

Women's Activism in Algeria: the Case of Kheira-Leila TAYEB, Eliette LOUP, and Rose SERRANO in the Algerian Liberation Struggle (1954-1962)

نشاط المرأة في النضال التحرري الجزائري ما بين (1954-1962): حالة خيرة ليلي طيب، اليت لوب وروز سيرانو.

Pr. SENOUCI née MEBERBECHE Faiza.¹

¹Département d'Anglais. Faculté des Lettres et des Langues - Université Abou-Bakr BELKAID – Tlemcen Algérie ,
faizafouzia.meberbeche@univ-tlemcen.dz

تاريخ الاستلام: 2019/01/22 تاريخ القبول: 2019/08/30 تاريخ النشر: 2019/09/15

Abstract

Women of Algerian and European origins actively participated in the Algerian national liberation front during the war for independence between 1954 and 1962. Women militants like Kheira-Leila TAYEB, Eliette LOUP, and Rose SERRANO dedicated their lives to serve the Algerian nationalist cause and fight. In this light, the present paper examines the trajectories of these Muslim and European female freedom fighters to acknowledge their military role and valorize their other roles and sacrifices in a war that was historically regarded as men's enterprise and in which women are claimed to have played only supporting roles.

Key words: women- activism- Algeria- independence- struggle.

ملخص

شاركت النساء من أصول جزائرية وأوروبية بنشاط في جبهة التحرير الوطني الجزائرية خلال حرب الاستقلال بين عامي 1954 و 1962. كرست نساء مناضلات مثل خيرة ليلي طيب وإيليت لوب وروز سيرانو حياتهن لخدمة القضية الوطنية الجزائرية والكفاح من أجل استرجاع السيادة الوطنية. في ضوء ذلك ، تبحث هذه الورقة مسارات هؤلاء المناضلات المسلمات منهم والأوروبيات من أجل الحرية للاعتراف بدورهن العسكري وتتمين أدوارهن وتضحياتهن في حرب اعتبرت تاريخياً أنها مشروع رجالي والتي يُرغم أن النساء لعبن فيها فقط أدوار ثانوية

الكلمات المفتاحية: المرأة – النشاط – الجزائر – الاستقلال – النضال

المؤلف المرسل: SENOUCI née MEBERBECHE Faiza ، الإيميل: senoucif@hotmail.fr

On 5 July 2017 Algeria celebrated its 55th anniversary from France following 132 years of colonisation and eight years of bloody revolutionary war that resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Algerian martyrs. During the long term occupation of Algeria, the French colonial ideology clearly stipulated that France was on ‘a civilising mission’. Indeed, the French claimed that one of their main goals in colonising Algeria was what they referred to as *mission civilatrice* (civilising mission) that brought enlightenment and development to northern Africa as a whole and Algeria more particularly. It was directed to bringing the natives out of darkness to the lights of the French civilisation and culture. This ideology in fact, was based on the belief of the superiority of the French civilisation and the backwardness of non European cultures and civilisations. Part of the French *mission civilatrice* and what the latter considered to be a duty, was to civilise what they regarded as being “barbarian” and “savage” each time they were confronted to.

To this end and in its colonies, France established a host of political and administrative institutions in Algeria which had significant effects on how people worked, lived, what they learnt, and the way they interacted with each other. France further adopted a series of policies which were not only designed for economic exploitation and political domination, but further dispossessed the Algerian natives from their own identity and culture for over 132 years opening, hence, the country to European settlers and extracting substantial economic benefits. These policies which were systematically and violently implemented had devastating human, social, and economic consequences.

As part of its civilising mission, the French adopted ‘the Assimilation Policy’. The latter was explicitly designed to integrate the natives into the French civilisation and culture. It is worth noting that assimilation valorised French norms and behaviours and undermined non European ways of life. It implied the colonised complete abandonment of their cultures in favour of assimilation to the French model. Indeed, the

Women's Activism in Algeria: the Case of Kheira-Leila TAYEB, Eliette

LOUP, and Rose SERRANO in the Algerian Liberation Struggle (1954-1962)

French have always valued their civilisation, language, and form of government and rejected non Western values and cultures.

The Africans were, in fact, perceived as morally regressive with little or no history. They have been described by Robert Delavignettes, a former colonial administrator, as naive, animal-like, and ignorant, people often struggling against each other; lacking discipline and logical and rational thinking. Undeniably, "the Africans were considered to be people without history" Historian Michael Crowder wrote:

[people] without any civilization worthy of the name, constantly at war with one another and fortunate to have been put in touch with the fruits of French civilization. Thus, French books describe the conquest of Africa as *la paix Française* [French peace] and her early administration as *l'oeuvre civilatrice* [civilizing work]...¹

Thus, for the French government civilizing meant assimilating the Africans in general and the Algerians more particularly to "a greater France through cultural assimilation and administrative centralization"²

The origins of this "assimilation" ideology go back to the French Revolution of 1789 ³ and its principles of "equality, fraternity, and freedom", which should apply to anyone who was French (citizen or subject) regardless of race, ethnicity, colour, or origin.

The combination of these egalitarian ideals together with the opposite colonial idea of the so-called superiority of the French civilization and culture gave birth to the French civilizing mission, historically referred to as *mission civilatrice*. Although this ideology stipulated a kind of equality that the Africans were able to become Frenchmen, it nevertheless, referred to Africa as a whole and Algeria more particularly as *Tabula Rasa*⁴ and that the Africans as a whole were people without history or civilization and had to be created and invented. This attitude was further reinforced through the adoption of *Le Code de L'indigenat* (the native code) in 1881 which deprived the Algerians of their civil and human rights and further dismissed the African identity and culture. For the majority of Africans the

SENOUCI née MEBERBECHE Faiza

realities of the French colonial policy were far from the spirit of French egalitarianism and fraternity.

The movement for independence in Algeria came to birth as a reaction to the realities of the French rule which regarded Algeria as a part of France. In theory, the Algerians were considered as French citizens. Yet, the privileges of the French citizenship were, in practice, denied to them. Their nationalist sentiment was further accelerated with the bloodiest confrontations which took place in Setif on May 08, 1945. This incident could but add fuel to the growing fire of the Algerians' nationalist feelings.

These discriminatory practices over the Algerians paved the way for general dissatisfaction and discontent with the way the Algerians were governed. The Algerians, therefore, realized that they needed to defend their aspirations in opposition to the French government which degraded them. People from all social ranks, men and women, took up arms against the colonizer.

Women of Algerian and European origin actively participated in the revolutionary struggle. Yet, in the early stages of the Algerian War for Independence (1954-1962), the participation of women in the liberation struggle was not always willingly accepted by the male fighters. Some believed that the women who joined the fighting did so to find a husband. Others, however, identified women with domestic life. They could not conceive the idea that a woman could play a political role viewed as a male dominated activity that is typically masculine in nature. The Algerian male fighters were particularly reluctant to the women's nursing activities. At first, many men were angered by this new role, and felt that it was inappropriate for women to care for naked and enlisted men. More important, the Algerian liberation struggle for independence had been traditionally described as a man's war fighting on the battlefields. It was regarded as a masculine enterprise in which women are claimed to have only supporting roles.

Being the chief sufferers and victims of war, women started to say "no", and began their campaign trying to find a way to be heard. Some

Women's Activism in Algeria: the Case of Kheira-Leila TAYEB, Eliette

LOUP, and Rose SERRANO in the Algerian Liberation Struggle (1954-1962)

found in poetry a refuge which acted as a weapon for the hopeless and the weak. Others, however, massively participated in civilian networks which hid, fed, and cared for male urban guerillas and rural *maquisards*. Yet, another minority group of women refused to be treated as second hand participants in a war that was also theirs, and vigorously challenged the male existing beliefs which institutionalized gender inequality and reduced the woman to the status of minors for life. This small group of women belonged to the educated, francophone young women, very small in number, who dressed in Western cloths. This literate minority group played a pivotal role in the Algerian war for independence. They were fighters, spies, fund raisers and active members in *Le Front de Liberation National* (National Liberation Front: F.L.N) until Algeria took its independence from France in 1962. In doing so, and together with the other rural and urban women of all social classes, they defended the Algerian cause. Rose Serrano Eliette Loup, and Kheira-Leila Tayeb were among those outstanding Algerian figures that played a pivotal role in the Algerian liberation struggle.

Rose SERRANO was born about 1926 in a very poor Spanish family. Her parents left Spain in 1920 and moved to Algeria which became their home. In Algiers, they settled in a predominantly Spanish neighborhood where Rose began working as a servant as early as 1940 at the age of fourteen. Being very modest, Rose's father was a shoemaker and was not at all interested in politics. It was rather her brother, François, who was among the first militants of the PCA (The Algerian Communist Party).

Being raised in a modest environment and surrounded by many other Spanish, Italians, and Algerians from the same modest social background, Rose did not experience inequality or class difference at that time. It was only when she started working at a young age as a servant that she became aware of inequality and injustice and soon joined *les Jeunes Communistes* (young Communists) after the end of World War II.

In 1947 she married an activist and together they joined a branch of the PCA in Bab El Oued in Algiers where she worked as courier and

SENOUCI née MEBERBECHE Faiza

propaganda agent. Arrested and jailed in 1957, she was then liberated 18 months later to be sent to a camp in Beni Messous and then in Tefeschoun where she stayed for three months. After her release, Rose came back to Bab El Oued but it was almost impossible for her to settle down there due to her activism.

Eliette LOUP was another outstanding figure who marked the history of the Algerian revolutionary struggle. She was born in 1934 in a farm near Houch Mezgheni in Metidja. Her mother was an eminent activist in the PCA who helped fund war in Spain and also hosted Spanish communists in her farm. In 1936, she moved to Russia for some time and then came back during World War II to support the laborers working in her farm by providing shelter and health care services during the war until her death at the age of 57.

Being brought up in a revolutionary context, Eliette started to question about social and racial justice and equality as early as 1954 while she was only 20. She soon joined the PCA which, according to her, was the party that raised her awareness about colonialism and injustice. She began working as a courier and was also responsible for printing. She was arrested and tortured in 1957. It was during her imprisonment that she could meet Louisette Ighilahriz, another eminent activist who played a pivotal role in the Algerian liberation struggle. Three years later Eliette was sent to *Maison Carrée*, and then to *Baumettes* in France. After her liberation, she came back to Algeria to carry on her activism until Algeria got its independence in 1962.

Another Algerian women activist who dedicated her life for the Algerian cause was Leila-Kheira TAYEB. Born in Mascara in 1939, Kheira was the descendant of the revolutionist El Amir Abdelkader. Being brought up in a family whose members were revolutionists could but have a positive impact on Kheira's activism.

At the age of five, she was the first and the only Arab pupil enrolled in *Magnan* School. At a very young age, she transported tracts, money and munitions and became an active member of the FLN. At the age

Women's Activism in Algeria: the Case of Kheira-Leila TAYEB, Eliette

LOUP, and Rose SERRANO in the Algerian Liberation Struggle (1954-1962)

of 17, she joined the National Liberation Army (*L'Armée de la Libération Nationale* "L'ALN") in zone 4 of wilaya 5 where she started working as a nurse and then she left this health unit to serve in a military section led by Colonel Fellouhi. After some time, Kheira joined the *Maquis* in zone 1 wilaya 5 under the leadership of Capitain Zoubir. In 1957, Kheira moved from Mascara to L'Oursenis until May 1958. Because of a serious illness, Kheira moved then to Morocco for a while and remained there until 1962.

Kheira-Leila TAYEB, Eliette LOUP, Rose SERRANO, and many other women of Algerian and European origins actively participated in the Algerian revolutionary war not only in support activities but also in the battlefield. They acted as nurses and cooks, and they also served as couriers, transported arms, provided shelter, collected money and fought for the causes that men were unable and possibly unwilling to fight for. These women fighters dedicated their lives for the Algerian cause. Their role in the Algerian war is just as significant as the men's, and any discussion of the war in general should not leave this fact out.

End notes:

1 M. Crowder, *Senegal: A Study in French Assimilation Policy*, (London: Oxford University Press for the Institute of Race Relations, 1962), p. 12.

2 Christopher Clapham, *Third World Politics: An Introduction*, (Madison: WI University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p.21.

3 The French Revolution began in 1789 and ended in 1799 under the ascent of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) against the absolute monarchy and the feudal system. [www. Britanica.org](http://www.Britanica.org)

4 Tabula Rasa is an expression that is derived from Latin to refer to "blank slate". It is used to describe the mind in its early stages. According to some scientists, the minds of human beings are born "blank" and that their knowledge is gradually acquired through experience. During the colonial era, the Europeans used the expression to refer to the African as having the mind of a newly born with featureless mind and in need to start from the right beginning. [www. Britanica.org](http://www.Britanica.org)

Bibliography:

SENOUCI née MEBERBECHE Faiza

- AMRANE-MINNE, Danièle Djamila, *Des femmes dans la Guerre d'Algérie*, Paris, Karthala, 1994.
- BENALLEGUE, Nora, "Algerian Women in the Struggle for Independence and Reconstruction" in *International Social Science*, Vol. 35, 1983.
- BESSIS, Sophie and BELHASSEN, Souhayr, *Femmes du Maghreb: l'enjeu*, JCL, 1992.
- CHARRAD, Mounira M. *States and Women's Rights. The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001.
- FLEISCHMANN, Ellen L. « The other "Awakening" : the Emergence of Women's Movements in the Modern Middle East, 1900-1940 », in Margaret L. MERIWETHER, Judith E. TUCKER (éd.), *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*, Boulder (Colo.), Westview Press, 1999, pp. 107-120.
- KNAUSS, Peter R, *The persistence of Patriarchy*, Great Britain: Praeger Publishers, 1987.
- LUCAS Lélie & AIMEE Marie. unpubl, "Women's Struggle in Algeria during the War for Independence and After", 1986.
- PRÉVOST, Lucie. *Femmes d'Algérie. Société, famille et citoyenneté*, Alger, Casbah éditions, 2002.
- SHAABAN, Bouthaina, *Both Right and Left Handed*, The Women's Press, 1988.
- SMITH, Dorothy, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*, Open University Press, 1988.
- STONE, Martin, *The Agony of Algeria*, 1997.