

Historicizing Colonial Memory by Algerian Women: Unveiling a Woman's Testimony in Colonial Algeria (1950's-1060's)

Fatima Zahra BESSEDIK

University of Oran 2, Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria
fatima_zahrabessedik@yahoo.fr

Received: 29/04/2024,

Accepted: 24/06/2024,

Published: 30/06/2024

ABSTRACT: *Algerian Men and women resisted French colonialism and led the war to their independence. Indeed, during a period of more than a century, women led militant missions inside and outside their homes. This paper attempts to historicize colonial experiences told by Algerian women who took part in the resistance during the French colonial period in Algeria. In fact, this paper will be reporting their stories as models on how Algerian women struggled and resisted during colonialism. This report, then, is interested in overlooked but profoundly significant testimonies by women not written in books of history. Drawing from their stories, it will be demonstrated multifaceted history of women who navigated the complex terrain of colonialism and militancy. By amplifying the voices of such women and situating their stories within the postcolonial cultural context in Algeria, this report contributes to an understanding of colonial Algeria.*

KEYWORDS: Colonial memory, French colonialism, Algeria, Women.article, formatting, guidelines, style

RÉSUMÉ: *Des hommes et des femmes ont résisté au colonialisme Français et ont mené la guerre pour leur indépendance. En effet, pendant plus d'un siècle, les femmes ont mené des missions militantes à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de leur foyer. Cet article tente d'historiciser les expériences coloniales racontées par les femmes algériennes qui ont pris part à la résistance pendant la période coloniale française en Algérie. En fait, je raconterai leurs histoires parce que c'est un modèle sur la façon dont les femmes algériennes ont lutté et résisté pendant le colonialisme. Cet article s'intéresse donc à un témoignage*

négligé mais profondément significatif de femmes, tiré de l'histoire orale. Tout au long de leur histoire, je démontre une histoire aux multiples facettes de femmes qui ont parcouru le terrain complexe du colonialisme et de la résistance. En amplifiant les voix de ces femmes et en situant leurs histoires dans le contexte culturel postcolonial en Algérie, ce rapport contribue à une compréhension de l'Algérie coloniale.

MOTS-CLÉS: Mémoire coloniale, Colonialisme français, Algérie, Femmes.

المخلص: قاوم الرجال والنساء الاستعمار الفرنسي وقادوا الحرب من أجل استقلالهم. وبالفعل، وخلال فترة تزيد عن قرن من الزمان، قادت النساء مهمات نضالية داخل منازلهن وخارجها. تحاول هذه الورقة تأريخ التجارب الاستعمارية التي روتها النساء الجزائريات اللاتي شاركن في المقاومة خلال فترة الاستعمار الفرنسي في الجزائر. في الواقع، سننقل قصصهن أنها نموذج لكيفية نضال المرأة الجزائرية ومقاومتها خلال الستعمار. تهتم هذه الورقة بشهادة النساء التي تم التغاضي عنها ولكنها ذات أهمية كبيرة، مستمدة من التاريخ الشفهي. من خلال قصصهن، نعرض قصة متعددة ألوجه لنساء اجتازن التضاريس المعقدة للاستعمار والمقاومة. ومن خلال تضخيم أصوات هؤلاء النساء ووضع قصصهن ضمن السياق الثقافي ما بعد الاستعماري في الجزائر، يساهم هذا التقرير في فهم للجزائر الاستعمارية

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذاكرة الاستعمارية، الاستعمار الفرنسي، الجزائر، المرأة

Introduction

From the French invasion of Algeria after the fall of the Turks in 1830 to the independence in 1962, the colonial regime of violence and oppression, Algerians, men and women, struggled for independence. More than one million and a half of the Algerian people have been killed just since 1954.

The Algerian war has been described as a “moment in which gendered, religious, and ethnic identities were challenged” (Vince 2010, 448). In what follows, I pay a particular focus on women as a postcolonial voice reporting terrific conditions on French colonialism and acting as militants.

I was born in a country of long resistance and liberation. Though I was born as late as the 1980's, I am still remembering childhood home, games and infantile fools in schools and streets, and I am also recalling many of my grandparents' stories about their thoughts and sentiments after their experiences of being colonized by the French. One of the experiences reported by my grandfather is his hard work in one of the mountains of Mazouna, a small village in the Commune of Relizane. He, as employed by colonial authority, had to go out as early as 4:00 AM, to dig, carve, and collect large stones from the mountain. Apart from being exploited at mountains, he sometimes had to collect, for long days in summer, grapes from the vineyard field, to be transferred to the village cave for wine preparation. His work has been compensated a very small amount of money.

Regardless of men like my grandfather, or men of early resistance such as Emir Abd al-Qadir, Cheikh Bouamama, and Ahmed Bey, women also constituted a female anti-colonial account of resistance such as famous women documented by history as Lalla Fatma N'soumer who led a popular resistance (1854-1857), and lately, Hassiba Ben Bouali and Zohra Drif whose militancy participated at La Bataille d'Alger next to Ali La Pointe. Experiences described by warrior women in the fifties as Djamilia Bouhired, Zohra Drif and Samia Lakhdari are such as follows,

We had visited the site and noted several possible targets. We had been told to place two bombs, but we were three, and at the last moment, since it was possible, we decided to plant three bombs. Samia and I carried three bombs from the Casbah to Bab el Oued, where they were primed...Each of us placed a bomb, and at the appointed time there were two explosions; one of the bombs was defective and didn't go off. (qtd. in Amrane Minne, 1993, 97)

Other civilian women of resistance also deserve to be documented here in order to historicize how Algerian women contributed to the military and the cultural decolonization of Algeria. In this paper, I am interested in reporting some of the testimonies by Algerian women during French

colonialism.

Women orality, as recounting testimonies, anxieties, as well as literature, constitute a significant anticolonial discourse. In her "Algerian Women's 'Būqālah' Poetry: Oral Literature, Cultural Politics, and Anti-Colonial Resistance", Susan Slyomovics importantly refers to "buqala," popular poems told by women in Algerian feminine culture, as an expression of resistance to the domination of the French language during French colonialism (2014, 146). Methodologically speaking, it is through postcolonial orality that I am attempting to historicize colonial memory and define some Algerian women's anti-colonial identities. I am going to recount testimonies and intimate memories of family members about their militant mothers. I recorded the following memories in the local Algerian language and then reported them in English.

Women and the War of Independence

Many historians have underlined the presence of women during the Algerian War. Frantz Fanon, in his 1959 essay "Algeria Unveiled," explores the role of the Algerian woman whom he calls "she who hides behind a veil" in her battle against the occupation forces (43). As visualized in Gillo Pontecorvo's famous film *La Bataille d'Alger* (1966), women's "haik" have admittedly played a significant anti-colonial role and expressed integration and commitment to their decolonizing mission. As noted by Roberts Katherine, one important way to contribute to the liberation movement without picking up arms or fighting was the wearing of the veil (381).

According to some registrations, more than eleven thousand women were involved in the Algerian war (De Groot and Peniston, 247). Generally, women committed in the war to the Independence were referred to as the "mujahidat" or "fidaiyat." As Seferdjeli notes in her article "Rethinking the History of the Mujahidat during the Algerian War," women left their homes and families to join the FLN armed guerrilla bands, the Armée Libération Nationale (ALN)" (239). As Hassiba Ben Bouali and Djamila Bouhired, women were young,

unmarried, and prepared to join the resistance with or without the consent of their families.

During the liberation movements across various regions and eras, while the majority of women did not participate directly in combat, they played equally crucial roles in supporting the cause. Their contributions included providing essential resources and services that sustained the fighters and the movement as a whole. The *mujahidat*, Seferdjeli notes, also were “social assistants to the rural population in the zones in which they were posted and would give local female peasants advice on topics such as hygiene and education” (239). Indeed, they also had important political responsibilities as many of these female combatants organized political meetings with other women. Meredith Turshen states that “women participated actively as combatants, spies, fundraisers, as well as nurses, launderers, and cooks” (890). Gerard De Groot also adds that “women assisted the male fighting forces in areas like transportation, communication and administration” (223). In addition to that, some non-combatant women in the FLN had the mission of reporting the latest political situation to women, while “providing support and advice on hygiene, and being in charge of cooking” (Amrane-Minne and Danièle, 62-77).

Colonized Women Memory, Revived

I was intrigued by a memory by a woman named Yahiaoui Zohra, born during the period of colonialism (with an unregistered date) and died in 1989 in Bethioua, Oran (the West of Algeria). During the occupation, she lived in a village next to Chekkala, a village in the current city of Relizane. Her grandfather taught her with a great engagement to use weapons from an early age and she used to serve as a night guardian for the fear of the coming of any French army.

It was later understood that this obligation of night surveillance was because that particular village was a village of *Mujahidin* (i.e. people of resistance) and that they were indeed Algerian spies for the service of the French, who dared to forward information about them to the army. As a matter of fact, her husband married more than twenty

women because he wanted to create a resisting army by and for himself.

Indeed, her grandfather was caught by the French army after he had been reported by an unknown person. Her grandfather was taken and tortured to death, and was thrown from a French plane to that village. His children buried him in that exact place and planted a banner there that exists till today.

When Yahiaoui Zohra reported her stories during colonialism to her children, as I was told by her daughter, she used to cry. She was hurt to talk about her traumatic experience. When the French army came to her village, some had to inform so that the villagers could flee. Many of them used to flee and many of them died under French shootings.

Her obligation during the night extended to cooking: fabricating fermented milk by using traditional material '*chakwa*'. She prepared bread and coffee, so that she could transport it to the *Mudjahidin*, i.e. resistance men in the mountains, during the night far from any eyes. Before she accessed their door, she pronounced the password, which was "lhadj", the name of her son. In case of the presence of any injured men, she also had to stay there in the night, while in cold, or rain, or snow, to serve as a nurse. Yahiaoui was also a protector of her beautiful daughters, as she used to put soot on their faces in order to make them dirty, for fear of sexual aggression by the French army.

Another story concerns an Algerian woman from Boumerdes, who lived in Bni Araf, Thenia, also a place full of *mudjahidin* (men of resistance). She moved to France after her marriage in 1959. She recounted many of the incidents when she was in Algeria, among them is on covering the young girls' faces with soot. She also said about a magical means to protect women from rape, as they used to exercise the "rabt." The latter term can be literally translated in English as "knotting," and particularly means the magical practice of rendering a young girl unable to lose her virginity, and consequently unable to be pregnant. This particular act is considered a taboo in contemporary Algeria and a sin in Islam, and for this reason, few oral testimonies by *Mujahidat* (i.e. women of resistance) about their sexuality during the Algerian War document this issue. In fact, the recurrence of such a

practice in a conservative society like the Algerian during French colonialism can be regarded as an anti-colonial act of resistance and of self-protection from rape and sexual abuse¹.

The Algerian woman from Boumerdes had many incidents with the French army. One of them is when she was reported to cook for *Mujaahidiin*, and was taken for execution; then for a given matter, returned alive. Her memories could not escape the story of her daughter, Drifa, who suffered from perceptions: she was officially known by the French as a spy for the service of the colonial authority, while for the *mujahideen*, was known as *biaa*, or *harkia*, i.e. traitor, or was believed to have “worn”. In Algerian colloquial dialect, the verb “to wear” meant to have worn the French uniform. Interestingly, however, her mother used to report that Drifa was at the service of Algeria, as she used to protect those who were supposed to be arrested and distribute food given by the French to children. She also used to protect girls and boys. After the war ended in 1962, Drifa’s story did not end. She was caught by the *mujahideen* but because she was pregnant, they could not kill her. They had put tar on her hair as an act of revenge. After she had given birth, she fled to France.

Conclusion

Through this report about Yahiaoui Zohra and about Drifa which recounts their hard work and their commitment as Algerian militants, we discern that women were multi-skilled and polyvalent in their battle against the French colonization. They served as warriors holding weapons, or guards, nurses, and cooks. We also note that women and their daughters during French colonialism have suffered from sexual aggression, a common fact in both stories from Relizane and Boumerdes, and which led women to opt for any means to protect themselves.

The roles women played were indispensable to the success and endurance of the liberation. Their contributions, though often less

¹ For more reading on the history of women of resistance during colonialism, see (Seferdjeli 238-255)

visible than direct combat, were foundational to the operational success and of advantage to remedy the violence of the colonizer.

Acknowledgements:

I thank Professor Chami Nedhal (Department of English, University of Oran 2) for launching the initiative to work on women's colonial memory. I thank Mr Rahli Hamza (Department of English, University of Boumerdes) for providing the oral testimony of his grandmother during the years of the Algerian war.

References

Roberts, Katherine A. (2007). ["Constrained Militants: Algerian Women 'in-between' in Gillo Pontecorvo's The Battle of Algiers and Bourlem Guerdjou's Living in Paradise"](#). *The Journal of North African Studies*. 12 (4): 381–393.

Amrane Minne, Danièle Djamila. 1993. *Femmes Au Combat: La Guerre d'Algérie*. Algiers. Éditions Rahma.

De Groot, Gerard, Peniston-Bird, Corinna. A Soldier and a Woman: Sexual integration in the Military. New York: Longman, 2000.

Fanon, Frantz. 2003. "Algeria Unveiled." *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*. ed. Prasenjit Duara. Routledge. 42-55.

Seferdjeli, Ryme. 2012. "Rethinking the History of The Mujahidat during the Algerian War." *Interventions*. 14 (2): 238–255.

Slyomovics, Susan. 2014. "Algerian Women's 'Būqālah' Poetry: Oral Literature, Cultural Politics, and Anti-Colonial Resistance." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 45.2: 145–68. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43305682>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.

Turshen, Meredith. 2002. "Algerian Women in the Liberation

Struggle and the Civil War: From Active Participants to Passive Victims". *Social Research* Vol. 69. 3: 889-911.

Vince, Natalya. 2010. "Transgressing Boundaries: Gender, Race, Religion, and 'Francaises Musulmanes' during the Algerian War of Independence." *French Historical Studies*, 33.3: 445-474.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/00161071-2010-005>