Constrained Militants: Algerian Women ‘in-between’ in Gillo Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers and Bourlem Guerdjou’s Living in Paradise

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ABSTRACT Beur filmmaker Bourlem Guerdjou’s 1998 film Living in Paradise follows the divergent trajectories of a young Algeria couple (Nora and Lakhdar) living in the Nanterre shantytown during the Franco-Algerian war. Although the focus on Nora may seem on the surface to subvert the film’s male-centred narrative as her growing political conscience leads her to harbour FLN militants from the French police, the film’s gender politics are in fact complex and even problematic. Drawing on theories of women and nation in Algerian literature and film (Woodhull and Hadj-Moussa), this paper argues that Guerdjou is working within a stock set of images of women in Algerian society during the Franco-Algeria war, inherited from newsreels, documentaries and film classics such as Gillo Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers. Women of Living in Paradise embody contemporary Algeria’s irreducibly contradictory identity. Expected to be both courageous militant and guarantor of traditional national culture, they are, in fact, asked to negotiate the ‘betweeness’ (Woodhull) of Algerian society in ways that have proved disastrous for them immediately after liberation and that continue to haunt contemporary gender relations in their country.

Fist clenched, eyes ablaze, hair in the wind, her body moving defiantly to the sound of the drums and cries of the crowd around her, an Algerian women dances in the street, taunting the French troops and waving in her hands the flag of the nation that eight years of bloody civil conflict have brought into being. Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 revolutionary classic The Battle of Algiers ends with an image that like many of the film’s scenes has become a cliché, oft-reproduced and oft-excerpted as representative of the filmmaker’s ‘capturing’ of a critical moment in the history of liberation struggles around the world. Indeed, the scene is preceded by a blank screen with the words, ‘July 2, 1962: the Algerian Nation is Born’, in a way that conflates text and image, allegorising the anonymous dancing woman. It is she, the film suggests, who brings the nation into being, who carries forward the flag and whose presence signifies the beginning of modern Algeria. It is certainly a very powerful image, well known to critics and film scholars alike, functioning as dramatic epilogue which heralds the inevitable victorious outcome for the Algerian people in a film whose narrative is primarily concerned with events taking place several years

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earlier during the battle for the city of Algiers (January to September 1957). Yet it can be argued that in this last fiery, symbolically charged sequence, women and nation/flag come together in a way that has had a profound impact on the representation of women in anti-colonial liberation struggles in North Africa and elsewhere in the Muslim world. One cannot help feeling that through this image—the figure of the individuated local woman, symbolic repository of indigenous peoples’ liberating potential—a series of possibly conflicting signifiers has been fixed or sown together, as it were, by Pontecorvo’s film, in a way that forecloses the signifying process and optimistically positions women at the heart of the liberation struggle in Algeria. To what extent does this image and others like it that The Battle of Algiers has no doubt inspired participate in a unifying process that soothes over and sutures the wounds of what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam identify as an already fissured revolutionary process (1994)? To what extent do they deflect attention from tensions within and without, solidify and thus obscure women’s concrete experience in revolutionary movements?

More than 30 years after the release of Pontecorvo’s revolutionary classic, the figure of the female militant returns in second-generation Algerian filmmaker Bourlem Guerdjou’s Living in Paradise (1998), a poignant portrayal of the Nanterre shantytown outside of Paris during the Franco-Algerian war. Like Pontecorvo’s defiant dancing ‘indigène’, Guerdjou’s main female protagonist, Nora, is also filmed dancing and clapping against the backdrop of the Algerian flag as Algerian independence is celebrated in the shantytown, once again collapsing together woman and nation on the eve of a new political era. This nuanced portrayal of a community caught in a psychological and political no-man’s land thus mobilises the image of the female militant and women’s participation in the war in ways that both inspire and disturb given the glaring incommensurability between women’s anti-colonial militancy and their current and continued disenfranchise-ment in independent Algeria (Bouatta and Cherifati-Merabtine, 1994; Moore, 2003). The present article is inspired by a desire to go against this closing down of signification, to break up and disrupt iconic representations of female militants and to reflect upon the instrumentalising of the heroic virtuous women warrior. What are the stakes that underlie the use of images of women to represent war? Drawing upon recent feminist scholarship in the areas of nationalism and militarism, I will first explore the question of women’s presence/absence in military iconography (Cooke, 1993, 1995) and, more specifically, the Algerian woman’s role as ‘intermediary’ and ‘negotiator’ of conflicts among men in the context of the modern/tradition divide that has long characterised Algerian society (Woodhull, 1993). This will provide a background for a critical reading of gender politics in Living in Paradise. Although conceived in terms of heroic militancy, honour and courage, women in Geurdjou’s cinematic universe are essentially symbolic; beautiful, inspiring yet contained, in much the same way as Pontecorvo’s three famous fidayate or fire-carriers in The Battle of Algiers and the lone dancing woman with which this paper began.

Deconstructing the ‘War Myth’

Women’s relationship to anti-colonial nationalism has indeed been a problematic one to the extent that nationalist movements mobilise both women and feminist discourses strategically in order to further their goals. Much attention has to be paid in recent years to the ‘war of images’ within Islamic Fundamentalism which relies increasingly on the pious,
chaste Muslim women—guarantor of authentic values in the private sphere—to counteract increasing economic precariousness and western influence visited upon the public sphere. However, a similar mobilisation of women as repository of national identity, as synonymous with ‘national culture’ has been operative in Algeria long before the war of independence. For many, the politicisation of gender is at the heart of the national imaginary, seemingly indispensable to emerging postcolonial national identities and to revolutionary iconographies, or what Miriam Cooke would call ‘the War Myth’, that underlie them (1993, p. 201). In this context, Valentine Moghadam’s assertion that the focus on women does not subside but intensifies in times of revolution and upheaval is of added significance: ‘Because of their reproductive capacity, women are seen as transmitters of group values and tradition and as agents of sociability of the young. When group identity becomes intensified, women are elevated to the status symbol of the community and are compelled to assume the burden of the reproduction of the group’ (1994, p. 18).

Thus Algerian women’s participation in the war of independence was symbolic, not in the sense that their concrete participation is denied, but in that their participation was logical given the symbolic status conferred upon them (repository of Algerian national identity). Their participation was symbolic also in the sense that concerns us here, that is to say, that the reality of the large majority of women who fed, housed and clothed militants is largely glossed over, superseded and replaced by the story of a heroic few who in turn have become symbols of courage, heroism and enigmatic purity (e.g. the three women ‘fire-carriers’ immortalised in The Battle of Algiers to which I will return later). As Miriam Cooke reminds us, when the fighting is over and it demands to be described, ‘the War Myth’ becomes the ultimate ordering principal which interprets actions and protagonists. The details are not in themselves intrinsically important; they acquire long-term significance only if they find a context and narrator to accommodate them (1995, p. 10). In so far as this great myth is controlled by men, women who did not write of their experiences immediately afterwards have lost the war of symbols that always follows the war of weapons (p. 15).

In the case of Algeria, the war of symbols began long before the liberation struggle ended as demonstrated by recent feminist scholarship’s reassessment of Frantz Fanon’s essay on the veil: ‘L’Algérie se dévoile’, first published in 1959 and translated as ‘Algeria Unveiled’ in A Dying Colonialism (1965). Fanon’s essay remains of critical importance to the study of women and nationalism for, as Anne McClintock reminds us, he was one of the first male theorists of nationalism to take gender as its formative dimension (1997, p. 93). For him, the wearing of the veil during the early phases of the independence struggle in Algeria signalled women’s allegiance to cultural traditions that enabled the emerging nation to forge an identity. The veil thus became critical during the period of armed resistance to the French forces as both symbol—refusal to be ‘won over’ or ‘penetrated’ by western men—and instrument—as women began hiding explosives under their veils. Fanon’s essay might best be understood as a cultural and political intervention in a historical process in medias res that tries to enable the liberation of Algerian women in a way that complements nationalism and simultaneously challenges western ideologies (Woodhull, 1993, p. 22), defining women as the agents of a cultural mutation and the signifiers of a new postcolonial culture (Moore, 2003, p. 61). His text has nevertheless come under increasing criticism for silencing women or endowing them with a structural, auxiliary and, I might add, symbolic agency. In Lindsay Moore’s terms, scant attention is paid by Fanon to the gendered organisation
of Algerian cultural space before independence. This cultural cleavage was not only the result of French intervention even if colonialism led to its over-determination. Fanon underestimated the influence of ‘religio-cultural determinants and tenacious local forms of patriarchy’ in Algerian society (2003, p. 62). The question as to whether Fanon failed Algerian woman (in not properly analysing their situation) or whether they, in fact, failed him in not seizing the moment and becoming the new postcolonial woman he strove to bring forth remains a difficult one. Nonetheless, Fanon’s ideal Algerian woman is articulated in the realm of the not-quite-yet possible, an ideal image of post-revolution gender relations. 

Fanon’s importance for our purposes here is twofold: he remains, in ‘Algeria Unveiled’, the first theorist to attempt to interpret the possible significations of Algerian women’s participation in the war effort. Second, ‘Algeria Unveiled’ also constitutes the first link in a long process of mystification of that same participation as evidenced by dramatic descriptions such as the following which can be found throughout the essay: ‘Carrying revolvers, grenades, hundreds of false identity cards or bombs, the unveiled Algerian women moves like a fish in the western waters. The soldiers, the French patrols, smile to her as she passes, compliments on her looks are heard here and there, but no one suspects that her suitcases contain the automatic pistol which will presently mow down four or five members of one of the patrols’ (1965, p. 58). Long before historians were able to document women’s participation in the war effort, the image of the attractive, unassuming, yet deadly female fatale militant came to dominate discourses on women in the Algerian war. Any genealogy of the woman militant must therefore begin with Fanon. Women’s experiences in the Algerian liberation struggle, i.e. their motivations, background and concrete activities, have been only partially documented; much remains to be done and information gathering is difficult due in part to the fact that so few women are registered by the Ministry of War Veterans (Lazreg, 1994, p. 119; Amrane, 1999, p. 63). We do know that the majority of women who participated came from rural areas, which reflects both the limited urbanisation of Algeria in 1957 and the fact that a major part of the war was fought in the countryside. This ‘participation’ included organising food supplies and hideouts, working as liaisons, and guides, collecting funds from other women, obtaining medical supplies, washing fighters’ clothes and transporting weapons (Lazreg, 1994, p. 124). All of these activities, although a far cry from Fanon’s weapon concealing heroism, were cause for immediate arrest and torture on the part of the French authorities. We also know that the post-independence governments in Algeria sought to erase the memory of this participation (Bouatta and Cherifati-Merabtine, 1994, p. 197), all too quickly reinterpreted as a temporary aberration from women’s traditional roles. Once again, not having written immediately about their experiences has meant that Algerian women have had little if no defence against the extensive discursive manipulation at work in post-war Algeria. Yet, as Djamila Amrane herself admits, in the case of The Battle of Algiers, the story cannot be told without remembering the women who participated on all levels, including that of leadership (1991, pp. 114–16). Here, indeed, state-sanctioned historiography was faced with a dilemma. How to tell the story of this most important and decisive battle (a military defeat yet a political victory as it played a crucial role in galvanising support for the FLN) while simultaneously avoiding what Clarisse Zimra has called ‘the epistemological tear’ (1996, p. 827) that legitimising women’s political agency would cause to the fabric of this particular society. From a cinematographic perspective, I will contend that the image of the heroic, beautiful and courageous woman militant has
been the response to this dilemma, as a site of both celebration (of unparalleled patriotic duty) and containment (for male anxieties and fears around the transgression of gender roles).

Winifred Woodhull’s study of Algerian women in both colonial and postcolonial literatures by men and women provides a useful framework for analysing the complex discursive practices at work with respect to gender. Her rereading of the classics of Algerian literature, alongside the dominant discourse of western scholarship on Algerian women, leads her to assert that women are not so much excluded from national civic life—as the modernity/tradition, male/female, public/private binary model would explain—but are called upon ‘to embody contemporary Algeria’s irreducibly contradictory identity and contain the nation’s dangerous conflicts, at great cost to women’ (1993, p. 2). Torn, in the immediate post-war period, between the contradictory aims of the Algerian Revolution (to establish a modern socialist nation and restore pre-colonial indigenous culture), and, more recently, between competing notions of Islam (FIS defined fundamentalism and state-sanctioned regulated Muslim practices), the Algerian nation is in a state of perpetual social-cultural schizophrenia. Women have come to be associated in this complex cultural matrix less with ‘tradition’ than with Algeria’s ‘betweenness’, its traversal by irreconcilable modern and traditional currents (Woodhull, 1993, p. 10). Her analysis resonates most deeply with Algeria’s more recent religio-cultural divisions, but its relevance can be traced back to the immediate post-war period at a time when gender roles, once disrupted by the war, were in immediate need of realignment by the state. Women in Algeria have long embodied the ‘conflicting forces that simultaneously compose and disrupt the nation’; women are the ‘guarantors of national identity, no longer simply as guardians of traditional values but as symbols that successfully contain the conflicts of the new historical situation’ (Woodhull, 1993, p. 11). These conflicts are numerous and multifaceted, be they competing forms of Islam, the refusal to acknowledge the social consequences for Algerian society of significant changes in women’s education and employment, or increasing economic, social, religious and political divisions among men. As Woodhull explains, ‘in its effort, then, to mute economic conflict between men and forestall violent struggle between fundamentalist groups such as the Muslim Brothers and “progressive” nationalist factions, the state has fixed upon “the Arab and Muslim Algerian woman” as the indispensable unifying force, a symbol whose power is turned against Algerian women [. . .] in the name of national cohesion and stability’ (1993, p. 13).

For Woodhull, women in Algeria—far from being impotent victims of a monolithic patriarchy or religion—are actively and skilfully negotiating ways to affirm their own religious and cultural values while simultaneously protecting their own economic and social gains in public employment (1993, p. 5). Yet, conversely, the possibility of imagining a cohesive (though not unitary) national body relies on the rhetorical strategy of reducing the multiple, heterogeneous identities of Algerian women to a single female figure. The female militant has become one of the ways for the national imaginary to collapse down or compress women’s increasing complex and contrasting realities, channelling them within the safe confines of post-independence heroic discourse. The war of independence is, after all, the foundational moment of modern Algerian society. If, as Algerian feminists argue, the current political function of misogynistic customs is to forge solidarities among men who are otherwise deeply divided, while maintaining what is perceived as a crucial distinction between Muslim and western societies, it is reasonable to say that the oppression of women, or rather their ‘containment’, has become indispensable to
Algerian nationalism in its present form. What, then, has the national imaginary done with women’s multiple heterogeneous identities?

**Fidayate, Laskars and Domestic Conflict in a Nanterre Shantytown**

Bourlem Guerdjou’s 1998 film *Living in Paradise* brought to the screen a largely forgotten chapter of French history: the plight of thousands of immigrant workers living in the squalid shantytowns of Paris during the later days of colonial rule in Algeria. In adapting the autobiographical text by fellow second-generation immigrant Brahim Benaïcha, Guerdjou expanded upon the largely child-focused narrative of the book, adding the point of view of the young boy’s parents, Lakhdar and Nora. Guerdjou’s narrative foregrounding of Lakhdar and Nora offers a rare glimpse—albeit significantly more effective in the case of Lakhdar than of Nora—into the consciousness of these often one-dimensional figures who are rarely given their due in Franco-Algerian cinema. The film takes on the question of alternative and competing collective historical memories in that it features a dramatic recreation of the 17 October 1961 FLN-organised demonstration against the curfew imposed on Algerians living in Paris, resulting in the death of hundreds of Algerians at the hands of the French police. Although perhaps less well known to French historical consciousness, this event has become a veritable événement de mémoire for the Algerian immigrant community. The film’s portrayal of the 17 October massacre, the depiction of conflicts among Algerians within the shantytown, the use of Arabic dialogue and non-professional Algerian actors, the grayish newsreel-like quality of the cinematography and the painstaking recreation of the Nanterre shantytown based on archival footage (the film was shot in Tangiers) all concur to produce a stylised documentary-like aesthetic effect—similar in many ways to Pontecorvo’s ‘docu-realist’-style *The Battle of Algiers*. However, films such as *Living in Paradise*, like much of Beur cinema, have primarily been studied for the ways in which they contribute to debates about France as a plural society, challenging hegemonic representations of Frenchness while foregrounding the voices and subjectivities of ethnic others (Tarr, 2005, pp. 1–26). Placing Guerdjou’s film instead in the context of Algerian representations of history/national culture brings to the fore a whole new set of questions. How do filmmakers come to understand their country of origin? How have second-generation Algerians filmmakers remembered women in the war of independence struggle?

*Living in Paradise* follows the divergent trajectories of Lakhdar and Nora as they negotiate the paradoxes of living (and for Lakhdar, also working) in a country at war with their own. The conflict that ensues between them constitutes one of the main narrative twists of the film. Lakhdar’s dream to obtain a modern apartment for his family leads to isolation and causes him to exploit members of his own community. The film establishes Lakhdar as the narrative’s main focaliser through the frequent use of close-ups that show his reactions to the harshness of life in the shantytown, often without any dialogue. The spectator is made complicit with his desire for warmth and intimacy from his wife along with his dream to provide a decent home for his family and to see his son succeed in school. His literacy and mastery of French give him a certain status within the community; he writes letters home for the illiterate workers and acts as a translator for a French doctor who tends the wife of another migrant worker. However, Lakhdar is not a consistently sympathetic character. Guerdjou’s portrayal here of the immigrant father functions as a reaction to glorified depictions of ‘les pères magrébins’, hard-working and faithful,
sacrificing themselves for their families. Lakhdar’s motivations for bringing his wife and children from their village in Algeria—without warning Nora of the conditions in which they would have to live—appears decidedly selfish. His obsession with finding the money to pay for a decent apartment alienates him both physically and psychologically from his family and is behind both his refusal to devote cash to support the FLN and his construction of a makeshift hut to rent out to a fellow migrant and his family for extra income. Nora, who is led into FLN militant activities, appears at first to challenge her husband’s authority; yet her one-dimensionality or the lack of depth in the portrayal of her character ultimately makes her a figure of containment for conflict among men in the shantytown.

The film first depicts Nora in traditional dress in a sun-drenched sandy village (metonymy for the ‘homeland’), receiving a letter from Lakhdar which she asks her son to read. When the family arrives in Paris, the spectator sees her body from behind, covered in the haïk or white veil characteristic of 1960s Algerian. She is mute and passive although close-ups to her face attest to the disappointment she feels at the sight of the squalid living quarters she must now inhabit with her children and the realisation that her husband purposefully did not disclose the particulars of their living situation in his letters. The role Nora is called upon to play within the context of the bidonville is commensurate with our previous discussion of the gendered organisation of cultural space in Algerian society, i.e. women as negotiators of the ‘trauma’ of Muslims living in an increasingly westernised society. Much like the move from small villages to larger cities within Algeria has meant an increase in veiling and limits on women’s circulation, freedom and movement due to forced cohabitation in close proximity with strangers, Nora looses what freedom we can assume she had in her native village upon entering the shantytown: Lakhdar forbids her to leave the hut and to wash with the door open when a neighbour was found spying on her bare legs. Nora’s character indeed does become more interesting when she leaves the hut to explore Nanterre’s rows of corrugated shacks, loses her way and is befriended by Aïcha, a tall, determined woman in modest western dress and active FLN militant operating on French soil. A relationship between the two women ensues wherein Nora is drawn into militant activism. What appears at first to be a genuine rapport of female solidarity is, however, tempered by the fact that Aïcha is in need of recruits to carry out operations and that the newly arrived, disoriented and disillusioned by their new circumstances are often easiest to convince.

Aïcha’s initial reaction to Nora, ‘You smell of home’ (in Arabic, using the word bled for home), spoken with more than a tinge of nostalgia, posits Nora as the incarnation of authentic Algerian culture: the repository, the village-home, the need-to be-protected and preserved-from-colonial influence for which Aïcha and her fellow FLN militants are fighting. In a key scene, Aïcha visits Nora when Lakhdar is absent in order to collect funds for the FLN. Aïcha encourages Nora to go and do her washing with the other women and not to isolate herself because ‘life is hard here’. She also convinces Nora to help with the war effort for she is no longer at home. Aïcha’s suggestion that Nora is ‘elsewhere’, away from home, might lead the spectator to interpret her situation as potentially liberating and Aïcha’s remark as an invitation to act in a way that she would not otherwise, therefore suggesting that the French bidonville could become a place for a transformation in gender roles and a politicising of women’s identity. Yet the film is constructed around a complex reconfiguring of here/there, France/Algeria. While the men must negotiate between two spaces, the bidonville and the workplace which requires some contact with French society, the female characters in Living in Paradise do not really leave Algeria in a socio-cultural
sense. Through community networking and the parcelling out of shantytown territory, the social structures operative in Algerian villages were reproduced in France; those families originating from the same village were grouped together in the shantytown, thus creating a miniaturised version of the Algerian not-yet-nation on French soil. While Nora is ‘not at home’, the film suggests through Aı¨cha’s actions that this socio-cultural space is to be utilised only temporarily to further the nationalist cause. Women’s agency—much like our preceding discussion of Algerian women’s participation in the war—is once again accorded, conferred and structured by external forces for a common goal, that once attained, presupposes women will return to pre-revolutionary roles. Aı¨cha returns to Algeria with her husband shortly after these encounters with Nora, only further suggesting that this ‘away from home space’ is not to exploited for the transformational possibilities it may offer women in terms of gender hierarchies, but as a site of strategic intervention.

Aı¨cha and her husband’s characters are inspired by what is known of the French faction of the FLN operating in France during the war. Known as laskars, they were experts of the Paris metro system routinely dropped off weapons and leaflets in the trash cans which others came to collect (Graebner, 2005). At one point in Living in Paradise, Aı¨cha hands a suitcase to Nora and explains to her how to use the metro system, knowing that the young women cannot read the station names. Aı¨cha’s importance for the mobilising of the Algerians in Nanterre is captured in a dramatic sequence: alone atop a podium, her first in the air, the wind against her headscarf, she rallies the inhabitants amid resounding cries of ‘Make Algeria Algerian’ and leads them to Paris in what was to become the tragic demonstration-massacre of 17 October 1961. The staging of Aı¨cha, I will argue, bespeaks, at least in part, of the mobilising of a national cinematic intertext in the form of Pontecorvo’s The Battle of Algiers and, in particular, the famous ‘fire-carrier’ sequence during which three women masquerade in western dress in order to transport bombs to the European neighbourhoods of Algiers in 1957. My comparison is based here on reoccurring imagery, but also on the complex pleasure the spectator experiences in observing and identifying with the female militant (although the fact that Aı¨cha is allotted significant dialogue in Guerdjou’s film makes her a more empowering and complex character than Pontecorvo’s trio). My return to Pontecorvo’s classic here is also grounded in Algerian cinema’s lack of images of the female militant that would have been available to filmmakers like Guerdjou. As Mouny Berrah has noted, women were largely absent from Algerian fiction films about the war except in the figure of the martyred/suffering mother who mourns her dead son (e.g. Le vent des auxs, 1966, Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina).

Pontecorvo’s film dramatises the French military crackdown on FLN militants in Algiers and its effect on the civilian population. The film offers insights into the organisation of the various cells of the FLN and to the political motivations behind the movement. Although anonymous Algerian women are shown in various roles as supporters and providers of refuge for FLN militants, the film’s most memorable depiction of women is through the famous sequences during which the fidayate, ‘fire-carriers’ or sacred martyrs, disguise themselves in western dress in order to pass through French army checkpoints and ultimately plant bombs in the European section of Algiers. This sequence has been extensively analysed by film scholars for the way in which it plays with notions of masquerade as a subversion political ploy and underlines racial and sexual taboos of desire within colonial segregation (i.e. the women become desirable to the French soldiers when they masquerade as French women: Shohat and Stam, 1994, pp. 249–55; Orlando,
2000). Of particular importance is Lindsay Moore’s recent analysis of this sequence in conjunction with her rereading of Fanon’s essay. She points out that the spectator has limited access to the subjective experience of the women for they are not seen participating in the planning strategies of the guerrilla activities—and historical research suggests that they were (Amrane, 1991, pp. 114–16). The spectator’s interaction with these three women is mediated through their mirror images in the lengthy masquerade sequence: ‘The viewer is placed in a paradoxical situation; we witness the women in nominally intimate space but can only see the disguise of their bare faces. The overall impassivity of the faces and the lack of verbal exchange imply that the women are acting under orders to which they collectively subscribe. The spectator here engages with a social rather than a private consciousness’ (Moore, 2003, p. 65). While it is true that the film skilfully deploys identificatory mechanisms on behalf of the women, for example, eyeline matches in the bomb-planting scenes, ‘these insist primarily upon the humanity of the “terrorists” and so, once again, privilege identification with the Algerians as a national group’ (Moore, 2003, p. 68). Lack of access to female testimony, Moore contends, and the focus on the play of surfaces (masquerading as the West) conceals a lack of depth in the portrayal of these women.11

Contrary to the female militants, the male militants in The Battle of Algiers do not lack depth; they are psychologically motivated characters whose actions are to be understood within a well-defined paradigm of submission, alienation and eventual revolt. The film’s protagonist, Ali La Pointe, who dies in an explosion at the end of the film, is described by a voice over in newsreel-style at the narrative’s inception as an illiterate draft-dodger, in and out of juvenile court for acts of vandalism and civil disobedience. He becomes politicised in prison where he witnesses the execution of fellow prisoners and is subsequently tested and then recruited by the FLN cells operating within the Casbah. The film’s narrative logic thus situates and contextualises the male revolutionaries, motivating their actions. The women militants do not, however, receive the same treatment. Although Pontecorvo had written dialogue for the three women during the masquerade sequence, the dialogue was deemed to ‘ring false’ and was omitted.12 Thus, we do not have access to the women’s motivations. If there is a rise to consciousness on their part, it occurs off-screen. No indications are given with respect to the women’s past—age, place of birth—as with Ali La Pointe—nor does the film contain other scenes that would explain their desire to carry bombs for the FLN. As to whether the absence of any references to the women’s respective pasts hides a less than auspicious life led before the revolution is unclear. Their one-dimensionality, however, makes them ready fodder for symbolic representation: they become courageous heroines, untainted, uncomplicated figures of female militancy.

Research on women’s participation in the war effort has emphasised their contribution to what Miriam Cooke would call ‘the home front’. As previously discussed, their enormous contribution to the Algerian revolution is best measured through the hiding of FLN militants and activities such as nursing, food preparation and delivering supplies as well as consciousness raising among village women. Those women who were fidayate were a distinct minority. Yet Amrane underlines that those few women who engaged in combat had totally broken away from traditional female roles in Algerian society. They are depicted in photographs dressed in military fatigues or in long pants with short hair and thus in complete contrast to the image of the seductive fire-carriers in The Battle of Algiers. While it is true that the masquerading process was necessary in order to enable them to pass through French checkpoints, the camera’s lingering on their beautiful
faces during this sequence transforms the women into objects of visual pleasure. Further, the incessant, relentless drum music that stands in as dialogue during this scene serves to ‘Africanise’ these women, underlining the temporary nature of their adoption of western dress and placing them within an ‘indigenous’ context of frenzy and fury. The use of the same music at the end of the film during the famous closing sequence depicting the dancing flag-bearing woman establishes a crucial link between the two representations of Algerian women, positing them as both the source of an authentic Algerian local culture and restricting them through their silence. They are figures of containment; figures that galvanise, that mobilise, yet that allow identification without the complexity afforded to male characters. It is precisely this complexity that can and has led to divisions among men within the FLN. The Battle of Algiers glosses over this threat yet prefigures the troubles to come in post-independence Algeria in the words of key revolutionary Larbi Ben M’Hidi: ‘it is after the revolution is won that the real difficulties begin’.

Our discussion of the fire-carriers sequence provides a necessary framework within which to analyse women in Bourlem Guerdjou’s film. Like the fidayate, Aïcha in Living in Paradise is bereft of context that would explain her militancy. She is portrayed as a determined, courageous woman who is not afraid to stand up to men. Close-ups of her face and medium shots of her sober, yet elegant dress emphasise her height and beauty. Despite the way in which her character inspires and moves, she, too, functions in the film as a figure of containment, of this ‘in-betweenness’ articulated by Woodhull that was already present during the revolutionary period. Aïcha’s one-dimensionality also serves as a counterpoint to contradictions among men and ultimately serves, I will argue, to neutralise them. Indeed, the film foregrounds tensions within the Algerian community in Nanterre through the character of Lakhdar. He refuses to give money to the FLN ‘brothers’ in Nanterre, despite Nora’s insistence, which prompts the militants to accuse Lakhdar of wanting Algeria to stay French. When Nora forces him to contribute, he accuses her in turn of betrayal, demanding to know whether she is ‘with him or against him’. This scene serves to highlight the complexity of the situation of the Algerian migrants, unwilling to admit that they are fighting for the independence of an Algeria to which they will probably never return. Through Lakhdar, Guerdjou problematises alliances at once cultural, familial and national: he hints at mechanisms of coercion within the bidonville—people pay because they have to—and the ease with which the inhabitants are manipulated by their leaders, bringing to the surface divisions that will plague post-independence Algeria. Through Nora, these same shifting alliances simplified and collapsed. Her commitment to the revolutionary cause is neither fully explained nor contextualised. Nora must remain one-dimensional in order to ‘anchor’ Lakhdar, enabling him to negotiate the modern-tradition conundrum that defines his life in France.

The film’s mise-en-scène reinforces this gendered representational code. While male characters such as Lakhdar and his friend Rachid are individualised through close-ups of their faces and dialogue significant to establish their psychology, the women, with the exception of Nora and Aïcha, are represented as a collective unit. They perform various domestic tasks in groups but without any meaningful dialogue among them (the only other minor female character is a nameless neighbour suffering from mental illness). In one scene we witness Nora being watched by Lakhdar from behind. Her clothing and hair are so similar to her neighbours’ that the spectator can barely distinguish her from the others. The film thus ‘imbeds’ her within the larger female community in Nanterre. These and other scenes take on an ethnographic dimension in the way they
allow the spectator to view these women without giving access to their consciousness, such as the medium shot of Nora, seated, sowing the Algerian flag in the company of four other women and another of the women dancing during the arranged marriage of a neighbour. During the closing scenes of *Living in Paradise*, Lakhdar, having gambled away the family home in an effort to pay for the precious apartment, prepares to leave the shantytown, suitcase in hand. He stops and stands opposite a fence separating him from the rest of the inhabitants, fervently celebrating Algerian independence. Nora is at the centre of this image, clapping and dancing, the Algerian flag in the background. She becomes here Pontecorvo’s *indigène*: unspoiled, uncomplicated by material greed. Lakhdar looks to her to resolve his problems; she sees him, leaves the group, crosses the empty field and the couple is reconciled. It is she, the filmic argument suggests, who will bring Lakhdar back into the community, providing the unifying force that will heal divisions among men.

As Alex Hargreaves has convincingly argued, the strength and originality of *Living in Paradise* lies in the complexity of Lakhdar’s character: this mixture of strong and weak, silent and spoken, sympathetic and antipathetic features that make him such an arresting presence (2000, p. 350). Neither Nora nor Aïcha are afforded the same complexity. Aïcha’s departure prevents the film from further developing the friendship between her and Nora and from confronting the fate reserved for female revolutionaries after the fighting is over. Nora is last pictured sitting in silence with her family, aimlessly brushing her daughter’s hair. Through their one-dimensionality, both women serve as figures of containment that will supposedly heal the emerging Algerian nation. In sum, neither *Battle of Algiers* nor *Living in Paradise* shows women’s participation in the war effort to be transformative in the sense described by Miriam Cooke. Whether this perhaps explains why women were unable to resist the conservative tide that would come to characterise their situation in post-war Algeria remains to be seen. One thing is certain: as long as women are typically constructed as the symbolic bearers of the nation, they will be denied any direct relation to national agency. And Pontecorvo’s dancing *indigène* will remain forever an enigma.

**Notes**

1. This scene, like many others in *The Battle of Algiers*, was carefully staged and rehearsed; however, this knowledge does not appear, at least in my view, to take away from the raw and seemingly spontaneous energy that is offered on screen. For details on the production of Pontecorvo’s classic, see Joan Mellon’s (1973) *Filmguide to the Battle of Algiers*, and the booklet and additional audio-visual material included in the film’s recent three-DVD re-release (Criterion Collection, 2004).
3. For Miriam Cooke, Algerian women were not so much ‘let down’ by their male FLN counterparts as by themselves to the extent that they underestimated the importance of their actions as transgressions of prescribed gender roles. In comparing both men’s and women’s writings about the war, Cooke argues that: ‘[t]o the Algerian male writer, women’s military participation was filled with significance, but to the woman writer it was not. Whereas the women wrote of multiple, generally undramatic roles for women in the revolution, the men described only one that was mythically terrifying. Political, sociological, and now this literary evidence contends that during the revolution, Algerian women were not conscious of their opportunities, and they have not thereafter “allowed” themselves to be disempowered’ (1993, p. 185). Reasons for this are still unclear, although Cooke sites the absence of an indigenous Algerian feminist movement within which women could situate their struggle as a determining factor.
4. Two recent memoires by women militants—L’Algerienne (2001) by Louïsette Ighilhriz and Des douars et des prisons (1993) by Jacqueline Guerroudj—have begun to reverse this trend. I am indebted to Caroline Kelley (2004) for bringing these two texts to my attention.

5. Author’s emphasis.

6. Many early second-generation Algerian films tend to portray this first wave of immigrant workers as tired, resigned figures—impotent fathers and resilient, traditional mothers—lost in a passive reverie for a home to which they will never return and are unable or unwilling to articulate their histories (Tarr, 2005, p. 125).

7. The erasure of this event from French historical consciousness has been recently addressed in the placing, on 17 October 2001, of a commemorative plaque near the Pont Saint-Michel dedicated to victims of the police repression of what was in essence a peaceful demonstration. For a detailed discussion of the memory of 17 October 1961 as it relates to Algerian literature, see Seth Graebner (2005) and Anne Donadey (2001).

8. Indeed Guerdjou admits to having been ‘bothered’ by the image of the ‘good immigrant father’ and thus wanted to create a more complex character, an individual who tries to rise above his circumstances: ‘The situation was so difficult that the exploited could become, in turn, exploiters. Algerians robbed each other. One must not forget that there were 89 shantytowns on the outskirts of Paris and 25,000 people in Nanterre. There were also what we call “the sleep merchants” who rented barracks, hotels, cars, whatever they could. In the same sense, people were obviously for the liberation of Algeria but they resented paying for it. In this film, I broke with the strictly positive portrayal of the first-generation migrant; I try to break away from clichés […]’ (interview with Didier Peron, Liberation, 17 March 1999).

9. Despite being directed by an Italian filmmaker and co-produced in Italy, Battle of Algiers is based on a script by FLN militant Yacef Saadi and sanctioned by post-independent Algerian government authorities. The film is generally perceived by Algerian intellectuals to this day as ‘une commande’ for Pontecorvo, i.e. a successful cinematographic rendering of an idea emanating from an Algerian historical consciousness.

10. Berrah’s condemnation of Algerian cinema for its erasure of women is virulent: ‘In a country where there were heroines of the caliber of Djamlia Bouhired, Jacqueline Guerroudj, Djamilia Boupache, Hassiba Ben Ali, Ouïrda Meddad, Anne Steiner, Zohra Drif, Meriem Zerdani, Baya Hocine, and many others, in a country that ordinarily loves heroes, all of these women were erased from history—with one exception, the extraordinary Djamilia l’Algérienne by Youssef Chahine (1958)’ (1996, p. 76). Once again if the female militant was the subject of a film it was the work of an outsider, in this case, an Egyptian.

11. The three women bombers of 30 September 1956 were Djamilia Bouhired, Zohra Drif-Bitat and Samia Lakhdari. The film depicts the masquerading and bomb carrying of Bouhired and Drif-Bitat along with Hassiba Ben Bouali who in fact did not participate in this incident. She dies with Ali La Pointe in the explosion—re-enacted in the film—that marks the end of the battle of Algiers. It is worth noting that the booklet that accompanies the new DVD release of the film contains much less explanatory and biographical information on female militants than on male militants.


References


**Filmography**

