UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
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ISLAMIC CULTURE AND THE QUESTION OF WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTH AFRICA: A STUDY OF SHORT STORIES BY ASSIA DJEBAR AND ALIFA RIFAAT

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A MINI-DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE MA PAN-AFRICAN LITERATURES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH IN THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

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MARCH 2006

CONTENTS

DEDICATION

To

Rosemary Alice Gray

the mother hen that never abandons its chicks
the dawn that never fails to come
the river that never stops to flow
the light that never flickers,
but shines through the straits of time
bringing life to the lifeless,
joy to the joyless,
love to the unloved

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe many thanks to all who supported me in my endeavours to bring this work to fruition.

Special thanks go to my supervisors, Ms K Soldati-Kahimbaara and Professor R Gray, for their academic mentoring and unflinching guidance.

I appreciate the efforts of all my lecturers in the Department of English in helping me lay the groundwork for this research. I thank especially my former head of department, Professor D Medalie, who often went to great lengths to see that my study environment is conducive for academic productivity, and Mrs F Welgens, whose constant willingness to attend to my needs helped me overcome several seemingly insurmountable situations.

My friends and family in South Africa have been very supportive, in more ways than I can recount. A special note of gratitude goes to Jerry and Irene Angeh, Elizabeth, Makgomo and Tinyiko Masango, Michael and Marian van Deventer, Nikki Funke, Malvis Wayoe and Emilia Akande. They stood by me in favourable and unfavourable times, constantly injecting me with hope of a brighter tomorrow.

Most of all, I say a big thank you to my parents and siblings back in Cameroon for their understanding of and patience with me, especially at those times when I put academic interests ahead of theirs. They have been most supportive and encouraging. They certainly deserve more than these few words on paper.

Summary

Using selected stories by two North African women writers, Alifa Rifaat of Egypt and Assia Djebar of Algeria, this study, entitled 'Islamic culture and the question of women's human rights in North Africa: a study of short stories by Assia Djebar and Alifa Rifaat', analyzes the creative representation of contemporary Muslim society and its treatment of women.

The continued marginalization of women in Muslim societies has led to the rise of feminist movements in North Africa and the Middle East. Muslim women, like their Christian counterparts, have made a most remarkable appearance on the African literary scene by producing literature that interrogates a system in which women are denied the rights to life, equality and freedom, which are the inalienable rights of all Islamic adherents. Thus, North African women's writing reveals a disparity between Islamic culture, which is based on the Qur'an and upholds equal rights for all believers, and Muslim culture, which denies women access to full rights.

The writings of Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar espouse the need for a transformation of Muslim culture such that the practices of Muslims effectively harmonize with the teachings of the Qur'an. The stories selected for analysis illustrate that while Rifaat uses the conservatist approach or womanist thrust in her criticism of Muslim culture, Djebar adopts a more radical approach that is ultimately feminist. Nevertheless, both writers address similar issues affecting women in Muslim societies, such as forced or arranged marriages and the suppression of female sexuality.

The first chapter situates the argument within gender discourse and the human rights framework, providing a critical appraisal of women in Islam from pre-Islamic times to modern days. To contextualize the literary scene, the second chapter positions Muslim women's writing within the broad corpus of African feminisms, using the works of Nawal el-Saadawi, Mariama Bâ and Zaynab Alkali to chart the many challenges facing Muslim women today. Chapters Three and Four focus on the selected literature of the chosen writers, Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar, respectively, showing how each writer uses her art as an instrument to combat social injustices against women. The concluding chapter establishes the points of convergence and divergence between Rifaat and Djebar and, ultimately, draws attention to the dire need for all Muslims to respect the human rights of women.

This study, therefore, blends literary interpretation with sociological findings to assess the extent of the failure of Muslims to endorse the principle of equality for all humans irrespective of race, class, or gender. Essentially, it seeks to raise consciousness on women's rights in Islam.

Key terms

Alifa Rifaat. Assia Djebar. Culture. Feminism. Islam. Muslim societies. Muslim women. Patriarchy. Principle of equality. Qur'anic teachings. Short story. Women's human rights.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Aim

Through an analysis of selected short stories by two North African women writers, Alifa Rifaat of Egypt and Assia Djebar of Algeria, this study investigates the conflict between Islamic culture, on the one hand, which upholds the human rights of women in Muslim societies, and Muslim traditional practices, on the other, which restrict women from pursuing these rights. The choice of the short story genre stems from an observation that these African short stories have not hitherto been subjected to rigorous analysis. Selection of the stories is based on the premise that the problems and issues they address are representative of the challenges facing North African women, in particular, and Muslim women, in general. In essence, this work aims to evoke consciousness of the need for the recognition of women's human rights not only within Islamic societies, but also within the African community at large.

Proposition

This study argues that Islam *per se* is neither oppressive nor restrictive in its treatment of women, but Muslim men are. Thus, the essential argument is that if Muslim men and women respect each other's inalienable rights as human beings equal before God, then society would experience political, economic and socio-cultural advancement as both parties would work hand-in-hand to build the family and the nation. The women's human rights movement does not call for an eradication of culture, but rather a re-evaluation of cultural norms that apply to women. If cultural prescriptions for women were carefully constructed as not to infringe on their rights to liberty,

equality and sorority, then the result would be a society in which women could not only be productive, self-reliant, and resourceful, but also more effectively contribute to the improvement of the human condition. Based on the analysis of literature by Muslim women, therefore, this study proposes that there be increased activism in and commitment to the ongoing struggle to raise the status of Muslim women and so align it with Islamic teachings.

Definition of concepts

Before articulating the problems to be investigated in this study, it is necessary to discuss and define the term "culture". Culture as used in scholarly circles has grown to have a multiplicity of meanings depending on its implications for different schools of thought. In the light of this study, its meaning is narrowed to that advanced by anthropologists. According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (1985: 456), the term "culture", taken in its wide ethnographic sense, refers to 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. This definition, as the encyclopedia notes, was first advanced by British anthropologist Edward B. Taylor in 1871 and since then has been widely accepted given the assumption that its use of "man" as generic for "humankind" largely predates the age of gender consciousness.

Commenting on Taylor's definition, the *Grolier Academic Encyclopedia* (1988: 384) pertinently observes that throughout the years 'anthropologists have offered numerous refinements and variations on this definition, but all have agreed that culture is learned behavior [*sic*] in contrast to genetically endowed behavior [*sic*]'. This suggests that humans are not genetically conditioned to behave in a particular way

and, therefore, culture is not static, but is subject to change. A people's culture, even as it is handed down from generation to generation, is susceptible to revisions and enrichments in accordance with prevailing attitudes. Abdullahi An-naim and Jeffrey Hammond (2002: 13) have noted that 'every culture is constantly changing through the interactions of a wide variety of actors and factors at different levels of society' and that 'although people are generally predisposed to act in culturally sanctioned ways, they are to varying degrees agents of change in the transformation of their own culture'. This, in effect, means that culture is constantly being transformed as people's altered mentality influences their actions. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972: 4-5) phrases it, 'a change in the nature of their struggle will alter their institutions and hence their mode of life and thought'.

It can be deduced from the definitions offered by the two encyclopedias quoted above that culture refers to that ensemble of traditional mores and modes that distinguishes one group of people from another. It is not unusual then for one to encounter a stream of appellations defining different groups of peoples using such broad terms as "Western culture", "African culture", "Afro-American culture", and "Asian culture", and moving to more specific terms like "Indian culture", "Arabic culture", "Muslim culture", "Hindu culture", "Yoruba culture", and "Hausa culture". Hence, it can be argued that there is an African culture as opposed to a European one, a culture that is peculiar to the African peoples. However, such a culture is not uniform, for to say that the African continent has a uniform culture would be unrealistic. For one thing, Africa harbours a diversity of peoples, races and languages, a fact which in itself challenges the very idea of an African cultural homogeneity. Nevertheless, one finds that certain cultural practices, like polygamy, female excision, male initiation rites, child-naming

ceremonies, bride price payment, ancestral worship, forced or arranged marriages and communal farming, tend to run across the continent, from West Africa to North Africa, from the urban regions of Kenya to the remote areas of Zimbabwe. Interestingly, *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (1985: 456) conclusively claims – and the claim remains as valid today as it did twenty years ago – that culture encompasses ways of thinking, feeling and behaving which once learned give people a particular and distinct collectivity. Hence, to put the different traditional African cultures on a platform of comparison is to reveal a 'distinct collectivity' which argues that Africa does have a culture unique to the African peoples, although these shared affinities do not presuppose uniformity.

The reference here is to the continent and its people as a whole. African culture in its broadest sense transcends national boundaries and skin colour to encompass the many traits common to most African societies, be they Black or Arab. In recent times, there have been debates on whether North African literature is part of African literature and its history part of African history. Kofi Awoonor (2004: 2), in a paper delivered at an English departmental seminar at the University of Pretoria, addresses this issue and attributes such ethnographical demarcations to neo-colonialist influence when he states that 'the long-standing efforts by Europeans to excise Egypt, for example, from Africa is symptomatic of Europe's tendency to divide up things, place each in compartments ...'. This kind of ethnographical division is mirrored in African literature when, for instance, one picks up an anthology, such as *Poems of Black Africa* (1975) edited by Wole Soyinka, and realizes that its exclusion of North African poetry is not a question of space but of cultural compartmentalization. In other words, the poetry of "Black Africa" recognizes the similarity among cultures of sub-Saharan

Africa, the different elements of which combine to give the region that 'distinct collectivity', whereas Arabic or North African poetry boasts no semblance of what is considered as genuinely African. However, it can be argued that North African cultures do share communion with Black African cultures.

Karen King-Aribisala (1991: 36) notes in an article entitled 'African Homogeneity: the Affirmation of a "United" African and Afro-West Indian Identity' that prominent anthropologists, like George Peter Murdock, have observed more than eight hundred and fifty different traditional societies in Africa, each with its own distinct culture. Nevertheless, 'these differences belied certain commonalities which reveal the quality of Africanity and which made Africans distinct from other peoples of the world'. These commonalities range from a common colonial experience, patterns of subsistence economic activity, and the existence of a matriarchal system in the pre-slavery days, to the sacredness of land to man, the affinity between "Negro" languages and Egyptian ones and the cultural affinity and fellowship that exist among the African peoples. These elements can be traced in many African societies from north to south, east to west. In addition, 'the similarity of ways by which Africans view and adapt to their environment' and 'the diffusion of the cultural within a given entity' are two mechanisms, each reinforcing the other, that 'combine to create a common culture' (King-Aribisala, 1991: 38). Although the latter assertion is decidedly contestable in that agrarian and nomadic societies tend not to have established social structures, making a comparison between them and stable societies a complex undertaking, it is understandable that many African societies share a kind of cultural affinity that begs recognition for an African culture.

Of particular interest here is the point that King-Aribisala (1991: 38) argues on the basis of a cultural affinity between black cultures and Egyptian ones, building her argument on historical evidence:

> African historians such as Cheikh Anta Diop have argued convincingly about "oneness" of Black culture and the Black Heritage. Diop contends that the parent culture of all blacks derives from Egypt, and that all black culture shares this common identity, this foundation. Among those cultural characteristics which unite the Africans, Diop cites the ancestor cult as a foundation of cosmogony in both Black Africa and Egypt. Diop also notes that the matriarchal system was another facet of Africanity arguing that it was the basis of social organization in Egypt and Black Africa.

Following this argument then, the concept of African culture can best be explained as groups of cultures that are interrelated and have common characteristics that provide the continent a sense of oneness. Thus, to posit the idea that Muslim culture in North Africa is an integral part of the broader corpus of African culture would not be too far-fetched.

Significantly, Islam is not geographically restricted to North Africa. It is also the dominant religion in most parts of West and Central Africa and has a considerable number of followers in East and Southern African countries. Hence, Islam as lived and practised connects the Muslim of Algeria to the Indian Muslim in South Africa by virtue of its legal constituency and cultural dynamism. In the same vein, the Egyptian woman's experience within her immediate environment is no more degrading than that of the Senegalese woman battling with the double burden of poverty and patriarchal exploitation. However, it would be a matter of cultural bias to ignore the specific setting of each woman's experience. The Nigerian feminist critic, Mary Kolawole (1997: 38), observes that African culture is complex and it is as variegated as the leopard's skin, for although there are common denominators within the heterogeneous components in that the Fulani woman's experience is similar to the

Ijaw, Sotho or Nuba woman's in several ways, the uniqueness of each cultural or regional sub-group cannot be erased. It, therefore, becomes imperative to address the question of culture in relation to the specific society that informs the African woman writer's experience.

To speak of African culture in North Africa is to speak of Islamic culture in this part of the continent. This is not to say that the peoples of Egypt and the Maghreb do not have indigenous cultures, but that these cultures have over the years been subsumed under Islamic precepts to the extent that one can hardly draw a line between an indigenous practice and one sanctioned by Islam. An example that illustrates this double-coating well is the case of female circumcision in Senegal. According to Liselott Dellenborg (2004: 80-82), who undertook fieldwork among the Muslim Jola women of Lower Casamance, the primary reason for women's resistance to the government's attempt to stop the practice of clitoridectomy is their conviction that circumcision for women is part of Islam and is a requirement for Muslim women who want their prayers to be meaningful. Such situations in which indigenous practices are over time accepted as part of Islamic culture are common in many Muslim societies.

Islam, one of the world's major religions, is not just a repertoire of beliefs and spiritual values; it also incorporates a legal and cultural system to which all its adherents must conform. Islam in North Africa dominates every facet of life from the political system through the judiciary to the family arrangement. In this light, culture in North Africa can be defined as the totality of habits, practices, beliefs, and customs that influence the Muslim's way of thinking, feeling and acting. Like all other African cultures, Islamic culture constitutes a system of written and unwritten laws, codes and

mores by which all members of society must abide. In essence, it is a way of life for all Muslims.

It is important at this juncture to distinguish between the terms Islamic culture and Muslim culture as used in this study. Ali Pourmarjan (2005: 1), in a paper entitled 'Women in the Culture of Islam' presented at a *Women's Rights in Islam* conference,[1] makes the following distinction:

> …when we speak of Islamic culture, we do not necessarily mean Muslim culture. Although Muslim culture is an extraction of Islamic culture, the two do not necessarily reflect the same values because we cannot ignore or overlook the fact that over the centuries, various Muslim societies have deviated from the original Islamic culture. This deviation, however, has been in varying degrees in the various Muslim societies in different parts of the world. As a result, what is reflected today in the various Islamic societies of the world portrays Muslim culture and not necessarily the culture of Islam. The true culture of Islam can be evaluated only through the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions (Ahadith) and by studying the lives, characteristics and the behaviour of the Prophet (SAW) as well as the Infallibles (AS). On the other hand, Muslim culture can be evaluated by studying the norms and behavioural patterns of the Muslims and the cultural works of the writers, artists and poets of that culture.

From the above quotation, one deduces that Islamic culture is based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadiths of the Prophet whereas Muslim culture refers to the everyday practices of Muslims and their literary representation in works of art. This, in effect, means that Muslim culture differs from country to country whereas Islamic culture is one and unique since it is based on Qur'anic teachings. This study, therefore, uses the term Islamic culture to refer to the beliefs and customs of Islam as stated in the Qur'an, and Muslim culture to refer to Muslim practices, which do not always reflect the true teachings of Islam. In this regard, Ahmad Yamani (2005: 28), in an article on justice and equality in Islam, explains that the fact that a socio-economic order based on justice and equality remains more of a dream than reality in contemporary Muslim world is 'the fault of Muslims who have neglected the true

teachings of Islam, and have thus deprived themselves and others of an important pillar of strength'. Thus, while Islamic culture endorses equality of rights for both men and women, Muslim culture, like many traditional African cultures, has in the recent past denied women their basic rights to freedom of choice, education and employment.

By the simplest of definitions, human rights, as deduced from an interpretation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, stipulate that every human being, irrespective of race, gender, age or nationality, is entitled to, among other things, life, freedom of choice, equal opportunities, social security, healthcare, and justice. Such a definition presupposes that the rights of women are an integral part of Universal Human Rights. The clamour for an international recognition for women's rights culminated in the convening of the 1993 United Nations Human Rights Conference in Vienna, 'which explicitly placed the issue of the human rights of women on the international governmental agenda and incorporated that terminology in its Declaration and Programme of Action, stating that the human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights' (Gierycz, 2002: 30).

From 1948 to 1993, not much had been done by the international community to ensure that individual states implemented policies aimed at protecting the rights of women. Of course, several other conventions had been adopted during this period, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)

and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981). Even though these latter two had provisions that addressed the question of women's human rights, none of them explicitly addressed the issue of culture as a major barrier to the realization of women's rights. The Vienna Conference, however, brought the matter into the limelight and challenged 'the justification that culture, tradition and religion rule out the applicability of international legal standards, stating that "gender-biased violence and all forms of sexual harassment and exploitation, including those resulting from cultural prejudice and international trafficking, are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and must be eliminated" ' (Gierycz, 2002: 45-46).

Sadly, many countries have refused to ratify international treaties on human rights, arguing on the basis of 'cultural relativism', a theory that disputes the universality of human rights and challenges its applicability to specific cultures. Foremost among those taking the stance on cultural relativism are the Muslim states of the Middle East and North Africa. According to Khadija Elmadmad (2002: 253), there are no regional binding Islamic conventions on human rights in the Muslim and Arab world except for a few draft texts, such as the Islamic Declaration on Human Rights adopted on 19 September 1981 by the Islamic Council in London which, however, speaks only of the rights of married women and ignores women who are not married. This omission presupposes that a Muslim woman gains entitlement to rights only when she is legally contracted to a man as if to say that a woman's right is contingent on that of her husband and she who has no husband has no rights. This declaration, therefore, simply camouflages conformity to international law, while Muslims throughout the Arab world still subscribe to cultural prescriptions of female subjugation.

Paul Magnarella (1999: 3) has observed that Arab human rights' advocates do not regard the Permanent Arab Commission on Human Rights founded by the Council of the League of Arab States in 1968 as part of the universalistic human rights movement. His investigation reveals that this commission has done little to guarantee human rights in the Arab world and although it produced an Arab Charter on Human Rights, which it presented to the Council at the 102nd session in 1994, it did not ensure the practical implementation of it, for as of 1 January 1997 no Arab state had ratified the charter. In line with this report, Husayn Mihrpūr (2003: 133) notes that the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, drafted and approved by members of the Islamic Conference Organization in Cairo in August 1990, is similar to an international declaration of human rights except that it simply introduced a 'common interpretation of human rights and not a committing contract of convention'. Mihrpūr (*ibid*.) makes a significant observation: 'so far, several meetings and work groups have been held with a view to studying the bill and putting its rights [in]to effect. However, it has not gone beyond a declaration'. Thus, human rights in North Africa exist at best on paper. This disparity between theory and practice in Islam, especially concerning women's human rights, therefore necessitates women's rights activism, a process aimed at deconstructing existing attitudes towards women and introducing reform where change is needed.

In view of this situation, North African women writers recognize that, as artists, they have a moral obligation to respond to the injustices perpetuated against women in Muslim societies. Thus, their writing mirrors their reaction to prevailing socio-political realities, for as Chidi Amuta (1989: 81), commenting on the role of literature in society, states, 'modern African literature is a historically determined and complex

admixture of art forms marked by a *reactive stance* towards major historical experiences'. Women writers like Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar, who throughout their lives must have experienced the prejudices directed against their sex, have successfully shown through their writing that they have a 'moral prerogative to point the way to others and educate the spirit' of the underprivileged in society (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1987: 12). Like Amuta, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie sees writing as a vehicle for social change, and although Djebar and Rifaat can arguably both be classified as writers of "commitment", both prioritize the mimetic over the diagetic mode, the story over the message, as becomes evident in the analysis of selected short stories in Chapters Three and Four. Rifaat and Djebar have, in their short stories, creatively portrayed the unyielding Muslim culture as a major obstacle to the realization of women's human rights in North Africa.

Background to the study: women in Islam

In her introduction to *Women in Middle Eastern History*, Nikkie Keddie (1991: 1-2) observes that there are varying opinions on the question of Islam and women's rights. While one group holds the view that the Qur'an upholds gender equality and that the prevailing mistreatment of women is the result of Arabian patriarchy and foreign importations, the other group argues that Islam is undeniably 'gender inegalitarian'. However, the critics listed below have argued that Islam as a religion does not command or endorse discrimination against women.

Azizah Al-Hibri (1982: viii) in her editorial to *Women and Islam* states that in a situation of conflicting claims, such as noted above, it becomes crucial to distinguish between Islam and Islamic tradition and culture. She asserts: 'there is no doubt that

Islamic tradition and culture is patriarchal. But the important question is whether Islam, as revealed through the Qur'an, is patriarchal'. Al-Hibri later shows in her essay entitled 'Islamic Herstory: or how did we ever get into this mess?' (1982: 207-219) that the patriarchal oppression of women stems from cultural practices rather than Islamic teachings. In the book *Human Rights in Islam*, the renowned Islamic scholar Abul A'la Mawdudi (1980: 11-12) claims that Islam has laid down universal fundamental rights for humanity which are to be observed and respected in all circumstances and that these fundamental rights apply to everyone by virtue of his/her status as a human being. His words indicate that all human beings, irrespective of whether they are male or female, are entitled to the fundamental rights that Islam has granted to its followers. Thus, many scholars have come to agree that '(original) Islam is compatible with the modern notion of human rights' (Moosa, 1998: 508), which presupposes that it does not sanction discrimination against women.

Since Qur'anic teachings do not engender the oppression of women or any other human beings for that matter, it is only logical to conclude that man-made traditions are responsible for the prevailing marginalization of women in Muslim societies. An attempt has been made here to find out, in Chinua Achebe's words, 'where the rain began to beat' the Muslim woman (quoted in Stratton, 1994: 24); and the roots of this canker can be traced to the patriarchal order of pre-Islamic Arabia.

The condition of women in pre-Islamic Arabia

Islam was instituted in the Arab peninsula in 622 A. D. when Muhammed emigrated to Medina from Mecca after the Meccans sought to kill him for having insulted their gods by preaching a new religion of monotheism (Mernissi, 1991: 30). Thus, Medina

became the first Muslim community in the Arab peninsula. The period before the establishment of Islam in this region is referred to as *jahiliyya*, meaning the age of ignorance (Al-Hibri, 1982: 208). The age of *jahiliyya* was characterized by atrocious practices including female infanticide and slavery. According to Al-Hibri (1982: 209), many female infants were killed by their own parents either because of poverty – female children being considered as an economic burden – or from fear of shame, should the daughters be captured during a raid and turned into sex slaves by their captors. In some cases, female children were sold or exchanged for animals (Al-Hibri, 1982: 209). The poignant irony was thus that animals were considered to be a more valuable commodity than human beings of the female sex.

The condition of women in pre-Islamic times was indeed deplorable as women were considered no more than objects whose sole use was to be indulgent of the whims of men. The *harem* system in Turkey, for instance, reduced women to sex objects and reproduction machines (Ahmed, 1982: 154). The *harem* was a social structure in which a group of women, chosen for their beauty, were confined to the imperial house and placed under the guardianship of eunuchs. These women henceforth had only one purpose in life: giving pleasure and rendering service to the Sultan who, after a certain period, would chose the most favoured ones to share his bed. These women were arranged in a hierarchical order from the novices called 'Sagrideler' to the fortunate ones called 'Ikbal' (Ahmed, 1982: 154).[2] The imperial *harem* system, therefore, turned beautiful women into victims of male lasciviousness as though their natural endowments were a curse rather than a blessing.

Arabic women could not inherit property; they were themselves inherited by men as part of the property left behind by a deceased relative. With the advent of Islam, however, things changed: 'not only would a woman no longer be "inherited" like camels and palm trees, but she would herself inherit' (Mernissi, 1991: 120). Thus, men no longer had the sole right to inheritance since women could now compete with them in the inheritance of property. Mernissi's study indicates that, according to pre-Islamic customs, unmarried young girls considered to be ugly were cheated out of their inheritance through the conspiracy of their guardians and suitors while the pretty ones were often the victims of sexual abuse and mistreatment (1991: 124). These women had no rights whatsoever in deciding their own fate. During raids, women who were captured as prisoners of war became the property of the victors as each man took into his household as many women as corresponded to his power and means and bedded as many as he desired without the complement of a marriage alliance. Worse still, this system of concubinage did not oblige the man to recognize the children that resulted from such illicit unions (El-Saadawi, 1982: 199). Consequently, these children became social outcasts as they remained slaves – unacknowledged by the men who had fathered them.

Even where marriage was the basis for male-female relations, Arabic women still suffered exploitation and abuse from men, because *jahiliyya* customs permitted a man to marry up to a hundred women at a time, the majority of whom would be inherited by his son upon his death. At this stage, the son then had 'the choice of marrying them (except his mother), incarcerating them until they [gave] up any property they may have in exchange for freedom, or marrying them off to another male and pocketing the dowry' (Al-Hibri, 1982: 209-210). Such was the dehumanizing treatment to which

pre-Islamic women were subjected. Hence, although El-Saadawi (1982: 194) asserts that women in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times 'enjoyed a greater degree of liberty and independence' since they could choose their husbands and also had the right to divorce them, these were not standard practices. The instances she cites of women maintaining their self-determination were exceptional, while the majority of women staggered under the burden of *jahiliyya* customs. As Farida Mohamed[3] (2005: 3) puts it, 'it is a disconcerting thought that … one finds the relatively independent women alongside the hopelessly enslaved ones'. The above discussion has shown that, for the most part, pre-Islamic women were despised, treated as property, and only recognized for their subservient roles as house helps and sex objects.

Women's status in the days of Prophet Muhammed

Arab women experienced a change in social status when Muhammed appeared in Medina in 622 A. D. bringing with him a new religion, as already mentioned (Mernissi, 1991: 30), and way of life that guaranteed equal treatment for all who accepted the supremacy of Allah, women not excluded. Thus, Islam as a religion displaced the matriarchal gods of pre-Islamic Arabia while Islamic culture replaced its traditions. It is indisputable that Prophet Muhammed treated women with the greatest respect and dignity, and accorded them rights pertaining to freedom of expression, marriage and divorce. El-Saadawi (1982: 195) asserts that the Prophet was more emancipated with respect to women than most men of his time and even most Muslim men today, for he gave his women the right to stand up to him, rebuke him or tell him where he had gone wrong. According to Al-Hibri (1982: 214), although Muhammed's record was not that of a feminist revolutionary, he certainly made one brave attempt 'to undercut patriarchy and regain for women some of their lost rights'. Muhammed's

relationship with his wives provides evidence of women who exercised their basic human rights, albeit within a limited sphere.

Mernissi, in her book *Women and Islam: an Historical and Theological Enquiry* (1991: viii), probes the history of Islam in Muhammed's days and presents ample evidence of 'women who enjoyed the right to enter into councils of the Muslim *umma*, to speak freely to its prophet-leader, to dispute with the men, to fight for their happiness and to be involved in the management of military and political affairs'. Mernissi's study reveals that the wives of the Prophet were women whose exceptional beauty was complemented by their sound judgement, strong political convictions and unparallelled self-determination. Umm Salama, for example, belonged to the Quraysh aristocracy like Muhammed and was one of those women in whom physical beauty and intelligence combined to assure her 'the privilege of being consulted on matters of vital concern to the community' (Mernissi, 1991: 116).

Umm Salama was not the kind of woman who accepted female subservience as a god-given role. Her awareness of her personal worth as a woman moved her to question certain religious incongruities that persisted in the early days of Islam. According to Mernissi (1991: 118), the Prophet was not surprised when Umm Salama raised very political questions that only mature women were in a position to ask: ' "Why," she asked the Prophet one day, "are men mentioned in the Koran and why are we not?" ' Umm Salama then waited for a reply from heaven since in those days Muhammed received messages directly from God, especially when a woman or man asked a question concerning his/her status in the new community. Then one day she heard the Prophet recite in the Mosque the latest verse that had been revealed to him and which

was an answer to her question. According to Mernissi (1991: 118-119), 'the answer of the Muslim God to Umm Salama was very clear: Allah spoke of the sexes in terms of total equality as believers, that is, as members of the community … and it is not sex that determines who earns his grace; it is faith and the desire to serve and obey him'.

Thus, the verse that Umm Salama heard is revolutionary in that it specifically alludes to women alongside men, breaking free from the pre-Islamic tradition of men only. Umm Salama's question constitutes a milestone in the history of Islam, since it resulted in Islam introducing a new system of laws and regulations which 'affirmed the idea of the individual as a subject, a free will always present in the world, a sovereign consciousness that cannot disappear as long as the person lives' (Mernissi, 1991: 121). Thus, her question was the spark that ignited recognition for the female individual both within the Qur'an and in everyday religious life. Clearly, Umm Salama was a woman who opposed every form of discrimination and whose action in this regard shows that self-expression is a human right, not the privilege of a particular group called men.

Umm Salama was not the only wife of the Prophet to display a spirit of self-assertion. The Prophet's first wife, Khadija, was also known for 'her imposing personality, her independence both socially and economically since she earned her own living through trade, and the freedom which she insisted upon in the choice of her husband' (El-Saadawi, 1982: 196). Mernissi (1991: 116-118) also refers to another woman in Muhammed's days who acted with courage in resisting foreign encroachment: 'a typical example of the dynamic, influential, enterprising woman in public as well as private life is Hind Bint 'Utba, who played such a central role in the Meccan

opposition to Muhammad that, when he conquered Mecca, her name was on the list of the few Meccans condemned to death by the Prophet'. Although Hind Bint 'Utba accepted Islam on the day of the conquest of Mecca and was thus spared execution, it is evident that she was not a woman who cowered in fear at the sight of men. From the above examples, it can be said that women in the Prophet's days were models of self-expression. The example of the Prophet's wives was soon emulated by other Arab women who could then stand and challenge their husbands on matters that affected their social or religious well-being.

Regarding the issue on the absence of a feminine appellation for Muslim female believers, Mernissi (1991: 119) explains that Umm Salama's question represented a general viewpoint among the women of Medina and a veritable protest movement by the women, for 'not only did the women share Umm Salama's concern, but they also took that answer from Heaven for what it was: a break with pre-Islamic practices, the calling into question of the customs that ruled relations between the sexes'. This shows that early Muslim women, influenced by the self-assertive spirit of the Prophet's wives, were self-determined and conscious of their rights as human beings.

With such freedom of expression granted women by the new religion (Islam), it is not difficult to see that the situation of women in the first Muslim community at Medina was considerably better than that of pre-Islamic women. Muhammad Chaudhry (2002: 13) argues that 'Islam, for the first time in the history of man on earth, raised the status of woman from mere chattel which was to be owned and possessed and enjoyed like any other object of property, to the status of a human being having the same rights as of man'. Thus, Islam introduced the principle of equality of all

individuals before God and raised women from the dungeon of commercialisation to the platform of human dignity.

However, it is worth stating that the patriarchal order of pre-Islamic times, which rotated on the axis of inequality between the sexes, was not completely destabilized with the advent of Islam. Inasmuch as Islam abolished certain practices, like female infanticide and forced marriages for young girls, it did not eradicate the imbalance within power structures whereby men remained the masters of women's destinies. Agreeably, the women of Prophet Muhammed's days enjoyed considerable political and economic privileges, but that was only because the Prophet's word could not be challenged. Maimul Khan (2003: 241-242) makes an important observation on the indispensable role played by Muhammed in the pursuit of human rights:

> Under the direct supervision of the prophet Muhammed, the theoretical concepts of Islamic human rights received the highest level of practical implementation. After his death, the level of actualization of Islamic human rights differed depending upon the person at the helm of state affairs and the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural development of different Muslim states and societies. Muslim rulers in particular and the Muslim masses in general did not always fulfill [*sic*] their religious and moral duty to safeguard human rights for others.

Thus, Muhammed's death marked a hiatus in the pursuit of human rights, especially for women. After the death of the Prophet, Islamic zealots re-instituted the tradition of female subservience, a tradition that has survived to the present with very few amendments.

The situation of Muslim women in modern times

The condition of Muslim women in modern times has undergone significant amelioration in some countries in the Middle East while it still remains a matter of international concern in most countries in North Africa. According to *World Human*

Rights Guide (Humana, 1992), Islamic laws in both Algeria and Egypt are still very much in favour of male dominance. A survey conducted in 1991 to evaluate the level of social and economic equality for women reveals that the patriarchal tradition persists, with women's position in the socio-economic milieu being worsened by growing Muslim fundamentalism (Humana, 1992: 17). The report also shows that 99% of the Algerian population are practising Muslims; and Muslim traditions and practices favour the husband both in marriage and divorce. The situation in Egypt is no less pessimistic with traditional discrimination against women persisting in the areas of social interaction, employment and pay, and the husband enjoying a higher traditional status over his wife. Female circumcision, alleged to be as high as 80% in the rural areas, as some critics argue, remains a nightmare that Egyptian women have to contend with (Humana, 1992: 100-102). Magnarella (1999: 4) states that 'according to statistics, the life expectancy for females in Egypt stands at 63.46 years as opposed to 69.46 years for females in Algeria, the difference lying in the more exploitative treatment of women in Egypt'. In both cases, it is important to note that human rights enforcement in these two countries is severely hampered by Muslim practices rather than religion.

According to Charles Humana's survey reported in November 1991, human rights enforcement in Egypt stands at 50%, while Algeria boasts a percentage of 66. On a general scale, these figures indicate a considerable improvement over the 1986 report. But if one were to narrow down the study to women's human rights, one would no doubt be confronted with a less impressive report, for Humana (1992: 9) admits that women's position under Islamic Shari'a law is a complex one since 'there is no possibility of UN treaties on women's rights prevailing against a religion and tradition

that demand total obedience and conformity'. In more recent times, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in North Africa and the Middle East has rendered the status of Muslim women even more demeaning. Elmadmad (2002: 258) makes this significant observation:

> Recent developments in the world and the failure of ideologies have given rise to fundamentalist ideas all over the world and notably in the Muslim world. The fundamentalists movements in the Islamic world demand veiling women and not allowing them to work, to leave the house or to seek education. In short, these movements want to consider women as minors. Their attacks on women's liberation movements in the Muslim world are so aggressive that few of these movements have succeeded in confronting them. … The present situation of Algerian women is worse than in a declared war.

Thus, Islamic fundamentalism symbolizes a return to the pre-Islamic practice of keeping 'woman' at point zero (El-Saadawi, 1983). Recent investigations reveal that today in countries like Iran, Algeria, Sudan and the Gulf states, a special way of veiling women is imposed and women have no right to dress freely (Elmadmad, 2002: 251). Interestingly, the fundamentalists seem to be driven by the noble desire to preserve Islamic culture from Western influence. But their political ideals exclude women and, in fact, cast them into the wastebasket of humanity. Thus, Aaron Fellmeth (2000: 686) believes that 'religious rights and cultural beliefs may lead to continued oppression of women in fundamentalist societies, and protection of family rights might preserve the unequal power structure within the family in traditional societies'.

As if true to his words, the 2005 report from *Amnesty International* (accessed 07/03/2006) on women's rights in Algeria shows that women have continued to be subjected to discrimination in both law and practice. The report states the following:

> Twenty years after the introduction of the discriminatory Family Code, women's organizations reinforced their campaigning activities for women's legal equality. A government-appointed commission proposed amendments to the Family Code, but these had not been adopted by the end of 2004. Proposed changes included the abolition of certain provisions – such as women requiring a "marital tutor" (a male relative) to conclude their marriage contract on their behalf – but fell far short of ensuring women's equality before the law. The proposed changes did not affect discriminatory divorce laws. The authorities did not act with due diligence to prevent, punish and redress acts of sexual violence against women in the family.

Clearly then, the question of women's human rights in Islamic societies remains an issue that warrants attention as to what needs to be done to raise greater awareness. To date, the Muslim world remains a very conservative one and it tends to be socially and religiously allergic to any concept coming from outside its sphere of influence. Hence, the problem of the Muslim woman who, through Muslim practices, is denied her fundamental human rights can only be solved by the Muslim woman herself. This is why North African women writers like Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar have taken a major step in raising consciousness on women's rights through the art of creative writing. The selected stories of these writers not only capture the many challenges facing modern Muslim women but also earmark strategies of survival for women. In addition, these stories advocate a kind of cultural transformation as a necessary step towards democracy and development.

It is worth stating that these writers are not trying to replace one system of law with another, in this case Islamic law with International law. They simply project Muslim culture as a primary hindrance to the realization of women's human rights in North Africa and also show ways in which Muslim women can exercise these rights in profound ways without ultimately divorcing themselves from the very culture that forms an integral part of their identity. These women realize that the concept of

human rights is not in any way opposed to Islamic culture or antipathetic to its existence. Mernissi (1991: viii) states: 'any man who believes that a Muslim woman who fights for her dignity and right to citizenship excludes herself necessarily from the *umma* and is a brainwashed victim of Western propaganda is a man who misunderstands his own religious heritage, his own cultural identity'. Thus, the movement for women's human rights in Muslim communities is not aimed at relegating Islamic culture to the dustbin of international politics, but at refining it by re-invoking the pristine glory of Muhammedan Islam, one that is devoid of the adulterating influence of a male élite that feels threatened by women's emancipation.

This is certainly an uphill task, but not an impossible one. For North African women writers, it becomes a cumbersome one since Muslims have failed to articulate the values underlying Islamic human rights and to apply them to all individuals without discrimination. It can, therefore, be said that writing for these women is a way of unveiling themselves to the world as individuals who can exercise their fundamental rights as human beings, especially that of freedom of "speech", while at the same time showing respect for the basic Islamic laws that shape their experiences. By the mere act of writing, Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar lend force to the argument that the principles underlying Islamic culture and women's human rights do not exist in a relationship of binary opposition. In fact, they show that women's rights are an integral part of Islamic law and culture.

Problems and issues to be investigated

The conflict between Muslim culture (as opposed to Islamic culture) and a person's fundamental human rights, as evident in the literary output selected from North Africa for discussion, constitutes what can be described as a clash of titans given that many Muslim countries do not endorse international human rights standards (as noted above). Thus, the fact that the principle of "equal rights" does not hold true for most Muslim societies reveals a dichotomy between the teachings of the Qur'an and those of the Hadiths, God's law and man's law, respectively. Although Islam preaches equality for all believers, Muslim women continue to be denied equal participation in all areas of public and private life. In effect, what passes for Islamic culture today is a deviation from the true Islamic culture practised by the Prophet and the Infallibles.

It is not untrue to say that Muslim culture has in the recent past denied women and female children full rights to higher education, communal decision-making, sexual independence, economic independence, political representation, freedom of expression and equal job opportunities.[4] This is the predicament of the female characters portrayed in the works of Nawal el-Saadawi, Mariama Bâ, Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar. Their quest for freedom, equality and partnership with their menfolk is hampered by a patriarchal system that places women simply as pawns on the political, economic and socio-cultural chessboard of activity. Thus, 'the problem of the African woman torn between her desire for independence and fulfilment and the claims and constraints of her society' emerges as 'the most striking and controversial issue in contemporary African fiction by and about women' (Frank, 1984: 46-47). The question that baffles any seeker of knowledge is whether it is possible for African women to uphold their traditional and cultural values and at the same time be able to

exercise their rights as a group entitled to the same privileges as men, or whether the two actions are mutually exclusive.

In a conflicting situation like this, there is a temptation to think that the idea of women's rights is completely impossible in traditional African societies. This is a serious misconception that warrants immediate correction. Abdullahi An-naim and Francis Deng (1990: xii) propose that the misconception that the idea of human rights is alien to some cultural traditions may arise because 'those cultures do not conceptualize or articulate the values underlying those rights and apply them to all human beings on an equal basis'. As Dunstan Wai (1979: 116) also observes, it would be grossly unfair to assume that respect for human rights in traditional societies is alien to Africa and that their violation is a return to the pre-colonial days of "barbarism". Concerning human rights in Islam, Mernissi (1991: viii) states with conviction that 'the quest for dignity, democracy and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition'. The prevailing misconception on human rights in North Africa having been clarified, the concern of this study is to explore, through a critical analysis of selected short stories by two North African women writers, the extent to which Muslims have failed to articulate the values underlying human rights and apply them to all individuals as well as groups without discrimination.

This failure is evident in the continued subjugation of women in Muslim societies, a factor which lends force to the feminist movement and its African womanist

counterpart. The concept of feminism, however, poses a problem for Muslim women, as it does for many African women, for as Katherine Frank (1987: 17) notes, 'feminism is by definition an individualistic ideology in contrast to the communal nature of African society'. The question that warrants careful investigation, therefore, is whether feminism and communalism run on parallel lines, or whether there exists a possibility of reconciliation between Muslim culture and feminist aspirations. A study of the selected North African women's writing provides a starting point to the resolution of this problem.

Literature review

In an article entitled 'Current Muslim Thinking on Human Rights', Mayer (1990: 134) observes that Islamic legal thought emphasizes a preservation of social and traditional family structure and a suppression of individual freedoms. Thus, the pursuit of individual freedom comes at a high price, for it places writers, particularly female writers, on the brink of ostracism. Djebar's attempt to upgrade the importance of individual freedoms by writing novels and stories in which women strive to be self-assertive has invited much critical attention. According to Rafika Merini (1999: 94), 'Djebar has declared in a speech that, although she has been attacked repeatedly for the individualistic nature of her writing, she fully intends to go on writing as she has'. One of the areas in which Djebar has received critical attention relates to her stance on feminist politics in Africa.

In an article entitled 'Feminism and the Question of "Woman" in Assia Djebar's *Vaste est la Prison*,' Jane Hiddleston explores this trope in Djebar's writing. According to Hiddleston (2004: 91), Djebar does not celebrate a united feminine

identity, such as feminism seeks to impress, but she navigates between this collective mode and the individual feminine experience. The kernel of Hiddleston's (*ibid*.) argument reads as follows:

> Feminist resistance for Djebar revolves not around the uncomplicated celebration of female solidarity but around a continued shifting between collective and singular critique. Women's resistance to patriarchal oppression in Algeria consists of a continual process of convergence and divergence. Djebar does not propose a single feminist argument but charts instead the very difficult process of creating a shared concrete cause.

What seems to be the focal point of Hiddleston's argument is not that Djebar does not privilege feminine homogeneity over individualist ideology, but that she creates a platform of compromise where these essential elements can exist in a state of complementarity. To accomplish this, Djebar struggles to dissociate herself from the discourses of both Islam, which emphasizes communalism, and Western secularism, which thrives on individualism, and rather explores both singularity and collectivity by turns, revealing the ways in which these modes of thinking become intertwined.

Moreover, Hiddleston (2004: 92) asserts that Djebar does not endorse 'a monolithic feminist ideology' as if to say that African women face identical problems irrespective of their specific cultural backgrounds. In this regard, Djebar seems to share Kolawole's view (referred to earlier, 1997: 38) that although there are common denominators within the heterogeneous components of African culture in that the Nigerian Fulani woman's experience is similar to that of the Ijaw, Sotho or Nuba woman's in several ways, the uniqueness of each cultural or regional sub-group cannot be erased. Thus, although patriarchal oppression of women persists in almost all African societies, the degree and intensity as well as the form of such oppression varies from region to region, depending on the prevailing cultures of the peoples. In this case, women's individual experience of the devastating effects of patriarchy

materializes as of prime importance. Hiddleston (2004: 94), however, observes that Djebar does not glorify the individual to the detriment of communal relations, but instead seeks connections between women of different epochs and laments their common plight. It is in this sense that one can say that Djebar's discourse is constructed against a backdrop of mediation between communal interest and individual desires, between culture and the feminist aspiration.

In 'Tradition and Transgression in the Novels of Assia Djebar and Aïcha Lemsine,' Silvia Nagy-Zekmi moves beyond Djebar's relationship with feminism to look specifically at her reaction to patriarchy as a seedbed of culture. Nagy-Zekmi (2002: 1) begins her critique on Djebar by invoking Trinh Minh-ha's theory of the 'triple bind' which proposes, firstly, that women of third world countries may find themselves caught between the problems of race and gender – being colonized once by the colonizer and then by the patriarchal order – and, secondly, that women writers often find themselves facing the odd predicament of writing in a language which upholds a white-male-norm ideology and is used predominantly as a vehicle to circulate established power relations. Cecily Lockett (1989: 29) explains the South African situation in the light of the 'triple bind' when she states that 'where white women confront only gender oppression, black women are the victims of what is termed "triple oppression" – racial oppression, class oppression and gender oppression'. Thus, the burden of African women is triple in the sense that their oppression is based not just on gender, but also on race and class. Nagy-Zekmi (2002: 2) identifies tradition as the force that keeps the flames of patriarchy alive and prevents women from escaping this triple oppression. In her opinion, unlike Aïcha Lemsine who 'tries to reconcile Maghrebian tradition and Western values,' Assia

Djebar 'opts for a careful deconstruction of tradition as an oppressive force in her representation of history', but at the same time her writing is embedded in the Islamic tradition 'as an axis of religious and social identity'.

The point Nagy-Zekmi stresses here is that although Djebar proffers tradition as an integral part of a person's identity, she also sees it as the foundation of an inegalitarian system that keeps women under the control of men. Thus, for women to break free from the constricting fetters of tradition, they have to 'transgress taboos', like those pertaining to marriage and sexuality. As Nagy-Zekmi (2002: 2) again notes, Djebar's works present female characters who rebel against 'the domineering traits of patriarchy' as a means of self-preservation and self-identity. By creating characters who flout established norms, Djebar herself becomes a transgressor of tradition. Nagy-Zekmi (2002: 4) quotes Mildred Mortimer's explanation that Islamic culture revolves around the discourse of silence, and therefore a Muslim woman who is seen or heard in public disclosing matters of the private world is guilty of a 'double trangression', while the female writer who dares to preserve for posterity the very secrets that are not to be revealed in public is committing a 'triple transgression'. Thus, Nagy-Zekmi posits the notion that for Djebar, committing this 'triple transgression' is a path she must tread in order to unveil the desires of women suffocating under the yoke of patriarchal traditions. What Nagy-Zekmi does not seem to recognize in Djebar's act of transgression is an affirmation of an innate tendency towards self-expression and freedom of choice, an external manifestation of an internal drive towards human rights as the inalienable heritage of every human being.

Interestingly, the subject of transgression in Djebar's fiction has caught the attention of many a critic. In her article titled 'Strategies of Transgression in the Writings of Assia Djebar', Belinda Jack probes further into the reality of the 'triple bind', but focuses on writing itself as a strategy of transgression for the Muslim woman. Jack (1995:28) argues forcefully that 'to explore the self in writing, as a North African woman, is a subversive act' and Djebar chooses subversion over conformity in her novels *L'amour, la fantasie* (1985), *Ombre Sultane* (1987) and *Les Soeurs de Medine* (1991). In Jack's view (1995: 20), these texts are subversive in both form and genre, for Djebar uses language as a medium of self-definition. The power of speech, both spoken and written, becomes at once a means of self-assertion and a source of alienation for the Muslim woman writer. Jack (1995: 19) observes that for Djebar, 'a North African *woman* writer, language is part of a complex set of relationships between corporeal confinement and freedom, encountered in multiple guises'. Djebar chooses to write in French, a foreign language, and this act, as she herself notes, is tantamount to 'making love outside the ancestral faith' (quoted in Jack, 1995: 20). By divorcing herself from the traditional women's oral Arabic discourse and exploring taboo subjects like sexuality and feminine desire, Djebar, in Jack's opinion (1995: 25), subverts patriarchal colonial history, and although she emerges as a spokeswoman for Arab women, she finds herself alienated from the oral Arabic world of her women compatriots. This, however, does not deter her from continuing to write in French. As a feminist, Djebar will remain an advocate of women's liberation until such time as it can be said that it has been fully attained.

The language question in Djebar's writing remains a matter of interest to critics. It can be argued that Djebar's use of the foreign language, French, in her writing is a

strategy of assuming a power that was denied her by colonization and patriarchy. Soheila Ghaussy, in 'A Stepmother Tongue: "Feminine Writing" in Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*', discusses Djebar's use of a 'feminine language' or *écriture féminine* in her propagation of feminist politics. Referring to *Fantasia: an Algerian Cavalcade* (the English version of *L'amour, la fantasie*), Ghaussy (1994: 2) charts the double motive in Djebar's use of French in writing as follows:

> French, the original language of the novel and the language of colonization, is … used to generate discourse – an act of empowerment – and questioned regarding its appropriateness for and appropriation of self-expression of the colonized. Thus, Djebar is undercutting the power formation of her own discourse while simultaneously creating discourse *for* empowerment.

What Ghaussy is, in fact, saying is that Djebar's use of the French language in narrative is both a question and a statement on the effectiveness of the language as a medium of self-expression for the Muslim woman writer. Her appropriation of French in feminist discourse will be illustrated in Chapter Four.

Djebar, however, does not make use of the written language only. According to Ghaussy (1994: 20), she combines (his)-story and (her)-story by fusing written narratives by men with oral accounts by women, and in this way she not only emphasizes the differences between 'male' and 'female', but also succeeds in undoing the male/female binary. The result is a complex strategy developed along lines of transgression which 'disrupts the logic associated with patriarchal discourses and offers an alternative "logic" of simultaneity and paradox which can be used for feminist purposes' (Ghaussy, 1994: 20). Ghaussy's argument only goes to supplement the body of evidence on Djebar as a prolific Muslim woman feminist writer who has committed herself to the task of deconstructing Muslim perceptions on femininity and reconstructing a more wholesome, insightful, positive and progressive outlook on

gender roles within the Muslim community.[5] But Assia Djebar is more than a feminist; she is a humanist and a humanitarian committed to the huge task of raising awareness on the *human rights* of Muslim women as a necessary pre-condition for socio-political development in the Arab world, as the later in-depth discussion of her chosen short stories shows.

Like Djebar, Alifa Rifaat has also, through her writing, shown the need for Muslim women to be recognized as individuals entitled to the same rights as men in all spheres of life. Although not as prolific as Djebar in her campaign for women's liberation, Rifaat has certainly made a bold statement on the prevalence of female subservience in the Muslim world.[6] Her writing is aimed at giving women of Egypt a voice of their own and a will to act in defence of women's needs and desires. In her introduction to *The Torn Veil: Women's Short Stories from the Continent of Africa*, Annemarie van Niekerk (1998: xi) uses the metaphor of 'the torn veil' to capture 'the voices of African women which have been muted or veiled for a very long time, but which now insist on being heard'. She goes on to identify 'patriarchy in religion' (1998: xviii) as one of the repressive institutions which render women effectively autistic, and this becomes an important theme in Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret*.

In a more extensive introduction to North African women writers in her anthology of African women's writing, Charlotte Bruner (1993: 151) catalogues North African women writers as 'significant interpreters of their own cultures and of women's place therein'. Bruner juxtaposes writers like Nawal el-Saadawi, Leila Sebbar, Assia Djebar, Gisèle Halimi and Andrée Chedid who are overt in their condemnation of undue restraints on Muslim women with less prolific writers like Alifa Rifaat and

Laila Said who, though not outstanding as advocates of equality between the sexes, still boldly pinpoint the flaws inherent in the system. According to Bruner (1993: 150-151), then, if one thinks that Assia Djebar is unduly harsh in depicting restraints on North African women, then one should read the short stories of Alifa Rifaat, 'who may not condemn the system, but who still conveys the shallowness and impoverishment of women's ordinary lives in Egypt'. Sadly, though, Rifaat's stories have not received adequate critical attention to date. Hence, by presenting an in-depth analysis of Rifaat's short story collection, *Distant View of a Minaret*, using the framework of human rights in Islam, this research project hopes to fill that vital gap. Ultimately, the study shows that both Djebar and Rifaat address the 'woman's question' from a similar perspective although their narrative voice differs in tone, the former being more overt and radical than the latter.

Methodology

Through an analysis of selected short stories by the Egyptian writer, Alifa Rifaat, and the renowned Algerian writer, Assia Djebar, this study examines specific areas in which Muslim culture has deviated from true Islamic culture where women's rights are concerned, and shows the various strategies employed by female characters to rise above traditional constraints and create new identities for themselves. The study, therefore, employs a qualitative methodology in the analysis of the selected stories.

In contrast to quantitative research methodology which relies upon measurements and uses various scales, such as numbers, by which different cases and different variables might be compared, qualitative research methodology relies upon words and sentences to qualify and record information about the world, making language a far

more sensitive and meaningful way of recording human experience (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000: 38). According to Paul Leedy and Jeanne Ormrod (2005: 135), there are five common qualitative research designs, namely, case study, ethnography, phenomenological study, grounded theory study, and content analysis. Of these five designs, content analysis appropriately describes the framework of this research. Content analysis is defined as 'a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases' (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005: 142). Thus, this research will focus on common themes in the short stories of Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar without, however, overlooking the writers' individual stance on the issue of women's rights in Islam.

The analysis of the selected stories is deductive, rather than inductive, since the conclusion arrived at is drawn from the body of evidence presented in the texts, and is not a rule (as in Mathematics), but simply a summarizing statement about specific, concrete observations. This approach, ultimately, emphasizes a shift in viewpoint, that is, from seeing literature simply as a reflection of societal ills to recognizing its potential as an instrument for promoting social change.

Structural organization

This work comprises five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction, which provides a background study on the subject of Islamic culture and women's human rights in North Africa. In order to contextualize the literary scene, Chapter Two explores the literary contributions of prominent Muslim women writers like Nawal el-Sadaawi, Mariama Bâ, and Zaynab Alkali, focusing on the diverse, and yet similar, perspectives from which they examine the problems and challenges facing Muslim

women in Africa, and the impact their works have made on the African literary scene. The third chapter is an in-depth study of selected stories by Alifa Rifaat, with specific focus on the writer's disclosure of the multiple faces of women's oppression and the complexities inherent in upholding a culture that inhibits one's individual freedom. Chapter Four is a critical appraisal of Assia Djebar's thematic concerns in selected stories depicting female characters battling with the hazards of war and the injustices of patriarchy. The concluding chapter recaptures the argument of the study, assesses the extent to which the problems raised in the introduction have been resolved, and suggests areas for further research.

Notes

1. The conference was organized by the Embassy of Iran in Pretoria and the Centre for International Political Studies at the University of Pretoria. It took place on 27 July 2005 in celebration of the international Muslim Women's Day and the birthday of Fatima al-Zahra, daughter of the Prophet.

2. Lindsey Collen satirizes this set-up in her novel *The Rape of Sita* (1993. London: Bloomsbury) when she names her androgenous story-teller 'Iqbal the Umpire'.

3. Farida Mohamed is currently a Member of Parliament in South Africa. Her paper entitled 'Equality of Men and Women in Islam' was presented at the *Women's Rights in Islam* conference in Pretoria, on 27 July 2005.

4. Although women in Muslim countries are gradually gaining entrance into universities and political circles, Islamic laws, especially in the rural areas, still restrain women from pursuing human rights in the same capacity as men (see Afary, Janet. Feb. 2004. 'The Human Rights of Middle Eastern Women and Muslim Women: A Project for the 21st Century'. In *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1: pp. 106-125).

5. Assia Djebar has published over twelve novels, two plays, a collection of poetry, two short story collections and a collection of essays. She has also directed two films and one documentary film. For a complete list of her works, see *Contemporary Authors Online* at http://0-galenet.galegroup.com.innopac.up.ac.za/servlet/LitRC?vrsn

6. Alifa Rifaat has published two novels and five short story collections. A complete list of her works is provided in Chapter Three under the section on author's background.

CHAPTER TWO

ECHOING VOICES: CONTEXTUALIZING MUSLIM WOMEN'S WRITING

The context of African feminisms

The term "feminism" evokes different reactions from different groups of women, ranging from reluctant acceptance to outright apathy. Notable black African women writers, like Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo and Zaynab Alkali, are known to have denied any identification with the feminist movement (James, 1990: 21, 31; Huma, 1996: 173). Lately, even the most vocal of current African women writers by preference approach the subject with an evasiveness that bespeaks detachment. In an article on re-conceptualizing African gender theory, Kolawole (2004: 254) draws attention to the ambivalence and shifting positions of scholars and authors, such as the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembga of Zimbabwe and the South African writer Miriam Tlali, in identifying with feminism.

Nevertheless, although feminism has been severely attacked by African critics as a purely Western ideology, the movement certainly plays an indispensable role in the African woman's struggle to rise above the murky waters of patriarchal dominance. Chandra Mohanty (1991: 7) states that 'third world women have always engaged with feminism, even if the label has been rejected in a number of instances'. Kolawole (2004: 254) seems to share Mohanty's view in this regard when she points out that

'most African women scholars agree that African women's muting or invisibility is not desirable or justifiable, irrespective of ideological polarity and diversities in conceptualizing gender'. Thus, it is evident that despite the differences in approach in situating feminism within an African context, many African women writers and critics still identify with the objectives of the Western feminist movement.

In its most humane sense, the concept goes beyond a search for public acceptance and recognition; it is a conscious process of self-renewal in thought, feeling and action. As the feminist critic Pam Morris (1993: 5) puts it, it does not aim simply 'to create more space in the sun for women within the existing social structures' but to 'deconstruct the prevailing status quo completely so as to transform the existing order of reality'. Feminism, therefore, has as its ultimate goal the triumphal emancipation of the woman as a unique, distinct individual with a mind uncluttered by patriarchal beliefs and abusive submission to tradition. Anthonia Ekpa (2000: 29) confirms this assertion when she states that African feminism seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual, and contributing being, while it rejects stereotypes of woman that deny her a positive identity. Hence, an African woman who identifies herself as a feminist recognizes her potential as a human being – not necessarily a female human being – and is proud of the areas in which she excels, be it on the home front or at the work place. Then she seeks ways to enlighten others on her intrinsic worth, such that dignity and respect are conferred on her, not as a favour, but as a matter of assigning honour where honour is due.

This is the more radical and taskful agenda of feminism – the need to alter human thinking processes in terms of uprooting deep-seated misconceptions about the female sex and implanting a new, wholesome, positive, and progressive outlook on femininity, that is, on being female. Morris (1993: 2) notes the complex interrelationship between the three terms "female", "feminine" and "feminist" when she distinguishes between ' "female" as designating biological sex, "feminine" as referring to cultural conceptions of gender and "feminist" as involving political perceptions and aims'. Thus, *feminism* as a movement aims at deconstructing gender-based theories on *femaleness* and *femininity*. This explains why the detrimental effects of patriarchal dominance on the lives of so many African women occupy centre stage in feminist literature. The term "patriarchy" and its centrality to feminist studies has been explained as follows:

> It is important to recognize that the focus of feminist studies is this institutionalized male dominance, operating through social structures like the law, education, employment, religion, the family and cultural practices. None of these is to be explained simplistically in terms of conscious intent, of ill-will or conspiracy of individual men or even groups of men. These self-sustaining structures of power, by means of which women's interests are always ultimately subordinated to male interests, constitute the social order known as "patriarchy", a designation which applies to almost all human societies, past and present. (Morris, 1993: 4)

Thus, it is indisputable that patriarchal subjection of women transcends borders, peoples and cultures. According to Susanna Swart (1999: 1), 'the belief that men are superior to women characterizes all the major religions of the world, including Islam, Judaism and Christianity'. Since the notion of male superiority permeates a number of societies and religions, it is not surprising then that the concept of feminism has also emerged with a strong political agenda in many African communities to the extent that each region has grown to acquire autonomy in feminist identification as evident

in expressions like "Arab feminisms", "Black feminisms", and "French feminisms". No doubt, such feminist movements are born of society's failure to place women alongside men in the arena of activity (Heilbrun & Stimpson, 1989: 63). African feminists are concerned about the continued marginalization of African women under the three-striped banner of culture, tradition and religion. It is this growing awareness of women's oppression and the need to redress the situation that has moved many an African woman writer to take a feminist stance, sometimes using the radical approach, such as Nawal el-Saadawi does in her writing, accruing no doubt from her incarceration for her beliefs. In effect, feminism has become, in Ekpa's words (quoted in Emenyonu, 2000: 29-30), the spade with which African women have 'dug the grounds of imaginative writing and planted the seed of an authentic female portraiture'.

Arab feminism and gender discourse

A question that has been recurrent in the critical forum is whether feminism is relevant to Arab women, and by extension all Muslim women. Nawar al-Hassan Golley makes this the subject of a paper in which she charts the impact of feminism, nationalism and colonialism on modern Arab women. Golley (2004: 521) shows that feminist consciousness in the Arab world 'has developed hand in hand with national consciousness since the early 19th century'. Admittedly, Arab feminism[1] is often seen as an imported concept from the West. Golley (2004: 529) clarifies this notion when she states the following:

> Arab feminism was not imported from the West. The story of Arab feminism can be outlined in the following fashion. First, the call for women's rights was part of the

> general movement to reform Islamic practices, and hence the whole social order of Islamic societies. Second, the first calls for women's emancipation were voiced by educated men and women of the national bourgeoisie, who were later joined by men and women of the petit bourgeoisie, struggling for liberation and democratic rights. Third, Arab feminism was born within, and continues to suffer from the predicament caused by, the double struggle: internally against the old religious, social and economic order; and externally against European colonisation.

Golley's contextualization of Arab feminism enables one to see that the struggle for women's rights in North Africa and the Middle East was necessitated by the unfairness of Islamic laws towards women. Thus, Arab feminism aims, not at destabilizing Islam, but at regulating Muslim culture through which women are subjected to male manipulation, particularly in the areas of marriage and divorce.

Arab feminism, like Islamic-Hausa feminism in Nigeria, aims at negotiating power with men, for it seeks to raise consciousness among Muslim women on the need for female empowerment. Thus, one finds that the writings of North African women tend to portray female characters who transgress taboos on marriage, sexuality and male-female interaction. El-Saadawi's *Two Women in One* (1985), for instance, centres on the life of a young girl, Bahiah Shaheen, who rejects her family's choice of spouse and pursues a sexual relationship with Saleem, a fellow student at the Medical college in which she is enrolled. Assia Djebar's short story 'Three Cloistered Girls' presents three young girls who discard Islamic conventions on female seclusion by developing romantic relationships with men all over the Arab world through letter writing.

Novian Whitsitt (2002: 120), in discussing Islamic-Hausa feminism in Nigeria, shows why this kind of writing can be considered as feminist when she states that 'Hausa women writers are undeniably feminist in the sense that they possess an awareness of

the constraints placed upon women because of their gender and a desire to dislodge these constraints, thus creating a more equitable gender system'. Thus, like the writings of these Hausa women, the writings of North African women, such as El-Saadawi, Assia Djebar, Alifa Rifaat and Leila Sebbar, also reveal their awareness of the burden placed upon Muslim women by the strict Islamic codes on social behaviour and interaction. Muslim women in the Arab world are through writing and activism challenging the culture of silence that denies women the right to freedom of expression, be it in speech or writing.

The discourse of silence remains a major subject of Arab feminist criticism. Deborah Cameron (1990: 4) explains this phenomenon of silence when she states that women's voices are not *silent* but have been *silenced*: 'for it is not just that women do not speak: often they are explicitly *prevented* from speaking, either by social taboos and restrictions or by the more genteel tyrannies of custom and practice'. Thus, by writing stories in which women express their desires, feelings and wishes, North African women writers are giving their sisters a voice, thereby subverting the system from within. The very act of writing in itself challenges the patriarchal ideology that 'the order of language is a masculine order dominated by the phallus' and, therefore, 'those who do not possess the phallus – women – remain marginal to language' (Cameron, 1990: 9). By daring into a male tradition, that is, writing, these articulate women succeed in negotiating power with their men.

Arab feminists are concerned with a number of issues that affect women in the Muslim world. Two main subjects occupy centre stage in Arabo-Islamic feminist

discourse, namely, marriage and sexuality. The problems relating to marriage that Muslim women writers address include early marriage for teenage girls, which is based on the idea of protecting the girl from violation or unwanted pregnancy; contracted marriages in which parents choose a husband for the girl; polygamy, which permits a man to have as many as four wives; paternal cousin marriage, which ensures that property stays in the patrilineal line; and the divorce laws, which favour men over women. On this last point, Keddie (1991: 8) states that 'a man may divorce a wife by a thrice-pronounced declaration, whereas women can divorce only for specified causes, agreed to by a judge in court'. Thus, the contractual nature of Muslim marriage and the dismissive nature of the divorce laws become subjects of great concern for Arab feminist writers like El-Saadawi, Djebar and Rifaat, since they underpin a patriarchal tradition of male domination and female compliance.

Closely related to marriage is the issue of sexuality, which has necessitated much criticism in recent times. Mumbi Machera (2004: 157) sees sexuality as a 'complex term with a multifaceted meaning referring to deep emotional feeling as well as issues of power and vulnerability in gendered relationships'. She notes that although the feelings and power dynamics are linked to the biological existence of an individual as either male or female, the scope of sexuality is socially constructed in the sense that 'sexual feelings and behaviour are influenced and constrained by cultural definitions and prohibitions rather than by physical possibilities for sexual indulgence'. Thus, in all patriarchal cultures matters of sexuality are considered as taboos for women and female children.

In a paper on sexuality and sexual politics in the Middle East, the Lebanese feminist critic, Evelyne Accad (1991: 240), refers to her meeting with Ilham Bint Milad, a Tunisian feminist, who feels that the silence of Tunisian feminists falls over three main spheres, namely, the feminine body, women's personal relationships, and sexual identity. In Milad's view, as Accad states, silence reigns over subjects such as menstruation, virginity, masturbation, sexual pleasure in general, abortion, birth, and the feminine body as a whole. Looking at a short story like Rifaat's 'Distant View of a Minaret', in which sexual intimacy between the female character and her husband is marked by dissatisfaction and a desire that cannot be verbally expressed due to traditional constraints, it becomes evident that silence over matters of sexuality is not peculiar to Tunisian women. Accad (1991: 244) describes the Lebanese situation when she identifies certain practices she ran away from in Lebanon at the age of twenty-two, including forced marriage, virginity, the codes of honour, claustration, the veil, polygamy, repudiation, beating, lack of freedom, and the denial of the possibility to achieve one's aims and desires of life. These practices, in her opinion, are part of a whole range of oppression women suffer in the Middle East. It is this prevailing injustice in sexual politics that moves her (1991: 237) to insist that 'change is fundamental at the level of sexual and familial intimacy'.

In essence, then, one could say that Arab feminism strives for the elimination of all practices that regard women's needs as secondary to men's, and, ultimately, it emphasizes a need for change in male attitude towards women in the Arabo-Islamic world. What is truly remarkable about Middle Eastern and North African women writers, as Bruner (1993: 151) observes, is that 'these articulate women share a hope,

if not a promise, that a new world order of equality and empathy could exist, based not on might, coercion and violence, but on mutual respect and understanding'. This is the artistic vision that both Rifaat and Djebar share, as an analysis of their short stories illustrates later.

Feminist politics in Muslim women's writing

If African women in general are making an impression on the literary scene, it is worth stating that Muslim women in particular are making a most remarkable appearance by moving 'beyond the veil' (Mernissi, 1987) to speak out to the world through their writing. Living in societies where speaking out is still difficult to negotiate without inviting the wrath of the powers that be, these women have chosen to be women's rights activists through creative writing. In this regard, the late Yvonne Vera (1999: 3) states that 'if speaking is still difficult to negotiate, then writing has created a free space for most women – much freer than speech'. A brief look at the works of three Muslim women writers reveals that writing for this group of African women is an effective medium for assuming the power of speech and casting off the cloak of silence that has been imposed on African women in general.

Nawal el-Saadawi of Egypt, Mariama Bâ of Senegal and Zaynab Alkali of Nigeria are three prominent Muslim women writers who have examined the problems and challenges facing Muslim women in Africa and the impact of patriarchal repression on the female identity. Although all three writers are concerned about the status of the Muslim woman within Islamic culture, each approaches the subject from a different perspective and with peculiar objectives in mind, with the result that El-Saadawi

emerges in her writing as a revolutionary and Bâ and Alkali as liberals. This is to say that while El-Saadawi advocates a radical transformation of the social and political order, such that women's needs are given immediate attention as those of men, Bâ opts for dialogue between men and women and separation only when absolutely necessary, whereas Alkali recommends equal partnership between men and women at all times. What all three women, nonetheless, agree on is the need for change in the social relationship between men and women in Muslim societies. None of them prescribes an ideal way of achieving this change, but there is a suggestion that whichever route the oppressed woman takes should produce the desired result.

Nawal el-Saadawi

Nawal el-Saadawi is an internationally acclaimed feminist who has published several works, both fiction and non-fiction, that reflect the extent to which women in Muslim communities are oppressed by patriarchy. Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1995: 6-7) states that El-Saadawi's concern with 'an overarching patriarchy whose roots are social, religious, and political combines with her treatment of gender and the body in a formula that is nothing short of feminist'. El-Saadawi's unapologetic castigation of Muslim patriarchal traditions comes out clearly in all her works, but for the purpose of this study only two of her novels, *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) and *Two Women in One* (1985) are used for illustration.[2] In both novels, she shows the position of "woman" within contemporary Muslim culture as one of subservience, degradation, manipulation, exploitation and abuse.

The novel *Woman at Point Zero* is a heartrending fictional account of the life of Firdaus, a woman the narrator meets during her research on neurosis in Egyptian women. Firdaus is a prisoner at the Qanatir Prison awaiting execution as her sentence for killing a pimp. The unnamed narrator then makes Firdaus tell her own story, a story of misery, sexual molestation, religious hypocrisy, and emotional vandalism. Firdaus is a victim of sexual violation and exploitation, clitoridectomy, family manipulation, unemployment and male aggression in all its forms. She is deceived, beaten, or raped by all the male characters in the novel, from her father to her uncle, the little boy Mohammadain, her husband Sheikh Mahmoud, Bayoumi the coffee shop owner, Fawzy the pleasure-hunter, the policeman on the street, Di'aa the journalist, Ibrahim the revolutionary, Marzouk the pimp and an Arab Prince. Thus, patriarchy, represented by the abusive and exploitative figures of male authority, is blamed for making her a prostitute (Malti-Douglas, 1995: 62). It is the molestation she suffers at the hands of these men that pushes her into prostitution and makes her life the exact antithesis of the paradise that her name invokes.[3] The novel, therefore, hinges on an ironic discrepancy between expectations and outcome.

The viciousness with which matters relating to sex and sexuality are suppressed is vividly portrayed in this novel. While still in her pre-teen years, Firdaus is subjected to the ritual of clitoridectomy, because she dares to ask her mother a question: 'how is it that she had given birth to [her] without a father' (13).[4] This ritual robs her of the ability to experience the pleasure she used to feel during her sexual antics with the little boy, Mohammadain: 'It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it used to arise, or as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would

never return' (15). From this incident can be deduced two significant points: first, that freedom of expression is not the prerogative of the Muslim female child, and second, that women are agents in their own oppression (a theme raised also by Alifa Rifaat), for it is Firdaus's mother who initiates the clitoridectomy performed on her.

Muslim marriage is one of the institutions that El-Saadawi attacks in *Woman at Point Zero*. As in *Two Women in One*, she portrays marriage as a social contract in which family members choose a husband for a girl without seeking either her consent or her approval of the prospective groom. Firdaus's life is mapped out for her by her uncle and his wife, and without any warning, she finds herself in Sheikh Mahmoud's house as his wife. El-Saadawi shows that the quest for economic security is most often the reason behind pre-arranged marriages. Firdaus's uncle is married to a woman from the middle class partly because of the material benefits that result from such a marriage (23). The uncle and his wife marry Firdaus off to the woman's own uncle, a man three times her age, not because she suits him, but because they hope to get a huge dowry from the old man (37). Thus, one finds that material interests are privileged over the individual's personal happiness. By her effective use of what Malti-Douglas (1991: 142) catalogues as 'the marriage-as-commerce metaphor', El-Saadawi succeeds in portraying Muslim marriage as an institution through which female manipulation is enforced.

The issue of arranged or forced marriage in Muslim societies again catches El-Saadawi's critical eye in *Two Women in One* as she lashes out against a system that turns women into commodities of trade. The novel presents a young girl, Bahiah

Shaheen, a student of medicine, who is forced by her family to marry her uncle's son, Muhammad Yaseen, a business-school graduate. Bahiah's whole life is determined by her father, 'who owned her just as he owned his underwear' and who 'could marry her off or not marry her off, for he was the broker, even though she had never authorized him' (96).[5] Her father needs no authorization from her to marry her off to whomever he chooses – tradition empowers him to trade her for whatever amount he thinks appropriate. Hence, 'at a big family party they sold her to a man for three hundred Egyptian pounds' (99). In effect, her marriage to Muhammad Yaseen becomes a monetary transaction between an owner of a property and a potential buyer. Using graphic imagery, El-Saadawi thus shows that Muslim marriage is one of the areas in which patriarchal oppression of women is most visible and intense.

This critique on Muslim marriage is heightened as the reader gets to see the patriarchal foundations of paternal cousin marriage. Bahiah is married off to her paternal uncle's son, Muhammad Yaseen, not because he loves her, but because such a marriage would ensure that property remains in the patrilineal line, for 'her savings would grow thanks to his expertise in commerce, and they would raise children who would inherit their wealth and bear his name, and the names of his father and grandfather before him' (72). Thus, Bahiah's marriage to Muhammad accomplishes a two-fold purpose: her dowry payment, property or any other incumbent savings would remain within the Shaheen/Yaseen family, while their children would grow up to perpetuate her husband's name and maintain the family lineage.

Like Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*, Bahiah is trapped within a system that deprives her of the right to freedom of choice, but unlike Firdaus, she resists family pressure, defies custom, and rebels against everything that inhibits her independence. Thus, she becomes two *women* in one *woman*. On the one hand, she is the polite, obedient, respectful medical student that her father wants her to be. On the other hand, she is a non-conformist who defies Islamic prescriptions for women and established norms on marriage in an attempt to assert her distinct personality. In the end, the second Bahiah triumphs over the first, and although she ends up in prison, she attains personhood, self-identity and individuality. It is in this light that El-Saadawi can be termed a revolutionary, offsetting the existing order through writing and reordering society in a dramatic way, which shows that women can still regain their self-worth if they cultivate the desire and will-power to do so.

Mariama Bâ

Literature from Senegal acquired a gender-conscious female voice with the advent of Mariama Bâ into the world of writing. Bâ's two novels, *So Long a Letter* (1981) and *Scarlet Song* (1986),[6] vividly capture the conflict between cultural demands on women and their right to freedom from oppression. Mbye Cham (1987: 89) has condensed Bâ's concerns in both novels into a single theme – the abandonment of women, a social malaise that transcends race, class, ethnicity and caste. Arguably, female abandonment is a universal problem which yields both physical and psychological consequences for women. But Bâ goes beyond the effects of abandonment to trace its roots, showing that a primary cause of this social disease is the misuse of traditional privileges by men to gratify their selfish desires. The

misapplication of culture by the male characters in both of Bâ's novels becomes a direct abrogation of Muslim women's right to husbandly protection and economic maintenance.

In *Scarlet Song*, Bâ presents Mireille, a white educated woman whose Senegalese husband, Ousmane Gueye, abandons her on the pretext of returning to his tradition, his tradition taking the shape of another woman, Ouleymatou. Ousmane invokes tradition to justify his actions since Islamic culture permits him to marry as many as four women. He, however, forgets that this same culture requires him to provide for his wives without partiality or favouritism and that the Qur'an specifically warns polygamous husbands to 'turn not away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air)' (*The Holy Qur'an*, Sura 4: 129). Sadly, though, Ousmane spends all his time with Ouleymatou and empties his bank account in caring for her needs and those of her family. Thus, he accepts the traditional privilege of having more than one wife, but rejects the injunction to care for them equally. As his friend Ali puts it, he tries to find 'cultural justifications for what is simply a physical infatuation' (139).[7] Ousmane's behaviour is, therefore, a 'selective adherence to tradition – selective because it acknowledges privileges yet shirks responsibilities and obligations that come with such privileges' (Cham, 1987: 90).

As in *Scarlet Song*, woman's lot in a patriarchal culture runs like a thread through Bâ's first novel, *So Long a Letter*, a novel for which she received the Noma Award in 1980. The lead female character of the novel, Ramatoulaye, is deserted by her husband, Modou Fall, who abandons her with their twelve children and starts a new

life with his second wife, Binetou, a young girl who is supposed to be his daughter's best friend. Aissatou, Ramatoulaye's friend, suffers the same fate when her husband, Mawdo Bâ, walks out of their marriage and marries another woman. Unlike her friend, however, Aissatou rises above her husband's betrayal by divorcing him and starting a new independent life for herself and her four sons abroad. The theme of betrayal in Bâ's two novels, therefore, acquires both concrete and abstract proportions, for it is not just that the male characters decide to take second wives, but also that in doing so they move away, contrary to the Islamic code, from their first wives, both physically and emotionally, and create new worlds for themselves, in which these women have no space.

In *So Long a Letter*, the different reactions of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to polygamy raise a number of questions as to what course the feminist movement should take in a culture-sensitive environment like the Islamic society. One wonders whether Muslim women should continue to endure the oppressive yoke of tradition while at the same time seeking ways to enlighten their husbands – and men in general – on the solidarity which should exist between man and woman, as Ramatoulaye does, or whether they should reject all practices that keep women enslaved to men and pursue an independent life, as Aissatou does. It is important to note that Bâ does not condemn Islamic cultural values, but she does lash out at those aspects of culture which put women at a disadvantage vis-à-vis men. What she advocates is a union, a marriage between culture and women's human rights on a platform of mutual respect and reciprocal accommodation. In this regard, it is significant that she dedicates *So Long a Letter* to 'all women and men of goodwill'.

Another contemporaneous writer who interrogates the woman's role in Muslim society in Africa is Zaynab Alkali of Nigeria, whose writing also indicates that recognition for women's rights was a major preoccupation of African women writers in the 1980s.

Zaynab Alkali

Zaynab Alkali is one of the first women writers to emerge from the predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria (Hausaland). She has published two novels, *The Stillborn* and *Virtuous Woman*. Alkali's *The Stillborn* (1988) is particularly relevant to feminist discourse as it raises a number of arguments on what constitutes Black African feminism or African womanism. The novel centres on the life of Li, a young girl who, albeit confronted by obstacles, triumphs over male domination as she moves from childhood into womanhood. Li has to adopt a self-assertive stance in order to survive in a system in which women's desires are overshadowed by societal expectations.

Alkali begins her interrogation of patriarchal norms by re-invoking the matriarchal trend also evident in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), in which spiritual power lies with the female. Li's ability to receive premonitions of doom sets her off from the beginning as a woman endowed with supernatural power. Her quest for self-assertion inevitably involves defying the law and transgressing taboos, especially those pertaining to male-female relationships. She has a strong sense of self that often manifests itself as rebellion. In the end, she gains maturity by withstanding the storms of patriarchal coercion.

As in Bâ's *Scarlet Song* and *So Long a Letter*, female abandonment emerges as a central theme in this novel. The three central female characters – Li, Awa and Faku – are all abandoned by their husbands, who drift away into the arms of other women or the gaping mouth of the bottle (alcohol). In spite of their disheartening experiences, these women succeed in stepping out of the muddy pool of abandonment and making a life of their own. Although female abandonment is a universal feminine problem, the distinctive experience of each woman cannot be ignored. As does Bâ in *So Long a Letter*, Alkali here shows that different women react to this situation in different ways: some with tolerance (Faku), others with equanimity (Li) and still others with an indifference that subverts from within (Awa).

Closely related to the theme of female abandonment is that of female self-sacrifice, that is, women who sacrifice their personal happiness for the well-being of others, their husbands not excluded. Awa is one woman who has sacrificed personal desires to care for the needs of her family. She is the 'man' of the house, the mother of the children, and the caretaker of the household, for she spends all her meagre earnings in providing food for her large family while her husband, Dan Fiama, squanders his income on alcoholic beverages. Li cannot help but admire her sister's efficiency in managing household affairs: ' … years of constant hustling had made her steps light. She was everywhere at the same time. This was another person who had given her life for the happiness of others' (102).[8] Bâ shows a similar trend in her novels when Mireille in *Scarlet Song* gives up her family and a life of contentment to marry the

man she loves and Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* defies her family to marry Modou Fall.

What Alkali and Bâ seem to point out is that society often fails to acknowledge the huge sacrifices that women make to sustain relationships, both filial and romantic, and that in most cases their self-sacrificing endeavours are not appreciated by their menfolk. As their novels show, kindness is often repaid with ingratitude, love with infidelity, and loyalty with betrayal. Their writing is, therefore, an indictment of male-centred pleasuring and an affirmation of El-Saadawi's advocacy of a need for the readjustment of male attitude towards females.

Like Bâ, Alkali does not propose the creation of a system that replaces men with women or one in which women operate to the exclusion of men. When Li tells her sister, Awa, of her intention to return to her husband, Habu Adams, who is now literally lame, Awa expresses her surprise and asks if her sister intends to 'hold the crutches and lead the way' or 'to walk behind and arrest his fall', and Li says no to both questions, but adds that she 'will just hand him the crutches and side by side [they] will learn to walk' (105). Thus, what both Alkali and Bâ project as the ideal structure is a society in which men and women function as partners, not enemies; they demand a society in which women and men support each other, complement each other and help each other attain great heights, be it politically, economically or socially. This is the essential core of African feminisms, and it is what North African women writers like Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar also suggest in their writing.

The works of El-Saadawi, Bâ and Alkali not only mirror the challenges facing Muslim women in Africa, but also propose various strategies for women's emancipation in a male-dominated Islamic society. While Alkali and Bâ emerge as moderates, El-Saadawi surfaces as a radical feminist and understandably so. The voices of these three writers, although modulated into different tones and varying pitch, constitute a harmonious blend of sound that is perceived as a heartrending song, the scarlet song of women's oppression. Therefore, one can conclusively state that these Muslim women writers form the heartbeat of Islamic feminist literary studies.

Notes

1. The term "Arab Feminism" is used here to refer to feminist movements in North Africa and the Middle East.

2. Nawal el-Saadawi writes mainly in Arabic, but most of her works have been translated into English. Her most famous non-fictional work has been translated into English as *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982). Some English translations of her novels are *God Dies by the Nile* (London: Zed Books, 1985), *The Fall of the Imam* (London: Methuen, 1988), *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), *Circling Song* (London: Zed books, 1989), and *The Innocence of the Devil* (London: Methuen, 1994).

3. The name Firdaus in Arabic means Paradise (see Malti-Douglas, 1995: 63).

4. All text quotations are taken from El-Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (translated by Sherif Hetata). 1983. London: Zed Books.

5. All text quotations are taken from El-Saadawi's *Two Women in One* (translated by Osman Nusairi and Jana Gough). 1985. London: Al Saqi Books.

6. Bâ's two novels were originally written in French. Her first novel, *So Long a Letter*, was published as *Une si longue lettre* (1980. Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines)), and her second novel, *Scarlet Song*, published posthumously, appeared as *Un chant ecarlate* (1981. Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines).

7. All texts quotations come from Ba's *Scarlet Song* (translated by Dorothy Blair). 1986. New York: Longman.

8. Text references are taken from Alkali's *The Stillborn*. 1988. Essex: Longman.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CRY OF A MOTHER HEN: ALIFA RIFAAT SPEAKS FOR MUSLIM WOMEN IN NORTH AFRICA

Author's background and creative vision

The name 'Alifa Rifaat' is a pseudonym for Fatma Abdalla Rifaat, a name she adopted when she published her first short story in 1955. Born on 5 June 1930 in Cairo, Egypt, Rifaat grew up in a traditional Arab society dominated by Islamic thought, principles and culture. In an interview (published in *Contemporary Authors Online*, 2001: 2), Rifaat states that after finishing school she wanted to pursue university education by enrolling at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo, but her father's refusal was decisive, forcing her to stay at home until 3 July 1952, when she was married off to her maternal uncle's son, Hussein Rifaat, a police officer. Her marriage lasted until 1979 when her husband died, leaving her with three children, a daughter and two sons.

Rifaat writes mainly in Arabic, her native language. She has published a number of short story collections, most of which remain untranslated, such as *Hawatandbi-Adam* ('Eve Returns with Adam to Paradise' 1975), *Man Ya Kun al-rajul?* ('Who Can This Man Be?' 1981) and *Salat Al-hubb* ('The Prayer of Love' 1983). Two of her short story collections, however, have been translated into English and these are *Leil Al-Shetaa Al-taweel*, translated by Denys Johnson-Davies as *Distant View of a Minaret*

(1983), and *Kad Lia al-Hawa*, translated as *Love Made a Trap for Me* (1991). She has also published two novels, namely, *Jawharah Farum*, translated as *Pharaoh's Jewel* (1991), and *Girls of Baurdin* (1995). In 1984, she received the Excellence Award from the Modern Literature Assembly.

Rifaat's inclination toward creative writing had begun to manifest itself at a very tender age. At the age of nine, she wrote a short story about despair in an Egyptian village, but was punished for this effort. This moved her to explore other art forms, like oil painting, music and song writing. It was only in her twenties and after a few years in marriage that she started writing again, but this soon created problems within her marriage. She states: 'It is significant that my husband should have created a storm when I published my first short story in 1955. Even though I published under a pseudonym until 1960, he discovered it and made me swear on God's book that I stop publishing, or else he would divorce me' (*Contemporary Authors Online*, 2001: 2). It is clear from this that Rifaat had to overcome mountainlike obstacles to be able to continue with her writing career. Having experienced firsthand the prejudices and injustices directed towards women in Muslim society, she is able to articulate women's problems in a manner that touches the reader's heart, stimulates his/her mind, and incites him/her to take a reactive stance against the suppression of women's human rights in Islam. As Denys Johnson-Davies (1983: viii) points out, 'the directness with which [her] stories are handled, even the fact that she deals with sexual themes and suggests that women can have views and rights in these matters, is unusual in such a society'.

The choice of Rifaat for this study stems from an observation that although her stories focus exclusively on women's issues, each of the fifteen stories in the collection is situated within the frame of Islam and – contrary to Western feminist writing – within the frame of marriage. Thus, on the one hand, like Assia Djebar, she is concerned about the lot of women in Muslim society, but on the other hand, unlike Djebar, she constructs her stories against a backdrop of Qur'anic teachings, and her characters seem to find meaning in life only when they adhere to the Islamic way of life.

Rifaat's short story collection, *Distant View of a Minaret* (1983), is of particular relevance to this study, because it captures the disparity between Islamic culture, which upholds women's human rights, and Muslim culture, which often denies women these rights. In other words, the present maltreatment of Muslim women lies, not in the Qur'an's failure to endorse the principle of equality of all human beings, but in the failure of Muslims to practise the true teachings of Islam. In her translator's foreword to *Distant View of a Minaret*, Johnson-Davies (1983: vii-viii) states that although most of Rifaat's stories express a revolt against many of the norms and attitudes related to woman and her place in society, such revolt remains within a strictly religious, even orthodox, framework. Thus, by writing within the framework of Islam, Rifaat 'differs wholly from the women writers of Beirut', such as Ghada Samman and Hannan Shaykh, whose form of women's liberation 'is inspired by its Western counterpart' (Johnson-Davies, 1983: viii). It is evident from the stories in *Distant View of a Minaret* that inasmuch as she boldly pinpoints the flaws inherent in Muslim perception of womanhood, she does not wish to separate herself from her culture. As Carole Boyce-Davies and Elaine S. Fido (1993: 318) note, the vision she

presents in her stories is that of 'a dissident womanhood within Islam that nevertheless intends to remain within that culture'. It is this profound Islamic consciousness and the desire to remain within its culture that make Rifaat different from other North African women writers, like Nawal el-Saadawi and Leila Sebbar.

The tensions between Qur'anic teachings and the Hadiths, between God's law and man's law, are given specific form in Rifaat's short stories as one encounters female characters who are denied their right to the basic necessities of life, protection of honour, and sexual satisfaction in marriage. Her stories, therefore, deserve rigorous analysis since they underpin a dire need for all Muslims to respect the human rights of women in all avenues of life. Before embarking on the textual analysis, however, it is necessary at this point to give an overview of the stories in the collection. Unless otherwise indicated, all textual references in this chapter are to Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret* as translated by Denys Johnson-Davies (1983. London: Heinemann).

A Synopsis of *Distant View of a Minaret*

Alifa Rifaat's *Distant View of a Minaret* is an anthology of fifteen stories, including a translator's foreword by Denys Johnson-Davies. With the exception of one story, 'At the Time of the Jasmine', the lead characters in all the stories in this collection are females – either women battling with problems in their marriages and reminiscing over their childhood, or young girls moving from a state of innocence into one of guilt. Although critics (Johnson-Davies, 1983: viii; *Contemporary Authors Online*, 2001: 2) have argued that Rifaat's main themes are sex and death, a closer reading of the fifteen stories in the collection – of necessity reviewed only briefly in this section

because of the constraint of space imposed by a mini-dissertation – reveals multiple themes pertaining to women's lot in Islam, such as marriage, love, interrelationships, prayer, teenage pregnancy, bereavement, widowhood, old age, loneliness, estrangement, and, above all, loss. In this case, sex and death become merely generic terms encompassing a broad range of themes, in which the term 'sex' would include sexual relationships, gender relationships, and interrelationships like mother-daughter and father-son, while 'death' includes loss of spouse, loss of innocence, loss of faith and loss of meaningful relationships.

In the title story, 'Distant View of a Minaret', one meets a female character battling with the problem of sexual dissatisfaction in marriage. Similar situations are presented in the stories 'Badriyya and her Husband' and 'The Long Night of Winter', where the main female characters suffer sexual deprivation and sexual violence in marriage, respectively. In all three stories, Rifaat projects male selfishness as a force that pushes female sexuality into the realms of passivity. In another story, 'Bahiyya's Eyes', Rifaat presents the psychological effects of female circumcision on the girl-child. The female character in the story laments over the excision rite performed on her by a group of women even before she reaches puberty. The story shows how she moves from childhood into womanhood with tears in her eyes on a constant basis, giving symbolic meaning to the title 'Bahiyya's Eyes' (as shall be seen later).

Rifaat's preoccupation with death emerges in 'Telephone Call', where the main character is a woman who suffers acute loneliness as a result of the death of her husband. The theme of loss here is tempered by the concrete and the abstract in which

two telephone calls in the middle of the night – which turn out to be a wrong number – come to symbolize the widowed character's desire for contact with her recently deceased husband, and, paradoxically, an acceptance of fate, leading to a renewal of faith in eternal life and the power of God. This theme of loss is given another dimension in 'At the Time of the Jasmine', where the main character, Hassan, is forced to travel to his village after a long time when he receives news of his father's death. Only after reading his father's will does Hassan realize that his father really cared about him, and especially about his daughter, Jasmine, whose name appears on the list of people who are to inherit his fortune. Hassan's guilt increases as he realizes how late it is for him to mend his relationship with his father: 'the years had passed and a life had come to an end and the wish had not been fulfilled' (86). This is one story in which Rifaat vividly portrays the reality of death and the guilt that often plagues surviving family members at the death of a loved one.

Rifaat takes on this trope of guilt again in 'Degrees of Death', where the narrative voice is that of a young child whose confrontation with death, when a female character in the story, Nanny Zareefa, kills a rabbit for which the narrator has developed affection, is at once shocking and revealing. The narrator's failure to stop the act results in an overwhelming feeling of guilt and a stunning realization about life: 'It was my first felt encounter with death and it provided me with the bitter knowledge that for grown-ups there were, as it were, degrees of death, one for humans and another for animals' (105). Thus, the rabbit becomes, paradoxically, a symbol of life and the cruelty of death, for the narrator is forced to accept death as an inevitable part of human life.

The themes of love and loss are interwoven in 'Mansoura', a story in which Rifaat uses the technique of a story within a story. The story is narrated by a male character, Sheikh Zeidan, who tells a group of working men about the mysterious disappearance of a young woman, Mansoura, and how she later returns to take revenge on her murderer. The story shows how unreciprocated love, marital infidelity and deviousness can spark a chain of reaction culminating in the loss of life. It is a story of morality in which Rifaat presents the perils of infatuation, the consequences of adultery and murder, and the brutality of revenge. Rifaat again captures the dynamics of male-female relationships in 'The Kite', where the main character, Widad, is married off to a man she does not love while the man she loves, Mitwalli, marries another woman. Mitwalli's sudden reappearance and proposal of marriage to Widad, several years after both have lost their respective spouses, comes to Widad as a welcome change to a life of unfulfilled dreams. In the end, Widad's chickens, one of which is snatched by a kite, come to symbolize the transitory nature of life.

In contrast to this story, the theme of love is given idealist proportions in 'My World of the Unknown' in which Rifaat blends the real and the fanciful, possibly to show humans' innate need for love. This assertion is supported by Johnson-Davies' observation that 'the woman's fantasies as she lies beside her unloving and unloved husband are not of possible bliss in the arms of a more adequate man but of a dreamworld that is obviously, though perhaps not consciously, Freudian' (1983: ix). A more critical look at this story, however, seems to suggest Rifaat's endorsement of female carnality, paradoxically within the bonds of marriage, although without

conjugality. The story can be seen as her attempt to subvert the religious myth of the snake as evil.

The stories in this collection also reveal Rifaat's preoccupation with social problems affecting women and children. In two stories, she highlights the challenges facing women raising their children single-handedly either because their husbands are away on work purposes, as in 'An Incident in the Ghobashi Household', or because they have taken second wives and abandoned the first ones, as in 'Me and my Sister'. These two stories address social realities, such as polygamy, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, sexual exploitation of girls and teenage pregnancy.

In most of the stories, the female characters suffer from loneliness as they grow old and as their children leave home to work elsewhere or get married. This is the predicament of the main characters in 'Thursday Lunch', 'Bahiyya's Eyes' and 'Just another Day'. Others suffer from depression as a result of losing their husbands, as in the case of the female character in 'Telephone Call', already commented on. The stories also show that children become estranged from their parents as they move away from home. In 'At the Time of the Jasmine', Hassan becomes alienated from his father 'during the time away from home with foreign tutors' (78), while the main female character in 'Thursday Lunch' is unable to discuss the problems of her marriage with her children since they are preoccupied with their own lives; and she is hesitant about telling her own mother owing to 'the gulf' that separates them (18-19). Thus, Rifaat shows that as children move away from home and eventually become

adults, certain ties between them and their parents are severed, creating a social problem that weakens the foundations of the family.

In all Rifaat's stories, the Islamic way of life emerges as the essence of human existence, as evident in the constant reference to the call for prayers, the characters' performance of ablutions, and their offering of the prescribed prayers for each period of the day. In 'Distant View of a Minaret', the female character views the five daily prayers that Muslims perform as 'punctuation marks that divided up and gave meaning to her life' (3). Thus, Islam as a way of life becomes the chord that links the fifteen stories in *Distant View of a Minaret* together, giving the anthology a distinct linear tune or unifying melody. All fifteen stories in this collection warrant an in-depth analysis, but as this is a mini-dissertation, only six of the stories will be analysed in detail to illustrate Muslims' failure to practise true Islamic culture where women's human rights are concerned. The six stories selected for analysis are chosen on the basis that they aptly portray Muslims' deviation from certain Qu'ranic verses that clearly uphold women's right to kind treatment, economic maintenance, and protection of honour, as shown below.

Women's right to love and kind treatment

And among his signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and he has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are signs for those who reflect.
(*The Holy Qur'an*, Sura 30: 21)

The above verse in the Qur'an stipulates that the qualities of love and mercy should be the foundation of marriage in Islam. Referring to this verse, Jamal Badawi (n.d.:

16) states the following: 'the Qur'an clearly indicates that marriage is sharing between the two halves of the society, and that its objectives, beside perpetuating human life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. Its bases are love and mercy'. Abdullah Y. Ali (1993: 1056), in his commentary on this verse, validates Badawi's assertion when he acknowledges that there is a special kind of love and tenderness between men and women, which differs in quality from that between men, and that this kind of tenderness 'may from a certain aspect be likened to mercy, the protecting kindness which the strong should give to the weak'. Thus, this Qur'anic verse indicates that, in Islamic culture, women have to be treated with love, tenderness, kindness and compassion. The right to love and mercy becomes a human right for women as it is for men. In *Distant View of a Minaret*, Rifaat imaginatively captures a society in which failure to practise this Qur'anic teaching manifests itself even in a most private area like sexual intimacy in marriage.

The title story 'Distant View of a Minaret' is a beautifully constructed piece of narrative in which the two dominant themes of sex and death coalesce. Although sexual references are explicit in this story, Rifaat sidesteps an endorsement of soft pornography by situating the descriptions within the sanctity of marriage. The story is set in a bedroom where the actions begin and end. Thus, the setting of the story complements the theme in the sense that an intimate subject – sex – is captured within an environment of intimacy – the bedroom.

The story opens with the male and female character involved in sexual activity. In spite of the intimacy of the act, the female character feels estranged from her husband:

'as usual at such times she felt that he inhabited a world utterly different from hers, a world from which she had been excluded' (1). This suggests that sexual relations have not resulted in any physical or emotional bonding between the female character and her husband, for she is 'only half-aware of the movements of his body' (1). The rift between them is indicated by the fact that he inhabits a world of his own, while she remains indifferent to his movements, her eyes roving around the room, taking note of the cobwebs that need to be brushed off the ceiling and her toe nails that need to be trimmed (1). At this stage, Rifaat employs the flashback technique, in which a scene from the past is replayed, to give the reader an insight into the circumstances that have forced the female character to become passive to the activity.

Tellingly unnamed, the female character recalls her desperate attempts to get her husband to feel her sexual needs, for 'when they were first married she had tried to will her husband into sensing the desire that burned within her and so continuing the act longer', but 'she had been too shy and conscious of conventions to express such wishes openly' (1). Her inability to openly discuss her wishes with her husband points to a code of silence by which sexual matters between them remain a forbidden subject. This code of silence by which women refrain from expressing their wishes can be explained using the assertion proffered by Dorothy Wills (1995: 162) that in a patriarchal culture speech is classed as action, and thus to speak much or to complain indicates non-nobility and 'to assert one's rights is to violate one's claim to status'. Owing to traditional restraints on freedom of expression with regard to certain subjects, therefore, the female character in this story resorts to body language in telling her husband what she expects of him during sexual intercourse, but 'on each

occasion, when breathlessly imploring him to continue, he would – as though – purposely to deprive her – quicken his movements and bring the act to an abrupt end' (1). Thus, rather than titillate the reader, Rifaat's artistic creation of explicit sex shows the extent to which the twin qualities of love and mercy (mercy being synonymous with tenderness and kindness, as already shown) in marriage have been pushed aside by males in their desire to satisfy personal needs only. In effect, the female character in this story emerges as a symbol of sexual frustration, while the male character becomes a representation of active sexuality in a patriarchal culture.

The sexual frustration of the female character is heightened by the vivid description the writer employs in presenting her recollections of the past: 'sometimes she had tried in vain to maintain the rhythmic movements a little longer, but always he would stop her. The last time she had made such an attempt, so desperate was she at this critical moment, that she had dug her fingernails into his back, compelling him to remain inside her' (1-2). This graphic description paints a clear picture of the female character's desperation to attain sexual fulfilment, a desperation so intense that she digs her fingernails into her husband's back. Her actions provoke him to fury, for he gives 'a shout as he pushed her away and slipped from her' (2). His rejection of her demands is obvious from the harshness of his tone as he asks her: 'are you mad, woman? Do you want to kill me?' (2). Implicit in these two rhetorical questions is the male character's conception that the female is making undue demands. However, by Islamic standards, 'marriage should guarantee sexual satisfaction for husband and wife and protect both partners against seeking satisfaction outside it', and 'the institution of marriage penalizes the husband or the wife who fails to provide sexual

services for his or her spouse' (Mernissi, 1987: 59). Contrary to this precept, the male character in this story fails not only to satisfy his wife's sexual needs, but also to realize that they exist. The result is that she begins to feel as if she has committed a gross sin. She tells herself: 'perhaps it's me who's at fault. Perhaps I'm unreasonable in my demands and don't know how to react to him properly' (2). Her husband's rejection 'had made an indelible tattoo mark of shame deep inside her, so that whenever she thought of the incident she felt a flush coming to her face' (2). It is as though she now feels remorse about putting her sexual needs above those of her husband. After this incident, she no longer makes any demands on him, for 'she had submitted to her passive role' (2), allowing her husband to pilot their sexual life in the direction he deems suitable. This explains why she plays a passive role in the sexual activity with which the story opens. Thus, the flashback is effective in portraying the characters as symbols of sexuality, with female sexuality marked by frustration, disappointment and dissatisfaction, while male sexuality is characterized by selfishness, harshness and lack of empathy.

Rifaat uses graphic imagery to portray the male character's lack of gentleness and consideration for his wife's needs. In describing his body movements, she employs adjectival phrases like 'ugly contortion', and 'more frenzied' as well as verbal expressions like 'seizing it' and 'thrusting it' (2), all of which conjure up a picture of aggression, roughness, forcefulness and lack of consideration. This suggests that the male character's actions are geared towards taking, rather than giving, as it is 'with a groan' that he 'let go of her thigh' and withdrew when 'the call to afternoon prayers' filters 'through the shutters of the closed window', bringing them 'back to reality' (2).

His disregard for religious duties is evident in his failure to respond to the call to afternoon prayers, for rather than waking up as his wife does, 'he took a small towel from under the pillow, wrapped it round himself, turned his back to her and went to sleep' (2). Unlike him, the female character rises from the bed to offer the afternoon prayers. Having performed the ritual cleansing of the body after intercourse, as Muslim law demands, 'she closed the living door room, spread the rug and began her prayers' (3). The Islamic way of life becomes the only constant in her life, for 'her five daily prayers were like punctuation marks that divided up and gave meaning to her life' (quoted earlier) and 'each prayer had for her a distinct quality, just as different foods had their own flavours' (3). This suggests that Islam is a way of life and that any deviation from its teachings results in an alienation of one's self from God, in which case one would only have a distant view or perception of God, represented here by the minaret.

The significance of the title surfaces as the female character sits near a window and looks out at the city of Cairo. She observes that Cairo, which used to have 'countless mosques and minarets', now has only the single visible minaret, 'the tall solitary minaret that could be seen between two towering blocks of flats' (3). She notes that 'this single minaret, one of the twin minarets of the Mosque of Sultan Hasan, with above it a thin slice of the Citadel, was all that was now left of the panoramic view she had once had of old Cairo' (3). The solitary minaret is a symbol of the female character herself, a lonely, unhappy woman in an unfulfilled marriage, who is caught between two overpowering blocks: Muslim culture which inhibits woman's sexuality, on the one hand, and woman's desire to be sexually fulfilled, on the other. This

juxtaposition brings out the contrast between male sexual attitudes toward women and women's right to loving and kind treatment in marriage as prescribed by the Qur'an. Thus, one could say that Rifaat's symbolic construction of woman against a backdrop of deteriorating religious amenities symbolizes a collapse of social institutions when marital duties are not performed to satisfactory levels.

It is significant that the story opens with sexual activity between the male and female character and ends with the death of the male character. When the female character walks back into the bedroom with a coffee tray and finds her husband in an unusual position on the bed, she knows at once that 'something [is] wrong' and immediately her senses are assailed by the 'odour of death in the room' (4). Rather than raise an alarm or give in to hysteria, she simply walks to her son's room and tells him to 'go downstairs to the neighbours and ring Dr Ramzi' (4). She then returns to the living room and pours herself the coffee she had made for him. The story ends with the words: 'she was surprised at how calm she was' (4). The suggestion here is that she accepts her husband's death with equanimity just as she has come to accept her sexually unfulfilled life with indifference. This points to a subtle synchronicity between sex and death. The two themes are interwoven in the sense that the male character dies just after the sex act, and not because his wife 'wants to kill him' by her sexual demands – since she simply surrenders her body to him – but because he suffers a fatal heart attack after the sex act. The irony is that his sleep becomes permanent as he fails to respond to the muezzin's call to afternoon prayers, in which case his death can arguably be read as poetic justice. Thus, by juxtaposing death and sex as two fundamental aspects of human existence, Rifaat shows an overriding

concern about the human condition, with emphasis on the female's experience of these two realities.

Rifaat's concern about woman's lot takes another dimension in 'Bahiyya's Eyes', a story in which she shows that being born woman in the Muslim society is seen as a curse rather than a blessing. Although this story is written in the epistolary mode in which the lead character, Bahiyya, is writing to her daughter in the city to inform her of her impending blindness, the narrative voice gives it the quality of a song of lament or a dirge, making it affective in profound ways.

The lead character, whose name means the one with beautiful eyes, is an aging widow with failing eyesight, which the doctor attributes to 'the flies and the dirt' (6) but which Bahiyya knows is caused by 'all the tears I shed since my mother first bore me and they held me by the leg and found I was a girl' (7). Thus, Bahiyya's gradual loss of sight results from the many tears shed for her own and other women's lot in patriarchal Islam, making her decry even her own gender. Her childhood experiences show that woman's oppression begins at birth. As children, she and her sisters suffer physical assault in the hands of their brother Awwad: 'as he grew up he became worse and worse with us, always pinching us and hitting us. It was as if he enjoyed hearing us scream' (7). Rather than being a protector of his sisters, Awwad becomes a dictator and a tyrant, ordering them around and beating them whenever it suits him, for 'he'd just sit back and think up things for us to do and find fault with us so he could give us a clout over the ear' (8). Awwad thus fails to treat his sisters with kindness and mercy, as required by the Qur'an of all male believers.

This is a beautifully crafted story in which the theme of sex is approached through gendered difference between males and females and the Muslim ritual of clitoridectomy. Bahiyya learns about the process of procreation by observing animals, like cats and dogs, noting the similarity in their ways of mating, and 'bit by bit [she] was able to understand how the same thing went on between men and women' (8). Thus, it is only by adopting a system of self-education that she begins to understand the dynamics of sex and sexuality. Responding to the dictates of her curious mind, she creates her parents out of mud, putting in-between her father's legs 'a thing like a cat's tail' and giving her mother 'something like a sort of mulberry' (9). These images of a cat's tail and a mulberry are the nearest she can come to figuring out exactly what the male and female sexual organs look like and how they differ from each other. The poignant irony is that the pre-teen Bahiyya's growing curiosity results in a group of women forcefully and crudely excising her clitoris with a razor blade. The cruelty with which the rite is performed on the bewildered nine-year old is evident in the narrative tone as the incident is recounted:

> Then early one day as I was about to go out to have a look at my mud things and see whether or not they'd dried yet in the sun, I found the women coming in and gathering round, and then they took hold of me and forced my legs open and cut away the mulberry with a razor. They left me with a wound in my body and another wound deep inside me, a feeling that a wrong had been done to me, a wrong that could never be undone. And so the tears welled up in my eyes again. (9)

Thus, one notes that the young Bahiyya is forcefully subjected to the rite of clitoridectomy, the significance of which she does not even understand, which is why it leaves her, not only with a physical wound, but also with 'another wound deep inside' her psychological self.

This incident in the character's life marks the ruthlessness that characterizes the suppression of female sexuality. Bahiyya carves her parents out of mud with their distinct sexual organs in place and the women are so appalled at her openness and expressiveness that they grab her and cut off her 'mulberry'. Like Bahiyya, the main character in El-Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus, asks a question about her paternity and her mother responds by getting her circumcised (as was shown in Chapter Two). Both Rifaat and El-Saadawi, therefore, show that the Muslim girl-child has no right to freedom of expression in any form, not even by gestures. Bahiyya's case attests to the brutality with which the female's expression of knowledge about sexual matters is silenced by women themselves. The excision rite performed on her aptly illustrates the notion of "surplus" women and female excess. Dorothy Driver (1988: 4) explains this notion as follows:

> The social threat of "surplus women" was precisely that the "surplus" in "woman" was threatening to break free, the "surplus", that is, which is at odds with the Symbolic Order which dishes up human beings in their categories of masculine and feminine, and identifies female sexuality with reproduction. About to overwhelm and disrupt the signifying system, the surplus or excess in "woman" was being excised, and the word "woman" was being firmly redefined as "feminine", thus having its status confirmed as (patriarchal) sign.

In line with this argument, female circumcision can be described as a means of getting rid of the "excess" in woman. Bahiyya is subjected to this rite because of her natural curiosity and creativity. It is as if the women attribute her boldness to her possession of a clitoris, in which case the clitoris becomes an "excess" or a "surplus" that must be eliminated.

It becomes evident that clitoridectomy is one of the means through which the suppression of female sexuality is effected. The ironic reversal is thus situated within the gender issue, and the two aspects of the story – sexuality and clitoridectomy – coalesce around gender rather than sex, *per se*. The story shows that society may endorse the dominant and often bullying role of males, but within the same society women can be equally domineering and cruel and, in fact, are complicit in their own oppression, for it is the women, rather than the men, who enforce the excision rite on Bahiyya. Thus, Rifaat does not only address the dynamics of female sexuality but also interrogates the complexities that surround the practice of clitoridectomy in Muslim societies.

The oppression of women by women in this story is a case of situational irony in that what the reader 'sees' is not what he/she expects. Bahiyya's own mother accepts her second-class status and endorses her son's authoritarian control over his sisters. This is evident in her response to Bahiyya when she and her sisters complain about their brother's cruelty. She bluntly tells them: 'when your father's gone he'll be the man in the family and what he says goes so you'd better get used to it' (7). Her words seem to suggest that Bahiyya and her sisters must accept Awwad's cruelty, because he is male; and it is 'normal' for males to abuse females. It is interesting to note that a very similar, and yet despicable, behaviour is endorsed by the narrator's mother in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), although the society portrayed in this text is not an Islamic one. As a result of this internalized acceptance of male superiority, Bahiyya goes through life knowing that 'there's no joy for a girl in growing up' since 'it's just one disaster after another till you end up an old woman who's good for

nothing and who's really lucky if she finds someone to feel sorry for her' (8). Thus, it can be said that this story epitomizes Rifaat's lamentation over woman's lot in a gender-biased society, a theme reiterated by Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* (1988: 16) when she makes one of her female characters state, with apparent dejection, that 'this business of womanhood is a heavy burden'.

The bleakness of woman's life in patriarchal Islamic society is effectively captured in Bahiyya's final words to her daughter: 'daughter, I'm not crying now because I'm fed up or regret that the Lord created me a woman. No, it's not that. It's just that I'm sad about my life and my youth that have come and gone without my knowing how to live them really and truly as a woman' (11). Her words suggest that woman's life in this society is a life of grief, misery, pain and agony, which is not because God has made woman inferior to man, but because humans have structured society on the basis of gender. This mother could only have lived life 'really and truly as a woman' if both men and women had treated her with love and compassion as the Qur'an demands. Because this is not the case, she has been forced to go through life like a shadow on the wall, with culture as a blindfold over her eyes. Her final words seem to confirm the notion that the African woman is nothing but 'the shadow of a life that apologises for living' (Beyala, 1996: 41). Ultimately, Bahiyya's rapidly fading eyesight comes to signify a lack of enlightenment that transcends gender.

As in 'Distant View of a Minaret', the gloomy predicament of women caught in a web of male selfishness comes through in 'The Long Night of Winter'. Unlike 'Bahiyya's Eyes', the story is written in the third person narrative, and the main character,

Zennouba, is a woman trapped in a marriage blighted by the constant betrayals of her husband. Zennouba wakes up at night to the sounds of nature and 'all at once she realized that she was in bed and that she was alone' (55). While waiting 'for the return of her husband' (55), she reminisces about her idyllic childhood, 'to that closed society that children effortlessly set up for themselves, days of security in a house where love and tenderness were a child's right and did not have to be earned, where death was without dominion and sorrow never lasted beyond a night' (55). The poignant irony is that no sooner does she begin to enjoy 'her world of childish freedom', as she goes around singing and dancing with her friends, than she is torn out of it 'like a foetus from the womb's warmth' (56). Like Bahiyya, her freedom is curtailed when she attains puberty, for she is 'prevented from playing with her companions' and 'soon afterwards she [is] married to her cousin, Hagg Hamdan, so that the land might stay in the family' (56). Thus, in this story, the theme of loss is embodied in a young girl's loss of her childhood freedom and dreams, while the patriarchal manipulation of females is revealed through the practice of marriage to one's cousin. Zennouba's marriage is an economic transaction, which ensures that her family's land remains in the patrilineal line (a situation similar to Bahiah's in El-Saadawi's *Two Women in One* discussed in Chapter Two).

Male selfishness is again seen in this story as Zennouba's husband turns out to be a cruel and unfaithful partner. Zennouba recalls the first night of their marriage when Hagg Hamdan had to proclaim his right over her body: 'it had been a night of violence and pain' (56). This suggests the use of brute force and aggression on her husband's part, a pattern that does not end on the first night, for 'since then it had

been repeated hundreds of times, with the element of pain replaced by that of repugnance at the rough hands that kneaded her body, and the evil-smelling breath and spittle of a *habitué* of the blue smoke of hashish' (56). Such vivid description projects the marriage bed as repulsive. Thus, Zennouba's marriage has become a seedbed of pain and unhappiness as a result of her husband's lack of tenderness and consideration for her own needs, desires and feelings. His aggressiveness indicates that sex is simply a power game, and like so many "games", it is a violent one.

This situation is confounded by his constant unfaithfulness as he always sneaks off at night to sleep with one of the servant girls. When Zennouba demands a divorce, he placates her with 'a pair of gold earrings' and an affectionate kiss on her forehead (57). However, 'with the passing of time, such nights were repeated and gifts of gold jewellery were made to her, while the girl servants came and went at his bidding without apparent reason, for he was the master of the house' (57). The male character is portrayed here as a cruel, disgusting, and unscrupulous man who uses females for his own selfish gratification. Not only does he subject Zennouba to nights of 'pain and violence', but he also exploits the servant girls who are mere sex objects to him. The theme of victimization thus comes out very strongly in this story.

Equally central to the story is the theme of disillusionment. Zennouba recalls her husband's mocking response to her request for a divorce: 'why should I divorce you? Why don't you go and ask your mother about your father who spent so much time on his prayer mat?' (57). Mustering up the courage, Zennouba asks her mother during the latter's visit about her father. Her mother's blunt response that 'all men are like that'

confirms her fears that her mother too has 'suffered the same nightmare of a life' as she has, and she asks herself if this is 'the fate of all women' (58). Thus, the disillusionment that marks the life of the lead female character in this story epitomizes the bleakness that characterizes women's lives in patriarchal Muslim society.

This loss of hope is evident in Zennouba's present relationship with her husband: 'the pent-up hatred against him had long changed to a cold contempt; the hopes that things would change had now gone, but the ache to love and be loved was still there, as physically part of her as her sight or sense of smell' (58). It is clear from here that the female character has relinquished any hopes of getting her husband to change from his ways. It also shows that the need to love and to be loved is as much a physical need as it is a spiritual requirement, and thus the male character's failure to treat his wife with love and compassion is an indication of his spiritual laxity as a Muslim believer. In effect, male selfishness, cruelty and exploitation of females are forces that turn woman's life into a 'long night of winter', a life devoid of any warmth, contentment or optimism. The poignant irony in this story thus lies in the title – a song of tenderness and love, qualities which are clearly absent from the marriage of the female character.

Women's right to maintenance

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what God would have them guard.

(*The Holy Qur'an*, Sura 4: 34)

The above Qur'anic verse clearly indicates that men have the primary responsibility of providing materially for their families. According to Badawi (n.d.: 23), 'man in Islam is fully responsible for the maintenance of his wife, his children, and in some cases of his needy relatives, especially the females' and 'this responsibility is neither waived nor reduced because of his wife's wealth or because of her access to any personal income gained from work, rent, profit, or any other legal means'. In accordance with Qur'anic teachings, therefore, one of the fundamental rights of the Muslim woman is the right to economic maintenance, irrespective of whether she is employed or not. Rifaat draws on this Islamic law in one of her stories where she presents a female character faced with a heartrending situation in which her right to maintenance is totally disregarded by her husband.

In the story 'Badriyya and her Husband', the lead female character is a young married woman, whose husband, Omar, has just returned from prison. The welcome party given to him by his friends to celebrate his return is pregnant with irony. This is evident in Badriyya's mother's words as she and Badriyya watch from the window while a group of men pilot Omar down the street to 'the café of Master Zaki with whom Omar used to work' (29). Observing the public fanfare accorded to Omar on his return, Badriyya's mother states: 'anyone would think he was returning from freeing Palestine. It wouldn't be so bad if he'd been doing a worthwhile job – not

stealing a couple of old tyres that wouldn't fetch fifty piastres' (30). This statement attests to Omar's failure to work and support his family – his wife and mother-in-law. He goes to prison for stealing tyres that are worth little or nothing, but on his return he is welcomed like a freedom fighter. Ironically, he fails to free his own family from the chains of poverty.

Omar's irresponsible lifestyle is clearly spelt out in Badriyya's uncle and mother's words to her that 'Omar was a wastrel, a good-for-nothing, who had merely been looking for a roof over his head and a woman to look after him' (33-34). Although their primary motive for saying this is to get Badriyya to divorce Omar and marry someone else of their choice, their words become prophetic as Omar, in fact, refuses to find a job and pursues a life of debauchery, while making Badriyya cater for his expenses. Thus, one sees a situation where the female character's hopes of marital bliss in companionship with her husband are dashed to pieces when the male character resorts to a lifestyle of drunkenness and extra-marital sex.

Omar's sexual escapades outside of marriage are revealed by another female character, Umm Gaber, the shopkeeper. When Badriyya goes to her shop to buy cigarettes for Omar, Umm Gaber asks her: 'and when's Mr Omar going to buy his cigarettes out of his own pocket?' Badriyya tries to cover for Omar by stating that 'God willing, he'll start work soon', but Umm Gaber knows better. In response to Badriyya's questions about another woman, she tells her frankly: 'girl, wake up I tell you. The whole place knew about him even before you married. Prison's just made it worse. That husband of yours, if he were a woman, would have been pregnant years

ago' (37). It is at this point that the truth about her husband's late nights dawns upon Badriyya and 'she left the packet of cigarettes on the counter and turned away' (37).

Here, one sees a situation wherein Badriyya becomes the 'protector and maintainer' of Omar, a role which the Qur'an ascribes to men, whereas Omar becomes a dependent on Badriyya. The irony in this story thus lies within a dramatic reversal of roles whereby the female character works to 'maintain' her husband and strives to protect his reputation while he exploits her materially and abuses her kindness by cheating on her. This ironic twist is effective in that it projects the female character as a symbol of marital exploitation, physical and emotional abandonment, and mistaken kindness. Thus, the title of the story 'Badriyya and her Husband' is effectively a mockery on Badriyya's marriage, for hers is a husband that cannot support her economically.

It is interesting to note how Badriyya's mother's attitude towards Omar changes from the morning after his return when he makes her 'some really excellent coffee' which tastes 'as though he put something into it' (34). When Badriyya returns from work and finds them playing cards and laughing, 'she was surprised for she had never seen her mother in such a good mood' (34). Contrary to expectation, her mother is now full of praises for Omar, stating that 'he's turned out to be a real nice fellow' and telling her how 'he brought a pack of cards and showed' her 'all the tricks he'd learnt in prison' (34). The irony is that, like Omar, whom she earlier on describes as 'not just a fool but a criminal as well' (30), she too has become a fool and a criminal; a fool because Omar now uses her to get cigarettes from Badriyya (35); and a criminal

because she gangs up with Omar to exploit her daughter, for 'when Badriyya returned with the packet of cigarettes [Omar] gave one to her mother and lit it for her, then stuffed a couple of cigarettes under her pillow' (36).

It is evident from here that Badriyya's mother is an accomplice in Omar's exploitation of her daughter. As in 'Bahiyya's Eyes', one sees a situation in which women aid in the oppression of other women. Thus, in both stories, Rifaat not only decries the patriarchal structure of Muslim society but also questions women's role in maintaining social institutions that prevent them from realizing their own basic rights as human beings.

Women's right to protection of honour

The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication, flog each of them with a hundred stripes: let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by God, if ye believe in God and the Last Day: and let a party of the believers witness their punishment.

(*The Holy Qur'an*, Sura 24: 2*)*

The chastity or honour of women is very important in Islam. The Qur'anic verse quoted above is just one of the many verses in Sura 24 (entitled *Nūr*, meaning Light) which emphasize the need for all Muslims to guard their honour and abstain from adultery and fornication. Islamic scholars have shown that Islam grants women in particular the right to protection of honour at all times. In his book *Human Rights in Islam*, Abul A'la Mawdudi (1980: 18) states the following:

> The third important element in the Charter of Human Rights granted by Islam is that a woman's chastity must be respected and protected at all times, whether she belongs to one's nation or to the nation of an enemy …. A Muslim may not physically abuse her under any circumstances. All promiscuous relationships are forbidden to him, irrespective of the status or position of the woman or of whether she is a willing partner to the act.

It is clear from Abul A'la Mawdudi's words that women's right to protection of honour is an integral part of Islamic human rights. However, as noted earlier in Chapter One, there is often a discrepancy between theory and practice, that is, between Islamic teachings and Muslim practices. This comes through in two of Rifaat's stories, namely, 'An Incident in the Ghobashi Household', and 'Me and my Sister', both of which effectively show that women's right to protection of honour becomes a challenge for Muslims when it comes to transforming words into action.

The story 'An Incident in the Ghobashi Household' is an insightful narrative that reveals woman's ingenuity in the face of a crisis. It features a mother-daughter relationship that is based on love and understanding. As in 'Distant View of a Minaret', 'Bahiyya's Eyes' and 'Badriyya and her Husband', the story pivots on the lot of women in Islam. When a young mother, whose husband is away working in Libya for a year, discovers that her eldest daughter is pregnant, she makes plans to protect her daughter from public shame – and coincidentally from her father – by sending her away from the village to Cairo to have the baby. Zeinat's protective care of her children comes through right at the beginning of the story when she wakes up from sleep at the sound of the muezzin and 'stretched out her arm to the pile of children sleeping alongside her and tucked the end of the old rag-woven *kilim* round their bodies' (23). Thus, like a mother hen that spreads its wings over its chicks, she spreads the old blanket over her children to protect them from the biting cold of the early morning.

Zeinat's motherliness is again manifested when she discerns that her daughter, Ni'ma, is pregnant. Rather than hailing screams and insults at her, Zeinat simply asks her over tea: 'since when has the buffalo been with young?' to which Ni'ma calmly replies: 'from after my father went away' (24). The metaphor of a buffalo with young shows that Ni'ma's present situation, as dishonourable as it is, still requires attention, care and tenderness, if only to protect the innocent life she is carrying within her. Zeinat, therefore, determines to save her daughter at all costs, to the extent that she feigns her own pregnancy by taking some 'old clothes' and 'winding them round her waist', and ultimately pretending that the child is hers. When Ni'ma expresses her surprise at her mother's action, she asks her: 'isn't it better, when he returns, for your father to find himself with a legitimate son than an illegal grandson?' (27). Thus, by sending Ni'ma away to Cairo to have the baby and pretending that she is pregnant, Zeinat not only protects her daughter from the penalty prescribed by Islamic law on sex outside of marriage, but also protects her husband's honour in the eyes of the community.

Significantly, on the night before his departure, her husband had given her strict instructions to 'take care of Ni'ma' since 'the girl's body had ripened', and he had added in prayer: 'O Lord, for the sake of the Prophet's honour, let me bring back with me a marriage dress for her of pure silk', to which Zeinat had responded: 'may your words go straight from your lips to Heaven's gate, Ghobashi' (25). The irony here is that what Ghobashi had prayed should not happen to his daughter has, in fact, happened as Ni'ma loses her honour before her father returns to bring her a marriage dress of pure silk, which is meant to symbolize her purity. Thus, the theme of loss

emerges – at once more serious and less morbid – as a young girl loses her virginity, which is a capital offense in Muslim society, but she is saved by the selfless wisdom of her mother. Zeinat's final words to Ni'ma: 'Cairo is a big place, daughter, where you will find protection and a way to make a living till Allah brings you safely to your time' (26) reveal her loving, compassionate, understanding and self-sacrificing nature. In effect, she epitomizes both maternal love and woman's cunning in an unforgiving patriarchal society.

The theme of sex in this story is implicit, rather than explicit, for it is made manifest in a young girl's loss of innocence, even though the reader is not given any clues as to whether the pregnancy is the result of promiscuity, ignorance or rape. All that the reader knows is that she has been impregnated by a young boy, Hamdan, who helps her and her mother cultivate the fields. This comes through when Ni'ma listens to the voices of the men outside exchanging greetings as they make their way to the fields, and 'amidst the voices could be heard Hamdan's laughter as he led the buffalo to the two *kirats* of land surrounding the house' (26). Listening to his carefree laughter, Zeinat states sadly: 'his account is with Allah. He's fine and doesn't have a worry in the world' (26). Thus, while Ni'ma suffers the consequences of her actions, being forced to leave home and have her baby in the city, Hamdan carries on with his normal activities, the "incident" having been buried within the Ghobashi household. In the light of this situation, therefore, one can arguably say that the twin calls to waking – by the cockerel and then by the muezzin – with which the story opens symbolize awakening in the sense of enlightened response to female crisis.

The theme of loss of innocence is again evident in the story 'Me and my Sister' where the narrative voice is that of a young girl perplexed by the duplicity of adult life. The story features a mother and her four daughters living together without a father figure in the house because of 'Daddy marrying another wife' (39). As in 'An Incident in the Ghobashi Household', the challenge facing mothers raising their teenage daughters single-handedly becomes a primary concern to Rifaat in this story. The question of women's honour is central to the story, although one notes a difference in the attitudes of an abandoned wife and her eldest daughter towards public censure. While the older woman is concerned about what people will say 'about us when we're on our own without a man in the house', the younger woman does not 'care about people' since 'they'll talk in any case' and she cannot 'go on being frightened of them' (39). Thus, the generation gap between Dalal, the eldest daughter, and her mother is so wide that the protection of women's honour becomes a challenge for mothers.

The theme of marriage is approached in this story through an ironic reversal of situation whereby rather than being shoved into marriage as in the case of Bahiyya in 'Bahiyya's Eyes' and Zennouba in 'The Long Night of Winter', Dalal is frustrated because she has been 'sitting at home waiting for someone to come and marry her' (40). Her inability to find a mate makes her become cruel towards her sisters, for the narrator notes that 'from the moment that Sahar had got engaged before her she used to hit me and Nagwa and the servants for the slightest thing' (40). Dalal's frustration eventually leads her into drug use and illicit sex with a young man, Mahmoud, who, in the end, 'said to her that he was not thinking of marrying and that he wished her all

the best' (43). Ultimately, Dalal not only loses her honour, but jeopardizes her sister's chastity in the process.

The narrator's loss of innocence is initiated by her elder sister, Dalal, to whom she is forced to play chaperone, because they are 'a strict family' and Dalal is not allowed 'go out alone at night' (41). She is bribed into silence with boxes of chocolates while Dalal 'got in the back' of the car and 'Mahmoud got in beside her' and she 'only noticed later on the car had filled with the smoke of the cigarettes and it was a funny smell and not at all like the smell of the cigarettes that Mummy and Daddy and their guests used to smoke' (42). Her innocence is symbolized by the 'picture of a white kitten' on the chocolate box Mahmoud buys for her. Mahmoud plays on her gullibility, telling her to 'come close so I can see how big you've grown', and when he blows the smoke into her face, she 'became dizzy and leaned [her] head against his chest' (43). Thus, through her elder sister's illicit relationship, the narrator becomes a prey to male caprice, and her loss of innocence falls just short of actual sexual intimacy.

The fact that this story ends with a car accident scene in which the narrator sustains 'a bump as big as a lemon' on her head while Dalal and Mahmoud end up 'with blood all over their faces' (44) can arguably be seen as retributive justice. In the end, Dalal relies heavily on her sister to keep her relationship with Mahmoud a secret: 'when she smiled at me I thought of the way she used to hit me in the face. I smiled back at her because I knew she wouldn't hit me again' (45). The ironic twist in this story thus lies in a dramatic reversal of roles whereby the narrator now becomes for her elder sister a

source of dread, for she alone knows the truth about Dalal's nightly trips. This is one story in which Rifaat focuses on the consequences of deviating from the path of morality prescribed by Islam. As in 'An Incident in the Ghobashi Household', she shows that both males and females are equally guilty of transgressing religious taboos and that both parties have to pay the price of their actions. On the whole, Rifaat shows that the protection of women's honour is as much the responsibility of women as it is of men.

From the six stories analysed in detail in this chapter, it is clear that Rifaat's major concern is the status of women in Islamic societies, for all her major characters are females and they are either objects of male manipulation and aggression or agents in their own victimization. It is evident that Rifaat's thematic concerns are intertwined in such a way that one can hardly discuss the theme of marriage without talking about sex and sexuality. Mahmoud Manzalaoui (1977: 35) confirms this assertion when he observes that in Arabic literature it is difficult to make clear-cut distinctions between the social and the affective or the political and the philosophical: 'the social verges at one end upon the affective, where a study of love is also a study of marriage, and of affection (or the lack of it) in a family. At the further end, it merges with the political, where the question of the relation of the individual to society, or to a system, involves a clash with authority'. Rifaat's stories exhibit a similar intricacy in that the themes of love and marriage are often inextricable, while sex and death (or loss) seem to exist in a relationship of "complementarity".

CHAPTER FOUR

ASSIA DJEBAR AS AN ADVOCATE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ALGERIA

Djebar's writing and the issue of women's rights in Islam

In the previous chapter, it was shown that while the Qur'an lays down specific guidelines on and commands for the treatment of women, literature from North Africa reflects a deviation by Muslim men and women from Islamic teachings. Situating her writing within the framework of Islam and the sanctity of marriage, Alifa Rifaat points to the patriarchal nature of Muslim society whereby males oppress females and females become accomplices in their own oppression. It is important to note that inasmuch as Rifaat's work constitutes an indictment of certain Muslim practices and attitudes toward females, her characters emerge as 'victims' of the system, for they, with few exceptions, are not portrayed as taking any major steps to change their lot in life. Thus, in decrying women's plight in patriarchal Islamic society, Rifaat adopts a conservative approach whereby reform is sought but within the boundaries of what is acceptable in Islam.

In contrast to Rifaat, Assia Djebar, the Algerian writer, implements a more radical approach to the issue of women's rights in Islam, as already noted. Djebar's writing reflects an undisguised revolt against established patterns of female behaviour and advocates an assertion of individual identity. This trend is evident in many of her

novels, such as *Les Impatients* (1958) and *Vaste est la Prison* (1995), as well as in her short story collection, *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1980). A closer reading of Djebar's short stories, which have been singled out for this study, identifies her as a 'politically engaged writer' who 'seeks to criticize the repressive structure of the society she examines and to promote the liberation of Algerian women' (Hiddleston, 2004: 92). This, however, is not to say that Djebar preaches rebellion against Islam; neither is it to say that she blames Islam for the subjugation of women in Algeria. As Hiddleston (2004: 93) has noted, 'social division is not inherent in Islam everywhere, but has become particularly emphasized in modern Algeria, and it is the violence and oppression that have grown out of this doctrine that Djebar wants to denounce'. Thus, what Djebar seeks to condemn, is not Islamic culture in its purest form (as defined in the introduction), but the gendered division of males and females in modern Muslim society, which results in the marginalization of women in Algeria, in particular, and in North Africa, in general.

Djebar's short stories, therefore, portray female characters who take on male attributes ('There is no Exile'), discard conventions to assert their right to individuality ('My Father Writes to my Mother'), subvert their family's role in their choice of spouse ('Three Cloistered Girls'), and sometimes abandon Muslim dress patterns in favour of western styles ('Women of Algiers in their Apartment'). In effect, although the Islamic way of life – represented by the prayers and performance of ablutions – remains a constant feature in Djebar's stories, as it does in Rifaat's, her characters tend to move away from culturally sanctioned ways of acting and assert their freedom of choice in radically conceived ways, especially in areas such as

marriage, education and employment. In this respect, her writings are closer to those of Nawal el-Saadawi than to those of Rifaat, Bâ or Alkali.

Born in 1936 in Cherchell, Algeria, Djebar has grown to become the most prolific Algerian woman writer of contemporary times and the second internationally acclaimed North African feminist writer after Nawal el-Saadawi. It is important to note that Djebar's feminist politics is inextricably linked with nationalist struggles in Algeria, for her writing espouses the plight of Algerian women battling with the double burden of patriarchy and colonialism. Her artistic invocation of the profound role played by women during the Algerian war of independence helps in lifting the veil that has been imposed on Algerian women throughout history. She has published many works including novels, poetry and plays and has also directed a film entitled *La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1977). As already noted, she writes mainly in French, the language in which she received most of her education. Most of her works have been translated into English. Titles of her works which exist in English include *Fantasia: an Algerian Calvacade* (1985), *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1987), *So Vast the Prison* (1994), *Algerian White* (1995) and the short story collection *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1980). Rather than focusing solely on the stories in *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, this chapter, in addition, draws on several of Djebar's stories published in various anthologies of short stories, in order to present a more holistic picture of her thematic concerns.

Brief overview of stories

A number of stories have been selected for this analysis and their selection is based on the fact that they present female characters who strive to rise above social bias against women and create new identities for themselves. Djebar's female characters tend to discard traditional roles as they acquire the colonial language, French. The acquisition of French enables them not only to define themselves in relation to their male counterparts, as in 'My Father Writes to my Mother', but also to help other women attain self-definition, as in 'There is no Exile' and 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment'. In effect, French, which is the language of the oppressor, becomes a means of empowerment for Djebar's female characters; and it is by her effective use of this technique that she subverts colonial and patriarchal discourse on female subservience. In 'My Father Writes to my Mother', the narrator's mother abandons local conventions and begins to address her husband by his first name Tahar as 'her ability to speak French improved' (1993: 163).[1] In another story 'There is no Exile', the narrator's sister, Aicha, fights the bleakness of life in exile by taking French lessons, and in spite of losing her husband to the war, she remains stoical, for 'she was getting an education and didn't settle for household work' (2002: 321). Thus, it is evident that a process of self-education inevitably results in one of self-definition and personal emancipation.

In the title story 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment', Djebar interrogates the concept of freedom for Algerian women, and the question 'who are truly free?' seems to be her pivotal concern as she charts the lives of women who, despite being scarred by the war of independence, become a source of strength and support for other

women. The female characters in this story are bonded by a common experience – female survival in a gender-structured and war-torn society – and by the desire to combat oppression and create individual identities for themselves. The identity question also emerges in 'There is no Exile' where one notes the dilemma of Algerian women living in exile as a result of the war and having to maintain their cultural values as Muslims. According to Elizabeth Fallaize (2002: xiv), Djebar 'foregrounds women's exploration of their identity' in this story 'in relation to the family, to the male, and to the fact of exile in France'. Thus, the theme of exile, foregrounded by identity struggles, becomes a dominant theme in Djebar's stories, in both a literal and figurative sense.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there is a strong tendency towards radicalism in Djebar's writing. In the story, 'My Father Writes to my Mother', she illustrates the possibility that women can actually break free from patriarchal customs if only men would give them the support they need. This is one story in which the author captures the 'necessary solidarity between man and woman' (Ojo-Ade, 1983: 176). In 'Three Cloistered Girls', Djebar questions the wisdom behind certain cultural constraints on Muslim girls, particularly with regard to their choices in marriage. Arguably, one could say that Djebar seems to be working within the international human rights framework rather than the Islamic human rights framework, *per se*. In essence, the thematic focus of her short fiction is the need for the recognition of the human rights of Muslim women, particularly their rights to choice of spouse, equality and education.

Women's right to choice of spouse

According to Islamic religious teachings, a woman has the right to reject any marriage that is contracted without her consent. In practice, however, this right is suppressed through institutions that force women into silence. In the story 'Three Cloistered Girls', Djebar not only addresses this problem, but also seems to suggest that women need to take radical measures to assert their individual rights to choice of spouse.

The story presents three young girls growing up in a big house that they hardly ever leave: 'three girls live cloistered in an airy house in the middle of Sahel village, surrounded by vast vineyards, where I come to spend my spring and summer holidays' (1993: 157). The narrator here makes deliberate use of the word 'cloistered' to evoke a milieu of confinement, seclusion, and a lack of freedom of movement. This restrictive lifestyle to which the girls are subjected is confirmed when the narrator refers to her 'not being allowed to wander in the dusty lanes of the village' (1993: 157), and to the fact that the postman who delivers letters to the hamlet 'had never set eyes on these girls' (1993: 159). Thus, the three girls remain confined, and effectively incarcerated, within the walls of their mansion.

In spite of this superimposed confinement, the girls have been engaging in some form of activity that transgresses conventional rules on male-female interaction: 'these girls, though confined to their house, were writing; were writing letters; letters to men; to men in the four corners of the world; of the Arab world, naturally' (1993: 159). Thus, although they are literally confined to their home in the village, they have assumed another kind of freedom of movement in the sense that they have created for

themselves a circle of male pen friends from countries, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Lybia and Tunisia, to whom they write letters and from whom they receive replies. In order to avoid suspicion, however, they make sure that 'the backs of the envelopes [bear] fancy names borrowed from Eastern film-stars, giving the impression that the senders were women' (1993: 159). As in Rifaat's 'An Incident in the Ghobashi Household', one notes a situation where females resort to creative cunning in order to protect themselves from public censure.

What is particularly striking about this story is its portrayal of writing as a medium for asserting one's right to choice of spouse. The youngest sister's declaration to the narrator illustrates this point: 'I'll never, never let them marry me off to a stranger who, in one night, will have the right to touch me! That's why I write all those letters! One day, someone will come to this dead-and-alive hole to take me away: my father and brother won't know him, but he won't be a stranger to me!' (1993: 161). This shows that letter-writing for this female character is a way of sabotaging the Muslim practice of arranged marriages in which the female has no say in her family's decision to marry her off to a pre-chosen groom. Writing, therefore, comes to symbolize her ardent desire to assert her right to choice of spouse. It is the outward manifestation of an inner rebellion against constricting Muslim rules on male-female relationships. Evidently, her sentiment is shared by her eldest sister, who started this correspondence, because of 'never finding any of her official suitors good enough for her' (1993: 160). In contrast to these two self-assertive sisters (that is, the eldest and the youngest), the middle sister, albeit being 'the prettiest' and 'the gentlest', is portrayed as 'the most docile' (1993: 160), while the rest of the females in the harem

are but 'frail phantoms' (1993: 158), a metaphorical allusion to their passivity and docility.

This is one story in which the theme of rebellion is given an appealing quality without ultimately revealing the writer's endorsement of it. By pursuing romantic relationships with foreign men, the eldest and youngest sisters rebel against traditional norms. The narrator acknowledges with trepidation 'the audacity needed to carry on this clandestine correspondence' (1993: 160). She alludes to some of the dangers to which these two girls are exposed, for 'there had been numerous cases in our towns of fathers or brothers taking the law into their own hands for less than this; the blood of an unmarried daughter or sister shed for a letter slipped surreptitiously into a hand, for a word whispered behind shuttered windows, for some slanderous accusation' (160). This reveals the degree of violence directed against women involved in secret relationships with men. In spite of this knowledge, the two sisters persist in their writing while the narrator watches as 'a secret spirit of subversion' seeps into the house (1993: 160). The girls' deviation from Muslim cultural injunctions on male-female interaction is nothing short of a feminist move to combat social discrimination, and this is embodied in the narrator's premonition that 'in the sleepy, unsuspecting hamlet, an unprecedented women's battle was brewing beneath the surface' (1993: 161). The irony in this story is embedded in the title itself, as it turns out that two of the 'three cloistered girls' are not only "un-cloistered" but, in fact, liberated in both thought and action. It is this dramatic reversal of values that moves one to see Djebar as an advocate of women's right to choice of spouse.

Djebar's preoccupation with the issue of freedom of choice in marriage also emerges in the story 'There is no Exile'. The narrator is a young woman living with her family in exile as a result of being 'chased out' of Algeria by foreign invaders (2002: 315). The two themes of death and marriage are interwoven on a paradoxical landscape in which 'everything had changed and yet in some way everything remained the same' (2002: 323). Although conscious of the sadness of life in exile and the constant presence of death, personified in the recent death of their neighbour's son, the narrator's family seems to carry on with life as usual, for 'they were still concerned with marrying [her] off' (2002: 323). The narrator notes a stark contrast in the women's reactions to the perils of exile: 'behind that wall, there is a dead person and the women going mad with grief. Here in our house, other women are talking of marriage' (2002: 320). This juxtaposition of death and marriage seems to suggest a resigned acceptance of both as essential spokes on the wheel of life and, paradoxically, man's powerlessness in the hands of fate.

The link between the two is emphasized when the narrator tries to understand the rationale behind her family's insistence on getting her married and comes to a dreary conclusion: 'just so I could have worries that never change whether it's peace or wartime …. Just so I could give birth and weep, for life never comes unaccompanied to a woman, death is always right behind, furtive, quick, and smiling at the mothers' (2002: 323). This captures the gloominess that overshadows woman's life when marriage yields unhappiness rather than contentment. The narrator's personal experience attests to this dreariness of woman's life, for at twenty-five she has lost hope of finding happiness 'after having been married, after having lost [her] two

children one after the other, having been divorced, after this exile and after this war' (2002: 317). Thus, although Djebar paints a more graphic picture of women's suffering than Rifaat, because this suffering accrues from and is exacerbated by the war in Algeria, one can still draw a parallel between her characters and the female characters in Rifaat's stories, whose lives are marked by internal unhappiness and dissatisfaction in marriage. Both writers, in effect, stress the fact that marriage in the Muslim society has become routine rather than a union based on love and mutual attraction between two people.

It is interesting to note from this story that it is women, rather than men, who conduct the marriage negotiations between the narrating persona and the family of the prospective groom. The narrator's sister, Aïcha, and her mother become the final decision-makers, for according to one of the women from the groom's family, 'her father had already said yes to my brother' and so 'the question remains only to be discussed between us' (2002: 323). The narrator's rejection of the arrangement in the words 'I don't want to marry' (2002: 323), uttered with explosive anger in the middle of the negotiations, is ignored. The irony is that her mother gives her hand in marriage in spite of her blatant refusal to accept such a marriage. Her mother thus becomes the symbol of her own daughter's oppression, and it is with a voice tinged with sorrow that Hafsa, the French teacher, informs this young woman later that she is engaged, and adds: 'your mother said she'd give you away. Will you accept?' The resignation of the narrating experiencing self to her fate seems to indicate woman's inability to escape the constricting fetters of culture, even when far away from home. In effect, the narrator has been forced into a second exile, being chased out of her country and

now being forced into marriage by her mother. The story, however, does not end on this note of despondency, for Hafsa, assuming the voice of reason, helps the narrator to understand that the true exiles are 'those who keep bumping into the walls of the past' (2002: 325). This can arguably be seen as an indictment of blind adherence to traditional values that keep women enslaved to men. Ironically, it is the narrator's mother and sister who emerge as individuals tied to an Algerian past of lost glory.

Equality of man and woman

Djebar's social vision emphasizes equality between the sexes in all avenues of life, that is, both public and private. In the story 'My Father Writes to my Mother', one notes the creative transformation of a female character, showing that women can achieve equality with men if only they develop the will-power to do so and if men can recognize their worth and give them the support they need. This is one story in which Djebar shows that the idea of equality between man and woman does not make the husband any less of a man, nor the wife superior to her husband; it is the natural product of a relationship based on true love, understanding and mutual respect.

The story is narrated by a young girl of twelve who grows to have deep admiration for her parents, especially for her father whose affectionate way of dealing with his wife sends waves of shock through the village. Thus, the narrating persona becomes the primary audience, while the reader assumes the position of a second audience. The narrator begins by explaining to the reader that, in Arabic culture, a woman never refers to her husband by name or uses the appellation 'my husband', for 'every time she used a verb in the third person singular which didn't have a noun subject, she was

naturally referring to her husband' (1993: 162). Thus, it becomes significant when her mother begins to address her father as 'my husband' after learning to speak French, the language of the Algerian upper and middle classes. As the narrator observes, 'it was as if a floodgate had opened within her, perhaps in her relationship with her husband' (1993: 162). This points to a direct link between her acquisition of French and her change of attitude, perception and way of interacting with her husband, for she not only learns to speak a new language, but also allows that learning process to affect the way she deals with her husband. She begins to see him, not as her lord and master, but as an equal partner, and now when talking to her sisters or cousins she would 'refer to him quite naturally by his first name' (1993: 162). Thus, language becomes for her a means of emancipation.

As in 'Three Cloistered Girls', one sees a drastic move away from conventional standards on social interaction between males and females. The narrator notices that the other women in the harems are appalled by her mother's abandonment of the traditional formalities, although she continues to use them when in conversation with the older women to whom 'such freedom of language would have appeared insolent and incongruous' (1993: 163). By using her husband's first name in conversation, her mother acquires individual identity since 'none of the other women ever saw fit to refer to their menfolk, their masters who spent the day outside the house and returned home in the evening, taciturn, with eyes on the ground' (1993: 163). When she calmly pronounces his name, 'Tahar', his image 'seemed to pop up in the midst of all these women engaged in idle chit-chat on the age-old patios to which they were confined' (1993: 163). Thus, while her father becomes a real figure in the minds of everyone

present, the husbands of the other women remain nameless individuals 'of whom their spouses alluded impartially in the masculine gender' (1993: 163). The narrator, therefore, takes pride in her parents' unique relationship: 'I came to realise an irrefutable fact: namely that, in the face of all these womenfolk, my parents formed a couple' (1993: 163). Not only are they *husband* and *wife* but they also form a *couple*, the suggestion here being that they complement one another, they support each other's plans and their relationship is based on partnership rather than subordination.

The narrator's admiration for her father increases when he goes on 'an exceptionally long journey away from home', and while in his new location, he sends her mother a postcard: 'my father wrote to my mother – yes, to my mother!' (1993: 163-164). The exhilaration in her voice springs from two factors: first, her father signs the card 'simply with his first name', and secondly, he addresses it directly to his wife, rather than to the entire household, as is customary:

> The radical change in customs was apparent for all to see: my father had quite brazenly written his wife's name, in his own handwriting, on a postcard which was going to travel from one town to another, which was going to be exposed to so many masculine eyes, including eventually our village postman – a Muslim postman to boot – and, what is more, he had dared to refer to her in the western manner as 'Madame So-and-So …', whereas, no local man, poor or rich, ever referred to his wife and children in any other way than by the vague periphrasis: 'the household'. (1993: 164)

Djebar here uses this seemingly insignificant act to show that there is a possibility of change in the dynamics of male-female relationships in the Muslim society and that this change will best be achieved through male agency. From the narrator's point of view, her father's act of writing to her mother is a sign of his love for her: 'this postcard was, in fact, a most daring manifestation of affection' (1993: 165). The act of writing comes to symbolize a passage from the old patriarchal system, where women

are considered simply as servants, to a new world order in which men treat women as equals, thereby creating an egalitarian society based on mutual respect and support.

Naming acquires significance in this story when one notes that the narrator's father's name, Tahar, means 'The Pure', and he lives up to the pure Islamic teaching of treating women with love and mercy (as was shown in Chapter Three), thus becoming for the narrator even 'purer than his given name betokened' (1993: 163). By observing her parents, the narrator eventually comes to have 'some intuition of the possible happiness, the mystery in the union of man and woman' (1993: 165). Theirs is a relationship sustained on a pillar of friendship: companionship, mutual respect, complementarity and partnership. Most significantly, it is devoid of all cultural inhibitions: 'my father had dared "to write" to my mother. Both of them referred to each other by name, which was tantamount to declaring openly their love for each other, my father by writing to her, my mother by quoting my father henceforth without false shame in all her conversations' (1993: 165). These final words aptly capture the necessary solidarity that should, in theory, exist between husbands and wives. Djebar thus reveals that the concept of equality does not in any way destroy human values; rather, it seeks to create a new social order in which men and women work together in understanding and mutual commitment.

If the story above is a creative representation of an ideal marriage, then 'The Woman who Weeps' is an artistic recreation of marriage as an institution replete with melancholy and despondency, particularly for females. The main character in this story is a woman haunted by her past, a marriage marked by sexual dissatisfaction and

wife-beating, and just when she thinks she has found someone to love at last, it turns out that the man is an escaped prisoner wanted by the military. Like Rifaat's stories, this story underlines woman's unhappy journey through life.

The female character recalls her first marriage in which she simply played a passive role in sexual activity with her husband: 'it might just as well have been my skeleton that lay beside him' (1992: 53). Not only does she have to endure 'those grave moments before bedtime', but she also has to put up with his physical assault, for he literally 'busted [her] face', and she would 'walk the streets of Algiers as if [her] face were going to fall into [her] hands … as if the pain were trickling down from [her] features' (1992: 53). Even though she now tries to put 'the past at her feet' (1992: 53), it keeps surfacing as when she remembers 'those years of bourgeois marriage, the violent breakup, the long impulse toward the second man that tore her apart … the second man, a pale and fragile adolescent' (1992: 56). It thus becomes evident that the female character's life has up till now been a long drama of pain and disappointment. The constant crashing of the sea, therefore, symbolizes the upheavals in her marital life and the unstable nature of her happy moments.

The dominant image in this story is that of the sea – 'grey and green' – which paints a canvas of despondency 'as the sea continued its chant of a woman in confinement' and 'the sea gulls no longer came' and 'the bird cry had disappeared' (1992: 56). It is as if nature itself has conspired against the female character, for no sooner does she begin to feel a bonding with the stranger on the beach, 'talking, finally opening herself up, her hand on the man's right knee' (1992: 56), than he is taken away from

her when 'a first soldier … appeared behind them' and then later 'two other uniforms with rifles joined the first one' (1992: 57). The fleeting nature of her happiness is again symbolized by the weather changes, but the irony is that while she entertains 'hope for a beautiful summer' and, in fact, invites the man to 'get up and take a walk' with her, the hands of the law are already reaching out for him, for 'some time later, the military silhouettes were walking away surrounding the man' (1992: 57).

Although the reader is not told whether the male character is wanted for a criminal offence or political activity, it is clear that he is not what the female character perceives him to be – a man who will become her lover (see 1992: 57). The story, therefore, ends with a brilliantly constructed scene of appearance versus reality. The 'white veil' in which the female character wraps herself comes to symbolize at once her desperate search for love and failure to catch hold of it, which is why she weeps as her 'hands dug into the white veil she was twisting convulsively' (1992: 57). Thus, the title of the story itself points to the character's life as one devoid of any lasting cheerfulness, giving credence to Thomas Hardy's philosophical view of life, namely, that happiness is but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain.[2]

In spite of the atmosphere of sorrow that dominates this story, the writer's artistry comes through as the reader notes that, right to the end of the story, the male character remains silent, while the female controls their "conversation". The expressiveness of the female character and the muteness of the male can be seen as a conscious attempt to appropriate speech from the male and empower the female. In other words, by reversing the traditional role of the speaker, Djebar usurps language – a male

prerogative – and challenges the discourse of silence. The 'woman who weeps', therefore, becomes the symbolic representation of a society that laments its losses.

Women of Algiers *outside* their apartment

As already illustrated in the stories above, Djebar's female characters tend to reject traditional roles and embrace an individualistic lifestyle. However, in no other story is the theme of female subversion more palpable than it is in 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment', the story that gives Djebar's short story collection its title. This is a story in which Djebar presents female characters who not only subvert patriarchal ideology, but also help other females to resist its overpowering influence.

The title of the story is the title of Delacroix's painting of 1832 featuring three Algerian women, two of whom are seated in front of a hookah and the third one, in the foreground, leans her elbow against some cushions (1992: 135).[3] According to Djebar, Delacroix's painting is an artistic representation of his conservative image of woman, that is, woman as the traditional 'housewife' without a profound consciousness of self, for the three women 'remain absent to themselves, to their body, to their sensuality, to their happiness' (1992: 137). Djebar adopts Delacroix's title, but reverses its meaning by portraying women not as being *in their apartment*, implying physical imprisonment, confinement to domestic tasks, and enslavement to Muslim laws, but as being *outside their apartment*, implying freedom of thought and expression, freedom of movement, freedom to pursue the education and career of their choice, freedom to engage in political struggles and to fight for their individual rights.

Thus, the story 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment' can arguably be described as the totality of Djebar's artistic endorsement of Algerian women's liberation.

Concerning the irony surrounding Algerian independence, Golley (2004: 533) observes that in Algeria, where women played a great role in achieving independence, they were hoping to attain more rights as women than they actually have, for after independence, men often return to the 'old role pattern', which reveals 'a painful contrast between principles of freedom and equality and the docile acceptance of traditional female submission'. In this story, Djebar acknowledges the contributions of women to the struggle for independence, but also shows how independence fell short of guaranteeing freedom from oppression for women.

The story plots the life of Sarah, a young woman working with a recording company, and the men and women who people her world, impacting on her life in various ways. Sarah receives an urgent phone call from her friend Anne, a Frenchwoman on the verge of committing suicide. After listening to Anne's story about 'the husband, the three children, fifteen years of a strange life contained in one hour of words' (1992: 8), Sarah comforts her and, before leaving, arranges with one of Anne's neighbours to take care of the lonely, depressed Frenchwoman. In the course of time, the three women grow to develop a strong bond of affection for each other, irrespective of differences in nationality, culture and educational background. When the time comes for Anne to leave Algiers, she changes her mind just before it is time to board the plane, having observed other female travellers as they 'take along their baskets and their pottery all the way to the shantytown north of Paris that was waiting for them'

(1992: 51). Thus, the status of women in Paris is comparable to that of women in Algiers. As a result, Anne chooses to stay with Sarah who, so far, has helped her overcome her fears. Other female characters like Leila, Baya and Fatma (the masseuse) also emerge as women who have attained individuality either through significant contributions to the war of independence or as a result of enjoying economic independence.

The characters' rejection of conventional roles is evident in the different attitudes and lifestyles adopted by three of the daughters of the *hazab*, one of the male characters in the story, who reads the Qur'an at the mosque. These girls not only deviate from cultural norms on dressing, but also pursue careers that are not traditionally feminine:

> The eldest, twenty-four years old, had been practicing [*sic*] judo since her teens, and furthermore insisted on going out only in slacks (the only explanation, incidentally, for the persistent lack of serious marriage proposals). The second one, at twenty-two, was at the university, finishing a bachelor's degree in the natural sciences (and the father, strolling around outside, was making an attempt at understanding the relationship between the natural sciences and a female brain but dared not speak of it …) The third one, finally, Sonia, twenty years old – the teller of this minichronicle – was spending all her free time in athletic training. She had recently decided to become a physical education teacher. (1992: 11)

From the above quotation, one notes the radical transformation of females in Djebar's writing. The three daughters of the *hazab* emerge as controllers of their own destinies. Of particular significance is the fact that the eldest of these sisters insists on wearing slacks in public, in complete defiance of that which is acceptable within Islam. Djebar here shows that choice of clothing plays a crucial role in gender politics within the Muslim society: 'the most visible evolution of Arabic women, at least in the cities, has therefore been the casting off of the veil. Many a woman, often after an adolescence or her entire youth spent cloistered, has concretely lived the experience

of the unveiling' (1992: 139). Thus, the character's abandonment of the veil in favour of Western clothes reads as a complete breakaway from the conventional image of Arab women as portrayed in Delacroix's painting. In this way, Djebar strives to give an authentic portraiture of modern Muslim women in a gradually changing environment.

The theme of sisterhood surfaces in this story with strong connotations that seem to suggest that racial and cultural differences among women should not be barriers to feminist struggles against gender oppression. After Anne's 'unsuccessful suicide attempt' (1992: 8), Sarah gets one the *hazab*'s daughters living next door to look after her. When Sonia comes to Anne's house, she does not only take care of her household chores, but also decides to become 'better acquainted' with the foreign woman. In the end, both Sarah and Sonia, along with their friend Baya, become pillars of support for Anne, drawing her out through conversations and healing her emotional wounds with loving attention. This is especially evident when the women go to the public baths. While Sonia prepares the baths for them, Baya 'began in motherly fashion to pour tepid water over Anne's hair' (1992: 29). The fact that Baya and Sonia accord Anne special care, owing to her present fragile state, underpins a culture of female bonding and solidarity in the face of threatening internal breakdown. When Sarah joins them later, she also showers Anne with attention as she 'offers to untangle her wet hair for her' (1992: 32).

As the four women help each other to secure comfortable positions on the slabs and to understand the conversations of the other women present, they let themselves retreat

into this world that is unhinged from the globe of male authority. The *hammam*[4] becomes a territory dominated by woman's body and woman's voice: 'then sitting down, all of them rosy, looking alike, they were getting ready to be more lighthearted: conversations or monologues unrolled in gentle, trifling, worn-out words that slid off with the water, while the women laid down their everyday burdens, their weariness' (1992: 31). Thus, the spirit of sorority that permeates the *hammam* moves these women to unburden their souls to one another, an activity they cannot indulge in when confined to their homes and under the surveillance of their menfolk.

One notes, however, that united as they are in their woes, the women experience repression in varying degrees. Some of them are more outspoken about their daily traumas than others, as Sarah observes that 'the whispering about troubles continues once the pores of the skin are thoroughly open' (1992: 32). For this group of women, therefore, going to the baths symbolizes a transition into a world of unbridled expression, interaction and self-indulgence. The bathing process itself is a process of emotional healing and physical rejuvenation. For other women, however, the public baths simply represent a change of environment unaccompanied by a change of values: 'other women, mute, stare at each other across the steam: they are the ones who are locked inside for months or years, except to go to the baths' (1992: 32). Thus, in spite of the apparent liberation of women like Sarah, Baya, Sonia, and Anne, each of whom enjoys freedom of movement beyond the home environment owing to the nature of their jobs, the majority of the women in the bath live in seclusion.

Perhaps it is her consciousness of this continued alienation of Algerian women that moves Baya to scream out the word 'Freedom!', as she steps out of the steam room. Her desire for freedom is so overwhelming that she turns around and addresses the women: 'what wouldn't I break, inside of me or outside if need be, to get back with the others? To get back to the water that streams, that sings, that gets lost, that sets us all free, if only bit by bit' (1992: 32). Baya's explosive words reveal not only the absence of true freedom for women, but also their innate need of that freedom.

As does El-Saadawi in *Woman at Point Zero*, Djebar heightens the grimness of arranged marriages in 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment', where one of the female characters, Fatma, laments her childhood, for she is only thirteen when her father gives her in marriage to the son of his fellow soldier. At this point, Djebar makes Fatma tell her own story, and it is not difficult to deduce the pain in Fatma's voice as she recounts the events leading up to her marriage: 'on one leave, my father arrived with another soldier; my aunts were silent. They were going to take me away, a bride of the beginning of time. . . . For the son of the stranger, they said, the father had decided. The aunts wept, saying that if the grandmother were living, the father would never have dared' (1992: 40). This episode in the character's life reveals women's powerlessness in the face of male authoritarianism.

Fatma's arrival at her husband's house marks the beginning of a life of misery. No sooner does she arrive than the master of the house begins 'eyeing [her] with interest, as if [she] were there for him' (1992: 42). When night comes, she finds herself at the mercy of 'the husband, an adolescent whose hands groped over [her] cold body'

(1992: 42). The next day does not seem promising either, for she has to contend with the nagging of the women as they force her to work while at the same time screaming insults at her: 'You, your father gave you up for two bottles of beer in a garrison town!' (1992: 42). Unable to endure the women's taunting, the young bride escapes in the dead of night: 'the south no longer existed, the north no longer existed, only space and the night, the long night of my life was beginning' (1992: 42). Like Zennouba's marriage in Rifaat's story 'The Long Night of Winter' (discussed in Chapter Three), Fatma's marriage becomes for her a source of unbearable anguish. Thus, her being forced into an early marriage comes to represent the beginning of a life of sexual exploitation by men and women alike and of hard labour, as she eventually becomes a sex worker in a brothel and a water carrier in a *hammam* (1992: 42-43).

By the time Sarah, Anne, Sonia and Baya meet her in the baths, however, Fatma has become economically independent in that she is paid for her services, not only as a water carrier for the *Hadja*, the woman who owns the baths, but also as a 'masseuse' for the women who come to the baths. She tells the four women: 'it is a good thing that I do the massage for my own benefit' (1992: 35). As she begins massaging one of the women, it becomes evident that she herself benefits from the activity: 'almost black, peaceful, working rhythmically, the masseuse seemed herself to be relaxing' (1992: 30). Not only does she render a service to her client, but she also becomes involved in the process itself, such that 'the couple formed by the two women on the marble slab high above the other bathers [become] entwined . . . in panting rhythm, taking on a strange shape, that of a slow, well-balanced tree whose roots plunged down into the persistent streaming of the water on the grey stone' (1992: 30). The

metaphor of a well-balanced tree suggests that the two women, the one giving the massage and the one receiving it, are a source of spiritual nourishment to each other and are both sustained by a stream of psychic consciousness. Thus, Fatma has experienced a radical transformation, moving from being a sex slave to men to becoming a kind of psycho-therapist for women, relieving them of their physical and emotional distresses through a massage that is seasoned with tenderness and devotion.

It is significant that Djebar's female characters are very outspoken about the problems facing women in post-colonial Algeria. Leila is one such character who, in spite of her delirious state of mind (owing to solitary confinement in prison), never forgets the huge contributions that women made during the war of liberation. Sitting on her bed and listening to the 'melancholy voice' of Meriem Faki, an old Jewish 'songstress' who reminds her of her childhood, she begins to reflect on the past, plunging back into 'the drifting images of her nightmare: the looks of women veiled in white or in black but their faces freed, who were weeping silently, as if behind a windowpane', and 'telling herself, her body in pain, that they, these disappeared aunts and grandmothers, were weeping over her, over her dismantled memory' (1992: 22).

The drifting images cascading through Leila's delirious mind symbolize the fragmented state of women's lives in post-war Algeria. Djebar (1992: 142) confirms this assertion when she states: 'in the history of Algerian resistance struggles during the last century, numerous episodes, indeed, show women warriors who left the traditional role of spectator. Their formidable look would prod the men's courage, but suddenly also, right where the ultimate despair dawns, their very presence in the

boiling movement of battle decides the outcome'. Thus, although women participated in the war of liberation, they were not given the recognition they deserve and have continued to be cloaked in invisibility.

It is during one of her delirious moments that Leila reminds Sarah of the tragic experiences she and other women went through during the war years. Addressing her friend, she speaks out:

> We suffered the pain of your legs torn apart by the rapist soldiers. . . . Your bodies, used only in parts, bit by bit. . . . They should make vast close-ups for every triumphant Woman's Day: look at the fingers, ordinarily painted with henna, usually the active hands of the mothers who have survived (face aflame to make bread and to be burned), the same fingers without henna but with manicured nails carrying bombs as if they were oranges. Exploding every body we believed to be those of other's. . . . Tearing the enemy flesh to ribbons. And those who were still alive, or what passes for alive, behind iron prison bars, then behind the bars of memory, then . . . (she is weeping), then like me behind the delirium of fever. . . . The bombs are still exploding . . . but over twenty years: close to our eyes, for we no longer see the outside, we see only the obscene looks, the bombs explode but against our bellies and I am – she screamed – I am every woman's sterile belly in one! (1992: 44)

Leila's explosive words above summarize women's plight in Algeria's recent past of anti-colonial resistance. Djebar shows that despite women's contributions to the war efforts, male attitude towards femininity remained unchanged, and consequently, women remain marginal to power:

> Before the war of liberation, the search for a national identity, if it did include a feminine participation, delighted in erasing the body and illuminating these women as "mothers", even for those exceptional figures who were recognized as women warriors. But when, in the course of the seven years of the national war, the theme of the heroine becomes exalted, it is exactly around the bodies of young girls, whom I call "fire carriers" and whom the enemy incarcerates. Harems melted for a while into so many Barberousse prisons. (1992: 144)

Thus, the theme of loss emerges again, only this time more graphic than in Rifaat's stories, for Djebar places emphasis not just on the loss of lives but also on the loss of

human dignity and identity. The quest for national liberation in Algeria reveals an ironic reversal of values where prisons and mad houses became filled with the very group of persons – women – who spearheaded the struggle. As Sarah tells Anne, 'we jumped on the bandwagon for freedom first, we had nothing but war afterwards' (1992: 49). Both Sarah and Leila had fought in the war and still carry evidence of their heroism, the former having a scar on her abdomen to show for it, and the latter suffering mental disorientation as a result of it. Yet, society fails to give them due recognition for their self-sacrifice.

It is ironical that women in Algeria enjoy freedom from colonial domination but remain subject to patriarchal oppression. Despite their having participated in the fight for freedom, 'the image of woman is still perceived no differently, be it by the father, by the husband, and, more troublesome still, by the brother and son' (1992: 138). Sarah is an example of a woman who engaged in the nationalist struggle. When Anne sees a scar on her abdomen and asks her if it is a burn, she maintains a stony silence that only half conceals her unspoken rage:

> Anne knew nothing about the city during the period of fire and murders just past: women outside under attack by submachine guns, white veils with bloodstained holes …. How had Sarah squandered her youth? Somewhere, this way, in these open streets, then in prison crammed together with other adolescent girls. Was she working on this ostensibly artistic project, a documentary of the city, in order to answer the interrogation that had begun to take possession of her these days? The city, its walls, its balconies, the shadow of empty prisons. (1992: 34)

Thus, in spite of her present success as a song recorder, Sarah remains scarred by the injustices of the society in which she finds herself. She 'thinks about the cloistered women, not even in a courtyard, just in a kitchen where they sit on the floor, crushed by the overcrowding' (1992: 23). Her prison experience shows that women's

predicament goes beyond physical confinement to include psychological incarceration as well. In response to Anne's question about her life in prison, she states:

> The others noticed nothing but my silence. Leila said it only yesterday: I was a voiceless prisoner. A little like certain women of Algiers today, you see them going around outside without the ancestral veil, and yet, out of fear of the new and unexpected situations, they become entangled in other veils, invisible but very noticeable ones …. Me too: for years after Barberousse I was still carrying my own prison around inside me'. (1992: 48)

Sarah thus highlights the complexities surrounding the notion of freedom, showing that a release from prison does not automatically mean a release from bondage; neither does a casting off of the veil necessarily mean liberation for the individual. Although an abandonment of the veil is a major step towards self-liberation, as shown earlier, it is only the beginning of a long, tedious journey. Sarah's words to Anne as they drive back from the airport indicate a need for continuous activism, without which women's liberation will become nothing but a catch phrase:

> For Arabic women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves, in all the women's quarters, the traditional ones as well as those in the housing projects. Talk among ourselves and look. Look outside, look outside the walls and the prisons! The Woman as look and the Woman as voice …. Not the voice of female vocalists whom they imprison in their sugar-sweet melodies …. But the voice they've never heard, because many unknown and new things will occur before she's able to sing: the voice of sighs, of malice, of the sorrows of all the women they've kept walled in …. The Voice that's searching in the opened tombs. (1992: 50)

Here, Djebar uses the image of the wall to show the degree of women's seclusion and exclusion from participating in public activities. Cultural taboos have become like a wall that blocks women's view of the world around them and keeps them under constant surveillance. Thus, for Muslim women to enjoy true freedom, the wall of silence must be broken down through continuous activism, and the power of the Voice must become a possession of all women. Only by talking continuously about

women's plight, addressing problems and positing possible solutions, do the female characters in this story, especially Sarah and Anne, find a sure hope for Algerian women. Women's liberation from colonial and gender oppressions thus emerges as the dominant theme in this story. Djebar's concluding words in 'Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound' (1992: 151) points a way forward for Muslim women in North Africa: 'only in the fragment of ancient murmuring do I see how we must look for a restoration of the conversation between women, the very one that Delacroix froze in his painting. Only in the door open to the full sun, the one Picasso later imposed, do I hope for a concrete and daily liberation of women'. If all Muslim women were to share Djebar's conviction, perhaps someday one of Delacroix's descendants will be inspired to paint a portrait of women of Algiers *outside* their apartment.

Notes

1. In this chapter, dates of publication will be used along with page references to indicate the specific anthology from which the story has been taken.

2. The concluding words of his tragic novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (edited by Dale Kramer. 1998. Oxford: Oxford University Press).

3. Djebar undertakes a critical appraisal of Delacroix's painting in an essay entitled 'Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound', published under the heading *Postface* in *Women of Algiers in* their *Apartment* (1992. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia).

4. Arabic word for a public bath open to women and their children.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The previous chapter has illustrated that Djebar's primary concern is the liberation of women from all incumbent traditions that privilege communal interests based on patriarchal norms over women's individual freedom. Although positioned within societies that engender female submission to male authority, Djebar's characters strive to attain self-realization through the pursuit of educational goals and professional careers. In contrast to Djebar, Rifaat infuses her female characters with what Mamphela Ramphele calls the 'victim syndrome' (quoted in Coullie, 2004: 4). As shown in Chapter Three, her female characters succumb to societal pressure by maintaining silence on fundamental issues germane to their happiness. The female character in the story, 'The Long Night of Winter', is the creative representation of the Egyptian woman as Rifaat perceived her, for 'in compliance with her husband and for the sake of the children, [Zennouba] had submitted to the role of wife and mother, a woman protected by marriage and by the home that she would leave only when they bore her to her grave' (56). The character's benign acceptance of her husband's infidelity, for the sake of her honour and the welfare of her children, seems to suggest that suffering is a necessary price that women pay in exchange for social security. Rifaat's portrayal of women is thus a critical statement on the absence of the element of companionship within Muslim marital relationships.

In spite of the differences in creative vision, both Rifaat and Djebar address similar issues affecting women in contemporary Muslim society. The issue of forced or arranged marriage is critiqued in the stories of both writers. In Rifaat's 'Bahiyya's Eyes', the female character is "shoved" into marriage with a young man when she is still in her pre-teen years, while in Djebar's story 'There is no Exile', the narrator is given into marriage without her consent. Although there is a difference in the characters' ages in that the former is young and innocent when the marriage is arranged while the latter is a previously-married woman who has lost her two children to the Algerian war, their common plight underpins a culture of repression whereby women are prevented from exercising their right to choice of spouse.

Both Rifaat and Djebar address the issue of female sexuality, thus stressing its centrality to Arab feminist discourse. It is easy to draw a parallel between the female character in Rifaat's 'Distant View of a Minaret' and Sarah in Djebar's 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment'. Both characters face a situation in which sexual activity with their husbands is more of a ritual than an expression of love, thereby positing the notion that the world of sex is predominantly a male-authored one in which women are excluded from active participation. The females do not only remain outside the borders of sexual pleasure, but are, in fact, marginal to experience in the sense that they are completely shut out by their husbands who retreat into a world that is 'closed off' from them, moving Sarah to conclude that 'a man always remains opaque' (Djebar, 1992: 28). The image used here is that of an unfathomable and impenetrable surface that blocks out visual access and frustrates all attempts at understanding its very nature. Arguably, then, it is the male's eviction of the female from his cocoon

world of self-indulgence that forces female sexuality out of the *active* and into the *passive* realm. Ironically, it is Rifaat, using Islam as a frame of reference, who is more overt in her condemnation of Muslim regulation of female sexuality within marriage, as evident in three of her stories, 'Distant View of a Minaret', 'Bahiyya's Eyes' and 'The Long Night of Winter' (analysed in Chapter Three).

The dynamics of power relations as exemplified in the writings of both Rifaat and Djebar lend force to Manzalaoui's argument (1985: 20-21) that the Arabic short story, from its inception, has been directed towards didactic ends, ends concerned not only with personal morality, but with the problem of social and political injustice. Both writers have displayed a consciousness of the dual purpose of literature – to entertain and to teach – by producing fiction that not only serves as a magnifying glass on their respective societies, but also seeks to establish ways of reconciling women's individual needs with society's demands on them. Like Zaynab Alkali (discussed in Chapter Two), Rifaat chooses the conservative approach of allowing time and fate to improve one's situation, while Djebar opts for the radical approach like El-Saadawi, which involves the taking of firm action to change one's lot in life.

As was stated in Chapter One as one of the problems and issues to be investigated in this study, Muslim women writers face a challenge of preserving their cultural values while at the same time creating awareness on the need for Muslims to respect the human rights of women. The analysis of selected stories has shown that both Rifaat and Djebar succeed in denouncing Muslim patriarchal values without ultimately divorcing themselves from Islamic culture. Nevertheless, one deduces from Djebar's

writing that the struggle for women's rights in North Africa is one that inevitably involves an interrogation of Islam itself as a religion that assigns dignity to women. In 'Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound', the essay that concludes *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, Djebar (1992: 142) makes the following assertion:

> The Koran says, and this has been often repeated: "Paradise is found at the feet of mothers". If Christianity is the adoration of the Virgin Mother, Islam, more harshly, understands the term *mother* to mean woman without pleasure, even before seeing her as the source of tenderness. Thereby obscurely hoping that the eye-that-is-sex, the one who has given birth, is no longer a threat. Only the birthing mother has the right to look.

From the above quotation, it can be deduced that Djebar does not separate cultural practices from religious teachings. Unlike Rifaat, she seems to attribute woman's oppression not just to endemic social customs, but to the entire structure of Islam, including its law, religion and culture. In this case, therefore, there is almost no possibility of reconciling Muslim culture and feminist aspirations, except perhaps if the assumption is that Islamic culture in its pristine state bears no resemblance to modern-day practices. Only with this frame of mind can one begin to see any hope. Sakina Mohamed (2005: 36) summarizes the challenge facing all Muslims today beautifully:

> It is very clear that the Qur'an is not being followed. If the Qur'an is the guiding principle in every Muslim's life, then where have we gone wrong? I believe that we read the Qur'an and ask for guidance from Allah, but we fail to understand the Qur'an in a manner that would be educational to all its followers. The challenge for Muslim women is to adapt to societies that have taken on Western norms while being strong in their beliefs as Muslims, and to instil Qur'anic value systems into their lives and the lives of both men and women around them.

The task of assessing the extent to which Muslims all round the world will successfully meet the challenge of imbibing Qur'anic teachings and practising them is a huge one that is, nevertheless, worth undertaking. This research project has focused primarily on literature from North Africa, with specific reference to the artistic

representation of Muslim culture, in contrast to Islamic culture, by two women writers, Alifa Rifaat and Assia Djebar. A suggested area for future academic research would be a broader-based comparison of literature by Muslim women, ideally five works drawn from North, East, West, Central and Southern Africa, which investigates not only the creative transformation of women in African cultures, but also the ironies inherent in the exercise of power by women in Africa.

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