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Postcolonial Algeria and the Afterlife of French Colonialism: Memory, Identity, and Cultural Resistance in Assia Djebar's Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade

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ABSTRACT:

French rule in Algeria lasted from 1830 to 1962, yet its consequences for memory, language, and national identity did not end with formal independence. This article reads Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985/1993) as a literary response to that unfinished history. Drawing on Edward Said's account of colonial discourse, Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial alienation and language, and Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, the study asks how Djebar reconstructs Algeria's colonial past from positions that French and nationalist archives both tended to exclude, and what kind of postcolonial identity that reconstruction makes possible. Through a qualitative close reading of the novel, the analysis follows four threads: personal and oral memory used as a counter-archive to French military reports, women's testimonies treated as historical evidence in their own right, the ambivalent status of French as both an instrument of domination and a means of self-expression, and the persistence of colonial violence as a structuring presence in postcolonial Algerian life. The findings suggest that Djebar does more than restore missing voices to an existing record; she changes what counts as historical evidence in the first place, treating memory itself as an act with political weight. The novel's mixture of autobiography, archival document, and oral testimony produces a hybrid narrative form that mirrors the hybrid identities it describes. *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* indicates that decolonization in Algeria remains, in important respects, an unfinished project of memory, language, and narrative recovery.

KEYWORDS: **Algeria, Assia Djebar, cultural resistance, hybridity, postcolonialism.**

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الجزائر ما بعد الاستعمار وآثار الاستعمار الفرنسي: الذاكرة والهوية والمقاومة الثقافية في آسيا جبار فانتازيا: موكب جزائري

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ملخص البحث

استمر الحكم الفرنسي في الجزائر من عام ١٨٣٠ إلى عام ١٩٦٢، إلا أن تداعياته على الذاكرة واللغة والهوية الوطنية لم تنتهِ مع الاستقلال الرسمي. تتناول هذه المقالة رواية آسيا جبار "فانتازيا: موكب جزائري" (١٩٩٣/١٩٨٥) كاستجابة أدبية لهذا التاريخ غير المكتمل. وبالاستناد إلى تحليل إدوارد سعيد للخطاب الاستعماري، وتحليل فرانز فانون للاغتراب واللغة في ظل الاستعمار، ومفهوم هومي بابا للهوية الهجينة، تتساءل الدراسة كيف تعيد جبار بناء ماضي الجزائر الاستعماري من منظوراتٍ استبعدتها الأرشيفات الفرنسية والقومية على حد سواء، وما نوع الهوية ما بعد الاستعمارية التي يتيحها هذا البناء. من خلال قراءة متعمقة نوعية للرواية، يتتبع التحليل أربعة محاور رئيسية: الذاكرة الشخصية والشفوية المستخدمة كأرشيف مضاد للتقارير العسكرية الفرنسية، وشهادات النساء التي تُعامل كأدلة تاريخية قائمة بذاتها، والوضع المتناقض للغة الفرنسية كأداة للهيمنة ووسيلة للتعبير عن الذات في آنٍ واحد، واستمرار العنف الاستعماري كحضور مُهيمن في الحياة الجزائرية ما بعد الاستعمارية. تشير النتائج إلى أن آسيا جبار لا تكتفي بإعادة الأصوات المفقودة إلى سجل موجود، بل تُغير مفهوم الدليل التاريخي في المقام الأول، مُعاملةً الذاكرة نفسها كفعل ذي ثقل سياسي. يُنتج مزيج الرواية من السيرة الذاتية والوثائق الأرشيفية والشهادات الشفوية شكلاً سردياً هجيناً يعكس الهويات الهجينة التي تصفها. تُشير رواية "فانتازيا: موكب جزائري" إلى أن إنهاء الاستعمار في الجزائر لا يزال، في جوانب مهمة، مشروعاً غير مكتمل لاستعادة الذاكرة واللغة والسرد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجزائر، آسيا جبار، ، المقاومة الثقافية ، التهجين، ما بعد الاستعمار.

1. INTRODUCTION

French troops landed at Sidi Fredj in June 1830 and took Algiers within three weeks. The occupation that followed lasted 132 years and reorganized land ownership, language instruction, legal status, and the writing of history itself (Stora, 2001). Algerian independence in 1962 ended French political rule, but it did not resolve the questions colonialism had raised about language, memory, and belonging. Those questions have continued to shape Algerian public life and literature well into the postcolonial period (McDougall, 2006).

Postcolonial Algerian literature has become one of the main spaces where these unresolved questions are worked through in detail. Among Algerian writers, Assia Djebar (1936–2015) occupies a distinctive position. Her fiction returns repeatedly to the intersections of memory, gender, history, and resistance, often giving narrative space to people excluded by both colonial administration and local patriarchal custom. *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, published in French as *L'Amour, la fantasia* in 1985 and translated into English by Dorothy S. Blair in 1993, is widely read as one of her central works. It combines autobiography, French colonial archival material, and the oral testimony of Algerian women who lived through the war of independence, and it moves between these registers without settling into any single one.

The novel does not present Algerian history as a finished record waiting to be illustrated. It treats history as contested ground where French military reports, nationalist accounts, and women's oral memory compete for authority and visibility. Djebar places these sources side by side rather than ranking them, and the friction between them becomes one of the novel's main subjects.

This article asks how *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* represents the afterlife of French colonialism through the related categories of memory, identity, and resistance. More specifically, the guiding research question is: how does Djebar's narrative practice reconstruct historical memory excluded from colonial and nationalist archives, negotiate the ambivalence of language and gender under French rule, and produce a model of postcolonial Algerian identity that resists both colonial and nationalist orthodoxy? The article argues that Djebar uses literary narration as a method of historical recovery that works in two directions at once: it dismantles the authority of colonial discourse, and it builds, out of the resulting fragments, a plural and unfinished version of Algerian identity.

2. Literature Review

The enclosed literature review examines the principal theoretical and critical studies relevant to the present research paper. It first outlines the major concepts of postcolonial theory before reviewing key scholarship on Assia Djebar's ***Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade***. Together, these studies establish the conceptual foundation for the analysis that follows.

2.1 Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory

The relationship between colonial history and literary representation has been a central concern of postcolonial studies since the 1970s. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2003) argues that European writing about the East produced the colonized subject as an object of knowledge rather than a speaking subject, and that this body of representation worked alongside, and in support of, colonial administration. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said (1994) extends this argument to the novel form itself, suggesting that European narrative conventions often normalized empire by treating colonized territory as background rather than as a site of competing claims. Applied to French Algeria, this account helps explain why nineteenth-century French military memoirs of the 1830 invasion could describe conquest in administrative or even celebratory terms while erasing the experience of those being conquered.

Frantz Fanon's work develops the psychological dimension of this argument. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (2008) describes how colonized subjects can come to experience their own language and culture as inferior once they are educated within the colonizer's linguistic and conceptual framework, producing what he calls a divided sense of self. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (2004) treats decolonization as a process that has to remake culture and consciousness, not only political institutions. Read together, these two works are particularly relevant to Francophone Algerian writers, for whom French is simultaneously the language of schooling and literary production and the language that once justified their colonization.

Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) offers a third, related framework. Bhabha argues that colonial identity is never simply imposed in one direction; it is produced through an ongoing and unstable exchange between colonizer and colonized that he calls hybridity. In a chapter titled "DissemiNation," Bhabha (1994) also distinguishes between the "pedagogical" version of a nation, the official story told in textbooks and ceremonies, and its "performative" dimension, the everyday, contested experience of belonging to that nation. This distinction is useful for reading Djebar's treatment of Algerian nationhood, which resists a single, settled national story in favor of multiple, sometimes conflicting, accounts.

2.2 Memory, Gender, and Language in Djebar Scholarship

A substantial body of scholarship has examined *Fantasia* from the perspectives of memory, feminism, and historiography specifically. Mildred Mortimer (1990), in one of the earliest extended studies, reads Djebar's fiction as an effort to recover Algerian women's voices from historical silence. Françoise Lionnet (1995) focuses on the novel's blending of autobiography and collective memory, arguing that Djebar's narrating "I" is never purely individual but always entangled with the voices of other women. Lindsey Moore (2008) examines the relationship between gender and postcolonial identity across Djebar's fiction and that of other Arab and Muslim women writers, situating *Fantasia* within a broader corpus of women's resistance writing.

Soheila Ghoussey (1994) coined what has become one of the most cited descriptions of Djebar's relationship to French, reading the novel's treatment of language through a specifically feminine model of writing. Nancy Von Rosk (2001) describes the novel's structure as a "polyphony" of women's voices set against French colonial documents, producing what she calls a dialectic between orality and writing. Jane Hiddleston (2006, 2009) places this ambivalence within a wider account of postcolonial theory, describing postcolonialism itself as an open and ongoing process of critique rather than a fixed position. More recently, Alexandra Magearu (2021) proposes the concept of "subaltern aurality" to describe how Djebar's narrator listens to, rather than simply transcribes, the oral testimony of other Algerian women, treating listening itself as a form of historical method.

French-language criticism has addressed the novel from related angles. Christiane Chaulet-Achour (1998) studies the fragmentation of Djebar's narrative voice across her work, and Jean Dejeux (1994) situates *Fantasia* within the broader tradition of Francophone Maghrebi women's writing. Winifred Woodhull (1993) reads this same tradition as a space where feminism and decolonization intersect, while Clarisse Zimra (1999), in an afterword to the novel, stresses its layered, palimpsestic quality, the sense that each part of the text is written over an earlier, only partly erased one.

Not all readings agree on how to characterize Djebar's relationship to French and to colonial history. Ferma Lekesizalin (2017) argues that much of the existing criticism overstates the novel's ambivalence and discursive uncertainty, and underplays its more assertive, anticolonial argument about historical agency. For Lekesizalin, *Fantasia* is less a meditation on undecidability than a deliberate counter-history that holds French colonizers accountable for specific, named acts of violence. This disagreement matters for the present study, because it suggests that Bhabha's

hybridity framework, while useful, may need to be tested against readings that treat the novel's stance toward French and toward colonial history as more deliberate than ambivalent.

Despite this range of scholarship, comparatively few studies bring memory, language, gender, and resistance together as a single, interacting frame within *Fantasia* specifically, rather than treating them as separate threads. This article addresses that gap by reading the novel through Said, Fanon, and Bhabha together, while remaining attentive to the tension Lekesizalin identifies between ambivalence and deliberate counter-history.

3. Conceptual and Analytical Perspectives

This study approaches *Fantasia* as a literary counter-history, a narrative that challenges colonial representation by reconstructing memory rather than by arguing against it directly. Colonial archives, as Said's account of discourse suggests, privileged the testimony of military officers, administrators, and European travelers, while treating indigenous experience mainly as something to be observed, managed, or translated by others. Djebar destabilizes this hierarchy by placing oral testimony and personal recollection directly alongside official French documents, without subordinating one to the other.

In this framework, memory is not simply a record of what happened. Following Fanon's argument that decolonization requires a remaking of consciousness and not only of political structures, memory in *Fantasia* becomes a political act through which previously unrecorded experience gains visibility and, with it, a claim to historical truth. Identity, in turn, is treated as something produced through encounter rather than given in advance. Bhabha's notion of hybridity is useful here because it allows identity to be read as unstable and composite without treating that instability as merely confused or incomplete. At the same time, this study keeps in view Lekesizalin's caution that hybridity should not be used to flatten moments where Djebar's narrative makes a direct, accountable claim against specific colonial actors and events.

Cultural resistance, the third term in the title of this article, names the way literature can contest domination and reclaim agency without necessarily taking the form of direct political argument. Together, these three concepts, colonial discourse and its counter-archive, hybrid identity, and cultural resistance, provide the framework through which the analysis below reads *Fantasia* as a site where historical recovery, identity formation, and resistance converge.

4. Textual Approach to Literary Postcolonial Criticism

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive method built on close textual analysis, a standard approach in literary postcolonial criticism. The analysis focuses on narrative structure, the placement of historical documents within the novel, autobiographical passages, and women's oral testimony, organized into three broad categories: colonial memory, postcolonial identity (language and gender), and cultural resistance.

The corpus is *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, in Dorothy S. Blair's English translation (Djebar, 1993). The novel was chosen because its fragmented, three-part structure, autobiography, the 1830 conquest as recorded in French sources, and oral narratives of the independence war, gives the analysis direct access to all three categories within a single text, rather than requiring a comparison across multiple works. The fragmentation of the novel's form is treated here not as a stylistic flourish but as evidence in itself: the discontinuity between parts mirrors the discontinuity of colonial memory that the article examines.

Two limitations should be noted. First, the analysis works from Blair's English translation rather than Djebar's French original, so observations about specific word choice are necessarily mediated by translation. Second, focusing on a single novel allows for depth but not for claims about

Djebar's wider body of work, which includes several related texts that extend the same themes. Where relevant, the discussion notes how secondary scholarship situates *Fantasia* within that larger body of writing.

5. Reclaiming History and Voice: Reading Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade

The analysis below moves through five interlocking dimensions of the novel: memory's function as a counter-archive, the recovery of women's testimony, the ambivalence of French as both wound and instrument, the persistence of colonial violence, and the novel's wider project of reimagining the Algerian nation. Each section reads specific moments in the text against the theoretical framework outlined above, treating Djebar's narration as a deliberate strategy of historical recovery that simultaneously dismantles colonial discourse and reconstructs a plural account of Algerian identity.

5.1 Memory as a Counter-Archive

Fantasia opens not with the conquest of 1830 but with a small domestic scene: the narrator's own first day of French school, recalled as "a little Arab girl going to school for the first time" (Djebar, 1993, p. 3), walking beside her father. The scene is personal, almost ordinary, yet it marks the beginning of the narrator's entry into the French-language world that the rest of the novel treats as both a wound and a resource. By opening here rather than with a battle or a treaty, Djebar signals that the novel's history will be built from private memory outward, not from official record downward.

This choice has direct consequences for how the novel treats the French archive. Djebar repeatedly sets colonial military reports against the experience of the people those reports describe. Lekesizalin (2017) shows how Djebar questions the eagerness of French officers to publish their own memoirs of the 1830 invasion, reading their accounts as documents that flatter their authors more than they record events accurately. Read through Said's account of colonial discourse, these officers were not simply describing a conquest; they were producing the version of it that would justify French rule to a French readership. Djebar's narrative interrupts that production by placing alongside it the testimony of those the reports rendered as objects rather than witnesses.

The novel's fragmented structure reinforces this argument formally. Mortimer (1997) describes the same kind of formal fragmentation across Djebar's later Algerian novels as a deliberate narrative strategy rather than disorganization, and the description applies just as well to *Fantasia*'s own three-part structure. Chapters move without warning between the narrator's childhood, nineteenth-century French sources, and twentieth-century oral testimony, and the discontinuity between them is never smoothed over. This formal choice suggests that colonial history cannot be confined to the past tense; it continues to organize how memory itself is structured in the present. Memory, in this sense, becomes a form of resistance against historical erasure, not because it corrects the French record point by point, but because it makes that record one source among several rather than the only one.

5.2 Writing Women into History

A central achievement of *Fantasia* is its treatment of women as active participants in history rather than as background figures. Djebar constructs what Von Rosk (2001) calls a "polyphony" of women's voices, set deliberately against the written record left by French colonizers. These voices are not decorative additions to a male-authored history; they carry information, about hiding from soldiers, about imprisonment, about loss, that the official archive does not contain at all.

The narrator's own trajectory makes this point directly. Recalling her unusual freedom to study and travel, she describes her world as one of "the outdoors and the risk, instead of the prison of [her] peers" (Djebar, 1993, p. 184). The line draws a contrast between her own atypical mobility and the seclusion expected of most Algerian women of her generation, a seclusion that Marnia

Lazreg (1994) documents in detail as a structuring feature of both colonial and patriarchal control over Algerian women's lives. Djebar's narrator benefits from her father's decision to send her to school, but the novel does not present this as a simple escape; it is exile as well as freedom, since it separates her from the maternal world she also wants to recover through writing.

This recovery raises a question that Gayatri Spivak's (1988) work on the subaltern makes unavoidable: when Djebar transcribes and translates the spoken testimony of rural Algerian women into literary French, whose voice is the reader actually hearing? Magearu's (2021) concept of "subaltern aurality" offers one way to answer this without resolving it too neatly. Rather than claiming to transmit these women's voices directly, Djebar's narrator is presented as someone who listens, who positions herself in relation to testimony she cannot fully own or translate without remainder. The novel does not pretend that this mediation disappears. It makes the act of listening itself part of the historical record.

5.3 Language, Identity, and Colonial Ambivalence

Writing in French places Djebar in a position the novel addresses directly rather than glosses over. At one point the narrator calls French her "step-mother tongue" (Djebar, 1993, p. 214), a phrase that captures both intimacy and estrangement: French raised her, in the sense that it gave her access to education and authorship, but it is not the mother tongue carried by the maternal household she also writes about. Elsewhere she states more starkly that "this language was formerly used to entomb my people" (Djebar, 1993, p. 215), naming French directly as an instrument the colonial administration used against Algerians, including in matters of life and death.

Fanon's account of colonial language helps explain why this double relationship to French is not simply a personal preference. For Fanon, acquiring the colonizer's language under colonial conditions is rarely a neutral act of communication; it reorganizes how the colonized subject relates to their own culture and to themselves. Djebar's narrator experiences exactly this kind of reorganization, but she does not resolve it by rejecting French. Instead, she keeps both halves of the phrase "step-mother tongue" active at once, refusing to choose between French as wound and French as instrument.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity describes this unresolved doubleness well: Djebar's narrative voice occupies what Bhabha calls an in-between position, neither fully inside French literary tradition nor fully outside it, and this position generates rather than forecloses meaning. Even so, Lekesizalin's (2017) reading is worth holding onto here. The novel's use of French to name specific colonial crimes, such as the burning of the Dahra caves discussed below, suggests something more deliberate than ambivalence: Djebar takes an instrument of domination and turns it toward documentation and accusation. Hybridity and assertive counter-history are not necessarily opposites in this novel. The same sentence that exposes French as the language once used to bury Algerians is itself written in French, addressed to a readership that includes the language's original owners.

5.4 Colonial Violence and Historical Trauma

The representation of violence is one of the novel's most direct points of contact with documented Algerian history. Djebar incorporates French military correspondence describing the 1845 fumigations at the Dahra caves, in which French forces under General Pélissier set fire to caves sheltering Algerian families who had taken refuge there, killing those inside through smoke and asphyxiation. By quoting from these officers' own reports rather than paraphrasing them, Djebar lets the colonial record indict itself: language meant to document a military operation efficiently becomes, in the context the novel builds around it, evidence of atrocity.

This violence is not limited to the nineteenth century. Djebar extends the discussion to the war of independence in the 1950s, drawing on the oral testimony of women who were imprisoned, tortured, or displaced during that conflict. McDougall (2006) describes how Algerian nationalist historiography has itself sometimes simplified or minimized women's specific experience of this violence in favor of a more unified story of national struggle. Djebar's attention to women's testimony works against that simplification from a different direction than her critique of French sources, suggesting that the erasure of certain experiences from history is not unique to colonial archives.

Importantly, the novel does not represent Algerians only as victims of this violence. Acts of rebellion, the deliberate preservation of oral tradition, and the transmission of memory across generations appear throughout the novel as forms of resistance in their own right. Resistance, in this sense, is not something added to Algerian identity after the fact; it appears in the novel as one of its constitutive features.

5.5 Reimagining the Nation

Beyond recovering individual memories, *Fantasia* takes part in a larger project of rethinking what the Algerian nation is. Bhabha's distinction, in "DissemiNation," between the official, pedagogical story of a nation and its lived, performative experience is useful here. Official Algerian nationalist narratives, like French colonial ones, have their own pedagogical version of events, one that can flatten the specific experience of women, rural communities, and other groups into a single account of liberation. Djebar's novel resists this flattening by keeping the performative, contested texture of memory visible rather than smoothing it into a single national story.

This is where Magearu's account of listening becomes relevant again, now at the level of the nation rather than the individual testimony. A nation built, in part, on listening to its own internal disagreements and silences is necessarily a more plural, less settled construction than one built on a single official record. Djebar does not offer a finished alternative national story to replace the French or nationalist versions she questions. She offers, instead, a method, attentive, comparative, willing to leave contradictions unresolved, for continuing to ask who counts as a historical subject in Algeria and on what terms.

6. Major Insights and Discussion of Findings

The analysis above yields several findings about the relationship between colonial memory, identity formation, and resistance in *Fantasia*.

First, the novel demonstrates that French colonialism in Algeria persisted past 1962 in non-political form, through its continuing influence on memory, language, and the institutions that record history. This supports Fanon's argument that decolonization is a cultural and psychological process and not only a matter of transferring political authority.

Second, Djebar's juxtaposition of official French documents with personal and oral testimony does not simply add missing information to an existing historical record. It changes what counts as evidence in the first place, treating memory and testimony as legitimate historical sources alongside, and sometimes against, the written archive Said describes as a product of colonial discourse.

Third, women's narratives occupy a central, rather than supplementary, position in this reconstruction. Their testimonies challenge dominant accounts of Algerian history from both colonial and nationalist directions, though the question Spivak raises about mediated speech, who actually speaks when a writer transcribes another's testimony, remains genuinely open rather than fully resolved by the novel.

Fourth, the novel treats French as a site of negotiation rather than a settled position. It is, at once, the language the colonial administration used to disadvantage Algerians and the language Djebar uses to expose that disadvantage in detail. This finding aligns with Bhabha's hybridity, while also supporting Lekesizalin's caution that hybridity in this novel can shade into deliberate accusation rather than remaining purely ambivalent.

Fifth, cultural resistance in *Fantasia* operates mainly through the act of remembering itself rather than through direct political argument. Preserving and transmitting memory, across generations and across the colonial and postcolonial periods, becomes the novel's primary method of opposing historical erasure.

Taken together, these findings answer the research question that opened this article. Djebar's narrative practice reconstructs excluded colonial memory by setting personal and oral testimony directly against French archival authority, rather than by simply correcting that authority's facts. It negotiates the ambivalence of language and gender by keeping French active as both wound and instrument, and by treating women's testimony as historical evidence in its own right, even while acknowledging the limits of any single narrator's ability to transmit it. And it produces a model of postcolonial Algerian identity that resists both colonial and nationalist orthodoxy by refusing to settle into a single, finished national story, offering instead an ongoing method of attention to memory, language, and silence.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how Assia Djebar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* represents the afterlife of French colonialism in Algeria through memory, identity, and cultural resistance. Read through Said, Fanon, and Bhabha, and against the more recent scholarship of Ghoussey, Von Rosk, Hiddleston, Lekesizalin, and Magearu, the novel emerges as a text that does not simply narrate Algeria's colonial past but actively reorganizes how that past can be known.

By placing women's oral testimony beside French military and administrative records, by treating French itself as both colonial weapon and personal resource, and by refusing a single, settled national narrative, Djebar builds a literary structure in which previously marginalized experience becomes historically legible. The novel suggests that French colonialism continues to shape postcolonial Algerian life well after formal independence, and that memory, far from being a private or secondary concern, is one of the main grounds on which that legacy continues to be contested.

This study has limitations worth stating plainly. It works from a single novel in English translation, and it cannot settle the disagreement between ambivalence-centered and agency-centered readings of Djebar's work, a disagreement this article has tried to hold open rather than resolve. Future research might extend this analysis to Djebar's other Algerian novels, or compare her treatment of memory and language with other Maghrebi women writers working in French, to test whether the patterns identified here in *Fantasia* hold across a wider body of postcolonial Algerian literature.

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