

## Islamic Versus Western Feminism in Assia Djebar's Women of Algiers in Their Apartment

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### Abstract

*This article questions Assia Djebar's Islamic feminism in Women of Algiers in Their Apartment. Albeit Djebar is known as an Islamic feminist, the analysis of her collection of short stories, from an Islamic feminism standpoint, unravels non - Islamic practices in terms of forced marriages, beating wives and unveiling women. Djebar did not use Islamic sources to defend women against these non - Islamic practices. Her work exhibits many western feminist ideas relevant to the French feminism of Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray. Consequently, the collection does not represent Islamic but Arab feminism that is greatly influenced by western feminism.*

**Key words:** *Islamic feminism, non - Islamic practices, Arab feminism, French feminism, western feminism, Women of Algiers in Their Apartment.*

النسوية الإسلامية ضد النسوية الغربية عند آسيا جبار في نساء الجزائر العاصمة في شققهن

### ملخص

يتساءل هذا المقال عن النسوية الإسلامية لآسيا جبار في نساء الجزائر العاصمة في شققهن. بالرغم من أن جبار معروفة بالنسائية الإسلامية، إلا أن تحليل مجموعتها من القصص القصيرة من وجهة نظر نسوية إسلامية، يكشف الممارسات غير الإسلامية من حيث الزواج القسري، ضرب الزوجات ونزع الحجاب للنساء. جبار لم تستخدم مصادر إسلامية للدفاع عن النساء ضد هذه الممارسات غير الإسلامية. حيث أن عملها يعرض العديد من الأفكار النسوية الغربية ذات الصلة بالنسوية الفرنسية لكريستيفا وسيكسو وإريغاري. وبالتالي، فإن المجموعة لا تمثل النسوية الإسلامية ولكن تصور النسوية العربية المتأثرة بشكل كبير بالنسوية الغربية.

كلمات المفاتيح: نسوية إسلامية ممارسات غير إسلامية، نسوية عربية، نسوية فرنسية، نسوية غربية، نساء الجزائر العاصمة في شققهن.

### *Le féminisme Islamique contre le féminisme occidental chez Assia Djebar Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*

### Résumé

*Cet article interroge le féminisme islamique d'Assia Djebar dans le texte Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement. Bien que Djebar soit connue comme une féministe islamique, l'analyse de son recueil de nouvelles, du point de vue du féminisme islamique, dévoile des pratiques non islamiques en termes de mariages forcés, de battements d'épouses et de dévoilement des femmes. Djebar n'a pas utilisé de sources islamiques pour défendre les femmes contre ces pratiques non islamiques. Son travail expose de nombreuses idées féministes, occidentales pertinentes au féminisme français de Kristeva, Cixous et Irigaray. Par conséquent, le groupe ne représente pas le féminisme islamique mais dépeint le féminisme arabe fortement influencé par le féminisme occidental.*

**Mots-clés :** *Féminisme islamique, pratiques non - islamiques, féminisme arabe, féminisme français, féminisme occidental, femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement.*

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### **Introduction:**

Throughout history and since ancient times, one of the most controversial and polemic topics is women's position in both fact and fiction. Their position provokes ceaseless debates and endless discussions over many years and all over the world: East, West and Middle East. Feminism, as a social movement defending women's rights, is a diversified and thorny topic that requires a special scrutinization and this examination is not peculiar to western feminism only; it is also necessary for Islamic feminism because of the novelty and recentness of the topic. It appeared around 1990's to speak about the plight of Arab and Muslim women. Arab and Islamic feminism are used interchangeably by many scholars, but the most oft - used naming is Islamic feminism. A myriad of Arab and Muslim authors are classified under this naming and called Islamic feminists and among them is Assia Djebar. Mariam Cooke and Haideh Moghissi consider her as Islamic feminist advocating Muslim women's rights. Thus, this paper seeks to scrutinize Assia Djebar's collection of short stories *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* to see whether the stories represent Islamic feminism or another version of western feminism. It is an analytical study from an Islamic feminist standpoint mainly the ideas of Margot Badran. Therefore, this research endeavors to show that Djebar's work represents Arab feminism that is greatly influenced by western feminism.

### **1- Theoretical Background:**

Defining feminism in general is an onerous task due to its variant schools. However, defining Islamic feminism is more difficult because it is connected to religion unlike secular western feminism. In fact, Arab feminism is used reciprocally with Islamic feminism, and a meticulous research shows that feminism used by Arabs is called Islamic feminism which is the most widespread name in comparison to Arab feminism. For example, some scholars using Islamic feminism are Haideh Moghissi (1999), Miriam Cooke (2001), Barlas Asma (2002), Jane Hiddleston (2006), Kahf Mohja (2008) and Badran Margot (2009). Scholars rarely use Arab feminism.

A throng of scholars attempt to define Islamic feminism, but the most oft - cited quotation is by Margot Badran who tried to give a succinct definition to Islamic feminism by saying that "it is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence"<sup>(1)</sup>. Thus, Islamic feminism stems from "the interpretation of Islam and gender grounded in ijtiḥād, or independent intellectual investigation of the Qur'an and other religious texts"<sup>(2)</sup>. It derives its principles and premises from Islam per se and religious scripts mainly Quran and Sunnah (Prophet Muhammad's teachings). Hence, gender equality is advocated by referring to religious texts and not secular ones. This idea is reinforced by another definition by Tariq Ramadan who defines Islamic feminism as "going back to Islamic sources and using Islamic principles to act against any kind of discrimination"<sup>(3)</sup>. What is salient in the aforementioned definitions is one consensual idea that Islamic feminism is definitely tied to Islam, and this is also apparent in Marnia Lazreg's definition by saying that "feminist discourse on women from the middle East and North Africa mirrors that of theologians' own interpretation of women in Islam"<sup>(4)</sup>. This means that the framework for feminists is Islam as ascertained by Ziba Mir - Hosseini defining Islamic feminism as "a gender discourse that was and is feminist in its aspiration and demands, yet Islamic in its language and sources of legitimacy"<sup>(5)</sup>. The aim of Islamic feminism is to liberate Muslim women from patriarchal cultural practices that distort the image of Islam which highly bestows women with different social, economic and political rights. Yet, the naming of Islamic feminism is open to a contentious debate concerning the compatibility between Islam and feminism.

Different scholars including Hamed Shahidian (1998), Haideh Moghissi (1999) and Shahrazad Mojab (2001) vehemently argue that Islam is an anti - feminist, misogynist and patriarchal religion. It is considered as the reason behind Muslim women's subjugation. The notion Islamic feminism is oxymoronic because Islam is against women's rights and

feminism struggles to get their rights, so the two terms cannot coexist. All in all, the aforementioned researchers agree on the inadequate relationship between feminism and Islam. For them, Islam oppresses women in all aspects of their lives.

Although much ink has been spilled on the idea that Islam is against feminism, few researchers defend Islam. Yet, what is surprising is that a non - Muslim American academic claims that Islam is not oppressive of women. Miriam Cooke states that "Islam, however, is not gender - specific but rather a faith system and way of life open equally to women and men"<sup>(6)</sup>. Another outstanding Egyptian researcher is Margot Badran. She argues that Islamic feminism stems from Quran's teachings and preaching and "many verses of the Qur'an that declare male - female equality" <sup>(7)</sup>. Thus, Islam is a feminist religion that advocates gender parity.

The present research sides with the view that Islamic feminism is not oxymoronic and Islam per se is not patriarchal and misogynist. Rather, some men's interpretations of Islam and Holy scriptures are chauvinist and anti - feminism. They attribute certain cultural patriarchal practices to the explanation of Islamic sources. Asma Barlas explains some reasons behind viewing Islam as a patriarchal religion: "Muslims read Islam as a patriarchy partly because of how they read the Qur'an, who reads it, and the contexts in which they read it...Where the Qur'an is concerned, a whole host of scholars has shown that it has been continually de - contextualized and re - contextualized in light of Muslim sexual politics. And this politics is overwhelmingly male - centric"<sup>(8)</sup>. This means that women's accessibility to their rights depends on how, who and where the Quran is read. Building on Cooke's and Badran's opinions and arguments, the research questions the possibility of having Islamic feminism in Djébar's collection of short stories *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*.

Concerning the appearance of Islamic feminism in Algeria, there were early feminist movements hither and thither but without a collective action. Noteworthy is that women veterans during the French colonial period were the early feminists in Algeria like Zohra Drif Bitat. After being preoccupied by the national independence and finishing military war, another gender war floated on the surface; the feminist war to get women's rights.

In fact, despite the scarcity of documents relevant to feminism in Algeria, the feminist movement can be divided into three phases. For Zahia Smail Salhi, the first phase of feminism in Algeria started in the 1940's. Women in the colonial period were raped and mistreated by the French colonialists and humiliated by the Algerian men who turned their anger from colonialists to their women. Thus, their miserable situation attracted the attention of certain Algerian parties and associations like the PPA (Le Parti du Peuple Algérien: The Party of the Algerian People), the UFA (Union des Femmes d'Algérie: The Union of Algerian Women in 1943) and AFMA (Association des Femmes Musulmanes Algériennes: The Association of Muslim Algerian Women in 1947). In this period, women participated in the national war as nurses and doctors, and they helped men by providing food and weapons. However, after the independence, men expected women to return back to their private sphere. Nevertheless, women consider men's expectations as a betrayal to the spirit of the Algerian revolution. As a result, women engage in many feminist activities to be independent. During Boumedienne's rule, Salhi explains that women were given a chance to be integrated in the society through 1976 National Constitution which grants equality between men and women. In addition, the number of women's groups increased especially to defend women's rights that are violated in the Family Code<sup>(9)</sup>. Hence, the major aim of early feminists is to assert women's voice in the society.

However, according to Valentine Moghadam, after many ups and downs and different scattered feminist attempts to establish feminist claims, the first period was after the colonial period around 1980 - 1983<sup>(10)</sup>. Feminists of the first period were mainly concerned with the social changes and modification of the Family Code to appeal to feminists' interests.

The second phase of feminism that was around 1990's - 2000 witnessed prodigious political turmoil and riots due to the rise of the fundamentalist movement of Front Islamique

du Salut(FIS).The latter suffocated women's movement and advocated women's stay in their private sphere rather than participating in the public arena. FIS regarded feminists as a threat to the Algerian Muslim society since they were viewed as spokeswomen for western feminists. "Public women were branded as the avant - garde of colonialism and cultural aggression" <sup>(11)</sup>. FIS movement acted violently and attacked all that is anti - fundamentalist including women in general and unveiled women in particular to establish an Islamic country. Women suffered from kidnappings, rapes and deaths especially working women, unveiled ones or any woman who dared to be in public sphere. Many feminist leaders were sentenced to death for example Khalida Messaoudi and Zazi Sadou the founder of Rassemblement Algérien des Femmes Democratiques<sup>(12)</sup>. The leaders of feminism vehemently condemned all that is fundamentalist and Islamic due to its association with the FIS movement that distorted the image of Islam by maintaining patriarchal practices and acting violently towards women. Algerian fundamentalists' deeds make people believe that "the major dangers of Muslim fundamentalism are not for the West or Western civilization or even Western interests, but for the Muslim world and the people who live there" <sup>(13)</sup>. They traumatized Algerian people and pushed them consciously or unconsciously to embrace western thoughts and eschew all that is fundamentalist and Islamic. In addition, fundamentalists' non - Islamic practices especially against women led to the appearance of Islamic feminism in Algeria. The aim of Islamic feminists is to show Islam as a feminist religion whose principles were violated by the Islamic fundamentalists. Hence, the mission of Algerian feminists is "to fight on two fronts - against both the government and the Islamist opposition"<sup>(14)</sup> and their framework is international. Consequently, "in the Muslim world, Algerian women are now amongst the very few who do not call for more progressive interpretations of Islam but for the separation of religion and the state" <sup>(15)</sup> after undergoing a nightmarish experience with fundamentalists who misrepresented Islam and contributed to the fallacies around it.

For Zahia Salhi, women did not give up their feminist dreams under the outrageous acts of fundamentalists. Rather, they react by being more active in the public sphere. They go to their jobs and participate in demonstrations like the demonstrations of the 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1992. "Their banners carried slogans which read, 'No Iran, No Kabul, Algeria is Algerian,' 'Algeria: Free and Democratic', 'Let's save the principles of the republic'"<sup>(16)</sup>. Women do not want to have an Islamic country like Iran. Furthermore, women create other organizations and join international groups as the Magreb Egalité Network in 1995. They also participate in academic works and publish books as Khalida Messaoudi's book *Une Algérienne debout* in 1995 to talk about women's plight in the Algerian society <sup>(17)</sup>. Hence, Algerian women work very hard to have their voice inside and outside Algeria.

The third phase starting from 2000 onwards witnessed women's claim for gender parity. What is striking in Algerian feminism is that many feminists participate in the political sphere by involving themselves in the parliament and participating in the presidential candidacy and this is an extraordinary matter in Algeria compared to other Arab countries.

The three phases of feminism in Algeria show that feminism is not much tied to religion and fundamentalists' actions against people in general and women in particular traumatized people to refer to anything Islamic. Feminists greatly criticize fundamentalists' non - Islamic practices against women. The historical development of feminism in Algeria shows that its practices are against fundamentalists' non - Islamic deeds and Algerian feminists are also influenced by the international doctrine of feminism. In general, feminists' premises do not stem from the teachings of Islam, rather, they refer to international feminist discourse. Zahia Salhi ascertains this idea by saying that Algerian feminism is a secular movement<sup>(18)</sup>. Hence, feminism in Algeria reflects international ideas about women's rights.

Apart from feminist activists, there are many Algerian feminist writers, but one of the most outstanding figures is Assia Djebar. She is a Western educated Algerian feminist starting her education in colonial Algeria when the bulk of Algerian women were prevented from education, then she continued her education in France. She is a writer who represents

Algerian women on an international level. She describes herself as “a woman with a French education and an Algerian or Arabo - berber, or even Muslim sensibility”<sup>(19)</sup>. In addition, many scholars and critics have described her as an Islamic feminist and among them Miriam Cooke and Haideh Moghissi. For Cooke, “Islamic feminists like Assia Djébar is engaging in Islamic discourse in a way that is empowering for herself as well as for those who read her life as a model for their own”<sup>(20)</sup>. Furthermore, Moghissi states that “Islamic feminists like Assia Djébar, Fatima Mernissi and Nawal El Saadawi are learning how to take advantage of the transnationalism of Islam to empower themselves as women and as Muslims”<sup>(21)</sup>. This means that Assia Djébar is regarded as an Islamic feminist referring to Islamic sources to enhance women’s rights and she is not described as an Algerian, Arab or Muslim feminist, but an Islamic feminist. Yet, are her literary works, mainly *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* representative and congruent with the tenets of Islamic feminism?

## **2- The Analysis of Djébar’s *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*:**

The collection of her short stories *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* is first published in French under the name of *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* in 1980. The title is taken from the painting of the French painter Eugene Delacroix in 1832 and it is used as a cover to Djébar’s collection. While Delacroix paints Algerian women as cloistered and passive beings, Djébar makes the painting speak by giving a voice to her women characters to portray a different painting from Delacroix. She spurs women to speak and in her stories, a woman can tell her story which was used to be a privilege for men only to record history. Hence, Djébar usurps the advantages of men in telling history and a woman can tell “her” story as well.

The collection *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* includes seven short stories that are divided between the past and the present. It deals mainly with issues of pre and post independent Algeria. Her stories center on women in post war Algeria in a traumatized society recovering from a gruesome war. It is not about war and heroism, but the outcomes of war especially in relation to women and their status in the Algerian society.

Most importantly, albeit Djébar is worldwide known as an Islamic feminist, her first story of the collection named *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* reveals many non - Islamic practices. In the light of the meaning of Islamic feminism which derives its principles from Islam, and it should be representative of Islam and Islamic countries, the story itself represents cultural aspects that are treated and considered as Islamic ones. Any international reader taking this story and knowing Djébar is an Islamic feminist assumes that any single act is relevant to Islam, especially in religious matters.

In the story, Hazab is a religious person who is supposed to represent Islam and Muslims. However, some of his practices are against Islam and women’s position in Islam. He thinks that women cannot be rational to study scientific subjects and he prefers sons to daughters though he is already a religious person, and is supposed to know that there is no difference between the two genders in Islam. Albeit he reads Quran that gives equality to men and women, his idea of minimizing the capacities of women is a cultural one and not a religious idea. He represents cultural aspects that distort the image of Islam. He is not the only one underestimating women, other persons having a daughter in the patriarchal Algerian society regard the situation as a tragedy, and this is what Sarah, the protagonist, mentions in her narrative about her mother: “My dead mother...her life in which nothing happened. One tragedy only: she had me, no other child, no son, no one else. She must have lived in fear of being repudiated then, I suppose”<sup>(22)</sup>. Being a daughter in true Islam is a blessing to both parents because Prophet Muhammad peace and blessing be upon him says: “Whoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favour his son over her, God will enter him into paradise”<sup>(23)</sup>. Islam grants daughters a respectful position from which Islamic feminism stems its principles. That is to say, Islamic feminism calls for women’s rights from Islamic sources of both Quran and Sunnah. However, in Muslim societies, having a daughter is considered as indignation, and this action actually goes to pre -

Islamic practices that humiliate daughters and women. In the story, there is no sign of treating daughters in relation to Islamic principles or any endeavors to reconsider their treatment according to sources of Islam which are the gist of Islamic feminism.

Concerning the institution of marriage in *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, it is culture based rather than an Islamic institution. To illustrate, Islamic marriage is based on a daughter's consent to accept her future husband and endorses freedom of choice. From Sunnah, "Ibn Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of God, Muhammed (peace and blessings be upon him), and she reported that her father had forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of God gave her the choice...(between accepting the marriage or invalidating it)" (24). In addition, the Prophet Muhammad also demands from the family of the girls the following: "Do not marry a non - virgin except on her instruction, nor marry a virgin except with her permission, and her silence may go for permission" (25). However, the story exhibits a forced marriage against the will of the daughter. Her father violates the daughter's right to select her husband. This is actually the story of Fatma, the water carrier in the hammam. At an early age of thirteen, her father forced her to marry. She states: "On one leave, my father arrived with another soldier; my aunts were silent. They were going to take me away, a bride of the beginning of time for the son of the strange, they said, the father had decided" (26). This is the first violation of Islamic rules concerning marriage. Then, her dowry which is supposed to be a gift to her is totally against Islamic teachings. Her "father gave[her] up for two bottles of beer in a garrison town"(27). This clearly shows cultural practices instead of Islamic ones because beer, wine and intoxicants are prohibited in Islam as stated in Quran: "O you who have believed, indeed, intoxicants, gambling, [sacrificing on] stone alters [to other than Allah ], and divining arrows are but defilement from the work of Satan, so avoid it that you may be successful"(28). So, Fatma's father transgresses Islamic rules by forcing his daughter to marry and receiving bottles of beer as her dowry. As a result for such violations, Fatma runs away from her husband's house. She says: "At last I ran. One night I fled without a veil, in a red gown and with these words inside me: run straight always straight ahead!"(29), then she turns to be "a duly registered prostitute" and she says: "independence celebrations: houses open, jubilant streets, I go out, I think I'm free" (30). After her work inside a brothel, she turns to be a water carrier in hammam. These ups and downs in her life are the consequences of her forced marriage which is against the principles of Islamic marriage.

Other non - Islamic practices include beating women. In the narrative, a master of the house beats his four wives like cattle. Beating women is not an Islamic practice. Rather, it is a cultural one. The most striking fact is that beating in the Quran has different meanings and in relation to the context of beating women, it means separation and parting, and it is not relevant to physical beating(31). The cultural practice of beating women is due to taking the word out of its context in the Quran so the meaning is skewed. Generally speaking, men take this verse as an excuse to beat women. "But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand" (32). Striking or beating wives in this context means separation between the couples as the last resolution after their separation in bed. Thus, relying on the Quran which is an important source of Islamic feminism, beating wives is not an Islamic practice.

In addition, characters of *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* drink wine and whiskey like Sarah's husband Ali and his friend the painter. Even Sarah smokes cigarettes. Such practices are not relevant to Islam, but to culture and Muslim's practices. Drinking wine is prohibited in Islam and it is a non - Islamic practice. Any reader, who is not knowledgeable about the difference between Islam and culture, will assume that such deeds are purely relevant to Islam.

In addition, the veil is an important indicator of Muslim women and it is part of their religious practices. However, in the story, it is regarded as a cultural heritage from the previous ancestors. "A little like certain women of Algiers today, you see them going around

outside without the ancestral veil”<sup>(33)</sup>. This means that the veil is considered as a traditional matter and not a religious one. Furthermore, female characters in the story indicate their freedom and liberation from patriarchal Algerian society through taking off their veil as in the case of Fatma and Sarah.

Another reference to religion that is apparent in the saying of Sarah is about patriarchy. She states: “this is the moment...that Ishmael will really wail in the desert: the walls torn down by us will continue to surround him only”<sup>(34)</sup>. From the quotation, it seems that Islam represented in Ishmael cloisters women inside their apartments, and it is perceived as an anti-feminist religion that is why women are eager to escape its shackles to keep only men there. In addition, Djébar’s use of Quranic names like Ishmael, Sarah, Ali, Aïcha, Fatma and Ramadan contributes to the misleading idea that the stories of Women of Algiers in Their Apartment represent Islamic feminism. Although the names are used in the Algerian society, and they are derived from the Quran, the behavior of such characters and the names refer to cultural practices. They are not relevant to Islam and Islamic behavior.

All in all, the recurrent motif in Women of Algiers in Their Apartment is the tendency to liberate women from being harem inside their apartments to be outside their apartments. This is the target of the whole collection of the stories that is why it is placed at the beginning of the collection. It gives voice to voiceless women, light to the shadow, and it unveils women’s bodies contrary to Delacroix’s painting.

The second story is entitled The Woman Who Weeps. Djébar’s story opens with a woman complaining about her husband and her miserable marriage inasmuch as he constantly beats her. She states: “so he beat up on me...He literally busted my face...I would walk and walk the streets of Algiers as if my face were going to fall into my hands, as if I’d pick up the pieces, as if the pain were trickling down from my features”<sup>(35)</sup>. He harshly beats his wife and there is no love or affection between these two spouses. There is a big chasm between them and the unnamed wife confesses: “as for me sleeping with someone every night was it might just as well have been my skeleton that lay beside him And she thought back upon all those years: ‘tombstone statuary’ she used to say to herself at those grave moments at bedtime of before”<sup>(36)</sup>. The story is mainly about the unhealthy relationship of the two spouses.

The non-Islamic practices in the story include the forced marriage of the weeping woman and her beating by her husband. She was forced to marry her cruel husband and such an act is against the principles of Islamic marriage which is supposed to be a backbone of Islamic feminism. As a result, there is a lack of communication and alienation between the two spouses. She spends her nights with him as a dead skeleton only. Worse than that, he harshly beats her to the extent of busting her face. However, what is presented in the story is an exaggerated beating representing cultural aspects rather than religious ones. The husband’s beating and mistreatment of his wife are non-Islamic practices in the light of Islamic regulations in dealing with women and wives. Prophet Muhammad in his farewell sermon says: “Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers”<sup>(37)</sup>. The prophet asks men to take care of women. Yet, what is presented in the story is Muslims’ practices of Islam and not Islam per se. Such cultural practices are not relevant to Islam and Islamic feminism.

While the first part of the collection includes two short stories, the second is entitled Yesterday and it contains: There is no Exile, The Dead Speak, Day of Ramadan and Nostalgia of the Horde. The first story is mainly about refugees in Tunisia in 1959. The narrator of the story is Aïcha. Concerning the non-Islamic practices in the story, it includes the tradition of arranged marriages. This is a recurrent motif in Djébar’s short stories where daughters and women are forced to marry; however, in this story, Aïcha challenges her family to repudiate her arranged marriage. Such a marriage without asking for the consent of the girl is against the regulations of Islamic marriage. Albeit they are living in exile, for Aïcha there is no exile because exile for her is when women remain living in the past, silent about their own legitimate rights. In the story, there is juxtaposition between the death of her neighbor with

her arranged marriage and this embeds a hidden meaning. Starting by the cries of death before the marriage proposal foreshadows the nature of forced marriages which are like death in itself. Another practice that is not relevant to Islam is when one of the women visitors says: “an honorable woman doesn’t work outside her home”<sup>(38)</sup>. This is actually a cultural practice rather than a religious one. Investigating religious sources reveals that Islamic teachings do not prevent women from working outside their houses. For example, the prophet’s wives used to work in the public sphere like Khadija working as a business woman and Oum Salama working as a nurse in wars. Other women working as nurses in the time of the prophet include Oum Salim (the mother of Anas Ibn Malik) and Rufaida Al - Aslamia. Thus, women can work as far as their work does not humiliate them. Consequently, the story is mainly about repudiating a forced marriage to foster women to get their usurped rights. For Aicha, there is no exile inasmuch as she manages to speak her mind and refuse her arranged marriage. However, her repudiation does not stem from her consciousness of her religious rights of choosing her own husband or justified by religion which makes her action far away from Islamic feminism.

The second story in the second part is entitled *The Dead Speak*. It is mainly about the funeral of an old lady called Yemma Hadda. The story includes certain cultural practices that are detached from Islamic feminism. For instance, Aicha is also obliged to marry her husband. She is usurped from her right to select her husband which is an absolute right for women in Islam. Presenting forced marriages as an aspect of Islam distorts the image of Islam especially for international readers. Djébar’s intention is not to misrepresent Islam. Yet, calling her an Islamic feminist means that she represents Islamic practices in her work. However, her text represents cultural patriarchal deeds that contribute to the international misconceptions about Islam.

The third story of *Yesterday is Day of Ramadan*, and it is the shortest story. It is mainly about the atmosphere in the early day of Ramadan. A non - Islamic practice in the story is the father’s refusal of his daughter’s work outside the house. Despite the fact of being a religious family, a daughter’s work is regarded as a taboo. However, there is nothing in Islam that prevents women from working in the public sphere. The father’s refusal is a cultural practice. “The father had made Nadjia stop her studies. Since the independence, she wanted to pick them up again, wanted to go the city and work, be a teacher or a student, no matter, but be working: a family drama was brewing”<sup>(39)</sup>. Such a practice is not relevant to Islamic teachings that are regarded as a cornerstone of Islamic feminism, and there is no reaction from the part of the daughter to repudiate such a practice.

The last narrative story in the collection of short stories and the part of *Yesterday is Nostalgia of the Horde*. It centers on a bitter story of the grandmother Fatima. She narrates her story to female listeners including Nfissa and Nadjia. She married at a very early age when she was twelve years old. However, her husband was twenty eight years. At that age, her family in law expects her to do all the house chores. In fact, the story is full of non - Islamic deeds that demonstrate the plight of Algerian women. A forced marriage, wife beating and despising daughters are both non - Islamic and anti - feminist practices. They represent cultural distortion of Islam. Fatima was forced at an early age to marry. Then, she was beaten by her husband without any reason or for trivial matters. She states:

Sometimes he would beat me Once for almost nothing at all: I had forgotten to put away a plate of cakes after breakfast. He came in at the end of the morning, noticed my mistake, grabbed the taimoum stone that he used for his ablutions. Next thing I knew, he threw it at my face! The stone cut open my forehead just above my eye and then my husband went back to praying imperturbably<sup>(40)</sup>.

Remarkably, Fatima’s husband beats her while she is praying. From an Islamic perspective, a man beating his wife is not acceptable. Such a practice is irrelevant to Islamic teachings in relation to women’s rights. Then her sisters in law asked her to tell a lie to protect the



husband, but the most astonishing action is that Fatima spent all the night crying softly in order not to disturb the husband. Such deeds are cultural and not Islamic practices.

Another non - Islamic practice is shown in another story narrated by Fatima. The story is about an old woman called Mma Rkia who gave birth to a daughter. Rkia's sister in law did not welcome the arrival of the daughter by saying: "A daughter! You've given us a daughter! only good enough for a race of slaves!"<sup>(41)</sup>. Unfortunately, the daughter died after few days. Mma Rkia states: "I've always thought that God took her away from me because of my sister's in law's curses; she belonged to the race of hired mourners, that evil one!"<sup>(42)</sup>. Albeit people of this house read and recite Quranic verses, practices of culture and the age of ignorance are still present by disdaining a daughter's presence. The sister in law's reaction of unwelcoming a daughter's birth belongs to pre - Islamic era where they used to practice infanticide. However, Islam bestows daughters with a respectful position. In addition, there is no change or comment on the situation of daughters to treat them in the light of Islamic principles. Consequently, such practices represent culture and not Islam or Islamic feminism.

The last part of *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* is entitled *Postface* which includes only one nonfictional narrative called *Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound*. It is mainly about the painting of Delacroix. Djebbar states that Delacroix paints his work out of his memory despite the fact that he stayed three days in Algiers. In the last part, Djebbar shifts her comments to another painting by Picasso. It is called *Women of Algiers* which is inspired from Delacroix's painting. Picasso paints a different image where women are naked and nude. Pierre Daix comments: "Picasso has always liked to set the beauties of the harem free"<sup>(43)</sup>. Unlike Delacroix's painting which gives an orientalist image about Algerian women out of his memory, Picasso's painting liberates women from their harem and even their veil and attire as well. Djebbar comments on Picasso's painting by saying:

For there is no harem any more, its door is wide open and the light is streaming in; there isn't even a spying servant any longer, simply another woman, mischievous and dancing. Finally, the heroines with the exception of the queen, whose breasts, however, are bursting out - are totally nude, as if Picasso was recovering the truth of the vernacular language that, in Arabic, designates the 'unveiled' as 'denuded' women. Also, as if he were making that denuding not only into a sign of 'emancipation' but rather of these women's rebirth to their own bodies<sup>(44)</sup>. Djebbar seems to share the same idea with Picasso of liberating women from their harem, and she advocates women's freedom in modern Algeria. She concludes her collection of short stories by an important idea that she turns around throughout her entire work. She states:

There is no seraglio any more. But the 'structure of the seraglio' attempts to impose its laws in the new wasteland: the law of invisibility, the law of silence. Only in the fragments of ancient murmuring do I see how we must look for a restoration of the conversation between women, the very one that Delacroix froze in his painting. Only in the door open to the full sun, the one Picasso later imposed, do I hope for a concrete and daily liberation of women<sup>(45)</sup>. Djebbar clearly embraces the painting of Picasso that stresses freedom and liberation, and she calls for women's dialogue and sisterhood that are absent in Delacroix's painting. She subverts Delacroix's painting by giving a voice to her women and aspires for better conditions for Algerian women, and this is the most apparent feminist idea in the final part.

The whole collection of short stories focuses on recurrent practices which are forced marriages of girls without their consents, beating wives and unveiling women. They are presented as aspects of Algerian Muslim society. Actually, they are real and present in the society. However, they are cultural practices and not Islamic ones. Djebbar's stories do not represent Islamic feminism inasmuch as literary texts revealing Islamic feminism deal with aspects relevant to Islamic practices or at least condemning social practices in the light of women's rights in Islam.

Forced marriages are cultural deeds by tyrannical fathers, and they are not part of the Islamic preaching. Islam bestows women with a total right to select their future husbands. A girl's consent in marriage is one vital pillar in Islamic marriage and the girl has the final

saying to whom she will marry. However, in Djébar's stories, many women are forced to marry, and there is no complaint on the basis of women's rights in true Islam. Forced marriages are presented as Islamic practices and in case there is refusal, it is because of women's awakening to feminist ideas and not their primary rights in their religion.

Beating wives is also portrayed as an Islamic practice in all the stories. Paradoxically, religious and pious men performing their prayers and reading the Quran beat their wives in a very excessive way. However, their exaggerated actions distort the image of Islam because the word beating in Quran has different meanings. Taking only the superficial meaning of the word beating, it means physical hitting. However, relating the word to its context, it means separation. Hence, Islam and its sources including Quran is not an anti - feminist religion, but men's interpretations of Holy Scriptures include patriarchal ideas that are regarded as Islamic views. Consequently, Djébar presents the cultural practices of the Algerian men and their misunderstanding of Islam in her literary work *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*.

In addition, unveiling female characters is not an Islamic practice. Rather, it is a western one. Veiling in Islam is an important pillar to protect women's dignity and honor, and it is considered as a means of liberation instead of alienation and oppression. Mohja Kahf explains the importance of veiling regardless of its religious importance by saying: "to be veiled is to partake in a primal power: I see without being fully seen; I know without being known. I shore up an advantage over what I survey. Like a goddess like a queen of unquestioned sovereignty, I declare this is my sanctuary, my haram, from which I will impart what I will, when I will"<sup>(46)</sup>. The veil liberates women from the social conventions and empowers them. It is a marker of one's identity and religion in any society. It does not conceal the presence of a woman. On the contrary, it accentuates her to be respected, valued and protected from males' gazes and harmful harassment, and most importantly to be regarded as a rational human being judged by her capacities rather than her physical appearance. In *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, taking off the veil is regarded as an act of controlling one's body, and it is a sign of subjectivity and liberation. In the stories, female characters like Sarah and Fatma remove the veil as a sign of their awakening to feminist ideas that are not relevant to Islamic feminism but to western feminism. However, unveiled women are regarded as fetishized objects and their bodies as an object. So, to gain subjectivity, women have to cover their bodies, the objects, to be considered as subjects. "By wearing the veil women reclaim the right to become people rather than sex objects. The veil bestows honour, dignity and respect to women, eradicates pornography and blatant violence directed to women and offers them protection"<sup>(47)</sup>. Although veiling is an important pillar of Islamic feminism, it is absent in Djébar's stories.

Consequently, Djébar's stories reveal certain non - Islamic practices. Some of her female characters show repudiation to such practices not out of their consciousness of their rights in Islam, but because of their feminist awakening. Danielle Dunand Zimmerman views that Islam does not include patriarchal practices that are the outcomes of culture and not religion per se. For Zimmerman, the aim of Islamic feminism is to indict cultural practices that distort the image of Islam and liberation from western feminism that call for repudiating religion and all its form including the veil<sup>(48)</sup>. Thus, Djébar's stories do not reflect Islamic feminism. There is no criticism to cultural practices in the name of Islam or any attempts to overcome them in relation to women's position in Islamic teachings that are the backbone of Islamic feminism. The empowerment of her female characters is the result of their awakening to western feminist discourse. Djébar consciously or unconsciously represents non - Islamic feminist practices. She is not herself claiming to be an Islamic feminist, but the use of such naming is problematic in the case of this collection of short stories, and it needs reconsideration.

In addition to portraying unusual female characters, Djébar presents a new harem for Algerian women. Albeit the collection of the short stories is entitled *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, she advocates a new idea of *Women of Algiers Outside Their Apartment* from the beginning to her postface where she embraces the vision of Picasso instead of

relying on Delacroix's painting which enslaves women inside their harem. Djébar states in the postface: "for there is no harem any more, its door is wide open and the light is streaming in the heroines whose breasts are bursting out - are totally nude"<sup>(49)</sup>. There is a call to embrace liberty and freedom in the western sense.

The analysis vindicates that the collection of short stories does not reveal Islamic feminism. In fact, Djébar's stories represent cultural instead of religious practices in relation to women's rights, and they reveal a great influence of western feminism mainly French feminism which is culture rather than religion - based feminism. It is generally acknowledged that French feminism is mainly secular representing culture that is far away from religion. Western feminists vehemently criticize religion that suffocates women's freedom, and they embrace liberal and secular ideas for their feminism.

Djébar is influenced by western culture, most specifically French culture because she is a western educated Algerian author writing in French and living outside Algeria. She grows up with the writings of French and foreign writers like Sartre, Beauvoir, Derrida and Cesare Pavese. She is mainly influenced by French writings in general and French feminism in particular by focusing on cultural practices rather than religious ones. In addition, the survey of the development of feminism in Algeria shows that it is mainly secular and detached from religion. Algerian feminism is greatly influenced by international secular feminist ideas.

Furthermore, it is known that French feminist works portray cultural practices; however, French feminist theory is concerned with feminism in relation to language and psychoanalysis. Elaine Showalter contends that French feminism is mainly psychoanalytic focusing on repression<sup>(50)</sup>. The three pillars of this feminism are Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. Albeit they belong to French feminism, each one uses certain notions in relation to language and feminism. Notably, Djébar's text *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* demonstrates certain aspects relevant to each scholar.

Hélène Cixous views that women were excluded from the realm of writing which is regarded as a male centered sphere. They have been victimized by believing that they are a dark continent and have been psychologically repressed by male - centered systems<sup>(51)</sup>. Thus, women must speak and write. Writing was mainly phallogocentric. So, women should use another kind of writing which stems from their bodies. She coined the expression *L'écriture féminine* or feminine writing which is a challenge to men's phallogocentric writing. Unlike men's writing which is called phallogocentric, feminine writing relevant to the richness of a female's body is complex and vast inasmuch as a female sexuality is in every part of her body. A woman's body and sexuality are no longer the Dark Continent. Rather, this continent can be explored. Cixous states: "her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours"<sup>(52)</sup>. While men's writing is singular and straightforward, women's writing is fluid, cyclic, rhythmic and open to different possibilities<sup>(53)</sup>. In addition, Cixous calls for the subversion of patriarchal discourse and empowering women by reconstructing a voice to women through language.

Cixous' ideas are clearly exhibited in Djébar's *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*. Both Cixous and Djébar play on the level of language. Djébar's language is cyclic, subjective and fragmented and represents *l'écriture féminine*. She states in the preface: "fragmented, remembered, reconstituted conversations, fictitious accounts stories translated from...from the Arabic? From colloquial Arabic or from feminine Arabic an excoriated language, from never having appeared in the sunlight Words of the veiled body, language that in turn has taken the veil for so long a time"<sup>(54)</sup>. In addition, Djébar's writing as a female writer is a daring attempt in a patriarchal society where a woman's writing is regarded as a scandalous action inasmuch as she usurps men's privileges in writing. Hence, Djébar's writing is a violation of the social conventions that regard writing as a man's sphere.

In addition to that, not only Djébar's act of writing, but writing history by a woman and about women's history as well is another extraordinary achievement. Actually, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* is mainly about women's participation in the Algerian national

war. Through her collection of short stories, Djébar gives women a voice and chance to narrate and write their stories to be integrated in men's "his"tory. Djébar's writing as a woman is to defy the traditional patriarchal dichotomy that privileges men over women. Her writings enliven the narratives of women that were forgotten by men. Thus, she contributes to the recordings of Algerian females' oral stories as part of Algerian history and by this she gives homage to the feminine experience in the national war and opposes the traditional narrative of history. She deconstructs the hegemony of men in writing history because history is no longer an objective account. Rather, it is subject to many interpretations. In advocating women's voice, one of the oft - quoted passages from the collection of short stories is the following that is articulated by a feminist character Sarah:

For Arab women I see only one single way to unblock everything: talk, talk without stopping, about yesterday and today, talk among ourselves Talk among ourselves and look. Look outside, look outside the walls and the prisons! The woman as look and the woman as voice not the voice of female vocalists But the voice they've never heard, because many unknown and new things will occur before she's able to sing: the voice of sighs, of malice, of the sorrows of all the women they've kept walled in the voice that's searching in the opened tombs<sup>(55)</sup>.

She clearly spurs women to speak and have their voice. Furthermore, according to Priscilla Ringrose, both Cixous and Djébar create a kind of *sortie* from traditional thinking about women and both of them alienated themselves from their patriarchal language which are German and Arabic respectively to write in French<sup>(56)</sup>. Both Djébar and Cixous repudiate patriarchal practices.

The other pillar of French feminism is Julia Kristeva who is known for using semiotic language that is distinct from its traditional meaning. She states that in the pre - Oedipal stage, a child develops a type of language called the "Semiotics" and another type known as "Symbolic" which is developed in the Oedipal and post Oedipal phases. While the first language is related to feminine writing, the second is linked to masculine writing. Hence, the semiotics, or feminine writing, exists prior to the symbolic order where the child develops his/her language. That is to say, the symbolic creates direct, logical meaning that is relevant to masculine writing; however, the semiotics generates cyclic, emotional feminine writing. Kristeva views that there is no difference between masculine and feminine<sup>(57)</sup>. For her, when a child reaches the symbolic order s/he may choose either feminine or masculine state. He may choose feminine state and feminine writing and she may choose masculine position and writing. Kristeva breaks the traditional dichotomies and binaries. The language for her is a process and a combination of both masculine and feminine which they used to be binary oppositions and this is part of the construction of a model of identity<sup>(58)</sup>. Kristeva deconstructs the binary opposition masculine/feminine.

Djébar also seeks to construct women's identity through using semiotic language. Her fragmented language in *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* shows her use of semiotic feminine writing or *l'écriture féminine*. Ringrose ascertains the idea by saying: "the narrative becomes even more fragmented...this technique of persuasion by creating presence through repetition rather than by logical, linear argumentation can be seen as semiotic, not only because it mimics the endlessly repetitive pulsations of the chora, but also because it mimics the rhetorical style of the maternal language, Arabic"<sup>(59)</sup>. Although Djébar uses French which is regarded as a symbolic paternal language, she inserts her maternal semiotic language, Arabic, in the whole collection. It is not pure French, but a combination of French and Arabic. For example, using Arabic words like *Hazab*, *taimoum*, *henna*, *douar*, *hadja*, *burnoose* and *kohl*. Relying on Kristeva's meaning of language, one might say that Djébar's language is a process and a combination of both masculine and feminine, semiotic and symbolic. The semiotic language is clearly demonstrated in the nonlinear narrative and cyclic nature of Djébar's language in addition to her diction and syntax. For example, apart from Arabic words, there are Arabic expressions and sentences translated into French then English, but

their origin is Arabic structure for instance "may misfortune stay away from us"<sup>(60)</sup>. Another case is Djébar's need to use maternal semiotic language to express certain ideas that the French language is unable to do so. Djébar states in *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* "Sarah stopped the tape for a moment, looking for an approximation of the Arabic formulas (is the ghorfa just the room up high)"<sup>(61)</sup>. Consequently, there are credentials of Kristeva in the work of Djébar and the collection of short stories is a mishmash of paternal symbolic French language and maternal semiotic Arabic language.

In addition to Cixous and Kristeva, Luce Irigaray's ideas are also present in Djébar's stories. Irigaray also advocates the use of *l'écriture féminine*. Her major concern is to give importance to feminine language in the early psychological development of any person. Irigaray calls for giving a place for feminine language in psychology and early psychological state that both Freud and Lacan denied. She suggests that to overcome the marginalization of women in western discourse, they should take certain steps to assert their position. Women should create their female language to represent their female state and body and this is what is known as *l'écriture féminine*. The second point, according to Irigaray, is that a woman's sex is not one like men's. It is plural<sup>(62)</sup>. The diversity of her sex has a great influence on her writing which is also variant and complex. Another concern of Irigaray is advocating mutual relationships between women.

*L'écriture féminine* is clearly present in Djébar's short stories through her cyclic nonlinear language. Djébar advocates the use of feminine writing through giving a chance to women to narrate their stories and speak up their minds. Furthermore, throughout the collection, Djébar advocates women's collaboration to overcome their difficulties. Unlike Delacroix's painting that demonstrates a lack of communication between women in harem, in Djébar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, Sarah ostensibly spurs Algerian and Arab women to talk and speak to each other. She wants women to collaborate with each other to talk about their plight by articulating a new voice that is feminist voice to liberate Algerian as well as Arab women. While listening to Leila, she also advocates collaboration between women. She says:

I see no other way out for us except through an encounter like this: a woman speaking in front of another one who's watching; does the one who's speaking tell the story of the other one with the devouring eyes, with the black memories, or is she describing her own dark night with words like torches and with candles whose wax melts too fast? She who watches, is it by means of listening, of listening and remembering that she ends up seeing herself, with her eyes, unveiled at last<sup>(63)</sup>.

Sarah boosts dialogue and communication between women to complain about their rights and to gain power in a patriarchal society. "Both this idea of reciprocity (of both women helping each other) and the language used to express it, strongly resonates with Irigarayan undertones"<sup>(64)</sup>. Consequently, Djébar's work contains Irigaray's feminist ideas.

Consequently, not only Djébar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* portrays cultural and not religious practices in relation to women's position in the Algerian society, it is also mainly concerned with the issue of language in relation to feminism. In fact, both ideas of representing culture and feminism with its link to language are a hallmark of French feminism. This shows the influence of western feminism on Djébar's feminism. In her collection, she states in an interview the following: "feminism has always been tied up with the question of language, but not just French. *Women of Algiers* is my first response to the official policy of Arabization, which, I loathe"<sup>(65)</sup>. Her choice of French language is also regarded as an essential element that led to her influence by western feminism. It estranged her from her people. Djébar herself considers French language as a liberating tool. Thus, being educated in western knowledge, living outside Algeria, writing in French and in relation to French and foreign authors, and addressing international audience are all regarded as factors to consider her feminism as a western feminism. All in all, "she was educated in the French system, and remains highly influenced by it"<sup>(66)</sup>. This means that her works exhibit traces of her western education and culture.

To sum up, the analysis of Djébar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* unravels that it does not represent an Islamic feminist work inasmuch as many practices are non-Islamic ones, and they are not criticized relying on Islamic teachings. Hence, the labels Islamic feminism and Islamic feminist are not suitable in relation to Djébar's short stories which do not show any compatibility between Islam and feminism. In addition, if Islamic feminism is used, it would be based on awakening women to their rights in Islam or criticizing cultural practices that distort the image of Islam. However, both ideas are absent in Djébar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* to be called an Islamic feminist work.

In addition, although there are certain Islamic literary works like Djébar's *Far From Madina*, it is difficult to represent religion in literary works while the Muslims' practices in relation to women's rights mingle between religion and culture. In fact, there is a big difference between Islam as a religion that advocates women's rights and Muslims as practitioners of Islam. Moreover, albeit Islamic and Arab feminism are used interchangeably, Arab feminism is more appropriate to reflect cultural practices of Muslim people in relation to gender issues. For example, the literary works of Nawal El Saadawi and Fadila Farouk fall under the category of Arab feminism. Islamic feminism exists, but not all literary works of Islamic feminists fall under the naming of Islamic feminism like Djébar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*. Furthermore, the use of Islamic feminism to reflect cultural practices also perpetuates distorted images about Islam especially if these practices are presented in internationally recognized literary works. They would add intentionally or unintentionally to the already existing stereotypes about Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular. Another reason for using Arab feminism is that not only Muslim people practice feminism in the Arab world, there are non-Muslims and secular people in the Arab world that can be included under the name of Arab feminism.

#### **Conclusion:**

At the end, Djébar's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* represents Arab feminism that is greatly influenced by western feminism mainly French feminism because it represents culture and not Islamic religion that is the backbone of Islamic feminism. Moreover, Djébar's feminism is linked to the issue of language and all these elements of culture, language and feminism are aspects of western feminism and most specifically French feminism. The collection of short stories reveals ideas of Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray in terms of *l'écriture féminine*. Consequently, the research vindicates that Assia Djébar's collection of short stories *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* is not an Islamic feminist work. Rather, it is an Arab feminist work that demonstrates traces of western feminism mainly French feminism. However, other future analyses of other masterpieces by Djébar may reveal Islamic feminism. Therefore, investigating the tenets of Islamic feminism in Djébar's texts and other Arab author's literary works is open to future research.

#### **Endnotes:**

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7-Margot, Badran, op.cit: 248.

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- 59-** Priscilla Ringrose, ibid.53.
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