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Re-Writing Her Story: Identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Assia Djebar's *Fantasia* between the Interplay of Historical Legacy and Textual Representation

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Abstract

The present paper discusses how Assia Djebar's Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade and Toni Morrison's Beloved make testimony to historical truth in their representation of feminine identity in two historical contexts: colonialism in Algeria and Racism in America. In the postmodern, postcolonial novels, the African American Morrison and the Algerian Francophone Djebar rewrite two phases of human history, aiming to form, transmit and represent a true historical reality and consciousness through blurring fact and fiction. Djebar revisits the official history of colonialism and the Algerian War of decolonization from France; Morrison, on the other hand, rewrites the history of slavery in antebellum America. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's theory, "I investigate how both novelists resurrect the past and develop fictive strategies in seeking to represent a historical truth that corrects the misrepresentation of feminine identity. Both works problematize the question of representation and truth from the standpoint of working-class, marginalized women, namely the Black/African-American and the Arab/Algerian women. While Djebar and Morrison engage with official history shaping each period, they deploy and adopt most of the central tenets and politics associated with the postmodern historical novel, which are in congruity with what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction," a product of both the postcolonial and the postmodern era. In doing so, both writers excavate the archive in search of truth and disclaim the post-structuralist assumption that postmodern narrative is ahistorical.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper is mainly interested in deconstructing the claim that postmodern narrative is bereft of history. The prevalent claim positing that history no longer sustains its nineteenth-century illusion of being a transparent representation of the truth is disclaimed by what Linda Hutcheon coins as "historiographic metafiction," which is strongly invested in history. Virtually, the challenge to this unified and monolithic "History" occurred when colonial history became deeply intertwined with fiction since it is based on the blurred boundaries between fact and fiction, more importantly, because it has used fiction to problematize historical knowledge from its postcolonial perspective. Rewriting historical facts through the lens of fictive meaning-making techniques made some post-structural critics, such

as Barthes, argue that history is denied its transparent truth. Paradoxically, although the postmodern/postcolonial historical fiction, which will be the focus of this study, takes many of the tenets of post-structuralist deconstruction critique into account, it neither adheres to the latter's endless deferral of signification nor its exclusionary paradigm of subjectification. In rewriting two phases of human history, Djebar and Morrison's narratives blur the boundaries between fact and fiction; history, the body and memory to produce a historical truth and a narrative that is, first and foremost, corrective. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's theory of "Historiographic Metafiction," I challenge the postmodern and post-structural claim that historical texts provide neither historical truth nor a material referent. The postmodern narrative of Djebar and Morrison bears witness to historical truth through the entanglement of fact and fiction. Through the reimagining of history via fictive techniques, Djebar and Morrison not only affirm the historical nature of postmodern narrative but also subvert the misrepresentation of Algerian and African American women in *Beloved* and *Fantazia*. Their narratives reclaim agency and challenge historical erasure by reinscribing these marginalized voices into history.

In conjunction with most of Hutcheon's tenets of postmodern historical fiction, Assia Djebar and Toni Morrison produce inherently political and corrective narratives. Hutcheon argues that scattered historical facts cannot speak for themselves. Along with Hayden White (1987), she stresses the necessity of incorporating fictional elements in historical writing. Narrative strategies, commonly practised in fiction writing, are tools to decode the implicit meaning of historical facts. In their endeavour to unmask the "discredited knowledge" in the Morrisonian sense or "the subjugated knowledge" as Michel Foucault claims, I investigate how both Djebar and Morrison excavated the archive in a quest for the masked historical truth. Being fully conscious of the possibility of the archive lending itself, while not cautiously used to falsifying history, Djebar and Morrison question the truthfulness of such archival documents before interpreting and trying to understand these "bare facts" of history, as Barbara Christian calls them. White coined *emplotment* to describe how historical facts gain meaning through fictional interpretation. He argues that history becomes comprehensible by adopting narrative structures, with *emplotment* encoding factual chronicles into specific plot forms (p.397). Henceforth, access to historical truth results from a dialogue between history's facts and imaginative fiction's power. White believes that the "emplotment" of historical facts does not disclaim the text its truth and referentiality.

Djebar and Morrison's narratives exemplify a profound engagement with history, particularly in portraying Black and Algerian women. They demystify how these women are categorized as Other, pejoratively represented in Western discourse, and locked in geopolitical agendas. Belonging to different cartographies and historical realities, both Djebar and Morrison

are adamant about finding historical truth and correcting misrepresentations. By doing so, they deconstruct the monolithic "Third World Women" posited by Western/ feminist discourses. The entanglement of history and memory is a space wherein Morrison and Djebar negotiate the complexity of recovering feminine identity, which has been lost to restrictive Western discourses. Evidently, to both writers, interweaving fact and fiction is the only way to subvert the misrepresentation, as Proust states: "The work of art is the sole means of rediscovering Lost Time" (p. 154). In Djebar and Morrison's work, rediscovering the lost history and identity of African American and Algerian women depends on investigating and interpreting the labyrinths of archival documents through art. By doing so, both Djebar and Morrison allow space for Algerian and African American women to laboriously elbow their way towards reclaiming their identity.

Published in the mid-1980s, *Beloved* (1987) and *Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985) are two historical novels par excellence. In their impetus for excavating and animating the archive, Djebar and Morrison regard history as an infinite project, and they believe that knowledge is not free from bias and stereotypes. In a quest for truth, they explore the archive that waits to be narrativized and thus resurrected. However, for both writers, the archive cannot go unquestioned. Morrison and Djebar perpetuated significant techniques to rewrite history and re-describe the world from the position of the historian postcolonial female critic. Their oeuvre tries to cast light on specific historical traumas, notably the history of slavery in America and colonialism in Algeria, which have been lost, undocumented or misinterpreted, or unwritten and forgotten. Djebar and Morrison imagine and reshape actual and fictional materials to re-enact and reconstruct the reality of a history that might not otherwise be reached. Imagining is indispensable in defeating the incompleteness of history and defying historical misrepresentation. It is a re-writing that focuses on revising, rectifying, and reinterpreting through “employment.” Djebar's *Fantasia* and Morrison's *Beloved* utilize a postmodern historiographical approach, examining, selecting, and interpreting the historical archive.

Beloved and *Fantasia* highlight the political dimensions of two phases of human history and form a reflexive critique of historical representation while relying on the powers of fiction to unearth historical truth. While problematizing representation, both these women writers accomplish this critique through intertextuality that brings other texts either from the archive or the canon to be unraveled and deconstructed. Mixing history with fiction is used as a quest to "reconfigure", to use Ricoeur's term, the historical truth of African American and Algerian feminine identity. Despite the different contexts to which Djebar and Morrison belong, their concern about the traumatic experience of women and their search for agency and self-recognition is one. They deconstruct identity as static, archaeological and "Other." Women are

portrayed in their narratives as resistant agents of change despite the horrors they face. Both writers focus on memory to reinscribe women's voices in historical records and present an alternative vision of reality that challenges the codification and authority of imposed history. By inventively re-patterning historical documents, Morrison and Djebar re-create a historical reality that incorporates and transmits their personal and cultural experiences. In doing so, they illuminate the possibility of agency for African Americans and Algerian women.

In the first part of this study, I investigate how *Fantasia* and *Beloved* reclaim historical knowledge by engaging with the archive to challenge its accuracy and transparency. Aware of its potentially oppressive nature, both authors navigate the archive with deep critical analysis and thoughtful reflection. While archives are traditionally seen as sources of historical truth, scholars debate the reliability of archives. Historians like Ricoeur and Hutcheon view them as vital sources of historical truth, while post-structuralists argue that they distort history. This paradox highlights how archives both preserve and manipulate historical knowledge. Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction reveals how postmodern novels blend historical records with fiction, questioning historical "facts" and exposing history as a constructed narrative. Djebar's *Fantasia* and Morrison's *Beloved* engage with archives to critique dominant historical accounts, particularly regarding enslaved African Americans and colonized Algerian women, reclaiming silenced histories through fiction. For both authors, fiction is inherently political, as it actively engages with history rather than merely reflecting it, reinforcing the idea that the best art is both politically charged and aesthetically powerful. Djebar and Morrison's narratives underscore that history is not a neutral record but a narrative shaped by archives, ideology, and storytelling. Consequently, mixing fact and fiction remains a crucial tool for challenging dominant historical perspectives and recovering marginalized voices.

The second part discusses how Djebar's *L'Amour, La Fantasia* rewrites Algerian colonial history from a feminist postcolonial perspective, blending history and fiction to challenge dominant historical narratives. Djebar excavates the archive by using diverse sources—military reports, letters, interviews, and oral testimonies—to expose colonial biases and recover the suppressed voices of Algerian women. By engaging with archival documents and subverting colonial representations, Djebar reclaims the agency of Algerian women, positioning them as active participants in history rather than passive subjects. Her rewriting of French accounts and her use of intertextuality illustrates the power of fiction to challenge and reinterpret historical records through Hutcheon's concept of "historiographic metafiction." Furthermore, Djebar's inclusion of women's testimonies, such as Chérifa's account of colonial

violence, underscores the brutal realities of Algeria's past while asserting the significance of personal memory in shaping historical knowledge. In revisiting history, Djebar not only deconstructs colonial narratives but also demonstrates how "historiographic metafiction" is vital in reclaiming lost histories, amplifying marginalized voices, and exposing the fragility of historical truth. Much like Morrison's, her work highlights archives' selective nature and the necessity of storytelling in correcting history.

The third part investigates how Toni Morrison's *Beloved* addresses the incompleteness of historical narratives, particularly regarding the trauma and resistance of enslaved and colonized African American women. Morrison critiques the inadequacy of historical records and employs fiction to reconstruct the suppressed experiences of enslaved Black women, demonstrating how memory serves as both a narrative device and a tool for reclaiming lost histories. Morrison reconstructs the history of slavery, emphasizing the trauma and resilience of enslaved women under the dehumanizing machine of slavery. By blending history with fiction, Morrison fills gaps left by historical records, showing how the past lingers in the present. By focusing on the character of Sethe, Morrison reinscribes the voices of marginalized African American women by foregrounding their traumatic experiences. Much like in Djebar's *Fantasia*, women in *Beloved* serve as custodians of history, preserving collective trauma through storytelling. By challenging official histories, Morrison redefines resistance and highlights the power of memory in ensuring that marginalized voices are not erased.

The last part discusses how Djebar's *Fantasia* and Morrison's *Beloved* both seek to reclaim the histories and identities of Algerian and African American women by challenging dominant narratives. Through the protagonists Chérifa and Sethe, the novels foreground how colonialism and slavery shaped the oppression and resistance of women yet also emphasize their agency in rewriting history. Djebar and Morrison expose the traumas of their characters—whether through Chérifa's torture during the Algerian War of Independence or Sethe's violent escape from slavery—while demonstrating their resilience in resisting oppression. Both authors challenge patriarchal and colonial narratives, positioning women as active historical agents rather than passive victims. Ultimately, *Fantasia* and *Beloved* underscore the power of memory, storytelling, and resistance in shaping female subjectivity and inscribing marginalized women into the historical record. Both narratives emphasize that history is not singular but collectively preserved through women's storytelling, forging a shared legacy of trauma, survival and resistance. By blending historical facts with fiction, Morrison and Djebar challenge historical misrepresentation and redefine identity through memory and sisterhood. Both Djebar and Morrison remap the identity of Black and Algerian women who have been left out, negated or misrepresented in mainstream history. Both engage with the politics of

identity formation in their narratives and acknowledge, in Foucauldian terms, "the masked" conditions of Black and Algerian women by endowing them with the identity they have hitherto denied.

2. Djebar and Morrison Activating the Archive

In the last decades of the twentieth century, scholars concerned with literary history began questioning the significant aspects of archival theory by focusing primarily on using archives as a plot within fiction. Interestingly, much literature has been written on the archive and archival documents. Whilst some theorists proclaim that the archive has been a safe house of history due to the nature of its material and physical evidence of the truth, others, particularly post-structural theorists such as Derrida in *Mal D'archivé,* postulate that the archive contains documents already interpreted and falsified. Among the theorists and historians who posit the archive as an indispensable source for historical truth and knowledge are Linda Hutcheon and Paul Ricoeur. Being fully conscious of the archive's fragility and misleading nature, these theorists promote strategies for the historian to activate the archive.

The materiality with which the archive is constituted aims to establish documentary proof. In his groundbreaking work *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur elucidates that the archive is not just a physical or spatial place but also a social one (p. 210). Through the imaginative enterprise of the writer, the documents constituting the archive will be animated and rendered meaningfully. However, while the archive preserves and protects historical knowledge, it also falsifies it. By solving this paradox, Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction" relies on official documents and the human imagination collaboratively to create knowledge and historical truth. In an archival space, the material is examined and refashioned through fiction to yield a new historical perspective. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), Hutcheon asserts that Postmodern novels actively interact with history while questioning the nature of historical knowledge through their self-reflexive style. These novels combine historical elements with self-reflection, embodying the contradictions inherent in postmodernism. By blending apparent opposites, they often present fictional and historical narratives as explicitly political and inherently shaped by ideology (p.6). Hutcheon levelled a critique of the postmodern narrative as being ahistorical. Against the tide of many postmodern/post-structural theorists, Hutcheon regards postmodern fiction as historical, reflexive and political. She argues that historiographic metafiction does more than create fictional worlds; it actively engages with history, showing that our understanding of reality is shaped by cultural narratives rather than direct reflections of the past. While the past undeniably existed, we accessed it only through traces and representations. Historiographic metafiction

highlights how historical facts are constructed through selection and narrative framing, revealing that fiction is historically influenced and history is discursively shaped.

Based on excavating the archive, Djebar's and Morrison's novels Beloved and Fantasia are quintessential historical novels. Djebar and Morrison do not break with the politics of storytelling, as claimed in the Marxist tradition, nor do they falsify history or historical truth with fictive strategies, as Barthes and other post-structuralists have assumed. Both novels problematize historical knowledge since they question the existing knowledge of the enslaved African Americans and the colonized Algerian women's representation. In this respect, Hutcheon claims that "it is historiography's explanatory and narrative "emplotement" of past events that constructs what we consider historical facts" (p.92). Accordingly, Djebar and Morisson's postmodern narrative is self-reflexive in activating archival documents. In this respect, Morrison (1984) contends: "If anything I do, in the way of writing novels … isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it isn't about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private exercise of my imagination. . . which is to say yes, the work must be political …" (p.339). The entanglement of fact and fiction transcends its storytelling aspects to address political questions. Thus, a key attribute of the postmodern narrative is its political affiliation, as it is theorized by Hutcheon and articulated by Morrison. The latter also adds that the best art is "unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" (Morrison, 1984, p. 354). *Fantasia* and *Beloved* reclaim historical knowledge by delving into the archive to question its truth and transparency. Cautious of the threatening nature of the archive, both writers explore the archive with profound moments of critical thinking and reflection.

3. Fiction and Historiography in *L'Amour, La Fantasia*

In her famous Quartet: *Fantasia An Algerian Cavalcade,* Djebar rewrites Algerian colonial history from a feminist postcolonial stance. Djebar digs deep into the colonial archive to revive the subjugated identity of the colonized Algerian women. Written as "historiographic metafiction," Djebar breaks the dichotomies of history and fiction, autobiography and historiography, revealing that both discourses can convey a historical truth. Her approach aligns with Hutcheon's view about postmodern narrative in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). It disputes the notion that only history holds a claim to truth, questioning the foundation of this belief in historiography. Furthermore, it emphasizes that history and fiction are forms of discourse constructed by humans as systems of meaning, and their truth claims stem primarily from this shared nature (p. 93). In *Fantasia*, Djebar integrates history and fiction to reach the obscured historical truth. Her novel is a postcolonial rewriting of French accounts of the conquest of Algeria from 1830 through the 1850s. The novel's structure makes a distinction

between historical documental accounts, autobiography and fiction evident because the narrator reveals the sources of the events she narrates. Structurally, *Fantasia* is composed of three parts. The first two sections of the novel interweave Djebar's childhood memories with historical and political accounts of the French colonial conquest of Algeria during the 1830s. The final section, which will be the focal point of this chapter, addresses the Algerian Revolution of 1954-62. It is principally dedicated to the stories of Algerian women who were active in the resistance during colonial occupation, from the nineteenth century to the fight for the nation's independence.

To problematize colonial representation and historical knowledge, Djebar foregrounds many sources and genres, including archival documents, personal memories, interviews, letters, diary entries, official military reports, or newspaper articles written by the French invaders. The novel presents all the source material accounts of the initial invasion of Algeria in 1830. Djebar writes: "Thirty-seven witnesses, possibly more, will relate the events of this month of July 1830, some fresh from their experiences, some shortly afterwards. Thirty-seven descriptions will be published of which only three are from the viewpoints of the besieged" (p. 44). Djebar effectively inscribes their experiences to history, from which they had been denied. She does not only record the voices of these women in history to prevent their disappearance in oral culture, but more importantly, to unearth the historical truth of their masked identities. For instance, Zohra, a resistant woman whose voice is recorded in the novel's last section, regrets her inability to write her story: "Alas! We can't read or write. We don't leave any accounts of what we lived through and all we suffered (p.148). The voices of women recorded in the last section bear witness to the brutal, traumatic experiences they went through in the War of Algeria's decolonization. These women's testimonies unmask and rectify the "truth" of these historical events.

For Djebar, the archive serves as a means to explore the invasion of Algeria from both the colonized and the colonizer's perspectives. Wary of the danger of the archive, Djebar moves through the archive to gather knowledge about Algerian colonialism, questions it, and filters it to recast the dominant narrative of Algeria's past. She conceives of it as the ultimate source that reasserts the humanity of the historical figure, which has been erased from a collective national consciousness. Djebar consults the archive to generate a space for Algerian women to tell their own histories and to be vital contributors to Algeria's past and future. Relating the past with the future is a point that Frantz Fanon believes to be the duty of the colonized when he maintains that "the colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past to open the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope" (p. 232). Accordingly, through narrative, Djebar's women gain agency and open future horizons of hope and healing. Conscious of her

position as a privileged intellectual, Djebar follows Spivak, who equally calls to free the space for the subaltern to speak. In her groundbreaking essay in postcolonial theory "Can the Subaltern Speak?," the feminist Marxist political activist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak urges postcolonial women intellectuals to "begin to plot a history" (93). Spivak maintains that "[i]n seeking to learn to speak (rather than listen or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual systematically 'unlearns' female privilege" (91). Spivak is adamant on the necessity to un-silence or to recover the voice of the subaltern woman, she calls feminist intellectuals to go beyond voicing the female subaltern by problematizing and questioning its voiceless voice. In a similar vein, in her Overture to the short stories in *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*, Djebar states, "Don't claim to "speak for" or, worse, to "speak on," barely speaking next to, and if possible, very close to: these are the first of the solidarities to be taken on the few Arabic women" (p.5). Thus, in *Fantasia* and *Women of Algiers,* Djebar has cleared the space for women to speak for themselves and has avoided what Spivak designates as "spoken about." She dedicated a whole section to recording the voices of women speaking directly and participating in the narrative while recounting their experiences of the War of Independence. Djebar integrates these women's testimonies to inscribe their voices in history and to deconstruct the Western discourse that relegated them to passive subjects frozen in time and space. She also subverts dominant stereotypes, such as those issued from the old house of Orientalism, to reinstall an identity and subjectivity for Algerian women.

Djebar's destabilization of France's misrepresentation of Algerian women is most visibly noticed in her interpretations of French archives. By resurrecting these long-forgotten documents, Djebar brings to life the countless colonized women who lost their lives during the colonial era. In one brutal scene, the author exposes a short exchange between French soldiers who give details on seven Algerian women who were murdered during a military campaign in 1840: "One is the Aga's daughter, the others are two daughters-in-law and some of his relatives! […] seven in all were executed by our soldiers" (p. 54). These historical accounts contribute to correcting the production of historically biased accounts about the Algerian occupation. Djebar writes back to the French artist Eugene Fromentin, whose travelogue during nineteenth-century Algeria culminated in his most famous Orientalist works *Une Année dans le Sahel* (1858) and *Un Eté dans le Sahara* (1856). These works, which categorize Arab/Algerian women and cast them as "old fashioned" models of how they have been traditionally misrepresented, are subverted by Djebar, who subsequently reinstalls the lost identity of the colonized Algerian woman. Djebar's most striking parodic intertext in *Fantasia* involves her study of Fromentin's *Un Eté Dans le Sahara,* in which she describes his encounter with a severed hand he finds near the corpses of two dead Algerian women. Djebar writes in *Fanasia*:

> Eugéne Fromentin offers me an unexpected hand –the hand of an unknown woman he was never able to draw. In June 1853, when he leaves the Sahel to travel down to the edge of the desert, he visits Laghouat which has been occupied after a terrible siege. He describes one sinister detail: as he is leaving the oasis which six months after the massacre is still filled with its strench, Fromentin picks up out of the dust the severed hand of an anonymous Algerian woman. He throws it down again in his path. Later, I seize on this living hand, hand of mutilation and of memory, and I attempt to bring it the *qalam.*" (p.226)

Here, Djebar's narrative reflects Hutcheon's idea that when re-rendering history through paradox, certain liberties are taken by the postmodern author who seeks to "contest" determined paradigms. In Djebar's interpellation of Fromentin's initial text, she puts Hutcheon's (1988) intertexts of history and fiction into practice, granting them equal significance through a parodic reinterpretation of past texts (p.122). The reversed hand Fromentin depicts in his text where he disrespects the unknown woman's death has not gone unquestioned by Djebar, who metaphorically views that "unexpected" feminine hand as an emblem for all lost feminine subjectivity. Her utterance of the word *qualam*, the Arabic word for pen, emphasizes the physical and metaphorical re-inscription of women in historical text.

Djebar equally integrates the oral testimony of women who took part in the struggle for Algeria's independence. In *Fantasia*, one of the most horrifying stories of women's testimonies is the story of Chérifa, a resistance fighter during the War of Independence who used to fight in line with her brother since she was thirteen years old. Chérifa narrates: "When it was the turn of my second brother, Ahmed, to leave. I was thirteen. The soldiers came again: again they burnt our house down…..they took my mother and my brother's wife away. They burnt our house down for the third time" (p.177). Chérifa's story gives an account of how she and her family endured the struggles of the War of Independence. Since the dawn of her age, she was choked with the brutalities of the colonizer in the burning of her home, raping and torturing Algerian women and murdering their husbands. However, the horrors that Chérifa faced empowered and strengthened her enough to act against the enemy. According to Chérifa's testimony:

> They kept me there for the night. The soldiers had previously decided they were going to tie me up… 'Never', I shouted. 'Nobody's going to touch me! Several of you can guard me, if you like! Nobody's going to tie me up…They brought a whip. They beat me. They switched on the electricity for their machines. They tortured me. (*Fantasia* 133- 135)

Significantly, Chérifa's account of the French usurpation serves as a microcosm of the collective trauma experienced by Algerian women under colonial rule. Djebar's narrative is emblematic of the plurality of stories erased or distorted by Western colonial discourse. By granting these women a voice, Djebar actively challenges and deconstructs the colonial misrepresentation that has historically framed Algerian women as passive subjects. Instead of allowing colonial narratives to define their experiences, she reconstructs history through a lens that prioritizes the voices of the silenced women and reclaims their agency. In doing so, Djebar does not merely recover lost histories; she also exposes the fragility and selective nature of historical truth, revealing how archives can preserve and manipulate memory. Just as Djebar foregrounds Algerian women's suppressed voices, Morrison's narrative underscores the gaps and silences within the historical record, emphasizing that the past is not fully accessible but fragmented and shaped by those who hold power over its documentation.

4. Fiction and the Incompleteness of History in *Beloved*

Beloved, Toni Morrison's fifth novel, is engaged with rewriting the history of slavery. The novel is set in *Cincinnati*1874, nineteen years after Sethe, the protagonist, escaped from Kentucky and nine years after the end of the Civil War. This period is also eight years after Emancipation and eighteen years after the protagonist, Sethe, has cut her baby girl's throat in the woodshed, where she meant to slaughter all her little ones to protect them from the dehumanizing institution of slavery. *Beloved* records the historical, unspeakable, disremembered horrors of the Middle Passage and the traumas of slavery. Memory replaces chronological lines and plays a fundamental structuring element in depicting the progress from slavery to Emancipation. Through the lens of memory, the novel takes us to the mid-1870s; with the failure of reconstruction, the characters' memories take them constantly back to events happening in the pre-Civil War, such as the days of servitude at Sweet Home. Christian contends that Morrison's impetus behind reliving and recording the past justifies her belief that the past is boundless and that how we interpret it may hold greater significance than our aspirations for a finite future. What aspects of history have been overlooked despite notable academic work from the 1960s to the 1980s? What are the truths that Americans, including African Americans, have chosen to forget? Memory, serving as a vessel for buried histories, transcends mere entertainment; it emerges as a vital tool for envisioning and achieving future liberation. Morrison's characters traverse beyond linear timelines, seamlessly shifting between tangible realities and the realms of imagination (Christian, 200, p. 416).

Morrison seeks to interpret the past, which she believes to be incomplete, to fill in the blanks of the ex-slave narratives through the process of what she calls "interpretation" or fictive techniques of meaning-making. Along with Djebar, Morrison notes that previous literature was

not fair enough to the lives of enslaved people, and the brutal lives of enslaved women were not sufficiently exhausted. More importantly, she wages criticism of their false rendering of slaves and slavery. Interestingly, this explains why Morrison distanced her fiction from the identity politics of the Black Arts Movement to center on questions of historiography, agency and identity formation. Through what Morrison often calls fiction "guesswork" or "interpretation," she seeks to achieve these ends in a novel that historicizes fiction and fictionalizes history. In the following passage, she recollects the events on which *Beloved* is based:

> I ... remember being obsessed by two or three little fragments of stories that I heard from different places. One was a newspaper clipping about a woman named Margaret Garner in 1851. […] she had escaped from Kentucky . . . with her four children. She lived in a little neighborhood just outside of Cincinnati and she had killed her children. She succeeded in killing one; she tried to kill two others. […] She was a young woman. […] She had run off into a little wood shed right outside her house to kill them because she had been caught as a fugitive. […] They put her in jail for a little while and I'm not even sure what the denouement is of her story. But that moment, that decision was a piece, a tail of something that was always around. (Morrison, 1999, p. 82)

After reading Margaret's fragmented story, it grew more meaningful when Morrison narrated the story's other side of the coin. In Morrison's words: "it did not get clear for me until I was thinking of another story" (Rushdy, 1992, p. 570). Though history provides pivotal access to human self-knowledge, it merely reveals some truth instead of the whole truth about human reality. The historian is primarily "a storyteller," who suggests that historical sensibility is shown in the ability to construct a convincing narrative from a congeries of 'facts' that, on their own, seem meaningless (Morrison, 1999, p.23). Morrison claims that while facts just exist, the truth needs human intelligence. As Hutcheon (1989) claims: "Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole" (p.54). In “The Site of Memory,” Morrison writes: “What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. By "image," of course, I don't mean "symbol"; I simply mean "picture" and the feelings that accompany the picture (p.75). Morrison emphasizes the power of imagery in literature, where descriptions do more than just represent ideas; they create sensory and emotional experiences for the reader. This distinction highlights how literature can engage readers deeply, making them feel rather than just interpret.

Though Morrison's *Beloved* presents many women whose memories of the abyss of slavery constantly haunt their lives, the central character is Sethe, the cast shadow of Margaret

Garner. Sethe epitomizes how the history of enslaved Black women is dehumanized. Bell Hooks claims that Black women are more oppressed than anyone else in the world. She claims that "women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually-women who are powerless to change their condition of life…they are the silent minority" (p. 1). Throughout the novel, memories of Sethe's past in Sweet Home intersect. As a matter of fact, memory is the most important device Morrison utilizes for the "emplotment" of her narrative. At "Sweet Home", Sethe was subjugated to different acts of degradation. The nephews of the Schoolteacher usurped her body and psyche. Sethe projects Morrison in her use of personal memory and what Collingwood (1999) calls the "constructive imagination" to remember the dis-membered and the suppressed historical past (p. 90). Ashraf Rushdy claims that by taking a historical personage, Morrison offers introjections into the fields of revisionist historiography and fiction by articulating a reconstructive, critical and hopeful feminist voice. What Morrison does is create daughters signifying history (p. 568) who are both products of history and active participants in reshaping it, highlighting a hopeful, critical feminist vision.

Beloved is a political critic of the capitalist racial system of American slavery, which traumatized bodies and souls. In Beloved, The Schoolteacher is trenchantly the source of white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy in the era of slavery. His torture of Sethe led her to rebellion. In fact, in the face of the violations perpetrated by the slave system and its agents, Sethe herself comes to realize how much her whole being is reduced to animality. When Sethe was bringing her bitter memories of "Sweet Home" to Beloved, she told her about the incident when she heard the Schoolteacher ask one of the nephews: " 'Which one are you doing?' " and the boy answered, "Sethe." In fact, this is one of the crucial passages in the novel that demonstrates how the institution of racism tormented enslaved African Americans, especially women. In her reaction to the Schoolteacher's words, Sethe tells Beloved, "I commenced to walk backwards, but I did not even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back. When I bumped against a tree, my scalp was prickly.... My head itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp" (p.193). Sethe could not believe what she heard, nor could she find a plausible explanation. Sethe's reaction to Schoolteacher's words reflects a state of profound psychological disorientation and trauma. Her backward movement symbolizes a regression into past pain, an instinctive retreat from a reality too unbearable to process. The physical sensations she describes—her prickly scalp, the itching, and the feeling of fine needles—suggest a bodily manifestation of her emotional turmoil, as if the shock of the moment is physically invading her. This reaction underscores the paralyzing effect of trauma, rendering her unable to articulate her emotions or rationalize what

has been said. This moment connects to the larger theme in *Beloved* of how enslaved mothers are forced into impossible choices, including infanticide. Sethe's response to The Schoolteacher foreshadows the extreme lengths to which she will go to protect her children from the lethal system of slavery. The unspeakable trauma she endures mirrors the wrenching decision she later makes—to take her child's life rather than allow her to suffer the same fate. Morrison illustrates how black women, forced to endure the harsh realities of enslavement, navigate survival through actions that may challenge traditional morality but ultimately serve as acts of resistance and expressions of desperate love.

The horrors of slavery experienced by slave women led them to commit infanticide and deprive them of motherhood to preserve their children a life of servitude. Sethe is deprived of her mother, whom the white master hanged. It is only through Nan's memory that Sethe learns more about the story of her mother, whom she barely remembers. Nan, her surrogate mother, tells Sethe more of her mother's history:

> Nan holding her with her good arm, waving the stump of the other in the air. "Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe," and she did that. She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. The crew took both up many times. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others were from more whites, and she also threw them away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe." (P. 62)

Since Nan shared the traumatic experience with Sethe's mother in the Middle Passage, she told her history to Sethe, who is the only survivor of all her mother's children. Her mother killed all her "unnamed" other children who were fathered by the white crew. Not only does the institution of slavery deprive Sethe of her mother, but also of her daughter, Beloved. Sethe committed infinitude out of her deep love for Beloved and, in fact, for all her other children, as she meant to kill them all. The horrors of slavery that Sethe witnessed and experienced made her act back to the white master, though at the expense of her child's life, whose ghost has been haunting and tormenting her. The act of infanticide is to Sethe a way of expressing her utter love to Beloved. Sethe's infanticide in *Beloved* is reminiscent of an act of death in Djebar's *Fantasia*. In the battle of Staouéli, an eyewitness named Baron Barchou describes the death of an Algerian woman and the act of killing her child to prevent him from falling into the hands of the colonizer. Djebar writes:

> Another had been fleeing with a child in her arms when a shot wounded her; she seized a stone and crushed the infant's head, to prevent it falling alive into our hands; the

> soldiers finished her off with their bayonets…thus these two Algerian women-the one in whom rigor mortis was already setting in, still holding in her bloody hands the heart of a dead Frenchman; the second, in a fit of desperate courage, splitting open the brain of her child, like a pomegranate in spring, before dying with her min at peace-these two heroines enter into recent history. (p. 18)

In both *Beloved* and *Fantasia*, the harrowing scenes of maternal sacrifice—Sethe taking her daughter's life and the unknown Algerian woman witnessing her child's brutal death—underscore the devastating choices forced upon mothers under oppressive regimes. These acts, though agonizing, emerge as desperate attempts to grant their children an escape from the unthinkable horrors of slavery and colonial violence. Thus, Morrison and Djebar present motherhood as an intimate bond and a site of resistance, where love manifests in the painful decision to spare one's child from a life of suffering.

Crucially, the histories of women in both narratives are not singular but are carried and preserved through a collective female voice. In *Beloved*, women are the custodians of memory, ensuring that personal and ancestral histories are not lost. Nan, for instance, relays to Sethe the tragic history of her mother and other enslaved women, anchoring Sethe's personal suffering within a broader lineage of trauma and survival. Similarly, in *Fantasia*, the feminine voice permeates the narrative, weaving together fragmented histories of Algerian women's resistance against colonial rule. Both narratives craft a tapestry of interconnected stories, where individual experiences merge into a collective testimony and forge a powerful sisterhood that defies erasure and remaps identity. These women assert their existence by telling and retelling their stories, challenging historical silence and forging new spaces of recognition and identity. Through shared storytelling, women in *Fantasia* and *Beloved* reclaim their identity through collective memory and sisterhood.

5. Re-Articulating Feminine Identity in *Beloved* and *Fantasia*: The African American Sethe and the Algerian Chérifa

In calling women to reinscribe themselves in mainstream history, the French feminist Hélène Cixous is deeply concerned with the status of women silenced by official history and patriarchy. While calling women to put themselves in history, Cixous (1976) contends that women must write about themselves and their experiences, reclaiming their place in literature and history from which they have been excluded by oppressive forces (p. 875). Being a feminist intellectual who tries to rewrite the genealogies and histories of women who were either misrepresented or negated in official history, Djebar's work strongly appeals to Western feminism, especially Cixous, whose ideas have so many affinities with Djebar's feminine project. Cixous echoes Djebar when she states that women should be brought to their meaning

in history. She claims, "a universal woman subject who must bring women to their sense and to their meaning in history" (p. 857). In one of the critical moments in her *Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon calls the female intellectual to the need first to circumvent the dominant discourse and then only reinscribe it. This postmodern critique of reasoning is anchored in the narrative of Djebar and Morrison, who demystify, correct and then represent an alternative, credible and transparent version of truth. The interweaving relations among history, memory, fact and fiction augment knowledge of the reality of the female subject. The equivocal impulse behind Djebar and Morrison is to endow Algerian and African American female subjects with their identity, voice and place in mainstream history. Morrison and Djebar develop strategies that are explicitly concerned with the formation of Black and Algerian female subjectivity in the narrative, and in doing so, they deconstruct women as the excluded "Other". Their narratives grapple with the theoretical and practical complexities of what it means for women to construct their identity formation from within a position of marginality. Their feminist political stance is coupled with convincing strategies of narrating Algerian and African American feminine subjectivity, especially about racial and colonial discourses of domination. Examining the identities of Algerian and Black women allows for a comparison without resorting to a universal, essentialized subject. My analysis focuses on two protagonists: Sethe, the African American woman in *Beloved*, and Cherifa, the Algerian woman in *Fantasia*.

In their narratives, both Djebar and Morrison foreground the poetics and the politics of identity. Djebar encompasses both the personal and collective experiences of colonial and postcolonial North Africa. Her work is both political and deeply personal, especially regarding the position of Algerian women. Grappling with the question of identity, Djebar's unearthing of history becomes bound up with the quest for a new space in the world for postcolonial women. Prior to the publication of Djebar's quartet, she showed her deep concern with identity formation and its inherently rooted nature in history. According to Kelly Debra (2005), “The repossession of identity can only pass through history. The past-present dialectic has to be restored” (p.251). In unfolding the truths of so many oppressed feminine Algerian voices in *Fantasia*, Djebar writes: “I must lean over backwards, plunge my face into the shadows, closely examine the vaulted roof of rock or chalk, lend an ear to the whispers that rise up from time out of mind, study this geology stained red with blood. What magma of sounds lies rotting there? […] Alone, stripped bear, unveiled, I face these images of darkness”(p. 46). For Djebar, identity formation occupies a third space, one that comes at the intersection of the past and the present/ history and fiction and occurs at the text's level. "Writing" for Djebar "does not silence the voice, but awakens it, above all to resurrect so many vanished sisters" (p. 229). This

crisscrossing of history and writing in articulating the Algerian feminine identity pervades most of Djeba's novels.

Djebar's analysis of Algerian feminine identity is reminiscent of Morrison's examination of constructing a black feminine identity. Perhaps Morrison's mission as a woman writer is far more complex than Djebar's. When Morrison articulates her mission as a writer, she openly makes a declaration which Gayatri Spivak has thoroughly discussed in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Like Spivak, who contends that the task for women of color is double. First, the fact of being a woman, then second, the fact of being black. Morrison (2008) says: "For me …a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is Black and women…the exercise is very difficult. My job becomes how to rip the veil drawn over proceeding too terrible to relate […] historically, we were "seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic" (p. 110). Morrison is quite wary of the limitations of such a position because, in this stance, the woman writer confronts not only the predicament of the discourse of racism but also patriarchy. Therefore, though Morrison's novel engages Black men's struggle in her narrative, her novel commits to women's issues, as it discusses notions of motherhood, sexuality, violence, slavery and racism in a strong engagement with feminine identity. In a significant way, Morrison excludes all men from House 124 to create a space solely confined to women who establish relations of bonding through collective memory. Morrison's exclusion of men is a deliberate narrative choice that foregrounds the importance of female-centered spaces in healing and identity formation. The passage where Beloved, Sethe, and Denver merge into one identity—"you are my face; I am you…you are mine"*(p.* 216-217). craft a communal space where memory, trauma, and survival are shared and processed collectively. Through storytelling and remembrance, Morrison reconstructs their identities beyond the patriarchal structures that have historically defined them. Their collective voice signifies the intergenerational transmission of identity, where the past and present blur and selfhood is not singular but rather formed through relationships and shared histories. Morrison suggests that identity, especially for black women, is not static but shaped through communal bonds and collective memory. By rewriting women's voices and experiences, *Beloved* and Fantasia redefine women's identity as something that is not imposed by external forces but instead coalesces through the shared act of remembering, mourning and reclaiming the past.

Sethe in *Beloved* and Chérifa in *Fantazia* are two women who have, resistantly, fashioned tongues of their own to surmount the struggles they were subjected to for the sake of developing a sense of identity that is powerful, resistant and amenable to make a difference. The African-American Sethe and the Algerian Chérifa are inscribed in different cultural,

historical and geographical places. Although these women live under different historical hegemonic oppressions, they experience the same trauma and the same modes of subjugation. While Sethe is subjected to the brutalities of Slavery, Chérifa endures the horrors of French colonialism and the Algerian War of Independence. In constituting a discourse of resistance, Morrison tends to subvert the authority of history's master narrative by asserting women's subjectivity and consciousness. Two main rebellious acts that distinguish Sethe as an agent of change in breaking the master/slave dialectics were when she escaped from her master and her violent act of killing her baby daughter, which generated a plethora of criticism on Sethe's inhumanity. Morrison inscribes Black people within the center of stories about the American past by portraying them "as subjects, that is as generative and creative change-agents, rather than as objects, or victims of hegemonic agency and control, as master narratives have traditionally captured them.

Morrison inscribes Sethe's (Margaret Garner's) untold and unwritten story in history. Her recounting of the real lives of enslaved people through using the power of fictive techniques of art aimed to heal the broken bodies and psyches caused by slavery. Morrison humanizes and subjectifies the community of women in *Beloved* by unlearning their enforced invisibility. In other words, Morrison writes the voiceless black [female] subaltern back into history and puts the "authority back into the hands of the slave" (Mcdowell, 1988, p. 35) by giving them narrative voices. Black women in Morrison's narrative elbow their way to counter the atrocities of the white master and the brutalities of slavery. In *Beloved*, Morrison reinscribes the subjectivity and identity of black women in a space of resistance and rebellion. In one key passage in the novel, Sethe says:

> I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: it cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much. Now sit down and eat with us or leave us be. (p. 18).

Sethe's resolve to stay rather than flee reflects her readiness to confront her master, drawing strength from both her unwavering will and the resilience forged by her past wounds. Morrison makes the character of Sethe speak the "unspeakable" and the "unspoken" in the narrative. Her testimonies imply how powerful her identity becomes and her willingness to narrate a history of oppression and dehumanization. Morrison's depiction of the "Sweet Home" slave women reflects the Black feminine subjectivity, which the master narrative disclaims. Still, it continues to exist no matter how dreadful memories about the past realities bring back. Morrison's fiction

challenges the master's fixed narrative of Black women's inferiority by inscribing them within a space of resistance against hegemonic paradigms.

Moving to the context of Algerian colonialism and especially amid the War of Independence, Djebar's project of rewriting Algerian feminine identity started with her autobiography and extended to include other women, creating a space of feminine agency. Djebar's women characters grapple with stability and a strong desire to fight for their lands, culture and identity. In *Fantasia*, Djebar expresses her rejection of silence and celebrates the feminine voice by having women narrate their traumatic experiences. Being concerned with the feminine voice, Djebar states: "The voice, my voice (or rather the voice that issues from my open mouth, gaping as if to vomit, or chant some dirge) cannot be suppressed" (p. 115). Chérifa, the young Algerian resistant combatant who witnessed the traumas of the Algerian War of Independence from a very young age and who reported its memories in her interview, tells her story twenty years after the War. She recalls how she joined her brothers in the mountains and how the death of one of her brothers before her eyes strengthened her enough to continue to fight in line with the Brothers; however, she was later imprisoned and tortured by the French missionary.

The description of Chérifa's determination to follow the partisans' hiding place at the age of thirteen makes it clear that she is no different from her brother, Ahmed, who is hiding. Later in her account, when the French soldiers caught her, one *goumier* threatened her with killing, and she rebelliously replied: "Kill me, I said, if you are a man! But you aren't a man, you're a *goumier*! I'm not yet a grown woman, but that makes no difference! Kill me, since you love killing" (p.142) Interestingly, Chérifa's identity is strong enough to act back to colonial hegemony and was resistant in her years of imprisonment despite the brutalities of the colonizer. Her patriotism marks another instance in which the French soldiers tortured her to tell them the truth: "Confess! Tell us what we want to know or we'll shoot!" 'Shout!' I said. 'It makes no difference to me! I'm a girl, I'm not a grown woman, but I'll leave men behind me!...Each one of them will kill a hundred of yours! Kill me!.' (p. 135). Chérifa, whose voice is now inscribed in history, deems from her infancy that the place appropriate for her is not with the harem but along the maquisards.

Both *Fantasia* and *Beloved* explore the lineage of suffering and resilience among Algerian and Black women, emphasizing how colonialism and slavery uniquely shape notions of femininity and female identity. From the vantage point of the two different yet similar accounts, Sethe and Chérifa were subjected to the same physical torture. Chérifa reports: "They brought a whip. They beat me. They switched on the electricity for their machines. They tortured me" (p.135). Similarly, Sethe was whipped and had a tree imprinted on her back and

the tortured milking of her breasts. In terms of resistance, despite their age disparity, both female characters share the same historical and political consciousness. Both are etched in history as agents of change—active fighters steadfast in their commitment to nationalism. Virtually, in their quest for a feminine identity, Djebar and Morrison redress the masked histories of their female ancestors and inscribe them as agents of change. Both *Fantasia* and *Beloved* aim to trace a genealogy of the suffering and resistance of Algerian and Black women, highlighting the distinct impacts of colonialism and slavery on concepts of femininity and women's identity.

6. CONCLUSION

Assia Djebar and Toni Morrison challenge and redefine historical narratives by intertwining fact and fiction in their postmodern and postcolonial novels *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* and *Beloved*. By revisiting and reimagining historical events of colonialism in Algeria and slavery in antebellum America, Morrison and Djebar provide a more accurate representation of feminine identity, mainly through the interplay of historical legacy and textual representation. Through 'historiographic metafiction,' as conceptualized by Hutcheon, the authors affirm that postmodern narratives can indeed engage with historical truth, countering post-structuralist claims of ahistoricism. Djebar and Morrison deeply critique official historical narratives through their literary works, dismantling and reconfiguring these accounts to shed light on unmasked truths about feminine identity. By excavating the archive, they expose the ways in which dominant historical accounts have often excluded or misrepresented the voices and experiences of Arab-Algerian and African-American women. Their narratives do more than recount historical events; they delve deeply into the intricate dynamics of identity, representation, and historical awareness, highlighting how these elements intersect and influence one another. Djebar and Morrison draw attention to the ways in which systemic oppression, whether rooted in colonial rule or racial hierarchies, shapes the lived realities of women. Their novels challenge the reader to consider how historical truths are constructed and who gets to define them. By embedding these histories within richly textured stories, the authors advocate a more inclusive understanding of history that incorporates the silenced voices of marginalized women and reframes traditional narratives. In doing so, they illuminate the enduring complexities of identity and representation while fostering a deeper consciousness of the historical forces that have shaped and continue to shape these realities.

The implications of Djebar *Fantasia* and Morrison's *Beloved* extend beyond literary studies, offering critical insights into historiography, feminist theory and postcolonial discourse. Their novels challenge rigid historical methodologies by demonstrating how fiction

can serve as a legitimate mode of historical inquiry, emphasizing storytelling's role in recovering marginalized voices. Through the lens of historiographical metafiction, concepts such as time, the body, and memory can be further explored in both narratives, revealing the intricate ways in which personal and collective histories are constructed and contested. Additionally, more of Djebar and Morrison's fictional works merit investigation with regard to these themes, as they offer broader perspectives on the enduring effects of historical trauma. The two historical traumas of colonialism and slavery function as hegemonic regimes that primarily target domination, shape the socio-political landscape and profoundly influence women's experiences by reinforcing systemic oppression and gendered subjugation. This study invites further research into how literature operates as an alternative historiographical tool, particularly in societies where official archives remain incomplete, inaccessible or biased. It also reinforces the necessity of storytelling in challenging dominant historical narratives.

This research opens new perspectives for future scholarship. It could explore the comparative dimensions of *historiographic metafiction* across different cultural and geopolitical contexts, examining how other postcolonial and diasporic writers employ similar techniques to reclaim historical narratives. Further interdisciplinary research could also investigate the pedagogical applications of Djebar and Morrison's works in history and literature classrooms, particularly in fostering critical engagement with dominant historical discourses. Moreover, digital humanities projects could be crucial in preserving and expanding access to the marginalized histories Djebar and Morrison seek to recover. By integrating their methodologies with archival research, oral histories, and digital storytelling, scholars can further contribute to the reclamation of suppressed narratives. As the discourse surrounding historiography and literature continues to evolve, the intersection of fiction, history, and identity in postcolonial and feminist scholarship remains a fertile ground for ongoing exploration and critique.

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