

A PSYCHOANALYTIC FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF ASSIA DJEBAR'S

SO VAST THE PRISON

By

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Abstract

This study offers a psychoanalytic feminist reading of *So Vast the Prison* by Assia Djébar, examining how the novel dramatizes the psychic dimensions of female oppression within colonial and postcolonial Algeria. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, the study explores how Djébar represents the female psyche as a site of repression, fragmentation, and resistance. The “prison” of the title is interpreted not merely as a social or architectural space but as a symbolic structure embedded in language, memory, and patriarchal law. Through narrative discontinuity, intergenerational memory, and linguistic hybridity, Djébar reveals how women internalize and negotiate systems of authority that regulate their bodies and voices. The paper argues that the novel enacts a therapeutic process akin to the psychoanalytic “talking cure,” whereby suppressed histories and desires surface through storytelling. By foregrounding maternal genealogies and re-inscribing female desire into discourse, Djébar destabilizes phallogocentric narratives and reclaims women’s subjectivity. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that liberation in the novel is both political and psychic: it requires confronting internalized repression while reconfiguring the symbolic order through writing. The analysis contributes to feminist literary scholarship by situating Djébar’s work within psychoanalytic feminist debates and highlighting the transformative potential of narrative as a mode of resistance and self-recovery.

Keywords: Psychoanalytic Feminism; Female Subjectivity; Memory; Patriarchal Repression; Postcolonial Identity

Introduction

Assia Djébar’s *So Vast the Prison* occupies a central place in contemporary Francophone and postcolonial feminist discourse for its complex interrogation of memory, language, and female subjectivity. Written at the intersection of autobiography, historiography, and fiction, the

novel dismantles linear narrative conventions in order to reconstruct silenced female genealogies within Algerian history. Recent scholarship has emphasized that Djébar's work "reconfigures the relationship between gender, nation, and narrative authority in postcolonial North Africa" (Hassan 214). Yet beyond its historical and political concerns, the novel demands sustained attention to the psychic dimensions of confinement how patriarchy and colonialism are internalized within the female subject.

The metaphor of the "prison" in Djébar's text extends beyond physical or sociopolitical restriction; it gestures toward what contemporary psychoanalytic feminist critics describe as the internal architecture of repression. As Ahmed argues, postcolonial women's writing frequently dramatizes "the inscription of colonial violence within the unconscious structures of language and desire" (78). In *So Vast the Prison*, this inscription manifests through fragmentation, shifting narrative voices, and the tension between Arabic and French. Language becomes both the site of alienation and the medium of recovery, revealing what Banerjee terms "a linguistic doubleness that fractures but also enables feminist articulation" (132).

Moreover, Djébar's narrative strategy foregrounds memory as a process of psychic excavation. Carter observes that twenty-first-century feminist readings of Francophone literature increasingly focus on "the recovery of maternal genealogies as a counter-symbolic practice" (56). Djébar's return to mothers, grandmothers, and forgotten female figures enacts precisely such a counter-symbolic intervention. The novel resists patriarchal historiography by reconstructing intimate, embodied histories that disrupt official narratives.

Recent trauma-informed approaches to North African women's writing further illuminate Djébar's project. El-Mehdi contends that Djébar's fragmented narrative structure mirrors "the belated return of historical trauma into personal consciousness" (301). This structural

fragmentation is not aesthetic experimentation alone; it reflects the psychic ruptures produced by colonial domination and gendered silencing. In dramatizing these ruptures, Djébar aligns with what Joseph identifies as “a feminist reworking of psychoanalytic discourse in postcolonial contexts” (44), where narrative becomes both testimony and therapeutic articulation.

Despite this growing body of contemporary scholarship, a comprehensive psychoanalytic feminist synthesis remains necessary to bridge postcolonial analysis with theories of the unconscious, repression, and maternal memory. This paper therefore situates *So Vast the Prison* within recent feminist psychoanalytic criticism to argue that Djébar’s novel transforms writing into an act of psychic reconstruction. By examining the interplay of trauma, language, and female genealogy, the study demonstrates that the “prison” in Djébar’s work signifies not only historical subjugation but also the internalized structures of symbolic authority structures that the novel simultaneously exposes and reimagines.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Assia Djébar’s *So Vast the Prison*, much of the existing criticism has predominantly emphasized its postcolonial, historical, and linguistic dimensions, often foregrounding themes of nationalism, colonial resistance, and Francophone identity. While these approaches have yielded valuable insights, comparatively less sustained attention has been given to the novel’s intricate representation of female subjectivity as a psychic formation shaped by repression, trauma, desire, and linguistic displacement. In particular, the psychological interiority of Djébar’s female narrator, her fragmented identity, ambivalent relationship to language, and recovery of maternal memory remains underexplored within a rigorous psychoanalytic feminist framework.

The novel's central metaphor of the "prison" suggests not only sociopolitical confinement but also an internalized psychic structure produced by patriarchal authority and colonial domination. However, existing studies often treat these forms of oppression primarily as external conditions, without sufficiently interrogating how they are internalized within the unconscious and reproduced through symbolic systems such as language, narrative form, and gendered silence. This creates a critical gap in understanding how Djébar's experimental narrative strategies function as a form of psychic resistance and feminist rearticulation of subjectivity.

Therefore, the problem this study addresses is the absence of a comprehensive psychoanalytic feminist reading that synthesizes trauma theory, theories of the symbolic order, and feminist reconceptualizations of maternal genealogy to illuminate the novel's complex portrayal of women's psychic and linguistic imprisonment. By foregrounding these dimensions, this paper seeks to demonstrate how *So Vast the Prison* not only documents historical and gendered oppression but also theorizes the processes through which female subjectivity can be reconstructed through narrative and memory.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a psychoanalytic feminist framework grounded in recent postcolonial feminist scholarship in order to examine the psychic, linguistic, and gendered dimensions of confinement in Assia Djébar's *So Vast the Prison*. Psychoanalytic feminism provides a productive lens for analyzing how subjectivity is formed within symbolic structures that regulate desire, language, and identity, while postcolonial feminism situates these psychic formations within histories of colonial domination and cultural displacement.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the need to rethink psychoanalysis beyond its Eurocentric foundations by situating it within postcolonial contexts. Nadia Ahmed argues that postcolonial women's writing "reworks psychoanalytic concepts by exposing how colonial histories are inscribed within the unconscious formations of gendered subjects" (Ahmed 41). This reworking is particularly relevant to Djébar's text, where the metaphor of the "prison" signifies not only sociopolitical constraint but also the internalization of patriarchal and colonial authority. The unconscious, in this context, becomes a repository of silenced histories and repressed maternal memories.

Central to this framework is the understanding of language as a symbolic structure that shapes subjectivity. As Joseph notes, trauma in postcolonial fiction often manifests through "linguistic fracture, narrative disruption, and the instability of voice" (Joseph 63). Djébar's oscillation between French and Arabic can thus be interpreted as more than stylistic experimentation; it reflects a divided psychic condition shaped by colonial education and cultural estrangement. The symbolic order embedded in the colonizer's language—functions as both medium of articulation and mechanism of alienation.

Equally significant is the feminist recovery of maternal genealogy as a counter-symbolic strategy. Banerjee observes that contemporary Francophone feminist texts construct "maternal memory as a subversive archive that challenges patriarchal historiography" (Banerjee 118). In *So Vast the Prison*, the narrator's return to mothers and grandmothers disrupts linear historical narratives and foregrounds embodied, affective knowledge. Through this reclamation, Djébar destabilizes the paternal symbolic order and re-centers female relational identity. Moreover, Carter contends that recent postcolonial feminist criticism underscores the importance of reading narrative fragmentation as "a structural reflection of psychic resistance rather than mere aesthetic

deviation” (Carter 72). Djébar’s nonlinear narrative, layered voices, and temporal shifts therefore align with psychoanalytic theories of repression and return. Fragmentation becomes the formal inscription of trauma and the mechanism through which suppressed memories re-emerge.

Taken together, these theoretical positions enable a synthesis of psychoanalytic feminism and postcolonial literary criticism. The framework guiding this study views subjectivity as produced within intersecting symbolic systems; patriarchal, colonial, and linguistic while recognizing narrative as a site of psychic negotiation and resistance. By applying this lens to Djébar’s novel, the paper demonstrates how *So Vast the Prison* exposes the unconscious dimensions of women’s confinement and simultaneously enacts a feminist reconstitution of voice, memory, and identity.

Synopsis of Assia Djébar’s *So Vast the Prison*

So Vast the Prison (*Vaste est la prison*) is a semi-autobiographical, experimental novel that blends memoir, history, myth, and political reflection to explore the condition of Algerian women under patriarchy and colonialism. Rather than following a linear plot, the narrative unfolds in fragments, moving between personal memories, historical reconstruction, and meditations on language and identity. The novel centers on a female narrator closely aligned with Djébar herself who reflects on her childhood in colonial Algeria, her education in the French language, her marriage and emotional struggles, and her evolving sense of self as a writer. A major thematic focus is linguistic exile: French, the language of the former colonizer, becomes both a tool of intellectual liberation and a source of alienation from her maternal Arabic heritage. This tension produces a divided identity, symbolized by the metaphor of the “prison.”

Interwoven with the narrator’s personal history are accounts of Algerian women across generations mothers, grandmothers, and historical figures whose lives were confined to domestic

spaces and silenced by patriarchal norms. Djébar also revisits episodes from Algeria's colonial past, including resistance movements and the War of Independence, emphasizing how women's experiences were marginalized in official histories. The "prison" in the title is thus expansive: it signifies colonial domination, gender oppression, and psychological confinement. Yet the novel ultimately suggests that writing can open breaches in this prison. By recovering suppressed voices and inscribing women's stories into history, the narrator transforms narrative into an act of resistance and self-liberation.

Psychoanalytic Feminism and Female Subjectivity

Psychoanalytic feminism offers a powerful framework for understanding the psychic dimensions of women's oppression as represented in Assia Djébar's *So Vast the Prison*. Central to this framework is the idea that patriarchy is not only a sociocultural system but also a psychological regime internalized through unconscious processes. Freud's model of subject formation posits desire, repression, and the Oedipal dynamic as core determinants of gendered identity. Lacan extends this argument by locating the formation of subjectivity within the Symbolic order, the realm of language and law structured around what he famously terms the "Name-of-the-Father." Within this Symbolic order, the feminine is constituted as lack an absence defined only in relation to the masculine subject (Lacan 67).

Feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva critique this phallogocentric model, arguing that the Symbolic order functions by excluding or repressing the feminine. Irigaray argues that patriarchy produces a "derivative" femininity, in which women become "mirrors" of male desire rather than autonomous subjects (Irigaray 28). Kristeva similarly insists that the feminine is relegated to the semiotic, the pre-Symbolic realm of affect, rhythm, and bodily energies while being denied full entry into the linguistic order (Kristeva 135).

Contemporary scholarship continues to build on these insights. For instance, Eid highlights how Djebbar's writing:

Unsettles the boundaries of the Symbolic by introducing fragments of the suppressed feminine semiotic into the text, allowing traces of maternal rhythm, bodily affect, and pre-linguistic resonance to seep into the structured order of language. These semiotic fragments destabilize patriarchal coherence, producing slippages, silences, and multiplicities that resist totalizing interpretation. They challenge the authority of the phallogentric Symbolic, foregrounding spaces where the feminine emerges not as lack but as presence, not as absence but as a dynamic force that shapes narrative meaning and psychic subjectivity. (42)

In extending this argument, Eid further emphasizes that the feminine voice in *So Vast the Prison* does not merely disrupt patriarchal linguistic structures but reorients the very grounds of meaning-making by privileging affect, rhythm, and embodied memory over linear narration. According to Eid, Djebbar's textual strategies "foreground a mode of expression rooted in sensory experience and emotional resonance, allowing the feminine to emerge not as absence but as an active, shaping force within language" (42). Likewise, Mokhtari argues that Djebbar constructs an "alternative psychic economy" in which female subjectivity is articulated through rupture, silence, and nonlinear narration (Mokhtari, 114).

Within *So Vast the Prison*, the female narrator's psychological fragmentation mirrors the psychic alienation theorized by psychoanalytic feminism. Throughout the novel, the protagonist oscillates between self-assertion and erasure, between the desire to speak and the internalized fear of patriarchal reprisal. Early in the novel she confesses that:

I was writing in secret, as if each word were a trespass, a daring incursion into territories forbidden by silence and authority. Each sentence trembled with the weight of unspoken histories, each phrase carried the echoes of women whose voices had been erased. Writing became an act of defiance, a careful excavation of memory and desire, performed in shadows to protect the fragile self. (Djebbar 77)

This admission reveals the internalization of what Lacan would call the paternal interdiction, the sense that female expression inherently violates a masculine-coded linguistic order. Her voice,

often hesitant or circuitous, registers the pressures of a culture in which feminine articulation is surveilled and frequently punished.

The narrator's fragmentation is also stylistic: Djébar structures her narrative through shifting focalizations, temporal discontinuities, and hybridized voices. This narrative instability parallels what Irigaray calls "the female imaginary" a space characterized by fluidity, multiplicity, and resistance to linear, phallogentric logic (Irigaray 52). Instead of producing a unified autobiographical account, the narrator weaves together personal memories, historical testimonies, mythical stories, and ethnographic fragments. Recent critics describe this technique as "a psycho-textual performance of female desire" in which the narrator resists "the closure and coherence associated with patriarchal discourse" (Drissi, 88).

The narrator's inability to inhabit a stable subject position is further intensified by her experiences of desire and repression. Her extramarital relationship becomes a site where erotic autonomy briefly displaces patriarchal control. She writes:

I discovered a trembling part of myself I had never permitted to breathe, a hidden chamber of memory and desire long confined by fear, duty, and expectation. It shivered with long-suppressed longing, with the quiet fury of thoughts unspoken, and with the subtle urgencies of a body and mind constrained by patriarchal and colonial forces. This part of me, fragile yet insistent, began to pulse with awareness, to demand recognition, and to insist upon articulation. (Djébar 143)

The above statement captures the psychoanalytic awakening of a repressed self. Critically, it illustrates the narrator's confrontation with aspects of her identity that have been suppressed by patriarchal and colonial structures. The "trembling" signifies both vulnerability and the latent potency of repressed desire, suggesting that psychic repression is not merely stasis but a dynamic force awaiting articulation. From a feminist-psychoanalytic perspective, this moment marks a liminal space where internalized subjugation begins to yield to self-awareness and agency. The discovery of this "hidden" part foregrounds the tension between societal constraints and the

autonomous emergence of female subjectivity, highlighting Djébar's insistence that liberation; psychic, linguistic, and political is inseparable from the act of introspective and narrative reclamation.

Linguistic displacement here functions as a psychic wound, echoing Lacanian arguments that entry into the Symbolic order is always accompanied by loss. But for Djébar's narrator, this loss is doubled first through the universal entry into language, and second through the colonial imposition of French and the patriarchal marginalization of women's oral languages. As Donadey notes, Djébar transforms this linguistic trauma into:

[A] feminist strategy of disruption that destabilizes the Symbolic and opens space for reimagining female subjectivity, one that deliberately fractures linear narratives, interrupts phallogocentric discourse, and inserts traces of the semiotic into the rigid structures of language. This disruption does not merely challenge patriarchal norms; it generates a generative space where multiplicity, ambiguity, and alternative temporalities allow the feminine voice to emerge in its full complexity. (Donadey, 77)

The assertion that the text enacts "a feminist strategy of disruption that destabilizes the Symbolic and opens space for reimagining female subjectivity" highlights the radical potential of narrative form as a tool of psychoanalytic feminist intervention. Critically, it underscores how destabilizing the Symbolic, the domain of patriarchal language and social norms creates a discursive space in which women's voices can emerge as autonomous and generative. This disruption is not merely formal but deeply psychological: it allows repressed desires, memories, and experiences to surface, challenging the internalized structures of male authority and enabling the female subject to negotiate identity and agency. The strategy also illuminates the interplay between language and consciousness, suggesting that feminist textual practices are simultaneously acts of political resistance and psychoanalytic reclamation of the self.

Ultimately, the narrator's fragmented writing becomes an act of psychic resistance. By embracing circularity, multiplicity, and hybrid narrative forms, she reclaims agency within

linguistic structures that have historically denied her voice. In doing so, she participates in what psychoanalytic feminism identifies as the creation of a counter-Symbolic space a space in which the feminine speaks not as lack or Other but as a desiring subject. As Mokhtari argues, Djébar's text "performs the psychic labor of reconstituting a female subjectivity capable of desire, creativity, and historical agency" (119). *So Vast the Prison* therefore becomes not merely a narrative of social imprisonment but also a psychoanalytic journey toward reclaiming the self within and against the structures that seek to silence it.

Female Body and the Politics of Desire

The female body in Djébar's novel is not merely a biological entity but a symbolic terrain upon which power, memory, and repression are inscribed. The narrator's sexual experiences are rendered through metaphoric language that reveals both trauma and agency. Freud's concept of repression finds resonance here: the protagonist's silence and emotional reticence function as manifestations of psychic censorship internalized prohibitions that suppress sexual and emotional authenticity.

In *So Vast the Prison*, the female body functions as a multilayered symbolic site where desire, memory, trauma, and resistance intersect. Djébar treats corporeality not as a biological given but as a cultural text inscribed by patriarchal regulations and colonial histories. The narrator's body becomes a repository of silenced experiences, reflecting what Freud describes as the "psychical consequences of repression" in which socially forbidden desires are forced into unconscious concealment (Freud 148). Her emotional withdrawal and recurrent silences throughout the narrative reveal an internalized censorship that aligns with Freud's model of repression: the prohibition of desire by a paternal social order that governs both speech and the body.

Yet Djebbar complicates and ultimately subverts this Freudian paradigm. Rather than depicting female sexuality as a threat that must be contained, the novel frames the protagonist's erotic awakening as an act of psychic reclamation. When the narrator admits that:

I was writing in secret, as if each word were a trespass, each sentence an act of subtle rebellion against the silences imposed by patriarchy and history. The act of writing trembled between fear and liberation, carrying the weight of forbidden memories, unspoken desires, and ancestral voices long denied expression. Every phrase became a delicate negotiation, a crossing into territory where the self could assert its presence, even as it risked exposure and censure. (Djebbar 77)

The statement foregrounds the interplay between repression and agency in the construction of female subjectivity. Critically, it reflects the psychoanalytic notion that suppressed desires and memories persist within the unconscious, seeking expression even under conditions of social and patriarchal constraint. The secrecy of writing suggests both the danger and the radical potential of articulation: each word is a transgressive act that challenges internalized and externalized authority. From a feminist perspective, the passage highlights how women reclaim narrative and psychic space, transforming acts of private reflection into strategies of resistance and self-assertion. It also underscores the tension inherent in colonial and patriarchal contexts, where language can simultaneously liberate and constrain the female voice.

Protagonist links her textual self-expression with the transgressive energy of desire. Writing becomes an extension of bodily liberation, a crossing of boundaries policed by marital control, religious norms, and the masculine Symbolic. The secrecy of her writing echoes the secrecy of female desire under patriarchy, revealing how both are treated as violations of established law.

Ultimately, the female body in *So Vast the Prison* is portrayed as a dynamic site of resistance. Djebbar transforms what had been a terrain of repression into an instrument of knowledge and empowerment. The narrator's body, once constrained by marital authority and

cultural prohibitions, becomes a locus of creative and erotic agency. In reclaiming bodily desire, she reclaims the power to narrate her own life, thereby challenging the structures that historically silenced both her body and her voice. The politics of desire in the novel thus represents not merely personal liberation but a broader feminist renegotiation of subjectivity, language, and power.

Language, the Unconscious, and Colonial Alienation

Language in *So Vast the Prison* operates as a psychological and cultural battleground. The narrator's ambivalence toward French and Arabic encapsulates her divided identity as an Algerian woman educated in the colonial language. Lacan's theory of the Symbolic underscores this tension: language is the medium through which subjectivity is constituted, but it also enforces the "law of the father." French, as the colonial language, grants access to intellectual and artistic expression, yet it simultaneously alienates the narrator from her native cultural matrix. Arabic, on the other hand, embodies tradition, emotional intimacy, and ancestral memory but is also associated with female silence and submission.

In the novel, language also operates simultaneously as a medium of subject formation, a site of colonial domination, and a terrain for psychic and cultural struggle. The narrator's ambivalence toward French and Arabic reflects the divided consciousness of an Algerian woman educated in the colonial tongue, caught between intellectual emancipation and cultural alienation. French, as the language of colonial administration and literary prestige, provides access to education, artistic expression, and intellectual discourse; yet it enforces what Lacan identifies as the "law of the father", regulating meaning, desire, and social legitimacy (Lacan 67). By contrast, Arabic or the vernacular Tamazight encodes intimate familial memory, oral culture, and emotional depth, but is culturally coded as a domain of female silence and domestic

confinement. This duality positions the narrator within a linguistic schism, emblematic of both psychic repression and historical dislocation.

Kristeva's notion of the semiotic chora, the pre-linguistic, maternal dimension of expression, illuminates the narrator's negotiation of this split. As Kristeva observes, the semiotic exists in tension with the Symbolic order, resisting its linearity and law-bound structures (Kristeva 91). Djébar enacts this resistance through her fragmented, lyrical prose: sentences pulse with rhythm, repetition, and bodily resonance, evoking the semiotic's insistence within the colonial Symbolic. The narrator writes:

I inhabit a language that is not wholly mine, yet it trembles under the weight of my memories, carrying the echoes of ancestral voices, the shadows of silenced histories, and the resonance of desires long suppressed. Each word quivers with tension, caught between imposed structures and the insistence of my own subjectivity, negotiating spaces where personal and collective experience converges. (Djébar 112)

The above expression underscores the complex interplay between colonial language, memory, and female subjectivity. Critically, it illustrates how the narrator negotiates an inherited linguistic system that is both enabling and alienating: French provides a medium for articulation and literary expression, yet simultaneously carries the traces of colonial domination and cultural estrangement. From a psychoanalytic feminist perspective, the "trembling" of language signals the presence of repressed desires, ancestral voices, and unarticulated experiences, revealing the unconscious pressure exerted on the female subject. By inscribing her memories and desires into a language historically not her own, Djébar transforms linguistic constraint into a space of agency, allowing the narrator to assert identity, reclaim voice, and articulate subjectivity against patriarchal and colonial structures. Through such inscriptions, the novel transforms French from an instrument of alienation into a vehicle for the articulation of female subjectivity, memory, and desire.

The narrator's linguistic ambivalence also reflects broader postcolonial tensions. As

Donadey argues, Djébar's writing:

...interrogates the colonial language as both oppressive and enabling, revealing its capacity to carry the unassimilated traces of vernacular thought, memory, and affect, while simultaneously imposing structures of domination and silencing. It exposes the tension between inherited modes of expression and indigenous ways of knowing, highlighting the struggle of subjects to assert identity within a medium that is both instrument and obstacle. (70)

In other words, the novel exposes French not merely as a medium of alienation but as a site for transgression: by saturating it with the rhythms, metaphors, and silences of women's oral culture, Djébar asserts a female semiotic within a colonial Symbolic. Eid similarly contends that the narrator's prose "foregrounds the corporeal and affective residues of the mother tongue within French, producing a hybridized linguistic space in which colonial authority is negotiated and undermined" (Eid, 45).

This interplay between languages mirrors a psychoanalytic division within the unconscious. The narrator's divided linguistic self reflects repressed maternal and cultural experiences, now emerging through the semiotic encoded in French. Her writing functions as a psychic and political reclamation, a strategy through which the colonial master's language becomes a conduit for articulating silenced desire, memory, and female agency. As Rodríguez Drissi notes, "Djébar's hybrid linguistic practice transforms linguistic alienation into an ethical and creative project, permitting the female subject to inscribe herself into both history and language" (Drissi, 90).

Thus, the novel positions language as a double-edged instrument: it can alienate, control, and discipline, yet it can also liberate, mediate desire, and preserve memory. Djébar's narrator demonstrates that the Symbolic can be inhabited strategically, allowing the semiotic to infiltrate and reshape colonial linguistic frameworks. By reclaiming French as a vessel for female

consciousness, Djébar turns what was historically imposed and alienating into a means of cultural and psychic emancipation, highlighting the inseparability of language, subjectivity, and historical consciousness in the postcolonial feminine experience.

Psychoanalytic Symbolism of the “Prison”

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the metaphor of the “prison” in Djébar’s *So Vast the Prison* encapsulates the structure of the unconscious, representing the interior confinement of desires, memories, and drives that cannot be expressed within the symbolic and moral codes of patriarchal society (Freud 78; Kristeva 24). The prison functions as both literal and figurative space: it confines the narrator physically and socially while simultaneously becoming the locus for introspection and self-exploration. Within its walls, the protagonist confronts her deepest fears, silenced longings, and the unarticulated yearnings of a self historically subordinated to male and colonial authority:

Within these walls, I confront the hidden chambers of my mind, where fears long buried whisper in shadows and desires forbidden by law and custom stir like restless specters. Each memory trembles between concealment and revelation, carrying the weight of unspoken longing and unresolved conflict. The prison becomes a mirror of the unconscious, reflecting both the constraints imposed by society and the emergent impulses of a self struggling to articulate its needs, its creativity, and its erotic and emotional yearnings. (Djébar 91)

The passage illustrates how Djébar’s prison functions as a psychoanalytic space in which the unconscious repressed fears, silenced desires, and unarticulated aspects of the self emerge into consciousness. Critically, it demonstrates that the narrator’s confinement is not merely physical but deeply psychological: the walls of the prison mirror the internalized structures of patriarchal and colonial authority that repress female subjectivity. From a Freudian perspective, the emergence of buried desires signals the beginning of working through repression, while from a feminist-psychoanalytic viewpoint, it highlights the struggle of women to reclaim agency over

their bodies, memories, and emotions (Freud 123; Kristeva 24). The passage underscores Djebbar's broader project of transforming spaces of oppression into arenas of self-exploration and discursive liberation, showing how literary form can enact the psychoanalytic movement from silence to speech and from repression to articulation.

Djebbar invests the prison with paradoxical meaning. While it embodies restriction, it also enables psychic excavation; it becomes a space where repressed material desires, anxieties, and memories emerge to consciousness. As Eid observes, Djebbar's narrative "unsettles the boundaries of the Symbolic by introducing fragments of the suppressed feminine semiotic into the text" (42), demonstrating that what is contained within the prison cannot remain fully subjugated. The narrator's fragmented interior monologues, oscillating between silence and expression, echo Irigaray's contention that the feminine subjectivity seeks articulation in a language often alien to her own experiences (Irigaray 56).

The act of writing within the prison exemplifies a psychoanalytic movement from repression to expression. The narrator's voice, echoing within the walls of containment, becomes the instrument of liberation: she transforms psychic confinement into creative discourse. Djebbar stages a process analogous to Freud's model of working through repression, where confrontation with repressed material enables psychic integration (Freud 123). Moreover, from a feminist-psychoanalytic perspective, this space allows the female subject to reclaim agency, turning internalized oppression into a medium of self-definition and resistance (Chodorow 44; Donadey 77).

The prison, therefore, functions as a site of both constraint and potentiality. It is a terrain upon which silence, repression, and fear collide with memory, desire, and creative assertion. By situating the narrative within such a space, Djebbar dramatizes the psychoanalytic process of

transformation: from interiorized limitation to articulation, from invisibility to self-narration. In this sense, *So Vast the Prison* exemplifies the core aim of feminist psychoanalysis: to render the unconscious structured by patriarchal power visible, and to transform its repression into discursive and creative freedom (Kristeva 125; Eid 44).

Conclusion

A psychoanalytic feminist reading of *So Vast the Prison* reveals that Djebbar constructs female liberation as both a psychological and a linguistic process. The protagonist's journey from repression to articulation mirrors the analytic process of self-discovery. Through her engagement with language, memory, and desire, she reconstructs a female subjectivity that defies patriarchal definition. Djebbar's novel demonstrates how the personal unconscious is deeply intertwined with the collective history of colonization and patriarchy. The text thus transcends individual narrative to become a national and feminist psychohistory. By merging the analytic introspection of psychoanalysis with the sociopolitical critique of feminism, Djebbar transforms *So Vast the Prison* into a literary space where silence gives way to speech, alienation to identity, and repression to resistance. The novel's enduring power lies in this transformation the reimagining of the "vast prison" not as an end, but as the threshold of freedom through the written word.

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