of his wife’s eyes he saw the image of so many drowning women whose destiny had been taken away forever and who tried to fight back (C28-29/L54).

Djebar’s presentation of a sympathetic male consciousness in Youssef is critical for preserving her affinity with the resistance movement. In using her feminist lens to construct a male character that is both physically engaged in the cause of national liberation and intellectually enlightened with regard to women’s gender entrapment, Djebar presents her ideal male form as one ultimately capable of differentiating between gendered acts of social solidarity and women’s social and sexual oppression. For Djebar, this distinction lies at the center of women’s two-sided revolution. By emphasizing Cherifa’s and Zineb’s reconceptualizations of marriage and motherhood to include notions of sexual pleasure and

---

27 Although women are physically bound to particular spaces, men also experience another form of seclusion which Djebar acknowledges in her narrative:

Tightly squeezed like a closed fist…the old town, set beside the plane, prides itself on being the only one that follows the roots that connect it to past generations. But frozen like this in the middle of the drift, the people in these families don’t notice that they have been forced to close in upon themselves, in the silence of their houses and their women…(Ch 128/L208).

The domestic sphere in Les Enfants is depicted as a cultural refuge for the Algerian man as he flees the public square, which has become colonized space (Zimra 2005, 214). Djebar writes, “‘Yes, it’s almost easy to forget,’ a man thinks when he comes home at night and looks at his wife, whom the other one, the omnipotent master outside will never know…. Here he is, inexplicably set free. Alone. What does it matter now, the fear that had held him captive throughout the day” (C4-5/L18-19). The fear of lost masculinity and lost virility that Algerian men experienced under French colonialism enabled a greater need to secure absolute and traditionalized male authority in the home.

28 Although Djebar ties the notion of female sexuality to pleasure; her portrayal of this ideal through a traditional woman character is explicit. The characterization of the extremely licentious Touma, an Algerian informant, represents an extreme example of sexual liberation. Touma is viewed by her society as a traitor, and her uncontrolled sexual behavior and regular engagement with French men seem intended to underscore her non-alliance with the traditionalist national movement, as she is referred to as “An emancipated Arab woman (Yes, with high heels, short skirt, a permanent wave, just like [French] women! And well stacked, too, an enticing little brunette; she could be from Marseille or Arles…)” (C90/L147). Through Touma, the Algerian woman becomes the archetypal site of colonial might, as her conquest by French cultural norms and even her
intellectual companionship, Djebar departs from French feminist traditions by pulling female sexuality apart from the function of reproduction and into a kind of feminism that, as Gayatri Spivak (1981) puts it, all women understand (1981, 180). In this way, Djebar takes an intellectual position against French thought while still cultivating a feminist angle on Algeria’s resistance by politicizing women’s sexual pleasure as a concept for mobilization.

**Djebar and Khalifeh: Situating Mothers**

Palestinian women engage in the politicization of motherhood by redefining their reproductive role as a national duty. To the extent that Palestinian women have grown into a sense of commitment to this duty, they refuse to challenge traditional Islamic gender roles in the spheres of work, public and private space, resistance action and a host of others. It is argued here that the Palestinian women in *Wild Thorns* yield to a traditional gendering of society in exchange for a heightened significance in the domestic sphere. As a result of the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian domestic sphere has become fixated on reproducing a male force capable of withstanding the constant household incursions from Israeli forces. Against this backdrop, motherhood takes on a new significance and efforts to circumvent traditional gender roles become more costly for women and for the nation as a whole. As Samira Haj (1992) explains, during a liberation struggle, “some theoretical positions— for example, the family as the principal site of women’s oppression—have no resonance amongst women whose families and communities are under assault by an occupying power” (1992, 778). Indeed nearly all distinctions between the domestic sphere and the public sphere collapsed for Palestinians with the onset of Israeli occupation. As Julie Peteet (1997) explains:

> For Palestinians, during the revolt of 1936-39 and the wars of 1948-49 and 1967, the home was the front. Blurring the home and front …collapsed distinctions between feminine and masculine spaces…. The continuous violation of the home – the violent entries, searches, and demolitions …cast aside notions of the home space as distant from the conflict (1997, 108).

The domestic sphere’s transformation into a spatial territory beyond the enemy’s reach has advanced Palestinian domesticity itself as a source of ideological endurance and resistance for the nation. Palestinian women have regarded their role as mothers and nurturers in the domestic sphere as a mode of political activism, through which they can embody virtue by

attractiveness to French men seems intended to convey her untrustworthiness and her shirking of the Algerian cause. As Yuval-Davis (1997) explains, “Women are often required to carry the burden of representations, as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honor, both personally and collectively” (1997, 45).
diligently and patiently protecting the home front. As Linda Pitcher (1998) further notes:

Presence [in the Palestinian domestic sphere] is...stridently articulated in the expression of Sumud, or ‘steadfastness.’ Sumud permeates the ethic consciousness of every Palestinian...Sumud illustrates a deeply held conviction of the Palestinians...to bear the hardships they face daily under occupation in the hope of one day outliving the alienation, oppression, and marginalization they have withstood for generations (1998, 26).

Through the performance of “caring labor” in an atmosphere of danger and uncertainty, Palestinian mothers have come to exemplify the notion of Sumud and, in doing so, have grown to perceive their domesticity as a contribution to the resistance equal in value to that performed by men in active political struggle.

Khalifeh calls attention to the collapsing of masculine and feminine space in her depiction of domestic incursions. As the Israeli army storms the home of an elderly female character, ‘Um Usama, in search of her son, the opportunity arises for ‘Um Usama to exhibit great courage by “reach[ing] out to the machine-gun, push[ing] it out of her way and walk[ing] over to the wardrobe” (WT 166/AS 140). An Israeli soldier asks Um Usama if she has become accustomed to their visits, to which she replies, “I’m used to your presence in my neighbors’ homes. The only time I leave my windows is to go to sleep,” adding, “And who doesn’t expect your visits these days? We’re under occupation” (WT 166/AS 140). In this way, Khalifeh calls out certain fluidities in the domestic sphere, where women might transcend traditional gender roles to commit more male-coded acts of resistance.

Whereas Khalifeh portrays Palestinian women as forgers of a unique political role within the masculinist Palestinian resistance narrative, Djebar casts maternity to the margin in her effort to highlight Algerian women’s overturning of traditional gender norms within the revolutionary moment. Marnia Lazreg (1994) calls attention to this moment, noting that even after the colonial era had come to an end, “women’s new image of themselves as autonomous persons was not institutionalized in a new political agenda to upgrade women’s collective status” (Lazreg 1994, 769). Algerian women did not challenge the FLN’s ideological framing of women’s social role, as they themselves tended to regard female sexuality as “part of the ideological struggle” between Algerian and French culture. Gradually, Algerian women would

29 Although I am using Um Usama as my primary example, Wild Thorns also depicts home demolition scenes where the distinction between the public and private sphere is blurred. These scenes also accentuate the Palestinian tendency to cast defeats as victories. With each house demolition, Khalifeh enables the reader to almost hear the reverberating ululations of Palestinian women. She writes, “Then came the deafening sound of the explosion. The great house shuddered and stones seemed to fall from the sky. Then the traditional ululations of the women burst out; the sound of emotion, joy and sorrow filled the street” (WT 206/AS 175). The scene not only demonstrates the tragedy/victory link, but also exemplifies Sumud as a working concept in times of conflict.
realize the extent to which Algerian resistance discourse denied them recognition in an effort
to stifle the foundlings of a women’s movement. As one female revolutionary put it, “We
thought we would earn our rights. We thought they would naturally be recognized later” (in
Lazreg 1994, 769).

Intent on maintaining a distinction between religiously sanctioned masculine and
feminine spaces, the FLN defined women’s contribution to the resistance30 according to
“conventional understanding[s] of the sexual division of labor” (Lazreg 1994, 767) in the
Soumman Platform31, which outlines women’s revolutionary duties as “providing moral support
to fighters and resisters; taking care of liaison, food supplies and sanctuary and helping
families and children left behind by those at the front, in prison or detention camps” (in
Lazreg 1994, 129). Although an estimated 10,500 women participated in the war effort32,
women’s participation in the Algerian resistance has been silenced in historical accounts of
the conflict (Amrane 1982, 126-9). As Djamila Amrane (1982) describes is, “Theirs was a
monotonous and thankless task, bereft of military glory or heroism, and yet demanding
exposure to danger” (1982, 129).

Unlike Khalifeh’s narrative, Djebar uses Les Enfants to shatter the spatial and practical
boundaries that isolate and restrict Algerian women.33 One female character, Cherifa, for
example, becomes resolved to leave her household, telling her husband Youssef that the
French army is looking for him. Although hesitant at first, Cherifa musters the courage to
leave without even the slightest understanding of the outside world, except what she could
imagine from her husband’s stories. Cherifa’s emotions while roaming the streets alone are

30 For more on the roles assigned to Algerian women during the revolution, see Benabdessadok, Cherifa, “Pour Une
Analyse du Discours sur la Femme Algérienne,” Diplome D’Etudes Avancées En Linguistiques, Algiers University, Algiers.
(1979)
31 The Soumman Platform is a position paper issued by the FLN on August 2, 1956.
32 This total includes 1,343 imprisoned and 949 killed in combat.
33 As early as the opening scene of Les Enfants, Djebar illustrates the restrictive nature of physical space:
In the old Arab quarters at the foot of the mountain the whitewashed houses all look alike…. Each home is at the end of a
cul de sac, where after wandering through a maze of silent alleys, one must stop. All that can be heard is some vague whispering…. Once the soldiers have gone, the
mothers, each with her own brood, settle down again at the back of their room, on the tile floor on a mattress. There they stay for hours on end, and through the door, with its raised
curtains opening wide onto the courtyard and fountains, they watch the spectacle the guard had announced is about to begin: the mountain under fire (Ch 1/LJE 13-4).

In the context of war, the patriarchal equation is set and simple: men battle while women watch and wait. Women live cloistered and silent, taking care of the children and men are the masters of the public sphere. Enclosures become both protective and silencing mechanisms. Describing the structure of these enclosures, Clarisse Zimra (2005) writes:
The inner spaces are left to women: the traditional house, itself contained by the Arab district, the casbah, (whose name means ‘fortress’, another cipher of containment). At the center, opens a patio; around the patio a circular warren of rooms that cannot be said to be ‘open’ onto the patio; around the patio a circular warren of rooms that cannot be said to ‘open’ onto the patio because, they, too, are contained, ‘veiled’ by a curtain. Such endlessly concentric enclosures are the spatial metaphors of spiritual enclosure, but with an absent female self within. Woman becomes a textual trope of absence, even when on display (2005, 70).
made clear:

[Cherifa] had forgotten the danger [of the French army looking for her husband] itself. In truth, it’s perhaps not that which drove her, but rather a gnawing desire to suddenly know whether she could really spend her life waiting in her room, in patience and love. That’s why she crossed the entire town, bared her presence to so many hostile eyes, and at the end of her trek discovered that she was not only a prey to the curiosity of men – a passing shape, the mystery of the veil accosted by the first glance, a fascinating weakness that ends up being hated and spat upon – no, she now knows she has exited (Ch 143/LE 228).

Cherifa’s journey into the public sphere is a metaphor for Algerian women’s liberation, as it is through such acts that each of Djebar’s female characters becomes able to reassess her self-image through a new relationship with the outside world.34 Hesitant to ask for directions to her husband’s shop on her first solo journey outside the home, Cherifa finally musters the courage to ask an Algerian schoolboy, who instantly and without provocation regards her as a prostitute, “…let[ting] out a cheerful series of obscenities” (Ch 141/LE 224). When Cherifa finally reaches the shop, her husband’s partner, Yehia, refuses to let her stay, finding her suspicious for being outside on her own. Yehia finally asks Cherifa to leave, fearing her seductive power.35

Djebar creates these metaphorical journeys as a way to disturb the classical Algerian trope of the patriarchal family, while challenging negative correlations between women’s public behavior and moral character. Les Enfants similarly speaks out against women’s emotional dependency on their husbands through a questioning of spatial norms in the work. When the character Lila is abandoned by her husband as he decides to join the resistance on the mountain, she becomes severely depressed and lonely in her high-rise apartment and begins to think about death (Ch 24/LE 48). The reader learns that Lila’s husband, Ali, had constructed his understanding of marriage in a traditional way: “[Ali] expected to make an ideal woman out of the wild young girl…[and]…persisted in wanting to shape Lila—the now so rebellious Lila—in projecting her as closely as possible onto the absolute form he had in

34 Although my exploration focuses on the liberating journeys of Cherifa and Lila, they are not the only female characters in Les Enfants to attain agency by undergoing new experiences. Amna protects Youssef by lying to her husband, Hakim, who works for the French army – an act aligning her with the revolution (Bigelow 2003, 15). Sixteen-year-old Hassiba is obstinate about joining the fighting on the mountain. She exclaims, “I want to shed my blood for the revolution… I can walk! Barefoot if need be. I want to walk with the fighters. I want to suffer with the fighters. Night and day…”(Ch 148/LE 235). Salima, a schoolteacher, is arrested and tortured because of her connection to a revolutionary, whose whereabouts and activities she refuses to inform of.

35 In the passage Cherifa says, “‘I’m chaste…both in body and spirit.’ He remains adamant. He no longer responds. He forces Cherifa to leave; a glance, a single glance, at the young woman’s ankles, in spite of himself” (Ch 142/LE 225-6).
mind” (Ch 22/LE 45). In marriage, Lila is changed from a passionate philosophy student to a downcast and subservient wife, forbidden by Ali to work and to access the public sphere. Lila accepts her fate, reasoning that Ali’s love for her is her sole refuge and satisfaction.

As *Les Enfants* progresses, however, Lila slowly escapes her isolation by reconnecting with her past, as, “For two weeks she…drift[ed] in the dangerous waters of her recent past, trying to pick up the thread again somewhere beyond it. She’s aware of it and has also discovered a new desire to be in harmony with the town and find herself a place here” (Ch 154/LE 244). Lila’s sense of self had been completely dissolved into her husband’s view of her until her slow detachment from him, as she “believed indisputably that for her there was no way to know herself other than in love—and love was the cluster of links that enslaved her to Ali” (Ch 182/LE 286). By visiting family and engaging old female friends in long conversation,

Lila is eventually reborn. She discovers “that one can find oneself with the same lucidity when one is with a friend, a comrade in arms, or an equal” (Ch 183/LE 287). Djebar thus proposes that women free themselves and each other from the grip of patriarchy by depending emotionally upon each other, rather than upon men. In and through her process of self (re)discovery, Lila is able to redefine her own ideas about the revolution and contemplates “her own commitment to national liberation” (Bigelow 2003, 13). By the end of the novel, Lila is implicated, interrogated, and imprisoned for contributing to the cause of Algerian national independence. Despite abuse from her interrogators, Lila is obstinate and refuses to provide answers. Silence is no longer imposed upon Lila, but rather self-selected as a gesture of commitment and active participation with the resistance. She is relieved to be in prison and to have existed as a part of the revolution, saying, “So, I’m here at last” (Ch 196/LE 308).

**Conclusion**

Djebar suggests that the primary step to women’s liberation is a reengagement with the public sphere, both within everyday life and with regard to resistance activities. *Les Enfants* presents a spectrum of female characters who, through a dismantling of the frames set upon them by their husbands’ sense of morality and propriety, forge new and independent identities which they use to advance the new and independent nation. Djebar thus challenges the FLN’s position that women should be limited to the domestic sphere and construed in traditional terms by granting them sexual pleasure and revolutionary credentials, and by reinserting them into the pages of Algeria’s resistance history.

Djebar attempts to release women physically, emotionally and psychically from the
ideological struggle between Algerian patriarchal discourses and the discourses of French colonialism by offering a feminist lens, arguably Western in construct, for reorienting the revolutionary project to include a new view of women and female propriety. Djebbar’s enthusiasm for an arguably Western feminist model which perceives Muslim women as victims of their own culture is inconveniently coupled with the implication that Western frames for understanding liberation are somehow inherently superior or more rational. Whereas Djebbar differentiated her view of feminism from the French model by emphasizing sexual pleasure over reproduction, critics have continued to lump her into the category of ill placed, inauthentic and Western-centric authors who approach non-Western women from an inquiry of, “what can we do for them?” (Spivak 1981, 155). Another reading of Djebbar, however, sees her moving toward what Gayatri Spivak (1981) identified as a kind of international feminism that, “promotes a sense of our common yet history-specific lots” (1981, 184).

Khalifeh, on the other hand, does not attempt to make space for a feminist reorientation of gender roles and norms within the Palestinian resistance narrative but rather reorients Palestinian women’s roles within its traditional gender construct as a mode of resistance. By affirming the importance of mothers’ reproductive capacity, Khalifeh allies herself with the Palestinian resistance movement as it is and ultimately exposes the ways in which Palestinian mothers have transformed and politicized motherhood as a social and political category. Together these narrative renderings of women’s contribution to the resistance movements in Algeria and Palestine convey, as Deniz Kandiyoti (1994) aptly puts it, that “Feminism is not autonomous, but bound to the signifying networks of the national context which produces it” (1994, 380).

References


Farsakh, Leila. “Palestinian Labor Flows to the Israeli Economy: A Finished Story?”

Ghazoul, Ferial Jabouri. “Children of the New World: A Novel of the Algerian War (Review).”
*Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 3(2): 120-122. (2007)


Jayawardena, Kumari. *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World in the 19th and Early 20th*


