

Fantastic Elements in Assia Djébar's *La Femme sans*

sépulture

Ana Medeiros, University of Kent

Tzvetan Todorov famously defined the fantastic genre as comprising texts set in a recognisably 'real' world that involve the possibility, but only the possibility, of a supernatural explanation underlying the events of the story related. Where the supernatural and the natural co-exist as hypotheses within the text, the reader enters a state of hesitation concerning the status of the story-events set before her (Todorov, 1975). If this hesitation is sustained to the end, according to Todorov, the text can usefully be classified as belonging to the (pure) fantastic genre. Subsequent theorists have adapted or added nuances to Todorov's position, but his idea that hesitation is fundamental to the reader's experience of an eerie sensation that can usefully be termed the fantastic has stood the test of time.

Is Assia Djébar's *La Femme sans sépulture* (2002) a fantastic text in Todorov's sense? On the one hand, the sense that this 'roman' is set in the real world is reinforced by the autobiographical elements of the text.¹ Specialists of Assia Djébar are aware that in

¹ Anne Donadey discusses the danger of women writing autobiographies in a Maghrebi context, especially when they write in French: 'Cette difficulté associée à une conception différente du sujet parlant ainsi qu'au projet féministe de ramener les femmes dans l'histoire se traduit dans toute l'œuvre d'Assia Djébar par un mélange dans lequel l'intertextualité, l'intratextualité et la mémoire (individuelle et collective) jouent un rôle primordial' (Hornung 1998, 101) [This difficulty, which is associated with a

1976 the author began work on a documentary film, *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* (1978), which may be described as a meditation on Algerian women, memory and the role of 'le regard.'² Djebar dedicated the film to the heroine of her hometown, Zoulikha 'la mère des maquisards' (Djebar 2002, 14).³ *La Femme sans sépulture* is, on one level, the culmination of the research undertaken nearly three decades prior to the publication of the text. But even the reader who is unaware of the autobiographical dimension of the work is invited to read this 'roman' as having a primarily documentary relation to reality. As Djebar puts it in the *Avertissement*: 'Dans ce roman, tous les faits et détails de la vie et de la mort de Zoulikha, héroïne de l'indépendance de l'Algérie, sont rapportés avec un souci de fidélité historique, ou, dirais-je, selon une approche documentaire' (9).⁴ Of course, to call the work a 'roman' is nevertheless to allude to its fictional dimension, as Djebar immediately concedes: 'Toutefois, certains personnages, aux côtés de l'héroïne, en particulier ceux présentés comme de sa famille, sont traités ici avec l'imagination et les variations que permet la fiction'(9).⁵ In brief, Djebar presents her work as a novel very much rooted in historical reality.⁶

different concept of the speaking subject and with the feminist project of bringing women into history, finds expression in all Assia Djebar's work as a blend of elements in which intertextuality, intratextuality, and memory (both individual and collective) play a vital role]. All English translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² In 1974 Djebar returned to Algeria as a Professor of Literature and in 1978 she directed *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*. At the start of the film one learns that 'Ce film en forme de nouba est dédié à titre posthume: – au musicien hongrois Béla Bartók, venu en 1913 dans une Algérie quasi-muette étudier la musique populaire; – à Yamina Oudai dite Zoulikha, qui en 1955 et 1956 coordonne la résistance nationale dans la ville et les montagnes de Cherchell' (Salhi 1999, 81). 'This film in the format of a *nouba* is dedicated posthumously to the Hungarian musician Béla Bartók who came in 1913 to an almost mute Algeria to study popular music and to Yamina Oudai known as Zoulikha who in 1955 and 1956 coordinated the national resistance in the city and in the mountains of Cherchell.' Therefore there is a clear link between the documentary being made by the narrator 'Djebar' and the film completed by the author in 1978. Moreover, from the start of the text the main narrator declares that the film she is working on is dedicated to Zoulikha and to Béla Bartók (2002, 15-17). For an introduction to the study of the film see Réda Bensmaïa's '*La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua*: Introduction à l'œuvre fragmentale cinématographique.'

³ 'Zoulikha, the mother of all the maquis.'

⁴ 'In the novel, all the facts and details pertaining to the life and death of Zoulikha, heroine of Algeria's independence, are reported with care regarding historical fidelity, or I might even say that they are reported following the approach of a documentary.'

⁵ 'Nevertheless, certain characters who surround the heroine, in particular those presented as being members of her family, are described with imagination and the variations allowed in works of fiction.'

⁶ As an historian Djebar is able to question French accounts of the colonization of Algeria; as a woman she has access to the oral culture of Arab women; and as a francophone writer she is able to combine the written and the oral, the past and the present, so as to bring women into the public sphere and therefore

There is no recourse here to the 'reality' of Realism, or the 'effet de réel' as theorised by Roland Barthes in *Littérature et réalité* (1982). Details of interiors and landscapes are only ever briefly noted, and objects (like the cushions used by Dame Lionne for her aching back; Djebar 2002, 26) have the role of props, or, indeed, in the case of the *couffins* [baskets] carried by Zoulikha to the *maquisards*, are the very stuff of political resistance.⁷ The reality that interests Djebar is the web of words and actions that constitute Algerian resistance, and particularly resistance on the part of Algerian women and their families.⁸ Her representation of this reality, though not without its visual touches, is primarily an auditory one: it is the voices of various characters, usually women, that together constitute what the *Avertissement* terms 'la vérité de Zoulikha.'⁹ Even when the story of Zoulikha's life is at its most dramatic, the reader is always aware of a (female) narrative voice mediating events; the dramatic effect of the story on the women who tell it or listen to it is always emphasized.¹⁰ Thus the level of *énonciation*, in which women address each other in dialogue, cannot be ignored. This is not a surprise to readers of Djebar, for throughout her writing career she has attempted to give oral tradition, and the women who sustain it, their rightful place in Algerian history.¹¹

Djebar, then, proposes a hybrid, a fiction with an autobiographical/documentary basis. And so when 'Djebar' meets Zoulikha's friend Dame Lionne, or her daughters, or their

give them a voice, or rather a plurality of voices. She allows them each their own individual voices, hence the multitude of narrators in her novels. In so doing she avoids homogenizing the situation of her peers as third world victims of a culture and religion.

⁷ Another heroine of the Algerian resistance, Zohra Driff, arrested in 1957, was later to explain: 'The Casbah was under tight control, and the brotherhood would have been immobilized if we had not been there. We lived in the same way as the men, except at the level of 'terrorist' action, where our lives were more intense because we could move around wearing veils. They [i.e. Algerian men] were the cloistered ones' (Tomlinson 2003, 38).

⁸ Discussing Djebar's work in general, Anne-Emmanuelle Berger has written: 'Assia Djebar explicitly conceives of her work as a transcription of the oral memory of Algerian women' (2002, 76).

⁹ 'Zoulikha's truth.'

¹⁰ Michael O'Riley clearly analyses the connection made by the narrator-author, between Zoulikha's stand and the on-going struggle in post-independence Algeria (2004, 70).

¹¹ This is a topic which has been treated by a vast number of critics as it is so crucial to the study of Djebar's works. For example, in a recent book, Debra Kelly considers 'the ways in which Djebar seeks a path to the liberation of the self and of the wider community (notably the community of women, both past and present) through the re-examination of history and the relationship of the individual and of the collective to their histories' (2005, 251).

aunt, the reader is in little doubt: the author intends her to understand that she is listening to voices belonging to the real world, the kind of voices, if not the very voices, to which Djebar has attended in reconstructing the 'truth' of Zoulikha's life. Within the frame provided by the *Avertissement*, the reader feels she has been guaranteed a connection to the real world often denied by (pure) fiction. This can afford a 'reality effect' of a particular kind. The reader does not know where fact ends and fiction begins; but she may well assume that Djebar has stuck to what she sees as the facts as far as possible, whilst observing a duty of discretion concerning Zoulikha's surviving relatives.

So in Djebar's text, Todorov's requirement that the fiction be set in the reader's world (as opposed to a fantasy setting) seems to have been met, in a manner characteristic of much of Djebar's writing. But within this ostensibly referential frame, does the reader experience hesitation concerning whether the 'facts' of the story are susceptible of a supernatural explanation? Zoulikha's elder daughter certainly believes in her mother's continuing supernatural presence in Caesarea. In a section of Chapter 2 entitled 'Voix de Hania, l'apaisée'¹² Hania expresses the possibility that her mother lives on in the very atmosphere of the town: 'Zoulikha restée là, dans l'air, dans cette poussière, en plein soleil ... Si ça se trouve, elle nous écoute, elle nous frôle' (50).¹³ At the same time, the words 'si ça se trouve' sustain an ambiguity concerning Hania's own belief in the possibility of her mother surviving in some ethereal form. Further on in the same section we learn how Hania periodically experiences insomnia, a compulsion to talk ceaselessly, 'pour elle seule,'¹⁴ and disturbances of the visual field (60-61).¹⁵ In a

¹² 'Hania's voice, the appeasement.'

¹³ 'Zoulikha remained there, in the air, in the dust, in the light of the sun ... Perhaps she is listening to us, touching us.'

¹⁴ 'just to herself.'

¹⁵ 'Since Hania searched in vain for her mother's body in 1962, changes have taken place in her own body and behaviour. She stopped menstruating and therefore is unable to give birth to her own children. From this time onwards Hania is also described as being, at times, taken over by words which she cannot control but which are continuously spoken by her. 'Hania reste alors allongée. Elle s'écoute, silencieuse, comme dans une méditation sans fin ... La parole en elle coule: à partir d'elle (de ses veines et veinules, de ses entrailles obscures, parfois remontant à la tête, battant à ses tempes, bourdonnant à ses oreilles, ou brouillant sa vue au point qu'elle voit les autres, soudain, dans un flou rosâtre ou verdâtre)' (61). [Hania then remains in bed. She listens to herself in silence as in an endless meditation. The speech flows from her (from her veins and venules, from her dark entrails, sometimes rising to her head, pummeling

western, post-Freudian perspective, these symptoms can be explained as a kind of hysteria provoked by the trauma in which Hania twice loses her mother, first when Zoulikha joins the *maquis*, then when she is arrested and disappears without trace. But Hania imagines her mother's ghost literally inhabiting her, and pushing her daughter to find her lost body deprived, perhaps, of burial rites: 'Quêter sans fin sa mère, ou plutôt, se dit-elle, c'est la mère en la fille, par les pores de celle-ci, oui, qui sue et s'exhale' (61).¹⁶ At one point Hania seems to be in no doubt that her mother's ghost haunts her in this way: 'Un jour, c'est sûr, tenace comme une sourde-muette, la mère en [Hania], entêtée, soudain murmurante, la guidera jusqu'à la forêt et à la sépulture cachée' (61).¹⁷ Yet the certainty expressed by 'c'est sûr' is immediately negated: 'Mais non! La guerre finie, rien, de cette issue qu'elle a attendue, n'arrive: où trouver le corps de Zoulikha?' (61).¹⁸ Hania – and perhaps the reader too – hesitates between two explanations of her own symptoms. Either her mother periodically 'inhabits' her and will one day reveal her hidden tomb (this would place her, obviously, in a world where supernatural intervention is possible); or nothing of the sort will happen (in which case Hania lives in a world governed by scientific or natural laws only).

On the following page this type of hesitation recurs as Hania compares and contrasts her own experience of being inhabited by her mother with a traditional belief in 'meskounates' or djinns:

Etre habitée: d'autres femmes, autrefois, disait-on, étaient 'peuplées,' 'habitées' – en arabe, on les surnommait les *meskounates* – mais il s'agissait à l'époque d'un djinn, bon ou mauvais esprit avec lequel ces malheureuses devaient composer, ou se soumettre en silence, quelquefois tout au long de leur vie. Une sorte d'amant invisible, maléfique, les dominant, les harcelant de l'intérieur. (62)¹⁹

her temples, buzzing in her ears or blurring her vision so much that she sees others, suddenly, in a pinkish or greenish haze].

¹⁶ 'Looking non-stop for the mother, or rather, she says to herself, it is the mother in the daughter, who sweats and exhales herself through the pores of the daughter.'

¹⁷ 'One day, for sure, tenacious as a deaf-mute, the mother inside [Hania], obstinate, suddenly murmuring, will guide her to the forest and to the hidden tomb.'

¹⁸ 'But no! When the war ended, the expected result did not come at all: where is Zoulikha's body to be found?'

¹⁹ 'To be inhabited: once upon a time, so they said, other women were "peopled", "inhabited" – in Arabic they were called the *meskounates* –, but at the time they meant a djinn, a good or bad spirit with whom

What Hania seems to believe is that her experience is like that ascribed to 'd'autres femmes, autrefois' in that both involve a form of possession, but unlike that of those other women (the 'mais' marking the boundary between Hania's experience and theirs) in that they were possessed, not by a ghost but by a djinn. The final paragraph of the Chapter seems, however, to reinstall a doubt concerning the belief in djinns (and, by extension, perhaps, belief in spirit possession): 'Or, depuis la guerre contre la France, toutes ces étranges créatures – auxquelles Zoulikha n'a jamais cru, elle qui avait appris à Hania à se méfier de "ces sornettes" – ont fui probablement sous d'autres cieux'(62).²⁰ Zoulikha may never have believed in djinns, but she only managed to teach her daughter to be suspicious of this belief; and if Hania sees no empirical evidence of djinns around her, she expresses this as a 'probable' flight of these spirits to some other realm. Just as she hesitates concerning the existence (historical and actual) of djinns, so she hesitates concerning the (actual, supernatural) presence of her mother inside herself. It would seem reductive and Eurocentric to argue that Hania's doubt concerning her mother's spirit is presented by Djebar as a quaint local superstition. Rather, Hania's hesitation is expressed, in Hania's own perspective, as perfectly logical; the reader, then, may reasonably infer that she is invited to share that hesitation. We may be on ground familiar to psychologists of the west, where what we call hysteria may be understood in terms of concepts such as trauma, repression and so on, or we may be on less familiar (cultural) ground, where the supernatural may be a real and effective force.

This type of ambiguity is reinforced by Djebar's choices concerning the form of the text. As commented above, Djebar structures the text polyphonically; it is woven, so to speak, from the voices of various women in conversation with other women, and the whole is framed by the narrator 'Djebar.' It is impossible not to notice how often the narrator delegates her role to other female figures. We have already examined a section

the unfortunate women had to reach a compromise with or submit in silence to them, sometimes for the whole of their lives. A type of evil invisible lover who dominated them, harassing them from the inside.'

²⁰ 'Yet, since the war against France, all those strange creatures – in which Zoulikha never believed, she who had taught Hania to be suspicious of those "tall stories" – had probably fled to live beneath different skies.'

entitled 'Voix de Hania, l'apaisée,' in which we hear Hania's 'voice' in the sense that the passage is written in a kind of *style indirect libre* associated with Hania's perspective. In other sections, we hear other voices that are not the narrator's, either in *style indirect libre* or in direct speech. This is how we gradually accede to a polyphonic account of Zoulikha's heroism. All of this may seem perfectly naturalistic, in that the various voices we hear have supposedly been recorded, at first or second hand, by the framing narrator. The women who narrate Zoulikha's story exist on the same level, or inhabit the same world as 'Djebar' in search of her documentary subject. But there is one voice to which this does not apply: that of Zoulikha herself. For no fewer than four times (in Chapters 3, 7, 10 and 12) a monologue is presented as though it were spoken by Zoulikha, in direct speech. These monologues are addressed to Mina, Zoulikha's younger daughter, and also occasionally to 'Djebar.' But they are supposedly pronounced after Zoulikha's death, for they relate that very death, from the moment of arrest through torture and death and beyond, until the corpse is exposed to the sun and the jackals, before being stolen and buried by a young *maquisard* [member of the resistance]. These monologues reach us from beyond the grave, beyond that problematic grave that is and is not the location of the mother's body.²¹

How are we to interpret this? On the one hand, Djebar (or 'Djebar') had declared at the outset that she had used the resources of her imagination to express the 'truth' of Zoulikha: 'J'ai usé à volonté de ma liberté romanesque, justement pour que la vérité de Zoulikha soit éclairée davantage' (9).²² So the heroine's monologues can be read naturalistically as imaginative extrapolations from the narrator's research into her subject. However, surely in the context of this text where Hania feels haunted by her mother, we are also invited to imagine the possibility that, through contact with

²¹ Zoulikha states: 'Quinze ou vingt nuits après, c'est à la lumière de la lune, dans une clairière que je ne reconnus pas, qu'il choisit de m'enterrer consciencieusement N'importe, c'est sur la place du douar, la voix de l'inconnue chantant inlassablement, c'est là, yeux ouverts, dans tout mon corps pourrissant, que je t'attends' (212). 'Fifteen or twenty nights later, it was by the light of the moon that, he chose to dutifully bury me in a clearing which I did not recognise it doesn't matter, it is in the square of the 'douar,' with the voice of the unfamiliar woman singing non-stop, it is there, with my eyes open, in the entirety of my putrefying body that I await you.'

²² 'I made free use of my novelistic freedom, precisely, so that Zoulikha's truth could be clarified further.'

Zoulikha's daughters, the framing narrator herself has become haunted, or is on four occasions 'inhabited' by Zoulikha, who inspires or rather dictates those four poetic monologues.

At one point the narrator (referred to as 'l'étrangère' [the foreigner]) realises quite how pervasive is Zoulikha's ghostly presence: 'Ainsi – rêve l'étrangère – Zoulikha l'héroïne flotte inexorablement, comme un oiseau aux larges ailes transparentes et diaprées, dans la mémoire de chaque femme d'ici (128).²³ And she is herself affected, as if by contagion, so that these memories begin to live in her. In the Epilogue she writes:

Zoulikha habite encore le cœur de la cité antique. Après son arrestation et les tortures subies, elle fut portée disparue. Auparavant, ayant déployé une parole publique, lyrique, il me semble qu'elle s'est, pour ainsi dire, envolée... Femme-oiseau de la mosaïque, elle paraît aujourd'hui, pour ses concitoyens, à demi effacée! Or son chant demeure. (214)²⁴

This passage is followed by a comparison with the myth of Ulysses listening to the sirens' song, though it is Djebar who listens to the siren voice of Zoulikha.

This is not, of course, a case of Djebar the real, historical author asking the reader to imagine her being actually haunted by a disembodied Zoulikha. But she is inviting us to imagine the framing narrator of the text, 'Djebar,' a textual entity, as being possibly (but possibly not) so haunted. This move has a double effect on the reader. On the one hand, it permits the experience of the fantastic as defined by Todorov, not only in relation to Hania's symptoms but also in relation to the narrator's writing as a whole. On the other hand, as we recognise the difference between Djebar and 'Djebar,' or between the real author and the framing narrator, we can read the narrator's 'haunting' by Zoulikha as a metaphor expressing the author's sense that she has reached the truth of Zoulikha as completely as if she were, at times, possessed by her.

²³ 'That is how – dreams the foreigner – Zoulikha the heroine floats inexorably, like a bird with long transparent and iridescent wings, in the memory of each local woman.'

²⁴ 'Zoulikha still lives in the heart of the old city. After her arrest and the torture she endured, she was declared missing. Before, having made use of a lyrical public voice, it seems to me that she flew away so to speak... Bird-woman of the mosaic, nowadays she seems half-erased to her fellow countrymen! However, her song remains.' The inclusion of Zoulikha in the mosaic with its Western roots alludes 'to the spectres of imperialist history haunting Algeria since Independence from France in 1962, the text mirrors the mosaic's projection of the haunting narratives and images of imperialism and their reiteration in history' (O'Riley 2004, 79).

There is, then, a strong sense of identification connecting the narrator to her subject. There is, above all, the reader's sense that she is learning the story not just of one heroine of the war, but of many women, including, vitally, the narrator herself. This is, after all, a case of placing Zoulikha 'au centre même d'une large fresque féminine' (as the *Avertissement* expresses it). And there is an uncanny effect of doubling that occurs as the lives of various women and different generations overlap and shape each other. Above all, as the text is woven from the various voices that constitute it, a series of similarities between the narrator and Zoulikha emerge.

For the extent of the identification between Zoulikha and the narrator to be clear, it must be understood that Zoulikha's life is represented as a fight for freedom from two types of oppression. First there is of course the oppression of Algeria by the French colonisers. But just as important, there is the threat of oppression of women by those forces within Algerian-Berber society that seek to impose the sequestration of women, and Zoulikha also rebels against such forces. This emerges, for instance, in the 'Troisième monologue de Zoulikha,'²⁵ in which the heroine recalls her pride at being, as her father proclaims, 'La première Arabe, ma fille, à avoir eu son certificat d'études dans la région, peut-être dans tout le département!' (166).²⁶ This is a moment of supreme joy for the thirteen-year-old girl: 'Ce jour-là, je me souviens, je sautillais sur le sentier et je remontais la colline' (166).²⁷ However, on account of her westernised dress, a passing peasant displays anger towards her, spitting to the side of the road and declaring by way of insult: 'La fille Chaieb déguisée en Roumia!' (166).²⁸ But the young girl's spirit is resilient, as manifested in the remainder of the passage:

En s'éloignant, [le paysan] cracha de nouveau. Et, pour manifester davantage son mépris, il changea de côté pour poursuivre son chemin. Car moi, devant l'insulte si brusque, je m'étais arrêtée net. Figée, je crois, étais-je, mais aussi, par esprit de contradiction, je me sentis presque heureuse: je me dis, une seconde, que c'était vrai, j'étais 'déguisée,' mais à force de narguer les colons et leurs femmes, à force de faire la fière avec leurs filles, à force d'insulter leurs garçons

²⁵ 'Zoulikha's third monologue.'

²⁶ 'My daughter, the first Arab girl in the region, perhaps in the whole administrative department, to have received her diploma!'

²⁷ 'I remember that day, I was hopping on the path going up the hill.'

²⁸ 'The Chaieb girl disguised as a Christian.'

quand ils tâchaient d'approcher de moi, croyant peut-être me faire honneur, j'avais oublié l'essentiel. Face aux miens, aux paysans dits "indigènes," à leurs femmes terrées dans leurs cabanes, à leurs filles qu'ils n'envoyaient pas à l'école, moi, par chance, je paraissais 'déguisée'! Je repris, seule, ma route, et sautillant dans mes souliers neufs: 'Déguisée! ... Déguisée! ...' (167)²⁹

It should be noted that in this passage the young Zoulikha emerges as doubly rebellious. On the one hand, she has always proudly resisted the condescension of the colonisers; on the other hand, she now realises that by receiving a western education she has become the object of hostility from within her own community. And if this is the case, it would seem to be in part because she is envied by the peasants' 'femmes terrées dans leurs cabanes' and their 'filles qu'ils n'envoyaient pas à l'école.' She suddenly realises she is experiencing a freedom denied to many girls in her community, and with this realisation she begins to rejoice again, in spite of, indeed because of the peasant's insult.

If this set of tensions is somewhat implicit in the passage above, it is reiterated further on in the same chapter where Zoulikha recalls how at the age of twenty she would proudly cross the village appearing (with her westernised clothes and absence of veil) too European for the indigenous population and (with her henna-red hair) too Moorish for the Europeans (170-71). She explains how she realised she was the focus of hostile envy as she is insulted in the street by a veiled woman:

Je me souviens que soudain, devant cette forme d'hostilité-là, surprenante pour moi, je me sentis vieillie – écrasée par quel fardeau des autres? –, comme si toutes les invisibles semblaient me dire, même derrière leurs persiennes fermées, elles qui ne se hasardaient pas comme celle-ci, une servante probablement, dont elles faisaient leur porte-parole auprès de ma jeunesse audacieuse: 'Pourquoi, mais pourquoi toi, toi seule, au soleil exposée, déshabillée, livrée?' (171)³⁰

²⁹ 'As he moved away, [the peasant] spat again. And to further express his disdain, he changed to the other side of the path to continue on his way. Because faced with such a brusque insult, I had stayed rooted to the spot. I think I must have frozen but also in a spirit of contradiction I felt almost happy. I told myself, for a second, that it was true, I was "disguised", but by dint of teasing the colonizers and their wives, by dint of being haughty with their daughters, by dint of insulting the boys when they tried to approach me, believing perhaps I would be honoured, I had forgotten the essential. In the eyes of my people, the country folk, the so-called "indigenous" people, in the eyes of their wives, holed up in their huts, in the eyes of their daughters whom they did not send to school, luckily, I seemed to be "disguised." Alone, I resumed my route, hopping along in my new shoes: "Disguised! ... Disguised! ..."'

³⁰ 'I remember that suddenly, in response, to that form of hostility which surprised me, I felt aged – as if weighed down by some mysterious burden imposed by others? –, as if all the invisible women seemed to tell me, even from behind their closed blinds, they who did not dare to show themselves, unlike this woman, a servant most likely, whom they chose as their spokesperson to address me in the boldness of my youth: "Why, but why is it only you, you alone, in the sun, exposed, unclad, abandoned?"'

Zoulikha sees her liberation from this social pressure to conform to a norm of sequestered womanhood as forging the way for her daughter to enjoy similar freedoms. Apostrophising Mina, she explains it is for her sake that she embraced such freedoms, 'Pour toi aujourd'hui,' but also for 'tant d'autres, soudain nombreuses au soleil, et n'en déplaie à celle qui me défia, dents serrées sous le voile de blanc sali, œil unique accusateur, vous, à votre tour, et ensemble, vous marchez enfin 'nues' (171).³¹ This, then, is the double liberation for which Zoulikha has striven: from the French, but also from a sequestered life, expressed as a life away from the sunlight.³²

The reader who knows other texts by Djebar will recognise similarities of theme between this passage and, for instance, 'Fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l'école,' from *L'Amour, la fantasia*, where the author identifies the beginnings of her intellectual, social and political liberation in her father's decision to send her to school, and a French school at that. But even without such intertextual comparisons, Djebar invites the reader to link the figures of the framing narrator and Zoulikha. Liberation is the cause of the narrator, the result of the very act of narration, or of the chain of narrations her return to Caesarea unleashes:

Une histoire dans l'histoire, et ainsi de suite, se dit l'invitée. N'est-ce pas une stratégie inconsciente pour, au bout de la chaîne, nous retrouver, nous qui écoutons, qui voyons précisément le fil de la narration se nouer, puis se dénouer, se tourner et se retourner... n'est-ce pas pour, à la fin, nous découvrir ... libérées? (129)³³

Her return to Caesarea, as a 'fille prodigue' [prodigal daughter] (219), and the long-lost neighbour of Hania's household, permits a liberation that was begun with Zoulikha but

³¹ 'For you today,' ... 'so many others, suddenly numerous in the sun, and with all due respect to the one who defied me with gritted teeth under her soiled white veil, with her single accusing eye, you, when it is your turn, together you will finally be able to walk "naked."'

³² The two struggles converge when Zohra Oudai relates her attempt to claim one of the former French colonial houses for herself and her dependants, and she finds herself refused by Allal, the man responsible for the division of the properties in question, because she has embarrassed him in front of other men by addressing him unbidden and in Berber. Clearly, then, those Algerian women who had struggled for independence are expected to submit to male prerogatives once the French have left (Djebar 2002, 134-136).

³³ 'A story within the story and so on and so forth, the guest says to herself. Is it not an unconscious strategy to, at the end of the chain, find ourselves, we who listen, who see with precision the narrative thread tying itself in knots and then untying itself, turning itself and turning itself anew ... is it not in order finally to find ourselves ... emancipated?'

somehow blocked or suspended by her (apparent) disappearance. The narrator, in her activity as narrator but also as catalyst for others' narratives, completes Zoulikha's task by fulfilling her hopes of freedom for her daughters. It is as though Zoulikha is acting on her daughters, even exerting a healing power on them, through the narrator, in such a manner that one seems to be 'inhabited' (literally, as by a ghost, or metaphorically, as an influence) by the other.

This somewhat mystical relationship between the narrator and her subject is returned to in the Epilogue. Here the narrator explains that if she has returned to Caesarea, it is entirely in order to bear witness to the fact that Zoulikha still lives on (literally? metaphorically?) in the heart of the city: 'Je suis revenue seulement pour le dire. J'entends, dans ma ville natale, ses mots et son silence, les étapes de sa stratégie avec ses attentes, ses fureurs' (214).³⁴ But rediscovering Zoulikha's presence is also a case of rediscovering herself: 'Moi, la fillette de la ville revenue de l'exil pour quelques jours, pas plus, oui, décidément 'l'étrangère pas tellement étrangère,' moi, à force d'avoir écouté Mina et Hania, Dame Lionne ainsi que, dans les collines, au-dessus de la ville, Zohra Oudai (ces deux dernières dames, combien leur reste-t-il désormais à vivre?), me voici de retour' (215).³⁵ The ghostly presence of Zoulikha conveyed in the words of the women who loved her somehow restores the narrator to herself.

To return to the question with which we began: is Djébar's text an example of the fantastic genre? Certainly the author plays with the conventions of that genre, skilfully juxtaposing two types of explanation for the events recounted and fostering a hesitation on the part of the reader. But this is not an end in itself for Djébar. Rather, the possibility of the supernatural seems to function as a metaphor; if Zoulikha 'haunts' those who live on after her disappearance (her daughters and former comrades, the narrator herself, and all those for whose freedom she fought), this means that we all

³⁴ 'I came back only to say this. In my native city, I hear her words and her silence, the various stages of her strategy with its moments of waiting and its furies.'

³⁵ 'Me, the little girl from the city, who has returned from exile, for a few days, no longer than that, yes, really "the not so foreign foreigner", me by dint of having listened to Mania and to Hania, Dame Lionne as well as Zohra Oudai in the hills above the city (how much longer do the latter two have to live?), here I am back again.'

owe a duty to the past. The author takes her own duty to the past extremely seriously, patiently reconstructing the almost-lost histories of Algeria's heroines. Only once she has done her duty to Zoulikha in this way can she feel that she has truly returned home.³⁶ And it is entirely appropriate to represent this relationship to the past as a kind of haunting. This is the use to which Djébar puts the idea of the supernatural; whilst celebrating and continuing Zoulikha's struggle for the liberation of Algeria and its women, she uses the possibility of the fantastic to convey the uncanny experience of a constant return to her own (cultural) self.

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³⁶ Even if the return home is not to be a permanent one. As Jane Hiddleston has commented: 'In using the motif of spectrality, moreover Djébar adds to her previous reflections on the limits of the specific and the endless proliferation of the singular-plural a more developed sense of the interpenetration of the living with the dead, of the resurgence of the not-quite-dead. The narrator's quest in the novel is both a search for an Algerian genealogy, a communion with her country's inheritance, and a discovery of the inaccessibility of that inheritance' (Hiddleston 2006, 169).