SCHEHERAZADE REBORN IN THE CONTEMPORARY FRANCOPHONE FICTION OF LEÏLA SEBBAR, PIERRE KARCH AND VINCIANE MOESCHLER

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ABSTRACT

JENNIFER SUZANNE DE VILLE: Scheherazade Reborn in the Contemporary Francophone Fiction of Leïla Sebbar, Pierre Karch and Vinciane Moeschler
(Under the direction of Dominique Fisher)

Since the mid-1980s, Francophone authors from both the Eastern and Western worlds have displayed a renewed interest in Scheherazade, the legendary storyteller of Les Mille et Une Nuits. This rediscovery of Scheherazade, particularly in the postcolonial context, serves as a vehicle for refuting hegemonic and patriarchal domination. As a multicultural figure, Scheherazade also functions as a means through which sexuality and maternity can be redefined. Furthermore, Scheherazade’s recent renown is inextricably linked to the impact of globalization and multiculturalism in the information age, wherein the emblem of the empowered literary and political icon is available to all, regardless of race, gender, or geographical location.

The title character in each of the primary sources I examine in this dissertation is overtly named after Scheherazade. Although these primary works share a common namesake, however, the cultural, religious, ethnic and ethical
values relating to the women within them vary considerably. The five novels and four short stories in which the Scheherazade figures appear were written over a span of twenty-one years, by both male and female authors from Algeria/France, Canada, and Switzerland.

In Leïla Sebbar’s seven Shérazade works, the Scheherazade figure is an educated, powerful and defiant Beur runaway who is the quintessential anti-odalisque. Shérazade overcomes death and rape, ultimately becoming a mother-figure in contemporary Algeria. In Le Nombril de Scheherazade, Pierre Karch reinvents Scheherazade as a pseudo-transvestite storyteller in the Bahamas. Karch’s abundant use of parody forces the reader to question the cultural construct of gender while simultaneously calling attention to dysfunctional family dynamics. In the case of Vinciane Moeschler’s Schéhérazade, ma folie, both parodic Scheherazade figures succumb to languor, dependency and despondency. By presenting two ill-fated narratives of excess, one in Medieval Baghdad and another in contemporary Algiers and Brussels, Moeschler offers a diachronic reproachment of female hypersexuality and Western misperceptions of the East. In addition to subverting Orientalist stereotypes of Scheherazade, Sebbar, Karch and Moeschler refute the binary opposition between sexuality and
maternity, thereby proferring a redefinition of women’s voice, power and identity in the twenty-first century.
In memory of my mother, Anne Marie
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Aristeides Polyzos, my very own Schahriar, for listening to my stories for almost 3,000 nights. Στο κάτω κάτω της γραφής, υπάρχει ευτυχισμένο τέλος, μωρό μου!
La légende dit que Shéhérazade,
Dans le Bagdad des Mille et Une Nuits
A trompé la mort avec le récit
Le soir, elle commençait un conte
Et cessait aux aurores la parole consentie

Ses petites-filles, aujourd’hui usent
A peu près de la même ruse:
Elles trompent le destin avec des écrits
Qui en disent plus vrai
Que tous les bulletins du monde

Inaam Kachachi
Paroles d’Irakiennes

La parole, au cours de ce déplacement qui est à la fois
transport du corps et du cœur, nécessite une assez longue
maturation pour émerger; pour renaitre.

Assia Djebar
Ces voix qui m’assiègent
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, Francophone authors from both the Eastern and Western worlds have displayed a notable interest in Scheherazade, the legendary storyteller of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*. This attention to Scheherazade coincides primarily with the popularity of postcolonial literature in France, particularly since the foundation of *le Ministère de la Francophonie* in 1986, during the presidency of François Mitterand. Dina Sherzer explains that “[s]ince the mid-1980s a cultural phenomenon has emerged in France which involves the rediscovery, reassessment and representation of the Empire, colonial politics and ideology, and colonial life” (103). As part of this process, both Western and non-Western Francophone authors started to use Scheherazade as a vehicle for refuting hegemonic colonial and patriarchal domination, because, in both contexts, she is a multicultural figure who also displays an overt link between women, political power and orality.¹

¹ The term orality refers primarily to the vocal quality lent to a text by the insertion of songs, storytelling techniques and words from other languages not yet written down, such as Berber dialects in Maghrebian literature. Orality brings rhythm to the written text and transgresses the rules of traditional French grammar. The concept of
One can consider the figure of Scheherazade a multicultural emblem since the *Arabian Nights* tales come from a multiplicity of sources, including India, Persia, and Egypt, later translated through the biases of French, English, and numerous other languages. In recent Francophone rewritings, the Scheherazade figures are further embedded in multiculturalism since each author reinvents her character as a geographical, cultural, linguistic, and sexual hybrid.

Scheherazade’s renewed renown is also inextricably connected to the impact of globalization and multiculturalism on peripheral culture in the information age, since, as Fatima Mernissi states, “[w]ith access to state-paid education, computers, and the Internet, Muslim women have gained wings” (*Scheherazade Goes West* 201). Essentially, Mernissi argues that expanded access to information and technology has enlightened women, especially Muslim women who were previously not privy to such data. With this plethora of information and communication, the Scheherazade figure and her stories are available to all, regardless of race, gender, or geographical position.

Orality is very closely linked to polyphony, which plays integral roles in Francophone literature. Critics such as Françoise Lionnet and Ronnie Scharfman underscore the importance of polyphony by arguing that one must avoid “the monolingual approach that tends to look at Francophone literatures from around the word without taking into consideration the oral traditions (be they Creole or Arabic, African or Caribbean) which postcolonial authors incorporate into their written French texts.” (“Editor’s Preface” 1).
The mid-1980s also marks the time when “France was becoming increasingly multi-ethnic with the growing population of individuals from the ex-colonies of Africa and North Africa” (Sherzer 103), thereby making the notion of French identity a subject of debate. Consequently, Maghrebian films, rai music, and Francophone literature have increasingly become part of today’s French culture; one in which Scheherazade is becoming more accessible as a literary and political icon. Above all, Scheherazade is a role model for women’s empowerment. Additionally, the act of borrowing Scheherazade’s name and her storytelling qualities conveys the fact that literature can no longer be considered a pure and simple art form within the postcolonial context. Rather, literature has become both a political and artistic tool. Postcolonial literature experiments with language, form and genre, often borrowing the interlocking short story format found in Scheherazade’s tales in order to play with polyphony and subvert its ability to question established notions of truth and power.

**Scheherazade in the Francophone Context**

The publication of Leila Sebbar’s *Shérazade: dix-sept ans, brune, frisée les yeux verts* (1982) marks the beginning
of a late-twentieth-century renewal in the theme of rewriting Scheherazade in the Francophone world. In Sebbar’s novel, Shérazade is a young female Beur runaway in Paris who begins a journey of understanding her cultural roots as well as the way others perceive her. In this particular context, Shérazade’s onomastic inheritance instantaneously reignites the Western myth that Scheherazade is nothing more than an exotic Arabian sexpot. Along with her historically charged name comes a voluminous amount of Western and non-Western cultural stereotypes which Sebbar’s Shérazade constantly questions. In Autour du roman beur (1993), Michel Laronde discusses Shérazade’s practice of name changing as a means of altering her identity, and thus characterizes la substitution nominale as one of her methods of disguise (199). In Shérazade: dix-sept ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts, the character

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2 Shérazade is a hybridization of the name Scheherazade, which connotes an intersection of both French and Maghrebian cultures in the sense that her name is neither entirely French, nor purely Maghrebian. The shortening of her name and the insertion of the ‘é’ both attest to the Frenchification of her Maghrebian name.

3 A Beur is a second generation Algerian immigrant who lives within metropolitan France (Lionnet and Scharfman 1). The term Beur is backslang (or verlan) for the word Arabe. By reversing the first and second syllables of the word Arabe, one arrives at the appellation Beur. In Autour du roman beur, Michel Laronde offers further commentary on both le verlan as well as the term Beur. He explains that le verlan is a phenomenon of the 1980s coined by the youth of the Parisian suburbs which is “un argot codé dans lequel on inverse les syllabes des mots” (Laronde 52). As such, the term l’envers became ver-l’en and then le verlan. Concerning the definition of Beur, Laronde adds that the term first appeared in the Larousse dictionary in 1986 (Laronde 53). The inclusion of the term in the dictionary thus signifies the fact that marginal parts of French culture, such as Maghrebian slang, made their way into the mainstream.
occasionally refers to herself as Camille or Rosa. In Sebbar’s *Les Carnets de Shérazade* (1985), Shérazade adopts not only the names Camille and Rosa, but Balkis as well. However, it is not until 1991, with the publication of *Le Fou de Shérazade*, that Shérazade attempts to speak Arabic and recuperate the lost syllable of her own name, thereby referring to herself as “Shéhérazade,” and thus a woman of Maghrebian origin.

The name Scheherazade, while it varies orthographically from novel to novel, is a defining criterion in my choice of primary works as it is symbolic of the multiple identity issues at stake in postcolonial and postmodern contexts. More specifically, the Scheherazade figure in each of the primary sources I examine in this dissertation is clearly named after Scheherazade, a name that is used to examine the function of wit and voice in relation to women’s empowerment. Although these primary works share a common namesake, the cultural, religious, ethnic and ethical values relating to the women within them vary considerably. For example, these five

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4 Throughout this study, I will use the common Western spelling “Scheherazade” when referring to the heroine in general. Numerous spellings are employed by other authors, such as Chéhérazade, Chahrazade, Schéhérazade, Shéhérazade, Shaherazad, Shahrazâd and even Tchirâzâd. The variety of spellings of her name further reinforces the multicultural origins of Scheherazade, as well as her position as a globally accepted figure in today’s world.
novels and four short stories were written over a span of twenty-one years, by both male and female authors from France/Algeria, Canada and Switzerland. This broad geographical spectrum exhibits the migrating popularity of Scheherazade, which serves to reinforce her hybrid identity caught as it is between North American, European and North African cultures. Furthermore, the name Scheherazade, while Persian in origin, is one that can cross Eastern and Western geopolitical borders and be employed as a symbol of freedom and empowerment for women. In “Shaherazad’s Daughters,” the third part of Persian author Farzaneh Milani’s *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (1992), the author discusses how even though they were veiled and silenced, Iranian women preserved the power of Scheherazade through storytelling:

> Storytelling, traditionally the province of women in Iran, has been a form of discourse well integrated into their lives. Considered a safe and domestic craft, it entertained children and entangled them in webs of stories, it kept them away from trouble, it controlled them. Women held the key to the magic world of tales. (177-78)

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5 In the primary works I address, the Scheherazade figures journey to Algeria, the Bahamas, Belgium, France and Lebanon.
Although Milani discusses how women wielded some semblance of domestic power through their stories, and how storytelling was a strategy for survival through which “a woman could attract an audience and achieve merit” (Milani 179), neither publication nor recognition were possible for Perisan women in the public sphere until very recently. While I am not addressing Persian literature in this dissertation, Milani’s commentary applies to Arab women writers in general. The use of storytelling as a subversive device is common in works by female authors, Francophone or not, from both the Middle East and North Africa.


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6 In this dissertation, I will rely on a broad definition of Francophone literature, meaning any literature that uses the French language, yet contaminates and decolonizes it via the insertion of nonstandard speaking expressions such as slang, regionalisms, or foreign words. In this aspect, any literature attempting to alter the French text
decades, the term “Francophone” has become a subject of debate in the literary world. The fact that these authors write in French is not the only criterion that qualifies their works as Francophone literature. As Assia Djebar discusses in *Ces voix qui m’assiègent* (1999), the notion of francophonie is ambiguous, yet at the same time, it is tied to Western cultural hegemony: “notion pas toujours littéraire, ni même culturelle, et qui, dans maints pays d’Afrique, a encore partie liée avec le politique” (*Ces voix* 26-27). Djebar’s definition of francophonie, or franco-graphie as she states, is a method of decolonizing French language and culture so as to: “faire réaffleurer les cultures traditionnelles mises au ban, maltraitées, longtemps méprisées, les inscrire, elles, dans un texte nouveau, dans une graphie qui devient ‘mon’ français” (*Ces voix* 29). Like Djebar, Leïla Sebbar (Franco-Algerian), Pierre Karch (Franco-Ontarian) and Vinciane Moeschler (Swiss-Belgian) all write in French, yet none of these authors can be considered “Français de souche.” Additionally, they all employ experimental methods of writing in their works. Each of the aforementioned authors uses language as a form of dissidence and rebellion by inserting regionalisms, slang, or terms from other languages such as with regional or foreign expressions such as the work of Samuel Beckett, which is neither French nor English per se, would be considered Francophone.
Arabic and English into the “French” text. For these reasons, the primary works in my study can all be considered hybrid genres of literature that break from the traditional mold of literature from the Hexagon. More specifically, historiography, plural autobiography and orality play essential roles in the aforementioned Francophone works that constitute the primary sources in my dissertation.7

In Leïla Sebbar’s seven Shérazade works, the Scheherazade figure is clearly an educated, powerful and defiant character who overcomes adversities such as death and rape. In Karch’s Le Nombril de Scheherazade, however, the author reinvents Scheherazade as pseudo-transvestite storyteller in the Bahamas. Karch’s abundant use of parody forces the reader to question conventional female sexuality as well as stereotypes of Scheherazade that objectify her. In the case of Moeschler’s Schéhérazade, ma folie, both exaggerated Scheherazade figures become languid, dependent and despondent.8 Through the copious use of parody and excess, particularly in the forms of eating disorders and sex-love

7 In his article entitled “Autobiographie plurielle: Assia Djebar, les femmes et l’histoire,” Hafid Gafaïti discusses the importance of the plural autobiography as follows: “l’irruption dans le champ littéraire maghrébin de la femme-parole et de la femme-signe est capital en ce sens où elle participe à la formation de formes, de représentations, et de mythes qui sont les fondements de l’identité” (150).

8 Moeschler’s novel is in fact a novel within a novel, both of which are entitled Schéhérazade, ma folie.
addiction, Moeschler demonstrates that the debilitation of Scheherazade is deadly.
CHAPTER II

Scheherazade: Myth and Countermyth

Literary History of Les Mille et Une Nuits

In order to understand why, how and in what ways each author rewrites Scheherazade, it is important to take into consideration the literary history of Les Mille et Une Nuits, as well as how Scheherazade and her stories have been received in both the East and the West, particularly during the last three centuries.

Since the initial translations of the Arabic tales Alf layla wa-layla into French (Les Mille et Une Nuits) and English (The Arabian Nights), readers have been fascinated with the wit and resourcefulness of Scheherazade.9 While Scheherazade’s popularity is uncontested, Sylvette Larzul explains in Les Traductions françaises des Mille et Une Nuits (1996) that the origin of Alf layla wa-layla “se perd dans de grandes zones d’ombres” (13). In Nocturnal Poetics: The Arabian Nights in Comparative Context (1996), Ferial Ghazoul

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9 The Arabic title Alf layla wa-layla literally translates as “One Thousand Nights and a Night,” although in English we simply refer to the collection of tales as The Arabian Nights. (Irwin 2).
adds that we are not dealing with one text, but rather, a multiplicity of texts (1). He suggests that “[t]he earliest extant fragment of The Arabian Nights dates from the ninth century” (Ghazoul 1), and that it is “probably Syrian in origin” (Ghazoul 1). In his 1996 analysis entitled La féminisation du monde: Essai sur les Mille et Une Nuits, however, Malek Chebel echos other critics who state that Les Mille et Une Nuits are of Indo-Persian origin, going as far back as the Hazar Afsanah of the ninth and tenth centuries.10 Guity Nashat, on the contrary, argues that the earliest extant versions of The Arabian Nights “come from the fifteenth century, compiled in Egypt during the Mamluk period” (59).11 Based on such disagreements in origin, Ghazoul surmises that

[t]here is no parent textual variant that proliferated into others, at least not that we can identify and reconstruct with any assurance. The Arabian Nights probably grew into what we know it to be over centuries of deposited layers of narratives. Comparisons of various manuscripts reveal a similar framework story, but there are considerable variations in the nature, number, and order of enframed stories. The published “complete” editions of The Arabian Nights are either modifications of one manuscript, as in the first Cairo edition, commonly known as the Bulaq edition (1835), or a

10 Larzul also mentions the Perisan tales, which she refers to as the Hèzâr afsânè, meaning Mille récits and sometimes referred to as Mille nuits (13).

11 A Turco-Mongolian dynasty which came to power in Egypt in 1250 (Nashat xxiv).
To date, the five principal Arabic editions of *Alf layla wa-layla* are Calcutta I (the Shirwanee edition, 1814-18), Cairo I (the Bulag edition, 1835), Calcutta II (the Macnaghten edition, 1839-42), Breslau (the Habicht edition, 1825-38, and the Fleischer edition, 1842-43), and Leiden (the Mahdi edition, 1984) (Ghazoul 8). From these Arabic editions, myriad translations have been published in numerous languages over the last two centuries. Among the most well-known translations are those by Antoine Galland, Sir Richard Burton and Dr. Joseph-Charles Mardrus. Galland’s first volume of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, published in France in 1704, has been the primary translation used in France up until the end of the twentieth century. Although relatively well respected as a translation, it is now known that Galland’s edition was significantly toned down for the French audience, since “Galland traduit les *Mille et Une Nuits* à une époque où la bienséance régit toute production littéraire” (Larzul 22).

Burton’s ten-volume edition attained great popularity in England when it was published in 1885, although it is now widely accepted that Burton Orientalized the tales. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said argues that Orientalism is primarily a Western discourse on the Orient that manifests
itself as academic, epistemological and/or corporate (2-3). More specifically, it is a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 3), particularly during the post-Enlightenment period. In essence, Said’s argument implies a hegemonic domination of the Orient by the Occident. In Gendering Orientalism (1996), Reina Lewis sheds new light on Said’s work:

Orientalism establishes a set of polarities in which the Orient is characterized as irrational, exotic, erotic, despotic and heathen, thereby securing the West in contrast as rational, familiar, moral, just and Christian. Not only do these Orientalist stereotypes “misrepresent” the Orient, they also misrepresent the Occident—obscuring in their flattering vision of European superiority the tensions along the lines of gender, class and ethnicity that ruptured the domestic scene. (16)

It is precisely this misrepresentation of the Orient as overly exotic and erotic that I am evoking when referring to Burton’s Orientalist translation of the Arabian Nights.

Mardrus’s sixteen-volume French translation was printed between the years 1899 and 1904. Although Mardrus boasted that his work was a word-for-word translation from Arabic, more recent scholars posit that he significantly altered the text. Sylvette Larzul argues that “Mardrus recourt volontiers au gauchissement lexical” (182). She describes how his translation of the Bulaq manuscript implied that the Orient
was lascivious, wherein the pleasures of the flesh “font l’objet d’une manipulation paroxystique, l’érotisme envahissant véritablement tous les contes” (Larzul 181). While Larzul acknowledges the presence of licentious sequences in _Alf layla wa-laya_, which she states were maintained within “les limites de la gaillardise” (Larzul 181), she also points out that Mardrus took his translation to the extreme, and with negative side effects: “Cette inflation verbale, doublée de modifications diégétiques, n’est d’ailleurs nullement gratuite car, en filigrane, s’inscrivent les fantasmes d’un Occident qui projette sur l’Orient ses rêves de femmes offertes et de chaude sensualité (Larzul 181-82).” 12 In _The Arabian Nights: A Companion_, Robert Irwin concurs with Larzul in that Mardrus embroidered the original Arabic and inserted whole new stories. Many of Mardrus’s interpolations were erotic ones, for he shared Burton’s unspoken conviction that the _Nights_ was not dirty enough and he seems to have thought that the stories would be improved if the erotic element in them could be heightened. (38)

Irwin’s use of the word “dirty” is rather strong diction, but it calls to mind the predominant position held by erotica in

12 In _Les Traductions Françaises des Mille et une nuits_, Larzul also discusses Mardrus’s penchant for the absurd. She provides numerous examples of how his translation contains grotesque physical descriptions and a burlesque effect (Larzul 200-201). The overall notion of parody as a postmodern literary device is paramount to this dissertation, and will be reexamined in the chapters on Karch’s _Le Nombril de Scheherazade_ and Moeschler’s _Schéhérazade, ma folie_.

15
classical Arabic literature. The “erotic element” to which Irwin refers was later dismissed in modern Arabic literature, as sexuality became a subversive device.

Scholars continue to debate questions of authenticity and translation of Alf layla wa-layla, as well as issues related to the hypersexualization or desexualization of women therein. In this dissertation, I cite Jamel Eddine Bencheikh and André Miquel’s recent three volume translation of Les Mille et Une Nuits (1991-1996) published by Gallimard. My goals are to address the multiple variations of Scheherazade that appear in recent Francophone literature, examine the extent to which she is either hypersexualized or desexualized, and discuss the literary and cultural purposes that she serves.

The Framestory

Before embarking on an analysis of the “New Scheherazades,” in late-twentieth-century Francophone prose fiction, a discussion of Scheherazade as a personage is essential. According to the conte-cadre, or framestory, of

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13 When using the term the “New Scheherazades,” I am in fact borrowing from Algerian singer, songwriter, and author Djura’s notion of “les nouvelles Shéhérazades.” In La saison des narcisses (1993), Djura raises the following questions: “Ne sommes-nous pas les nouvelles Shéhérazades? A travers les visages de l’islam, de l’amour, de la passion, des coutumes, de la sagesse, des mystères, des cauchemars, mais également des rêves et des espoirs, ne sommes-nous pas les héritiers de
Les Mille et Une Nuits, Scheherazade was the eldest daughter of the vizier of a kingdom ruled by King Schahriar. After having been cuckolded by his queen, Schahriar kills her and begins his campaign of revenge on all women, since “[d]ésormais toutes les femmes lui semblent suspectes” (Kelen 180). The manner in which Schahriar is cuckolded bears examination, as it is complex. He discovers his wife having an orgy with ten female slaves and ten Black male slaves disguised as women. While the infidelity, not only with servants, but with Black slaves may have been his worst nightmare, the concept of an orgy itself, coupled with the disguise element as well as lesbian sex, are among men’s greatest fantasies. These questions of gender, disguise, desire, sex and excess are important factors present in the conte-cadre which I will examine in recent rewritings of Scheherazade. In the framestory of Les Mille et Une Nuits, Schahriar attempts to overcome his wife’s infidelity by wedding a virgin each day, bedding her that night, and then having her killed at dawn. By acting in such a tyrannical manner, he constructs a pathological sense of security in order to protect himself from ever being humiliated by a woman ces femmes qui ont marqué le passé? Ne devons-nous pas, nous aussi, raconter la suite de l’histoire, celle dont on n’arrête pas le cours: l’histoire de la femme?…” (116).

14 A vizier is a court official in Arab and Turkish dynasties.
again. Scheherazade enters the story then by convincing her father to allow her to marry Schahriar, all the while devising a plan to save herself and the remaining women in the kingdom. Along with the help of her younger sister Dinarzade, who prompts her from the foot of the bed each morning at sunrise, Scheherazade tells interlocking tales that captivate Schahriar for so long that he ultimately spares her life and lifts his reign of terror over the kingdom.\textsuperscript{15} Scheherazade is thus universally recognized for her role as the shrewd storyteller who rescues herself from certain death by enchanting Schahriar with one thousand and one contes emboîtés in both Eastern and Western translations of \textit{Alf layla wa-layla}. In addition to her role as storyteller, however, Scheherazade has been hailed as both an educator of Schahriar and the first feminist of Islam (Lahy-Hollebecque 247). In \textit{Chéhérazade: Personnage littéraire} (1981), Hiam Aboul-Hussein and Charles Pellat liken Scheherazade to Isis, the Egyptian goddess who brought her

\textsuperscript{15} Dinarzade is also spelled Douniazade or Dunyazad. In his essay \textit{De la mille et troisième nuit} (1980), Abdelkebir Khatibi refers to Dinarzade as “l’autre oreille de Shéhérazade comme Chahrzamane a été l’autre regard de son frère lors de la fameuse orgie” (11). The importance of Khatibi’s commentary in this instance is twofold. Firstly, he views Dinarzade as an integral part of her older sister Schéherazade; she is, in fact, her other half. Likewise, Shahzamane is equated to his older brother Schahriar. Khatibi’s manner of describing the brother and sister pairs is also noteworthy due to the senses he associates with each group. For the Schahriar/Shahzamane pair, sight is the key sense. As one would expect, the gaze reigns supreme in the male viewpoint. As for the Scheherazade-Dinarzade doublet, Khatibi highlights the sense of sound by calling Dinarzade her sister’s other ear. The author’s interpretation thus honors the empowering connection between Scheherazade and the sense of sound, particularly as it relates to the voice.
husband-brother Osiris back from the dead (37). More specifically, Aboul-Hussein and Pellat suggest that Scheherazade resuscitated her spouse, Schahriar, from an emotional death (37). As such, Scheherazade displayed the power to heal the sultan of his pathological behavior with a panacea of carefully crafted tales. One role that is consistently overlooked in the life and legend of Scheherazade, however, is that of mother. The fact that she was not only his wife, but also the bearer of Schahriar’s children, has essentially been ignored by literary critics. So much emphasis has been placed on Schahriar’s preoccupation with female sexuality, coupled with the Western conception of a Scheherazade steeped in seductive prowess, that her maternal side has been subverted. Furthermore, there is no mention of Scheherazade’s own mother in Les Mille et Une Nuits; in the patriarchally dominated setting, the reader knows only of her powerful father, the vizier. Indeed Scheherazade is not only a biological mother to her sons; she also acts as a mother figure to Schahriar during the course of Les Mille et Une Nuits, telling him a story each day at sunset. By extension, this act calls to mind the image of a parent reading fairy tales to his or her child at bedtime. For Scheherazade, however, the goal of entertainment is secondary to that of survival, for her life depends on her adeptness at
storytelling. In the process of “mothering” Schahriar, Scheherazade also gives birth to three sons: “le premier marchait déjà, le deuxième se traînait aux genoux, le troisième était toujours au sein” (Bencheikh and Miquel 682). The narrator’s description of the ages of Scheherazade’s sons further reinforces the difficulties and challenges she has to overcome. In addition to being married to a misogynistic tyrant, she is almost continuously pregnant with his progeny. If Scheherazade told stories for 1001 nights, up until the point that her eldest son was walking, her second son was crawling and her youngest son was still nursing, we can assume that of those two years, nine months and eleven days (1001 nights), she was pregnant 810 days. The remaining 191 days, equivalent to approximately six months, would have allowed her two months of convalescence after each pregnancy. In this way, we can estimate that her sons would have been born on night 270, night 600 and night 930, thus making them 731 days old (2 years), 401 days old (13 months) and 71 days old. During the years that Scheherazade distracted Schahriar from his plan to have her executed at dawn, she never once begged for his mercy. After the thousand and first night, however, Scheherazade asks but one wish of the sultan: that her life be spared for the sake of their three children:
—Sire, roi de ce temps, lui dit-elle, voici tes fils. J’émets le vœu que tu sois généreux envers eux et que tu m’accordes la vie sauve. Si tu me mettais à mort, ils perdraient leur mère, et ne trouveraient nulle autre femme pour savoir les élever. (Bencheikh and Miquel 682)

Eva Sallis points out that a “recurrent misreading of the close of the frame tale is that Sheherazade’s life is saved in the end because of the three children she presents to their father” (99). It is clear that this is not the case because Schahriar admits that he had already decided to allow Scheherazade to live before her request, since she had proven to be “chaste, pure, bien née et pieuse” (Bencheikh and Miquel 682). The emphasis on Scheherazade’s purity and chastity is of great import in this instance, as it underscores the two predominant poles of femininity: the good woman and the bad woman. The highest virtue of so-called good women

is preserving their chastity and resisting temptation when their husbands are away. Such women become the objects of their husbands’ eternal love and devotion. The bad woman represents the other side of the spectrum; her fatal failing is the sexual betrayal of her husband. By so doing, she goes outside the bounds set for a married woman by society, which demands that a wife remain sexually faithful to her husband, even in his very long absence. A woman’s violation of these rules constitutes the worst calamity for man. (Nashat 60)

Along with the traditional virgin-whore dichotomy, it is also necessary to take the role of mother into account. In
addition to her fidelity, one cannot ignore the fact that Scheherazade’s role as mother played a part in her survival, for Schahriar ultimately acknowledges this when listing the qualities that saved her. More specifically, he admits to Scheherazade’s father: “Grâce à elle j’ai renoncé à faire exécuter les jeunes filles de ce pays. Elle s’est révélée femme de qualité, probe, chaste, vertueuse et Dieu m’en a donné trois héritiers mâles” (Bencheikh and Miquel 683).

Scheherazade as a female archetype appears to take on the three traditional roles for women discussed by Luce Irigaray. According to Irigaray, patriarchal society throughout history has taken away any true sense of feminine sexuality. In This Sex Which is Not One (1985, 1977), Irigaray distinguishes three roles of women throughout history:

Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men’s ‘activity’; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers’ desire while offering herself as its material support without

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16 According to ancient myth, there was another prominent trinity of women’s roles relating to Goddess worship and the three realms of existence. In The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets (1983), Barbara G. Walker explains that “The Goddess Triformis ruled heaven as Virgin, earth as Mother, and the underworld as Crone” (1019). The three phases of womanhood are thus being “a young woman, a birth-giving matron, and an old woman” (1018). The matriarchal Virgin-Mother-Crone trinity therefore highlights a woman’s fertility. Patriarchal society’s virgin-whore dichotomy, on the other hand, is a judgmental label imposed on women based on how they make use of their sexuality.
getting pleasure herself... *Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has a woman any right to her own pleasure.* (186-87) [author’s italics]

Scheherazade weds Schahriar as a virgin, lives as his wife-prostitute and becomes a mother to both him and his children. In all three cases, Irigaray’s comment on the lack of pleasure for women applies to Scheherazade as well. The only pleasure Scheherazade must have had was the satisfaction she attained from successfully weaving her tales. Although she saves herself and rescues the remaining virgins in the kingdom from the double dishonor of defloration and execution, her relief must have been bittersweet. Schéhérazade assured the continuation of the patriarchal system by bearing male children, as expected in traditional Muslim society. She did not give birth to any daughters who could have taken up her plight and continued the fight for women’s rights in a patriarchally dominated society. In fact, it is likely that her life would never have been spared if she had not borne sons. And so, with neither a mother nor a daughter, Scheherazade stands alone as the archetype of the empowered Arab woman.

While her female body and the ability to give birth are assets, Scheherazade is not depicted as a hypersexualized being in Bencheikh and Miquel’s edition of *Les Mille et Une*
Nuits; rather, she is presented as a cunning scholar. In Scheherazade in England (1981), Muhsin Jassim Ali also emphasizes the importance of Scheherazade’s intellect over her body, asserting that “Unlike other unlucky females, Scheherazade draws upon her knowledge and wit” (3). Furthermore, he argues that “It is Scheherazade’s art, to be sure, which saves her life” (Ali 3). Even acclaimed author Isabel Allende, in Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses (1998), acknowledges the omnipotent power of storytelling when she refers to Scheherazade as “the prodigious storyteller of Araby who for 1,001 nights captivated a cruel sultan with her golden tongue” (16). Allende does not paint the portrait of a seductive or sexy sultana. Instead, she confirms the ultimate importance of wit when stating that Scheherazade “was not so much beautiful as she was wise, and she had the gift of words and an overflowing imagination” (Allende 16).

My study of Scheherazade as a multifaceted character in late-twentieth-century Francophone prose fiction will examine how representations of sexuality and maternity relate to storytelling. Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi’s Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems (2001) is an invaluable resource regarding the differing perceptions of Scheherazade around the world. Scheherazade Goes West was born out of a quest to understand the peculiar
reactions on the part of Western journalists during her book
tour for *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994).
For example, Mernissi was surprised and puzzled by the grins
and enchanted reactions that the word “harem” elicited in both
America and Europe. For her, “harem” is a synonym for the
family as an institution (*Scheherazade Goes West* 12). She
also states that it is anything but jovial, since “the very
origin of the Arabic word ‘haram’ from which the word ‘harem’
is derived, literally refers to sin, the dangerous frontier
where sacred law and pleasure collide” (*Scheherazade Goes West*
12). For Mernissi’s grandmother Yasmina, “the harem was a
prison, a place women were forbidden to leave” (*Scheherazade
Goes West* 1). However, Mernissi asserts that “when crossing
the frontier to the West, the Arabic word ‘harem’ lost its
dangerous edge” (*Scheherazade Goes West* 13). In the West, the
harem is still considered to be both an erotic and a forbidden
place. However, the meaning of “forbidden” has taken on a new
meaning in Western contexts. The harem is imagined as an
exotic venue where sexual gratification with and amongst
multiple women is an attainable fantasy. As Mernissi states,
“the Westerner’s harem was an orgiastic feast where men
benefited from a true miracle: receiving sexual pleasure
without resistance or trouble from the women they had reduced
to slaves” (*Scheherazade Goes West* 14). On the contrary, she
explains that Muslim women are far from being seen as passive, and that “Muslim men expect their enslaved women to fight back ferociously” (Scheherazade Goes West 14). As such, we gain insight into one of the primary myths of the Arab woman: for the Westerner, she is passive; for the Arab, she not only active, but threatening.

The Western Myth of Scheherazade

In Western translations of Alf layla wa-layla, Mernissi states that “the intellectual Scheherazade was lost [. . .] apparently because the Westerners were only interested in two things: adventure and sex” (Scheherazade Goes West 62). She gives the example of Sergey Diaghilev’s 1910 Scheherazade ballet, complete with costumes designed by Leon Bakst, as another turning point in the Western distortion of Scheherazade. This ballet “unleashed a continent-wide rage for harem-inspired fashion, especially the unforgettable harem pants, first designed by the French couturier Poiret.17 Poor Scheherazade was now condemned to exist only from the navel

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17 As Scheherazade has come back into fashion, so to speak, so has harem-inspired fashion. In the Summer 2003 issues of the Victoria’s Secret catalogue, a wide variety of harem pants were advertised, ranging from silk to cotton, thereby Westernizing the so-called Scheherazade look. Additionally, in Harem: The World Beyond the Veil, Alev Lytle Croutier states that “[d]esigners like Yves Saint-Laurent, Rifat Ozbek, and Oscar de la Renta continue to be inspired by harem pants, fezes, embroidered vests, and elegant bustiers” (195).
down. She had pants, yes, but no brain” (Scheherazade Goes West 69). Even more noteworthy is the fact that Scheherazade is an entirely silent figure in the ballet; her only method of expressing herself is with the movement of her body.

In Orientalism, Edward Said observes “an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex” in the works of nineteenth-century authors such as Gustave Flaubert (188). Said also points out that this hypersexualization is “a remarkably persistent motif in Western attitudes to the Orient” (188). This libidinous stereotype is what Neil Macmaster and Toni Lewis refer to as classic nineteenth-century Orientalism, since “[t]hrough the image of the violent and cruel sultan or sheikh who had at his command numerous wives and slave odalisques, the European male could indulge in fantasies of sexual domination and perversion while evading the restraints of repressive European Puritanism and Christian monogamy” (122).18 In other words, there exists an emphasis on female passivity in Orientalist art and literature, which are dominated by visions of “the Arab horseman as savage hero, the

18 According to Alev Lytle Croutier in Harem: The World Beyond the Veil, “The word odalisque comes from the word oda (room) and means literally ‘woman of the room,’ implying a general servant status. Odalisques with extraordinary beauty and talent were trained to become concubines, learning to dance, recite poetry, play musical instruments, and master the erotic arts” (31-32). In Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems, Fatima Mernissi adds that, Turkish in origin, odalisque is “the word most commonly used in the West for a harem slave” (36).
seductiveness of beauties in the **harim**, the charm of the bazaar, the pathos of life continuing amongst the ruins of ancient grandeur” (Hourani 300). Macmaster and Lewis add that “[t]he journey across the Mediterranean was an escape from bourgeois constraint and Victorian prudery into a terrain in which every manner of sexual licence could be indulged” (122). As such, Orientalist art can be seen as a form of exotic escapism.

According to Mernissi, Western rewritings of Scheherazade can be traced back to French author Théophile Gautier’s 1842 novella entitled “La Mille et Deuxième Nuit,” in which a disempowered Scheherazade is killed because she runs out of inspiration. For example, Schéhérazade states: “À force de conter, je suis arrivée au bout de mon rouleau; j’ai dit tout ce que je savais. J’ai épuisé le monde de la féerie; les goules, les djinns, les magiciens et les magiciennes m’ont été d’un grand secours, mais tout s’use [. . .]” (Gautier 221). When she attempts to weave just one final story told to her by a stranger, Schéhérazade is executed, leaving her sister behind in a catatonic state. Indeed, Gautier kills Schéhérazade for running out of stories: her inability to weave another tale leads to her death. Similarly, Edgar Allen Poe’s 1845 “The Thousand and Second Tale of Scheherazade” also ends in death. This time, however, Scheherazade is killed for
the opposite reason. In Poe’s short story, she is assassinated for knowing too much. Both Gautier’s and Poe’s renderings of Scheherazade end tragically. They proffer the message that violent behavior leading to death and silence is an effective means of disempowering women. Scheherazade is placed in an untenable situation in both Gautier’s and Poe’s short stories. No amount of intelligence or lack thereof can save her from death.

While Mernissi discusses both Gautier’s and Poe’s rewritings of Scheherazade, she does not address any recent Francophone authors. Mernissi’s commentary stops with nineteenth-century Orientalist painters and the Ballets Russes, despite the fact that Orientalist myths of lascivious, passive women from the East continue to thrive in today’s world. This confirms Said’s statement that “the Orient still seems to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies [. . .]” (Said 188). I will argue that Orientalism manifests itself more subtly now, rather than in the overt manner of the publications or paintings of the Orientalists. Nonetheless, critiques of Orientalism are obvious in the works of Leïla Sebbar and Assia Djebar. Both writers point to the Eurocentric aspects of French literature, art and history of the nineteenth century in their respective
novels, including Sebbar's *Shérazade* trilogy of novels and Djebar's Algerian Quartet.¹⁹

The contemporary Western view of Scheherazade is shockingly exemplified by the creation of a Scheherazade Barbie® doll. In 2001, Mattel marketed the "Tales of the Arabian Nights Giftset" as the second in their "Magic and Mystery" collection, with Barbie® as Scheherazade and Ken® as the sultan. Packaged in an ornately decorated box, these dolls further perpetuate Western myths of Scheherazade. The back of the box offers the following romanticized vision:

Come on a magic carpet ride to a wondrous world of far and wide.

From the palaces of Persia to the wild borders of China, beyond the river Ganges, farther than the Nile, and throughout far off places, stories have been told of a beautiful princess named Scheherazade. She captivated her husband, the great sultan, with tales of enchantment told during dark and romantic Arabian nights.

Fantastic genies from magic lamps, flying carpets, and voyages on the seven seas: the power and pleasure of these legendary stories still charm and give us the great gift of wonder.

Your Tales of the Arabian Nights dolls pay tribute to a magical storyteller and her beloved sultan. Barbie® doll casts a magical spell dressed as Scheherazade. Colorful, fanciful, and ultimately enthralling, she wears a fantastic costume inspired by Arabian design. Brilliant hues, golden trim, and a cascading veil capture the mystique of an exotic land. Ken® doll, dressed as the dashing sultan, sits spellbound with his trusty 'sword'. His extraordinary costume is

accented with a splendid turban, gloriously adorned with a sparkling faux ruby and golden plume.\(^{20}\)

This advertisement shows that the Barbie® Scheherazade is far from the Eastern prototype of the ingenious storyteller. Mattel’s emphasis on “the great sultan” and “the beloved sultan” whom Scheherazade captivated during “dark and romantic Arabian nights” disempowers her, while simultaneously objectifying her in the form of an anatomically impossible doll without a voice. Although exotic, beautiful and lavishly dressed, Scheherazade is a mute, inanimate object that can only be admired aesthetically. As such, the Barbie® Scheherazade falls into Mernissi’s description of the aforementioned Western Scheherazade.

The Eastern Countermyth

Mernissi also presents a countermyth of Scheherazade in Scheherazade Goes West. Contrary to the Western myth of the passive odalisque, she sets forth the image of an Arab woman who is so assertive that she is often be misconstrued as the potential embodiment of fitna. In her earlier works, including Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern

\(^{20}\) This comment appears on the back cover of the box containing the two dolls.
Muslim Society (1987), Mernissi discusses the concept of fitna at length. Fitna is an Arabic word which lies at the root of male perception of female sexuality in the Muslim world.
Typically, fitna means “disorder” or “chaos” (Beyond the Veil 31). Mernissi adds that it also refers to “a beautiful woman—the connotation of a femme fatale who makes men lose their self-control” (Beyond the Veil 31). Mernissi goes on to explain that Islam does not attack sexuality directly; rather, it debases women as “the embodiment of destruction, the symbol of disorder. The woman is fitna, the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representation of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential” (Beyond the Veil 44). The harem and other more direct manifestations of violence toward Muslim women are thus explained by fear:

The fear of female self-determination is basic to the Muslim order and is closely linked to fear of fitna. If women are not constrained, then men are faced with an irresistible sexual attraction that inevitably leads to fitna and chaos by driving them to zina, illicit copulation. The Prophet’s own experience of the corrosive attraction of female sexuality underlies much of the Muslim attitude towards women and sexuality. Fear of succumbing to the temptation represented by women’s sexual attraction—a fear experienced by the Prophet himself—accounts for many of the defensive reactions to women by Muslim society. (Beyond the Veil 53-54)

In Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women (2001), Khaled Abou El Fadl further explores the concept
of fitna(h), although this time from both a religious and a legal perspective:\(^{21}\)

Fitnah in Islamic discourses is often associated with turbulence, disorder, enticement, and the opening of the doors of evil. The issues addressed here focus on determinations that utilize or rely on the doctrine of fitnah as an essential legal element justifying a particular ruling. Of course, the concept of fitnah is often at the core of the discourses on the necessity of the veil. (233)

With the understanding that fitna is a dangerous form of seduction, Abou El Fadl states that it “connotes the notion that certain things or acts produce the type of sexual arousal that is conducive to the commission of sin” (233). However, the author is also very explicit in pointing out that “The Qu’ran does use the word fitnah, but not to refer to sexual arousal or seduction. The Qu’ran uses the word to refer to non-sexual temptations such as money, and to severe trials and tribulations” (Abou El Fadl 233).

Based on Mernissi’s and Abou El Fadl’s definitions, it is clear that even within the Muslim world, a word such as fitna can take on a number of meanings. Not surprisingly, like the meaning of the word “harem,” Western perceptions of Scheherazade differ greatly from Arab views of her. A

\(^{21}\) Due to the transliteration from Arabic to English, two spellings are commonly found for this term: fitna and fitnah.
metamorphosis took place when Scheherazade first appeared in the Western world, beginning in 1704 with Galland’s translation of Les Mille et Une Nuits. In Mernissi’s terms, “the Oriental Scheherazade is purely cerebral, and that is the essence of her sexual attraction” (Scheherazade Goes West 39). Furthermore, “[i]n the original tales, Scheherazade’s body is hardly mentioned, but her learning is repeatedly stressed. The only dance she performs is to play with words late in the night, in a manner known as samar”22 (Scheherazade Goes West 39). The etymology of Scheherazade’s name is also noteworthy, as it directly links her to knowledge and power. Mernissi explains that “Scheherazade is the Arabic pronunciation of the Persian tchihr, which means ‘born,’ and âzâd, which means ‘to a good race’—in other words, aristocratic”. (Scheherazade Goes West 43). An aristocratic upbringing thus explains how Scheherazade had access to the books and education that afforded her the necessary tools to combat her husband’s tyranny.

In her descriptions of the “Arab” Scheherazade, Mernissi presents the storytelling heroine as an intellectual and

22 Mernissi states that samar literally means “to talk in the night,” yet she also declares that samar is “one of the many Arabic words loaded with sensuality,” and that “it also implies that to talk softly in the darkness can open up incredibly rich veins of feeling” (Scheherazade Goes West 39). According to Hans Wehr’s A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic (1979) samar is defined as “nightly, or evening chat; conversation, talk, chat; night, darkness” (500).
political hero who “teaches that a woman can effectively rebel by developing her brain” (*Scheherazade Goes West* 52). She is active, yet nonviolent, for she uses words as her weapons of defense. The Western depiction of Scheherazade by the Orientalists, on the contrary, is intrinsically linked to fantasies of harems and nude, plump, passive odalisques like those portrayed in the paintings of Ingres and Matisse. It is important to note here that the term “Western” or “Orientalized” Scheherazade is not to be confused with what authors such as Mernissi refer to as the “Eastern,” the “Oriental,” or the “Arab” Scheherazade. The Orientalized Scheherazade is a mere sexpot, while the Oriental Scheherazade is a cerebral heroine.

**Rewriting Scheherazade**

Since the latter part of the twentieth century, a renewal of interest in Scheherazade has been developing as a symbol of empowerment for women which aids in combating Orientalist myths of the erotic, exotic, passive harem slave. Particularly in the case of Algerian author Assia Djebar and Franco-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar, the rewriting of Scheherazade is a method of rejecting patriarchal authority, cultural stereotypes and official historical discourses.
Djebar deals directly with the rewriting of Scheherazade in her 1987 novel entitled *Ombre sultane*. Published five years after Sebbar’s *Shérazade, dix-sept ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts*, Djebar’s *Ombre sultane* is related to the sultana of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, as further evidenced by its English translation: *A Sister to Scheherazade*. Although not a text directly about Scheherazade, *Ombre sultane* is significant in that it examines the sororal bond between two women, thereby highlighting the fact that women comprise a community of resistance in and to the patriarchal order. More specifically, Isma, Djebar’s initial narrator and Scheherazade figure, acts as both a sister and educator to her co-wife, Hajila, her “ombre-soeur” (*Ombre sultane* 91). At the beginning of Part III of *Ombre sultane*, Djebar inserts a passage from *Les Mille et Une Nuits* in which Scheherazade calls upon her younger sister Dinarzade to aid her in outwitting the sultan. In *Ombre sultane*, there occurs a shift between the two wives. Hajila is no longer in the shadows; she becomes both an educator and a Scheherazade figure in her own right. Hajila teaches her co-wife Isma to say “I,” a word which is taboo within the fundamentalist Muslim context of the novel. As Clarisse Zimra explains, “Isma and Hajila, modern-day Scheherazade and Dinarzad, not only change place but ‘double-up’ each other symbolically and semantically. *Ombre*
sultane gave women back some measure of agency by restoring them to sororal unity” (117). In essence, Scheherazade’s ability to gain power in her tyrannical relationship with Schahriar could not have occurred without the aid of her sister, Dinarzade. This is precisely the point Zimra makes when referring to Isma and Hajila in Ombre sultane.

Similarly, Sebbar’s Shérazade acts as both a storyteller and a seeker who is not afraid to question hegemonic and national dominance, whether patriarchal or religious in nature.

The fact that authors such as Djebar and Sebbar choose to rewrite the story of Scheherazade is paramount in the context of the Maghreb. The struggle to regain lost voices is especially pertinent in the context of the 1980s and 1990s, when women’s voices were still excluded from history, particularly in terms of their participation in the Algerian War of Independence. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke state in reference to women writers from Algeria and Palestine:

Women’s voices were even considered by some to be awra (something shameful to be hidden; usually refers to private parts of the body). The feminist discourse of Arab women writers destroys patriarchally produced female archetypes and replaces them with their own prototypes: women who have their own aspirations, desires, needs. (Opening the Gates xix)
During the period of violence in Algeria in the last two decades, many authors have chosen to redefine and relocate Scheherazade to both Eastern and Western contexts, since the issue of feminism transgresses geopolitical East-West dichotomies. In Leïla Sebbar’s Shérazade works, Pierre Karch’s Le Nombril de Scheherazade and Vinciane Moeschler’s Schéhérazade, ma folie, the respective Scheherazade figures journey to the Middle East, the Maghreb, Western Europe and even North America. I have elected to study the rebirth of Scheherazade in the contemporary Francophone context so as to understand when, why and how the Scheherazades created by Sebbar, Karch and Moeschler differ. Harkening back to the critical theory of Fatima Mernissi, there exists a clear distinction between Eastern and Western perceptions of Scheherazade, yet her analysis does not address any rewritings of Scheherazade in the twentieth century. In this dissertation I will go beyond the East-West paradigm in order to examine the gender-encoded maternal and sexual aspects of the rewriting of Scheherazade in the Francophone fiction of three different continents, published between 1982 and 2003.
As stated in the Introduction, the 1982 publication of Leïla Sebbar’s Shérazade: dix-sept ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts marks the first Francophone rebirth of Scheherazade in the twentieth century. In this novel, Sebbar rewrites Scheherazade as a young Beur runaway in Paris. Shérazade’s wanderings expose her to men as well as women who attempt to capitalize on her physical beauty and her exotic name. She is the constant target of acts which can be interpreted as forms of rape, both physically and symbolically. To better illustrate my use of the term “rape” in this chapter, it will be helpful to look at its etymology and many definitions. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, “rape” derives from the Latin verb rapere meaning “to seize” (1026). As a noun, “rape” is defined as: “1. The crime of forcing another person to submit to sexual intercourse, 2. The act of seizing and carrying off by force; abduction, 3. Abusive or improper treatment; violation” (American Heritage Dictionary 1026). In the context of Sebbar’s Shérazade works, which include not only a trilogy of novels (Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée,
les yeux verts, Les Carnets de Shérazade, Le Fou de Shérazade), but also four short stories ("Shérazade à Algiers,"
"Shérazade à Julien" [1997], “Nous sommes tous les petits-
enfants des tirailleurs et de Shahrazâd,” and “Shérazade à
Julien” [2003]), Shérazade escapes not only from rape in the
sexual sense, but also in the sense of abuse and violence.23
As Laurence Huughe points out in Ecrits sous le voile:
romancières Algériennes francophones (2001), the violence
Shérazade escapes is “une autre forme de violence, celle qui
émane du discours colonial et orientaliste dès lors qu’il
cherche à asservir la femme orientale dans une image conforme
aux fantasmes voyeuristes” (98). For Huughe, it is “[l]e
pouvoir salvateur de la parole féminine” that allows Shérazade
to escape such perils (Ecrits 98). As I will demonstrate in
this chapter, Shérazade comes to terms with her sexuality both
in spite of and thanks to the Orientalist gaze forced upon
her, making her the odalisque who gets away.

At the outset of Shérazade: dix-sept ans, brune, frisée,
les yeux verts, Shérazade’s name is undoubtedly the first and
most obvious link to the Scheherazade of Les Mille et Une
Nuits:

23 Two of Sebbar’s short stories are letters from Shérazade to
Julien, both entitled “Shérazade à Julien.” For the sake of clarity, I
also include the date of publication when citing them.
-Vous vous appelez vraiment Shérazade?
-Oui.
-Vraiment?  C’est... c’est tellement... Comment dire?  Vous
savez qui était Schéhérazade?
-Oui.
- Et ça ne vous fait rien?
-Non.
-Vous croyez qu’on peut s’appeller Shérazade, comme ça...?
-Je ne sais pas.  (Shérazade 7)

In this first meeting with Julien Desrosiers in a fast-food
restaurant in Paris, Shérazade immediately establishes herself
as a young, independent and flippant character who would
rather listen to her Walkman and drink her Coca-Cola than
listen to the Orientalist musings of a thirty-year-old man.
The way Sebbar associates Shérazade with popular (American)
culture within the capital city of France separates her from
traditional culture and aligns her with modern Beur marginals.
The title of Sebbar’s first Shérazade novel points to the
vague identity of its protagonist.  Like her police file
indicates, Shérazade is a seventeen-year-old runaway.  What
she is running from, however, is a subject prime for debate.
It is my contention that Shérazade is not merely running in
search of herself and her hybrid identity as part French, part
Algerian, as many literary critics like Michel Laronde,
Winifred Woodhull, Anne Donadey, Denise Brahimi and Charles
Nunley have argued.  Rather, as this novel and the subsequent
Shérazade works display, she is running from physical, sexual
and emotional captivity; by continually moving, Shérazade is the anti-odalisque. Neither passive nor captive, Shérazade is a survivor who takes control of her destiny, and above all, her female body.

For many, particularly the members of her family, Shérazade’s abrupt disappearance is a complete mystery. As Denise Brahimi explains in her literary portrait of Shérazade in _Maghrébines: Portraits littéraires_ (1995), “Personne n’a compris pourquoi elle a disparu brutalement et sans prévenir, en plein milieu d’année scolaire, alors qu’elle se trouvait en classe terminale. Le père, un Algérien de l’émigration qui travaille chez Citroën, n’a pourtant pas cherché à la marier de force [. . .]” (165). Although a child of struggling Algerian parents in the suburbs of Paris, Shérazade was about to complete her baccalauréat with no threat of being married off by her father when she ran away. In Sebbar’s novel, we learn that “[e]lle ne manquait de rien. Elle ne sortait pas beaucoup, mais elle n’était pas la seule, et les raclées du père n’étaient pas si terribles, tout de même” (Shérazade 69). Despite evidence of some physical abuse inflicted by the father in Shérazade’s family, this does not appear to have been enough to send her running. Furthermore, concerning marriage proposals, it is apparent that Shérazade’s father “avait accepté plusieurs fois qu’elle refuse un parti qui se
présentait. Pourtant combien auraient pu lui convenir” (Shérazade 69). According to Brahimi, Shérazade runs away because she is searching to fill a void identity,

While Shérazade belongs to different historical, geographical and social contexts than those of the legendary storyteller of Baghdad, she is repeatedly associated with the latter due to her name. For Brahimi, the amputated syllable separating her from the famous sultana symbolizes the lack of specific cultural identity Shérazade seeks to fill during her peregrinations. One can indeed view the missing syllable as a symbolic reminder of the violent French colonization of Algeria. The Frenchified version of her name is stripped down and denuded by the dominant French culture. In the passage from oral Arabic to written French, part of her identity was lost. For this reason, Anne Donadey argues in “Cultural Métissage and the Play of Identity in Leïla Sebbar’s Shérazade Trilogy” (1998) that
Shérazade’s name is a 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. What could be viewed as the richness of difference is rejected as unnecessary excess. (266)

In “From Schéhérazade to Shérazade: Self-Fashioning in the Works of Leïla Sebbar” (1996), Charles Nunley offers additional commentary on Shérazade’s name as it relates to France:

[t]he most explicit sign of Shérazade’s problematic relationship to dominant culture is, of course, revealed in her name. Instead of designating an individual unique in all her attributes, Shérazade’s name links her with fiction and, specifically, with the work that originally shaped France’s romanesque view of the Orient: Les Mille et une nuits. Since its first translation into French in 1704 by Antoine Galland, Les Mille et une nuits has remained one of the most popular works of exotic literature in France. In her narrative, Sebbar uses Les Mille et une nuits to situate her heroine within the context of French literary exoticism. (239)

Sebbar thus redefines France’s relationship with colonial Algeria through the vehicle of Shérazade. By altering Shérazade’s name and reinscribing her in the contemporary Francophone context, Sebbar combats centuries of literary exoticism.

Shérazade as Exotic Other
Time and time again in *Shérazade: dix-sept ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts*, Shérazade’s name sends men almost swooning with curiosity and desire: “[e]ven in the absence of any visual contact with Sebbar’s heroine, men are drawn to the exotic resonance of her name” (Nunley 240). In the process of trying to locate the missing Shérazade, her family fills out a missing persons report with the police, and also broadcasts announcements on Shérazade’s favorite radio stations. In one instance, her younger sister makes the following plea on Carbone 14: “Shérazade, c’est moi Mériem. Dis seulement que tu es vivante” (*Shérazade* 35). Before Mériem’s message, the radio announcer utters Shérazade’s name and then states “Je voudrais bien la voir, celle qui porte ce nom-là, si c’est pas un faux nom... Parce que quand on s’appelle comme ça...” (*Shérazade* 34). Already enthralled by Shérazade’s name and the voluminous cultural baggage it carries, the radio announcer’s curiosity is piqued. In fact, his comments do not stop there: “Il répêta le nom plusieurs fois, s’interrompit pour donner le numéro de téléphone de la radio pour cette Shérazade, si elle voulait appeler on lui laisserait carte blanche, elle pourrait dire et faire tout, tout, tout... avec un nom pareil...” (*Shérazade* 34). Despite Mériem’s heartfelt plea, Shérazade is too enraged by the comments regarding her name to
do anything other than rip the Walkman headphones off of her head. As if engaging in a pseudo-fantasy with an unknown woman, the announcer taunts the young Shérazade to come to him, where she will have free reign to do as she wishes. His unsolicited sexual innuendoes are clearly fueled by Orientalist myth.

With such highly charged reactions to her name alone, it is obvious that those who encounter Shérazade are even more fascinated with her than before meeting her. A dark-haired, green-eyed beauty, she is the quintessential exotic other. In particular, Shérazade’s green eyes stereotypically liken her to an odalisque. The French fascination with exoticism is precisely the basis of thirty-year-old pied-noir Julien’s obsession with the young runaway. For Julien, an Orientalist who is obsessed with all things Algerian, Shérazade becomes his very own objet d’art. After an interlude of daydreaming about Monet’s Olympia and the frigidity of the nude woman’s body, Julien is brought back to reality when he sees Shérazade:

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24 Two theories regarding women with green eyes were predominant in nineteenth-century France. Through the Orientalist lens, a green-eyed woman was viewed as an odalisque. During the same time period, she-devils and vampireses in Fantastic literature were depicted with green eyes. In both cases, women with green eyes were enticing and seductive.

25 The term pied-noir signifies a French citizen living in colonial Algeria. As the child of French schoolteachers who were working in Algeria in the 1950s, Julien is thus referred to as a pied-noir.
Il oublia tout à fait cet exotisme d’artifice lorsqu’il aperçut à sa place, Shérazade. Comment avait-il pu tomber si vite amoureux d’une fille qu’il ne connaissait pas, lui qui soutenait qu’il n’avait jamais été amoureux? Il mentait? Il avait oublié? Il disait vrai. Il ne savait rien du coup de foudre, jusqu’à ce jour. (Shérazade 75)

Based on nothing but observing the young girl around Paris, Julien believes that he is in love with Shérazade. He even watches her reading, in hopes of catching a glimpse of her when her eyes get tired and she looks up. Musing about the artificial poses of odalisques in Orientalist paintings, Julien perceives Shérazade as his very own exotic beauty. Although his perception of her is just as artificial as the Orientalist gaze, he nonetheless sees in Shérazade the incarnation of a Delacroix or a Matisse. Just as Delacroix objectified and stereotyped the women in his painting *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, Julien, too, uses Shérazade:

Mais lui préférait les *Femmes d’Alger*. Ce foulard d’un orient dégradé, trop jaune et trop rouge, dont on sentait au regard la triste fibre synthétique, parce que cette fille le nouait devant lui à la manière des femmes arabes qu’il avait vues chez lui, dans ce petit village d’Oranie, dans la cour et la maison d’école où son père était instituteur, dans les mechtas où sa mère l’emmenait pour soigner les femmes et les enfants, les mains de Shérazade, les doigts qui tiraient les bouts du foulard pour un nœud qui ne se déferait pas aussitôt et après réflexion pour un nœud double, ces gestes émurent Julien
As if a token of remembrance of his younger years growing up in colonial Algeria, Shérazade signifies the quiddity of the Algerian woman for Julien. The simple act of tying her scarf, a basic quotidian action, sends Julien reeling into mnemonic flights of fancy. Akin to a veil, the headscarf is a symbol of the mysterious Orient and the hidden faces of her women. Shérazade’s green eyes further solidify Julien’s spellbound attitude toward her:

Lorsqu’elle alla au Louvre avec lui pour les Femmes d’Alger, elle remarqua que la femme de gauche appuyée sur un coude, les jambes repliées sur la fouta rouge et dorée, avait les yeux verts.
Il avait regardé fixement Shérazade, la prenant aux épaules:
- Comme toi. (Shérazade 13)

Interestingly, it is initially Shérazade, not Julien, who notices the green eyes of the Algerian woman in the painting, as if he were unaware of this Occidentalization. Once Shérazade points out her green eyes, Julien seizes not only the idea, but Shérazade herself, grabbing her by the shoulders as he makes the connection. Although she remarks on the

26 The masculinist desire to lift the veil and penetrate secret and sacred feminine space abounds in Orientalist literature such as Gustave Flaubert’s Salammbô (1897) and Gérard de Nerval’s Voyage en Orient (1851).
sameness in eye color, Shérazade is still unaware of what she represents. For Julien, she is an Occidentalized odalisque.

Julien is not the only man to take notice of Shérazade’s unique green eyes. In the squat where Shérazade takes up residence, Pierrot spontaneously declares to Krim, “Shérazade a des yeux verts” (Shérazade 63). For Krim, half-Berber, this calls to mind the memory of his mother: “Comme ma mère. Ma mère est berbère, elle est blonde et elle a des yeux clairs, verts ou bleus, je sais pas. La prochaine fois je regarderai mieux” (Shérazade 63). The significance of this particular passage lies not in Krim’s thought of his mother, but in the association he makes with Berber women and light-colored eyes. As such, Shérazade’s green eyes hold cultural importance for Krim, and they also point to the ethnic diversity of the Maghreb. Likely because she is perceived as a Berber by a Berber, Krim emphasizes her Maghrebian heritage rather than her sex-appeal as an exotic other. In another instance, Shérazade’s brothers use her eye color as the distinguishing factor that sets her apart when searching for her in various night clubs and Caribbean-themed parties. Her physical traits, “une jeune fille brune, frisée, des yeux verts,” are used to hunt her down (Shérazade 72). Although they repeatedly search to no avail, Shérazade’s brothers emphasize her green eyes, which make her stand out.
On yet another occasion, Julien both praises and appraises Shérazade’s literal and figurative emeralds when he remarks: “Tu as des boucles d’oreilles fantastiques. C’est le vert de tes yeux” (Shérazade 91). The green of Shérazade’s eyes is reinforced by the dazzling emeralds given to her by Pierrot after a robbery he committed.27 What transpires immediately after Julien hears mention of another man’s name, however, is quite remarkable: “Soudain, Julien n’eut plus envie d’emmener Shérazade chez lui. Elle avait à peine parlé et il ne voulait plus. Il l’aurait laissée là; il se serait mis à courir pour disparaître. Shérazade le regardait. Il renonça à la fuite” (Shérazade 91). It is perhaps upon realizing that he is not the only male suitor in her life that Julien suddenly loses interest in Shérazade, the ultimate object of his desire. His reaction may be one of pure male jealousy, although such a motivation often causes the threatened man to pursue his prey even more aggressively than before. Another possibility for Julien’s emotional shutdown can be explained by an absolutist labeling of her as either virgin or whore. At the mention of Pierrot’s name, Julien may have automatically assumed that his young, exotic virgin was literally and figuratively “taken” by another, thus relegating

27 The character Pierrot highlights the postcolonial context of Sebbar’s Shérazade novels. Yet by his name and his behavior, Pierrot is also a reference to Jean-Luc Godard’s film Pierrot le Fou.
her to the status of “damaged goods.” A third and even more disturbing potential reason for Julien’s desire to uninvite Shérazade to his apartment is the fact he lost interest in her after hearing her utter only a few words: “Shérazade avait à peine parlé et il ne voulait plus” (Shérazade 91). The narrator’s account of the situation leads the reader to believe that it is Shérazade’s ability to speak that scares Julien away, for she is not a mute odalisque: “Il l’aurait laissée là; il se serait mis à courir pour disparaître” (Shérazade 91). It is not Shérazade, “la fugueuse,” who wants to flee in this case, but Julien. Based on his behavior, one can surmise that Julien prefers to look at Shérazade but not listen to her, thereby reinforcing the misogynistic adage that a woman ought to be seen but not heard (Sois Belle et Tais-Toi is the title of a 1957 French film). Only after she looks at him again does he decide to abandon his plan to flee.

Julien’s obsession with mute Algerian women is evidenced by the lengths to which he went to buy a watercolor painting of an Algerian woman holding a baby in her arms (Shérazade 97). At Julien’s apartment, Shérazade takes the painting of the unveiled Berber woman off of the wall and inquires about it. The way he explains how he came to own it (or rather, her) is practically a confession. After coveting her for an entire day, he returns the following morning with money to buy
the painting, only to find that she had already been sold. Julien’s obsession becomes apparent when he becomes desperate to buy any painting, “pourvu qu’il y ait une femme algérienne… Une femme arabe” (Shérazade 98). It is this similar painting, purchased out of desperation, which he offers to give to Shérazade. His desire to rid himself of the impulsive purchase is practically an act of repentance for having coveted the painting. It is not simply that Julien loves “ces femmes-là” (Shérazade 89). Rather, he loves them as clichés of the Oriental woman “en peinture,” in the framework of a two-dimensional piece of art that can be purchased, hung on the wall and admired for its beauty.

Shérazade is quick to escape anyone who objectifies her or tries to possess her. At the Vanves flea market on a Sunday morning, Pierrot, another of her suitors and the same one who gifted her with the stolen emerald earrings, catches a glimpse of Shérazade suddenly running off and then disappearing in the crowd. Although Shérazade “s’était sauvée parce qu’elle avait cru reconnaître de loin son père, sa mère et ses petites sœurs,” Basile uses the opportunity to warn Pierrot about clinging too much to Shérazade (Shérazade 95). The obvious implication is that doing so will only cause her to run more. Once again, Shérazade proves to have a strong personality; she will not tolerate being possessed by anyone,
be they family members, lovers or simply friends, both Arab and non-Arab alike.

When she is not the object of Julien’s attention, Shérazade leads a very difficult, if not risky, lifestyle. As a seventeen-year-old Beur runaway in the environs of Paris, she is relegated to a life of stealing and squatting merely to make ends meet. While sharing rooms with other immigrant runaways and outcasts in a squat, Shérazade is surrounded by drugs, prostitution, and robbery. Although she takes part in petty theft, stealing red high heels or boots, for example, Shérazade remains relatively straight-laced given her precarious circumstances. Although her fellow squatters shoot heroine, snort cocaine, and smoke marijuana, she rarely partakes of anything other than the occasional cigarette at parties. For Shérazade, reading is the best fix: “C’est ma drogue, c’est mon vice” (Shérazade 49). Reading, both as a cerebral activity and as an allusion to studying in the Arabo-Muslim context, further sets her apart from the Orientalist illusion of the passive odalisque, as well as the more recent twentieth-century Western view of the brainless Arabian sexpot.28

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28 In Ces voix qui m’assiègent, Assia Djebar elaborates on the meanings of the verbs “to read” and “to study” in the Maghrebian context. Being able to read French meant being able to leave the home or the harem in order to study. Djebar offers the example of a joyful mother who cries “elle sort parce qu’elle lit” with regard to her daughter (Ces voix 69).
Literal and Figurative Rape

Although Shérazade is able to go unnoticed in certain clubs where her brothers search for her, she barely escapes rape in others. It is Shérazade’s savvy that saves her in extreme situations. After hearing some of Djamila’s experiences working as a prostitute, the narrator describes how “Shérazade avait eu elle aussi des propositions à peine déguisées et, plus d’une fois, elle avait dû quitter la table ou la boîte avant le piège” (Shérazade 86). As soon as she feels threatened, Shérazade’s “visage juvénile et rieur” changes (Shérazade 86). She suddenly becomes stiff, mean, even vulgar, before getting up and running (Shérazade 86). Shérazade knows when to draw the line, and thus does not use her sexuality as a commodity like Djamila.  

Shérazade occasionally dines with men, this is merely a survival tactic, a means of feeding herself. On occasion she would “se faire draguer,” for a meal “[q]uand elle savait

Djebar clarifies: “C’est-à-dire, en traduisant de l’arabe dialectal, qu’elle ‘étudie’” (Ces voix 69).

29 Sebbar’s choice of the name Djamila for Shérazade’s prostitute friend is worth noting. In Arabic, Djamila means “beautiful.” Such a name emphasizes the character’s physical attributes, which is not surprising for a young woman who sells her body. Djamila thus stands in direct contrast to Shérazade, who, like her namesake Scheherazade, represents the power of brains over beauty.
It is important to note that when Shérazade chooses to go to dinner with a man, she is most certainly the one in control of the situation. She reverses the voyeuristic Orientalist gaze by peering at her potential suitor through the glass of the telephone cabin, rather than being spied upon by him first. She agrees to dine with him in a public establishment, never at his residence, but only if he is not “repoussant,” and always after giving him one of her false names. For the seventeen-year-old runaway, this is a relatively safe and cost-effective way of meeting her nutritional needs, while seeing to it that she is not forced to meet any man’s sexual needs.

One evening, however, Shérazade barely manages to escape “deux salauds de la rue Saint-Denis” (Shérazade 87). Although rue Saint-Denis is the most renowned street in Paris for soliciting prostitutes, Shérazade admits: “Je marchais, rue Saint-Denis, sans faire attention...” (Shérazade 88). Seized by

30 Throughout the novel, as a means of disguising herself, avoiding the authorities, and perhaps even trying to escape the exotic connotation of her name in France, Shérazade makes use of pseudonyms such as Camille and Rosa: “Elle répondait, suivant la personne, à la question du prénom, Camille— ou Rosa” (Shérazade 87). When deciding upon an alter ego for her fake identity papers, Shérazade declares: “Je m’appellerai Rosa. Rosa Mire et j’aurai dix-huit ans, je serai majeure, tu comprends. Je serai née à Paris XIVe et je serai étudiante en psycho. Voilà” (Shérazade 179).
two men and completely unaware of her environs, Shérazade recounts:

Je passe derrière le rideau avec eux et là ils me coincent dans une petite cabine où ils m’obligent à regarder. Je vois une fille à moitié nue qui se masturbe et qui sourit. Je ferme les yeux. Je savais pas qu’elle me voyait pas. J’ai compris où j’étais. Je me suis débattue comme une folle, j’ai crié, la fille derrière la glace sans tain continuait, les types me disaient “Regarde, mais regarde, petite garce, rince-toi l’œil et regarde bien pour apprendre, parce qu’on va te mettre derrière la glace comme elle, tu gagneras de l’or et nous aussi.” Ils me tiraient les cheveux pour que je relève la tête. J’ai hurlé, j’ai mordu, j’ai donné des coups de pied. Ils ont entendu du bruit, un client peut-être, ils m’ont lâchée et je me suis sauvée… (Shérazade 88).

By her own admission when recounting the story to her fellow vagabonds, Shérazade declares “ils auraient pu me violer,” yet thanks to her determination to fight for her emotional safety and preserve her physical body, Shérazade breaks free and runs, once again (Shérazade 89). One cannot ignore, however, the way in which Sebbar constructs the peep-show scenario. Although Shérazade has thus far been the victim of the voyeuristic eye, in this case she is forced into the role of la voyeuse by observing a half-naked woman masturbating and smiling at her behind the glass of the viewing cabin.31

31 In La goutte d’or (1986), Michel Tournier constructs a very different peep-show scenario that also takes place on the rue Saint-Denis. In Tournier’s novel, the male protagonist, Idriss, chooses to enter the peep-show rather than be forced in. He witnesses a “femme-lionne” with slanted green eyes who fondles her breasts and her vulva. Unlike
According to Laurence Huughe’s analysis, the context of the Parisian sex-shop gives us the opportunity to view male/men’s perversion “dans sa forme la plus crue, la plus violente et la plus dégradante pour la femme” (106-07). What is so violent about the voyeuristic gaze is the fact that the sex worker is effectively blind. As Huughe explains, “[l]e peep-show permet au voyeur de voir sans être vu de la femme qui se trouve derrière le miroir. Celle-ci, se sachant regardée, doit jouer le jeu de la séduction sexuelle pour le plaisir de ceux dont elle ne verra jamais le visage” (107). Although Shérazade is unaware that the sex worker cannot see her, she is nonetheless horrified by the scene, by the abuse of women and by the prospect that she could be similarly exploited. Although the two men want to force Shérazade to perform as well, she breaks the vicious voyeuristic circle. By refusing to watch the spectacle and by running away before she is made to perform, Shérazade succeeds in combating the objectification and hypersexualization both of herself, and of women in general.

Shérazade displays an acute understanding of female sexuality and through her actions, she draws a fine line between the use and abuse of the female body. While she admits to flirting with a man in order to get a good dinner

Shérazade, who is horrified by the peep-show, Idriss becomes excited by it, and leaves the cabin “tremblant de désir frustré” (Tournier 163).
out of the situation, Shérazade is neither able to reconcile nor assume the obvious position in the master-servant dyad that results from the sale of the female body in the sex industry. While conversing with her prostitute/roommate Djamila at the squat one evening, Shérazade asks:

-Djamila, tu dis que tu aimes pas servir un patron ou des clients mais ces types-là, tu les sers non? Tu fais ce qu’ils te demandent, tu es à leur service.
-Mais tu le prends pas contre rien puisque tu réponds à leurs caprices toi, avec ton corps. (Shérazade 89-90)

Even after Djamila’s insistence that her clients serve her, and not the contrary, Shérazade sees the situation quite lucidly and quite differently. In her opinion, Djamila is the one paying the higher price in the end, for she does so with her body. Although she earns money, Djamila is still the one assuming the submissive position by being at the mercy of a man’s sexual demands. Djamila perpetuates the myth of the yielding woman who is good for nothing more than the sexual gratification of men. Such a costly risk is clearly not one Shérazade herself is willing to take.

Based on the knowledge that Shérazade is unwilling to prostitute herself, her relationship with Julien, an older man she hardly knows, is both fraught and mysterious. After
Julien offers to give Shérazade the painting of the Algerian woman, Shérazade subsequently spends the night at his apartment. This act, combined with the fact that Shérazade slept in Julien’s bed wearing neither bra nor panties raises some questions about the nature of their relationship (Shérazade 110). Although the narrator does not explicitly reveal whether or not Shérazade consummated her relationship with Julien, the reader cannot help but wonder, since she lies asleep in Julien’s bed wearing nothing but a tee-shirt. Even though he realizes that she is a minor and he is almost twice her age, Julien continues to pursue Shérazade. Although neither overtly physically nor sexually threatened by Julien, Shérazade is the eternal fugueuse, always on the run from anyone attempting to possess her.

As previously discussed, Julien is quick to objectify Shérazade and covertly perceive her as his own odalisque. He is not, however, the only man to do so. An overt perception of Shérazade as an odalisque occurs at a chic party she attends with her friends Zouzou and France. When the three arrive at the soirée together, the crowd focuses on them and the pseudo-exotic venue. The narrator overemphasizes the Orientalist setting of the party:
On les regardait. Elles s’étaient assises sur les coussins soyeux disposés autour du palmier central, un vrai palmier à larges palmes très vertes, sans dattes, qui s’ouvrait vers les balcons intérieurs d’une loggia qui faisait le tour de l’immense pièce carrée, comme dans une cour ou plutôt un salon mauresque. (Shérazade 123)

The young women are compared to three odalisques seated on silken cushions beneath a palm tree. Although the palm tree is authentic, the scenario in which Shérazade finds herself is contrived. In Women as Portrayed in Orientalist Painting, Lynne Thornton discusses how typical scenes with odalisques were painted in nineteenth-century art: “In many Orientalist works, women loll against cushions doing nothing but idle the hours away, alone or gossiping with companions, day-dreaming or wafting a fan or fly-whisk backwards and forwards” (28). Thornton’s description of the idle women reclining on cushions is similar to what the partygoers view. It is in this Orientalist setting that the attendees begin to gather around Shérazade and inquire about her. One man refers to Shérazade as “La fille du grand vizir sous un palmier... Je rêve...,” thus launching into an exotic reverie because of her name (Shérazade 124).

Shérazade is obviously both desired and admired, not only at this party, but in general. People do not speak directly to her; rather, they inquire about her as if she were deaf and mute, thus likening her to an odalisque. The fact that they
gather around Shérazade, “qu’on reniflait,” further demonstrates the desire to consume her being (Shérazade 123). However, she is quick to break this emprisoning cycle when declaring of one of the men, “Qu’est-ce qui lui prend à celui-là? Il est fou ou quoi. Bon, je me tire. Ils m’emmerdent tous ces cons” (Shérazade 124). She simply refuses to be filmed or captured in any way, although photographers, directors and fashion magazine editors “s’agitaient tous autour de Shérazade comme des groupies sur un podium” (Shérazade 124). When photographed against her wishes, Shérazade reacts in violent self-defense, as if threatened by rape. She grabs the camera and throws it several meters, thus breaking, or “mutilating” the expensive piece of equipment (Shérazade 124). In Transfigurations of the Maghreb (1993), Winifred Woodhull explains that “[i]n and through image production, the photographer enacts his fantasy of possessing the daughter of the powerful vizier sexually, while dispossessing her as a maker of cultural meanings” (118). In her article “Cultural Métissage and the Play of Identity in Leïla Sebbar’s Shérazade Trilogy,” Anne Donadey expands on Woodhull’s ideas regarding Shérazade’s violent reaction and Sebbar’s use of sexualized vocabulary:
The camera explicitly symbolizes the phallus. Sebbar thus exposes the libidinal investment attached to the use of photography to appropriate women’s images. By attacking the camera, Shérazade hits where it hurts most—literally, below the belt. Her violence, as a response to violence of a sexual nature exerted against her, is experienced as sexually castrating. By breaking the camera, she effectively neutralizes (neuters?) Orientalist desire, a desire which is perceived as violent because the camera, like the phallus, can be used as a weapon. (268)

Based on Woodhull’s and Donadey’s analyses, one can see why Shérazade reacted as violently as she did. Although protecting herself and her privacy, Shérazade is maligned and threatened as the photographer objectifies her, calls her a whore and then yells: “Ça vient où ça ne devrait pas, ça excite tout le monde, ça joue les allumeuses, ça pose avec les petites copines, des gouines encore celles-là et en plus ça détruit le matériel…” (Shérazade 124). The insults he directs toward Shérazade may originate from the financial distress she caused him by breaking his equipment, yet his choice of diction reveals a more deep-seated resentment. By referring to her as “ça” rather than “elle,” he dehumanizes and belittles Shérazade.32 Furthermore, he resents Shérazade for playing the role of an allumeuse who sexually excites and ignites everyone. His resentment is based on the fact that he

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32 “Ça” is a form of address one uses to refer to objects, not people. When used in reference to people, it can only be derogatory. As such, Shérazade is doubly objectified (both visually and linguistically) by the photographer.
cannot have his way with her, either physically or artistically. As such, the photographer resorts to one final episode of name-calling, in which he refers to Shérazade, Zouzou, and France as “gouines” (Shérazade 124). With his ego and his virility threatened by Shérazade’s spurning, the photographer lashes out. The homophobic insult (“dykes”) he directs at the three girls is another form of degradation. In calling them lesbians, the photographer attempts to protect and assert his fragile masculinity.

After the infamous “soirée Tropique et Palmier,” Zouzou, France and Shérazade become embroiled in yet another racy scenario from which they must extricate themselves. This time, it is a different photographer’s scheme to take exotic photos of them scantily clad in zebra, leopard and tigress costumes. Like the previous photography scene, this one is another form of attempted rape, using the camera as a weapon. In Rethinking Rape, Ann Cahill sheds new light on the concept of rape, which she defines as “an assault on a person’s embodied sexuality using eroticized weapons, whether or not they are body parts” (139). Cahill’s definition can be applied both to physical penetration as well as psychological rape. For Shérazade and her female friends, the attempted rape manifests itself in the form of a voyeuristic scene: “Il les regardait. Il s’approcha d’elles et avec la dexterité du
professionnel, il dégagea un sein ici, une fesse là, il échancra d’avantage le décolleté de Shérazade” (Shérazade 154). While preparing to take the photos, the photographer directs the three girls as if it were a lesbian fantasy, telling them to take turns lying on top of one another. He is also insistent that their breasts and buttocks be visible in the process. In an attempt to justify his outlandish requests, the photographer declares: “Si vous étiez dans un sauna ou un hammam puisque c’est la mode, vous seriez toutes nues et ça ne vous gênerait pas, eh bien là, c’est pareil” (Shérazade 154-55). He is obviously interested in Shérazade, Zouzou and France merely so that he can exploit them and profit from their photos. His focus on isolated body parts, namely “les fesses” and “les seins,” further exemplifies his objectification and hypersexualization of the three girls. The photographer’s attempt to convince them of the normalcy of his contrived pseudo-lesbian scenario by comparing it to a sauna or a “Turkish” bath further demonstrates the way in which he Orientalizes Shérazade, Zouzou and France.33 Sebbar’s reference to the sauna or the hammam is not neutral; they are typical loci in Orientalist paintings. Arguably the most well-known Orientalist depiction of the hammam is Ingres’s

33 For more examples of Western homoerotic fantasies regarding Middle Eastern women in hammams, see Alev Lytle Croutier’s Harem: The World Behind the Veil (1989) and Annabelle d’Huart and Nadia Tazi’s Harems (1980).
Bain turc. In her description of this painting, Lynne Thornton points to the homoerotic tone of the painting: “Here, an extraordinary profusion of nudes is shown reclining or sitting so close to each other that their thighs touch. Two women are tenderly intertwined while another throws herself back with an abandoned air” (Thornton 72). Although Thornton does indicate that Ingres’s painting “combines sapphism and voyeurism,” she fails to note that the two women are not simply “tenderly intertwined;” one is undoubtedly cupping the breast of the other (Thornton 72). Such an overtly sexual exchange between women in an exotic setting is precisely what the photographer endeavors to accomplish with Shérazade, Zouzou and France. Luckily, Shérazade arrived at the shoot fully prepared to deal with such entrapping and unpleasant circumstances. From inside her bag, she removes “trois pistolets qu’elle avait achetés dans un magasin de jouets et qui imitaient parfaitement les vrais pistolets” (Shérazade 152). The guns come in quite handy when the three girls decide not to complete the photo shoot, and must make a quick getaway, saving themselves from exploitation once again.

Odalisque/Anti-odalisque
While Shérazade seems to flirt with danger and run away from unknown men who try to exploit her, there is one pivotal character from whom she runs as well: Julien. This is a rather curious fact since the two are involved in a relationship, albeit it an atypical one in which seventeen year-old Shérazade dominates the almost thirty year-old Julien. He is in constant pursuit of her, waiting for her to arrive at his apartment or spend an evening with him. Although Sebbar never presents an explicit sexual love affair between the two, Julien is quick to declare his need for her: “Je peux seulement te dire que je t’aime, Shérazade, que je ne veux pas que tu sois malheureuse, que c’est important pour moi que tu viennes ici même si tu ne restes pas, que c’est avec toi que j’existe...que je t’aime Shérazade” (Shérazade 178). His declaration of love is especially odd given that he and Shérazade have never even spent an entire day together, suggesting the fact that it is not love that Julien feels, but rather obsession (Shérazade 188). Interestingly, the first day they subsequently spend together is at the Louvre, where Shérazade wants to see Delacroix’s Femmes d’Alger. While at the museum, Julien teaches Shérazade about other Orientalist paintings, particularly the odalisques of Matisse. Shérazade, hearing the word odalisque for the first time, is surprised by
their appearance, and asks “C’est toujours des femmes nues?” (Shérazade 189). In tutorial fashion, Julien responds:

Elles sont toujours allongées, alanguies, le regard vague, presque endormies... Elles évoquent pour les peintres de l’Occident la nonchalance, la lascivité, la séduction perverse des femmes orientales. On les a appelées Odalisques dans l’art du siècle dernier en oubliant que l’odalisque, dans l’empire Ottoman, l’empire turc, était simplement une servante, une esclave au service des femmes du harem royal. (Shérazade 190)

Through Julien’s response, Sebbar exposes Orientalist clichés of the vapid, languid, supine Oriental woman. The fact that he comments on the true definition of odalisque is also noteworthy in this passage since it removes the glamour and fantasy that has been associated with the word for the last century. Regardless of the definition, Shérazade abhors the idea that Julien perceives her as an odalique, so she leaves him a note to set the record straight: “Je ne suis pas une odalisque” (Shérazade 206). The more Julien becomes obsessed with Shérazade, the more she feels compelled to distinguish herself from the painted harem slaves. Calling from a telephone booth in Beaubourg, Shérazade announces her imminent departure to Julien: “Je m’en vais. Tu as bien entendu. Je pars.” (Shérazade 231). When Julien learns that Shérazade is leaving for Algeria, he wants to tag along, announcing “C’est avec toi que j’ai envie d’aller là-bas. [. . .] Si tu veux,
on part tout de suite. Je largue tout, je pars avec toi. On va à Orly on prend l’avion. Tu veux? Shérazade?” (Shérazade 232). Shérazade emphatically retorts, “Je veux aller en Algérie seule, SEULE, tu entends?” (Shérazade 232). She is intent on breaking free from any situation that keeps her from finding herself, and her heritage, in Algeria. Most surprisingly, however, Shérazade consummates her relationship with Julien that night and declares her love for him. After her departure for Algeria via Marseilles, Julien finds three examples of proof of her love for him. On a piece of paper left under his pillow, on the bathroom mirror in her lipstick and on the bay window in white paint, she writes: “Je t’aime. S.” (Shérazade 236). Nonetheless, Shérazade’s departure is definitive, as is her need to save herself from a man who usurps her identity. She slams the door behind her and leaves the keys inside (Shérazade 236). This symbolic gesture implies that she has no plan to return to Paris, or to Julien.

Shérazade’s final stop before leaving Paris is at the Centre Pompidou in Beaubourg, where she hides in the women’s lavatory and spends the night. In the morning, before opening time, she ambles through the museum, taking notes in her red notebook. Not surprisingly, the paintings to which Shérazade pays the most attention all share a common denominator: they are all “portraits de femmes dans des positions, des attitudes
différentes mais presque toujours allongées sur un sofa ou assises avec un livre, brunes ou rousses, les yeux noirs ou verts” (Shérazade 243). What occurs next surprises even Shérazade. After observing what she thought were all of the odalisques, she walks directly to Matisse’s Odalisque à la culotte rouge, shocked that she had never noticed it before. Shérazade is moved by the painting, but she doesn’t understand why (Shérazade 245). Although captivated by the odalisque, it is essential to note that Shérazade does not find her beautiful. At last, Shérazade finally understands that the odalisque is what Alev Lytle Croutier dubs “the image of total submission, stupor, and surrender” (Croutier 202). Shérazade notices that the woman depicted in Matisse’s painting is an object whose body, clothing and surroundings are exaggerated; she is a caricature. For example, the reclined position of the odalisque gives her the appearance of a rather grotesque double chin. Furthermore, she is overly adorned in brocade and pearls, which emphasizes her status as both a decorated object and a decorative object. Although covered in rich materials, the odalisque is simultaneously denuded; her breasts are exposed, as is her navel34. Matisse’s painting is

34 In “Orientalism: from unveiling to hyperveiling,” Neil Macmaster and Toni Lewis describe classic Orientalism as “erotic images of unveiling or what might be termed the ‘Scheherazade syndrome’” (122). The depiction of Matisse’s Odalisque à la culotte rouge, for example, is a mere fiction; it is nothing more than “a projection of European masculine fantasies,
a prime example of the “Scheherazade syndrome” (Macmaster and Lewis 122). In addition, the vibrant colors and busy decorations around her further exemplify the feigned authenticity of Matisse’s painting. For Rafika Merini, the preponderance of red is paramount to the message Matisse conveys in the painting:

More than the woman’s face or the rest of her body, it is the bright red pants shining against a deep red background that occupy the front of the scene as if to say that the woman’s soul is to be found behind these pants whose protuberance she is lasciviously contemplating (Merini 123).

In Harem: The World Behind the Veil, Alev Lytle Croutier reveals that Matisse’s “artistic harem deviated from actuality,” thus indicating the inauthentic nature of his paintings (196). In his own words, even Matisse admitted to the hyperbolic dimension of his odalisques, such as “the array of hangings and rugs, the rich costumes, the sensuality of heavy, drowsy bodies, the blissful torpor in the eyes lying in wait for pleasure” (Croutier 198). In Scheherazade Goes West, Fatima Mernissi gives further proof that Matisse’s odalisques were far from realistic. She notes that L’Odalisque à la
culotte rouge was finished in 1921, which is an important date in Muslim history “as it is the year when women’s liberation occurred in Turkey, as part of a nationalist struggle for liberation” (Scheherazade Goes West 109). For Sebbar’s Shérazade, however, there is nothing blissful about L’Odalisque à la culotte rouge. Contrary to Matisse’s rendering of a passive odalisque, Shérazade is compelled to be active instead. As if driven by the sight of the odalisque’s exposed navel, symbol of both sexuality and memory, Shérazade decides to act on her decision to go to Algeria: “Shérazade ira en Algérie. Elle n’hésite plus. Elle partira dès ce soir avec Pierrot s’il va à Orléans, sans Pierrot s’il reste à Paris” (Shérazade 245-46). Before leaving the museum, Shérazade buys ten postcard reproductions of L’Odalisque à la culotte rouge which she uses as though they were change-of-address cards. Shérazade adopts the odalisque in red trousers as a symbol of both her rebellion and her identity quest.

35 The association of Arab women and passivity it not just apparent in Orientalist paintings of odalisques. According to Edward Said in Orientalism, the Orient itself was generally viewed by the West as passive as well as feminine. In the same vein, in Politique des sexes (1998), Sylviane Agacinski speaks of Sigmund Freud, who, “comme tant d’autres en Occident, associe toujours aveuglément l’actif au masculin et le passif au féminin” (24) [author’s italics].

36 The way in which Shérazade identifies with L’Odalisque à la culotte rouge is not accidental. In addition to her emotional understanding of the way the odalisque is exoticized and captured, the color red is also another key element that links her to the woman in the painting. Aside from the green of her eyes, red is the color that most characterizes Shérazade. She wears red lipstick, carries a red notebook,
She immediately sends one to her sister Mériem, announcing: “Je quitte Paris ce soir. Dis qu’on ne me cherche pas. Je pars en Algérie. Je vais très bien. J’enverrai des nouvelles” (Shérazade 247). Having no time to see them before her imminent departure, Shérazade also leaves a postcard behind for Zouzou and France, on which she writes “C’est à cause d’elle que je m’en vais” (Shérazade 252). Shérazade’s request to Mériem that people not search for her, coupled with her symbolic message to Zouzou and France, reinforces her quest to be free of constraint; to avoid being seized or made to submit in a Matissian fashion.

Although the reader expects to find Shérazade in Algeria at the outset of Les Carnets de Shérazade, the second novel in Sebbar’s trilogy of novels, she is not. In fact, Shérazade only made it as far as Marseille after Pierrot died in the car explosion in which they were involved at the end of the first novel. Les Carnets de Shérazade, as the title suggests, relates to journaling and storytelling. Unlike Les Mille et
Une Nuits, which constitutes a sequence of nights, Les Carnets de Shérazade is based on days. The novel is divided into chapters named after the days of the week. We meet Shérazade on Monday and learn that she is hitchhiking throughout France. She is found sleeping in the front seat of a semi driven by a trucker named Gilles, who is dumbfounded as to how to handle the situation. Assuming that she is a hitchhiker and an allumeuse, his thoughts are immediately sexual in nature. Obviously tempted by the sight of a young girl asleep in his truck, Gilles is quick to realize that he could end up in jail for attempted rape for touching her. He immediately takes a misogynist viewpoint wherein the woman is inculpated for a man’s advance. Additionally, Gilles prejudges Shérazade based on her appearance:

Gilles remarque le jean sale, poussiéreux, taché; elle devait dormir avec, vivre nuit et jour dans le même jean crasseux; elle ne l’avait peut-être pas enlevé depuis des semaines. Gilles pensa à la culotte. Est-ce qu’elle la changeait quand même? La saleté du jean l’obligeait à imaginer la culotte. (Les Carnets 14)

Once again, we see that Gilles’s thoughts wander when he looks at the sleeping Shérazade. After noticing her dirty jeans, he instantly wonders if her underwear is dirty as well. He states that the dirtiness of her jeans “obligated” him to imagine her underwear, in an attempt to excuse or justify his
inappropriate thoughts. Although Shérazade is a wanderer, likely unable to shower or do laundry on a regular basis, one must not ignore the possibility that her unkempt appearance is intentional. Clearly a streetsmart young girl, perhaps Shérazade makes herself look undesirable as a means of protecting herself from lascivious advances and/or sexual assault.

As soon as Gilles takes her black and red notebook and begins to read it, Shérazade wakes up and reacts violently, “Elle hurle, à genoux sur le siège, le carnet serré contre sa chemise kaki sale. Elle le traite de voleur, de voyeur…” (Les Carnets 18). When Gilles asks “Pourquoi pas violeur?” she is quick to respond, “Oui, justement, j’allais le dire, c’est pareil…” (Les Carnets 18). Sebbar’s use of the three similar-sounding nouns, differing by only one sound, serves to reinforce the similarity Shérazade perceives between them. Based on the aforementioned scene, being raped, being robbed and being spied on are all the same to Shérazade. Returning to the multiple definitions of “rape” at the beginning of this chapter, all three acts invade her personal space and seize a piece of her physical body or her identity.

Although displeased with Gilles’s actions, Shérazade effectively has nowhere else to go. Having missed the boat to Algiers, she asks Gilles to allow her to travel with him in
exchange for her storytelling: “Elle lui raconterait des histoires chaque fois qu’il s’ennuierait ou pour empêcher de s’endormir. Il verrait. Il ne pourrait plus se passer d’elle. C’est lui qui réclamerait la suite chaque fois qu’elle cesserait de parler. Il verrait…” (Les Carnets 19).

It is interesting to note that Sebbar does not resuscitate the association between Shérazade’s name and her legendary storyteller namesake until this second novel. In Shérazade: dix-sept ans, brune, frisée, le yeux verts, the author targeted and then debunked other people’s Orientalist perceptions of Shérazade. In Les Carnets de Shérazade, Shérazade begins to claim parts of her onomastic heritage. She treats Gilles as if her were a modern-day Schahriar, baiting him with her promise of tales. Unlike Scheherazade’s situation with Schahriar, however, Sebbar’s Shérazade does her storytelling during the day, to keep Gilles awake while he drives. To her surprise, he takes her up on the offer, and Shérazade’s quest to retrace the path of “la Marche des Beurs” commences (Les Carnets 21).37 Sebbar’s heroine is a

37 “La Marche des Beurs” was a march of second-generation Maghrebian immigrants which began in Marseille, passing through Lyon, Strasbourg and Lille. During the march, which culminated in Paris on December 3, 1983, approximately 100,000 demonstrators demanded equality, citizenship, justice, and cultural recognition. (http://www.mrap.asso.fr/article.php3?id_article=628). In Nomadic Voices of Exile: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb (1999), Valérie Orlando elaborates on the importance of the Beur March, stating that “[t]he Beurs’ pilgrimage was one of their first organized
contemporary Scheherazade who has a political agenda which involves reenfranchising second-generation Algerian immigrants in France.

At Chez Lucienne in Carpentras, where Gilles plans to spend the night at his usual stopover, Shérazade meets his friends Roland, Jeannot and Gérard. The three men instantaneously assume that Gilles is having his way with the young girl. They are utterly confused to learn that he is not, and thus want to take their turns raping her. Roland even ordered extra crêpes for Shérazade “pour la voir croquer les crêpes sucrées roulées en cigares” (Les Carnets 31). His attention to the manner in which she eats the phallic food is perverted, as is his scheme to order alcohol and then follow Shérazade out into the parking lot to accost her when she goes to get her bag for the night. Furthermore, Jeannot begins to question Gilles about Shérazade, wondering why he doesn’t literally take “tit for tat;” as though sexual favors should be exchanged for transportation. Jeannot denigrates Gilles, making it seem as though a man who does not take advantage of a young girl in such a situation is dévirilisé: “Je l’aurais déjà sautée ou alors je serais plus un homme” (Les Carnets 34). Moreover, Jeannot twists the situation in such a way as

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movements and definitively solidified their identity, creating what is now known as the Beur Nation” (171).
to justify a sexual advance on the beautiful Shérazade when he declares: “[e]lle sait ce qu’elle risque non, quand elle arrête des mecs qu’elle ne connaît pas et qu’elle roule la nuit avec eux? Tu as vu ses yeux?” (Les Carnets 34). By insinuating that she is asking for it in the first place by hitchhiking at night, Jeannot essentially perpetuates the misogynist view that Shérazade is nothing more than a cheap little slut who deserves what she gets. He is quite blunt when discussing his plans for Shérazade. Overcome by her sensuality, Jeannot wants to have her, even if it means raping the “fille sensuelle” while she is asleep (Les Carnets 35).

Neither Jeannot nor his companions can understand why Gilles has not and will not take advantage of the young Shérazade. They assume that he must be unmanly for passing up on the chance to sleep with her, but they are unaware of the fact that Shérazade has already made a deal with Gilles, one which protects her from physical and sexual harm. Jeannot feels entitled to sex with Shérazade as though she were common property, saying to Gilles, “[j]’ai autant de droits que toi, je peux faire ce que je veux, tu es pas son père, ni son frère, ni son mari, même pas un copain...” (Les Carnets 35).

What the other truckers do not realize is that he has already begun an intellectual and political relationship with his storytelling companion. Like the Scheherazade of Les Mille et
Une Nuits, she succeeds in shifting the focus away from her physical body. By using her intelligence and her creativity, Shérazade effectively preempts rape by the truckers. Shérazade quickly won the respect of Gilles, who, in turn, thwarted the efforts of others to take advantage of her.

By Wednesday, Shérazade comes into contact with someone else who wants to exploit her, but this time, it is a woman. Clara, the director of a modeling agency, offers Shérazade what seems to be an idyllic life as a model. She exclaims, “Shérazade! Shérazade! Tu auras une vie de princesse des Mille et Une Nuits! Viens avec moi… je reviendrai te chercher, demain ou après-demain. Attends-moi” (Les Carnets 111). Clara clearly subscribes to the Orientalist myth that the Scheherazade of Les Mille et Une Nuits had a charming and carefree life as a princess since she was the sultan’s wife. Like many, Clara fails to recognize the danger and daily threat of death that Scheherazade endured and subsequently overcame. Shérazade is wise enough to see through Clara’s promises, and, even after refusing her once, Clara begged, “Clara m’a suppliée, elle m’a promis beaucoup d’argent, un appartement à Paris, tout ce que je voulais. J’ai dit non. Elle est partie en me disant que je le regretterais un jour, que j’étais une sotte” (Les Carnets 111). While Clara presented Shérazade with no threat of physical harm, the
latter was wise enough to recognize the way in which Clara wanted to profit from her and make her look “French.” For Shérazade, the stripping of her Algerian heritage and the exploitation of her physical body are not worth compromising for money or luxury; they are forms of rape.

After seven days of traveling together, Gilles comes to know and understand some aspects of Shérazade’s personality. Based on her stories and her body language, he deduces that she loves no one. Most likely as a defense mechanism, the young runaway does not allow anyone to get too close to her, lest they take advantage or distract her from her path. In Nomadic Voices of Exile, Valérie Orlando comments on the way in which Shérazade stays in control of her situation. Although I have previously referred to Shérazade as a runaway, echoing a denomination her creator Sebbar also employs, Orlando argues that she does not fit the stereotype as she is in charge of her own destiny and writes her own story: “[s]he is not a fugueuse—a runaway—as the French media so enjoy depicting young Maghrebian women” (171). In doing so, Shérazade “is breaking the Western stereotype of delinquency and truancy that has plagued the Beur children” (Orlando 171).

As Les Carnets de Shérazade comes to an end, so does Shérazade’s journey with Gilles. At last he understands why she proposed to tell him stories: “tu as dit que tu me
raconterais des histoires et c’est vrai, tu m’en as raconté comme Schéhérazade, pour m’empêcher de te tuer, de te violer? Peut-être bien après tout...” (Les Carnets 280). In “Narrative Strategies and Postcolonial Identity in Contemporary France: Leïla Sebbar’s Les Carnets de Shérazade,” Françoise Lionnet surmises that “Shérazade is a storyteller and a narrator who exchanges words for the possibility of going on” (74). Like the Schéhérazade of Les Mille et Une Nuits, Sebbar’s Shérazade makes use of her intellect rather than her beauty to overcome adversity. She manages to escape abuse of her body and her heritage; a heritage she takes steps to reclaim while tracing the path of the Beur March during her travels with Gilles.

Shérazade’s physical body becomes the target of sexual violence yet again in Le Fou de Shérazade. In this third installment of Sebbar’s trilogy, Julien is busy preparing the set for his neo-Orientalist film, for which he wants Shérazade to be the green-eyed star. He even imports an olive tree from Algeria and transplants it in the Parisian HLM, thereby making a contrived movie set not unlike Matisse had done with his odalisques. Still wondering why her daughter ran away, Shérazade’s mother visits the movie set and laments her daughter’s disappearance. Her only explanation for Shérazade’s flight is the evil eye: “La mère a fini par penser que les yeux verts de Shérazade et les paroles des voisines
lui ont porté malheur. Elle croit au mauvais œil” (Le Fou 79-80). It is possible to interpret what is meant by the evil eye in this instance. In his Dictionnaire des symboles musulmans (1995), Malek Chebel, the “mauvais œil est l’une des armes employées par la cohorte des envieux et des jaloux” (304). Chebel adds that the evil eye “est sanctionné par des échecs, des avortements, des blessures, parfois la maladie et la mort” (Dictionnaire 262).38

We do not meet Shérazade in Paris, or in France, for that matter. At the outset of Le Fou de Shérazade, Shérazade is in Lebanon. While in Beirut, Shérazade is mistaken for a spy, captured by militants and abused by them: “Le chef la gifle. L’un des hommes la fouille. Elle doit baisser son jean, il tâte son ventre, ses fesses. Elle soulève son tee-shirt, il touche ses seins sous le soutien-gorge” (Le Fou 22). In this instance, not even Shérazade is able to escape being strip-searched by the rebels. Nonetheless, she emerges from the scene seemingly unscathed.

38 Belief in the evil eye is a common cultural practice throughout North Africa and the Mediterranean. In Italy, Greece and Turkey, blue glass amulets in the form of an eye are worn and/or placed in the home to ward off the evil eye. Malek Chebel presents other methods for dispelling the evil eye, such as hanging bones on the property, planting fans in the fields and nailing horseshoes over doorways (Dictionnaire 263). However, if such passive measures are unsuccessful, Chebel states that “on a toujours le moyen de recourir à des défenses actives, soit orales” (Dictionnaire 263). In the case of Shérazade, it is clearly her active, oral defense that saves her from harm time and time again.
In Beirut, Shérazade is taken hostage, sent to a jail and tortured. Laurence Huughe describes two forms of rape which Shérazade must overcome:

Lors de son séjour au Liban, Shérazade est en effet prise en otage et, sous la menace des armes, elle est obligée d’accepter de se faire photographier par ses geôliers qui projettent d’envoyer son portrait aux médias internationaux. La séance de photographie forcée suit immédiatement une scène de tentative de viol dont est victime la prisonnière comme s’il s’agissait d’établir un parallèle entre ces deux actes de violence qui atteignent la jeune fille au plus profond de son intimité. La séance de photographie que l’on fait subir journellement à la jeune fille comme une sorte de torture, évoque dès lors une autre torture qui serait celle du viol à répétition. (115)

While Shérazade is unable to escape these acts of violence, she does fight back, both with words and with violence. Even when forcibly kissed by one of her jailers, she bites him until he bleeds (Le Fou 101). Shérazade is finally freed when the rebels need her cell for someone else. Although Shérazade did not manage to escape on her own, Sebbar makes an important point regarding the reason that Shérazade was freed.

When Le Fou de Shérazade comes to an end, Shérazade is playing the role of an Israeli Jew in Julien’s film. By this point, it is clear that the character to whom Sebbar refers in the novel’s title is Julien, who is still obsessed with Shérazade. However, once again, Shérazade manages to get
away. When the filmmaker, not Julien, decides to blow up the scene in which the last shots are being filmed, Shérazade succeeds once again in being the anti-odalisque. While Shérazade and the other women who “s’allongent à demi” speak, smoke and drink tea from expensive cups, bombs explode on the scene, making it appear that all have been killed (Le Fou 202). The only thing truly killed, however, is Julien’s pseudo-harem scene. As Shérazade’s sister Mériem declares to her worried mother, “Shérazade n’est pas morte. C’est le film... Ta fille est vivante...” (Le Fou 203). Indeed, Shérazade is alive and well, an “odalisque évadée” (Le Fou 202).

**Shérazade in her Motherland**

Laurence Huughe asserts that Shérazade’s “voyage en Algérie, toujours reporté, ne se fera jamais” (134). However, after writing her trilogy of novels, Sebbar also published four short stories in which Shérazade appears. In “Shérazade à Algiers,” she finally makes it to her family’s homeland. Although only two and a half pages long, “Shérazade à Algiers” affirms the title character’s arrival in Algeria. It also demonstrates how, once more, Shérazade manages to escape bodily harm.
It is not until “Shérazade à Julien” (1997), Shérazade’s first of two letters to Julien, that we learn more about her feelings for the latter. Although the letter is not addressed from a specific place, simply “D’une colline plantée d’oliviers,” it is clear that Shérazade is in Algeria since she adds: “C’est du pays de ma mère que je t’écris” (“Shérazade à Julien” [1997] 44). Although she repeats “Je suis dans le pays de ma mère,” Shérazade refuses to name the country. Instead, she infers, “Tu sais de quel pays je parle. Je ne peux pas le nommer” (“Shérazade à Julien” [1997] 45). Still unsure as to whether or not her mother’s land is her motherland, Shérazade hesitates. Although imminently threatened by the arrival of guerrilla soldiers, whom she says may be coming “pour me tuer ou me mutiler,” Shérazade finds strength and solace in writing to Julien (“Shérazade à Julien” [1997] 45). While their relationship was ambiguous in France, Shérazade finally refers to Julien as “mon bien-aimé” as she writes to him from Algeria (“Shérazade à Julien” [1997] 45).

In her third Shérazade short story, “Nous sommes tous les petits-enfants des tirailleurs et de Shahrâzâd” (1998), Sebbar offers a brief summary of Shérazade’s wanderings since the end of the trilogy and an update on some of the characters with whom Shérazade squatted in the first novel. Shérazade’s continual movement is evidenced by the phrase “elle ne retient
It is not until Shérazade’s second letter to Julien, also entitled “Shérazade à Julien” (2003), that she finally stops running. Shérazade repeatedly escapes either obsessed or perverted men who eroticize her and try to capture her in photographs, in bed or in prison. As Laurence Huughe explains, “[l]a constante mobilité du personnage lui permet donc d’échapper à tout assujettissement, que ce soit celui de la police, de l’amant, ou de l’image” (130). By this last short story, she no longer feels the urgent need to escape. In her letter, Shérazade recounts how Julien always expected her to be at his disposal:


Contrary to his expectations, Shérazade is not at Julien’s beck and call; she makes it a point to tell him, “Je suis en Algérie, sans toi” (“Shérazade à Julien” [2003] 170). It is not until she makes the decision to stay there definitively that Shérazade finally invites Julien to join her. This time,
if their union is to occur, it will clearly be on Shérazade’s terms. She is no longer framed within the counterfeit Arabicized setting of Julien’s studio apartment where he views and photographs her through his Orientalist lens, nor is she on the set of his movie. In the shockingly real setting of the Algerian countryside after a devastating earthquake, Shérazade invites, or perhaps even dares, Julien to join her beneath the refugees’ tents. Although Shérazade neither returns to her biological mother in France, nor gives birth to any children of her own flesh, she symbolically becomes a maternal figure to the homeless and motherless girls in the Algerian refugee camps: “Pour les garçons découverts, pister les filles c’est un jeu, pour elles, non. J’avais, autour de moi, des petites filles qui cherchaient un pli de la jupe de leur mère, elle se collaient à mes jambes, je sentais les petites mains chaudes contre le jean” (“Shérazade à Julien” [2003] 171). Having finally escaped physical and psychological rape, Shérazade makes it her duty to protect the orphans from those same dangers in the geographical space that is their collective cultural motherland: Algeria.

During the course of Sebbar’s three novels and four short stories, Shérazade evolves into a young woman with an increasingly political agenda. Throughout the seven works, Shérazade struggles with sexual and cultural stereotypes based
on her cultural heritage and her physical appearance. By means of disguise, both literal and figurative, she manages to escape Paris and begin her journey of self-discovery. Thanks to her stellar wit and storytelling ability, she navigates her way first through France, then to Lebanon and finally to Algeria. By juxtaposing contemporary politics and criticism of Orientalist paintings and ideology, Sebbar presents a culturally diverse postmodern female heroine who escapes rape and objectification and ultimately finds herself in her motherland.
CHAPTER IV

Orphans and Orifices in Le Nombril de Scheherazade

Emphasis on redefining sexuality is once again an integral theme in Pierre Karch’s 1998 rewriting of Scheherazade, aptly entitled Le Nombril de Scheherazade. Karch, a Franco-Ontarian author and French professor, clearly draws inspiration from Les Mille et Une Nuits in this novel-cum-murder mystery in which he exaggerates and exploits the Scheherazade of Les Mille et Une Nuits. Neither French nor Québécois, Karch belongs to a French-speaking Canadian minority in Ontario. His work can be considered migrant literature in the sense that it involves cultural diversity and a certain degree of nomadism, like the works of Monique Proulx and Régine Robin. Karch’s work can also be construed as border writing because the author must negotiate geographical, cultural, political and linguistic borders that are neither distinctly French, nor Canadian, nor American. In an article on Régine Robin’s 1983 La Québécoite, Claudine Potvin sheds more light the term border writing, or “écriture
According to Potvin, “[l]a fragmentation de l’ordre culturel, linguistique et politique [. . .] caractérise l’écriture frontalière et accentue les différences entre les codes référentiels de deux ou plusieurs cultures au lieu de les effacer” (269).

Through his rewriting of Scheherazade, Karch reevaluates the problem of colonial exploitation in a North American context. Although Karch’s novel is Francophone literature, it differs greatly from the novels and short stories of Sebbar addressed in the previous chapter. *Le Nombril de Scheherazade* is rather postmodern in the sense that it contains a great deal of parody and caricature, particularly regarding Scheherazade’s obfuscated gender. Karch’s use of an epigraph in which he cites Jean Baudrillard’s *Le paroxyste indifférent* gives further insight into how gender roles are represented in *Le Nombril de Scheherazade*:

> Jusqu’à la sexualité, qui flotte aujourd’hui dans une drôle de dimension interstitielle, ni masculin, ni féminin, mais quelque chose entre les deux [. . .]. Plus de définition sexuelle, donc plus de différence sexuelle à proprement parler. Le principe d’incertitude est au cœur même de la vie sexuelle comme de tous les systèmes de valeurs. (Karch 7)

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39 Potvin adapts the terms “écriture de frontière” or “écriture frontalière” from border writing, a concept developed by D. Emily Hicks regarding Latin American literature in *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (1991).
This epigraph sets the tone for a novel in which Karch questions not only the concept of human sexuality, but that of Scheherazade in particular. The protagonist of *Le Nombril de Scheherazade* is a woman named Sam who moonlights as a transvestite storyteller with the stage name Scheherazade at the Oasis, a nightclub at a Bahamian resort. One cannot ignore the fact that the name Sam is androgynous, thereby challenging gender limitations from the start of the novel. Additionally, Sam is a distinctly Anglophone appellation. Although a nickname for both the masculine Samuel and the feminine Samantha, this Sam is neither; she is instead a recolonized, (North) Americanized Scheherazade.

**Parody and Postmodernism**

Throughout *Le Nombril de Scheherazade*, Karch distorts and reinvents the Scheherazade of *Les Mille et Une Nuits* by way of irony, travesty and parody. In *The Politics of Postmodernism* (2002), Linda Hutcheon argues that parody is “considered central to postmodernism,” and that it is “often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality” (89). The mere fact that there is no clear-cut distinction between parody, irony, pastiche and intertextuality demonstrates the hybrid, postmodern nature of parody for Hutcheon. Based on
his copious use of sexual and textual parody, I consider Karch’s novel to be a work of postmodern literature in which he recycles not only excerpts, but also the main character of Les Mille et Une Nuits. In light of Karch’s literary borrowings, it is important to note Hutcheon’s assertion that the “parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always critical” (Politics 89). However, Hutcheon argues that parody is a form of ambiguous and ironic representation which “is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (Politics 97). In A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms (2000, 1985), Hutcheon specifies that this “[i]ronic inversion is characteristic of all parody” (6). In the case of Le Nombril de Scheherazade, the ironic inversion is clearly that of Scheherazade’s sexuality. Sam/Scheherazade is often more asexual than she is sexual. By simultaneously problematizing the title character’s sexuality to the point of excess, Karch forces the reader to reexamine Orientalist stereotypes of her ultra-feminine beauty and passivity.

The parodic, hyperbolic setting is also paramount in Karch’s recent Francophone rewritings of Scheherazade. Although it is officially set on the island of Treasure Cay in the Bahamas, the expression “un décor oriental de pacotille,” taken from Abdelkebir Khatibi’s critical essay De la mille et
troisième nuit, more accurately describes the setting of Le Nombril de Scheherazade (Khatibi 21). For Khatibi, there is no need to perpetuate exaggerated depictions of Scheherazade:

nul besoin d’imaginer Shéhérazade comme un corps réel tatoué de perles et de parfums enivrants dans un harem de paradis où dansent et partouzent les princes (les principes), les concubines et les esclaves en un coût sériel, nul besoin de reconstruire cet Orient de pacotille [. . .]. (Khatibi 3)

Karch, on the other hand, chooses to situate his Scheherazade within a caricaturized setting. Depravation and emotional disinterest, as opposed to the heaviness and languor of Delacroix’s Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement, abound in the opening paragraph of Karch’s novel:

La soirée à l’Oasis tirait à sa fin. Certains auraient dit: «s’étirait en longueur». A peu d’exceptions près, les mêmes visages que la veille sirotaient des boissons, dont les glaçons fondaient plus vite que leur ennui, en écoutant une mélodie d’amour à fleur de peau dans un décor fané. (Karch 7)

The name of the nightclub itself, “l’Oasis,” connotes a lush area within a Middle Eastern desert. Furthermore, the description in which the same lackadaisical people sip drinks in a faded décor is very reminiscent of Orientalist depictions of passive odalisques in harems. This evening in particular, however, Sam, the hotel entertainer, “avait du mal à entrer
dans la peau de la conteuse Scheherazade. Debout derrière les rideaux, elle attendait que le spot et le piano l’invitait à monter sur la petite scène du club de l’hôtel de Las Palmas” (Karch 8). Not only does the club in which Sam works have an exotic name, but so does the hotel in which the club is housed. “Las Palmas,” Spanish for The Palms, augments the already hedonistic tone set by the author. The expression “entrer dans la peau de la conteuse Scheherazade” further emphasizes both the physical and sexual extent to which Sam assumes the role of Scheherazade. In the following passage, in which the Orient is evoked in song, the metamorphosis from Sam to Scheherazade is clearly demarcated:

Les lumières s’éteignirent. Il se fit un silence relatif que le pianiste chassa en tapant quelques notes qui le méritaient bien, mais qui s’en plaignirent. C’était le début d’«Ali Ben Baba,» une chanson vaguement arabe, tout juste assez pour donner le ton. L’unique projecteur éclaira la scène. Sam écarta elle-même les rideaux. On l’applaudit sans conviction. Scheherazade monta sur le plateau et leva lentement les bras, ses mains battant l’air comme un moulinet de crécelle, jusqu’à ce qu’ils fussent au-dessus de sa tête. (Karch 8)

The song “Ali Ben Baba” played on the piano vaguely lends a hint of the Orient to the setting, with a title that resembles “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” a tale often, but not exclusively, attributed to Scheherazade and The Arabian Nights. Karch’s use of the name “Ali Ben Baba” rather than
simply “Ali Baba” is also noteworthy as it further exoticizes and hybridizes the setting by making use of the common Arabic name particle “Ben,” meaning “son of.” In this makeshift imitation of the Orient, it is Sam who, without the help of a stagehand, opens the curtains herself. It is Scheherazade, her alter-ego, however, who walks on stage and gesticulates much like a belly dancer. Preoccupied by her own unclear family history, and the possibility that she may, in fact, have a sister, Scheherazade begins telling the story of two sisters. Karch’s Scheherazade thus echos the Scheherazade of Les Mille et Une Nuits and her sister Dinarzade, both by the fact that his Scheherazade hints at having a sister, and because the story she begins to tell is that of two sisters.40 The storytelling séance is suddenly interrupted, and the subject pronoun bounces back to “Sam,” which occurs when Scheherazade’s storytelling train of thought is interrupted by the appearance of Jacopo Santorini:

Sam n’arrivait pas à terminer sa phrase. C’est lui! se dit-elle. Pour se donner le temps de se ressaisir, elle annonça que, voyant apparaître le matin, Scheherazade, discrète, devait se taire, mais qu’elle reprendrait son récit là où elle l’avait laissé, dès

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40 Ironically, Sam’s situation is the opposite of the sultana of Les Mille et Une Nuits. While Scheherazade had a younger sister, Sam is wondering about the possibility of having an older sister. This provides yet another example of how Karch ironically inverts his rewriting of Scheherazade.
qu’il ferait nuit de nouveau, soit dans un quart d’heure ou peu s’en fallait. (Karch 21)

In a comically exaggerated fashion, Sam manipulates her public and jumps back out of character so as to buy herself a pause in the story, just as the Scheherazade of Les Mille et Une Nuits did at the dawn of each new day. She is distracted not only by “des doutes sur les liens de parenté qui l’unissaient à Aude, dont la mère avait tout récemment révélé l’existence probable d’une soeur cadette, d’un an plus jeune qu’elle,” but also by “l’homme à la moustache fine qu’elle venait d’apercevoir” (Karch 21).41 The aforementioned man, Jacopo Santorini, is an antiques dealer from Toronto “dont la boutique, qu’elle avait visitée deux années plus tôt, portait le nom prometteur d’Atlantis” (Karch 21). The exoticism inherent in an antiques store called Atlantis is noteworthy, as it further lures the reader into a mysterious and exceptional realm, much like the Orientalist art and literature discussed in the previous chapter. The exoticism multiplies exponentially when the link between Santorini, the Bahamas and Atlantis are investigated. Santorini, the surname of the antiques dealer, is clearly an Italian name, yet it is

41 The resemblance between the name Aude and aube (“dawn”) are worth noting here, as Scheherazade’s younger sister Dinarzade played an invaluable role in prompting her sister to cease her tale-telling each morning at dawn.
also the modern name of the Greek island in the Cyclades historically known as Thera (θῆρα).\(^{42}\) Scholars such as seismologist Angelos Galanopoulos have linked Santorini to the civilization of Atlantis described in Plato’s *Timaeus* (Mavor 18-33).\(^{43}\) Some theorists and archaeologists also postulate that the ancient mythic civilization is located on the sea floor off the coast of the Bahamas.\(^{44}\) By employing names such as Santorini and Atlantis in a novel set in the Bahamas, Karch succeeds in transporting the reader to a culturally diverse environment.\(^{45}\) Yet, the postmodern aspect of this setting is evidenced in this novel by the appearance of cheap décor, bad taste and overall exaggeration.

**Sexually Ambiguous Scheherazade**

\(^{42}\) Although it is known by both names, the name Thera is Greek in origin, while Santorini originates from the Italian name for the church of Saint Irene (Santa Irini) located on the island.

\(^{43}\) In *Bulfinch’s Mythology*, Atlantis is defined as “A mythic island of great extent which was supposed to have existed in the Atlantic Ocean. It is first mentioned by Plato (in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*), and Solon was told of it by an Egyptian priest, who said that it had been overwhelmed by an earthquake and sunk beneath the sea 9000 years before his time” (Bulfinch 887-88).

\(^{44}\) Capitalizing on this theory, Kerzner International Resorts, Inc. opened a resort called Atlantis on Paradise Island, Bahamas. For more information and photographs of the archaeological excavations, visit www.atlantis.com.

\(^{45}\) Likewise, in *Vaste est la Prison*, Assia Djebar makes reference to Atlantis and also links the stele of Dougga to an ancient civilization.
With a quasi-Oriental backdrop in place for his novel, Karch also reinvents the sultana of Les Mille et Une Nuits in a most unique fashion by labeling her a transvestite, although in reality she is neither a true drag queen nor a drag king:46

Sam, qui se faisait passer dans sa vie d’artiste professionnelle pour un travesti, mais qui, comme le savait Aude, était en réalité bel et bien une femme, ce qui donnait de la profondeur à son personnage ambigu, celui de la conteuse libertine Scheherazade, aimait s’asseoir au bar de l’Oasis, échanger des banalités avec un client, de préférence une cliente, seule, qui ne serait pas mal à l’aise d’être vue avec un travesti portant un ample voile en soie parsemée de paillettes d’or et doublée de brocart,47 qui sans les spots et loin de la petite scène, avait l’air d’un monstre de nuit qu’attirent les éclairages discrets, tamisés par des rideaux de fumée. (Karch 26-27)

The sexual ambiguity of Karch’s Scheherazade is thus highlighted by both her unorthodox physical appearance and her

46 In Female Masculinity (1998), Judith Halberstam discusses female masculinity and drag kings and queens at length. For Halberstam, drag queens are more mainstream, and are construed as men performing femininity. Drag kings, on the other hand, are women who perform masculinity, although not necessarily lesbian roles, as is the case with drag butch (Halberstam 232). In the context of Le Nombril de Scheherazade, Sam/Scheherazade is neither a drag queen nor a drag king nor drag butch. Rather, she is a pseudo-transvestite who subverts the concept of gender altogether.

47 Note de l’auteur: Les passages en italiques, dans les contes et les conversations de Sam, sont empruntés à la traduction que Joseph Charles Mardrus fit des Mille et une nuits, parue chez Eugène Fasquelle, de 1899 à 1904 et reprise chez Laffont, en 1983, en 2 volumes. (Karch 11)
sexual orientation.\textsuperscript{48} She is not only a woman masquerading as a transvestite, but also a person who prefers to speak to women at the bar rather than men. In \textit{Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety} (1992), Marjorie Garber provides countless analyses of transvestism in both literature and film across the globe and across the centuries. Garber also makes the point that transvestites are not necessarily homosexual, nor are they always men, as is the case with Karch’s Scheherazade.\textsuperscript{49} The way Karch labels her “la conteuse libertine” also suggests that she is an excessive, amoral character (Karch 27). Karch’s direct citation of text from the Mardrus translation of \textit{Les Mille et Une Nuits} (in italics) is a form of pastiche which further serves to heighten the

\textsuperscript{48}In Karin Van Nieuwkerk’s book \textit{“A Trade Like Any Other”: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt} (1995), she discusses the distinction female entertainers make between masculine and feminine behavior. While they are heralded as ultra-feminine, and thus dangerous and seductive, the entertainers themselves, particularly those working in nightclubs, understand the inherent need for balance between masculine and feminine behavior. By definition, working “in a public place puts female entertainers in a male world” (Van Nieuwkerk 169). As such, they must adaptively behave. This includes the need to be “nice, pleasing, and feminine, yet at the same time tough, strong, and masculine” (Van Nieuwkerk 173).

\textsuperscript{49}In \textit{Vested Interests}, Garber also discusses two examples from the \textit{Arabian Nights} in which women cross-dress. In one instance, the woman “dresses herself in male clothing to protect her virtue and, taken for a man, is made king of the country” (Garber 321). The other example is quite similar, and both tales end with the disguised women seducing their lovers. Garber thus surmises that “the woman is in distress at the absence of her male lover, she acquires power through cross-dressing, but the result of that acquisition of power is to revalidate the man and the heterosexual experience” (322). On the contrary, in the context of Karch’s Scheherazade, cross-dressing is a form of empowerment which transcends gender boundaries.
sense of hyperbole in Karch’s text. It is thus apparent that this Scheherazade is not just a storyteller, but an exaggerated version of the storyteller of *Les Mille et Une Nuits* who challenges conventions and stereotypes. However, despite her preference for speaking to women at the bar, Scheherazade is not specifically a lesbian. As Judith Halberstam argues, drag performances “provide some lesbian performers (although all drag kings are by no means lesbians) with the rare opportunity to expose the artificiality of all genders and all sexual orientations and therefore to answer the charge of inauthenticity that is usually made only about lesbian identity” (240). In this case, one can argue that Sam/Scheherazade’s female masculinity “codifies a unique form of social rebellion” (Halberstam 9). In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990, 1999), Judith Butler suggests that “drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (174). As such, gender for Butler is an artificial cultural construct. Butler also argues that gender is performative, stating that the “notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities” (137). What remains problematic in
the analyses of both Halberstam and Butler’s work, however, is that Sam as Scheherazade is not simply cross-dressing. She is a woman pretending to be a man who cross-dresses as a woman. In essence, I view Sam’s performance as Scheherazade as a type of “double drag.” By providing such a lavish physical description of a transvestite Scheherazade in a large veil with golden paillettes and brocade, Karch parodies not only the Western myth of a highly decorated Scheherazade, but the ideology of feminine sexuality. In *Le Nombril de Scheherazade*, however, an edge exists to this decorated Scheherazade; in the darkness she also resembles a monster behind curtains of smoke. As such, Karch’s Scheherazade embodies some aspects of *fitna*, for she is also a sexual being to be feared; a potential *femme fatale*.

In her room, “une cellule de célibataire,” Scheherazade transforms back into Sam, who describes herself as grotesque: “Les grotesques comme moi, pensa-t-elle, amusent le public, comme les crapauds, les enfants, sauf que personne ne veut les toucher” (Karch 29). Sam’s autodescription is highly revealing, for she views herself as something of a circus

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50 For more information on “double drag,” particularly as it applies to the female sex-symbols Marlene Dietrich and Madonna, see Rebecca Kennison’s article “Clothes Make the (W)man: Marlene Dietrich and ‘Double Drag’” in *Femme/Butch: New Considerations of the Way We Want to Go* (147-56). In this article, Kennison discusses the way famous sex-symbols have reappropriated gay male drag and turned it into an haute couture performance of power.
attraction to be ogled but not touched. The author’s lengthy portrait of Sam as she examines herself in the mirror further exemplifies this carnavalesque quality in Mikhaïl Bakhtine’s sense since parody is “tout un système de miroirs déformants” (Sangsue 47). While literally looking in the mirror, Sam’s androgyny is caricatural. The descriptions of her boyish haircut, straight shoulders and hips and flat chest overemphasize the “style garçonne” of the 1920s. Even Sam admits that she could have mistaken her own gender. Her ambiguous sexuality and the fact that her body appears disfigured challenges Western stereotypes of Scheherazade, who is often mistaken for nothing more than an exotic, voiceless beauty or a sexual slave.

Moreover, her reflection in the mirror impels Sam to wash away the distorted image, and by the same token those of Aude and the mother who deserted her. The absence of a mother is yet another link between Sam and the Scheherazade of Les Mille et Une Nuits.

As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, there is no mention of Scheherazade’s mother in the framestory.

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51 For further information on the “style garçonne” or Flapper style, see http://www.fashion-era.com/flapper_fashion_1920s.htm.

52 “Elle se savonna vigoureusement pour que les bulles emportent Aude et la mère qu’elles avaient peut-être en commun, cette mère qu’elle jugeait, à l’heure présente, dénaturée parce qu’elle l’avait abandonnée à sa naissance” (Karch 29).
of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*. Scheherazade’s only family ties are to her father, the vizier, and to her younger sister and accomplice, Dinarzade. For Karch’s Scheherazade figure in *Le Nombril de Scheherazade*, her orphan status is clearly a source of discomfort, for she symbolically washes away feelings of the mother who abandoned her. It is worth noting that along with cleansing herself of Aude and her long-lost mother, Sam also leads herself to believe that she can rinse away the vestiges of Scheherazade as well: “Puis une fois couchée, elle se fit croire qu’il ne restait de Scheherazade qu’un parfum doux comme celui d’une fleur tropicale” (Karch 29). Once again returning to an exotic theme, Karch’s Scheherazade is linked to the sweet scent of a tropical flower. In *Idols of Perversity* (1986), Bram Dijkstra examines the nineteenth-century association of hypersexualized women with flowers. He writes that “[m]an began to realize that to surround himself with flowers was to surround himself with the temptation of woman’s orgiastic potential” and that “[w]oman as flower became a nightmare vision of woman as a palpitating mass of petals reaching for the male in order to encompass him” (Dijkstra 241). Although Sam is no longer in character, per se, Scheherazade is still clearly part of her being despite Sam’s ablutions. She opens her arms and legs like petals, awaiting the seduction of the dream state which will tell her
stories, not unlike her stage persona, Scheherazade the storyteller.

In Karch’s novel, Scheherazade is referred to as “la conteuse libertine” (Karch 27), and the stories she tells are “ses petits contes libertins” (Karch 43). The author’s repetition of the adjective “libertin(e)(s)” in reference to both Scheherazade and her tales thus emphasizes the exaggerated, licentious aspect of this legendary character. At The Oasis bar, Scheherazade perpetuates myths of the exotic, erotic Orient, yet with a slightly different twist. She leads her listeners on fascinating journeys where heroes cry at the feet of princesses who bestow caresses upon them. Thus the women of Scheherazade’s tales in Le Nombril de Scheherazade are somewhat empowered. Simultaneously, however, the sexuality of these women appears to be intoxicating, leaving doubts as to whether they are actually empowered, or simply acting as seductresses.

As if possessed by her stage persona, Sam develops an insatiable appetite for Scheherazade’s stories. She constantly reads the unexpurgated Mardrus volumes slowly, rationing them so as to prolong her pleasure:

les deux volumes qu’elle trimballait avec elle depuis un an pourraient lui durer deux autres années, après quoi elle s’attaquerait à d’autres versions de ces
contes fabuleux dont elle ne se fatiguait pas tant ils
sont multiples, leur variété tenant de l’imagination
interessable des Arabes, mais aussi de leurs traducteurs
qui surenchérissent en y mettant leur passion, leur
culture et leur sagesse que rajeunit le sens de l’humour
propre à chacun. (Karch 44-45)

While Sam is clearly fascinated with the myriad translations
and editions of the Arabian Nights, her perception appears to
be skewed, for she falls prey to the embellished and
scandalous translations of Mardrus that underscore sexuality
moreso than wit. This incongruity or ironic inversion further
lends a parodic tone to Karch’s rewriting of Scheherazade.
The parody resides not only in the exaggerated character of
Scheherazade, but also in the manner in which she reads the
Mardrus edition of Les Mille et Une Nuits. In addition, the
Scheherazade figure’s observation of the multiplicity of the
Arabian Nights texts acts as an overall commentary on the lack
of originality. There is not one original Arabian Nights
text, nor can we define the original Scheherazade, or find an
original gender; they are all cultural constructs.

It becomes increasingly clear during the course of
Karch’s novel that Sam prefers Scheherazade’s world, both
physically and psychologically, to her own. By inhabiting the
body of the legendary sultana, Sam feels more comfortable and
more desirable to the extent that her genderless body becomes
attractive. It is interesting to note the way her sultana
costume clings to her body, such that Sam has difficulty physically (and emotionally) stepping out of character: “Comme le costume de la sultane lui collait à la peau, elle s’en séparait toujours difficilement” (Karch 45). It appears that for her, the costume itself stages ambiguous sexual and cultural identities. Indeed, while Sam attempts to become Scheherazade, she is a mere false imitation, much like the fake jewel in her navel:

Et quand, à la fin elle retirait le faux brillant de son nombril, c’était, lui semblait-il malgré les applaudissements et le succès remporté, une écorchée vive qui se mettait sous la douche dont l’eau, toujours froide au début, l’attaquait à clous d’acier. (Karch 45)

The act of removing the fake jewel from her navel signifies a loss of power and sensuality for Sam, much as it did for the belly dancer Saida from whom a keepsake golden bullet/good-luck charm she wore in her navel was stolen in the 1974 James Bond film The Man with the Golden Gun. According to Malek Chebel, the navel is a symbol of both sensuality and memory (Encyclopédie 454). Additionally, the navel is regarded as the power center of the body in yogic tradition, also known as the third chakra. More specifically, the third chakra is called manipura in Sanskrit, which means “jewel city” (Fraser 27). For Sam, the navel, where she wears her jewel, is both a
sensual and mnemonic link to Scheherazade. Even after removing her costume, Sam continues to imagine herself as the sultana: "elle éteignit et sentit aussitôt, dans la noirceur, dix esclaves femelles et dix esclaves males aux joues trop tendres encore pour connaître les injures d’une barbe, souffler sur elle leur haleine chaude" (Karch 45). In the darkness of her shoddy room, Sam succeeds in inscribing herself in the milieu of Les Mille et Une Nuits. It is peculiar, however, that she should fail to insert herself either into a scene with Schahriar or within one of Scheherazade’s stories. Rather, Sam reverts to the infamous orgy scene of Schahriar’s first sultana, who is caught with ten male slaves and ten female slaves. The author’s choice of diction in the adjectives “mâles” and “femelles” objectifies and bestializes the slaves in the orgy. Additionally, one must not overlook the fact that in Sam’s commentary, the ten male slaves are not disguised as women as they were in Les Mille et Une Nuits. This forces the reader to further question Sam’s perception of gender. Regardless of her own gender or that of the twenty slaves she imagines with her, Sam sees her shower as a hammam in Baghdad, thereby increasing her self-identification with her stage persona: "Qu’il lui était
difficile de quitter le hammam de Bagdad, la Ville de paix!” (Karch 45).\textsuperscript{53}

Sam’s apparent fascination with Baghdad stands in stark contrast to her actual living conditions. The view from her first-floor window, which looks out over the toilets by the pool at Las Palmas, is described as “factice,” since the island is a facsimile of exotic luxury (Karch 46):

Une île tropicale «améliorée» avec ses palmiers royaux groupés par deux, ses sentiers battus, sa musique latino-américaine, ses boissons aux jus de fruits et au rhum importés servis dans des verres en plastique \textit{Made in Taïwan}, ses serviettes de plage Donald Duck! \textsuperscript{53} (Karch 46)

The narrator’s parodic depiction of the island places the reader in an Orientalist context of globalization and Americanization of the world. The narrator succeeds in invoking sarcasm by placing the word “améliorée” in quotation marks within the text. The mention of tropical drinks served in plastic cups made in Taiwan and Donald Duck beach towels all expose the falsity of her fabricated paradise.

Within the slipshod utopia of the Bahamian resort where she works, Sam becomes embroiled in a murder mystery in which two American tourists are killed. The first is found strangled and raped, with the second only strangled. It is

\textsuperscript{53} Author’s italics.
Sam who tampers with the second crime scene, ripping the underwear of the second victim, thereby imitating a rape, admitting: “j’ai ajouté le viol” (Karch 72). Sam’s sexual orientation is once again brought into question when Baba asks “Vous avez violé un cadavre?” (Karch 72). Sam specifies, “j’ai imité un viol” (Karch 72). As if tampering with the undergarments of a dead woman’s body were not enough to plant a seed of doubt in the mind of the reader, that is not the only disturbing piece of information to surface about Sam. When Baba further questions her by asking, “Ça vous a excitée?” Sam replies “Beaucoup” (Karch 72). Although Sam explains that she only imitated a rape to exonerate the doorman wrongly accused of the first crime, Sam’s actions still have a disturbing and destabilizing effect on the reader. In the framestory of Les Mille et Une Nuits, Schahriar is the tyrant who all but rapes a virgin each night after he weds her. In the case of Le Nombril de Scheherazade, Karch reappropriates the rapist-rape victim dyad by placing Sam in the position of would-be rapist. The fact that she

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54 Baba is another character in the novel who, like Aude, is suspected of being Sam’s sister. Karch’s use of the name Baba for a female character challenges gender roles in Le Nombril de Scheherazade once again. Typically a masculine name, Baba could be construed as a nickname for Barbara. Baba is also the appellation for Dad in both Greek and Arabic, which further parodies the construct of gender in Karch’s novel.
only imitates the crime rather than actually committing it gives a parodic, albeit dark, tone to this part of the text.

**Familial Dysfunction**

Twenty minutes after the crime discovery, Sam transforms herself back into Scheherazade for her evening performance. It is through the bias of her storytelling that Sam reveals details about herself that she does not discuss out of character. As such, the guise of Scheherazade empowers Sam. In this portion of the novel, Karch accomplishes three tasks by way of his heroine. Firstly, he composes a short story in the tradition of the *Arabian Nights* entitled “L’Histoire des trois filles du sultan.” Additionally, Karch uses this story to place emphasis on alternate roles for daughters in a family context, contrary to *Les Mille et Une Nuits*. Finally, the author validates gender bending and alternative lifestyles through the story Scheherazade tells. Her tale is one which “soulevait donc un ou deux voiles sur son identité, sur son choix de carrière, sur ce qu’elle pensait de sa famille, si famille il y avait” (Karch 74). The potential family members to whom Sam alludes are Baba and Aude, both of whom she glimpses in the audience that evening.
In her tale, Sam in the role of Scheherazade describes three daughters: Primera, the eldest, Happrêtoa, the youngest, and Çasupphila, la benjamine. Based on Scheherazade’s story, the parents of the three daughters know that they will be able to marry off Primera and Happrêtoa. However, the case of Çasupphila is unique, for her parents decide to dress her as a boy so that she will live “loin des yeux de ses père et mère” (Karch 75). The explanation of Çasupphila’s cross-dressing and her parents’ desire to cast her away is the first hint at an explanation for Sam’s transvestism. Like her invented character Çasupphila, Sam also resembles a boy. As a child, Sam clearly felt rejected by her family as well. Çasupphila describes how she was an orphan who ultimately ran away and changed her name, much like Sam herself did:

Qui jouait-elle tout à coup, elle dont le premier rôle de sa vie avait été celui, intolerable, d’orpheline élevée par une tante neurasthénique et complexée jusqu’à l’époque où, ayant terminé son secondaire, elle s’était sauvée d’une famille qu’elle jugeait déséquilibrée et d’un village arrière, perdu dans un coin oublié de l’Ontario pour s’épanouir, enfin, à l’Ecole nationale de théâtre où elle s’est inscrite sous le nom de Sam? (Karch 57)

Thus, through her storytelling, Sam reveals pieces of herself. In fact, her tales are a method through which she comes to terms with her own history and attempts to heighten her
damaged self-esteem. Even in the hyperbolic context of Karch’s novel, there is a clear message that wit and creativity are empowering.

In the mise-en-abyme Sam creates in “L’Histoire des trois filles du sultan” it is Çasupphila who is not outsmarted in a quest for riches like her parents and her sisters. Using her mind rather than her body to win the affection of l’Inconnu, she manages to survive and reinstate peace in the kingdom. Like Scheherazade of Les Mille et Une Nuits, Çasupphila (and, by extension, Sam) rejects the importance of assigned sexual roles and gender, thereby emphasizing intellect above all. After having saved the kingdom, Çasupphila is free from her parents’ constraints and may lead the life of her own choosing.

Even when she is arrested for the murder of the two American tourists on the island, Sam continues to tell stories. While in prison, unable to sleep without her copy of Les Mille et Une Nuits, she and her fellow prisoners tell tales to pass the time. Just as Scheherazade was a prisoner of Schahriar’s pathological behavior, Sam as Scheherazade is prisoner of a society that wrongly accused her of a double murder.

Once in jail, the chief of police takes an interest in his most unique prisoner. He calls attention to the fact that
Sam is “un nom ambigu” (Karch 136). As he hints at Sam’s sexual identity, she asks his question for him in saying “pourquoi je me fais passer pour un homme qui imite les femmes, alors que je suis un peu le contraire? C’est une longue histoire. Vous voulez la version Scheherazade ou Sam?” (Karch 136-37). Although she offers him two versions of the story, I argue that they would be one and the same, since Sam merely uses the name and the person Scheherazade to thinly disguise the story of her own life. It seems that Scheherazade, symbol of women’s empowerment, gives Sam an outlet for her emotions. However, although she begins to tell him a tale, the mystery of Sam’s sexuality is never revealed within it. It seems that the Scheherazade figure does not want to fit any mold; she is a postmodern hybrid. Her transvestism is invoked by another man who asks “pourquoi vous faites-vous passer pour travesti alors que vous ne l’êtes pas?” (Karch 151). Once again, Sam avoids his question. She chooses to remain an enigma and thus challenge the cultural construct of gender through her own unorthodox performance of it.

Like her cross-dressing character Çasupphila as well as the Scheherazade of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, Sam reinstates order in a troubled town. When she and the doorman find smuggled emeralds and link the murders to Jacopo Santorini, it
is the ingenious Sam who knows how to prove it. She takes one gemstone for the police and hides it, as the title suggests, “Dans le nombril de Scheherazade” (Karch 155). Thanks to her cooperation with the authorities, Sam plays an integral role in the arrest of Santorini and the solving of the crimes. When invited to go out with the chief of police, Sam asks: “Je serai princesse ou prisonnière?” to which he replies “Vous serez et vous ferez ce que vous voudrez” (Karch 176). Regardless of her ambiguous sexuality or her questionable past, Sam is exonerated from the crimes and her integrity is restored.

By subverting Sam/Scheherazade’s sexuality within an exaggerated setting that cheaply yet comically mimics Oriental luxury, Karch succeeds in disengaging Western Orientalist myths of Scheherazade as an exotic Arabian sexpot. In Le Nombril de Scheherazade, he calls attention to the Scheherazade figure’s body in such a way that the reader is forced to question conventional sexuality. By virilizing Sam/Scheherazade’s physique and depicting her as a pseudo-transvestite, Karch dispels the myth that Scheherazade is all feminine beauty and no brains. His highlighting of her navel, particularly in the novel’s title, further emphasizes the power of Scheherazade to use her intelligence both to extricate herself from a crime scene, and her storytelling
capability to rid herself of doubts and painful childhood memories. Although it is a symbol of sexual intimacy, maternity and memory, the navel also represents Sam’s personal power, for it is indeed her manipura, the literal “jewel city,” which, combined with her ingenuity, helps Sam exonerate herself from prison. Through his employment of irony, travesty and parody, Karch thus creates a recolonized, (North) Americanized Scheherazade who challenges stereotypes of feminine sexuality as well as the importance of the family in modern society.
Sexuality as well as maternity are also integral themes in Vinciane Moeschler’s 1990 rewriting of Scheherazade entitled Schéhérazade, ma folie. Moeschler, a journalist and novelist born to a Belgian mother in Geneva, Switzerland, chooses to reinvent the storyteller of The Arabian Nights through a mise-en-abyme that spans two different centuries and multiple countries, including Belgium, Algeria and Iraq. More a postmodern than a postcolonial novel, Moeschler’s Schéhérazade, ma folie makes use of parody to expose the fantasy and excess that still surround Scheherazade’s name as well as countries located in the Middle East and North Africa. Moeschler’s novel is also postmodern because of the recycling of the Scheherazade figure from the literary past, as well as Moeschler’s use of mise-en-abyme. By creating a narrator, Héloïse, who is a novelist in the process of reinventing the

55 The use of a mise-en-abyme in the context of Algeria immediately calls to mind Assia Djebar’s L’amour, la fantasia, the first novel of her Algerian Quartet in which the author deploys the literary device to go back and literally rewrite the country’s bitter colonial history with France. Through this mise-en-abyme, Djebar succeeds in reinscribing the lost voices of women who were raped, killed and silenced during the invasion and colonization of Algeria.
story of Scheherazade in her own right, Moeschler allows the reader to experience not one, but two literary rebirths of Scheherazade, both of which are entitled *Schéhérazade, ma folie*. In both cases, the reader is left with a Scheherazade who is far different from the clever storyteller of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*. Through exaggeration and excess, Moeschler, as well as Héloïse and Schéhérazade, forces the reader to reexamine sexuality and maternity in Muslim countries as well as Western ones.

Moeschler begins her own novel with a symbolic birth. *Schéhérazade, ma folie* does not commence with a traditional childbirth, yet Moeschler’s descriptions call to mind images of gestation and genesis. At the outset of Chapter 1, Héloïse, the Scheherazade figure, has just finished her first novel: “Point final. Héloïse avait enfin terminé.” (Moeschler 11). The reader also learns that over a period of time, Héloïse nurtured her novel, “[q]u’elle avait amoureusement couvé pendant des mois avec la possession d’une jeune mère chatte” (Moeschler 11). Moeschler employs zoological terminology when comparing Héloïse’s nesting behavior to that of a young feline mother with a litter of kittens. In the same sentence, the verb “couver” likens Héloïse to a hen sitting on her eggs. The animal imagery also forms an association between Héloïse and the exotic, non-Western other.
Héloïse’s behavior is undeniably maternal, yet simultaneously hyperbolic. Moeschler deviates from traditional representations of motherhood since it is not a child, but a book that Héloïse cares for. The book is a sort of reverse allegory of a child: “De quelques phrases écorchées sur un brouillon était né un livre” (Moeschler 12). The mother-child attachment is also a parody of motherhood: “Héloïse ne parvenait pas à détacher son regard de son roman. Ses mains restaient collées aux feuilles comme celles d’un enfant qui ne veut pas abandonner son jouet” (Moeschler 12). Héloïse regresses to a puerile state in which she grips her manuscript, while at the same time this act is akin to a mother’s protective grip on her child. The link between maternity, protection and nurturing is moreover associated with bulimia and addiction: “Du papier et de l’encre, Héloïse en avait consommé tout au long de son parcours de romancière en herbe” (Moeschler 11). More specifically, Héloïse literally binged during the process of writing her novel: “Avec boulimie, elle absorbait des mots, encore et encore jusqu’à l’overdose” (Moeschler 12). Although increased appetite is typical of an expectant mother, the reader begins to doubt the healthiness of Héloïse, as well as that of her novel-child due to the hints of excessive behavior and bingeing. The focus is no longer on nurturing, but rather, on
malnourishment, a typical result of bulimic behavior. Moeschler’s reference to bingeing (and purging) serves as foreshadowing for both Héloïse, and for Schéhérazade, the protagonist of Héloïse’s aforementioned novel. The preponderance of unhealthy levels of consumption points to the fact that Héloïse/Schéhérazade is an inversion of the good mother archetype.

Parodies of the East

In keeping with the excessive behavior of the main characters, the hedonistic setting of Schéhérazade, ma folie is reminiscent of the Orientalist novels and paintings from nineteenth-century France. Moeschler’s decision to embellish and exaggerate the setting urges the reader to be suspicious of the content. Edward Said’s observation that nineteenth-century French writers characterized the Orient by “its feminine penetrability” and “its supine malleability” pertains directly to the mise-en-abyme in Scheherazade, ma folie (Said 206). Entirely unlike the cold, grey skies of Brussels, Héloïse’s hometown, her own novel is set in an elaborate, exotic and languid venue:

Héloïse perpetuates and enhances all of the stereotypes of the Middle East: exotic, spicy, colorful, sunny, passionate and forbidden. The parallel she draws between food and literature is directly related to *The Arabian Nights*. Furthermore, the continuing images of food and ingestion in the author’s description, in which skin is described as milky, and the sun grates, i.e. itches and irritates the skin, and intoxicates forbidden passions, form a link between the consumption of exotic food and exotic literature in the West. Such exaggerated images are parodic. As such, it will be helpful come back to several definitions of parody in order to identify how and why the device functions in *Schéhérazade, ma folie*.

In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon explains that, “[f]or artists the postmodern is said to involve a rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention” (89). Indeed, Moeschler’s novel is postmodern, not only in the sense that it uses parody, but
this parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always critical. It is also not ahistorical or de-historicizing; it does not wrest past art from its original historical context and reassemble it into some sort of presentist spectacle. Instead, through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference. (Politics 89)

Moeschler makes use of parody not just for art’s sake; rather she does so in order to call attention to the Western preoccupation with Orientalizing both women and the East. Parody is used either to “legitimize or subvert that which it parodies,” and in the case of Moeschler’s novel, what is being parodied is female sexuality against the backdrop of both Medieval Baghdad and modern-day Algiers (Politics 97). For the purpose of this chapter, I will be analyzing the way Héloïse and Schéhérazade fall prey to passion and pregnancy by way of imbalance and excess with regard to food, sex or drugs, and what effect this parodic excess has on the novel as well as its mise-en-abyme.

Although she previously exhibited bulimic tendencies during her writing phase, Héloïse loses her appetite as she nears completion of her novel about Schhéhrazade: “Depuis
qu’elle sentait approcher la conclusion de son histoire, elle n’avait plus d’appétit et refusait systématiquement de quitter son lieu de travail, le cocon de sa chambre” (Moeschler 13). Once again, she is ruled by excess. Her excessive behavior now flirts with anorexia, or loss of appetite.\textsuperscript{56} Perhaps out of fear, excitement, and anticipation, she isolates herself. The maternal image of the cocoon is employed, thereby likening Héloïse to a pregnant woman sheltering her fetus. In this sense, the meaning of the word “novel” is twofold: Héloïse’s novel-child is symbolically her new child.

**Pathology and Excess**

Héloïse is portrayed not only as an expectant mother, but as a single mother as well since she refers to her lover, Vincent, as nothing more than “le compagnon de ses nuits” (Moeschler 13). Although he is a sexual partner, she does not love him: “Elle ne l’aimait pas. Enfin, pas vraiment. Juste un gramme de tendres sentiments. Et un besoin. Du corps et du cœur. Une crise d’envie aiguë” (Moeschler 14). As if a

\textsuperscript{56} In Greek, the term ἀγάπη literally means “without appetite.” Anorexia (scientifically referred to as anorexia nervosa) is the name of a psychological disease wherein the sufferer engages in food deprivation. Although seemingly very different, both anorexia and bulimia are eating disorders that indicate a severe lack of physical and emotional balance. While the former involves obsessive abstinence from food, the latter entails bingeing and purging.
drug she takes to cure an ailment, Héloïse takes Vincent as a lover to satisfy her “besoin,” her “envie.” It is also worth noting how Héloïse ironically quantifies emotions in terms of grams in the aforementioned passage. The narrator’s heavy use of pharmacological terminology parodies Western society’s dependence on pill-popping and recreational drug use as methods of either problem-solving or the self-medicating avoidance thereof. Héloïse’s narcotic description of her lover is further elaborated upon as she objectifies and reduces him to that most common of medications, aspirin:

Elle avait décidé de s’octroyer un amant, comme on prend un cachet d’aspirine, pour panser la plaie et la passion écorchée d’un premier amour d’adolescence qu’elle n’arrivait pas à faire déguerpir. Un homme interchangeable qui apaiserait sa douleur, diminuerait ses coups de folie, calmerait son état d’apesanteur et lui ferait réintégrer peu à peu le râpeaux contact de la réalité. L’obligerait à palper le quotidien, à s’y fondre. (Moeschler 14)

To cure her ills, Héloïse once again reverts to addictive behavior. It is interesting to note the evolution of her tendencies toward excess throughout the novel. At the outset, the narrator connects her with binge-like habits, particularly during the gestation period of writing her book. Then, as she prepared to “birth” her novel, Héloïse changed drastically by suddenly refraining from eating. The underlying theme of both
behaviors is that they are out of balance and self-destructive. As Mary Pipher argues in Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls (1994), “Like all addictions, bulimia is a compulsive, self-destructive and progressive disorder. Bingeing and purging are the addictive behaviors; food is the narcotic” (169). By this point, however, Héloïse’s narcotic has evolved from food to men; it is Vincent to whom she turns to heal the scorching wounds left over from adolescence. Héloïse casually takes a lover as one would take an aspirin, but even more alarming than this fact is the catalogue of cures that she seeks through Vincent. More than just a lover, she wants a father, a psychiatrist and even a cheerleader. Rather than find these within her own animus, Héloïse seeks them out in the form of a man-remedy. Héloïse essentially makes Vincent her ἄρεμα, or remedy, for the narrator describes him as “une guérison idéale” (Moeschler 14). While often used to refer to a remedy in literary criticism, my use of the Greek term here, which literally means “drug” or “medicine,” also serves to reinforce the pharmaceutical aspect of Vincent’s pseudo-therapeutic role in Héloïse’s life. She continually searches for something she can take to cure her ills, simultaneously giving herself away in the process. Héloïse even cedes her manuscript to Vincent, giving him the literal fruit of her labor, in keeping with the
childbirth metaphor. Upon doing so, Héloïse experiences a sense of loss: “Vincent, sans s’en rendre compte, allait lui voler une partie d’elle-même, un petit coin de son intimité. Un peu comme si on lui arrachait la peau avec délice pour aller fouiner à l’intérieur de son corps” (Moeschler 17). Héloïse’s boundaries seem violated as she surrenders her novel to him; rather than simply steal a part of her, as expressed by the verb “voler,” the slang Moeschler employs suggests that he is about to rape Héloïse (“v[i]oler”) and search her insides, as the author’s image of ripping skin connotes.

Héloïse admits that she is torn between her wish to share her novel and keep it for herself, yet she ultimately decides that the birth of her novel-child is inevitable, for it was “[u]n accouchement qui n’avait de raison que par la séparation” (Moeschler 17). She accedes that it “allait défiler devant une multitude d’yeux, ricocher de main en main pour être absorbée par des inconnus” (Moeschler 17). Not only will her creation be consumed by others, but upon publication, she will also be exposed: “toute nue,” “[d]évoilée,” “[t]ransparente” (Moeschler 17). Héloïse’s reaction to being denuded is particularly significant here, for her trepidation at being unveiled directly corresponds to the act of a woman writing as unveiling, particularly in the context of the Middle East and North Africa.
In *Ces voix qui m’assiègent*, Assia Djebar discusses both the power and the risks a woman takes when writing. For example, she explains, “Le danger gît là: la femme qui peut écrire (on écrit d’abord pour soi, car l’écriture amène le dialogue avec soi), cette femme risque d’experimenter un pouvoir étrange, le pouvoir d’être femme autrement que par l’enfantement maternel” (*Ces voix* 76). Djebar’s correlation between writing and the act of becoming a woman in a manner other than childbirth are especially fitting in the context of *Schéhérazade, ma folie*, since the completion of Héloïse’s novel is a symbolic form of childbirth. In addition to being a potential vehicle for potent power, Djebar also discusses the possibility for ridicule when exposing oneself through writing. In *Ces voix qui m’assiègent*, Djebar repeats a quote from *L’amour, la fantasia* which displays this point exactly: “L’écriture est dévoilement en public devant des voyeurs qui ricanent...” (*Ces voix* 77). Héloïse’s fear of being transparent in the eyes of her readers, like in Djebar’s *Ces voix qui m’assiègent*, underscores the violence of the gesture of unveiling.

With Héloïse’s manuscript in one hand and “un verre de coca” in the other, Vincent settles into a soft armchair to begin reading (*Moeschler* 17). The image of him reclining in a La-Z-Boy with a Coke in hand emphasizes the postmodern context.
of Moeschler’s novel in that she combined the playful and comical with a slight thumbing of the nose at popular culture. The way in which Moeschler recycles the archetype of Scheherazade also relies on intertextuality, since she borrows the character from Les Mille et Une Nuits. In The Politics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon reports how the majority of critics believe that “postmodernism offers a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms and that this is a most apt mode for a culture like our own that is oversaturated with images” (90). While one could interpret the scene with Vincent as mere entertainment, I will argue that Moeschler’s purpose in juxtaposing his casual reading of Héloïse’s novel to the exaggerated portrait of her Schéhérazade is a parody of feminine sexuality and vulnerability that is anything but neutral. For Hutcheon in particular, “postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representation” (Politics 90).

The transition from Moeschler’s novel to Héloïse’s book, also entitled Schéhérazade, ma folie, is marked by a change in typeface. While postcolonial authors such as Assia Djebar

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57 While I will address the actual naming of Héloïse’s novel by Vincent later in this chapter, it is important to investigate the double meaning of the word “folie.” On the one hand, it implies a mental illness such as insanity, while on the other hand it can simply mean folly or extravagance. For Héloïse, Schéhérazade comes to symbolize both.
often make use of such typographical shifts as a means of offsetting the written from the oral, Moeschler’s use of two fonts serves a different purpose: it allows the reader to distinguish between the author’s narrative on Héloïse and Héloïse’s embedded narrative on Schéhérazade. At last, the reader enters the mise-en-abyme, and voluptuous world of Héloïse’s Schéhérazade: “Un soleil vorace dardait. Schéhérazade, le corps fruité encore habité d’un reste de sommeil, sortit en cachette du palais” (Moeschler 18). In addition to the blinding sun and the delicious body of Schéhérazade, the entire scene in which she is introduced is a parody of the Orient, including a pet leopard, Hindbad, bedecked in jewels, and an odalisque who serves Scheherazade and her forbidden lover “du thé vert à la menthe” (Moeschler 18). Stereotypes abound in the following passage, in which Moeschler, via Héloïse, emphasizes the languidity as well as the fecundity of the East:

Les jardins du palais embaumaient. Des vapeurs entêtantes se fondaient en un bouquet de jasmin et de musc qui se coulaient entre les allées bordées de rosiers. Les couleurs voluptueuses des grenades écarlates gavaient les yeux et donnaient envie de croquer. L’écorce des oranges mûrisait frénétiquement au soleil. Certains fruits pourrissaient plus vite, perforés par la chaleur démesurée. Alors, imprégnés de moisissures, ils tombaient un à un, sur le sol bouillant. (Moeschler 19)
The numerous references to the overwhelming sights and smells of the palace garden call to mind Zolian scenes of the overpowering temptation of a woman in a fertile garden who oozes sexuality, as in the case with Albine in Zola’s *La faute de l’abbé Mouret*. In *Idols of Perversity*, Bram Dijkstra refers to this powerful phenomenon characteristic of late-nineteenth-century literature and painting as “turning a bower of flowers into a house of ill repute,” since woman and nature were seen as one and the same force, both attempting to seduce men (242). Like the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, the voluptuous red of pomegranates in Héloïse’s depiction stuff (“gaver”) the eyes and give rise to the urge to eat (“croquer”). Additionally, the hyperbolic style and abundance of exotic clichés lend a negative aspect to the scene. Illicit activity is also connoted by the fruits that are “perforés,” implying sexual penetration. Even the spoiled fruits carry a connotation of (ill-fated) pregnancy in the palace garden, for they are literally “imprégnés de moisissures” (Moeschler 19).

The link to pregnancy is further evidenced by the presence of pomegranates described in this passage. Persian in origin, the pomegranate is intrinsically linked to fecundity by its shape, which resembles that of the uterus. This association has been highly exploited in Persian art, as
evidenced by the acclaimed paintings of Nasser Ovissi. As far back as Classical mythology, the Greeks associated the pomegranate with fertility in the myth of Persephone and her mother Demeter. Thus, “[p]ar sa forme, par la multitude de grains qui la remplissent, la grenade est ainsi très fortement féminisée” (Chebel, Encyclopédie 288). However, the fruits are spoiled in Schéhérazade, ma folie, and have fallen to the ground, thereby alerting us of the other side of the Oriental fantasy. While Héloïse’s Schéhérazade lives “[a]u siècle où les sultans, les vizirs puissants et les belles princesses régnaient sur Bagdad” in a “[v]ille fantasmagorique” and “un Orient voluptueux et raffiné,” it is also a world of brutal inequality (Moeschler 20). Although we have been led to believe that this story is a “[s]ymbole de palais dorés, de bijoux fastueux, de parfums éternels qui se brouillaient avec le délice de l’irréel et de l’imaginaire: tapis volant, philtre d’amour, cheval ailé,” Héloïse asserts that “[l]a réalité était plus âpre” (Moeschler 20). Indeed, it was a world of young slaves, cloistered eunuchs and starving women who would sell their bodies for a handful of food (Moeschler 20). The setting is so out of balance that Schéhérazade is not free to be with Ali, “[f]ils de gitan qui n’avait pas le

58 For an online sampling of Ovissi’s work, see <http://www.galleryovissi.com>.
droit d’aimer sa princesse” (Moeschler 20). Orientalist paintings by Gérôme, Ingres and Matisse display palace gardens, odalisques, hammams and even slave markets that present a false version of the Eastern world. Through her parody of Schéhérazade, Héloïse offers an alternate view of the Middle Eastern woman, and it is not an optimistic one. Not even a rich princess can be happy when surrounded by inequality and subordination.

For a brief moment, the reader is reintroduced to Vincent as he reads Héloïse’s manuscript. The narrator’s commentary focuses on food as Vincent stuffs himself with empty calories: “Vincent avala une gorgée de coca. C’était le fond de la bouteille, et le liquide ne pétillait plus. Il se déplaça jusqu’au frigo, en sortit une boîte de Canada Dry, qu’il accompagna d’une poignée de chips au paprika. Et se plongea dans sa lecture” (Moeschler 21). Emphasis is placed on Vincent as a consumer both of food and of Héloïse. As the reader is sickened by Vincent’s snacking habits, we delve back into Héloïse’s novel to find an ailing Schéhérazade. Yet, while describing her suffering, the narrator draws attention to the curves of Schéhérazade’s body beneath her silken dress. In nineteenth-century rhetoric, silk connoted prostitution. Scheherazade in a silken dress thus situates her in the virgin-whore dichotomy. By clothing her in silk, Héloïse as
the author makes Schéhérazade into a *femme fatale*. Suddenly, Héloïse is equally sick and bedridden. Like Schéhérazade’s servants, Vincent wipes a wet sponge across the brow of Héloïse, and turns to her manuscript once again. Schéhérazade’s spasms occur more and more frequently, and she mutters incoherently to her guardian and tutor, Rawzi. Even with the most renowned doctors, and “malgré des soins intensifs, Schéhérazade ne guérisait toujours pas. Des vomissements lui ébranlaient le corps et…” (Moeschler 22). Schéhérazade thus vomits and her body convulses. In *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: essai sur l’abjection* (1980), Julia Kristeva explains that repulsion is, in fact, a form of protection: “Dégoût d’une nourriture, d’une saleté, d’un déchet, d’une ordure. Spasmes et vomissements qui me protègent. Répulsion, haut-le-cœur qui m’écarte et me détourne de la souillure, du cloaque, de l’immonde” (10). In the same vein, Schéhérazade’s convulsions and fits of vomiting are a form of ridding her body of physical and emotional contamination.

Much like Héloïse, Schéhérazade, too, exhibits unhealthy behaviors. In this instance, she is literally unable to digest the reality of being a royal orphan unable to love someone from a social class beneath her own, and so her body

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59 Like the Scheherazade of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, whose mother is never mentioned, Héloïse’s Schéhérazade is an orphan whose parents were killed (Moeschler 22).
attempts to purge itself. Conversely, Héloïse lies at the other end of the spectrum, indulgently searching for something to fill her void. In both cases, however, the behavior is pathological and excessive, thereby emphasizing the parodic nature of both plots. The author’s intent in both cases is to disrupt and destabilize Orientalist representations of Scheherazade.

Although Vincent skips ahead in Héloïse’s manuscript to find Schéhérazade well again, it is disappointing that neither the wit nor the strength of the famous storytelling Scheherazade of the Arabian Nights can be discerned in Héloïse’s narrative. Instead, Schéhérazade is a hypersexualized being, akin to Fatima Mernissi’s discourses on fitna (chaos) and zina (illicit copulation) in both Scheherazade Goes West and Beyond the Veil. The erotic, exotic odalisque, complete with the green eyes of a nineteenth-century femme fatale, is a predominant image presented in Héloïse’s manuscript:

une sensualité d’animal sauvage. Qui attirait les hommes et faisait fuir les femmes.60 (Moeschler 23)

The dichotomy of attraction and repulsion is evident in Héloïse’s description of Schéhérazade, the embodiment of the Orient.61 Only her physical attributes are highlighted, and they invite the reader to envision her as a gastronomic and sensual delight. With skin the color of gingerbread and the sensuality of a wild animal, she is a temptress par excellence. In this instance, Schéhérazade becomes fitna. As Mernissi explains in Beyond the Veil, Islam views women and sexuality differently than Western Christianity, wherein “sexuality itself was attacked, degraded as animality and condemned as anti-civilization” (44). According to Mernissi, Islam does not attack sexuality, but rather labels women specifically “as the embodiment of destruction, the symbol of disorder. The woman is fitna, the epitome of the

60 In addition to connoting an odalisque in nineteenth-century rhetoric, green eyes also symbolize vampirism. The vampiress Clarimonde in Théophile Gautier’s “La morte amoureuse” is just one example of this phenomenon in nineteenth-century French literature. In the case of both the odalisque and the vampiress, the woman is a grotesque figure.

61 In Orientalism, Edward Said discusses this dichotomy inherent in the Orient, and particularly in the Arab woman. He illustrates his point of simultaneous attraction and repulsion through Gustave Flaubert’s description of Kuchuk Hanem, “a famous Egyptian dancer and courtesan he encountered in Wadi Halfa” (Said 186). Said affirms that “[s]he was surely the prototype of several of his novels’ female characters in her learned sensuality, delicacy, and (according to Flaubert) mindless coarseness. What he especially liked about her was that she seemed to place no demands on him, while the ‘nauseating odor’ of her bedbugs mingled enchantingly with ‘the scent of her skin, which was dripping with sandalwood’” (Said 187).
uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential." (Beyond the Veil 44). In the following passage in which she begins to dance with abandon, Schéhérazade is indeed the embodiment of fitna in which she resembles a wild beast:


Within the mise-en-abyme, Schéhérazade becomes more and more exaggerated, as evidenced by the repeating images of her as a predator that entrances her (willing) lover. The animal imagery further reinforces the concept of Schéhérazade as a huntress, a whore, and a coy tigress that attacks, extends her claws and then ficklely wants to be petted.

Attention to Schéhérazade’s navel calls additional attention to her sensuality and sexuality: “Le nombril découvert s’agitait, se tordait, se contorsionnait en tous les
sens” (Moeschler 24). In Le nombril centre érotique (1983), Gutierre Tibón notes the universal eroticism of the navel as evidenced in its repeated references in the Song of Songs, the Kama Sutra and the Arabian Nights (21-22). In L’Encyclopédie de l’Amour en Islam (1995), Malek Chebel argues that the navel also symbolizes amnesia:

Symbole troublant de l’intimité du corps, le nombril, l’omphalos (du nom de la déesse grecque de la volupté, Omphale), participe également de la beauté physique d’une personne. Il est le résultat de la séparation d’avec la mère et le lieu où les corps en position amoureuse se rencontrent: le nombril est ainsi autant béance sur une mémoire irrémédiablement perdue qu’accomplissement de désir. (454)

The importance of Chebel’s definition in the context of Schéhérazade, ma folie is twofold. First of all, it highlights the sexual connotation of the navel, since that is where two bodies often meet during the act of sex. Additionally, the navel as a reminder of the maternal connection is also worth noting here, as it is a key factor in Schéhérazade’s life as well as Héloïse’s. With such a strong connection to sexuality and seduction, it is not mere coincidence, therefore, that when her navel is exposed and unprotected, Schéhérazade dances to the point of delirium:
Les pieds gesticulaient au son de la derbouka. Nus sur le sol. Magnétisés. Comme ensorcelés. Elle entrait en danse. Se perdait dans un délire onirique, complice des djinns qui convulsaient son corps dément. Ses cheveux se collaient sur son visage en sueur. Il faisait chaud. Trop chaud. Et le rythme s’accélérait. De plus en plus vite. De plus en plus fort...68,69...Mal à la tête...chevilles qui se tordent...reins disloqués...55...27...66...Elle trébucha. Se releva, dégoulinante de sueur, les yeux exorbités, de la bave coulait au bord de ses lèvres. (Moeschler 24)

In addition to the grotesque appearance of Schéhérazade, the author’s syntax also lends a sense of excess to the text. Her use of ellipses as well as the delirium indicated by Schéhérazade’s inability to lucidly count the stars in the sky above her indicate a loss of control. As if possessed by the music, Schéhérazade dances faster and faster, until literally drooling and sick in a carnavalesque manner. In Idols of Perversity, Bram Dijkstra explains that “women’s insatiable need for rhythmic motion” was linked by nineteenth-century scientists to their savage nature and hysteria (242-43). Moreover, Moeschler parodies Salomé’s dance in Flaubert’s “Hérodias”. In the following excerpt from “Hérodias,” it is clear that Moeschler has recycled Flaubert’s metaphors:

Les paupières entre-closes, elle se tordait la taille, balançait son ventre avec des ondulations de houle, faisait trembler ses deux seins, et son visage demeurait immobile, et ses pieds n’arrêtaient pas. [. . .] Elle dansa comme les prêtresses des Indes, comme les Nubiennes des cataractes, comme les bacchantes de Lydie.

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Elle se renversait de tous les côtés, pareille à une fleur que la tempête agite. Les brillants de ses oreilles sautaient, l’étoffe de son dos chatoyait; de ses bras, de ses pieds, de ses vêtements jaillissaient d’invisibles étincelles qui enflammaient les hommes. [. . .] Ses lèvres étaient peintes, ses sourcils très noirs, ses yeux presque terribles, et des gouttelettes à son front semblaient une vapeur sur du marbre blanc. (Flaubert 130-31)

Schéhérazade and Salomé are both supremely seductive young Arab women with physical beauty that lures men into their spell. Additionally, both get carried away by the frenzy of dance until they are out of control and bathed in sweat. Although the writer appears to recycle portions of Flaubert’s text, Schéhérazade and Salomé are in point of fact quite different. While Salomé is the virgin-whore manipulated by her mother, Moechler’s Schéhérazade acts of her own accord, dancing for her own pleasure and taking a lover. Whereas Salomé obeyed her mother, Moeschler’s Schéhéherazade overtly defies the patriarchy by disobeying her guardian and sleeping with a gypsy peasant. Only the slaps from Rawzi bring Schéhérazade back to reality; a bitter reality where an unmarried princess cannot associate with a gypsy lover. After the starvation of being separated from one another,

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62 The image of the out-of-control woman bathed in sweat harkens back to nineteenth-century portrayals of the orgasmic woman, also discussed by Bram Dijkstra in Idols of Perversity.
Ali avait profité d’un voyage de Rawzi pour s’introduire la nuit discrètement dans la chambre de Schéhérazade et lui instiller son amour jusqu’à l’épuisement. Sécrétant une passion à gros bouillons: la peau perforée, le cœur chiffonné et le sexe déchiré. En une nuit, ivres d’un amour trop refoulé, démangés de désir, ils avaient récupéré gloutonnement des mois d’attente. Un rêve qui avait pris sensualité, un fantasme qu’on déguste [. . .]. (Moeschler 35)

Images of hunger followed by overindulgence abound in the previous passage in which Ali “fills” Schéhérazade to the point of exhaustion, with her skin (and hymen) torn. Even his passion (namely, his ejaculate) is described as secretions of large drops. Ali and Schéhérazade are so “drunk with love” and “eaten up with desire” that they act as gluttons and ultimately “taste,” or fulfill, their fantasy. The entire scene overflows with grotesque qualities. Although fully aware that they are playing with fire, Ali and Schéhérazade “avaient décidé de ne plus jamais macérer dans leur solitude et d’abandonner leurs instincts et leurs corps, dévorés par cette jouissante torture qu’engendre la passion clandestine” (Moeschler 35). Devoured by their desire to be together, the two are willing to risk being caught. Their clandestine passion, however, changes quickly from ecstasy to suffering.63

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63 Passion derives from the Latin passus, past participle of pati, to suffer. In The American Heritage Dictionary, passion is defined as: “1. A powerful emotion or appetite, such as love, joy, hatred, anger, or greed. 2.a. Ardent, adoring love. b. Strong sexual desire; lust,” passion is also “5.a. (Passion) The sufferings of Christ in the period following the Last Supper and including the Crucifixion” (907-08). Based
For Schéhérazade, passion ceases to signify adoration and becomes synonymous with anguish when Rawzi appears unexpectedly and stabs Ali, piercing his heart and killing him.

Like the Schéhérazade in her novel, Héloïse, too, is ruled by passion. Moeschler describes Héloïse thusly: “Fille excessive. Avec tous les risques qu’entraîne la démesure. Qui mène à la solitude, à la folie, à la mort. [. . .] Elle pensait qu’il fallait vivre vite et fort. Très fort” (Moeschler 38). As Moeschler aptly states, “vivre violemment, c’était aussi écrire brutallement” (Moeschler 38). In Schéhérazade, ma folie, the way in which the author quantifies and concretizes abstract concepts such as love and passion while also equating them with the act of writing functions as a form of derision.

Much to Vincent’s dismay, Héloïse and Schéhérazade begin to meld into the same person as he reads the former’s manuscript. By attempting to rewrite the story of Scheherazade, Héloïse ends up altering her own destiny. Initially they suffer simultaneously from illness, then excess. Ultimately, Héloïse becomes Schéhérazade:

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on these definitions, it is apparent that passion has both positive and negative connotations. The ambivalence of this term serves to highlight both the pleasure and the pain felt by Héloïse and Schéhérazade.
Schéhérazade était son reflet. Même Vincent s’y était pris. Toutes ces ressemblances la dérangeaient beaucoup. Elle n’avait jamais vraiment fait le rapprochement avec son héroïne, mais c’était vrai qu’elle lui avait prêté son âme. […] Schéhérazade était une passionnée. (Moeschler 42)

Unlike the orphaned Schéhérazade of her manuscript, Héloïse grew up in a household with parents described as “des parents modèles, compréhensifs et ‘cool’” (Moeschler 69). In fact, her parents are psychologists who raised Héloïse and her two brothers, Timy and Gabriel, “très librement” (Moeschler 70). Consequently, they accepted Timy’s homosexuality “le plus naturellement que possible” (Moeschler 70). However, there exists another side to Héloïse’s liberal upbringing. She was fully aware of her mother’s lovers and her father’s mistresses, as well as her father’s marijuana habit (Moeschler 70). Even more disconcerting is the fact that her “mère-copine” put her on the Pill while Héloïse was more interested in holding on to the last vestiges of childhood than in having sex: “À quinze ans, cette mère-copine l’avait emmenée chez sa gynéco pour qu’elle lui prescrire la pilule, même si Héloïse n’en avait pas saisi tout de suite l’utilité, plus occupée par Sam, son nounours” (Moeschler 70). Although many children crave easygoing parents, the effect of growing up in such a household was ultimately a negative one on Héloïse: “Ces pratiques dites révolutionnaires qui avaient jalonné sur son
enfance, Héloïse les désapprouvait totalement” (Moeschler 70). Not only did she disapprove of them; they marked her childhood in a negative way.

In La famille en désordre (2002), Elisabeth Roudinesco discusses the causes and effects of the decomposition of the nuclear family in Western society. In essence, the family is no longer a model of values:

Sans ordre paternel, sans loi symbolique, la famille mutilée des sociétés postindustrielles serait, dit-on, pervertie dans sa fonction même de cellule de base de la société. Elle serait livrée à l’hédonisme, à l’idéologie du «sans tabou». Monoparentale, homoparentale, recomposée, déconstruite, clonée, générée artificiellement, attaquée de l’intérieur par des prétendus négateurs de la différence des sexes, elle ne serait plus capable de transmettre ses propres valeurs. (Roudinesco 11)

In Héloïse’s case, it appears that her parents are indeed inclined to hedonistic and “sans tabou” behavior discussed by Roudinesco. As such, the lack of balance and boundaries set by Héloïse’s parents ultimately affected her personality, her passage to womanhood and the development of her coping mechanisms. As if pushed too hard and too fast to become a woman, Héloïse feared the loss of her innocence:

L’attente des premières règles, la peur devant ce corps qui pousse, qui lui échappe. Le désir qui naît au bout des doigts sans qu’on sache le définir. Cette
question qui plane sur un univers-mystère et qui se reflète abruptement dans le miroir. Pas envie de se nourrir. Pas envie de grandir. (Moeschler 71)

Héloïse thus flirted with anorexic tendencies, and feared the passage to womanhood. More specifically, she had no desire to get her first period, to feed herself or to grow up. As psychoanalytic theory has proven, food deprivation and/or loss of appetite are increasingly common behaviors in adolescent girls. By not eating, they are able to retard the onset of menstruation and the development of breasts. Consequently, adolescent girls who refuse to eat or have no desire to consume food remain in prepubescent bodies, where they may prolong their childhood and safeguard themselves from sexual advances and objectification. In Female Masculinity, Judith Halberstam offers further commentary on female adolescence:

as soon as puberty begins, however, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl. [. . . ]
Female adolescence represents the crisis of coming of age

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64 While the absence of sexual taboos had a negative effect on Héloïse, the presence of strict sexual taboos and patriarchal values have a similar effect in Muslim society. A prime example of this exists in Nina Bouraoui’s La voyeuse interdite (1991), in which Fikria hides the signs of her femininity at the onset of puberty.

65 In La voyeuse interdite, Fikria’s denial of her period is a way of combating patriarchal violence and the rape inherent in a forced marriage. In Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement, Assia Djebar describes the violence with which the husband deflowers his virgin bride on their wedding night: “Une plaie vive s’inscrit sur le corps de la femme par le biais de l’assomption d’une virginité qu’on déflore rageusement et dont le mariage consacre trivialement le martyr. La nuit de noces devient essentiellement nuit du sang” (Femmes d’Alger 154).
as a girl in a male-dominated society. If adolescence for boys represents a rite of passage (much celebrated in Western literature in the form of the bildungsroman), and an ascension to some version (however attenuated) of social power, for girls adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression. (Halberstam 6)

In Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls, psychologist Mary Pipher explains that “Anorexia is both the result of and a protest against the cultural rule that young women must be beautiful. [. . .] It is a young woman’s statement that she will become what the culture asks of its women, which is that they be thin and nonthreatening” (174-75). Naomi Wolf further illustrates the link between anorexia and sexual safety in The Beauty Myth (1992), in which she explains that “The anorexic body is sexually safer than the pornographic,” thereby implying that an anorexic girl is safe from sexual assault (199). Héloïse, who dreaded the onset of puberty and did not want to eat, offers a critique of postmodern society in which balance is lacking. She fluctuates between bingeing and self-deprivation as methods of controlling a world which is increasingly dominated by excess.

Like her heroine in Baghdad, Héloïse, too, travels to an Arab country. In the latter’s case, it is under the auspices of a photojournalism assignment; her mission is to take photos for a reportage on Algiers. As she bids her family good-bye, Héloïse exclaims “adieu les brouillards de Bruxelles et à moi
l’Orient” (Moeschler 73). Upon arrival, Héloïse is greeted by thirty-year old Ali Malkouf, who proceeds to guide her around the city and expose her to its local color. When Héloïse meets Ali, she cannot help but think “Putain ce qu’il était beau!” (Moeschler 78). The author’s use of the word “putain” carries a double significance in this case. Firstly, her use of slang is suggestive of sexist discourse. Secondly, “putain” also means “whore.” In this instance, it is indeed the Oriental Other who is labeled the whore, yet the sex roles are reversed, as it is a man rather than a woman here who is labeled as such.

Moeschler once again parodies stereotypes of the Orient through her account of Héloïse’s trip to the medina. The olfactory and gastronomic descriptions of the Orient, in which sweet odors and exotic spices and flowers teem, are overwhelming and aphrodisiacal in the description of the medina:

Ali et Héloïse se dirigèrent vers la medina et pénétrèrent dans le labyrinthe des souks. À l’oblique des toiles tendues au-dessus des ruelles, les spasmes du soleil venaient sucer les parcelles d’ombre. Dans la lumière tendrement tamisée, des lanternes éclairent les entrées des échoppes trop sombres. Les souks offraient leurs odeurs sucrées. Des flacons transparents, roses, jaunes, bleus, dégageaient des vapeurs de jasmin, de fleur d’oranger, de muguet, de vanille, de cannelle, de cardamome. Mystère des eaux odorantes que des marchands
aux doigts boudinés tripotaient et présentaient aux touristes, égarés dans la foule. (Moeschler 79-80)

In addition to being seduced by the hyperbolic sights and smells of Algiers, Héloïse is seduced by Ali as well: “Ali se coucha près d’elle. Contre elle. Sur elle” (Moeschler 82). Although unable to understand the “mots voluptueux” that Ali whispers to her in Arabic, the two quickly return to her hotel, where his mouth “se posa avec gourmandise sur ses seins” (Moeschler 82-83). Despite declaring his love for her, Ali insists that Héloïse return home, since “un homme ne doit épouser qu’une Musulmane” (Moeschler 84). Héloïse is devastated by his words:

Comme un enfant qui apprend que le Père Noël n’existe pas, Héloïse leva ses grands yeux mouillés vers le ‘vilain monsieur’ qui lui avait déchiré son rêve. Ali eut mal de voir sa mine de petit chat tout triste. Comme pour effacer ses paroles, il la serra très fort contre lui et la berça comme un bébé. Alors, il fit glisser son peignoir. Debout, il la plaqua contre le mur. Elle, maladroitement, lui enleva son pantalon, enroula une jambe autour de sa taille. Le sexe gonflé, il la pénétra. (Moeschler 91)

Héloïse’s childlike vulnerability in the aforementioned passage serves to highlight Ali’s macho violence. Additionally, the reference to childhood presented by the author forces the reader to question the text. In order to fill the void left by an adolescent heartache, Héloïse first
took Vincent as a lover much like one would take medication. Now, in the case of Ali, she is once again hypervulnerable. When he denies her a future together with him, her reaction is that of a child whose dreams have been crushed and Ali thus rocks her “comme un bébé” (Moeschler 91). Their interaction abruptly shifts from a parental one to a quasi-incestuous one as he removes her robe, pins her against the wall and penetrates her (Moeschler 91).

Héloïse’s passion (in the form of suffering) increases exponentially when, after several days, she fails to hear from Ali. It is not until she speaks to his cousin Karim that Hélo learns the devastating news: Ali died as a result of a violent dispute with his father regarding his love for her (Moeschler 101). Like Schéhérazade’s lover Ali in her manuscipt, Héloïse’s Ali also died as a result of forbidden love. What follows is the painful realization that by rewriting Schéhérazade as a feeble and lustful being, Héloïse manifests the same situations in her own life. In a letter to her brother Timy, she reveals: “Je cours droit vers mon destin diabolique; je poursuis, page après page, l’histoire de Schéhérazade. […] Schéhérazade est mon double. Ali mon manque” (Moeschler 104). Héloïse’s choice of the word “manque” as a substantive rather than a verb is revelatory of her psychological state. “Manque” primarily signifies an
emptiness; thus her continual campaign to fulfill herself (with food, men, excessive behavior). Secondarily, “manque” refers to withdrawal, particularly in terms of narcotic substances. Not surprisingly, Héloïse replaces one habit with another when she begins taking sedatives: “Karim, le cousin d’Ali, qui m’a recueillie quelques jours, m’a prescrit des calmants. Il faut que je me repose. Je n’ose plus sortir, j’ai peur. La dépression me guette” (Moeschler 105). The final words “Au secours” in Héloïse’s letter alert the reader to the severity of her anguish, as well as that of Schéhérazade.

**Termination of Pregnancy**

In fact, Héloïse’s rewriting of Schéhérazade is entirely unlike the heroine of the Arabian Nights. Regardless of the translation, Scheherazade has been renowned for her strength in the face of adversity. Her intellect and her cunning enabled her to overcome a neurotic tyrant and save her life and the lives of countless others. In Héloïse’s untitled manuscript, Schéhérazade is driven to the point of self-destruction after having lost the man she loves. Following the death of Ali, she regresses to an infantile state much like Héloïse. Her regression also reveals her inability to
exist without a man. Pregnant with Ali’s child, she climbs a mountain overlooking Baghdad, assumes the fetal position and sucks her thumb; Schéhérazade is childlike, powerless and vulnerable. Although pregnant, she is scarcely able to care for herself, let alone another human being. Schéhérazade ultimately revolts and turns her rage and her suffering upon herself and her unborn child:

Folle, elle était devenue folle: elle saisit une branche sèche qu’elle introduisit entre ses cuisses écartées jusque dans son vagin et, par coups brusques, déchira l’utérus pour tuer l’enfant qu’elle portait en elle. La douleur fut si forte qu’elle s’évanouit sur le sol. Son sang se répandit, absorbé par la terre. Du sang partout, du sang sale, noir, de ce bébé qui partait en lambeaux. (Moeschler 128)

This scene of self-mutilation and self-induced abortion is horrifying, yet Schéhérazade is actually comforted by the catharsis. She literally purges and cleanses her body of the painful memories of love lost. By emptying her womb, Schéhérazade also attempts to reclaim her lost innocence, both physical and emotional:

Elle ressentait ce fœtus comme une aggression, une douce aggression. Mais aussi une interruption de sa jeunesse. Elle regarda le bas de son ventre difforme. La vision de ce sexe mutilé la fit vomir par spasmes. Ses genoux écorchés saignaient. Le corps mou et crasseux, elle décida de mettre fin à ses jours. Elle ne voulait pas avoir le temps de vieillir. Seule. Avec le
souvenir de cet avortement qui avait ridé son corps adolescent, déjà fatigué. (Moeschler 128-29)

The pregnancy not only robbed her of her childhood, it also exhausted her adolescent body. Like Héloïse, who had no urge to eat in the wake of adolescence, Schéhérazade purges both her uterus and her entire being in spasms of vomiting induced by the repugnant sight of her mutilated body. Her ultimate attainment is indeed one of lightness as she empties her body of life by suicide: “Schéhérazade se traîna sur le grand rocher, puis se laissa tomber dans le vide. Son corps parut encore plus léger. Sans faire de bruit, il toucha le sol” (Moeschler 129).

Like the heroine in her manuscript, Héloïse, too, craves an end to her suffering. Back in Brussels, the twenty-year old attempts an overdose with the tranquilizers (“les dragées de l’oubli”) prescribed by Karim in Algiers: “Elle en glissa un au fond de sa bouche, puis deux, puis trois, puis tout le flacon” (Moeschler 134). Her attempt is thwarted by Vincent’s timely arrival, and he comforts her like a baby: “Là, là, calme-toi! C’est fini, mon bébé, oublie ce vilain cauchemar” (Moeschler 135). It is indeed a nightmare for Héloïse, who reveals to Vincent that she also lost Ali’s baby while still in Algiers. Although she does not admit that she tried to kill herself or induce an abortion, Héloïse’s dédoublement
with Schéhérazade implies the like. In the case of Héloïse, rather, the fall is not from a cliff, but down a flight of stairs: “J’ai perdu l’enfant d’Ali...Je suis tombée dans les escaliers” (Moeschler 137). After this revelation, Héloïse’s codependent behavior continues as she asks Vincent to make love to her. Once again, she shifts from the pitiful child to the female object to play with Western stereotypes of weak, child-like women by making her depend on a man. With a runny nose and tears in her eyes, Héloïse asks Vincent to make love to her. Filled with both pity and desire for her, he does so:

Sur le parquet il la déshabilla. Elle se laissa faire, sans la moindre réaction. Lorsque la bouche du garçon caressa son ventre, elle commença à se détendre, et Vincent put sentir, contre son cou, l’accélération de sa respiration. Jamais il ne lui avait fait l’amour avec autant de passion. Nus au contact de sol froid, dans cette pièce sans décor, ils se débattaient dans une atmosphère irréelle. Après, le corps flasque, evacué de ce gonflement d’amour, ils restèrent l’un contre l’autre à regarder bêtement au plafond les fils électriques qui pendaient. (Moeschler 138)

While Héloïse is at the apex of her suffering, Vincent makes love to her with more passion than ever. In fact, his sexual desire is heightened by Héloïse’s increased anguish. What is particularly striking in this passage is Héloïse’s emotional withdrawal. She allows Vincent to take her without the slightest reaction at first. After having sex and completing
the binge-purge cycle of their bodies, Vincent attempts to save Héloïse from a fate equal to Schéhérazade’s. More specifically, he orders her to destroy her manuscript, which he, not Héloïse, entitled Schéhérazade, ma folie. Vincent’s decision to use the word “folie,” connoting both madness and extravagance, intrinsically links Héloïse and Schéhérazade to whoredom, since madness in the nineteenth century was associated with prostitutes who went crazy after contracting syphilis. For Héloïse, destroying her novel is an unthinkable act, as she cries “Mais, Vincent, c’est l’ouvrage de ma vie: je ne peux pas!” (Moeschler 140). It is indeed the work of a lifetime, the fruit of her labor, the novel-child she delivered at the beginning of Moeschler’s novel. And yet, in one final instance, Héloïse purges herself of her own poison: “Et Héloïse, en guise d’exorcisme, déchira le roman” (Moeschler 140). The reference to an exorcism is particularly noteworthy here, as it symbolizes the way Héloïse became possessed by her novel. The rewriting of Scheherazade as a tragic, frail, depressed woman rendered Héloïse incapacitated. Only by destroying the manuscript is Héloïse able to escape the tragic fate that she projected onto a once empowered female figure. By finally liberating the crazed Schéhérazade that she imprisoned within the walls of codependency and hypersexualization, Héloïse also frees herself: “Délivrée.
Héloïse avait enfin terminé. Point final” (Moeschler 140).
The life cycle of both Héloïse’s novel and Moeschler’s novel comes to an end as the author repeats the same two sentences with which she began.

Héloïse’s destruction of the manuscript also conveys a larger message: it implies the destruction of Orientalist myths of Schéhérazade. Through her use of parody, Moeschler gives birth to two Scheherazade figures, Héloïse and Schéhérazade, both of whom fall victim to excess. In addition to her critique of women’s dependency on men, Moeschler formulates a commentary on motherhood. She creates two heroines who fail to give birth to the babies they are carrying. While Schéhérazade aborts, Héloïse miscarries. In both cases, the young women suffer from either broken or dysfunctional families. As an orphan, Schéhérazade has no family to depend on; she only has Rawzi, the symbolic Muslim patriarch, similar to the Scheherazade of Les Mille et Une Nuits who had only her father, the vizier. Héloïse’s situation lies at the opposite end of the spectrum. Her parents are so lax and ultra-modern that she fails to develop adequate boundaries and coping mechanisms. By presenting these two extremes, Moeschler successfully constructs a parody of sexuality as well as of the family, both Eastern and Western, medieval and modern. The only form of creation that
survives is Moeschler’s critical novel, which proves that disempowering Scheherazade is fatal.
CONCLUSION

The Legacy of Scheherazade

While the exact geographical and chronological origins of Scheherazade and *Les Mille et Une Nuits* remain questionable, there is no doubt that the heroine of the frame story has experienced a late twentieth-century rebirth. Conceived in the Middle East during the ninth and tenth centuries AD, Scheherazade has come alive again in the contemporary Francophone context. For Fedwa Malti-Douglas, Scheherazade is a modern-day feminist who has been “[r]ejuvenated, manipulated, and redefined,” thereby transcending her original literary environment and becoming a major player on the world literary scene (“Shahrazad feminist” 40). Malti-Douglas also notes that:

just as Shahrazad found herself caught in a delicate game of sexual politics in the *Nights*, so does she now find herself the pawn in an equally delicate game of gender and creativity, but this time on a universal scale. Male writers, female writers, Eastern writers, Western writers: neither gender nor geography has kept them from exploiting the dynamics of the frame. (“Shahrazad feminist” 40)
As I have shown in the preceding chapters, Francophone writers of the last two decades, both male and female, have indeed reinscribed Scheherazade into the modern literary landscape while simultaneously reevaluating her womanhood.

In the context of the framestory of Les Mille et Une Nuits, critics such as Gérard Pirlot refer to the healing words of Scheherazade as “une immense ‘cure de parole’ comparable à celles auxquelles se soumirent les patientes hysteriques de Freud” (240). According to Pirlot, Scheherazade’s “talking cure” heals her own fear of sexual trauma while simultaneously acting as an antidote for the cuckolded sultan’s pathological behavior (241). For writers such as Leïla Sebbar, Pierre Karch and Vinciane Moeschler, it is more accurate to speak of a “writing cure” through which the reinvention of Scheherazade re-empowers the legendary storyteller. Beginning with the Orientalist art and rhetoric of the nineteenth century, Scheherazade has been continually objectified and disempowered in the West up until now. Through their unique rewritings of Scheherazade, all three authors manage to use narration as a means of redefining her sexuality and re-empowering her as an intelligent being.

In Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing (1991), Fedwa Malti-Douglas devotes a chapter to the importance of narration for Scheherazade, whom
she refers to as “queen of narrators East and West” (11). Malti-Douglas explains that “Shahrazâd uses narrative to redirect desire, and, hence, sexuality” (Woman’s Body 11). In other words, the female voice is more than a simple physical phenomenon; rather, it is “the narrative instrument that permits her to be a literary medium” (Woman’s Body 5). In Sheherazade through the Looking Glass (1999), Eva Sallis agrees with Malti-Douglas, stating that “the desire she manipulates is not sexual, it is narrative, substituted for the sexual” (Sallis 102). Far from a passive odalisque, Scheherazade is what Sallis calls “proactive” (Sallis 103). In the same vein, Leïla Sebbar, Pierre Karch and Vinciane Moeschler present new Francophone Scheherazades who are intelligent and creative. Through their inventive narrative styles and copious use of parody, all three authors succeed in disengaging the Western myth of Scheherazade as nothing more than a silent, sexy sultana.

Each of the three authors whose works I have analyzed in this dissertation reinvents Scheherazade in a different way. In her Shérazade works, Leïla Sebbar subverts Orientalist stereotypes of the passive harem slave through a Scheherazade figure who is the ultimate anti-odalisque. Contrary to the vapid, reclining nudes of the nineteenth century, Sebbar’s Shérazade is continually on the move. For Winifred Woodhull,
the nomadic quality of her existence is tied at every moment to the evasion of various forms of confinement evoked in and through the figure of the odalisque; the practices of veiling and seclusion in Algeria; Shérazade’s father’s attempt to translate those practices, in Parisian context, by strictly (and violently) regulating her movement in public space; the collusion between her father and the French police who, despite their mutual mistrust, together devise a description of the runaway girl to be tracked down; and a modern orientalism [sic] that at once exoticizes the girl as an object of fascination and embodies her in the supposed conquest of France by foreign invaders. (Transfigurations of the Maghreb 115)

In addition to fighting confinement, Shérazade repeatedly escapes physical and emotional rape. She ultimately proves that one does not have to choose between safety and sexuality. Like the Scheherazade of the framestory, Sebbar’s Shérazade makes use of ruse to disentangle herself from threatening situations without having to stifle her sexuality. When she finally reaches Algeria, Shérazade becomes a mother figure in her motherland. The young Beur runaway leaves France, her stepmother, behind, to nurture and protect children orphaned by an earthquake in Algeria.

In Le Nombril de Scheherazade, Pierre Karch also deconstructs Orientalist clichés through his parody of an exotic resort where the evening entertainer is a pseudo-transvestite storyteller named Scheherazade. Karch’s novel blends exaggerated excerpts culled from Les Mille et Une Nuits
with a criticism of the construct of gender. Sam as Scheherazade is an orphan whose sexual orientation is unknown. Furthermore, she is neither a drag king nor a drag queen, but rather a woman who pretends to be a man performing as a woman. The absurdity of this concept points directly to the fact that gender is nothing but a performance, as Judith Butler argues.

Vinciane Moeschler’s Schéhérazade, ma folie offers commentaries on modern perceptions of sexuality and maternity as well. Through her double rewriting of Scheherazade, Moeschler destabilizes faulty perceptions of the lush and languid East. At the same time, the author parodies Western preoccupations with consumption in the forms of food, drugs and sex. By presenting two narratives of excess, one in Medieval Baghdad and another in contemporary Algiers and Brussels, Moeschler offers a diachronic reproachment of female hypersexuality and Western misperceptions of the East.

The intermingling of sexuality and maternity has been a recurrent theme in this dissertation. In This Sex Which is Not One, Luce Irigaray critiques the three historical societal roles for women: to be either a mother, a virgin or a prostitute (186-87). Barbara G. Walker offers a more mythic and holistic interpretation by invoking the Goddess Triformis: Virgin-Mother-Crone (1018-19). The concepts of sexuality and maternity also lie at the very core of Adrienne Rich’s Of
Throughout patriarchal mythology, dream-symbolism, theology, language, two ideas flow side by side: one, that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, 'the devil's gateway.' On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood—that same body with its bleedings and mysteries—is her single destiny and justification in life. (Rich 34)

The essential problem present in Irigaray's, Walker's and Rich's observations, as well as in Sebbar's, Karch's and Moeschler's works of fiction, is society's imposition of a necessary choice between sexuality and maternity. The cultural construct of gender further complicates the issue for women. In "Mothers, Sexuality and Eros" (2001), Susan Chase and Mary Rogers note how mothers, particularly in American culture, are supposed to be "neither sexy nor sexual" (115). A similar situation occurs in the framestory of Les Mille et Une Nuits, in which Schahriar pardons Scheherazade because she is a pious and chaste wife and mother. However, a woman's identity cannot be based solely on a binary opposition between sexuality and maternity. In a contemporary context, Chase and Rogers explain this opposition:
The divergence between maternity and sexuality points to the modern Western mind/body split, which in turn separates spirituality from sensuality and cognition from emotion. Like other cultural binaries, these presuppose either/or thinking; one cannot be both spiritual and sensual, just as one cannot be both maternal and sexual. Maternal desexualization also derives from a cultural pattern whereby women’s passions and erotic energies are stifled or even denied in the interest (it seems) of attuning them more to men’s and children’s satisfactions than their own. (115)

The legacy of Scheherazade thus includes several facets. Scheherazade’s successors must continue to make their voices heard and reclaim their bodies without fear of their own sexuality or their ability to bear children. At the same time, it is paramount that women remain active as anti-odalisques, continually fighting the objectification and hypersexualization of women present in Orientalist translations of Les Mille et Une Nuits. In the introduction to Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing, Susan Muaddi Darraj emphasizes the disempowerment of Scheherazade in the West by past translators of The Arabian Nights:

Revered in the East as a heroine for distracting the sultan Shahrayar from his murderous rampage with intriguing stories (giving us “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp” and “Sinbad the Sailor”), Scheherazade became nothing more than a harem sex kitten when Antoine Galland, and later Richard Burton, introduced the Nights to the European canon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An intelligent woman, schooled in literature,
philosophy, and history, reduced to an erotic, shallow, sex-crazed body behind a veil—it happened many times with many Arab and/or Eastern women, including Cleopatra, Khadijah, and Aisha. (1-2)

Muaddi Darraj thus reiterates the Western myth of Scheherazade as previously discussed by Mernissi and calls for a need to reclaim the image of Scheherazade. By extension, reclaiming the image of Scheherazade implies a need for a new understanding of the female body in the West, which has been both territory and machine, virgin wilderness to be exploited and assembly line turning out life. We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, control, and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community, intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed. (Rich 285-86)

Future generations of Scheherazades must therefore strive to be dynamic intellectual pioneers who combat stereotypes and redefine womanhood in the outside world, just as Leila Sebbar’s, Pierre Karch’s and Vinciane Moeschler’s rebirths of Scheherazade do in the realm of contemporary Francophone fiction. By continually resisting patriarchal domination and refuting the binary opposition between sexuality and maternity, the Scheherazade figures of tomorrow can reclaim
women’s voices, power and identity in the twenty-first century and beyond.


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