2003

Franco-Maghrebian youth in the works of Leila Sebbar | Between generations and cultures

Bethany S. O'Connell
The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mail.lib.umt.edu.
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission  
No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature: ____________________________  
Date: May 15, 2003

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
FRANCO-MAGHREBIAN YOUTH IN THE WORKS OF LEILA SEBBAR:
BETWEEN GENERATIONS AND CULTURES

By

Bethany O'Connell

B.A., The University of Montana, 2000

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

May 2003

Approved by:

Chair, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date

5-16-03
Leila Sebbar writes mainly about the Franco-Maghrebian immigrant population in France. Her father is Algerian and her mother is French. This thematic study of the youth in the works of Leila Sebbar explores how families relate amidst verging cultures and geographies. The inter-generational family portraits in her works explore the losses of exile, yet establish the territory of memory as a redemptive tool for connecting the sons and daughters to their mixed heritage.

Leila Sebbar emphasizes the relevance of youth and their connection to traditions and the past. Sebbar demonstrates the importance of the mother's oral tradition and her central role in teaching the family traditions to her children. The mother is a territory or asylum for sons in transit or social exile. The mother and son must bridge the communication between different languages, cultures and generations. Mothers and daughters also experience their relationships in the works of Leila Sebbar as an interweaving of similarities and differences. Their gender places them in similar positions, but the difference in generation and culture creates very different perspectives and experiences for the mother and her daughter. Her works describe daughters who run away and the contradictions this freedom creates for them.

She also explores how the Maghrebian and Islamic community often dictates how fathers and mothers relate to their sons and daughters. When the memory of the mother or father becomes silenced because of the pain of exile or the restrictions of the community, the sons and daughters seek out the story of the past through intermediary mother and father figures and the cultural signs surrounding them. Her works contribute to a greater understanding of French and Maghrebian society in a social and historical context.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ ii

Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................... iii

Chapter

I. Introduction: The Contradictions that Bridge Generations and Geographies in the Life and Writing of Leila Sebbar ......................................................... 1

II. The Maternal Territory as Asylum for Exiled Sons ......................................................... 17

III. Separations between Mothers in Exile and Daughters in Flight ................................ 30

IV. Veils of Honor between a Father and a Daughter, a Brother and a Sister .................. 50

V. The Son Lives the Exile of His Father's Generation ...................................................... 61

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 72

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................. 74
Chapter One
The Contradictions that Bridge Generations and Geographies
In the Life and Writing of Leïla Sebbar

When Leïla Sebbar writes in Lettres parisiennes: Autopsie de l’exil that she has a disposition for exile, she speaks of her family and the culture she has inherited which is neither French nor Algerian, but a crossing between the two. Daughter of a French mother and an Algerian father, exile, she writes, is the only place where contradictions and divisions can be enunciated. She explains,

Fille d’un père en exile dans la culture de l’Autre, du Colonisateur, loin de sa famille, en rupture de religion et de coutumes, fille d’une mère en exile géographique et culturelle-
ma mère avait quitté dans le drame une famille d’agriculteurs de Dordogne pour suivre un Arabe dans un pays lointain- j’ai hérité, je crois, de ce double exil parental une disposition à l’exil, j’entends là, par exil, à la fois solitude et excentricité (Lettres 51).

Leïla Sebbar feels most comfortable writing on scraps of paper in cafés and she detests typing. She describes in great detail the texture of her paper as well as the atmosphere and clientele in the café. Such descriptions are in fact directly related to her position as a writer coming from mixed heritage. She finds meaning in seemingly errant details, refusing to be reduced to a simple identity. During her childhood in Algeria, Leïla and her sister were isolated from other Algerian children, but she did not feel a part of the daughters of the French colonials either. She describes the ridicule coming from both groups in her essay, “Les Jeunes Filles de la colonie” (Une Enfance outremer 192). Her mother and father, both schoolteachers, were not integrated into the community because they were neither Christian nor Muslim, neither Arab nor Pied-noir. When Leïla Sebbar was twelve, the rupture caused by the war between France and Algeria magnified her
families differences, forcing the family into exile in France in 1962, returning to the
country of Sebbar's mother.

Leila Sebbar was living in Paris as a writer, schoolteacher and mother during her
correspondence with the Canadian writer and schoolteacher, Nancy Huston. In *Lettres
parisiennes*, the two women compare their childhood experiences and the similar
impression they feel of being “tourists” when they return home to their native countries.
For Leïla Sebbar, the rupture of leaving her country occurred because of the violence of
war. Nancy Huston, however, experienced the deliberate rupture of leaving her family to
seek a new identity. Nevertheless, for both women, the break is made complete by the
passing of time and events. However, the two women are also enriched by their position
in exile. Mildred Mortimer explains in her introduction to the English translation of
Sebbar’s *Le Silence des rives*, that most of the great literature of Western culture comes
from exiles, refugees or immigrants whose profound sense of loss marks their
achievements (vi).

This study will explore why Leïla Sebbar writes about youth in different positions
of exile, as well as the cultural and generational gaps they experience in relation to their
parents. The ruptures created by the “coming of age” is felt more deeply by those who
have lost their roots or who feel out of place. Much of her fiction is categorized in the
“section jeunesse” or youth section. As a schoolteacher, Sebbar understands the
pedagogical relevance of teaching her readers to appreciate the long history of European
and Arabīc cultural exchange and why these relationships remain complex in the
aftermath of colonialization. The youth in the fiction of Sebbar are “croisés,” or young
adults at the crossroads between diverse cultures and the past generations. They
experience the ruptures created by immigration, violence and age. Yet Sebbar’s characters have the ability to re-create their own inventory of meaning and identity in a maze of contradictory societal gazes. They establish their rightful place within their society and their families.

The youth in the fiction of Leïla Sebbar experience ruptures within their families as a direct result of the cultural and geographical exile of their mothers, fathers and grandparents. The learned remembrance of the wounds of the past moves and motivates all of her young people. In *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique*, for example, sixteen-year-old Momo or Mohamed feels the strongest connection to his Vietnamese grandmother, Minh. He spends his time collecting and cutting up war photos from magazines and drops out of French society by moving into a shack behind his housing project. Leïla Sebbar’s novels and short stories describe in great depth the daily life and struggles experienced by the Franco-Maghrebian immigrant workers in France and the children of immigrants, or the generation “Beur.” The son in Sebbar’s *Parle Mon Fils, parle à ta mère* (1984), returns home to his mother after a long absence, during which he spent time raising awareness in France about issues affecting the Beurs. This outspoken activism is new for his mother. At first she relates to the term “Beur” as if it were a French word, like the word “beurre” or “butter,” a greasy substance that is foreign to her. Her son explains how the term “Arab,” often used pejoratively in racist discourse, has been appropriated by the youth and reconfigured through a form of slang called “verlan.” For example, everyday French words, like “café” and “métro,” become “féca” and “tromé.” Her son understands the importance of re-structuring language, he considers “Beur” to be a “beautiful monosyllable” with a new meaning (28). He repeats the word for his mother several
times and rolls the "r," as in the Arabic language, until she laughs and decides she likes the word, after all.

As the multi-ethnicity of France expands, the first generation of Maghrebian immigrants in France is only recently coming out of its status as invisible by way of their children and the Beur movement. Yet the young Beurs refuse to be associated, as their parents were, with the image of people who are ignorant and dependent upon the former colonial power. In *Poétique, politique et culture dans les romans de Leïla Sebbar*, Elizabeth Vergano writes,

Une culture Beur apparaît alors avec une vitalité, une dynamique que le Français ne peut ignorer. Des journaux, des magazines, des radio libres, des troupes théâtrales, des groupes musicaux créés par et pour les Beurs, témoignent d’un besoin pour cette génération d’affirmer sa spécificité identitaire (3).

The term, "Beur," may take on a definition of its own throughout this thesis because it seems to mean something different to each person asked to define it. Leïla Sebbar does not consider herself a "Beur," perhaps because she does not like to be defined in general, or perhaps she follows the definition given by Tahar Ben Jalloun in an interview with Thomas Spear who asked if Ben Jalloun’s daughter will be Beur or Moroccan. Ben Jalloun responds by saying that she won’t be Beur because “Beur” is something very specific,

Beurs are children of the subproletariat of immigrant workers and manual workers who have lived here...But if, for example, you look at the Paris phone book, you’ll find that there are hundreds upon hundreds...of Maghrebine professionals...with their families and their children, they live here like bourgeois French people. Can you call their children “Beurs”? ([Post/colonial Conditions](#) 33).
Ben Jalloun prefers a geo-political category for his daughter. He concludes that his daughter will be Franco-Moroccan. Thus placed in a very specific economic and social class, Leïla Sebbar emphasizes the value of the Beurs, despite their lack of economic power.

This group of young Beurs in Sebbar’s fiction often finds itself speaking between generations and cultures, yet in the role as outsider. Leïla Sebbar describes how she herself is often challenged to prove herself as “authentic” in order to be a voice of the Algerian Muslim population. She describes in Lettres parisiennes the hesitant reception she receives among Maghrebian writers because she does not speak Arabic, the language of her father. She writes,

*Ces remarques reviennent, lancinantes, lorsqu’il y a, du côté du public, des Maghrébins intellectuels en transit, en exil ou en immigration qui m’agressent, les hommes en particulier, pour savoir qui je suis, de quel droit j’introduis dans mes livres des Arabes alors que je ne parle pas l’arabe, et pourquoi j’ai besoin de parler de ces Arabes (hommes, femmes, enfants) puisque je n’en suis pas à part entière...*(Lettres 133).

The hypocrisy she experienced in many political movements has also made her wary. Writing, teaching and study are the only places she feels at ease. As for the French, she writes, they do not understand why she kept the name of her father to write in the language of her mother as a “French” writer. According to them, she should have chosen a pen name, to create for herself a more universal identity as writer *(Lettres 134)*. These reactions reflect the general attitudes of French and Algerian societies throughout the last two centuries, which regard métissage as a sign of illegitimacy or attempt to categorize cultures into elite classes.
During the year and a half that Leïla Sebbar corresponded with Nancy Huston in *Lettres parisiennes*, she usually described her relation to exile indirectly through exterior details such as the décor in the various cafés she visited. She writes of Amazons and vagabonds who fascinated her and how funny it is that she was always bundled up from the cold when she met other Parisian women writers in lighter clothing. It is not until a year passed in her correspondence, in her letter addressing the challenges posed her to present herself as identifiably authentic, that Leïla Sebbar states explicitly the obsession that drives her writing,

> Si je parle de l'exil, je parle aussi de croisements culturels; c'est à ces points de croisements culturels; c'est à ces points de jonction ou de disjonction où je suis que je vis, que j'écris, alors comment décliner une identité simple?[...] les sujets de mes livres ne sont pas mon identité, ils sont le signe, les signes de mon histoire de croisée, de métisse obsédée par sa route et les chemins de traverse, obsédée par la rencontre surréaliste de l'Autre et du Même, par le croisement contre nature et lyrique de la terre et de la ville, de la science et de la chair, de la tradition et de la modernité, de l'Orient et de l'Occident (*Lettres* 134).

Most importantly, she remarks that the subjects of her books are not her identity, but the sign of her identity as métisse, and her obsession with the crossing and meeting between the other and the same, tradition and modernity, the Orient and the Occident. This obsession, which is played out in Sebbar's fiction, serves to awaken a French and Franco-Maghrebian population from its amnesia and contributes to a re-writing of history. Young people today must also be awakened from this amnesia, if they are to impact societal changes in the generations that follow.

In her article, “Anamnesis and National Reconciliation: Re-membering October 17, 1961” from *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France*, Anne Donadey describes
Leïla Sebbar's 1999 text, *La Seine était rouge*, published in a collection for young adults. The novel demonstrates how three young adults become aware of and seek to research and memorialize the day in Paris when hundreds of Algerians in Paris were brutally massacred during a peaceful protest; dozens of their bodies being thrown into the Seine. All press coverage of the event was quickly censored. Donadey points out that, "In Sebbar's rewriting, anamnesis is shown to be a collective endeavor which occurs across generations, genders, political persuasions, and ethnic origins" (51). It is also the only novel so far to focus entirely on the memory of October 1961. Her main characters were all born after 1961 and the action takes place thirty-five years after the event, highlighting the importance for young adults to retrieve their history ("Anamnesis" 51).

Anne Donadey makes a connection between the process of national reconciliation France is undergoing with regards to World War II and the Vichy government, and the process it has yet to go through in what she calls France's Algeria syndrome. The "Vichy Syndrome" is divided by historian Henry Rousso into four stages, moving from amnesia to obsession ("Anamnesis" 48). France has yet to reach the stage of obsession in its recollection of the war with Algeria, although it is slowly moving out of its forgetting and amnesia. Thus, when Sebbar writes that she is "obsessed," she moves through generations, geographies, and wars. She contributes to France's progress in reconciling, or at least remembering, colonial and neo-colonial oppression in general. Her writing also bridges the ruptures between generations by emphasizing the interconnectedness of cultures and historical events.

Leïla Sebbar speaks quite briefly about her role as a mother of two sons in *Lettres parisiennes*. She quite clearly, however, insists that motherhood is necessary for her, to
mark a territory and that writing, or more specifically, exile is also her territory. The
territory she refers to is metaphorical rather than geographic, “Sans enfant, j’aurais été
sans terre et presque…sans corps…Je veux dire qu’ils m’ont été nécessaire pour marquer
un territoire même hypothétique et mythique” (144). Because she does not have any
daughters, she maintains close relationships with the daughters of her friends, like Nancy
Huston’s Léa. She admits that it is best this way, if she had a daughter she fears she
would have been too close to her, a suffocating mother (Lettres 144). In another letter,
she writes that she doesn’t feel a strong need to travel to her homeland in Algeria with
her sons, but it would be different if she had a daughter (79). She writes that her sons
afford her a reasonable distance by way of their difference, “Un fils reste l’Autre, et je
suis la mère à proximité, donc attentive et vigilante, ce que je n’aurais pas su être avec
une fille de ma chair et moi sa mère” (Lettres 144). This distance she refers to in her
relationship to her sons also explains in part why Sebbar prefers to write about those in
situations related to, yet very different from her own.

Leïla Sebbar also experiences the challenge posed by the generation gap and the
incomprehension between parents and their children. Sebbar notes more than once that
hér sons appear quite comfortable with their “French” identity, although she would prefer
that they chose to roam and search a bit more. In one letter, she writes,

Je poursuis chez moi cette lettre que je t’écritais dans un
café des Halles Au Père tranquille, où stationne une
jeunesse dorée bien parisienne. Des jeunes gens et des
jeunes filles à la mode, tranquilles, sûrs d’eux-mêmes et de
leur choix de lieux, de rencontre, d’études et de vie […] Je
les trouvai beaux, séduisants, drôles…Je pensais à mes fils:
est-ce qu’ils seraient comme eux dans quelques années?
J’avais plutôt envie qu’ils soient ailleurs, curieux et
vagabonds (Lettres 127).
Sebbar would like to see her sons question their existence more and experience life on the fringe of society. This position of not wanting your sons and daughters to forget about what is a part of them explains perhaps why her protagonists fulfill this role. In fact, she often speaks of her characters as if they were also her offspring. She explains how she did travel back to Algeria while writing her novel about Shérazade and that Shérazade was her companion, but they did not go to her village, “Shérazade m’a arrêtée à Alger, et c’était mieux ainsi, pour cette fois… C’est Shérazade qui ira en Algérie, dans l’Algérie contemporaine, sans moi… Parce que j’ai comme une peur d’aller où je n’ai plus rien à faire…” (83). She knows that to try to go back to her childhood house with the many gates and trees would be futile and disappointing. She imagines in letter XIII of Lettres parisiennes a return to her village in Algeria, holding hands with a little girl who would allow her to return to nostalgia. She describes in great detail her home and family there. The nostalgic details of her writing replace the actual voyage for her. In her novels, her characters also rely on memories or the memories of their parents to bring them to places from the past.

Everyday objects or banal rituals are part of this nostalgic process of learning to remember. Sebbar compares her writing process to the rituals of housecleaning in her article, “Travail de ménagère, travail d’écrivaine.” She describes how the objects surrounding her writing corner evolve and change depending on her work in the same way that one might re-arrange the living room either for amusement or by necessity:

...photographies de presse, cartes postales coloniales, étiquettes, timbres, écussons régionaux, cartes de géographie, paquet de cigarettes Camel, boutons de mercerie, plumes sergent-major, photographies d’enfance, paysages algériens… (4).
Thus, in her writing, everyday objects and images, such as a green ribbon or a Chinese notebook, propel her characters into a larger, historical and mythological framework. In many of Leïla Sebbar’s stories, the youth are acutely aware of the symbols of exile and integration while their parent’s generation is often depicted as numb to this type of reflection. They are sometimes unable to bridge the contextual gap between the family codes of honor they bring from their homelands and the new circumstances they face in raising their children in another land with contradictory codes. This often leads to ruptures between mothers, fathers and their sons and daughters. In some of Sebbar’s stories the grandparents, who either remained in Algeria or who are completely segregated from French society by language and religion, nevertheless are able to bridge this generation gap through their deep belief in the sacredness of their grandchildren.

The young characters in the fiction of Leïla Sebbar all experience nostalgia for their country of origin. It is also an unsure nostalgia, her protagonists experience the loss associated with fading memories of childhood visits or photographs. The broken bridge between languages is also a theme and how young people relate to the native language of their parents that they may never learn. They also struggle with their economic and social status, facing the racism and mistrust of the society around them. So while they may cling to the memories of their mothers and fathers, they experience a deep malaise which requires them to break from family tradition and go out “looking” for the wound. This is an unconscious recognition of the suffering experienced by the older generation and an attempt to identify with their parents by experiencing the pain of exile as well. Leïla Sebbar describes this search with great empathy, which allows her characters to transcend the banal and hopeless and emphasize instead the mythic proportions of the
individual. In *Les Carnets de Shérazade*, for example, the modern Shérazade demonstrates the influence of Arabic culture and its lasting presence in France as she travels and reads through her notebooks. She teaches Gilles, her companion, why the historical traces of her ancestors are important. She recounts, "À cause des Arabes, je voulais m’arrêter dans cette ville, pas ceux d’aujourd’hui, ceux du VIIIe siècle. Tu sais qu’ils ont occupé ces régions du sud-ouest et qu’ils ont tenu Narbonne plus de quarante années? Ils appelaient la Gaule le pays des « Afranjs » et « ard al Kabira » la grande terre" (264). Therefore, exile is not entirely exile when your family returns to a country that was once inhabited by your culture.

Leïla Sebbar emphasizes the relevance of youth and their connection to traditions and the past. She also affirms their right to live in France or any other country they choose. In an article written November 1, 2002 by Anour Majid entitled, “The Failure of Postcolonial Theory After 9/11,” the tendency to celebrate hybridity and national mixings as a form of liberation is criticized by Majid, for ignoring the growing disenchantment with globalization among people of all cultures. He describes several Muslim and North African texts that illustrate the bewilderment of cultural dislocation and emphasizes that most people in the world also suffer from this troubling alienation in a “vast, complicated social system they can neither comprehend nor change” (12). Nancy Huston writes to Sebbar in *Lettres parisiennes*.

...Il y a aussi nos réticences à l’égard de ce que tu appelles l’institution, notamment l’Université, dont je ne m’étais pas aperçue auparavant à quel point elles sont identiques. Je suis sûre que cela tient à nos conditions d’« exilées », même si on est arrivées là par des chemins différents. Toutes deux, on est entourées d’universitaires qui ont rédigés des thèses, décroché des diplômes,
Unfortunately, education can be a discouraging endeavor if it does not attempt to influence and answer to this alienation. Sebbar gives examples of Beurs who follow all the right steps of “assimilation” by pursuing technical diplomas, only to find they can not get hired because of high unemployment rates and discrimination. Imagine what they are capable of achieving if the global and national systems actually encouraged their aspirations rather than making them appear impossible.

Chapter two of this study explores how Sebbar demonstrates the importance of the mother’s oral tradition. The mother is a territory or asylum for sons in transit or social exile. Further, the chapter explains the cyclical nature of the mother-son relationship, which is one of bonding, then separation, and then a physical or symbolic return. It is the mother who speaks in *Parle Mon Fils, parle à ta mère* (1984), her voice is that of a Muslim woman who is homesick for Algeria, but who has raised all of her children in a workers housing project in France. Her son returns home after travelling the world, and the nostalgia he feels for his childhood is deeply connected to his mother, whose home and body become the representation of his actual homeland. The place is neither French nor Algerian, but it is both at the same time. The mother and son must bridge the communication between different languages, cultures and generations.

In other works, the young men depicted are so far removed culturally and physically from their mothers and the past generations that they are literally lost. Leïla Sebbar’s 1987 novel, *J.H. cherche âme soeur*, is dedicated to Kateb Yacine and recalls the themes depicted in *Nedjma* of lost origins and the search for roots through an idealized
woman. Two young prison inmates play out a curious love triangle that leads them back to a life in prison. Their search for love, real or imaginary, is related to their relationship with their mothers and their life in France as an alienated and displaced youth. The play on words Sebbar uses between “la mère” (mother) and “la mer” (the sea) also demonstrates the theme of the mother as source of origin and the impossibility of returning to the source.

The violent, social and political upheaval in Algeria for more than half a century (and as far back as 1830) coupled with the mass immigration of male Algerian workers to France has often left the mothers alone to raise the children. Leïla Sebbar’s 1993 novel, Le Silence des rives (winner of the 2001 Kateb Yacine prize for literature), explores the final day in the life of a Maghrebian immigrant man in France. The rootedness of his mother in Algeria is contrasted with the vagabond nature of her son, who breaks his promise to his mother to return home one day. Once he faces death, the man returns to the memory of his mother, seeking to return to his Algerian home on the other shore and complete the traditional rituals for the dying. His mother has died, and with her the maternal and paternal territory because her husband is not there. When the children no longer maintain ties to their families and cultures, the old ways and cultural knowledge of the mother’s generation also dies.

Chapter three of this thesis analyzes the mothers and daughters in the works of Leïla Sebbar who experience separation because of their generational and cultural differences. However, the young women do not lose the cultural and spiritual knowledge their mothers share with them and these teachings serve to strengthen the daughters when they confront the world outside their home. In most of Sebbar’s fiction there is an
example of a daughter who has run away from home. The daughters experience a complicated struggle for autonomy, which is to be explored primarily in Sebbar’s novel, *Sherazade: 17 ans, jeune, frisée, les yeux verts*. The young Shérazade runs away from her family and their perspective of her. She struggles for her own identity while the society outside continues to categorize and define her. During her flight, Shérazade meets other young women who have run away.

Leïla Sebbar also writes short fiction about runaway daughters. In the short story “Le travail à domicile” from Sebbar’s collection *Le Baiser*, a young medical student named Linn runs away with her boyfriend to travel to Vietnam, the homeland of her grandmother. The story depicts Linn’s process of connecting to her own history and her maternal lineage. The young daughters and sons in the works of Leïla Sebbar also attempt to connect to their paternal heritage, yet the relationships are more often marked with violence.

Further, Sebbar juxtaposes cultural references to nineteenth century Orientalist painters and writers with everyday modern life and the impressions they make upon the young women and men in her writing. She questions the authoritative voice and images of nineteenth century colonial discourse, emphasizing instead the authoritative voices of her characters and their experiences. The holistic view Leïla Sebbar creates in her multi-cultural and cross-generational fiction serves in the end to affirm the sacred and privileged position that multi-ethnic youth hold by being born at the crossroads of diverse cultures, geographies and economies.

Chapter four explores the separations and veils that exist between the Muslim fathers and their daughters in Sebbar’s fiction. The fathers are mainly portrayed as trying
to protect the family honor from the slander of the community. Her works also
demonstrate that brothers most often ally with the father whenever there is father-
daughter conflict. For young women such as Shérazade, the narrow role her father asks
her to play, coupled with the complicity of her brothers, sister and mother, creates an
unlivable family home for her and she is forced to flee. For other young women in
Sebbar’s fiction, such as Samira in Parle Mon Fils, parle à ta mère, the father threatens
violence and even death for a daughter’s transgression from patriarchal law. Under this
harsh rule, the mother and son secretly ally with Samira, trying to help her yet feeling
powerless to do so at the same time. This theme is also depicted in Fatima ou les
Algériennes au square. Leïla Sebbar is deeply sensitive to the fear that a father feels
about his daughter becoming a sexual being. She realistically portrays how the fathers
and daughters react to this fear in her short story “La Jeune Fille au balcon.” Ironically,
in many traditional Muslim homes, the power a father exhibits over his daughter is
disproportionate to the amount of time he actually spends with her. Yet Leïla Sebbar is
never one-sided in her depictions, so she shows how the small gestures a father makes to
support his daughter take on a lot of significance for her later in life.

Chapter five of this study explores how the relationships between a son and his
father center most often on the father’s memories of war. The aftermath of World War II
and the wars for independence in the French colonies make young men growing up in
France or Algeria today deeply affected by their father’s experiences. The fathers in the
fiction of Leïla Sebbar seem the most “exiled” of the other family members in many
ways. In several stories, they’ve chosen not to return home after serving as soldiers. In
other stories, they suffer from mental illness or have simply become defeated and
demoralized. Oftentimes, such as in the short story, "L'Enfer," the son learns about his father through the intermediary voice of his mother or grandmother. The father’s absence does not stop his son from empathizing with him or imitating him in some way. They are instilled with the rigid concepts of honor and religion, but they adapt these concepts to fit the experiences of their generation.

Leila Sebbar describes the signs of her identity through an analysis of the intertextual tapestry she weaves in her writing. Sebbar not only explores the presence of Maghrebian immigrants in France during the twentieth century, but her young people discover the cultural contributions of the Arabic presence in Europe throughout many centuries. Thus, the young Maghrebian population restores its legitimate heritage and belonging to European society through Sebbar’s writing. The young people in Sebbar’s fiction negotiate their multi-cultural identity through an exploration of the languages, arts and people they encounter outside their home. They may be exposed to different concepts and philosophies through their French education, through opera, rap music, or the neighbors in cafés. This exploration is a necessary bridge toward reconciling them with their parents, their history, and their loss of identity or exile.
Chapter II
The Maternal Territory as Asylum for Exiled Sons

The relationships between a mother and her son or a grandmother and her son are explored in the works of Leïla Sebbar throughout four formative stages: first, the sons remember their childhood experiences of the linguistic and physical bonding to their mother. Second, they also remember childhood experiences where points of separation from the maternal territory are marked. During the third stage, the mother and the son both make personal discoveries after the son comes of age and experiences a geographical exile from his mother. Finally, there is a powerful longing, experienced by both mother and son, for the son to return home to his maternal territory. The son may not be able to bridge the geographical or psychological distance separating him from his mother, but he finds asylum in her memory.

The sons in her works are deeply connected to their childhood memories of their mother. The territory they refer to as home is in actuality her household and body. Sebbar writes mainly about families who are wounded by poverty and racism. Their mother has kept their dreary apartments alive with her daily rituals of cooking, cleaning and prayer. Even during the absence of the fathers because of work, abandonment or insanity, the mothers have been the transmitters of family tradition, history and spoken Arabic.

The “maternal territory” in Parle Mon Fils, parle à ta mère and in Le Silence des rives resides stylistically in Sebbar’s emphasis on the universal. She refers to the characters in these works as “the young man, the mother, the cousin and the man,” so that the family relationships are brought into focus. Young people growing up in the
moderated income housing units, the “habitation à loyer modéré” or “HLMs” of France, will identify with or know of many other families like the one represented by Leïla Sebbar in Parle Mon Fils. Leïla Sebbar also avoids stereotyping the young sons as rebellious youth with no respect for the older generation. Their revolt is directed outward to society. The inward rebellion against the mother, which results in a rejection of certain family traditions such as marriage rites, is more directly a rejection of the father’s laws. This is because the mother upholds the will of her husband. However, when a son chooses to rebel against his mother and father he may actually be in the process of freeing his mother from this enclosed patriarchal structure by offering new alternatives.

The maternal territory in Sebbar’s novels is also represented stylistically through language; by juxtaposing the son’s longing to return to “la mer” when he is revisiting memories of “la mère” or vice versa. In J.H. cherche âme sœur, Jaffar tries to pour his heart out to a woman from the personal ads by revealing his longing to return to the sea, “Avant j’avais la mer et j’aimais pas la mer, maintenant je rêve toutes les nuits de vagues immenses qui vont m’engloutir et je me sauve” (J.H. 25). He burns this letter in an ashtray because it reveals too closely his longing for the maternal body. Similarly, the man who is dying in Le Silence des rives spends his last days wandering along the seashore, remembering “the other shore” of his maternal homeland. He has spent most of his life as an immigrant worker in France, in exile from his mother. He is not sure if she is still alive, or if he will make it home so she can speak the customary prayer at his death. Each chapter in Le Chinois vert d’Afrique begins with a description of Mohamed running and the reader discovers that he is running toward “la mer.” He has chosen to
run toward his origins, only in his story he leaves his parents behind because it is his grandmother who lives on the other shore.

The son bonds to the maternal territory of the mother through his childhood memories of her daily rituals and her physical presence. In Parle Mon Fils, the son spends the entire afternoon listening to his mother speak while reliving his childhood with her. His father is away in an asylum. The son is content to breathe the familiar aromas of the house, eat his mother’s cookies and drink mint tea from her special glasses etched with the camels. He notices that her dresses are still made of the same type of fabric she used to embrace him with as a child and he remembers their morning ritual, “Il aimait quand la mère fait le café debout devant la fenêtre. Il se levait toujours le premier” (Parle 20). He is the oldest son, so he occupies a special place in his mother’s heart.

Similarly, the Algerian man in Le Silence des rives spends his last days remembering the physical affection and the special bonds he developed with his mother. His old and yellow teeth remind him of the day he lost his first tooth. His mother took him in her arms and told him it was the prettiest tooth she had ever seen. Then she gave him a glass of warm milk to drink and a fresh fig to eat. He found a gold coin at the bottom of his glass of milk (Silence 45). As the oldest son, his mother also favored him, yet her favor is both a blessing and a burden. In the novel, J.H. Cherche âme sœur, Jaffar remembers his mother from his prison cell. He was passionate about geography and he remembers how his mother used to stop watching television to stand near him and watch him color his maps (J.H. 129).

The sixteen year-old Mohamed or Momo of Le Chinois vert d’Afrique, maintains his closest bonds with his Vietnamese grandmother rather than his Turkish mother, Aïda.
He remembers napping next to Minh on hot afternoons during his childhood visits to Algeria (Chinois 63). Mohamed’s bond with Minh is related directly to her territory. For Minh chose to follow her Algerian husband, Mohamed, to North Africa when the wars broke out in Vietnam. Although she did not convert entirely to Islam, she made herself a welcome part of the Algerian community by learning to speak French and Arabic and by spending time with the community of women. And because Slim and Aïda, Mohamed’s parents, live in France but do not adopt the European culture and language, Mohamed is naturally drawn to his origins in North Africa and with Minh.

The physical bonding during the son’s childhood reinforces the linguistic bonding. The son hears the maternal language when the mothers come together to chat, when learning prayers and rituals from his mother, when being praised or scolded and when the mother is transmitting her stories and family history. This linguistic bonding is significant, because the mother transmits knowledge to her son that suggests an alternative reading of conventional, patriarchal laws. When the son returns home for a day in Parle Mon Fils and his mother begins speaking to him in Arabic, it reminds him of the stories his mother told every night before bed (37). She transmits stories from the Koran, but she also tells folk stories from her Berber origins as well as the Thousand and One Arabian Nights, a classic story of a woman gaining freedom through linguistic prowess. The mother in J.H. cherche âme sœur cannot write to him in prison because she is illiterate, yet he guards his memories of conversations with his mother where the two exchange cultural knowledge with one another. Mohamed in Le Chinois vert is the only grandchild who always asks Minh to sing her Vietnamese lullabies to him.
Before entering adolescence, the son in Muslim cultures is often privileged to hear women speak among themselves. The women in a community gather to work at home or the son may go with the women to the public baths, or “hammams.” The son in Le Silence ponders the various perspectives he hears about the three sisters who wash and prepare the dead. He remembers how his mother would gather with the other women of the village in the hammams or to care for the cemetery while they exchanged superstitious gossip about the rituals and origins of these three sisters. These stories become an obsession for him; he spends hours in cafés, drinking beer and telling others about them. In the short story, “Monologue du soldat,” from the collection, Le Baiser, the son listens to the women talk while they work and thus learns the reason why his father sits mute all day.

Many of the sons in the works of Leila Sebbar exchange promises with their mothers and grandmothers while they are young. These linguistic exchanges are incredibly powerful; they create a lifetime bond and influence the decisions the sons make. Mahomed, or Hammidou as his grandmother called him, has the picture of Minh tacked up in his abandoned worker’s shack. It is the picture she promised to give him one day. He promises her to work and earn enough money to take her back to her Vietnamese homeland one day, “Il aurait de l’argent pour aller avec elle dans son village des rizières, c’est juré, promis, il a scellé le pacte secret en frappant un grand coup sur la petit main fine de Mina...” (Chinois 72). Similarly, the mother in Parle Mon Fils asks her son to save his money so that his father can make the Hadj, or pilgrimage to Mecca (Parle 21). The man in Le Silence des rives is burdened with grief as he grows older because he did not keep the promise he made to his mother to return home and assure that
her last wishes would be carried out correctly. He feels he has wasted his life drinking and gambling, yet as a final gesture, he scribbles out messages and throws them in the sea so that the seagulls might carry them to his mother on the other shore. In the short story “La Photo d’identité,” the young Beur, Yacine, finds himself staring day after day in the bookstore window. He is joined by an older, ragged-looking Algerian man who shows him the photo taken by a French soldier of his mother in the book, Femmes algériennes, 1960. The Algerian man recounts his childhood; how his grandmother blames the camera or “mauvais œil” of the French soldier for his mother’s insanity. He promises her he will find the French soldier and bring his camera back to his grandmother to break the spell.

Points of separation and exile from the mother parallel the memories of bonding to the maternal territory. While the separation is both linguistic and cultural, it exposes the mirror of difference and similarity between the experiences of a mother and a son. The descriptions of linguistic bonding to the maternal body are not meant to contradict Freud or Lacan, for the memory of the maternal language is at the same time a reminder of the beginning points of separation from the mother. This separation, however, is a “double lack” and has more to do with the outward, cultural condition of exile. The son who is born in France becomes exiled from his maternal language and lives in what Leïla Sebbar describes as a “double exile,” because he does not truly belong to France or Algeria (Lettres 62). In Le Chinois vert d’Afrique, Momo sneaks home one afternoon to shower and leave without a trace. Yet his mother Aïda finds him there. She responds, “Parle-moi, je suis ta mère, tu es mon fils, mon premier fils…” (Chinois 104). He does not respond and will not look her in the eyes. He runs away when she lets go of him.
This linguistic separation creates the entire narrative structure in Parle Mon Fils, parle à ta mère. The young man returns home to his mother in the HLM apartment after a long absence. She asks him to speak to her, “Qu’est-ce que tu dis? Parle, tu es mon fils non? Parle. Je suis ta mère. Tu as faim mon petit?” (2). Her son is ashamed of his absence and lowers his eyes. She speaks to him all afternoon and he responds only briefly, through his gestures or occasionally he says reassuringly, “Oui Imma, tu as raison, je t’écoute” (Parle 4). After many years of living in France, the mother understands, but does not speak or write, the French language. Her son understands Arabic, but is educated in the French language only. Thus, his mother speaks to him in Arabic and he responds in French. He remembers the day he came running into the kitchen, proud to show his mother how he had borrowed the Thousand and One Arabian Nights from his library at school, only to see her respond with disappointment that he was reading it in French instead of Arabic (Parle 34). For the mother, who does not know how to write, cultural heritage is transmitted through oral tradition. The son, however, also needs to explore his Arabic roots with his own eyes and in his own language, which means understanding the Arabic culture through French.

The cultural separation the mother and son experience is also a question of religion. The mother in Parle Mon Fils is very concerned that her son no longer practices the five daily prayers of Islam the way she taught him to do when young. She relates to him as prodigal son, hoping she can save his soul from damnation. There is a similar exchange between a young man and his grandmother in Sebbar’s short story, “L’Enfer,” from the collection, La Jeune Fille au balcon. The grandmother sends her grandson off to the big city with the small prayer rug she made for him as a child. The grandmother
blesses him, but warns him to avoid the violence that shamed his father. She does not realize her grandson is leaving home with a pistol wrapped inside the prayer rug ("Enfer" 140). In the case of "L’Enfer,” the grandson has been influenced by Islamic militants to justify his acts of violence. His grandmother remains ignorant of this troubling religious current sweeping through the youth of today. The grandmother is still traumatized by the violence in her family—her son, her husband and her father all fought during the conflicts between France and Algeria—so she may want to deny these wounds or she is just praying for a different outcome in the case of her grandson. These young men continue to venerate their mothers and grandmothers as sacred beings while adapting religious dogma to fit their generational and cultural needs.

The adherence to tradition and especially marriage traditions is an important way for many North-African immigrants to preserve their religion and culture in a foreign country. The first generation of immigrants to come to France following World War II carried their traditions with them. In the generations to follow, however, many young Beurs who have not had the strong geographical bond to their cultural origins have chosen instead to affirm the specificity of their identity and traditions. In the documentary film, Les Beurettes, for example, young Maghrebian men and women express how difficult it is for them to maintain strong ties to their families and/or their religion after marrying a European. The persons interviewed in the film were at the same time quite happy to embrace the diversity in their families and the métissage of their children. In Parle Mon Fils, parle à ta mère, the son’s mother is also concerned that he will choose to marry a French woman instead of a Maghrebian woman. She recounts how her friend’s son was stolen away from his family because of his mixed marriage:
"Mais la Française a voulu le garder pour elle. C’est elle, la voleuse” (Parle, 77).

Claude Liauzu explains in his essay about mixed marriages among French and North Africans that mixed marriages among the French and Algerians receive the most negative attention in those two countries. Il écrit, “Le licite et l’illicite sont strictement codifiés, et si le désir suscite la transgression, le ‘couple interdit’ ne peut produire que des ‘enfants illégitimes.’ Ce qui est vrai de manière générale l’est plus encore dans le cas franco-algérien, qui cumule les hypothèques” (“Guerres des Sabines” 115). In Le Silence des rives, the man chooses to marry a French woman. She portrays this negative image of the “thief.” She is depicted as unhappy and unable to accept neither her husband nor his cultural origins. She is more like the European wives, described by Odile Casenave in Rebellious Women: The New Generation of Female African Novelists, who will not assimilate to an African culture (19-38).

The mother’s view in Parle Mon Fils is complicated because mixed marriages are often viewed as a transgression. A mixed marriage transgresses either the Muslim, integrist viewpoint that European culture corrupts a Muslim family or the Algerian, nationalist viewpoint that one is submitting to the colonizer by marrying a European. However, though these perspectives persist, colonialization and immigration have changed the landscape and demographics of families in France. As though she understands this reality, the mother sends her son away with the photograph of a beautiful cousin she has chosen for her son. She is realistic about her son’s desires to be free to choose his own path, so she ingeniously chooses a young blue-eyed, Algerian who is studying to be a doctor. She hopes the blue eyes (although she prefers brown) and education of the cousin will compete with the sophisticated, blue-eyed French women her
son may be seeing. Thus, she seeks to bridge the cultural and ideological distances between herself and her son through compromise. Although he only comes home for one afternoon before leaving again, his mother gives him the cousin's photograph as a talisman and a reminder that her son should choose to connect to the maternal territory by obeying his mother's wishes.

The son must make the final separation by leaving home altogether. This stage of geographical exile from the mother represents a necessary time of discovery. The son in Parle Mon Fils travels all around North Africa, discovering the geography of his ancestors. Mohamed in Le Chinois vert wanders the city, meeting other, mixed-ethnic young people like himself, and discovering the wars of his ancestors by collecting war photographs. As the novel unfolds, he is running toward the sea. His mother Aïda has difficulty understanding why he is so fascinated by photos of boats and photos of war. During his absence, his sister Melissa helps Aïda to understand why this interest is so important for him. These are the signs of his search for the wholeness of the maternal territory, one that is not wounded by poverty or war. The grandson in “L'Enfer” and Jaffar in J.H. cherche âme sœur, have been numbed by the more pathological symptoms of violence, exile and fanaticism among young men. Their need to flee is very real.

Leïla Sebbar collaborated with the photographer Gilles Larvor on a photographic essay about the Parisian suburbs entitled, Val-Nord: Fragments de banlieu in 1998. In an interview with Mona Collet, Gilles Larvor explains that before the end of the 1980's, the Beur movement had not yet touched the ghettos. He made friends with all of the people he photographed. His friend Khatir explains,
On a laissé moisir les cités. Quand la situation s'est dégradée, ceux qui en avaient les moyens les ont désertées- je ne les condamne pas, j'en fais partie! Là où j’habitais, il y avait trop d’embrouilles, ça devenait invivable (“On Vit avec le béton” 4).

However, Leïla Sebbar also instills within her young men the memory of their childhood and a longing to understand their origins. This includes encounters with different people in similar phases of life and a very deliberate sorting through the world’s media and culture. All of these young men, through their outward voyage, discover new roots and the richness of their origins, as well as the ties that bind them to their mothers. This sorting and choosing explains why Jaffar, for example, is given a copy of Yacine’s *Nedjma* by the prison librarian. Or further, why the reader discovers that Shérazade is Jaffar’s cousin from the Parisian suburbs. His first day out from prison he hitches a ride from the driver, Gilles, of the blue “Gauloises” truck who spent seven French-Arabian days with Shérazade on her journey in *Les Carnets de Shérazade*. Later, it seems Jaffar and Shérazade meet in *Le Fou de Shérazade* while hiding from snipers in the midst of the violence in Beirut, Lebanon. In *Le Silence des rives*, the man finds himself drawn to the nearby cabaret where his younger cousin just happens to be the singing diva. Although he doesn’t reveal his identity, her singing soothes him and reconnects him to the lost maternal territory.

All of the son’s voyages of discovery have their parallel for the mothers as an inner voyage of discovery. The mother in *Parle Mon Fils* finds herself alone when the younger children are at school listening to the radio stations like “Radio Beur” that speak of the pride growing among young people of North African heritage. She sincerely wants to understand the generational gap between herself, her son and her run-away daughter.
Sebbar indicates an understanding on the mother’s part and a willingness to learn from her children’s generation. She wants her son to tell her about the Beur march through France, organized by “S.O.S. Racism” in 1982, to raise awareness and pride among the population of France for this unique and gifted generation. She worries about them at night, as if she were the mother of them all, wondering if they are getting enough food and blankets to make the march from Paris to Marseilles. In Le Chinois vert, Mohamed’s mother, Aïda, began listening to cassettes the neighbor women gave her, of the Algerian singer Djur Djura, although the men around her denounce the music as profane. The music of Djur Djura vindicates the liberation of women while remaining relevant to the cultural ties of Muslim and Berber women.

Thus, there exists a mirror of differences and similarities between the different experiences of the mother and the son. They are both enclosed, or limited, by their status as “foreigner” in a nation-state that both welcomes and rejects them. However, the mother is in her double enclosure of exile and wife. The son may not surpass the outward appearance of being labeled a foreigner, but legally he becomes educated and enjoys the rights of a citizen. His mother remains limited to her household or odd jobs. These are sacred and beautiful spaces, as Sebbar clearly illustrates. Yet the mother depicted in these stories and novels will not seek to transgress her role as Muslim wife because she is holding her territory together for her children. Her son is thus free to wander and explore. This freedom, however, is not without its own dangers and limitations.

In her description of her childhood home in France, Leïla Sebbar writes that a home can only be held together and the children will only return if there is a woman present (Enfance outremer, 188). The son who leaves his mother in quest of his
geographical and cultural origins, nevertheless needs to return to his mother, as point of
origin, in order to find asylum in the nostalgia of childhood. The relationship is
reciprocal because the mother needs her son to return in manhood in order to keep her
“foundation” solid and bring peace to her territory. In Le Silence des rives, the cracking
foundation of the house and the general demise of Algeria represent the broken promises
of the fathers and sons to return home (Silence, Mortimer, xiv).

illustrates how the mother maintains the coherence and “territory” of a family. An old
woman spends her last days living in a small rented room in Marseille. She raised her
seven children there after immigrating to France and though they have all left to start
families in America and elsewhere, she refuses to join them there. She maintains that the
place where she raised her children in exile has now become the home where she will die.
Sebbar writes,

Je les ai mis au monde ici dans cette ville, c’est ma ville,
aujourd’hui où je suis vieille, je veux mourir dans ma
chambre et j’ai ma place dans la cimetière marin que je
connais, s’ils ne m’adon­nonnent pas, qu’ils viennent là où
je vis, à Marseille, dans la ville où ils ont appris à marcher
et à parler avec les Arabes et les Nègres qui sont nés
comme eux dans la ville de l’exil, leur ville natale, ma
ville... (“La Chambre” 47).

Her only sorrow is that she will die alone, as symbolized by the irritation she feels for the
grandfather clock on her wall that has stopped ticking. She sees no point in repairing it
anymore, with no one there to care for it (50). Therefore, the longing to return home to
the maternal territory is shown to be impossible. And while Sebbar’s young men do
venture off in search of the lost object, they also rely upon memory in order to make a
symbolic return to the mother of their childhood.
Chapter III
The Separations between Mothers in Exile and Daughters in Flight

Mothers and daughters experience their relationships in the works of Leïla Sebbar as an interweaving of similarities and differences. Their gender places them in similar positions, but the difference in generation and culture creates very different perspectives and experiences for the mother and her daughter. For example, the enclosed or private space takes on different meanings for a Muslim-Algerian mother in exile than it does for her young daughter who has often run away from her home. Both women are “unsafe” in the realm of public space, but for different reasons. One must first understand where the mothers and daughters in Sebbar’s works have come from in order to understand where they are and where they are going.

The notion of difference has always been troublesome for any culture because difference creates a void in what was imagined to be whole. Julia Kristeva describes this unsettling process of meeting the foreigner as a destruction of the self, in that one may reject and at the same time identify. This may remain in one’s psyche as a psychotic symptom (thus the need for repression) or become an opening toward a new process of facing the incongruous as part of oneself (Étrangers 188). This same psychological process occurs collectively in society when facing the question of gender. Woman is viewed as other, whether she is native or foreigner, and patriarchal society controls her “incongruity” by various means and to various degrees. In Woman, Native, Other, Trinh T. Minh-ha explains that the gender divide is violated by necessity. Further, she writes that violations of gender,
Having always been experienced as a terrifying force when carried out collectively, they also constitute an effective means of redressing a power imbalance or defying the established order, and they aim, not at effacing the gender line, but at confirming it through change (116).

The daughters in Sebbar's work who violate traditional notions of gender by necessity become separated geographically and culturally from their mothers. Meanwhile, Sebbar's mothers tend to preserve the gender line, also by necessity. They may have daughters who choose to remain in the traditional female role and other daughters who attempt to escape this role. The novels and short stories of Leïla Sebbar include mothers who live in war torn countries such as Libya and Algeria, mothers who live in France as exiled immigrants or in the case of J.H. cherche âme sœur, the mother of Lise is a French farmer. Stylistically, Leïla Sebbar does not usually name her mothers in her short stories and novels, although she always refers to their geographical origins. In her early novel, Fatima ou les Algériennes au square, her title suggests that Sebbar has created a portrait of Algerian women and the family that surrounds them. Rather than create the idea that all of her mothers are the same, and therefore uninteresting; her works can be read as a whole. This reading creates a larger and more profound portrait of motherhood, and allows the unifying elements of "the mother of all mothers" to clarify the individuality of each woman.

In North Africa, the extent to which a Muslim woman is veiled and kept at home depends upon her country's government, her regional customs and her family. Women who have remained in Algeria have seen their freedoms to enter public space come and go as a confusing progression and regression of violence, as is described in the short story, "La Jeune Fille au balcon." In the early 1990's, fifteen year-old Melissa lives in
one of the most violent sections of Algiers, called Kaboul. Melissa sits with her mother and her aunts watching the news, they see coverage of demonstrations, with women marching in the streets, unveiled and angry. Melissa's oldest aunt was educated in the French schools and participated in the freedom movements of the fifties and the sixties, in which Algerian women used western clothing and removed the veil as a way of infiltrating the Europeans. This made it possible to confront the colonial presence in the streets, as Malek Alloula describes in The Colonial Harem (10). While watching the news footage of their country, the women feel as if they are seeing Algeria for the first time, because they never leave their neighborhood. Melissa challenges their present complacency, yet begins to understand that the women are as equally afraid of shame as they are of violence. Today they would never want to be seen in the streets, waving their “naked” arms in protest with the other women, even though they may have done this thirty years earlier, during the struggle for Algerian independence. Now their neighborhoods are controlled by fanatical bands of terrorists, driving black Golf Volkswagens. The women going to market must hide from them behind walls and trees, they say that the cars will shoot women and children (“La Jeune Fille” 17). Force and fear preserve the power structure and impose a rigid moral order.

In France, Muslim women may still be compelled by their families or community to keep the cultural traditions or they may be free to make their own choices. Often, for a Muslim woman in France, wearing the headscarf, called the “hijeb,” or the full veil, called the “haïk,” is an affirmation of her cultural identity in European society. Yet restrictions against wearing the veil in France may actually hinder a woman’s religious and cultural practices (Cordelier 71). Since 1994, in response to the “affaire du foulard,”
there was a movement to ban the veil in schools and other public institutions because it was seen as being an ostentatious religious symbol (Civilisation française 89). However, as the recent, March 8th International Women’s Day in Paris affirmed, many young Maghrebian women who live in the French cities feel they must wear the veil as protection from disrespect or rape (Cousin 27). Also, as Shérazade describes in Sebbar’s Les Carnets, her mothers do not wear the Haïk when in France, but whenever they visit Algeria, they are sure to veil themselves. Thus, older women tend to maintain or cross the established gender lines by cultural necessity and according to the generational norms they are rarely free to establish. The young women who marched on International Women’s Day wore t-shirts with the slogan “Ni Putes, Ni Soumises” in order to protest their exclusion from the cultural decisions of what it means to be a respectable woman. The younger women of Shérazade’s generation find themselves automatically placed in the category of “whore” or “submissive” unless they flee to the extreme position outside of their culture and family. These categories, however, cannot be escaped because they are also deeply instilled in Western European culture and are applied more liberally to women representing “the exotic other.” For example, Shérazade and her Parisian friends, France and Zouzou, are tricked into coming to a photographer’s studio, who actually intends to use the women for an exotic, pornographic jungle scene. The women escape by threatening him with toy pistols (Shérazade: 17 ans 155). Sebbar shows that the voyeuristic fantasies of the exotic woman, exemplified in the French colonial postcards of Algerian women in the early 1900’s, continue to be mass marketed and often exploit women of low incomes.
Whatever her religion or custom, every Maghrebian woman must ponder the legacy against which Nina Bouraoui rebels in *La Voyeuse interdite*, "Mon avenir est inscrit sur les yeux sans couleur de ma mère et les corps monstrueuses de mes sœurs. Parfaites incarnations du devenir de toutes les femmes cloîtrées!" (15). Born in Rennes in 1967, Bouraoui won the 1991 Inter prize for her novel in which the rebel gaze behind the veil indicts not only the paternal structure, but the complicit maternal structure that keeps women sequestered in shame. In Sebbar’s *Shérazade: 17 ans*, Shérazade has run away from home after feeling pressure from her family to marry a Muslim. However, she is deeply interested in learning about the women of Algeria and the colonial gaze forced upon them. One evening, after Julien and his friend have finished filming her for a movie they are making, she notices a book of photography with an Arab or Berber woman on the cover. It’s the book, *Femmes algériennes 1960*, the same book that causes the man in the short story, "La Photo d’identité," to seek revenge upon the soldier who took the photo of his mother. Shérazade notices that they all have the same intense gaze before the camera lens that an image can only archive, never dominate. All of these women spoke the language of her mother, thinks Shérazade, and as she leafs through the photos, she begins to cry (*Shérazade: 17 ans* 220). With the Frenchman, Julien Desrosiers, Shérazade hears the word “odalisque” for the very first time. Julien explains, “Elles sont toujours allongées, alanguies, le regard vague, presque endormies... Elles évoquent pour les peintres de l’Occident la nonchalance, la lascivité, la séduction perverse des femmes orientales” (190). Julien adds that the term “odalisque” under the Ottoman Empire, in reality referred to the slaves who served the women of the royal harem, and was used as a generic title by painters such as Delacroix, Ingres, Renoir and Matisse. Shérazade very
deliberately studies the nineteenth century paintings of the odalisques and reads
intently about the wars in Algeria in order to understand women who lived before her and
to understand the French fantasies about these women.

The Muslim mothers in Shérazade and Sebbar’s other novels bring their cultures
with them while exiled in France or preserve the traditional culture while remaining in
war-torn Algeria. This may mean that they are servants of their husband, confined to
their homes and the community of other Muslim women. Once exiled in France, the
mothers may have to adapt their traditions to fit their smaller apartments and private
spaces. Thursday is described in Shérazade as sewing day. Shérazade’s mother invites
all of the women in her housing block to sew dresses for holidays and wedding
celebrations. She transforms the small apartment into a workshop. The women come
together to work, drink coffee and share stories (200). The mother of Melissa and
Mohamed in Le Chinois vert d’Afrique insists on tanning the sheepskin each time her
family kills a lamb. Sebbar describes how Aïda painstakingly cleans the hide in the
bathtub and how her family always complains about the smell because she must dry the
skins under the children’s beds(102). The mother in “La Jeune Fille au balcon” washes
the family’s laundry by hand in the bathtub each evening and cherishes the quiet
moments when she can be alone to wash her own undergarments (18).

The mothers possess a strong dedication to their children and to other mothers in
the community. They share with their daughters the Muslim rituals of their homeland
and the daughters adopt them as they mature. These include occasional visits to the
marabout or Muslim priest, the five daily obligatory prayers, the ritual cleansing or
ablutions, the fasting during Ramadan and memorization of verses of the Koran.
Sherazade and her sister Mériem are familiar with the special evenings when they retreat to the bathroom to apply the henna to their hands (Shérazade: 17 ans 204). In the short story, “Vierge Folle, vierge sage” from La Jeune Fille au balcon, the twin sisters, Dina and Dora, experience their first day of Ramadan together with their mother, “Elles prient avec la mère, chacune sur son tapis dans la chambre à coucher. L’une à gauche, Dora, l’autre à droite, Dina, elles prient toutes les trois. Après les ablutions, elles changent de robe, elles mettent un foulard, et elles prient (119). Shérazade is often without a shower while in Paris. She often asks to shower at Julien’s place, where she naturally finds herself doing the cleansing motions of the ablutions her mother taught her (Shérazade: 17 ans 135).

The oral traditions the mothers preserve also reveals the transmission of a matriarchal, spiritual knowledge, passed down from mother to daughter for generations. These include the knowledge of plants and the healing powers they possess. When the daughter, Dalila, receives the beatings of her father, the mother, Fatima, applies a healing salve to her bruises at night that she makes from the herbs of the Arab markets (Fatima 13). The mother in Parle Mon Fils laments the impotency of the basil and mint in France. She says it does not have the power to ward off evil the way these plants do in Algeria (32). The impotency of the plants is symbolic of her own feelings of powerless in the foreign culture. She was powerless to keep her daughter, Samira, from running away. At home, her matriarchal knowledge was respected and conferred “potency.” In irreverent France, however, her beliefs are dismissed as superstitions. Similarly, in Le Fou de Shérazade, the old woman of the village is thought to be “folle,” or crazy, when the French filmmaker in the dark glasses encounters her wrath for having dug up the village
centennial olive tree to use for his film starring Shérazade. To this woman, the tree represents the sacred center of her universe, as Mircea Eliade describes in his explanation of the cosmology of traditional cultures in *Le Sacré et le profane* (129). The old woman leaves her village on foot in quest of the sacred tree; a young girl from the village accompanies her. She understands the old woman and the importance of the olive tree. Sebbar emphasizes the sacred power of the olive tree as an ancient symbol of peace when the filmmaker replants it in the courtyard of the immigrant housing where Shérazade's family lives. The tree transforms the entire neighborhood. The young boys form gangs around the tree to protect it from harm and the whims of the French filmmaker, the mothers plant herbs and vegetables in small plots around the newly transplanted earth, and neighbors from all around begin to cover the tree with amulets and offerings (*Le Fou* 133). Meanwhile, Shérazade slowly circles back home after a dangerous journey in which she often sits at the foot of olive trees in Beirut and Jerusalem. Her arrival coincides with the arrival of the old woman and the young girl as the magic realism of Sebbar highlights the power women possess to shape the political and social conflicts in France and in the Middle East.

The mothers also preserve their linguistic heritage. They all sing and tell stories to their children. The Algerian mothers do not lose the deep connection to the Arabic oral history of their people. They may not have learned written French or Arabic. As Mildred Mortimer explains in *Journeys Through the French African Novel*, Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar both serve to transcribe the oral tradition of Arabic women into French history (181). Assia Djebar was born in Algeria and in her critically acclaimed novels, she writes about Algerian history and peoples. While Djebar often transcribes the direct
speech of the women around her, Sebbar allows their stories to exist in the reader’s imagination while she tells a story about the storyteller. Trinh T. Minh-ha calls storytelling the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community. She writes,

In this chain and continuum, I am but one link […]
Pleasure in the copy, pleasure in the reproduction. No repetition can ever be identical, but my story carries with it their stories, their history, and our story repeats itself endlessly despite our persistence in denying it (Woman, Native, Other 122).

Shérazade remembers speaking in Arabic with her mother. She preserves this oral connection to Arabic enough that she is able to teach some of the dialectical Arabic to her friend, Julien. He, in return, teaches her literary Arabic. Shérazade also tells Julien about the legends her grandfather in Algeria told her when she was little. Her grandfather always credited the stories to Shérazade’s grandmother by adding, “Ta grand-mère vous en aurait raconté de plus belles si elle était vivante, mais elle est morte pendant la guerre” (Shérazade: 17 ans 147). Sebbar emphasizes the idea that with the death of our storytellers or griottes, we witness the death of an entire library.

Mothers who do not come from an Arabic, Muslim culture are also depicted by Sebbar as transmitters of traditional culture and oral history. In the short story from Le Baiser, “Travail à domicile,” Linn is studying to be a doctor so she won’t have to be a slave to the sewing machine, like her mother. Linn’s mother tries to make Linn understand why her grandmother repeats to her grandchildren the same sad events of her life in Vietnam. She explains that the grandmother has forgotten the events of her life before her husband was captured during the war and the events that came after her trauma in the refugee camp. The grandmother, who can only be found sitting in the house
around an altar to the ancestors, explains that she repeats the same story to the children because, “les enfants oublient, il faut répéter encore et encore” (91). Although outwardly Linn protests against having to hear the stories again, inwardly Linn resolves to run away to Saigon, her destiny influenced by the knowledge of her grandmother’s past. At the end of the story, she arrives for her plane home to France, smiling, arm in arm with twin Cambodian girls, who she adopted in order to save them from a life of prostitution (106).

In other works by Leïla Sebbar, a French daughter may experience the North African culture through her relationship with a mother by proxy. In the short story, “La Bain maure,” also from the collection, Le Baiser, Fabienne Larrieu is a museum curator in France who is propelled back to the memories of the hammam when she lived in Algeria as part of the French colonies. Her nanny, Fatouma, took Fabienne on visits to the baths in order to spend more time with her mother and sisters. Fabienne remembers how they ate oranges and drank tea. Then they washed one another and put orange water in her hair. As a museum curator, Fabienne is surely familiar with the white skin of the women in the nineteenth century painting by Ingres, “Le Bain turc.” In Sebbar’s portrayal, the dark-skinned women of the Moorish bath cleanse the white skin of Fabienne. When the two arrive home, Fabienne’s mother forbids Fatouma to bring Fabienne back into the dangerous, “black quarters.” That night, her mother snidely remarks that “orange” is for pastries, not for perfuming the body (115). In “La Bain maure,” Sebbar is also emphasizing how mothering is a soulful action that does not necessarily distinguish between class boundaries and blood relations. The child of the French bourgeois may find herself in a more nurturing relationship with her servant than with her own mother. This is also the theme in the short story, “La
Négresse à l’enfant,” which describes the very physical bond between the tired child sleeping in the arms of her servant as their sweat and smells mix along the long walk back to the colonial manor. The children who experience these comforting relationships with women from other cultures and classes also experience how their French mothers react to the servants with an unjustified racism and jealousy, attempting to break the bonds that have formed between them.

Not all of the daughters in Leila Sebbar’s novels run away from their families. Sebbar portrays daughters who run away and violate traditional gender lines and daughters who stay to adapt the ways of their mothers. Shérazade’s older sister, Mériem, does not break with her mother, but remains in her traditional role as daughter at home. She serves as intermediary between Shérazade and her mother, between European values and Islamic tradition. Shérazade always sends letters and a cassette of her voice through one of Mériem’s friends. Mériem is always the first one to hear any news of Shérazade, because she is more connected to the outside world. She also serves as a support to her mother, telling her it is all right to cry and assuring her that Shérazade will be fine. Similarly, Melissa is the eldest sister in Le Chinois vert d’Afrique and the only family member who remains in contact with her brother Mohamed when he flees. Their mother, Aïda, sends her son food and blankets through Melissa. Interestingly enough, Melissa had been an excellent student with a promising career as doctor but she dropped out of school after Mohamed ran away. She chose instead to take care of her little brothers and sisters at home and sew pretty things for her vagabond brother. Her family, while wanting her to have economic opportunities, nevertheless supports Melissa’s decision to stay at home and do housework. She has, perhaps subconsciously, taken on the
responsibility of the mother who creates a stable home environment so that her son will return.

In a more ironic short story, “Vierge Folle, vierge sage” the two twin sisters, Dina and Dora, choose opposing paths that lead both to a disturbing end. At fifteen years of age, it is Dora who has become a devout Muslim. She spends all of her free time reading the Koran in her room while her sister is out with her friends. At first, it appears that Dina has become “corrupted” by European culture and habits while Dora will remain the dutiful Muslim daughter. Yet Dora runs away the same day as her sister to join a group of Islamic terrorists. Their mother finds them gone and cries,

Mes filles... mes petites filles, lumières de mes yeux... Je suis dans la nuit, elles me laissent seule pour des démons... une vierge et une putain... Je savais, je savais, j’ai toujours su et j’ai fait semblant. J’ai prié, j’ai prié pour un peu de bonheur, encore un peu... et c’est le malheur qui vient, le malheur deux fois, pour toujours... (125).

The mother’s youngest son, Tarik, tries to assure his mother by telling her that her daughters will always be her daughters and they will come back some day. His words resemble those of Mériem, who several times throughout Shérazade’s absence has to reassure her mother that Shérazade will return. At the very end of Le Fou de Shérazade, Mériem and her mother arrive at their courtyard after Shérazade’s return, only to witness the explosion in the film that is supposed to kill her. Shérazade’s mother screams that her daughter has been killed, while Mériem tries to calm her and show her that it was only a film. Mériem’s last lines, “Shérazade est vivante, vivante... vivante...” are meant to reassure the reader as well as the mother. Yet the disturbing ambiguity of the ending also signifies the symbolic death of the heroine in the eyes of her mother.
When the daughters mature into young women, the mothers and daughters are unable to bridge the gap between their different generations and cultures. Leïla Sebbar and Nancy Huston took part in many feminist demonstrations and literary circles during the feminist movements in the late 1970’s. Sebbar writes in *Lettres parisiennes* of the bitter irony that comes with the feminist struggle of wanting to fight for the rights of woman by rejecting “our mothers” or the condition of traditional motherhood under patriarchy (109). In an essay by Ann Kaplan, entitled, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, feminism is described as remaining locked, psychoanalytically, in ambivalence toward the mother. Feminism is spoken from a woman’s position as “daughter,” deeply tied to the mother while striving for an apparently unattainable autonomy (173). Kaplan writes that many feminists are unable to analyze the mother from her position, but that we must now look toward explorations of the way the mother has been constructed and to give her the voice she has so long been denied (188). This silence is also associated with the first generation of Maghrebian immigrants in France, who only began to receive a voice through transcribed autobiographical narratives and through their children during the 1980’s and 1990’s (Ireland 24). Thus, a complicated struggle for independence marks the mother-daughter relationships in the writing of Leïla Sebbar, especially in the first novel of her trilogy, *Shérazade: 17 ans, jeune, frisée, les yeux verts*. Sebbar narrates the mother’s perspective while she cries to Mériem,

Sa mère pleurait en disant à sa fille que si Shérazade voulait revenir, elle serait contente et son père aussi. Ils n’avaient pas compris pourquoi elle était partie. Elle ne manquait de rien. Elle ne sortait pas beaucoup mais elle n’était pas la seule, et les raclées du père n’étaient pas si terribles, tout de même. Ce n’était pas une raison. (69).
Shérazade's mother also speaks for Shérazade's father. She compares Shérazade to the women of her generation and culture, finding that Shérazade is much better off than she was at her daughter's age. She is almost finished with her schooling, she has many suitors with promising careers asking to marry her, and she has a father whose punishments are much less severe than those of her own father. The mother and father feel that they gave their daughter everything, "Qu'est-ce qu'elle voulait de plus?" they ask.

Thus, while a mother and father may support the need for a son to wander and explore, in the daughter this need signifies a violation of normal feminine behavior. Leïla Sebbar describes how her own mother had difficulty understanding why she had such a passion for reading. In her essay, "Si Je parle la langue de ma mère," Leïla's mother talked with her friends about how different Leïla was from her sister, "Jamais rien pour la maison, même pour ses poupées. Il faut la forcer [...] Toujours avec un livre. Elle n'aime que ça. D'une paresse... (Les Temps Modernes 1179). Shérazade's mother repeats the same perspective, "Sa mère supportait mal de la voir lire tout le temps—comme une folle— quand il y avait tant de travail à la maison avec les petits..." (Shérazade: 17 ans 70). Because Shérazade and her mother live in two different cultures, they cannot understand one another until they are forced to look deeper during their separation. Her home and her children is the mother's private space, she doesn't seek to know more because she would not be safe outside this realm. She would feel in danger of being corrupted or abused by the culture outside her private space. Shérazade, because she has learned to read and write, both French and a little Arabic, and because she is naturally curious, chooses books and her journal as her private space.
Unlike her mother and her sister as well, Shérazade has too many unanswered questions and unfulfilled dreams to be content with her family’s expectations of her. Just as Sebbar describes in her essay, “Si Je parle la langue de ma mère,” she faced confusing and contradictory questions about her identity, but her mother and father did not give her satisfactory answers. She writes that she had to find them in books, “Pour arriver un jour jusqu’à moi il m’a fallu le détour des livres. Détour politique, je dirai. Le détour de la guerre. Le détour des femmes. Enfin. Où me trouver? Fille ou garçon? Du côté des colonisés, de la force? Petite fille modèle, rebelle?” (1181). Shérazade’s mother assumed her daughter was coming home late because she was out with a man, when in fact Shérazade was in the library, gathering answers about the wars of men and her female ancestors who lived through them, in both France and Algeria.

It remains vital to Shérazade’s mother and the other mothers in the works of Sebbar to maintain the stability of their gender role as a matter of survival and as a sacrifice for their children. The repetition of the same gestures and household rituals are acts of the soul. Leïla Sebbar explains in her essay, “Travail de ménagère, travail d’écrivaine” that these rituals protect against insanity and even death (3). In the same sense, the rituals of writing, of arranging and rearranging one’s thoughts and gathering substance, is an act of survival. The young women have replaced one ritual for another by gaining access to written language. For young women growing up in France, who may always be labeled a foreigner because of the color of their skin or their home address, becoming adept in the French language is a way to overcome this exclusion. Shérazade, like her mythological namesake, must read and learn stories as a matter of survival. Her knowledge becomes a talisman, like the seer who must lose innocence
through initiation into the mysteries while being purified and strengthened at the same
time.

Shérazade encounters other young run-away women during her flight. During her
stay in Paris, she finds shelter in an abandoned flat, or “squatt.” She meets a diversity of
young people, all brought together through their economic and social estrangement. In
her community in Marseille, Djamila was the only young woman to receive her
baccalaureate degree. Yet for many young Maghrebian men and women, success in the
French educational system does not guarantee a successful place in that society, nor does
it give satisfactory answers to the inter-generational family questions of origin and
identity. Djamila’s father went back to Algeria with her two brothers and never returned
to Djamila and her mother. Djamila learned that he had settled in Algeria and remarried
a cousin from Sétif. Nevertheless, Djamila feels compelled to go to Algeria and find him.
Her mother does not understand why she wants to leave, but she does not try to stop her
daughter (Shérazade: 17 ans 31). Instead of going straight to Algeria, Djamila heads to
Paris with no money and nothing but a map. Like Shérazade, Paris becomes a necessary
point of exploration and departure for Djamila, because it is a crossroads of cultures and
young people. More importantly, Shérazade and Djamila both understand that the
Maghrebian and Beur culture of Paris is rich and diverse, offering them more choices as
women than the traditional cultures instilled in their homeland.

Leaving the safety of domestic space and living alone in the city is also quite
dangerous. Shérazade is a run-away minor with no identification in a city where the
police suspect all young people of color and men often prey upon young girls who are
alone. Shérazade and her squatt companions often steal for food and clothing. Yet
Sherazade’s mother and Samira’s mother in Parle Mon Fils fear the worst for their daughters, thinking they will be killed or become prostitutes. Although the reader does not learn what happens to Samira, Sebbar narrates the adventures of Sherazade, who chooses quite carefully her friends and spends most of her time in the Beaubourg library, at the Louvre or relaxing at Julien Desrosier’s apartment. Still, the fears of the mothers are legitimate. They come from a culture where the honor of a woman is all-important, simply to go out alone and meet with her daughter in a café, Samira’s mother could risk the shame of the community or the physical abuse of her husband. Sherazade narrowly escapes rape, assault or arrest on many occasions throughout the three novels, Sherazade, Les Carnets and Le Fou. Sherazade escapes these traumas because Leïla Sebbar wants to emphasize that not all young women who choose non-conventional paths are powerless victims.

The flight of Sherazade also allows her to forge strong bonds with people who resemble alternative families. Sherazade works as a nanny for a family in Nantes in the novel, Les Carnets de Sherazade. Régis is a teacher and Aurore works with computers. Sherazade says she would have liked to spend a long time with them and their two daughters, Flora and Iris. They have a large library in the house, and Aurore introduces Sherazade to the journals of Flora Tristan, the French-Peruvian woman who traveled alone across France in 1844 in order to help the working class poor of France (Les Carnets 113). Aurore becomes a secondary mother to Sherazade. She offers Sherazade a different model of mothering, where economic stability and an intellectual community seem to create the utopian nuclear family. Sherazade compares her idyllic breakfasts out in the garden with Flora and Iris to the chaotic mornings in the tiny kitchen when
Shérazade helped her mother feed her little brothers and sisters (102). Her friendship with Aurore and the two girls could have deepened if Régis had not kissed her and propelled her to move on (130).

Leila Sebbar returns each year with her two sons to her mother’s farmhouse in the rural community of La Dordogne, France. In her writing, she often portrays farming mothers and daughters who experience very similar relationships as the mothers and daughters of Maghrebian immigrants. Sebbar demonstrates that the differences between mothers and daughters are not only because they live in two different cultures, but because they are separated by generation as well. The mother of Lise in J.H. cherche âme sœur is very tied to the domestic space of her farm. Lise is not interested in farm life and her dreams of owning a big, fancy car and travelling the world propel her into a life of crime, on the run from the police. Still, Lise’s mother and older sister remain dedicated to helping Lise, her mother is constantly doing her laundry and sewing things for her. As Mildred Mortimer points out in Journeys through the French African Novel,

> If colonialism has created an impoverished immigrant population in French cities, industrialization has marginalized a French rural population. Shérazade learns that the walls of enclosure which imprison Maghrebian women in urban ghettos reappear in rural France (190).

Mortimer refers to the scene in Les Carnets de Sérázade, when Shérazade meets a runaway farm girl named Francette. Francette describes her despair of the monotony of farm life, always alone with the animals, wearing her brother’s clothes and rubber boots (227). Shérazade also travels through France with another young runaway named Marie. For a few weeks, they sneak through farmlands, stealing eggs and milk from the farmers. The police suspect a gang of fugitives to have invaded the countryside. But Marie and
Sherazade find protection with an old farming couple who still speaks the regional dialect. Fernande, "une bonne fermière," adopts the two young women as if they were her daughters. She teaches them how to make jam and pâté and she sews them dresses. After Fernande takes Sherazade and Marie to a village dance, the village men start coming around, asking to see her "daughters." Once again, Sherazade has to move on, but Fernande sends them off with provisions and takes their photo as if she were sending her two daughters off to school (Les Carnets 169).

In chapter two of this study, the relationship between the son and the mother demonstrates a very clear longing to return home or to return to the memory of the mother. The daughters who run away from home in the works of Sebbar do not overtly exhibit this longing because they seem to understand that they have crossed a barrier that cannot easily be re-entered. In Parle Mon Fils, Samira's father has sworn that he will kill his daughter if she returns home. In other works, such as in "Vierge folle, vierge sage," the return is never mentioned and appears equally impossible. Sherazade does not actually return home to her family in Le Fou de Sherazade, even though she arrives in the neighborhood. Her mother and Mériem must learn through the neighborhood gossip that she is in the courtyard for the making of Julien's film. The ambiguous nature of her return, coupled with the staging of her death, demonstrates that the Sherazade her family described in the police reports, seventeen years old, brown, curly hair with green eyes, has perhaps changed through her journey beyond recognition. Although the mothers also witness similar changes in their sons after a long absence, it is not coupled with the disappointment that a mother may feel toward her daughter, for not choosing the same path that she chose. In her story, "Travail à domicile," however, Linn's return appears to
be triumphant. Linn has used her education, as well as the painful memories of her exiled mother and grandmother, to find a safe exile for the twin Cambodian girls.

Leila Sebbar portrays the separations between mothers and daughters as intertwined with the rest of the family and community. This means that the sociological and psychoanalytic presence of the father represents an important aspect in how the mother/daughter relationships are forged. Sebbar therefore leaves the return of the runaway heroine ambiguous because it remains to be seen how the fathers will evolve in their relationships with their daughters.
Chapter IV

Veils of Honor between a Father and a Daughter, a Brother and a Sister

Lei'la Sebbar demonstrates in her novels and short stories the tension in the lives of daughters who must negotiate between the culture at home and the culture at school and in French society. Daughters of North-African immigrants must continually negotiate between being respected and being disdained, as defined by different cultures (Geesey 60). The question of legitimate national status has become intertwined with the familial and societal ideas about purity and corruption, especially when referring to young women. Although the fathers and brothers in the works of Sebbar may remain quite distant from the daughters in most ways, they become more involved and outspoken when they feel her purity is compromised. It is thus necessary to examine the cultural attitudes about honor and the symbolic implications of the veil in the family relationships depicted by Leïla Sebbar. The works of Sebbar also demonstrate an evolving (rather than static) paradigm of patriarchal power as a result of colonialization, migration and the liberation movements of both men and women.

The respectability of the generations of children who were born in France after their parents emigrated from Algeria is continually questioned by both European and Algerian societies. Their Algerian families call them, “les enfants de France” while in Europe they are often the subjects of mistrust and ridicule (Geesey 59). Shérazade enjoys wearing a woven scarf that resembles the ones she saw Berber women wearing in Algeria. She no longer wears her black and white Palestinian scarf, after she observed that it was a sign to the French police that she is a young Arab, and therefore a probable
target for arrest (Shérazade: 17 ans 9). During the few childhood visits to Algeria, the grandfather of Shérazade and Mériem teaches them about his perspective on the Algerian war. He says that they will not learn about it in France, which he calls “le pays des mirages.” His granddaughters are his favorites, but they will go off to the “Infidèles” and become “Roumiettes.” The dictionary, Le Petit Robert, defines a “roumi” as the name by which Muslims designate a Christian or a European. During Shérazade’s journey in Les Carnets, she meets a man from the Kabyle region of Algeria who reminds her of her father. She asks him if he has any children in France, and he tells her that his children will always remain in Algeria. He explains, “Les enfants ici en France, nos enfants, sont des enfants perdus […] Ceux-là sont perdus pour toujours. J’en connais beaucoup, je sais ce que je dis” (68). The fathers and grandfathers of these “lost children” do not understand that their daughters want to live differently from their parents, but remain strongly connected to their North African cultural origins.

The Maghrebian fathers in the works of Leila Sebbar uphold the patriarchal traditions of Islam, but to different extents and for different reasons. Maghrebian immigrants may uphold traditions in order to preserve their unique identity under the colonizing influence of a Western society that they may define as materialistic and exploitative. In their homes and Islamic communities, Maghrebian men retain respect and privilege. Outside of this context, they may feel powerless and worthless as they face racism and economic dependence upon a European or American boss. Thus when the man in Le Silence des rives feels his life has been wasted, it is because he has spent his life in a foreign land working for a foreign company. He no longer participates in an Islamic community, he has no children and his French wife disdainfully views the Islamic
traditions and concepts of his family. The guilt he feels for his life relates to his concepts of honor and duty toward his Algerian family, rather than the more modern concept of individual merit and financial independence from one’s family. His situation illustrates that the taboos against mixed marriages attempt to preserve the purity and legitimacy of Arabic and Islamic families and traditions.

In her essay, “Tradition and Transgression in the Novels of Assia Djebar and Aïcha Lemsine,” Silvia Nagy-Zekmi states that, “Identity may be linked to tradition, which in turn may be understood as a system of long-established beliefs and customs.” In gender relations, traditions keep power relations between men and women in the hands of men. Men are responsible for public space, yet the economic and social status of Sebbar’s characters affects these responsibilities and often shows this public space to be hostile and dangerous. In “La Jeune Fille au balcon,” Melissa’s father is responsible for going out each morning in the dangerous streets of Algiers to work as a mechanic. He has been a faithful worker since the independence of Algeria, yet he and his colleagues receive death threats from the ultra-militant Muslims who are fighting for power. His wife is responsible for saving enough water from the small daily ration so her husband can wash the grease off himself with a hot bath each night. Melissa’s mother, like all Muslim mothers, is responsible for the domestic space. She must make sure the children respect the traditions and honor of the family. Her husband enforces this responsibility when he tells her that she is not strict enough with their daughter, Melissa, “Ta fille est trop libre. Tu la laisse faire n’importe quoi. C’est toi qui dois la surveiller. Un de ces jours, elle se fera enlever et peut-être même avec son consentement…” (38).
Leila Sebbar acknowledges in “La Jeune Fille au balcon” and in Le Fou de Shérazade that military might and religious dogma often allow men a tyrannical and violent power over women. Melissa hears about young girls who are kidnapped from their homes, brought out to desert military encampments and forced to marry their captors. Her father expresses this genuine concern for her safety, but he also acknowledges that if Melissa is not kept in the house more, she may also choose to be seduced without his consent. Her father’s suspicions are justified when Melissa begins a very natural and innocent exchange of secret letters with a young man named Malik. He copies Arabic poetry for her and she leaves her message with a green ribbon, representing the color of Algeria.

One hopeful solution Sebbar gives for ending violence against women is for men to become more educated. Shérazade is sitting at the foot of an olive tree in Lebanon in Le Fou de Shérazade when a truck full of militants accuses her of spying and takes her hostage. The main reason they give for accusing her is that she is a woman all alone in a dangerous country. The narration reveals that Shérazade is not naïve to the very real danger she is in,

Elle sait qu’ils sont capables de battre des femmes, des enfants, elle le sait […] elle sait aussi que des hommes, soldats, mercenaires, miliciens, massacrent femmes et enfants dans la guerre, des hommes sans honneur, sans loyauté, qui aiment éventrer les femmes, mitrailler des enfants, comme des bêtes dans une chasse sauvage (44).

The commandos who are the most educated participate more reluctantly when the others interrogate Shérazade and burn her books of poetry. Yet they participate nonetheless. Shérazade also remembers hearing the shouts and cries of women being beaten in her neighborhood. Men in France, Algeria and elsewhere allow this to continue because they
consciously or subconsciously recognize that another man’s “private space” is his own property. This idea is also reinforced through traditions and the legal systems.

If public space is dangerous for women in both Europe and North Africa, it reflects the fact that women have not participated equally in its creation. In Europe, where women have gained more access to the public spaces of commerce and politics and the countries have achieved relative stability, it is especially the economically underprivileged women who experience the dangers of public space. The men in Sebbar’s writing come from many different backgrounds and religious traditions. They are Muslim, Jewish, and Christian. They are communist revolutionaries, French farmers, artist-intellectuals and truck drivers. It is important to note, however, that despite their apparent differences, the men in the works of Leïla Sebbar react as father figures and protectors of a woman’s virtue, even when they are not related to her. They continue to affirm their mastery over the domain of public space and the idea that women should naturally be afraid to enter it. Sebbar exposes this apparent concern as a denial, on the part of men, of their complicity in the violence against women. For instance, Shérazade tells her male friends in the squat about how two men accosted her on the street in the area of St. Denis. Shérazade becomes exasperated with them when they respond by asking her what she was thinking, walking alone in that area, as if she were asking to be assaulted. They place the blame on her transgression of the boundaries rather than upon the perversity of the men she encountered (Shérazade: 17 ans 88). Like the young women pointed out during the recent International Day for Women in the journal L’Express, they often overhear men in the cities say that only women who are wearing a headscarf or veil are off limits for sexual assault. In Les Carnets de Shérazade, when
Gilles expresses disbelief that Shérazade manages to hitchhike alone without being assaulted, she is furious. She asks him if he would prefer it if she were raped, and she stresses that this is not the path she chooses nor the path she deserves. She will not allow her experiences to be controlled by the perceived or actual power men have over women.

Family honor revolves around the purity of the women in the family and thus the virginity of the unmarried daughters. If the parents want to retain the family honor, they must be careful to preserve the appearance of their daughter’s purity in the eyes of the community. Thus, a family struggles to appear normal and free of scandal. When young Linn runs away to Vietnam in the story “Travail à domicile,” the family does not alert the police and lies to her school about her absence:

La Solidarité va répandre la rumeur, qui n’est pas une rumeur, elle a vraiment disparu, et l’enquête va se mener discrètement de l’un à l’autre, le père et les frères, les oncles... Pas seulement les hommes, mais ils travaillent ensemble, avec le secours des femmes, vigilantes et perspicaces (Le Baiser, 89).

These families are hesitant to involve the police or administrative authorities in their private lives because of their position as “Other.” Yet they also fear the involvement of the community in gossip about their family affairs and family honor. The community spreads rumors that reflect the repressed desires of the group. Shérazade’s father waited eight days before he finally reported her absence to the police,

Le père de Shérazade n’avait pas voulu aller à la police, à cause de la famille, du quartier, de la rumeur toujours mauvaise, de la honte, ce mot répété et repris, des milliers et des milliers de fois de bouche en bouche, et pour n’importe quel geste qui n’obéissait pas à la règle de la tradition, depuis que la cité était habitée par des Maghrébins (Shérazade: Dix-sept ans 127).
Thus, anything the daughter does becomes a reflection of the family. The family prefers to search out its daughters through anonymous radio announcements and other underground means. For Shérazade’s brothers, this includes a search through every strip club and nightclub in Paris where Maghrebian women might be found. Once again, her brothers project their own repressed sexual desires onto their sister. If they were not so willing to believe that all women are either righteous virgins or fallen prostitutes, they could have found their sister in the Beaubourg library, reading books about Algeria. In the film, “Les Beurettes,” several Maghrebian women explain how they are stuck with their feet between two cultures and while they do not want to renounce their family and their Muslim origins, the pressure from their father often leaves them no other choice. Several of these women, Nassera, Nadia and Djida, describe how they have had to work nights in order to succeed in school. They are hoping to gain the respect of their fathers by showing them that they are a valuable part of their society. Yet at the same time, their fathers are always suspicious when they leave the house, and sometimes they must say they are going to visit an aunt rather than going to participate in a study group.

Sebbar unveils the gaze of the daughter through the thoughts of Shérazade. Like the women in “Les Beurettes,” Shérazade is concerned about the image her father has of her. The man she meets from Kabyle reminds her of her father, and she identifies his thoughts with those of her father’s, “Shérazade pensa à son père. Pour lui, elle était un enfant perdu, une fille perdue” (Les Carnets 68). She regrets that her father now thinks of her as a “fallen woman.” Shérazade is on the run from her home enclosure, so she distrusts any male who attempts to restrict her autonomy. When she suspects that Julien sees her as his living representation of the nineteenth-century odalisques, she subverts his
gaze by tearing up the photographs he has taken of her, by covering her beauty with less attractive clothing and by making herself unavailable to him. She loves him and she loves her father, but she refuses to be enclosed. Similarly, in Fatima ou les Algériennes au square, Dalila closes herself off in her bedroom in revolt against her father’s beating, but she wakes to the sound of him singing an Arabic tune while shaving. The song and the smell of the morning air are very familiar to her, but the morning after her father’s violence, the song feels cruel to her, and it convinces her that she must flee her home (19).

On her own, Sherazade finds that the details of other men remind her of her father and her brothers. Yet because her father and her brothers remain at a veiled distance from her, Sherazade is able to express herself more openly with other father figures. She observes that Gilles smokes with his left hand, but remembers that her brothers smoke with the right hand because they were influenced by the Muslim taboos associated with the left hand (Les Carnets 213). Gilles stops at the river so he can shave and she can wash her clothes. While he is shaving, Sherazade thinks about how she loved watching her father shave while he sang in Arabic. She loved the kiss on the cheek he always gave her when his face was nice and smooth (218). Both these scenes indicate that Sherazade’s gaze toward her father is both analytical of the signs of cultural and gender difference while deeply emotive on the deeper level of the psyche.

The exchange between Sherazade and Gilles represents an emotional and intellectual exchange that is rarely possible between fathers and daughters. Gilles comes from a working-class French background with little knowledge of other cultures. Although he has his own particular prejudices, he is very interested in Sherazade’s stories
and experiences. The two characters share their love for travel; Gilles introduces Shérazade to the landscape of rural France while Shérazade inscribes the history of the Arab presence onto the modern French landscape. Although Shérazade will not allow Gilles to read from her notebooks without her consent, she transmits her history and her love of Arabic and French literature and Art to a more open vessel.

Leila Sebbar explores how the veil and enclosure function on a symbolic level in her short stories and her Shérazade novels. In her second book, *La Saison des narcisses*, the Kabyle singer, Djura, explains that Islamic traditions are rooted in a great fear of the desire that women enflame within men. She notes that Islamic traditions vary according to the needs and interests of the culture or the time. In general, romantic love in Muslim societies is a force that threatens the familial structure. She writes,

\[
\text{Même reconnaître le sentiment amoureux serait reconnaître la force souterraine de l’amour et du désir, affirmer la puissance du cœur et du même coup la puissance de la femme qui engendre le désir [...] En élevant des barrières infranchisables, en enfermant les femmes dans des espaces clos et domestiques, en imposant aux hommes comme aux femmes un monde de conventions, les institutions ont mis en place toute une stratégie contre le diabolique charme féminin (68).}
\]

Djura adds that the “institutions” have imposed a world of conventions on men as well as on women. This is the consensus of Leila Sebbar, as well as many other Maghrebian male and female writers who rebel against this world of conventions, such as Tahar ben Jalloun. In the novel, *Enfant de sable*, for instance, Tahar ben Jalloun writes from both sides of the mirror of the sexual divide, and the father breaks under the weight of phallocentric tradition. He is so completely paralyzed by the “Symbolic” and the “law of the father” that he ignores the body of the “Real” and passes the imaginary phallus onto
his daughter by announcing to the community that the newborn is a boy. Raised as a son, Ahmed sees from both sides of the mirror, only to conclude that to be born a woman is a natural infirmity while to be a man is an illusion, an “act of violence that gives no reason” (70). Nina Bouraoui also confirms Tahar ben Jalloun’s position through her language of derangement and infirmity in the writing of La Voyeuse interdite. These writers explore their societies in which women are the most enclosed and the gaze and the body of the woman is suppressed, appropriated and preserved by both the material and the symbolic veil.

The gaze of the “community” and its power to confer and destroy the honor of a family functions as a wall between daughters and their families. Shérazade’s father and Melissa’s father in “La Jeune Fille au balcon” are both depicted as rather gentle and supportive of their daughters. Melissa’s father brings her a stack of empty notebooks to support her love of writing. He tells his wife that they are just for her when she protests that they should be shared with the other children (44). Yet because Islamic militants control their neighborhoods, her father’s rules must conform to the tyranny of the community: no music, no jewelry or makeup and the women must never be seen outside after curfew. In Shérazade: 17 ans, the father and brothers are careful to avoid the gossip of the community and her father tries to maintain his role as the authoritarian, but when he sees a photo of his daughter, he can not help but to think about how much he still loves her (133).

Thus, in the works of Leïla Sebbar, the relationship between the father and the daughter is portrayed from several positions. And while the gaze of the community appears to be the most controlling, Sebbar orchestrates an incredibly de-centering story in
Le Fou de Shérazade in order to point the gazes in new directions. While Shérazade is being held hostage, her captors put a picture of her wearing a blindfold all over European television (108). This takes place just after Julien has finished posting giant life-size reproductions of paintings of odalisques, photos of war and a portrait of Shérazade in the courtyard of her neighborhood. The community reaction is telling. The women try to veil over the posters of odalisques as the young boys of the neighborhood take this veiling to its violent conclusion by destroying the posters with their mud bombs. First they hit their faces, then their breasts and legs. Yet they spare the photographs of war and the giant poster of Shérazade, “Le portrait de Shérazade n’a reçu ni balle ni gravier, comme si aucun des garçons n’avait osé tirer sur une sœur aînée ou une sœur préférée”(50).

Once again, the young men identify with her as their sister so she is therefore untouchable. The odalisques, however, are fallen women that can be soiled and assaulted. The Orientalists of the nineteenth century were intent upon unveiling and preserving the hidden sensuality of the Oriental woman. The colonial gaze penetrated the harem, the forbidden place. The Muslim community in France continues to rebel against this invasion by holding fast to their traditions and the tradition of guarding their women. Julien’s “colonial gaze” is subverted along with the veiled gaze of the Muslim family because the women in the novel do not conform to the expected poses assigned to them. The undutiful daughter returns home. By focusing its gaze upon her, the mixed-heritage of her society erupts with the changes that challenge its intentions and respectability. Her father and the other men in her community now must adapt the gaze they have put upon her to include the new information and new responses of the daughter’s gaze.
Chapter Five
The Son Lives the Exile of His Father’s Generation

Three main themes are explored in the relationships between fathers and sons in the works of Leïla Sebbar: the father’s physical, emotional or mental absence, the son’s identification with the father’s suffering and power and the symbolic memory that connects the son to his paternal heritage. The fathers in Sebbar’s works come from primarily three situations, and they all share the common element of absence. Nearly all of her fathers have fairly large families and work in factories or do some other form of manual labor. They immigrated to France to find work or they were forced to seek political asylum during the Algerian war and the civil unrest that followed. She describes some fathers who left their families and joined “le maquis,” or the revolutionary fighters for Algerian independence. Sebbar also describes the fathers who were “Harkis,” or Algerian soldiers who fought on the side of France during the war. Later, they became the objects of scorn among fellow Algerians and Algerian immigrants living in France. The fathers do not tell their stories in their own words. Their sons learn their stories through the intermediary voices of mothers, grandmothers, or other men who lived through similar experiences. They also interpret the stories through the details that are left unsaid.

It is necessary to read the novels and short stories of Leïla Sebbar as a whole in order to notice the repeating details of the father’s absence or silence and how these details contribute to a fundamental understanding of her inter-generational family relationships. The father may be too tired from working to interact with his children as in
Fatima ou les Algériennes au square, “Il travaillait beaucoup, quelquefois le samedi jusqu’au soir, ou le dimanche…” (11). In the story, “La Jeune Fille au balcon,” Sebbar writes, “Il travaille loin du quartier, le soir il revient épuisé, il s’endort parfois sur son journal ou devant la télévision…” (17). In the short story, “La Photo d’identité” from La Jeune Fille au balcon, the young boy, Yacine, begins to appropriate his father’s space during his absence, he sits in his father’s armchair to watch news about wars. His father always arrives home late so Yacine knows he can be left in peace (64).

The children also notice their father’s silence when he is with them. Shérazade remarks in Les Carnets, “Mon père ne parlait pas beaucoup, c’est ma mère qui est bavarde” (168). The short story, “Monologue du soldat,” from Sebbar’s collection, Le Baiser, begins, “Mon père ne m’a rien raconté. Mon père ne m’a pas parlé” (9). The short story, “L’Enfer,” also begins, “Mon père ne m’a pas parlé de sa guerre” (La Jeune Fille au balcon 125). The fathers are silent; not simply to establish a reserved patriarchal distance between their family members, but because the wounds they have experienced run powerfully deep and cut them off from the rest of the family.

The fathers may suffer from mental illness for differing reasons in the works of Leïla Sebbar and in works by other Maghrebian writers, such as in Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed, by Mehdi Charef. In Le Thé au harem, the young Madjid has to go and bring his father home each day from the bistro, “Le papa a perdu la raison depuis qu’il est tombé du toit qu’il couvrait. Sur la tête. Il n’a plus sa tête, comme dit sa femme” (41). In Sebbar’s Parle Mon Fils, the reader discovers that the father is in an asylum, but the only reason that can be deduced is that he worked too hard or became too angry. The mother says to her son, “…si tu veux, je te fais un café. Ton père n’est pas là. Là où il
est, on veut pas le laisser sortir; viens, mes tomates vont brûler” (11). The son in “Monologue du soldat” also describes his father’s mental illness, “Ainsi, mon père, chassé de son pays, avait décidé de s’asseoir et il n’avait plus bougé, il n’avait plus parlé. Il n’était pas vieux, mais il vivait comme un vieux, sans même jouer aux dominos avec les autres Harkis du camp” (11). To compensate for this physical, emotional and mental absence, the sons develop an indirect relationship with their fathers.

The father’s story must therefore be told through an intermediary, such as the grandmother or an unrelated father figure. Yacine’s mother in “La Photo d’identité” yells at him from the dining room to stop watching so much war on the television. Yacine responds, “Oui, j’aime la guerre. Quand je serai grand, je serai soldat, colonel, j’irai à la guerre, tu verras…” (64). Every day, he stops in front of the bookstore window at the Librairie des Deux Rives because it displays war photographs. Sebbar describes the exact scenes in the photos that attract his scopic fascination with war. When the close-up identification photo of an Algerian woman appears displayed in the bookstore window, a slight confusion or small fissure is created in the mind of Yacine. He remarks that the photo is “bizarre” and at the same time he feels the discomfort of the breath of a stranger next to him. This stranger becomes a key for Yacine to what his father does not say.

This first meeting or crossing between a boy and an old Algerian in “La Photo d’identité” follows the pattern of nearly all of Sebbar’s meetings. The feelings of judgement and discomfort felt at confronting the unknown or the Other are quickly followed by some small recognition of the details which relate one identity to another. Sebbar describes many new encounters in her Shérazade novels. For example, when Gilles first encounters Shérazade asleep in his truck in Les Carnets, her dirty clothes at
first disgust him. But he then identifies Shérazade with the more familiar image of Marilyn Monroe because the two women have the same lips. While hitchhiking through France, Shérazade is less wary to ride with the Kabyle salesman whom she trusts because he has the mustache and eyes of her father.

Thus in “La Photo d’identité,” Yacine greets the warm breath of the stranger behind him with the initial reaction of repulsion until he notices that the man and his father wear the same style of hat, “Il n’aime pas la chaleur d’un inconnu. Le reflet dans le vitre, il le suprend très vite. Il reconnaît d’abord la toque en astrakan synthétique, son père en porte un, lui aussi, pour aller à son travail” (65). The man propels him to be curious and to think about his father. He thinks to himself, “Peut-être que l’homme a fait la guerre, dans le pays de son père? Yacine ne sait pas-- son père ne lui parle pas de ces années-là” (66). Yacine needs this man, a more haggard and unstable figure of his father, to explain what the films and photos of war do not express. He needs someone to explain the wound that creates the silence. The woman who owns the bookstore is also part of this exchange because her friend is the soldier who took the photo. The Berber woman in the photo is the Algerian man’s mother. The man explains to Yacine and the owner of the bookstore how his mother became insane shortly after her photograph was taken, as her village was overtaken by the control of the French forces. She also received the wound of war that creates silence, the man tells Yacine that this soldier-photographer stole his mother’s mind, she became empty, or “vide” (76).

The Algerian man also needs Yacine, to pass the symbolic memory of his story to a new generation and remove the burden he feels at being helpless to protect his mother from the “mauvais œil” of the camera. When he begins to tell his story, he trembles and
Yacine thinks he is going to cause a violent scene. He says that he has been searching for the photographer so that he can kill him and avenge his mother's tragedy. As a child, this man relied upon his grandmother to explain why his father was absent and why his mother no longer spoke. This feeling of helplessness is what burdens so many men in exile. They are exiled from participating in the political and economic decisions that affect their families. As Julia Kristeva describes in *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*, the natural rights of man very easily slip into the semantics of *national*, where *normal* citizenry tends to exclude the foreigner, politically and socially (151). The grandmother relates the chaos that ensued in their village as a result of the French military occupation,

Ils disaient que c’était pour nous protéger, ils assuraient notre sécurité... Quels ennemis nous menaçaient? Avant les militaires français, personne n’avait vu de soldats, jamais, pas un seul. Ton père était déjà parti, on disait qu’il avait pris le maquis, même ta mère ne savait rien, on ne l’as pas encore revu (“La Photo d’identité” 78).

The evil eye of the camera and the presence of the French soldier is also symbolic of a rape of the village women, and the boy’s helplessness to protect his mother becomes in the child’s mind his own castration. For the man, telling the story represents the cathartic death of the French soldier-photographer and a removal of the castrating presence of the law. He tears the page from the book of photography and burns it in the wood stove as he says, “Voilà, c’est fini. J’ai tué le soldat photographe et ma mère me reconnaîtra quand j’arriverai chez elle, au village. C’est fini. Au revoir, madame” (82). The man leaves the bookstore holding hands with Yacine as he offers Yacine a more peaceful alternative to healing the wounds of violence.

In “Monologue du soldat,” a young soldier describes the war in which he is fighting and the war in which his father fought. Hired to be a peace-keeper in the civil
war between the Bosnians and the Serbs, he experiences the killing and rape among neighbors, now enemy “brothers” and “sisters.” He compares the civil war to the experiences of his father, who had to kill his fellow countrymen as one of the Harkis. His father has become silent and withdrawn as the “glory” of war has become instead a shameful, dark family secret. The narrative of “Monologue” is one of parallels and memories that the young soldier relates back to his father. He remembers hearing about war and their refugee camp while he was still young enough to be around the women,

Je n’ai pas compris les mots éclatés qui se dispersaient d’une bouche à l’autre, dans le désordre. J’avais sept ans, je ne savais pas encore que ce pays n’était pas le pays de mon père, que ce camp forestier, il ne l’aimait pas parce que c’était “le camp de la honte” comme je l’entendais dire entre les pièces de linge, les femmes se parlaient sans se voir...(11).

Similarly, in the short story “L’Enfer,” a young man’s grandmother and great-grandmother extol the virtues of his grandfather and great-grandfather who fought as “honorable” soldiers for Algeria and Europe during World War II or as revolutionaries for Algerian independence. He spends his life believing that his father followed in their footsteps. Slowly, his grandmother reveals to him that his father had been a Harki and that he did not leave the family in honor, but in shame. Just before the young man leaves for the city, his grandmother reveals his father’s story, “Tu es grand. Tu dois savoir. Ton père est mon fils, mais je ne vais pas te mentir pour sauver son honneur. Son honneur, il l’a perdu, je le sais, je te le dis, tu dois savoir. Le silence de ton père, c’est le silence de la honte” (134).

The young son believes he can defend his father’s honor by joining a militant-Muslim street gang. As part of his initiation, he must assault and rob an important
bureaucrat and his son. Sebbar notes the symbolism of his act; the victims are the same age as the young man and his father. He says the prayers of the Koran and justifies his violence before God. The street gang presents itself as a powerful band of Robin Hoods, stealing from the bourgeois to help their poor neighborhood. In the past, his father had also perceived the French to be on the most powerful, winning side. The French culture affirms this view by honoring the Harkis. Yet the Algerian community views them as mercenary traitors. When the violent and religious fervor of the young man leads him to murder, Sebbar demonstrates how the tide of power and glory quickly turns upon the violent aggressor whenever his actions compromise the honor of the community.

Immigrant fathers tend to adhere to the laws of France while rejecting assimilation by adhering strongly to their religion and traditions. Their sons may become more assimilated into French culture, but they tend to choose social exile. Many young Maghrebian men in France see their parents struggling to survive in an increasingly competitive, global economic system. They see how factory work has stolen the life out of their fathers and they are disillusioned. For Yacine, a young Beur in the Parisian suburbs, this means that he and his gang of friends organize petty crimes in order to buy cigarettes and to feel the excitement of running from the police. Many of Sebbar's other young male characters follow suit. Jaffar in J.H. cherche âme sœur, the young brothers in Fatima ou les Algériennes au square, Mohamed in Le Chinois vert d'Afrique and the male roommates Driss and Krim in Shérazade: 17 ans, all resort to crime or in some cases, male prostitution in order to gain some economic control. With France and Algeria suffering from the problems of unemployment or "chômage", the lower class and immigrant population suffers the most. Thus, many young men since the eighties have
had little economic prospects and their precarious position leads them to reject societal norms of lawful behavior. As more Algerians move to France because of the desperate political and economic situation in Algeria and fewer immigrants are granted political asylum, illegal immigration and work in the Black Market is the norm (Hargreaves 10). The colonial project thus comes back to haunt its founders and divide communities.

For the sons in the works of Sebbar, the identification and imitation of the father is a means of experiencing the father’s presence in their lives. The son feels helpless to heal the wounds that exile him from his father. He saw his father’s dreams cut off at a certain point and he subconsciously hopes to return to this point in the father’s life, to become the embodiment of his father’s dreams. At the same time, the son’s imitation is a competition. He tries to supercede the position held by his father in society. He adapts his rituals of identification to the historical and demographic situation in which he lives. War films and photographs recount the symbolic memory of the “people” and the “family” as continually vanquished or manipulated by military force. The military is the young son’s first instinctual path because the wounds of the father originate there, at the extreme end of the symbolic order of the Law. The son strives to become powerful enough to experience the father’s wounds, but also to overcome them. Yacine, in “La Photo d’identité,” does not do well in school; he focuses his intelligence instead upon learning how to be a soldier. Yacine knows intuitively that his father became a powerless, poor laborer because of the causes of war, which forced him into exile. He may identify with the idealized figure of his father in the past, in the glory of military uniform, because his father in the present is the model of the vanquished proletariat.
In Sebbar’s writing, the one or two memories a son might keep for himself, such as his father’s brand of cigarette, become part of a larger, more connected repository of redemptive symbolism. This repository of symbolism relates back to Leila Sebbar’s comments in *Lettres parisienes* and her insistence that her characters are not her identity, but the *signs* of her identity. Sebbar affirms that the smells and sensations of daily, material existence create lasting, symbolic impressions within one’s psyche. The symbolism is redemptive because it connects generations to a purposeful and evolving existence. The son in “Monologue du soldat” remembers how he read aloud the label on his father’s cigarette wrapper as he watched him roll his cigarettes. He then reflects on the larger meaning of who he is and why he is a soldier in a foreign war between the Bosnians and the Serbs. In “La Photo d’identité,” Yacine can see the reflection of a stranger behind him in the bookstore window. Although the man resembles his father, the stranger does not smell of coffee and tobacco like his father does. His father smokes the tobacco of poor immigrants. Yacine smokes more expensive Marlboros with his friends, yet he is aware of the generational distance that would never allow him to smoke in the presence of his father. The young man in the short story, “L’Enfer,” associates the smell of henna with the hands of his grandmother and her ritual story about his grandfather.

The symbolic memory of the father connects young men to their origins and ancestors. Sebbar’s young men may have been born and raised in France and they may not practice the traditional language and traditions of their fathers, but they are highly conscious of their geographical and cultural heritage. In *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique*, when the factory workers in a café offer Mohamed something to eat, they are surprised that he
does not want the fast food of the French café but asks instead for a “galette,” the more traditional snack of rural France and Algeria. They become interested in his origins.

Mohamed points first towards the sprawling suburbs of Paris, until the men ask him to trace his lineage to his paternal grandfather. Mohamed responds, “Il est d’Algérie. Un village d’Oranie” (155). One of the workers is already familiar with other Algerian men who fought for France in the war in Indochina and returned to Algeria with Vietnamese wives. He explains that he knew many children with the same Asian eyes as Mohamed. The men discuss the different political situations facing Arabs in France, in Algeria and in Palestine. At home, Mohamed does not speak so openly with his father, Slim, about these subjects. Mohamed must venture out on his own and join other men to take part in his cultural heritage and to feel connected to a larger family of postcolonial subjects.

For Sebbar, writing is equivalent to sending messages, like an S.O.S. in a bottle. It therefore includes all forms of spoken, written and visual media. The soldier in "Monologue" keeps a journal of his experiences and his thoughts. For him, it is a way to communicate with his father, even if his father never reads a word of his journal. In La Seine était rouge, Amel and Omer inspire Louis to film the entrance to the prison across from his apartment. An historical marker describes war from the French viewpoint, glorifying the French resistance during the German occupation of World War II.

EN CETTE PRISON
LE 11 NOVEMBRE 1940
FURENT INCARCÉRÉS
DES LYCÉENS ET DES ÉTUDIANTS
QUI À L’APPEL DU GÉNÉRAL DE GAULLE
SE DRESSÈRONT LES PREMIERS
CONTRE L’OCCUPANT

Louis films the prison, this time, by analogy focusing on the later Algerian resistance to French occupation. Next to the historical marker he writes in red paint,
The young men seek out the historical truth behind the silence of their parents and the official silence of their society. Memory, then, becomes as relevant as present day events.

Thus, the young sons venture out to experience their father’s presence through his symbolic memory. They learn his story through the intermediary voices of strangers and other family members. As with the young women in the works of Leïla Sebbar, these young men seek a new understanding of their geo-political and historical origins. The neo-colonial, hierarchical power structure entrenched in the economic and military organization of France and Algeria today often reduces the potency of the patriarchal Muslim family. This allows many young men a greater freedom to find their power through other means, such as education, art or social change. Sebbar hints that the young men in her writings may long for a more egalitarian, non-violent type of power, but they are also vulnerable to the violence of the economic and military social structure that wounds their fathers. In her depictions of father and son relationships, Sebbar acknowledges that progress and change are contradictory, and that paths must be crossed and re-traced from within and between conflict and injustice.
Conclusion

The inter-generational portrait in the works of Leïla Sebbar emphasizes the separations and differences between generations and cultures. Her mothers, fathers, sons and daughters all experience a social or geographical exile. However, in order to unify a seemingly disjointed view of Franco-Maghrebian family life, an analysis of Leïla Sebbar must also read closely the unity in Sebbar’s details. In the color green, the feel of an Algerian prayer rug, or the sipping sound Algerian mothers make while savoring their tea, the Beur youth find their heritage while adapting the details to their individual identities. Because Leïla Sebbar grew up at the crossroads of religions and cultures, she is capable of describing the signs of this exile. In fact, her writing actually creates a new map of the territory of exile. She writes of the mother who suffers between the leaky roofs and creaky floors of her absent husbands, sons and runaway daughters. At the same time, the mother depicted by Sebbar is a strong, central foundation, with ideas and aspirations of her own. As she states in Lettres parisiennes, exile is the place where contradictions and divisions can be enunciated (51). Thus, Sebbar re-creates territories where strangeness or the Other can build or repair foundations, rather than create fissures. Sebbar carefully describes the socio-historical reality of present day Francophone society. This reality has always been full of contradictions and cultural crossings.

Like Sebbar herself, the youth in her works discover the territory of exile through memory. The learned memory of historical events is not a process of patching over old wounds. For Sebbar and her characters, this process requires listening to the stories of
the older generations as well as reading and re-writing history. It is necessary to study maps and connect modern territories with the events of the past. At times, it is also necessary to cross all the established boundaries and experience either the destructive or the regenerative territory of exile. Sebbar writes, “...l’exil est ma terre d’inspiration, de lyrisme, d’émotion, d’écriture” (Lettres 144). She indicates that writing is a very important tool, for herself and her characters, to establish and experience this territory for future generations.

Memory, then, becomes as relevant as present day events. The memory of a child may contradict the memory of the child’s mother or father. Sebbar allows the different interpretations to co-exist in the same territory through her writing. Her writing de-centers any one dominant, cultural paradigm. When the traditional viewpoint of the grandmother and the postmodern aspirations of her granddaughter gain equal respect among workers, politicians, and academicians alike, a community progresses beyond repression and fear. Leïla Sebbar’s family portraits ultimately depict a complex, yet hopeful, Franco-Maghrebian youth. They are unafraid to take to the streets or pick up a pen in order to edify the generations and cultures to which they rightfully belong.
Bibliography


---. “On vit avec le béton dans la tête.” *Périphéries,* April 1999. «www.peripheries.net/i-valn.htm.»


<<www.clicnet.swarthmore.edu/litterature/moderne/sebbar/ecrivaine.html>>


