



1 of 6

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## Between Subjugation and Agency: Female Identity in Assia Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade*

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### Abstract

Patriarchy in Third World operates not only as a socio-political system but as an oppressive force that constrains the lives of women through subjugation, spatial confinement and silence. This deep-rooted patriarchal hegemony tends to prioritize male supremacy while neglecting women's independence, aspirations and choices. The patriarchal strictures undermine the identity of women and often reduce them to marginalised and submissive positions. The paper analyses Assia Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1987) and explores how the female body under the restraints of patriarchy becomes the very site of both subjugation and emergent subjectivity. The novel focuses on the struggles of two female protagonists Isma and Hajila for quest of identity and freedom by dismantling patriarchal constraints. The paper analyses how their struggle for identity is symbolised by crossing the threshold that denotes a kind of a margin between the two worlds subjugated and liberated. Djebar delivers voice to female characters so that they can register their protest and claim their subjective position. She restores their independent identity by challenging the established patriarchal strictures and paradigm thus reconfigures and reconstitutes feminine subjectivity. The paper attempts to analyse how Assia Djebar redefines the female body as a strategic tool for struggle and self-assertion.

**Keywords:** Womanhood, Subjugation, Female resistance, Agency, Representation

### Introduction

*A Sister to Scheherazade* (1993) originally written in French as *OmbreSultane* (1987) is semi-autobiographical and forms the second novel of Djebar's 'Algerian-Quartet' series. The novel is a revolutionary female challenge to patriarchal strictures and confinement in the harem in Algeria. Neither sisters nor rivals, the two protagonists Isma and Hajila are wives to the same man at different periods of time. The central female figure of the novel is Isma, an educated, outspoken, modern and liberated Algerian woman who lived in France and subsequently returns to Algeria. Hajila on the other hand is uneducated, poor, submissive, timid and traditional Algerian woman. The novel juxtaposes their personalities in the Algerian society. One unveiled, emancipated, bourgeois and multilingual, the other veiled, secluded, dialect-speaking and silenced. At first both remain subservient to their indigenous customs and traditions and remain confined to harem, the male-dominated prison.

The novel concerns the marital challenges of Isma and Hajila in the home of their autocratic husband and how they defy the authority of their polygamous husband. Isma, the liberated one among the two embarks on a journey of film making. While as Hajila the traditional Algerian woman, chooses to cross her husband's apartment to explore the city in pursuit of freedom. Their lived experiences are varied, yet they share corresponding history of Algeria women as victimized and marginalized subjects. Through

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1



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Isma and Hajila, Djebar recounts the history of Algerian women as victims of subjugation and



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21

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