

## Odalisque on the Move: Leïla Sebbar's *Mes Algéries en France*

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Throughout her lifetime, Franco-Algerian author Leïla Sebbar has probed the inextricable pasts of her two countries of origin. Examining themes of memory and identity in light of the importance of the visual archive in the construction of history, Sebbar consistently references the odalisque, an emblematic icon of nineteenth-century French Orientalist painting.<sup>1</sup>

In Sebbar's first trilogy, three novels written over a ten-year period—*Shérazade, 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (1982), *Les carnets de Shérazade* (1985), and *Le fou de Shérazade* (1991)—she explores the representation of the odalisque through the thoughts and actions of her unforgettable fugitive heroine Shérazade.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the works, Sebbar uses visual and literary associations in her deconstruction of Orientalist stereotypes, making reference in particular to the enclosed and enslaved odalisque figure in nineteenth-century French paintings by Eugène Delacroix, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, and Henri Matisse.<sup>3</sup> With a name that conjures the “mysteries of the Orient,” the original Shéhérazade was the famed Persian queen who used her storytelling skills to stay her execution. But Sebbar's modern incarnation is a troubled teenaged runaway who longs to return to Algeria to find her roots. The novels' readers will remember Shérazade's un-odalisque-like green eyes, *keffiyeh*, tanned fingers, unruly hair, and her definitive statement: “Je ne suis pas une odalisque” (Sebbar, *Shérazade, 17 ans* 206).

Shérazade and odalisques reappear in Sebbar's more recent trilogy, *Mes Algéries en France : Carnet de voyages* (2004), *Journal de mes Algéries en France* (2005), and *Voyage en*

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<sup>1</sup> *Odalisque* comes from Turkish *oda* (“slave”) and originally meant “female slave in a harem.”

<sup>2</sup> Shérazade has no last name, which denotes a rejection of the patriarchal order but also the disempowerment of immigrants in France. In terms of the name Shéhérazade, as Anne Donadey argues, the elision of the extra syllable in Shérazade's name is the “perfect metaphor for France's assimilation policy with regard to immigrants. What is most representative of other cultures must be cut off for the other to be accepted and assimilated into the fabric of French life. Thus what could be viewed as the richness of cultural difference is instead rejected as unnecessary excess” (133).

<sup>3</sup> See Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing Between Worlds*, Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb*, and Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and Literatures*.

*Algéries autour de ma chambre : Abécédaire* (2008), works of “postmemory” (Hirsch)<sup>4</sup> and Sebbar’s illustrated (auto)biographical texts. Unlike her other fictional writing, they prominently feature a dynamic interplay of texts and images, in what Névine El Nossery has demonstrated as a powerful “photo-textualité” that recreates the forgotten “lieux de mémoire” of Algerian-French history (70-71). Those works mix narratives, diaries, portraits, and contain illustrations ranging from Orientalist painting to textbook pages and personal photographs. Featuring the diverse groups that make up that forgotten history, including children of immigrants and *pièds-noirs* in Algeria, among others, the trilogy is, in Sebbar’s words, a way to link Algeria and France: “. . . je poursuis et je poursuivrai encore l’Algérie en France. Prise par un besoin fébrile de mêler l’Algérie à la France, depuis la naissance, presque... L’œil fixé sur l’objet du désir, tendre prédateur, collectionneur fou, tendu vers ce qui s’exhibe et se dérobe, je tente par les mots, la voix, l’image, obstinément, d’abolir ce qui sépare” (*Journal de mes Algéries* 11).<sup>5</sup>

Thematically similar, the three *Algéries* albums have different structures. *Mes Algéries en France* is organized into seven sections, *Journal de mes Algéries en France* is a reproduction of a diary Sebbar kept between March 2004 and January 2005, and *Voyage en Algéries autour de ma chambre* takes the form of an ABC book about Algeria that, like the others, performs Sebbar’s associative and personal collective history of the two countries.

I examine Sebbar’s ever-evolving representation of Shérazade in *Mes Algéries en France*. Taking as a premise that “making pictures . . . and reading them can be seen as forms of feminist resistance” (Hirsch, *Family Frames* 215), I demonstrate that Sebbar’s representation of Shérazade in the section “Algériennes” (45-75) of *Mes Algéries en France* results in a feminist recuperation of the odalisque. Using as her “weapons of criticism” part of the “legacy of empire” (Said 245), Sebbar reclaims a visual display that does not forcibly reject the odalisque, but instead includes it in a multiple mosaic of representation. I argue that in the work, Sebbar’s clipping and reassembling of multiple images fragments the monolithic version of History and creates movement between text and image. Because there is no static representation, the representation of the odalisque becomes more subversive. Meanwhile, within the narrative itself, Sebbar’s bold protagonist Shérazade demonstrates the malleability of her colonial inheritance. In a departure from the character’s earlier understandings of the odalisque in *Shérazade, 17 ans*, in which she openly rejects it as part of her identity, in *Mes Algéries en France*, Shérazade accepts the odalisque as a part of her genealogy and sense of self.

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<sup>4</sup> In *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, Marianne Hirsch has theorized memory and mourning through family photographs of Holocaust survivors and coined the term *postmemory*, or memory across generations. For Hirsch, photographs and other artifacts are sociocultural fragments of meaning imbued with social and political implications that later generations attempt to understand and thereby create memory. Hirsch uses the term *postmemory* to describe that process, which reflects the fragmentary quality of the historical record.

<sup>5</sup> As Roland Barthes writes about photography in *La chambre claire*, the photograph indicates proof that “Ca-a-été” (120). Sebbar’s works rebalance the disproportional number of images coming from the French side of the Franco-Algerian conflict.

### “[P]érégrinations, textes et images”<sup>6</sup>

Sebbar is an authoritative name in discussions of Algerian and Franco-Algerian literature, but her writing, her characters, and her person are unclassifiable. The daughter of an Algerian father and a French mother, both teachers in French-occupied Algeria in the early twentieth century, Sebbar identifies herself as a “croisée,” playing on the multiple meanings of the word: a “cross-breed,” a crusader, and one at the crossroads (Sebbar and Huston, *Lettres parisiennes* 147).<sup>7</sup> Born in 1941, Sebbar has lived in France for most of her life, and French is her mother tongue. Because of those cultural and linguistic displacements, Sebbar’s texts consistently fixate upon the complexities of cultural dispossession, racial mixing, and exile:

... je ne suis pas immigrée, ni enfant de l’immigration... Je ne suis pas un écrivain maghrébin d’expression française... Je ne suis pas une Française de souche... Ma langue maternelle n’est pas l’arabe... Mais désormais je sais qu’il faut que je puisse dire, déclarer, affirmer sans ambiguïté, sans culpabilité, en me réservant le temps de développer les subtilités de cette position particulière qui est la mienne : je suis Française, écrivain français de mère française et de père algérien... (Sebbar and Huston 125-26)

Like Sebbar, her characters often find themselves between French and Algerian worlds, and in her autobiographical and fictional works, Sebbar focuses on the subtleties and complexities of her identity and ones like it.

Sebbar consistently revisits those questions by way of the photographed image. Photography’s invention in the mid-nineteenth century was seen as nothing less than revolutionary (Benjamin 224), and the reappearance of photographs throughout Sebbar’s prose is emblematic of the genre’s influence on her work.<sup>8</sup> As François Brunet demonstrates in his work *Photography and Literature*, even in its title, photography has very close ties with literature and has been consistently described in literary terms (20). Sebbar exploits the resonance between text and photo in *Mes Algéries en France* in her explorations of identity that take that representational form. *Mes Algéries en France* and *Journal de mes Algéries en France* show Sebbar’s continuation of her “pérégrinations, textes et images.” Using visual representations of material objects, Sebbar’s approach is what Abdelkébir Khatibi has called “un voyage dans l’inactuel et le mémorial” (10) or a return to and dialogue with the past, in the face of what Susan Sontag has described as “the vanity of even trying to understand the world and instead propose that we collect it” (82).

Sebbar possesses what Mieke Bal has called “the collecting attitude” or a collecting mind-set (99). In *Mes Algéries en France*, Sebbar intermingles interviews, fiction, photographs, paintings, candy wrappers, comic strips, and postcards, among other texts.

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<sup>6</sup> This is a quote from Sebbar, taken from her official website (“Journal de mes Algéries en France : Suite 7”).

<sup>7</sup> *Lettres parisiennes* is an epistolary exchange revolving around the questions of exile, identity, language, and motherhood between Sebbar and the Canadian writer Nancy Huston.

<sup>8</sup> Starting with her first novels, Sebbar has explored the relationship of photographs and memory, as in *Shérazade, 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (1982), *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique* (1984), the short story titled “La photographie” in the collection *Trente ans après : Nouvelles de la guerre d’Algérie* (1992), and the short story titled “La photo d’identité” in the collection *La jeune fille au balcon* (1996). It is her more recent works that I analyze here in which Sebbar has joined prose and photographed image in an album-like format.

Highly visual, the book can be browsed easily without being read; most of its signifying power comes from the presentation of the material object. The work is divided into seven sections, each of which communicates Sebbar's encounters with Algerian culture in France. As the second half of the title stated on the book's cover, *Carnet de voyages*, indicates, the work evokes the travelogue and, as in that genre, many sections are written in the first person. However, in contrast to nineteenth-century Orientalist *récits de voyage*,<sup>9</sup> Sebbar insists upon her travels in France: "J'aime voyager en France, la France habitée par l'Algérie" ("Leïla Sebbar : Un carnet de voyages"). Through text and image, Sebbar navigates history with her personal story, with titles notably bearing the possessive adjective "mes" and the 2005 work's genre of "journal."

Sebbar's new trilogy is intensely personal. Taking notes and photographs while she travels, Sebbar explains how she turns them into travel journals:

Je note la date, le lieu précisément. . . . Je découpe des articles qui m'intéressent. . . . De retour à Paris, je déchire les pages du carnet pour les coller dans un cahier rouge, mon journal intime, avec ou sans commentaires, je colle aussi les articles découpés, tout cela dans le désordre, le plus souvent, je sais que je retrouverai ce que je veux si j'en avais besoin pour une nouvelle, un récit, un article. ("Leïla Sebbar : Un carnet de voyages")

That practice of decoupage shows the process of the creation of *Mes Algéries en France*. In the work, Sebbar gathers the shards of the explosive Franco-Algerian encounter in order to place them in a new form. By reassembling her textual and visual souvenirs of Algeria and France, Sebbar recreates the *histoires* of Algeria in France. Combining her personal collections with others, Sebbar shows her understanding of history as always already plural, echoing Edouard Glissant's statement that individual "histoires" become "l'Histoire" (227). *Mes Algéries en France* creatively restores Franco-Algerian memory by putting aside and recomposing objects to create new *histoires* (stories and histories) of Algeria in France.<sup>10</sup>

My analysis of Sebbar's creative process in *Mes Algéries en France* views her as a "feminist agent" and a "maker and reader of images" (215) according to the definition put forth by Hirsch:

. . . the woman of the new generation is not just the collection of pieces of glossy paper on the floor, she is also the photographer who has so subversively disassembled herself in them. . . . As photographer and subject, she can find herself both in the collection of contradictory,

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<sup>9</sup> The *voyage en Orient* was repeated throughout the nineteenth century. Chateaubriand was among the forerunners of the genre with his *Itinéraire de Paris à Jerusalem* (1811). Lamartine (*Voyage en Orient*, 1835), Gautier (*Voyage pittoresque en Algérie*, 1845), and Flaubert (*Voyage en Orient*, 1849-51) also wrote of their Eastern voyages. At the end of the century, Loti revived the genre, notably by going to Constantinople several times, experiences from which he drew upon in several novels, including *Aziyadé* (1879) and *Fantôme d'Orient* (1892).

<sup>10</sup> In those ways, Sebbar is a historian according to Michel de Certeau's definition of the practice of writing history: "En histoire, tout commence avec le geste de *mettre à part*, de rassembler, de muer ainsi en « documents » certains objets répartis autrement. Cette nouvelle répartition culturelle est le premier travail. En réalité elle consiste à *produire* de tels documents, par le fait de recopier, transcrire ou photographier ces objets en changeant à la fois leur place et leur statut. . . . Bien loin d'accepter des « données », il les constitue" (84; emphasis in original). For Certeau, representing history in material objects happens through their collection, recontextualization, and display, all of which constitute imaginative work.

incongruous, and discontinuous images, . . . and in the act of reframing and rearranging them to trace a personal (and perhaps also a collective) history against their grain. (*Family Frames* 213-14)

In the diverse discourses, registers, media, and texts in the *Mes Algéries* trilogy, Sebbar not only navigates her own “croisement” and the complications of mixed affiliation and identity, but also creates an alternate aesthetic by reappropriating the odalisque and setting it in motion (Sebbar and Huston 147). Tracing a personal and collective history, *Mes Algéries en France* presents souvenirs, in the dual sense of the French word: mementos kept as a reminder or episodes inscribed in one’s memory. As El Nossery compellingly demonstrates, Sebbar uses the aesthetic of the fragment to interrupt a monolithic notion of identity, and her use of the visual combined with the textual becomes a mediation of history and memory (74).

In *Mes Algéries en France*, colonial postcards (60) and architectural blueprints (145) give way to drawings of Algerians (203), photos of cemeteries (101), and *harki* internment camps (193-95). Photographs of Sebbar’s personal collections appear as well: wrappers of Zouave cigarettes (189) and Leïla candies (227), figurines of “tirailleurs sénégalais,” and porcelain storks (215), birds whose migratory patterns span the sea dividing Algeria and France (235). In the words of Barthes, she writes “par fragments,” thereby insisting upon the fragmentary and contingent nature of memory (*Roland Barthes* 90).<sup>11</sup> Sebbar writes:

Puis, sans penser à mes livres, s’est imposée la mémoire enfouie de ces objets jusqu’ici fatras, fouillis, souk, bazar, objets inconsistants, auxquels j’accordais moi-même si peu de valeur, sachant, malgré tout, qu’un jour je saurais leur donner du sens. . . . Alors j’ai regardé, trié, gardé, jeté, classé suivant un ordre, désormais le mien propre, intime, sentimental, littéraire, ces signes d’une mythologie qui s’est peu à peu dessinée, imposée, fiction tendre et violente de l’Algérie dans la France, de mon Algérie dans ma France. (“Leïla Sebbar : Carnet de mes routes”)

As Mildred Mortimer writes convincingly about *Mes Algéries en France*, “Sebbar nous rappelle que l’histoire collective est une mosaïque composée de maintes histoires personnelles” (104).

That painstaking process results in a work that invites the reader to both interpret Sebbar’s deliberate correspondences and create new ones, especially regarding the feminine image. In *Mes Algéries en France*, the heteroclitite juxtaposition of her souvenirs promotes an associative, rather than logical, reading, encouraging the reader to fill in the blanks between text and illustration. Those images do not function as illustrations so much as illuminations in medieval manuscripts and as fragments of a past brought into view with a monocular. That visual and textual kaleidoscope undercuts the simplicity of any official colonial display by emphasizing its shifting meanings in the recontextualized image. The image thus yields its rigidity and fixity; the viewer loses his or her position as neutral and

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<sup>11</sup> Sebbar herself was extremely instrumental in that visual display; she describes how she worked closely with a graphic designer to create the arrangement of each page: “. . . les textes seuls seraient orphelins, d’autant que j’ai préféré le mélange des genres (lettres, récits autobiographiques, portraits, fictions, entretiens) à un texte homogène. . . . Établir des liens, des correspondances sans que l’image soit simplement illustrative, faire sonner des échos d’un chapitre à l’autre sans insistance excessive . . . modifier [la page] jusqu’à l’accord parfait” (“Leïla Sebbar : Carnet de mes routes”).

outside the text as he or she attempts to impose a narrative upon the intermixed illustrations.

### “Algériennes”

That associative process of reading is at work most strikingly in the middle section of *Mes Algéries en France* bearing the title “Algériennes” (45-75). The combinations of text and image in that section demonstrate the process in its unexpected juxtapositions of images of Algerian women. Because of those images’ recontextualization, readers are compelled to tell stories both with, and apart from, the text. That process occurs primarily with the material objects of postcards, photographs, or tableaux of Algerian women, including an image of an odalisque, the French artist Eugène Giraud’s 1830 painting titled *Odalisque en rouge*. The tableau depicts a reclining dark-haired woman dressed in a sumptuous red robe who looks directly at the viewer and in one hand clasps a hookah pipe while the other rests under her chin. By reframing that image with a series of other images of Algerian women, Sebbar insists upon the relativity of the figure in the painting. Instead of putting the odalisque on display in an objectifying frame, Sebbar presents her heteroclitite collection that takes on a life of its own.

As its title clearly suggests, “Algériennes” is a collection of images and prose about Algerian women. The section begins with an untitled watercolor painting by Sebbar’s son Sébastien Pignon representing the somewhat-blurred face and shoulders of a young, dark-eyed woman wearing a red headscarf, beaded necklace, earrings, and a white dress (45). Her origins are unstated; her dress and adornments do not evoke specific ethnic coding. Consequently, her inaugural portrait does not represent an “ethnic Other” so often visible in Orientalist imagery. After that portrait, the following representations of women are remarkable in their heterogeneity. Not simply a series of exotic beauties, the Algerian women represented in the section all come from different origins, ages, and walks of life. Sebbar fans several representations out before the reader: elderly women storytellers waving henna-stained hands (49), a smiling Kabyle girl (57), a grandmother (51), and an identification photo taken by Marc Garanger (50).<sup>12</sup> Next, two color photographs of contemporary Algerian women in European attire (53-55) precede a colonial-era postcard depicting a group of schoolgirls (60). Page 68 reveals a collage of photographs, including the *pied-noir* poet Anna Greki and members of the Algerian resistance. Finally, the section’s concluding image is Giraud’s *Odalisque en rouge* (74).

Sebbar’s inclusion of a typical odalisque in that cast of characters is a clear reappropriation of an Orientalist stereotype. Even though Giraud’s tableau possesses many of the clichés of traditional odalisques—the reclining pose, hookah, and ornate clothing—its visual power is diluted by strong counterpoints to the image that present a hybrid representation of Algerian femininity.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the stereotypical odalisque that ends

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<sup>12</sup> Serving as official photographer in the French army from 1960 to 1962, Marc Garanger took pictures of Algerian women for Algerian *cartes d’identité*. Because of that experience, he became a fierce critic of colonial policy. His photographic exhibits in 1961 and published collection *Femmes algériennes 1960* sparked public debate in France on military practices in Algeria. Woodhull (121-22) and Donadey (132) have analyzed Shérázade’s rejection of Garanger’s photographs in Sebbar’s Shérázade trilogy.

<sup>13</sup> That dynamic is not always the case in Sebbar’s assemblages of text and image. In “Visions of Odalisques: Orientalism and Conspicuous Consumption in Leïla Sebbar’s ‘Le peintre et son modèle’ (2007),”

“Algériennes,” Sebbar’s previous collection and display of other images of Algerian women suggests instead that their identities are multi-generational, multifaceted, plural, “indigenous,” Algerian, European, and most importantly, in constant evolution. By including portraits of freedom fighters, tribal members, *pied-noirs*, storytellers, and grandmothers alongside the colonial oppressed, Sebbar casts a large net to include a panoply of figures of Algerian femininity. Because of the relativizing gesture inherent in the collection, there is no exoticized Other put on display; instead, each image is made relative and contingent by its juxtaposition with other representations. In “Algériennes,” Sebbar gives full play to the complexities, paradoxes, disjunctures, and possibilities of Algerian women’s identities.

### “Shérazade, ton odalisque”<sup>14</sup>

Like the author, Sebbar’s fictional character Shérazade reclaims the odalisque. She too is a collector. Throughout the *Shérazade* trilogy, Shérazade collects scraps of Algerian culture to resist the silences around Algeria in French collective memory. For instance, she transcribes Arabic graffiti into a special notebook, requests Algerian novels at her local library, and collects colonial-era postcards. Hungering to learn more about her Algerian roots through their representation in Orientalist art, Shérazade also makes pilgrimages to museums in Paris and around France. In part, her boyfriend Julien inspires Shérazade’s quest. The son of *pieds-noirs*, Julien is interested in all things Algerian and spends a year in Aix-en-Provence conducting research at Le Centre des Archives d’Outre-mer. He listens to Oum Kalthoum,<sup>15</sup> collects colonial postcards and paintings, and falls in love with Shérazade because he thinks she resembles an odalisque. In *Mes Algéries en France*, Shérazade admits to Julien: “Tu sais que, contaminée par tes rites collectionneurs, je me mets à fouiller chez les bouquinistes et les marchands de cartes postales des brocantes?” (73). Places with Orientalist curiosities, flea markets, and bookstalls all contain examples of trash turned into treasure. Among other ephemera, Shérazade collects colonial-era postcards of odalisques that she calls “mes odalisques” (75). In time, she shifts direction to include them in the *métissage* of her identity, just as Sebbar’s “Algériennes” section does with its display of heteroclitic Algerian femininity.

Just as Sebbar includes exotica among her souvenirs, Shérazade’s understanding of herself involves both identifying with and against the colonial archive throughout both the *Shérazade* and the *Mes Algéries* trilogies. But the fictional Shérazade has matured and transformed since her first encounters with the odalisque in *Shérazade, 17 ans*. As Diana Fuss has convincingly argued, knowing one’s own identity involves identifying with and against undesirable models: “. . . our most impassioned identifications may incorporate nonidentity within them and . . . our most fervent disidentifications may already harbor the very identity that they seek to deny . . .” (10). Throughout her evolution, Shérazade displays multiple processes of identifying with and against her colonial past in order to negotiate

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Alexandra Gueydan-Turek compellingly argues that Sebbar’s work “Le peintre et son modèle” renews a problematic exoticism through the inclusion of a photograph by Joël Leick inline with her short story.

<sup>14</sup> *Mes Algéries en France* (75).

<sup>15</sup> Oum Kalthoum (1898-1975) was an Egyptian singer whose music and film acting made her internationally famous in the early twentieth century.

her present identity. Such movement of identification and distance reveals a hybridity of distance and proximity, a non-static way of being in the world.

For example, in a key passage of *Mes Algéries en France*, Shérazade tells her older brother that she identifies with images of odalisques on colonial postcards. However, her brother, stating that they are objectifying images of prostitutes, vehemently rejects them. Disagreeing, Shérazade tells her brother that the women were real and remain so for her:

- Tu cherches quoi ? Tu vois pas qu'elles sont déguisées pour plaire à des petits blancs ? Tu vois pas que c'est des putes, c'est pas des femmes de chez nous ?
- Tu dis « chez nous » et tu n'es pas né au bled. Tu es né entre béton et béton et tu sais pas la langue. . . .
- . . . Je discute pas. Si je trouve une carte comme ça, je la déchire, tu as compris ?
- Si tu veux, je peux te donner un livre, il est à la bibliothèque, tu verras que des femmes comme ça, sur cent pages des femmes à déchirer. Tu seras content..
- Garde-le, ton livre, j'en veux pas. C'est quoi, cette nostalgie ?
- C'est pas de la nostalgie. Ces femmes, je les regarde et elles existent, je leur donne une âme, tu comprends ? (75)

More mature and less impulsive, Shérazade now has the ability to process and accept the colonial image, and as the example demonstrates, she even instructs others on how to experience the colonial archive. She embraces the complexities of the visual, using her inherited images in flurries of assimilation, disguise, fantasy, and mythmaking.

In *Shérazade, 17 ans*, in a complete rejection of that identity, Shérazade scrawls “Je ne suis pas une odalisque” on an unsigned scrap of paper that she leaves for Julien (206). But in *Mes Algéries en France*, in the passage opposite the image of Giraud's *Odalisque en rouge*, Shérazade writes in a letter to Julien: “Je ne dirai pas « Je ne suis pas une odalisque », je n'ai plus dix-sept ans” (73). Later, she states: “. . . n'oublie pas mes odalisques. Elles me donnent l'illusion que j'appartiens à un peuple” (75). In the second statement, Shérazade reveals that she is consciously internalizing that figure in her mythopoetics of a people of origin. The odalisques have become Shérazade's foremothers. In order to tell the tale, Shérazade assimilates the figures into her own genealogy. In creative transformations of meaning, Shérazade recuperates her past to tell new stories about it and to give souls to the now-departed women in the photographs. Because of the movement of the many possible stories to be told about Shérazade's postcards, in those narratives they are transformed from eroticized objects into members of her tribe: her family.

### “[C]omme une odalisque”<sup>16</sup>

The final Shérazade scene in *Mes Algéries en France* is titled “Les tennis rouges de Shérazade dans le salon arabe de Pierre Loti” (146).<sup>17</sup> In that section, the Loti museum is

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<sup>16</sup> *Mes Algéries en France* (152).



closed to the public while receiving a delegation of visitors and writers from Turkey. The tour participants are regaled with tales of Loti's affection for the country and of his extravagant parties and eccentric disguises based on his experiences there. Later, when the group comes upon Shérazade asleep on a sofa in the *salon arabe*, they are surprised and confused by her presence in the museum:

Dans le salon arabe, sur le sofa, entre le paon de Perse et le portrait d'Aziyadé, les hommes de la délégation découvrent, sidérés, une jeune femme endormie. Allongée comme une odalisque, elle dort contre les coussins orientaux confectionnés dans l'ombre de la maison natale par les vieilles tantes de Loti pour l'enfant chéri, volage et fidèle. De la robe en tulle brodé d'arabesques dorées pointent des tennis rouges. (*Mes Algéries en France* 152)

As in *Les carnets de Shérazade*, when she stays overnight in Loti's museum and dresses up in his outfits, Shérazade has dressed herself in exotic clothing in an approximation of an odalisque's ornamentations. She lounges on the sofa in mimicry of the odalisque's pose. Not only does the passage contain a simulacrum of the figure, but Sebbar also underscores the inauthenticity of Loti's collection. The Oriental pillows on which Shérazade slumbers were in fact sewn by his "vieilles tantes" and not brought back from his travels. With her outstretched pose and elaborate clothing, asleep among Loti's ersatz objects, Shérazade simulates an odalisque in an example of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty has called defiant "oppositional agency." Mohanty writes:

The relations of power I am referring to are not reducible to binary oppositions or oppressor/oppressed relations. I want to suggest that it is possible to retain the idea of multiple, fluid structures of domination which intersect to locate women differently at particular historical conjunctures, while at the same time insisting on the dynamic, oppositional agency of individuals and collectives and their engagement in "daily life." (13)

Unlike the immobile, enclosed odalisques of nineteenth-century paintings and photos, Shérazade's representation remains unfettered and unsettled. In a key move, Sebbar titles the section "Les tennis rouges de Shérazade dans le salon arabe de Pierre Loti"; the red tennis shoes peeking out from Shérazade's skirt represent footwear of modernity and mobility. Just as her name is almost the original but not quite, in that scene, Shérazade is almost an odalisque but not quite. Shérazade refracts herself to express Homi K. Bhabha's formulation that the colonized must be "Almost the same [as the colonizer] but not white" (*The Location of Culture* 128); here, the colonized is almost the same as the colonized but not quite. Because of her concomitant likeness to and difference from the figure of the odalisque, the reader cannot place her identity within the limits of a fixed definition. Reworking Orientalist echoes to dissonant ends, Shérazade performs a meta-exotic arabesque that unsettles the reader. In those scenes, Shérazade represents the exotic object

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<sup>17</sup> French writer and naval officer Pierre Loti is best known for his semi-autobiographical *Aziyadé* (1879), a tragic love story of a young shipman and a beautiful Turkish slave. Loti was an inveterate collector who brought home from his journeys animals, artifacts, clothing, and parts of buildings. To extend his collections, Loti bought the house next door to his own, which was purchased after his death and turned into a public museum. Shérazade, singularly unimpressed with the museum, calls Loti a "maniaque grotesque" and his home a "souk" (*Les carnets de Shérazade* 161).

of desire, but in her hybridity simultaneously becomes the unyielding agent that renders the desire unlocatable.

### **Shérazade on the Move**

As my analysis of *Mes Algéries en France* has revealed, Sebbar's reassembling of multiple images rejects colonial visual culture's disengagement of human identity by reframing a stereotyped figure into a mixture of fragmented, ricocheting curiosities that pique the reader's desire to know more. Sebbar reframes the odalisque by relativizing it as a part of a multifaceted mosaic of identities. Her bold protagonist Shérazade is a key player in that process, by way of her demonstration of the recuperation of the odalisque into her identity.

In Sebbar's subsequent works that serve as intratexts<sup>18</sup> to *Mes Algéries en France*, *Voyage en Algéries autour de ma chambre: Abécédaire*, and *Shérazade à Julien, lettres* (2008), Shérazade reappears to take up similar themes. *Voyage en Algéries autour de ma chambre*, like *Mes Algéries en France*, performs an associative, fragmented, and hybrid epistemology of the two countries. "Algéries" in the plural denotes the plurality of Sebbar's intimate representations of Algeria. In creative play, Sebbar joins each letter of the alphabet with prose and images to again explore her personal journey into her multiple Algerias in France, as each "dictionary" entry contains a series of analeptic episodes from her personal past. Some of the selections are expected; others are not. For instance, "A" is for Aflou, the city in which Sebbar was born, and Algeria (15); "K" is for Kabylie (113), but "B" is for Joséphine Baker (32); "H" is for the Swiss Heidi of children's literature (96); and "P" is for Peugeot (146). Whereas *Mes Algéries en France* and *Journal de mes Algéries en France* follow the model of a personal diary, *Voyage en Algéries autour de ma chambre* disseminates an associative play of meaning in which the defining power of a dictionary is replaced by whimsical arabesques through time and space. Sebbar's *Voyage en Algéries autour de ma chambre* results in meaning that is made plural and put in motion. As in *Mes Algéries en France*, those unexpected associations dismantle any paradigmatic reading of Sebbar's works about Algeria and France.

In *Voyage en Algéries autour de ma chambre*, readers find Shérazade again under "S" (161). In an exchange of letters between Julien and Shérazade, she explains that she is visiting the Loire region of France to see the new exhibition *Costumes des Mille et une Nuits* at the Centre national du costume de scène, a museum in the city of Moulins (162). The letters accompany sketches of Oriental costumes for the 1948 play *Shéhérazade* at Avignon's famous theater festival. Enamored with the colorful scarves and turbans on display in the costume museum, Shérazade writes to Julien: "Je t'aurais attendu, déguisée, patiente" (163). Yet again, Shérazade is in disguise. She is almost an odalisque, but not quite, thereby assuming instead the position of a "migrant hybrid in masquerade ... mimic[ing] the collaborative colonial ideologies of patriotism and patriarchy, depriving those narratives of their imperial authority" (Bhabha, "DissemiNation" 318).

Just as Sebbar recuperates Giraud's *Odalisque en rouge* by recontextualizing it in the "Algériennes" section of *Mes Algéries en France*, Sebbar reclaims the figure of the odalisque

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<sup>18</sup> Michel Laronde uses the apt phrase "l'intratexte étendu" to describe the complementarity that unites so many of Sebbar's works (37).

here. She does so by deliberately lingering in an ambivalent space of identification and disidentification. Her disruptive masquerades of the odalisque deconstruct Orientalist aesthetics in their juxtapositions with other unexpected images. *Voyage en Algéries autour de ma chambre* continues the complexities of Sebbar's feminist practice of reframing and reinterpreting reframed images that began in *Mes Algéries en France* with the fractionalization of Algeria and France, especially in Sebbar's and Shérazade's recuperation of the figure of the odalisque. In those ways, Sebbar and her iconic protagonist continue their vital contributions to Franco-Algerian memory work. Shérazade is still on the move.

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