

The Literary Use of Female Sexuality: Nedjma, Jacobs and Walker

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2007

By Emily Boone

Thesis Director
Dr. James

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Downes

Emily Boone
Lit 479
James
Fall 2007
Thesis

The Literary Use of Female Sexuality: Nedjma, Jacobs and Walker

The recent publication *The Almond* (2004) has come under harsh criticism for its overtly sexual nature resulting in little academic criticism. However, when examined in the context of other influential works such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, *The Almond* shows its ability to rise above the vulgar and to participate in a feminist dialogue in which female characters use sexuality as a tool for overcoming oppression. Both of these works, like *The Almond*, were not immediately embraced as literary classics, but were rather challenged by the public because of their racy nature. However, each work is now often used in literature classes and well respected for its contribution to feminist literature and literature in general. The way these women control the sexual arena calls into question conventional literary sexual gender roles. In these cases, the women nearly always end up on top.

Clearly, with descriptions of homosexuality, prostitution, and sexual brutality, Nedjma was aware that her novel, *The Almond*, would come under attack. Because it is still in its early stages of interpretation, those who are talking about this book, both negatively and positively are using the internet as their forum for discussion. One such reviewer has said:

The Almond went flying off the shelves in Europe, the readers hoping perhaps that Nedjma, the author, might open a window into a closed world, however, it appears to me that the content, especially descriptions of some of the barbaric rituals inflicted on young, African Muslim girls were written for shock value with the explicit and almost pornographic sex scenes included only to titillate. Lotus Reads

This blogger does also however admit that there are redeeming qualities making the novel worth not only reading but also analyzing academically. "What redeems it is its sometimes exquisite prose, the cultural commentary on the women in rural Morocco." Another source, an article posted by Romain Leick discusses the novel's reception in France as well as the Muslim world

using a pseudonym, she publishes an erotic tale divulging the secret sexual lives and cravings of Muslim women. The book was a phenomenon in France, but conservative Muslims have attacked it as trash. If her identity were revealed, she fears she would be stoned in her native Morocco.

Of course she knew that her novel would come under heavy fire from many conservative Muslims. She wrote it in French because she feared that no one would publish it in Arabic. This fear of being harshly judged is also probably the reason she chose to write under a pseudonym and hide her identity.

Her use of the pseudonym Nedjma is one of the dominant conversations revolving around *The Almond*. More than likely, it is a reference to Kateb Yacine's novel *Nedjma* (1957). Yacine (1929-1989) was an Algerian novelist, poet, playwright, and "one of the two most important French-language Maghrebian writers- writers without whom this

literature would not be what it is today" (Bonn 1). His most famous work, the novel *Nedjma* treats the quest for a restored Algeria in a modernist manner. Its use of multiple narrative voices and discontinuous chronology has influenced Francophone North African literature and writers elsewhere. *Nedjma.*, which incorporates local legends and popular religious beliefs, is set in Algeria, under French colonial rule. Owing to the fragmented style, not too unlike that of Faulkner's, the plot is difficult to follow. Nedjma, a name meaning "star" in Arabic, is a beautiful, married woman, with an uncertain past. She is loved by four revolutionaries, but she comes and goes like the seasons. The more they think they discover about her, the less they really know. Nedjma never changes, but the other characters pass through all the ages of life. Nedjma, portrayed in an ethereal way, embodies the attachment of traditional Algerians to their clan. "Critical attention has concentrated on the novel's unusual structure. The action is not chronological-the narration has similarities with the arabesques and geometric forms of Islamic art."

(Liukkonen)

The novelist's choice of the name Nedjma tells us many things about her and her literature. Most importantly, and least discussed, she is seizing power in naming herself. Words and names are very powerful, and it is the one with the most power who decides on the name. Choosing her own name, rather than being named by another can be seen as analogous to creating her own identity, rather than letting others create it for her. In turn, it protects her from persecution from those who might not approve of her subject matter, much like Harriet Jacobs did by using the pseudonym Linda Brent. By using an Arabic name, she is choosing to be openly associated with the Arab world. To further connect herself to her "clan," the name references a famous novel which is part of the foundation

of Maghrebian literary identity. Thus the information Nedjma has chosen to reveal about herself, and the public identity she has constructed tells us that she is a powerful Arab woman who means to participate in Maghrebian literature.

Despite what we can extrapolate from examining her chosen name, Nedjma makes clear her intentions both in her novel, and in interviews. She tells Riding in an interview for the *New York Times* that what first set her writing was her anger at the terrorist attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, and Washington's reaction to them.

Two fundamentalisms collided. The fundamentalists committed an irreversible, shocking, outrageous act. But the reply was also monstrous, shocking, outrageous. I saw the two sides speaking only of murder and blood. No one cared about the human body. I had to talk about the body, it is the last taboo, one where all the political and religious prohibitions are concentrated. It is the last battle for democracy. I didn't want to write politically, but I did look for something radical.

It is a cry of protest. (Riding 1)

Nedjma's purpose is social and political, addressing both local and global issues. In her choice to fight political and religious prohibitions, judgments, and oppression by using the body, she is also participating in a trend of feminist literature exemplified by Jacobs and Walker. She opens the novel in her prologue by saying:

This narrative is first of all a story of soul and flesh. Of a love that states its name, often crudely, and is not burdened by any moral standards other than those of the heart . . . I raise these words as one raises a glass, to the health of Arab women, for whom recapturing the confiscated mention of the body is half the battle in the

quest to healing their men. (Nedjma 1)

From sentence one, the audience is aware that she is writing from her own moral compass, the one of the heart. Rather than writing a novel moral centered around the standards of Islam, she shows that she is purposefully fighting against the imposition of other people's moral standards and she is using the female body as her battleground. She is speaking out for gender equality in her local realm, and also the right develop her own values in the global realm.

The protagonist in *The Almond*, Badra, is a complex one, going through many stages of development which are not necessarily presented chronologically in the novel. As a way of juxtaposing tradition and modernity, the novel is structured as a series of flashbacks of Badra's childhood in rural Imchouk intertwined with her journey through the more modern Tangiers. Each sliver of the past divulged in Imchouk serves to illuminate the current trials she faces. The story begins with Badra escaping from a terrible marriage with a man twice her age and then moving in with her aunt Selma in Tangiers. The very idea that she has to escape the traditional town for refuge in the modern one sets the reader up to believe Tangiers is better, yet it is not without its own demons and emptiness. This is one of the most wonderful things the author does with her novel- contrasting two totally different types of society without making an overt moral judgment.

When Badra arrives in Tangiers, her aunt demands to know what on earth has happened to have her niece show up unexpectedly, has someone died? Badra responds, "I did." Without needing any further explanation, aunt Selma knows that the marriage failed and invites her young niece inside. As Badra begins to explain to her aunt about how she

was forced into marriage, the novel shifts into flashback for the first time. This passage is filled with imagery relating Badra to an animal being prepared and inspected for sacrifice, which only makes the arranged marriage seem even more inhumane. At age seventeen, she was chosen "for [her] turn to put [her] head on the block" (29) by a forty year old merchant as his third bride (his first two failed to produce heirs). Badra explains her silent acceptance to her aunt in this way: "Why interfere with the well-oiled codes that change the *hammam* [bathhouse] into a *souk* [market] where human flesh is sold at a third of the price of regular meat?" (31) Not ready to blatantly defy the wishes of her own family, Badra wages a silent rebellion "without bleating" (30) against the arrangement by choosing the most unflattering clothing she can and tying her hair in rags.

Despite her passive aggressive attempts to rebel, she is wed. The night of her wedding, not knowing exactly what to expect as her sister and new mother-in-law undress her and prepare her for the arrival of her husband at the bed chamber, Badra waits in highly anxious anticipation. She only hopes that her husband will be as gentle as the women who massaged oils on her naked body earlier that morning in the traditional pre-marriage bath house ritual. Her sister advises her to "close your eyes, bite your lips, and think about something else." (III) The whole wedding party waits outside the door expecting to see confirmation of the consummation in the form of blood on a shirt. Unable to penetrate Badra, Hmed continues to bang up against her, causing her extreme pain. Finally, he calls his mother in to help the process. In a hideous climax, Hmed's mother ties Badra's arms to the bed posts, and Badra's sister holds her legs apart as Hmed "with one hard blow, broke [her] in two." (115) This brutal scene is not unlike the opening scene in *The Color Purple*, in which Celie is being raped by her "father."

In contrast, when Badra arrives in Tangiers, having already made the decision to escape one relationship, she is given the chance to make up her own mind whether or not she wants to be wed. Directly off the train, a young man offers to take her to her aunt's house since Tangiers is a dangerous city and women as beautiful as [her] should never walk alone.' (14) This young man immediately falls madly in love with her, and frequents the courtyard in front of aunt Selma's house, weeping and praying for her love. Finally, Selma takes some pity on the boy and allows him inside, where he proposes marriage. Selma helps her to decide if this young man, Sadeq, would make a better match for her than her "billy-goat of a husband" (49). Selma tells Badra that this young man will treat her well, but perhaps she would like something else as she has never been in love before:

If you want something else, something better or much worse, if you'd like volcanoes and suns... if you know how to swallow hot charcoal without groaning, if you want a thousand lives rather than just one... well then Sadeq is not for you. 50

Selma's grandiose speech serves as foreshadowing of the earth-shattering relationship she will have with Driss in which she does indeed swallow hot coal without a sound. Broken-hearted, the young Sadeq jumps in front of a train at the place where the two first met. His willing death serves as a contrast to the unwilling death Badra experienced in her marriage. He did not have a choice in love as she rejected him while Badra experienced an internal death being forced into a relationship where there was no love.

Thus Badra has decided to search for a relationship that may help her grow through love, and eventually falls for a man named Driss. After months of subtle courting, Driss manages to seduce Badra, despite the bad reputation she risks in

committing *zina* (extra-marital sex which is a very severe sin in the Koran that results in 100 lashes and exile). Unlike her previous sexual encounters, "he did not rape or assault [her]. He waited for [her] to come to him, in love" (95). Badra throws caution and her conservative upbringing to the wind as Driss helps her to discover all the ways her body can possibly be pleased in a sumptuous sex scene. The scene culminates in Driss crying on her shoulder and calling her a virgin (despite the fact that she has been married). Badra thinks of this event as the loss of her "real virginity. The virginity of the heart." (117) Like Celie, the experience of sharing love and emotion in a romantic relationship is a giant step in her growth as an independent woman. She has left behind those who did not care enough about her to treat her with respect.

Eventually, she feels that Driss does not offer her the respect that she deserves, as his promiscuity gets out of control. At this point, it is she who stops the contact between the two of them. It is she who ends the relationship. It is she who leaves. The final straw for her is when Driss relays to her the story of having intercourse with a young man named Hamid. She refuses to allow Driss in her home again, or to speak with him at all until he agrees to have Hamid over to dinner. She chooses the scenario for the climax of their breakup. However, it does not play out as she had imagined. Feeling that a woman had more control over the relationship, Driss acts out violently in desperation. He ties Badra up and forces her to swallow a hot coal saying "This is what Touhami the farmhand did to Mabrouka when she dared kiss me on the cheek at Grandmother's funeral. [He] is not more of a man than I am! Touhami knew how to hold on to his woman. He knew how to train her. Open your mouth!" (209). Badra does as she is told, yet this event does not enable Driss to hold on to his woman. He makes it clear that he is

physically dominant, but that does not break Badra's spirit nor her resolve to end the relationship. It merely exposes Driss' insecurity with being in a relationship with a woman who thinks and acts for herself.

Like Albert, Celie's husband, Driss comes around to understand that women have agency and opinions all of their own. By the end of the novel both Badra and Driss are transformed and their differences reconciled. This, however, is only possible once Driss accepts that Badra has power and will use it as she sees fit. Their relationship at the end of the novel is one in which Badra has a dominant voice, deciding what she will and will not do.

Though Harriet Jacobs is very clear about the fact that she is making all her own choices, she had different intentions in writing about her journey through slavery. She became active in the anti-slavery movement around the time of the Civil War. Her story was geared towards gaining the sympathy of white women who might help her fight for abolition, whereas Nedjma uses her novel as a weapon fighting not for abolition; but rather equality. Jacobs tried to reach these women by emphasizing themes of family and maternal values. Because of the attitude of prudery practiced at the time, Jacobs had to approach the issue of her extra-marital sex gingerly. (Andrews 125-126)

Harriet Jacobs used her sexual power as a form of freedom in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs insists that choosing a lover over being degraded repeatedly by her master is the only expression of freedom available to her. In the climate of Civil War America, moral values were taken very seriously (as they seem to be in all war times). "I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others." (138) If Jacobs openly called herself immoral, she would have no audience. Instead, she

justifies her sexual pursuits by saying that slaves do not have enough options to make moral choices. As she put it "the conditions of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible" (137). Jacobs could choose to be repeatedly raped in a tiny cabin, or she could take a lover of her own choosing. She chose to embark in a relationship in which she felt she had freedom. "There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment." (137)

Likewise, Badra (the protagonist in *The Almond*) risked everything by leaving Imchouk, her husband, and her family. Her brother Ali, was ready to kill her if she ever returned for disgracing the family honor. "Your brother Ali is still angry. He has sworn to purify the family honor by smearing yours across the streets of Tangiers" (58) In both cases, as a reader, I was happy to see them get away from a prison of continual degradation and rape, into an arena where these women could find something that at least *felt* like freedom. Nedjma also makes a similar move as Jacobs in justifying her writing, specifically about sex. Knowing well the criticism she would receive, she justifies the sexual nature of her novel in several ways: she sees sex as completely natural; she wants to revive the Arab tradition born out of the *Kama Sutra* and other erotic works Arabia was once so famous for; she also considers that talking about the body openly is a way to break down barriers that keep Arab women silent.

Early on in the novel, as the author reads what she has just written she responds to her own writing in this way:

I blushed about what I had written, then found it to be very right. What is to stop me from continuing? The chickens are cackling in the courtyard, the cows are

calving and giving lavish milk, the rabbits fornicate and give birth every month.

The world is turning. So am I. What should I be ashamed of? (7-8)

In her prologue, Nedjma offers this defense along with others for writing about the explicit subject matter that she has chosen. Despite earlier assumptions made from examining her pseudonym, we really do not know anything for certain about Nedjma. The possibility exists that she is a 60-something staunch republican man who gets some sort of gratification from imagining the sexual life of a Muslim woman. At this point, only she knows. Does this affect how we should read the text? Ultimately, the novel is fiction, and what the novel is saying does not change based on the background of the author. I mean, Marx was himself a member of Bourgeoisie. The prologue for *The Almond* works in a very similar manner, and as a work of fiction the questions of authorship do not inherently change the purpose, drive and intention of the novel overall.

Also in her prologue, Nedjma uses tradition as another justification for her subject matter. Sex is not only found in nature, but it is also part of an Arab tradition that has been largely forgotten. "Who, besides me, the Arab woman, has had it up to here with an Islam you have distorted?... So why shouldn't I speak of love, of soul and ass, if only to match your unjustly forgotten ancestors in the argument?" (9) In a very short space, she manages to critique the current state of Islam- how it treats women and how it forgets where it came from. She also brings up the fact that the art coming from the Arab world, particularly in literature was once known for its sensuality. This is, unfortunately, not the case any more with the resurgence of conservative Islam. Some critics, such as Destais, seem to have forgotten her salute to the foundation of Arab literature and lumped her in the genre of French Erotic literature with the likes of Marquis de Sade. Though Destais

makes a convincing and logical argument by examining the structure of *The Almond* in comparison with some of Sade's works, the instances of sexual encounters are not nearly as exaggerated as the types of perversion that can be found in Sade's work. Even if they were, her intention does not seem to be solely to entertain, but through her prologue she makes it clear that she has more socially and politically oriented goals. The sex in *The Almond* is not strictly erotic, it often used as a plot device which marks the growth of the characters.

Another critic, Nadia Elia, attacks Nedjma for her use of sexuality. She posits that Nedjma's novel only serves to further exoticize Arab culture by addressing "that favorite American topic: Muslim women's oppressed sexuality" (159) rather than discussing domestic violence, single parenting, health care and social welfare. However, the novel does address domestic violence, as this is exactly what the protagonist seeks to escape when she flees from Imchouk to Tangiers. By juxtaposing the violent deflowering of Badra after her marriage to a much older business man with her second deflowering with Driss in Tangiers, Nedjma shows us two different ways that intercourse can be treated, one violent and one not. Having the two instances presented back to back, though not chronologically, serves to highlight the injustice of domestic violence, which is indeed one of the issues Elia argues that Nedjma neglects to address.

In her prologue, Nedjma also discusses the importance of speaking out. One of her biggest goals is putting female voice out there, which is a huge part of the feminist literary tactics in the Arab world. "My ambition is to give back to the women of my blood the power of speech confiscated by their fathers, brothers, and husbands" (1). Accad posits in her article "Assia Djébar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion,

Maturity, Vision" that there are certain themes, forms, and techniques in NAME (North Africa/ Middle East) feminist literature in the past sixty years. The tradition started with novels concerning bicultural anxieties and the loss of identity without any resolution. The next generation took a more self empowering look at their problems in search of themselves. This trend, however, was thought to be too Romantic and self-centered and we now find ourselves in a new phase- rebellion in the face of oppression. In these novels, the main character escapes from "thing-hood" by "universalizing the feminist cause and expressing women's problems in the context of Middle Eastern and North African societies."(Accad 2) In her explanation of Assia Djébar and the evolution of Arab women's literature, Accad quotes Djébar as saying: "For Arab women, I see only one way to unblock everything. Talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today. Talk amongst ourselves. And look, look outside, look outside the walls and prisons" (1). Even though the rhetorical strategies of this genre may evolve, one tactic remains unchanged. Essentially, the most important thing for an Arab feminist author is to find a voice and speak out. Speaking out above the vociferous din of oppression, both religious and sexist, is the only way to bring these issues to the foreground, where they are seen as being important enough not only for subject matter of a novel but also worthy of being seriously addressed and rectified.

Thus Nedjma, along with her literary antecedent Djébar, chooses to speak out, loudly and unabashedly. *The Almond* exposes the private life of a Muslim woman, a world that most Americans, like myself, do not often get the opportunity to peak into. Through this window, the reader can see many gender fueled injustices but also the power women hold. Every conflict in *The Almond* revolves around Badra and her sexuality. It

becomes for Badra a tool for personal growth. Throughout the novel, her attitude towards sex shifts as she learns more about herself and what she wants. She is very curious as a child, experimenting with her cousins, both male and female. She becomes disgusted after the brutal rape by her husband. After escaping and realizing that she is indeed in charge of herself just as much as any man can be, she finally discovers the wonder of intercourse coupled with love. After she discovers that her lover, Driss, does not value sex, this entity that in the abstract world freed her from violent subjugation, in the same way she is broken hearted and the relationship ends. As a result of this pain, she tries to approach sexuality in an emotionally detached manner that passes the time but is ultimately not fulfilling. By the end of the novel, Badra and Driss are reunited on her terms, however Badra denies him the sex he craves, showing that she has come to totally own her sexuality and identity and she, and no one else, has control over that.

The female characters in *The Color Purple* are strong, opinionated and sexually powerful. This follows a vein of literary tradition that runs through Harriet Jacobs, and continues with Nedjma. Celie, in *The Color Purple*, discovered that she did not enjoy having sex with men and instead took on a female lover. Jacobs opened the door of sexual liberation for her by showing how much power rests between the legs of a woman. Jacobs' story makes an argument that sexual transgressions are not always unmoral while showing that the woman can just as easily be the one messing around, an occupation previously held mainly by men in respectable literature. Alice Walker follows this by portraying female characters that not only use their sexuality as a tool but also choose what sex they prefer to sleep with.

The Color Purple is sexually charged all the way through. The very first page

includes a description of Celie being raped by the man she believes to be her father. "First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry." (1) But as Celie gets older, she gains more control over what her body is capable of and how she wants to use it. Celie had been a married woman for many years before she even discovered her clitoris, but once she does her sexual revolution begins. Her friend and husband's ex-lover, Shug, coerces her to look at "her button" in the mirror. "I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this the right button to mash" (80). Shortly after Celie's discovery, she also discovers that she would much rather sleep with women than men. "Take off they pants, I say, and men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss 'em, as far as I'm concern, frogs is what they stay" (224).

The ability to choose a sexual partner is symbolic of freedom as it is for Celie in *The Color Purple*. As these characters in Jacobs', Walker's and Nedjma's works show that they have the freedom and the power to decide how to use their sexuality and that their decision makes the largest impact on the plot, the conventional literary roles available for female characters widens. Whereas, previously the literary role of female characters has been restricted to: obstacle, such as Dido in *The Aeneid*; damsel in distress, such as in literature of the King Arthur period; and object of desire such as exemplified by the Cavalier poets. The works of Jacobs, Walker and Nedjma challenge this narrow definition of a female's role in literature and move women to the foreground, often using their sexuality as a means to gain power and freedom.

The most fascinating thing to me about Walker's portrayal of Celie's choice to

sleep with women is that no one in her community seems to question it or find it odd in any way. The two of them move away together to Memphis and Celie starts a new life and a new business away from her husband Albert. Throughout the novel, Albert is one of the most stubborn and ignorant characters. He is the kind of guy that you just love to hate. Yet, by the end, he learns through Celie's sexual explorations. He learns not to treat people so severely and that all women, not just Shug have sexual agency. In the end, Albert and Celie bond over their shared love for Shug. "When it come to what folks do together with they bodies, he say, anybody's guess is as good as mine. But when you talk about love I don't have to guess. I have love and have been love... It don't surprise me you love Shug Avery, he say. I have love Shug Avery all my life" (237). Albert is transformed in a way by Celie's sexual experiences. He learns to see love without prejudices based on gender.

Shug Avery's powerful character must also be considered when looking at the sexual role women play. Shug is walking sex appeal. She sings in bars, dresses scantily and talks like a man. She can have any man or woman she wants, and she does. Throughout the novel she takes on four different love relationships which all begin and end when she chooses. She knows her body and how to use it to get maximum pleasure and cares primarily for herself. These are traditionally masculine qualities and I think that it is absolutely revolutionary to depict a woman in such control sexually. The very existence of the character Shug calls into question the validity of the statement that "boys will be boys but women must remain virtuous." Shug is successful in all of her conquests, sexual and business alike and people do not judge her harshly for her actions (except her father). She is just like that. Shug proves that there is no reason why a man can be

sexually dominant and promiscuous and a woman cannot.

Badra goes through a phase in which she acts very much like Shug. In fact she seems to have a phase that is analogous to most of the female characters in *The Color Purple*. Originally, she is forced into an unhappy and sexually unfulfilling marriage like Celie. When she discovers that she has the ability to choose her own lover, she does so and is consequently happier, feeling more fulfilled by her chosen lover. Badra and Celie women begin to develop a healthier sense of identity as they enter into a relationship in which they are treated with care and love. Upon discovering that they not only can be treated like humans and not slaves in a relationship but also that they deserve to be (similar to Jacobs' assertion that there is something akin to freedom in choosing a lover who has to win one's affection), both women become more assertive and demand respect from their partners. Loving interaction is the catalyst for both women to become more independent as Celie leaves Mister and starts making her own money by sewing and Badra gets an education, job and place of her own, luxuries often denied to women in conservative Muslim culture.

After the loving relationship fizzles out, Badra evolves into a character more similar to Shug. She becomes promiscuous, taking what she wants from both men and women and discarding them as easily as they come. Badra takes on a masculine attitude towards sex that is reminiscent of Driss' detached view. She is confident in her ability to control others by means of her sexuality and does so without regret. She has a very real power over people and is not afraid to use it. In the development of this character, this is not the phase in which Badra becomes self-actualized by any means. She is mostly power-drunk and addicted to the drink. However, the exploration of a Muslim woman

with this kind of attitude towards sex shows a perspective not commonly available in Arab literature much like the character of Shug Avery shows a role possibility for a woman that was rarely explored.

Another character in *The Color Purple*, Sofia, is an example of a woman in total control of her relationship. She talks back to her husband Harpo and does as she pleases. He is frustrated and feels emasculated because she will respect his requests. Because of this frustration, he attempts to beat her and ends up with far more bruises than she. In order to master Sofia, Harpo begins eating enough to make him big enough to sit on her if she does not do as he says. As a result of his physical change, the sexual attraction between the two fades. Sofia confesses to Celie

I don't like to go to bed with him no more, she say. Used to be when he touch me I'd go all out my head. Now when he touch me I just don't want to be bothered... I use to chase him home from the field. Git all hot just watching him put the children to bed. But no more. Now I feels tired all the time. No interest. 68

Shortly after this confession, Sofia leaves Harpo and doesn't return for years. When her sexual interest runs dry, she sees no need to stay and ends the relationship. Not once in *The Color Purple* do we see a man end a relationship because the sex is unfulfilling. That right seems to be reserved for the woman alone. Likewise in *The Almond*, Badra is the one in control of ending each sexual relationship.

Through Jacobs, Walker and Nedjma, the literary role of the woman morphs from the oppressed object to the powerful subject. These women have used their sexuality to move forward in life, whether by taking on a lover to feel some sense of freedom by escaping daily rape, birthing a child, or pursuing sexual conquests at the rate and standard

that only a man would in the past. These women use their sexual power to find personal freedom and do not find it immoral to use what tools they have. They feel no less entitled to freedom, happiness and sensual pleasure than any man. They choose to be as masculine or as feminine as they want, and it is the men who have to accommodate them.

This portrayal of strong women having to overcome their men has been strongly reacted against. Alice Walker received harsh criticism for portraying black men as too violent, and only capable of macho behavior. Many saw this as an affront to the black community. In a 1990 interview, Walker responds to this criticism by pointing out that in *The Color Purple*, both Harpo and Mister go through a transformation. People just do not seem to notice the transformations because they include non-macho behavior which is hard for many to identify as male behavior. However these transformations are clear as Harpo begins to nurture his father, falling asleep with his arms around him. Mister too finally comes around. Walker feels this is best shown by his appreciation of the natural world, as he finds little sea shells to give to Celie. It is when he finally appreciates seeing the natural world that he can finally *see* Celie.

This argument can also be used in defense of Nedjma's treatment of her male characters. Critics such as Nada Elia have accused Nedjma for further eroticizing herself and her culture, as well as further demonizing Arab men. Elia claims that Nedjma and other Arab feminist writers are "not necessarily advancing a mainstream 'feminist agenda' . . . Instead, Arab and Arab American women are engaging in what is, at best, a 'reactive' agenda" (159). Nedjma, however, explicitly states in her prologue that her intention is to heal both the women of her blood and also the men. Driss, the most prominent male in *The Almond*, undergoes a complete transformation by the end of the

novel. Nedjma seems interested in portraying the journey men must go through in order to heal, as much as showing how their actions negatively affect women. Driss, in the beginning of the novel, is a self proclaimed atheist. He was brought up in a modernized world where he looked at society, religion, and sex through philosophic and detached lenses. This is the ultimate reason for the rift between Badra and him. The fearless, faithless Dr. Driss is diagnosed with cancer near the end of the novel and for the first time starts to examine his life and his emotions. After a fourteen year hiatus, Driss finds Badra and begs her to take him to Imchouk with her. As she cares for him in his final days, he begins to address Allah directly, apologizing for his ingratitude. He finally connects his body, intellect, emotions, and faith just before his death. This parallels *the Color Purple*; it takes sexuality to heal the woman, and spirituality to heal the man.

It is an amazing thing for an American, like myself, to see a portrayal of an Arab woman not just in control of herself, but also in control of the relationships she participates in. This fascination surely comes from the fact that I have been inundated with portrayals of Arab women as oppressed, submissive, and as objects rather than subjects. This novel breaks that stereotype, much in a way *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* did during the Civil War. The sexually strong female characters in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *The Color Purple* are eye opening and enriching additions to the literary cannon. Perhaps, with the recognition of how Nedjma's female characters use their sexual power as a means to gaining independence and self-fulfillment like those of Jacobs and Walker, *The Almond* can join these works of fiction in the literary cannon someday.

Works Cited

- Accad, Evelyne. "Assia Djebar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature, Rebellion, Maturity, Vision." *World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University Of Oklahoma* 70.4 (Fall 1996) 801-812. Alice Walker. MacAdams, Lewis and Dorr, John. Video recording. Lannan Foundation Literary Series, 1990. *The Almond by Nedjma*. Lotus Reads. Sept, 26 2006. Blogspot. Oct. 3 2007.
<http://lotusreads.blogspot.com/2QQ6/Q9/almond-by-nedjma.html>. Andrews, William L., ed. *The Literature of the American South*. New York: Norton and Company, 1998.
- Baym, Nina, ed. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: Norton And Company, 2003.
- Bonn, Charles. "Kateb Yacine" *Research in African Literatures* 23:2 (Summer 1992) 61-70.
- Destais, Alexandra. "Mode de Representation du Corps Erotique de la Femme Muslumane dans L'Amande de Nedjma: Du Corps Contraint au Corps Libertain." *Nouvelles Etudes Francophones* 21.1 (2006) 63-78.
- Elia, Nada. "Islamophobia and the 'Privileging' of Arab American Women." *NWSA Journal* 18.3 (2006) 155-161.
- Hayes, Julie Candler. "Sade's Material." *Eighteenth Century Studies* 37:3 (Spring 2004) 469-474.

- Jacobs, Harriet Ann. "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl." *The Literature of the American South*. New York: Norton and Company, 1998. Leick, Remain.
- "Erotic Novel Breaks Muslim Taboos." *Spiegel Online International*
March 2, 2005.
- Liukkonen, Petri. "Kateb Yacine" Books and Authors. Pesonen, Ari. 2002 Kuusankosken Kaupunginkirjasto. <<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/kateb.htm>>.
- Nedjma. *The Almond*. London: Doubleday, 2005.
- Priebe, Richard. "Literature, Community and Violence: Reading African Literature In the West, Post-9/11." *Research in African Literatures* 36:2 (Summer 2005) 46-58.
- Riding, Alan. "A Muslim Woman, A Story of Sex." *New York Times* June 20, 2005.
- Sullivan, Joanna. "Redefining the Novel in Africa." *Research in African Literatures* 37:4 (Winter 2006) 177-188.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Inc., 1982.

Works Consulted

- Al-Nowhaihi, Magda M. "Resisting Silence in Arab Women's Autobiographies." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33:4 (Fall 2001) 477-502.
- Cooke, Miriam. "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies." *Neplanta: Views from the South* 1:1 (2000) 91-110.
- Erickson, John D. "Kateb Yacine's 'Nedjma': A Dialogue of Difference" *SubStance* 21:3

(1992)30-45.

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck., Esposito, John L. eds. *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*.

Oxford University Press, Oxford: 1998.

Orlando, Valerie. "To Be Singularly Nomadic or a Territorialized National: At The

Crossroads of Francophone Women's Writings of the Maghreb." *Meridians:*

Feminism, Race, Transnationalism. 6:2 (2006) 33-53.

Rita, Stephan. "Arab Women Writing Their Sexuality." *Hawwa* 4:2 (2006) 159-180.

Taves, Ann. "Spiritual Purity and Sexual Shame: Religious Themes in the Writings of

Harriet Jacobs" *Church History* 56:1 (Spring 1987) 59-72.

Woodhull, Winifred. "Rereading 'Nedjma': Feminist Scholarship and North African

Women." *Substance* 21:3 (1992) 46-63.