

WHITHER THE SIGN: MOHAMMED KHADDA IN ASSIA  
DJEBAR'S *LA NOUBA DES FEMMES DU MONT CHENOUA*

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INTRODUCTION

Assia Djébar's film, *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1978), posits language as the vector through which Algerian women integrate the trauma of the war of liberation from the French, but also by way of a contradiction: The French language, which implies a secular education for women and their physical mobility, is juxtaposed to Tamazight, a dialect of the Berber language used by a significant non-Arab ethnic minority in Algeria. Djébar positions both mobility and the subjective integration granted by Tamazight as necessary to her central protagonist Leïla's recovery, yet Djébar also understands the French language as part of the structural logic that has injured her and her avatar in Leïla. This wound is addressed through memory work and a return to the mother tongue.

Djébar leaves the aforementioned contradiction profoundly unresolved in *La nouba*, though she does imply the possibility of resolution, if all women were to speak openly about their experiences during the war. Into this knot of unresolved postcolonial tension, Djébar inserts a painting by iconic Algerian modernist artist Mohammed Khadda. Khadda was vociferous throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in his defense of abstraction as an aesthetic language already proper to the Algerian territory. He saw abstraction as a necessary political corrective to social realism in painting, which he felt functioned too easily as ideological propaganda. In this paper, I will establish the fact that Djébar's relationship to language is ambivalent in order to suggest that she uses Khadda's work, which is bound up in his theory of language, to magnify the stakes of her ambivalence.

SYNOPSIS

*La nouba* is the first film made by a woman since Algeria's independence and it is largely credited as the first film made about women's experience of the war.<sup>1</sup> *La nouba* garnered

international critical acclaim almost immediately: it was presented at the Venice Film Festival in 1979, where it won the grand prize. Today it is one of a handful of Algerian films from the 1970s subtitled into English and available commercially on DVD. Critically, it persists as a foundational referent for the work of anamnesis with regard to women in Algerian society.

While filmmaker Assia Djébar is primarily known as a novelist, *La nouba* and a second film she made in 1982, *La Zerba ou les chants de l'oubli*, are considered a turning point in her work. *La nouba*, in particular, is read as Djébar's return to her ancestral roots in order to re-connect with her maternal language, or to an authentic discourse of self.<sup>2</sup> Healing from lingering war-related trauma is depicted as a process rooted in conversation with other women. *La nouba* is also significant in the corpus of Algerian cinema for its experimental structure and the fact that it documents the lives of women in rural Algeria in the 1970s.

Structured around the character Leïla, an architect played by Sansan Noweir, *La nouba* chronicles Leïla's return to the village of Cherchell on Mount Chenoua, a Berber-dominated coastal region seventy kilometers west of Algiers along the Mediterranean, more than a decade after the end of the war of liberation from the French (1954-1962). Leïla travels to Cherchell to accompany her husband Ali in his convalescence from a riding accident suffered during the course of his work as a veterinarian. In a voiceover to the film, which is understood to be Leïla's inner dialogue, it is revealed that she is struggling with psychological wounds that linger from her experiences during the war. Her parents and her uncle were killed, her brother disappeared, and she was imprisoned and tortured. As she waits for Ali to heal, she begins to drive alone throughout the region asking at neighboring farms for news of her brother. Her restless searching provides the pretext for discussions with a number of women who live in this rugged, rural landscape and who are Djébar's extended family in real life.<sup>3</sup> Leïla's voiceover articulates the impetus for her movement as a search for language:

I am not looking for anything. I just remembered that I was looking. I am not looking for anything, but I listen. It is for you that I would like to listen. [...] I am beginning to listen to you. You the women of my Chenoua. Open a door, greet, say nothing, let them speak. Is it the past or the present which is coming back to me?

With her listening, Leïla is constituting a *nouba* of women. *Nouba* is defined at the outset of the film as “the history of women who speak in their turn” and is based on a classical form of Andalusian music resembling a rhythmic symphony.<sup>4</sup> More colloquially, the term also refers to a festival, a wedding party, or to the military music of North African sharpshooters on parade.<sup>5</sup> The women in *La nouba* speak about the land they inhabit, their contributions to the war effort with supplies, and in some cases about their arrests and torture. They speak about these things simply, as matters of fact.<sup>6</sup>

Formally, *La nouba* is characterized by the heterogeneity of its source material.<sup>7</sup> Djebbar juxtaposes documentary material from the French National Audiovisual Institute’s photography and film archives with quasi-documentary footage of women going about their lives in the village. Leïla and Ali’s crumbling marriage and the healing work each has come to Cherchell to accomplish act as a frame for a broad range of filmic war memorialization: re-enactments of 19<sup>th</sup> century French military campaigns, references to stories of women’s heroic action and death throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and dream sequences in the past and the present. It produces a representation of women’s history as hybrid, composed both of fact and fiction, inconsistently objective.

The question of Leïla’s fictionality, or the extent to which her character is meant to read as a surrogate for Djebbar’s own experience, is complex.<sup>8</sup> *La nouba* is not literally autobiographic, but it draws heavily on Djebbar’s bilingual and postcolonial experience of language, as well as on her childhood in Cherchell. The ambivalent quality of Leïla’s fictionality is accentuated by the fact that Djebbar’s literary oeuvre is constituted by a mix of historical fiction and autobiographical material.<sup>9</sup> Maria Flood argues that fiction and documentary go beyond Leïla’s function as a stand-in for Djebbar, but exists already in the film’s structure:

Djebbar presents the spectator with a set of undeniably real people, and this raises the question of whether Djebbar is creating a fictionalised community of real individuals, or representing an existing social and political collectivity. The use of photographs from the war, the documentary-style shots of Algerian villages and rural settings, the real testimonies given by the women as well as the role of Lila as Djebbar’s fictional double in the film, all render the issue of community as real or represented particularly pertinent.<sup>10</sup>

What is at stake in Djébar's structural ambivalence is whether Leïla stands in for a universal figure, or whether her experience should be read exclusively in relation to women of Djébar's class, education, and proximity to the war of liberation. The film, and much of its critical literature, makes a universalist claim, but I argue that key scenes in the film are limited to women of Djébar's class and education.<sup>11</sup> This tension between a broad "history of women who speak in their turn" and the narrative of an individual with a particular relationship to language and to conjugal intimacy is key in so far as it marks the difference between a nationalist discourse on the role of women in Algeria postwar and the claims of Algerian feminists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup>

Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out that colonialization dominates through "discursive or political suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question", which is to say it functions by imposing abstract, general categories onto the lived experiences of its subjects as a means of control.<sup>13</sup> Mohanty draws a sharp structural parallel between this aspect of colonialism and feminist discourse produced in the "West" about "third world women", arguing that such discourse reproduces a colonial logic of homogenization. This type of feminist discourse, according to Mohanty, "discursively colonizes the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular 'third-world woman'—an image which appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of western humanist discourse."<sup>14</sup> Mohanty's injunction, which I extend to include Algeria, is to think feminism as that which is drawn directly from the lived and differentiated experiences of women in that postcolonial context, as constituting a necessary deconstructive response to colonialism's suppression of heterogeneity.

With this injunction in mind, from a juridical point of view, rural Algerian women were not emancipated with independence, their significant participation in and sacrifice for the war effort notwithstanding.<sup>15</sup> Nor did they all enter into language in a manner analogous to Leïla who, as Djébar's double, can be assumed to have studied at a secular French school. Leïla/Djébar's departure from traditional education for women, her bilingualism, and her freedom to choose whether or not to veil, condition her access to a driver's license and an SUV, for example, and her ability to cover broad distances alone and at will in search of others' testimony. Leïla exists in language—which is not simply a matter of communication but also of subjective experience—in a very different sense than do the

women she listens to. This difference marks the limit of the film's universalism, complicating the film's implicit feminism.

## TWO POSITIONS IN THE LITERATURE: DONADEY AND KHANNA

The majority of the critical literature on *La nouba* reads it as a successful attempt to represent and give voice to Algerian women and their experiences during the war. For Anne Donadey, for example, Leïla is emancipated when she establishes the continuity of oral transmission through her roaming conversations with village women, and through her identification with their memory of colonial violence.<sup>16</sup> Donadey interprets the film's structure as palimpsestic, meaning that all transmission takes place at least partially at the expense of some earlier understanding of the same event. The film thus erases or occludes histories in order to produce a history of the occluded feminine voice.<sup>17</sup> By acknowledging the history of violence to women, and by employing a structure that avows the violence of its own capacity to occlude the past, Algerian women are pictured emerging from their muteness.<sup>18</sup>

Ranjanna Khanna, by contrast, sees *La nouba* as an example of what she calls "fourth cinema", meaning that it provides a space in which fragments of different epistemological registers (sound, documentary footage, archival footage, acted screenplays) settle together without false resolution, "an unsutured moment of representational breakdown", and the necessary breakdown of a visual regime at least partially constituted by the exclusion of women.<sup>19</sup> Khanna articulates fourth cinema explicitly as critique of third cinema's structural masculinism. She argues that the relationship between the camera and the weapon—one that third cinema insists on—is privileged at the expense of any complex representation of women.

Further, a privileged relationship between camera and weapon fails to acknowledge that the representational absence of the feminine stabilizes both revolutionary and nationalist discourses, in Algeria in particular.<sup>20</sup> Third cinema is in danger of making a hero of the armed and usually masculine revolutionary while erasing the complex role that rape and sexualized violence played in the colonizer's effort to dehumanize and subjugate the colonized, effectively allowing masculinism to persist in post-revolutionary governments

and regimes. Rather than think the camera as a weapon, Djébar thinks the camera as one way of producing the source material for a collage of images and sounds. For Khanna, *La nouba* is emancipatory not principally for the platform it provides women to speak their truth, but because its chaotic experimentation with source material makes mastery impossible—the self-mastery of the filmmaker or of any of the revolutionaries she represents, but also mastery of any one representational idiom over any other, a point which echoes Mohanty's analysis of postcolonial feminism as necessarily heterogeneous. *La nouba* should be read as structurally feminist, especially in its apprehension of language, rather than a film about women that is therefore emancipatory.

#### DJEBAR: AN AMBIVALENT THEORY OF LANGUAGE

Djébar displaces the authority of the official discourse in favor of formal and oral cacophony, and, contrary to Khanna who sees that displacement happen at the level of the film's editing structure, I see that displacement is most vividly in Djébar's ambivalent relationship to language, privileging an oral experience of language over its written discourse. Djébar identified as a Francophone writer throughout her career, and she is lucid about the complexity of writing in the colonizer's language.<sup>21</sup> In *Algerian White*, for example, published many years after *La nouba*, during the Black Decade, Djébar implicates the French language in the problem of appearing in language to other Algerians across class lines. She recounts her friendship with Abdel Kader Alloula, an Oranian playwright assassinated in 1994 during the Black Decade, in these terms:

On the few occasions, it seems to me, where I must have started spontaneously a sentence in my local urban dialect, I knew immediately that I appeared precious—to Kader—even perhaps outdated, and that because of the softness of the dental consonants in the accent of women from the place where I was brought up—so quickly went back to the impersonality of French. In a second, by the flash of his gaze, I understood: speaking Arabic together, we were becoming excessively so, I an old-fashioned *bourgeoise* and he a crude rough village lad!<sup>22</sup>

French allows each of the friends to escape the explicit markers of their class status in what is otherwise a society marked with rigid hierarchies; it grants them rhetorical homelessness. Yet Djébar is also lucid about the price of being untethered from space by language, or from the upper-class that her accent alludes to. She claims French as a paternal language in an interview with Mortimer from 1985, remarking directly on the contradiction between the history of violence embedded in the French language and its capacity to personally set her free of the strict separation of the sexes and seclusion within the home:

If the first stage is to recover the past through writing in French, the second stage is to listen to women who evoke the past by speaking, and in the mother tongue. Then, evocation in the mother tongue must be brought back toward the paternal language. French is also for me a paternal language. The language of yesterday's enemy became for me the father's language, because my father was a teacher in a French school. Yet in this language there is death, by way of the testimony of the conquest that I retrieve with it. But it also contains movement and the liberation of the female body because, for me as a young girl attending French school, it was also means that I could escape the harem. Nonetheless, when the body once again becomes immobile, the mother tongue becomes memory and the song of the past.<sup>23</sup>

French is correlated to open space, while Arabic and the Chenaoui dialect are correlated to the mother and to the dark, recessed spaces like the womb, the cave, and the harem.<sup>24</sup> Djébar equates the French language with death, but also with the father and with freedom, whereas her mother tongue, never specified but at least here implied to be a dialect of Arabic, is the language of containment but also of dreams, the subconscious, and therefore the language that touches the experience of trauma most directly. Djébar sees one of the principal tasks of *La nouba* as seeking the mother tongue, and all the memory it contains, in order to bring it out into space, in order to emancipate memory by recourse to film, to editing, and to free movement. Thus, the characteristics of Djébar's paternal language are implicated in the recovery of her maternal one.

By 1995, at the release of her autobiographical novel, *Vaste est la prison*, Djébar evinces an even more nuanced sense of the role language plays in her self-perception and in her Algerian identity. In an interview with Lise Gauvin, she describes a contradiction between

Arabic and French. She relates that in the early 1980s she realized that she could speak neither of love nor of desire in French. Already a woman in her forties, she writes:

[A]s soon as I needed to express love—in my intimate life, I mean—French became a desert. I could not say the slightest tender word or speak of love in this language, to the point that it was a real womanly interrogation. Therefore, with certain men with whom there may have been a play of seduction, as there was no way through to the maternal language, an invisible barrier remained in me.<sup>25</sup>

French, in Djébar's view, does not grant equal access to all forms of space, nor even to all experiences of the body in space. It frees Djébar in thought, but it also builds a wall between herself as a speaker and her desiring body.

*La nouba* is a film about the capacity of oral language to metabolize traumatic experience, and it places women's oral histories at the center of memory work with regard to the war of liberation in Algeria. But *La nouba's* operative theory of language is riven with internal contradiction: How to speak and be free in a language (Arabic) that would close the woman into the home but is also the language from which feminine memory stems? How to leave and move freely if to do so entails an estrangement from both the mother tongue and the conjugal bed? I propose that this contradiction is reified by Leïla's difficult marriage to Ali and thus her complex relationship to her own desire.

As the only prominent male figure in the film and Leïla's narrative foil, Ali comes to signify the masculine agent of history and of language and to provide a screen onto which Leïla can project her ambivalence about the place of women in language. To drive this point home, Djébar places Khadda's painting in the background of scenes in which Leïla is in direct conflict with Ali.<sup>26</sup> The choice of artist is not accidental, as Khadda's position as a modernist painter and his own writing from the period places him at the center of debates about postcolonial aesthetics and language.

#### KHADDA: A POSTCOLONIAL THEORY OF PAINTING AS LANGUAGE

Mohammed Khadda trained as a typographer in Algeria, but had no further formal art education before moving to Paris in 1953, the year before the war of liberation broke out



in Algeria, with his friend and fellow artist Abdallah Benanteur. He remained in Paris until 1963, just after independence, where he is said to have been influenced by Cubism and Abstract Expressionism.<sup>27</sup> Upon his return to Algeria, Khadda joined poet and political militant Jean Sénac to found “l'École du Noun”, or the School of the *Noun*, which is the name of the “n” sign in Arabic script. This group was later known at the school as the “École du Signe”, or the School of the Sign.<sup>28</sup> He is among the handful of artists that curator and art historian Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche refers to as Algeria’s “modern masters” along with Baya, M’hamed Issiakhem, Denis Martinez, and Choukri Mesli.<sup>29</sup>

Khadda argued against either a return to Ottoman-era miniatures or to classic Islamic calligraphy as an authentic point of origin for the cultural expression of the newly independent nation. Especially in his early period, from the 1960s through the late 1970s, he claimed formal abstraction was an expression of Algerian radicalism, especially when grounded in an experimental approach to Arabic calligraphy and an Amazigh legacy of geometric abstraction. Abstraction, for Khadda, constituted a more authentic expression of national identity than Ottoman inspired miniature painting, social realism and other didactic forms of representation.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, Khadda’s intellectual project was mainly devoted to one problem: How to use a radical formal language taken, in part, from Parisian art circles to describe the experience in language (*mise en langue*) of post-colonial subjectivity? At the same time, how to translate the linguistic sign as abstraction to canvas and think its participation in a modernist semiotic universe? <sup>31</sup> Michel-Georges Bernard describes the linguistic aspect of Khadda’s project as part of Arab society’s understanding of the material world, writing that Khadda’s “abstraction is first that of the Letter. The stone welcomes it and becomes a book, pottery becomes earthenware books, glass and enamel all become loquacious, they say, happy to recite a verse, a sura. The same is true for walls, tools; everyday objects never cease to speak in Arabic culture.”<sup>32</sup> François Pouillon points out that Khadda was the only Algerian artist of his generation to write extensively and fluently on aesthetic philosophy, noting a profound commitment in Khadda’s manner of using language, both the French he largely wrote in and the Arabic calligraphic sign his early paintings largely referenced: “He has a material relation to the written thing: a labored-over, strongly written phrase that never gives way to the pen. Khadda writes as he engraves, his interest is to enter the texture of things, to print something material [...]”<sup>33</sup> Khad-

da conceives of language as a structural system that renders the world, but which is also embedded in the stuff of the world.

Khadda's graphic sign is at once abstract and grounded. It can drift and become polysemous, but only when grounded in a profound understanding of its support, whether canvas or metal plate or socio-linguistic territory. An understanding of language as that which is at once abstract and grounded differentiates his view from that of the *Aouchem* movement, contemporaneous to the School of the Sign, with which he was himself briefly associated. Khadda denounced what he saw as the group's superficial view of language, which he argued was limited to the declarative manifesto rather than embracing an understanding of the relationship between linguistic semiotics and aesthetic semiotics.<sup>34</sup>

#### AMBIVALENT REFLECTIONS: "REFLETS ET RONCES"

The painting of Khadda that appears in *La nouba* is hard to see given the quality of the films availability commercially at the time of this writing, but I identify it as a work from 1976 entitled "Reflets et ronces", "Reflections and Thorns" in English, though in Djébar's film the canvas is shown upside down.<sup>35</sup> Painted on a rectangular canvas, a field of blue is divided by a horizon line from the foreground below it with sharp, angular brushwork that transgresses from one zone to the other. Shown upside down, as it is in *La nouba*, the painting represents a city-scape arching aggressively into the sky. Seen in its proper orientation, it depicts a city stretching along a coastline and reflected in its water. The sea's mirroring effect renders it impossible to discern an absolute boundary between that which is proper the city, a "thorn", and that which is proper to the Mediterranean, a "reflection."

The title, "Ronces et reflets", gives an important indication of how to read Djébar's inclusion of this work, as Khadda refers to torturers as those who mime *ronces* or thorns in a statement dedicating an exhibition of his work to his friend and Algerian poet Bachir Hadj Ali in 1970: "[M]en, diabolically mimicking briers and *thorns*, braid barbed wire where other means are enclosed and crushed."<sup>36</sup> In 1966, Hadj Ali published a memoir about his torture at the hand of Algerian security forces in 1965, which he had written on toilet paper, rolled into empty cigarette tubes during his incarceration, and smuggled out of the prison during conjugal visits with his wife.<sup>37</sup> The Algerian torturers mimic the

thorns, which presumably refer to the French colonizers who used torture systematically throughout the war. “Ronces et reflets” is thus a portrait of a sea-side city, but also play on the illusory character of the enemy-torturer in the postwar period, as the Algerian government under its second president Houari Boumédiène brutally repressed the Algerian communist party (*Parti Communiste Algérien* or PCA) to which Hadj Ali belonged.

To what end does Djébar employ the painting’s appearance in her film? How does it function as a text within the overarching narrative structure of *La nouba*? Its placement is enigmatic for its orientation, upside down in the first scene and propped vertically behind Ali in the second, but also for its appearance only at moments of crisis within Leïla and Ali’s marriage. The painting dates from 1976, the film from 1978, they were produced at roughly the same time in the context of Algiers cultural scene, in which the overlap of social circles would have certainly put Khadda and Djébar in regular contact. The extent to which the reference to torture would have been legible at the time beyond this elite social circle is unclear. What is more certain is the fact that the painting can be read as representative of his ideological position in the postwar period, a position that was intimately tied to the linguistic sign.

“Ronces et reflects” surfaces in two different scenes in Djébar’s film. The first instance is a sequence of shots that introduces the viewer to Ali and to Leïla, depicting them at home in a modest rural house, each lost in their own pain. The second is a scene at night, when Leïla is asleep in a large bed alone after having put the couple’s child to sleep. Both scenes represent moments in the narrative in which the alienation between Ali and Leïla are at their most intense.

## HOMELAND

In the second scene of the *toushia*, the overture or the opening scene of *La nouba*, Leïla leaves her place by an open window and turns toward the interior of the room, musing, “I am fond of my memories...” as she makes her way along one wall toward Khadda’s painting. The camera frame stops short of showing the whole work at first. The painting is propped on an easel or a stand in the corner of the room. It doesn’t hang on the wall as one might expect, it isn’t integrated into any domestic installation. The rest of the room is

bare of rugs, furniture or decoration of any kind. It is empty of everything save Leïla, Ali and his wheelchair, and the painting.



Figures 1-2: Screenshots from *La nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua* (© ENTV).

Leïla unfurls a white silk scarf from its place on her shoulders, tosses it lightly onto the base of the easel, and rests her wrist on the rim of the canvas. “And finally, finally I will return to my homeland”,<sup>38</sup> the voiceover says, the implication being that the painting represents Leïla’s homeland, though it is an abstract work that renders no clear image of land, especially in its position upside down. The shot pans back to show the entire canvas, and Leïla standing beside it. “If only you would speak, but you don’t want to”, the voiceover intones. Ali wheels slowly into the shot so that he is filmed at a slight angle from behind. He stops in front of Leïla. They are watching each other from either side of the painting, which seems to divide them and to fill the space of their separation at the same time. The voiceover continues, “But if you did, you’d say”, then pauses as Leïla peels herself off the wall to advance into the room with a measured if absent-minded rhythm to her movements, until she

blocks the camera's view of the painting. When she is finally standing between him and the canvas, she speaks softly: "Long years have passed and you have not returned." Her tone is quiet, and she observes Ali without rancor but rather with softly detached observation. The scene compares a conjugal estrangement to the estrangement from a homeland from which Leïla has also long been absent, Mont Chenoua, with Khadda's abstract city by the sea, turned upside down, that is figured in the painting.

The montage throughout the *toushnia* functions as a way to establish the symbolic nature of Ali and Leïla's relationship, and to represent their estrangement from each other, but the painting's appearance and placement implies broader stakes. I see it as a signifier of Leïla's estrangement from language, from her husband, from her native village—it is meant to signify that the problem of return for Algerians postwar is located in language. In that sense, Khadda's painting can be read a prism through which to examine a rupture in Leïla's own relationship to language, or to signify the presence of the letter and the word as an abstraction that floats against its own ground anxiously. Crucially, this rupture mirrors (or reflects) the rupture in her marriage produced by her homelessness in language.

#### THE MASCULINE FIGURE

The second scene in which the painting appears is a sequence twenty-five minutes into the two-hour film. It depicts Leïla going to sleep after having told a bedtime story to her daughter Aïsha, while Ali watches from the doorway. He gazes into the room from his wheelchair as his wife tosses in her sleep, and behind him the same painting as before is visible, hung vertically, almost propped haphazardly. It reads like graffiti in the background of a street scene, it has the same quality of artificially accidental signification. Ali tries to rise, perhaps to join his wife in bed, but he finds that he is too weak and collapses back into the shadows.

At the moment of his collapse, the film cuts to documentary footage from the war of liberation, which depicts French soldiers shooting Algerians dead in the streets, men who are apparently unarmed, men who seem to be simply going about their daily lives. This documentary material belongs to the French National Audiovisual Institute's photography and film archives, and this footage has come to be iconic. It is brutal footage, especially in the visual correlation it draws between the bodies of Algerians falling to the ground and the

rack of weapons the footage cuts to after one fusillade, as though to emphasize that the act of killing is linked to an idea of Algeria and its people as property of the French and of the settler colonial society. Then the camera returns to Leïla, slowly closing in on her face as she appears to sleep peacefully, finally, before cutting to a black screen.



Figures 3-4: Screenshots from *La nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua* (© ENTV).

The film edit suggests what Djébar's shooting notes confirm, that the cut to archival images is meant to signify Leïla's war-related nightmares and to imply that her sleep is perpetually troubled by traumatic flashbacks. She writes:

Irrespective of the intellectual work or other sort of activity, while we make the film I turn in an empty bed. Does the film raise the issue of the sexual relations between men and women? Ali falls after a vain attempt to enter the bedroom. This fall corresponds to the scene of bodies being shot in Leïla's dream. Question: Is there a relationship between the impotence or the power of men and war?<sup>39</sup>

Clearly the answer to Djébar's closing question is yes, but the conditions of that answer are complex, both in the broader context of Algerian nationalism postwar and in the film's diegetic narrative. Marnia Lazreg, in her now classic 1994 sociology of the changing structure of women's lives between the 19th and late 20th centuries, *The Eloquence of Silence*, argues that French colonialism was bent on undermining Algerian masculinity through small, daily humiliation and through professional displacement at home and abroad, which had the effect of successively breaking apart rigid gender roles and the division of space that accompanied them. Jean Paul Charney, a French legal scholar writing in 1965, is even more explicit on this point, writing that "Man, driven toward domestic life (by his struggle against colonization) which disabled him, will directly and often closely manage the household."<sup>40</sup>

The correlation between Ali's collapse and anonymous Algerians being shot more than a decade previously may signify that Leïla is dreaming the symbolic death of Ali's masculinity at the hands of the French, a death that makes him unfit to share her bed. But it is also possible to read the crumpling figure as Ali's execution in Leïla's subconscious mind, with death as his punishment for thinking he could trespass into her bedroom. In either case, this scene suggests that violence operates in a feedback loop from colonizer, to colonized man, to colonized woman, back to colonized man. The way violence circulates through these subject positions mirrors Djébar's ambivalence with regard to language: it does not suggest a clear path to emancipation from the dehumanizing wound colonialism inflicted, nor does it resolve the question of why Khadda's painting haunts the background of this circular movement of postcolonial affect. It is as though the painting were the discursive ground for the figure of the masculine Algerian subject postwar, at once an illustration for this wish to reunite and a portrait of his muteness and impotence. Instead, Khadda's sophisticated use of competing aesthetic languages—French abstraction, Amazighen geometry, and the Arabic calligraphic sign—are indexed by Djébar to Ali and to his failure.

## CONCLUSION

Considering Khadda's influential artistic project to create a hybrid aesthetic formal language, "Reflets et ronces" might have signified a bridge between husband and wife forged in communication between genders in postwar Algeria. It might also have signified

Djebar's investigation of the relationship between cultural production, such as film, literature and painting, and the socio-linguistic context in postwar Algeria, as her own contradictory relationship to the French language mirrors Khadda's relationship to a European syntax of abstraction in key ways. The direct association *La nouba* makes between the painting and the two principle instances of Ali's failure, however, coupled with the disorientation of the painting in space indicates a different reading: I read Djebar's use of Khadda as instrumental rather than discursive. The painting is positioned as a sign of language rather than as speech, meaning that it is incapable of responding, on a profound level, to the film's feminine figure, Leïla, just as Ali is incapable of responding to her speech and incapable of joining her in sleep.

My critical reading is based largely on the painting's placement and filmic treatment, but it is worth pointing out that this reading is also analogous to Ratiba Hadj-Moussa's analysis of Djebar's use of other source material, namely to documentary footage from the war of liberation and footage of women speaking about their experience during the war. According to film scholar Ratiba Hadj-Moussa, *La nouba* exists in a temporal void between the empty dogmatism of early Algerian cinema and the moment when Algerian cinema turns resolutely toward the authority of the documentary genre, or toward a belief in the real. *La nouba* is located in the breach between a tendency toward mythologizing and heroic fictions in one period of the nation's filmic history and an opposing tendency toward equally mythologizing and heroic "truths" in the subsequent period.<sup>41</sup>

Hadj-Moussa also articulates a "hesitation" in the center of the film, which she reads as evidence of the difficulty of trying to metabolize that which history has excluded (women's voices) without objectifying either the women speaking or the established past that their speech is meant to trouble. As a result of this difficulty, one that I agree *La nouba* does not resolve, Hadj-Moussa argues that the film is in danger of becoming a sign of the women's constitutive exclusion from the writing of history, rather than their meaningful integration into it.<sup>42</sup> Further, Hadj-Moussa argues that the placement of "real" wartime images in the second sequence in which Khadda's painting appears, misunderstands their enormous historical incomprehensibility as documents of violence. These film sequences are used as objective referents, but the events to which they refer are unending in their consequences and, as a result, they are unstable.



Khadda's painting is deployed with a similar intent and with an analogous effect: it becomes a sign of the written word and of the masculine subject presumed to bear it, rather than an instrument to synthesize visual languages. Any potential Khadda's aesthetic legacy might have had to destabilize the origin of language is guarded against by virtue of its semiotic insertion into *La nouba*, and specifically its identification with Ali. In other words, Djébar (perhaps inadvertently) neutralizes Khadda's radical aesthetic project with regard to language, just as she reifies women's testimony and instrumentalizes images of graphic violence drawn from the French national archives. It is in this sense that I argue that Khadda is used to magnify Djébar's ambivalence with regard to the role of language in a postcolonial context.

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1. The title translates to "The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua". To the point of which filmic representation of women's involvement of war came first: Ahmed Bedjaoui cites Egyptian Youssef Chahine's film about Djamilia Bouhired, *Gamila l'Algérienne* (1958) as the first to focus specifically on women's role in the struggle for independence, and outlines the appearance of women and their experience in other films of the 1960s in his chapter on the subject: Ahmed Bedjaoui, "Femmes dans les représentations filmiques de la guerre de libération", in *Cinéma et guerre de libération: Algérie, des batailles d'images* (Alger: Casbah Editions, 2014), 183-206.

2. Djébar makes this point in an interview with Mildred Mortimer from 1985: "Quand je me pose des questions sur les solutions à trouver pour les femmes mes dans des pays comme le mien, je dis que l'essentiel, c'est qu'il y ait deux femmes, que chacune parle, et que l'une raconte ce qu'elle voit à l'autre. La solution se cherche dans des rapports de femmes. J'annonce cela dans mes textes, j'essaie de le concrétiser dans leur construction, avec leurs miroirs multiples." Mildred Mortimer, "Entretien avec Assia Djébar, Écrivain Algérien", *Research in African Literatures* 19, no. 2, special issue on Women's Writing (1988): 205.

3. Djébar is direct about her investment in the representation of young women in an interview with Tamzali (1979/2001): "Moi, au lieu de montrer une dizaine de femmes en train de papoter dans leur cuisine, j'ai pris une jeune femme que j'ai libérée dans l'espace, car c'est là le vrai changement : elle est libérée par mon imagination et par mon espoir, car je souhaite que la majorité des femmes algériennes circulent librement et qu'elles soient bien dans leurs peau en circulent—c'est le deuxième problème : bien circuler, pour voir et entendre, et n'avoir pas à échapper toujours au regard de l'autre. Et pendant que ma caméra circule dans l'espace avec mon héroïne au fur et à mesure le documentaire est là pour montrer ce qui existe c'est-à-dire des femmes..." Wassyla Tamzali, "Le cinéma: pour chercher les mots des autres", *Lectora* 7 (2001): 115.

4. In an interview in 1996 with Lise Gauvin, Djébar notes that her mother descended from the Andalusian Arabs, and that she had a classical education in both poetry and music from this period. She also notes that this heritage was only legible—to Djébar, at least—in Arabic. She writes, "Quand elle était dans sa langue arabe, elle réapparaissait dans tout son raffinement: pour moi elle est une aristocrate, avec une culture spécifique que je fais remonter jusqu'à la période andalouse ; elle est héritière des femmes andalouses. Elle avait ses cahiers de poésie arabe, elle chantait l'arabe classique et elle parlait un arabe dialectal. Lorsqu'on est allé vivre au village, j'ai compris que son arabe dialectal était un arabe raffiné qui n'avait rien à voir avec l'arabe des paysans dépossédés. Même dans la langue, l'enfant arrive bien à sentir à quel niveau se situent les adultes. Puis quand je me suis rappelée comment elle parlait aux voisines françaises, femmes d'instituteur, comment donc elle s'essayait au français, m'est parvenue à travers les décennies sa voix qui devenait une voix de fillette. Quand vous débutez dans une langue, vous en avez d'abord la maladresse ; pour l'enfant qui écoute ainsi sa mère, c'est comme si cette dernière perdait un peu de son statut." Assia Djébar and Lise Gauvin, "Territoires des langues: entretien", *Littérature* 101, *L'écrivain et ses langues* (1996): 77.

5. This ritual is sometimes also referred to as a *fantasia* which is the title of Djébar's 1985 novel, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993). See also Burton Holmes, *Burton Holmes Travelogues* (Chicago, IL: Travelogue Bureau, 1914), 99.

6. The women's tone was formally important to Djébar. She felt that their familiar speaking patterns constituted an alternative to the overblown, official language of the revolution: "Non, j'ai voulu une sobriété du style quand il y avait rappel de la souffrance. Quand j'écoutais des femmes de ma région, j'ai remarqué que plus les femmes avaient souffert, plus elles en parlaient sous une forme concise, à la limite presque sèchement. Pour moi la voix de ces femmes est l'opposition voulue à tout le style officiel. Que ce soit en Algérie ou ailleurs, après une guerre, il y a une manière 'ancien combattant' avec des discours très pompeux sur la souffrance et la mort des autres. Mais ceux qui ont souffert eux-mêmes et qui vingt ans après en parlent d'abord en général ils n'aiment pas en parler, ils en parlent, c'est par allusion. [...] Dans le film *La nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* je ne décris pas les femmes ; je les entends. J'ai photographié ces femmes et je les ai fait tourner. Elles sont elles-mêmes dans le film. Les femmes n'apparaissent que trois ou quatre minutes chacune ; quand elles parlent, elles parlent très sèchement. La manière dont elles parlent me paraît très importante. Par exemple, l'une raconte l'histoire de la mort de son frère. Elle dit que le frère a été tué et qu'elle voulait trouver le cadavre. Quand elle raconte cela elle est photographiée ; elle parle presque froidement." Mortimer, "Entretien avec Assia Djébar", 202.

7. Réda Bensmaïa, for example, argues that "the aesthetic of the fragment" governs the work and constitutes its filmic significance. See Réda Bensmaïa and Jennifer Curtiss Gage, "La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua: Introduction to the Cinematic Fragment", *World Literature Today* 70, no. 4, Assia Djébar: 1996 Neustadt International Prize for Literature (1996): 877-884.

8. Critic and activist lawyer Wassyla Tamzali was onsite for the production of the film in the 1970s. She has written extensive, first-hand, contemporaneous film commentary. She articulates the relationship between Leïla and Assia Djébar explicitly: "Avec Leïla l'héroïne du film, je dirais Leïla / Assia, nous remontons le temps et le Mont Chenoua, les montagnes de l'enfance de la réalisatrice." Wassyla Tamzali, "Commentaire de Wassyla Tamzali", see <http://www.maghrebdesfilms.fr/nouba-des-femmes-du-mont-chenoua-la.html>, retrieved 8/21/2017. Film producer and historian Ahmed Bedjaoui championed Djébar's right to make the film in his role as co-director of *Radio-Télévision-Algérie* (RTA), he writes of Leïla as a surrogate for Djébar: "Elle est à la fois l'épouse de l'invalidé (à l'amour) et le reflet fidèle de l'écrivain qui prend du recul, comme pour mieux contempler le monde des femmes et le handicap de l'homme." Bedjaoui, *Cinéma*, 191. See also Anne Donaday's citation of comments from a conference in Montreal where Djébar was present: "Both documentary and fiction, *La nouba* follows the filmmaker's 'alter ego,' Leïla, as she questions her relatives, thus reactivating her own memory of a war in which she lost many loved ones (Djébar, commentary in Montreal, 1994)." Quoted in Anne Donaday, "Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djébar's Films and Fiction", *World Literature Today* 70, no. 4, Assia Djébar: 1996 Neustadt International Prize for Literature (1996): 885.

9. For Assia Djébar's autobiographical novels, see specifically her Algerian Quartet, *L'Amour, La Fantasia: Roman* (Paris: Jean-Claude Lattès, 1985), *Ombre sultane: Roman* (Paris: J.-C. Lattès, 1987), *Vaste est la prison: Roman* (Paris: A. Michel, 1995), and *Le Blanc de l'Algérie: Recit* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

10. Maria Flood, "Common Vulnerability: Community and its Presentation in Assia Djébar's *La nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua*", *Modern & Contemporary France* 21, no. 1 (2013): 74.

11. When reading these scenes, I conflate Leïla/Djébar in order to mark this ambivalence. For a more a critical perspective on *La nouba's* universalism see Jane Hiddleston's argument via Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the inoperative community, Jane Hiddleston, *Reinventing community: Identity and difference in late twentieth-century philosophy and literature in French* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), which Flood cites and elaborates on in Flood, "Common Vulnerability", 75, 86; see also Maria Flood, *France, Algeria and the Moving Image: Screening Histories of Violence 1963-2010* (Cambridge: Legenda, an imprint of the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017), 58-79.

12. See Flood's discussion of the way the Algerian postwar government positioned women in order to bolster its own political mythology: Maria Flood, "Deep Wounds: Personal and Collective Histories in Assia Djébar's *La nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*", in *France, Algeria and the Moving Image*, 61-65.

13. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61. For an articulation specific to the Algerian context, see Marnia Lazreg, "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria", *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (1988): 81-107.

14. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes", 62.

15. For a critical account of how women's experience as militants during the war and in the decades that followed is grounded in extensive oral histories, see Natalya Vince, *Our Fighting Sisters: Nation, Memory and Gender in Algeria, 1954-2012* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015). Vince argues that women found themselves confronted by a strong resistance to their participation in public political life after the war, and that this experience contrasted sharply with the exceptional freedom they were granted during the fighting and in various capacities. Vince also notes that women's experience postwar depending largely on women's level of education, which was determined both by class and by an urban/rural divide, with rural women left without commemoration at the national level and without the economic benefits of a war pension. For specific passages, see pages 130-131 on war pensions, pages 164-67 on women's contributions of their gold to the national gold reserves, which impacted rural and lower-class women the most intensely, and page 235 for a discussion of these women's absence in official war commemoration ceremonies. Djamilia Amrane's account of women's participa-

tion in the war is based on privileged access to the Algerian archives of war veterans, though it does not present a critical view of the state vis-à-vis the unequal compensation given to female combatants. See Djamila Amrane and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Les femmes algériennes dans la guerre* (Paris: Plon, 1991). See also Assia Djebar's collection of short stories, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement: nouvelles* (Paris: Des femmes, 1980), which focuses primarily on the difference between men's experience of decolonization and women's experience of it.

16. Anne Donadey, "Rekindling the Vividness of the Past", 885-892.

17. Donadey, "The Multilingual Strategies of Postcolonial Literature: Assia Djebar's Algerian Palimpsest", *World Literature Today* 74, no. 1 (2000): 27-36.

18. It is worth noting here that Marnia Lazreg, in her foundational sociological study of Algerian women's lives in the 19th and 20th centuries, argues that the very idea that Algerian women were silent was a "colonial notion" that fundamentally misunderstood the nature of a society segregated by gender. She argues that women used non-verbal communication to speak to one another in the presence of men, but that amongst themselves they spoke freely and at length—in fact, the oral traditions prevalent in many parts of Algeria made women sonic repositories of history-as-fable. See Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), especially 106-13.

19. Ibid.

20. Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 124.

21. For a general discussion about the status of language in Algeria, see Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, *Algeria in Others' Languages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). Djebar speaks directly to this point, and with great nuance, in her interview with Lise Gaudin: Assia Djebar and Lise Gaudin, "Territoires des langues: entretien" *Littérature* 101, L'écrivain et ses langues (1996): 73-87. For a linguistic analysis of *La nouba* as a record of Algerian dyglossia, a situation in which colloquial and literary Arabic and also Tamazight are used within the same community by the same speakers under different conditions, and an analysis of Leïla's aphasia, or her muteness, see Ziad Bentahar, "A voice with an elusive sound: aphasia, diglossia, and arabophone Algeria in Assia Djebar's *The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*", *The Journal of North African Studies* 21, no. 3 (2016): 411-432. Bentahar notes that Djebar understands literary Arabic, or fusha, as intimately linked to a nationalist postwar discourse, and this with the center of power that has excluded the testimony of the women she films. While Bentahar does not relate the linguistic situation in Algeria specifically to traumatic experience, or the postcolonial theories of language, I think his analysis could easily facilitate this kind of argument.

22. Assia Djebar, *Algerian White: A Narrative* (New York: Seven Stories, 2003), 16.

23. "Si le premier volet est de ramener le passé à travers l'écriture en français, le deuxième est d'écouter les femmes qui évoquent le passé par la voix, par la langue maternelle. Ensuite, il faut ramener cette évocation à travers la langue maternelle vers la langue paternelle. Car le français est aussi pour moi la langue paternelle. La langue de l'ennemi d'hier est devenue pour moi la langue du père du fait que mon père était instituteur dans une école française ; or dans cette langue il y a la mort, par les témoignages de la conquête que je ramène. Mais il y a aussi le mouvement, la libération du corps de la femme car, pour moi, fillette allant à l'école française, c'est ainsi que je peux éviter le harem. Toutefois lorsque le corps est redevenu immobile, la langue maternelle, elle, est mémoire, chant du passé." Mortimer, "Entretien avec Assia Djebar", 201 (translation mine).

24. The voice-over that Leïla speaks throughout the film was first written in French and then translated to Arabic, but the original text was also inserted into the film in the form of French subtitles. See Donadey, "Rekindling the Vividness of the Past", 889.

25. "... dès que j'étais dans un besoin d'expression amoureuse—je veux dire dans ma vie de femme—le français devenait un désert. Je ne pouvais pas dire le moindre mot de tendresse ou d'amour dans cette langue, à tel point que c'était un vrai questionnement de femme. Ainsi avec certains hommes avec qui pouvait se dérouler un jeu de séduction, comme il n'y avait pas de passage à la langue maternelle, subsistait en moi une sorte de barrière invisible." Djebar and Gauvin, "Territoires des langues", 79.

26. Tamzali confirms that the painting is by Khadda in Djebar's production notes. Wassyla Tamzali, *En attendant Omar Gatlatto: regards sur le cinéma algérien* (Alger: En.A.P, 1979), 103. The identification of the exact painting is my own, I have found no other reference to it.

27. Mary Vogl, "Algerian Painters as Pioneers of Modernism", in *A Companion to Modern African Art*, ed. Gitti Salami and Monica B. Visona (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 197-217. See also Naget Belkaïd-Khad-da, "Présence de Khadda", in *Khadda* (Alger: Musée National de Beaux Arts d'Alger, 2011), 28-33. For an account of this period from the perspective of Jean Sénac and his close friends, see a collection of previously published writing edited with archived personal writing on art: Jean Sénac, *Visages D'algerie: Regards Sur L'art* (Paris: Paris-Méditerranée, 2002). For an account of the period centered on "Aouchem" co-founder Denis Martinez, and based largely on the author's interviews with him, see Cynthia Becker, "Exile, Memory, and Healing in Algeria: Denis Martinez and *La Fenêtre du vent*", *African Arts* 42, no. 2 (Summer, 2009): 24-31. On the

relationship between painting and revolutionary nationalism see Kateb Yacine, *Ceil-de-lynx et les américains, trente-cinq années de l'enfer d'un peintre* (Ministère du Travail et des Affaires sociales, Alger, 1977). For a contemporary summary in less poetic form, see Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche, "Résistance, appropriation et réappropriation dans l'art Algérien", *Modern & Contemporary France* 19, no. 2, (2011): 179-193.

28. However, countering this literature in an interview with the author on January 16, 2019 in Algiers, artist Hellal Zoubir noted that the School of the Sign and the Aouchem group were at fierce intellectual odds, with Khadda as the artistic figurehead for an Arabic linguistic tradition, and Aouchem devoted to Imazighen-inspired geometric abstraction. Given that the debate about the place and significance of the Berber minority in Algeria is so central to postwar politics about language in particular, this point deserves more research outside of the established (published) histories.

29. Gerhard Haupt and Pat Binder, "Art and Curatorial Practice in Algeria: Interview with Nadira Laggoune", *Nafas Art Magazine*, October 2009, retrieved 27 June 2018 from [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2009/algeria\\_art\\_curatorial\\_practice](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2009/algeria_art_curatorial_practice).

30. For a counterargument to Khadda's view on the legitimacy of Algerian artists' claim to abstraction, see Bernard Aresu, "Mémoire de signes: l'abstraction chez Jean-Michel Atlan et Mohammed Khadda", *The French Review* 83, no. 6, ALGERIE/FRANCE (2010): 1272-87. This argument, in my view, is orientalist and Euro-centric.

31. For Khadda's own analysis of his work and those of his contemporaries on the question of abstraction as political, see Mohammed Khadda, *Feuillets épars liés: [essai sur l'art]* (Algiers: Société nationale d'édition et de diffusion, 1983) and Khadda, *Eléments pour un art nouveau: suivi de Feuillets épars liés et inédits* (Algiers: Éditions Barzakh, 2015 [1971]). For information on his life and participation in the struggle for independence, see Khadda, *Mohammed Khadda* (Algiers: Ed. Bouchène, 1987) and Nicolas Surlapierre and Khadda, *Les casbahs ne s'assiegent pas hommage au peintre Mohammed Khadda, 1930-1991* (Paris: Snoeck Ducaju Zoon Editions, 2012).

32. "Cette abstraction est d'abord celle de la Lettre. La pierre l'accueille et devient livre, comme sont les livres faïences, le verre et l'émail qui tous deviennent loquaces, disent, content, récitent un verset, une sourate. Ainsi les murs, les outils, les objets quotidiens ne cessent-ils dans la culture arabe de parler." Bernard, *Khadda*, 59 (translation mine).

33. "Il a un rapport matériel à la chose écrite: une phrase travaillée, fortement inscrite et qui ne s'abandonne jamais au fil de la plume. Khadda écrit comme il grave, avec un souci d'entrer dans la texture des choses, d'imprimer une matière". François Pouillon, "Penser le patrimoine algérien: révolution et héritage dans les écrits sur m'art de Mohammed Khadda", in *Mohamed Khadda: Une vie pour oeuvre*, ed. Malika Dorbani-Bouabdellah (Alger: Musée national des beaux-arts d'Alger, 1990), 80.

34. Pouillon, "Penser le patrimoine algérien", 84.

35. A reproduction can be found in the exhibition catalogue for a 2011 retrospective of Khadda's work at the Modern Art Museum of Algiers (MAMA). KHADDA: Transformer son identité en termes d'avenir (Algiers: Musée nationale d'art moderne & contemporain, 2011), 188-189. The work is in the collection of Rachid Boujedra, an Algerian novelist, poet and playwright. My reading of the canvas' orientation is based on its presentation in the catalogue, but also on the artist's signature in the lower left-hand corner.

36. "[D]es hommes, mimant diaboliquement les ronces et les épines, tressent des barbelés où sont enclos et broyés d'autres hommes." Quoted in Bernard, *Khadda*, 106 (n. 28).

37. Ali B. Hadji, *L'arbitraire: Suivi de Chants pour les nuits de septembre* (Arbitrary: [variously translated as *Despotism*] Songs to follow the nights of September) (Paris: Les Éditiones de Minuit, 1966).

38. The Arabic term she uses is *aardi*, which is the term for ground and land, and then a possessive form. It translates literally to *my ground*, or *my earth*.

39. "Quel que soit l'activité intellectuelle ou autre, on tourne pendant le film autour d'un lit vide. Le film pose-t-il le problème des relations sexuelles homme/femmes ? Ali tombe après avoir vainement essayé d'entrer dans la chambre. Cette chute correspond à celle des corps fusillés dans le rêve de Leila. Question: y-a-t-il une liaison entre l'impuissance ou la puissance de l'homme et la guerre?" From Djebar's notes taken during the filming of *La nouba*: Tamzali, *En Attendant Omar Gatlati*, 100.

40. Quoted in Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, 106, n. 26: Ministère de la Justice: Avant-Projet de Code de la Famille, 1401H-1981, 10. In the original French: Jean-Paul Charnay, *La vie musulmane en Algérie d'après la jurisprudence de la première moitié du XXe siècle*, 1991 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), 389.

41. "Après un discours inutilement pléthorique sur la guerre (années 1960), mêlant la pire version hollywoodienne à une langue de bois quasi stalinienne, la cinématographie algérienne, pour ne s'en tenir qu'à elle, s'est détournée du passé glorieux, devenu suspect, pour s'ancrer, non sans raison, dans le présent factuel. Entre les deux existe un vide. C'est dans ce vide, dans ce double silence—silence des femmes et silences des films—que *La nouba* vient s'inscrire. Il constitue une sorte de réaction à l'amnésie, au refoulé de l'histoire, qui a fait des femmes des héroïnes désincarnées, don on disait qu'elles étaient là pour justifier et faire accepter le

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fait qu'elles ne soient plus. Le film opère dans cette torsion, de l'affirmation à la dénégation, du passé au présent." Ratiba Hadj-Moussa, *Le corps, l'histoire, le territoire: Les rapports de genre dans le cinéma algérien* (Montréal: Éditions Balzac, 1994), 198.

42. "Mais la marque en tant que signifiant du savoir historique, sur l'histoire, en tant que produit de la mémoire, de ses hésitations, des objets et de leurs restes tend dans *La nouba* à se défiler, se dérober, à recuser sa fonction de marque. Je m'explique: j'ai avancé que *La nouba* est traversé par un procès d'historisation qui cherche à recadrer des faits, des moments qui se sont déroulés dans le passé et, qu'en un certain sens, le film y serait lui-même le signe." Ibid., 200.