

Muted Voices in the Algerian History: A Feminist Perspective

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ABSTRACT: *Due to its international status as the greatest liberation revolution in the twentieth century, the Algerian Revolution against French colonialism has received remarkable consideration from intellectuals, writers, and historians. Generally speaking, the Algerian revolution is often associated with the sacrifices that all the Algerian people exhibited for many years. The Algerian women supported the revolution with their souls, bodies, money, and children. They were regarded as a source of patriotism and resistance. Nevertheless, women's presence in the historical documentation is very limited and generally remains hidden in the margin of the written history. Unfortunately, Algerian women were either inferiorized or excluded from the official history of the national independence. This paper examines the representation of Algerian women in both colonial and postcolonial discourses. Thus, the study highlights the necessity of shifting women's status from historical invisibility toward more recognition and visibility.*

KEYWORDS: Algerian Women, Colonial discourse, History, Invisibility, Patriotism.

Introduction

The continuation and the success of states, policies, and nations, often require strong names that have an impact on people and make them share a sense of belonging and unity, especially in cases of wars and revolutions. America, for example, is often symbolized and called the country of Uncle Sam. The name Uncle Sam dates back to the year 1812. Uncle Sam is the

name of a man named Sam Wilson, who was supplying the American army with meat in boxes bearing the letters 'US', short for the United States. However, a joke spread among members of the American army that made them read it as Uncle Sam. Gradually, some sketches and expressions strengthen the idea of considering Uncle Sam the symbol of American unity and solidarity (New-York Historical Society, 2023).

In the same context, we find a picture of the artist James Montgomery, which was a call to recruit the American people to participate in World War I (Vergun, 2019). The painting is to spread enthusiasm in the hearts of the Americans to join the army because using these symbols and personalities is closer to people's hearts and more impactful.

Correspondingly, Genghis Khan, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Che Guevara, and many others are all men whose names are written in golden letters in the history of their nations and the history of the world. Nevertheless, it is evident that the most important leaders in world history are men and that women are rarely mentioned. This disregarding of women and the domination of men in recorded history is seen as unfair and biased.

In this context, the Algerian women participated actively and played a profound role in the Algerian war for national liberation as soldiers, messengers, spies, cooks, and nurses; however, they were portrayed in the colonial and postcolonial discourses in a way that does not really represent them or give them the position they deserve. This study examines the manner in which Algerian women were depicted during the French colonial period and subsequent independence, with a particular focus on the relationship between cultures, discourse, and the rewriting of history.

1. Politics of Commemoration

History is often defined as a recounting of facts and real events and experiences. However, it is demonstrated that most of the historical records are proven to be fabricated or subjective. These records are often chosen

depending on the historians' or writers' subjective reading and interpretation. They often lean towards shaping reality and organizing data in a way that echoes their ideologies and subjective points of view (Munslow, 1997, p.127). However, since history is characterized by discontinuities, it is essential to relate it to its social and cultural constructions. The written history therefore is defined by the culture and the ideologies of those who own the power.

Herein, Foucault introduced the concept of the regime of truth (Mills, 2003, p.133) in which he associates the system's powers and the manifestation of truth which indicates that readers are often presented with biased images of historical events. Readers often miss some information or events that are not included in the written history. In fact, this information and events are defined as 'the vast unknown territories' (santoyo, 2006, p.13). These unknown territories are unknowable due to cultural and ideological reasons. Foucault's concept of the discourse suggests that it is discourse that is responsible for what is revealed and what is hidden.

The Algerian postcolonial discourse then, focuses on the notion that strong and immortal symbols are what often unify people. Therefore, it was necessary to list the names of leaders, honor them, and glorify their names, which encourages the people of the country and intimidates enemies and opponents. Names such as Ahmed Zabana, Mustafa Ben Boulaid, Larbi Ben Mehidi, Didouche Murad, Zighoud Youssef, and many others were written in gold in the Algerian history. Their stories and heroism make people feel proud of their belonging to this country.

Nevertheless, when talking about the jihad of Algerian women in the liberation revolution, it is noticeable that history often glorifies men more than women. For example, we find that male names are more commonly used when celebrating the revolution and independence. Place de l'Emir Abdelkader, Si El Haoues Street, Higher School of Infantry "The martyr Jalloul Obeidat"; University of Badji Mokhtar and many others. Thus, it is observable that most cities, schools, even hospitals, etc. in Algeria bear names of male martyrs and mujahideen. Except for the very few that bear the names of female martyrs.

In fact, most of male historians and writers believe that mentioning men more than women in historical documentation is not a marginalization of the role of women or a lack of recognition of their efforts. They argue that Djamila Bouhired, Hassiba Ben Bouali, and others are all memorable names throughout the revolutionary history of Algeria. Nonetheless, Female writers, artists and critics still believe that the injustice and exclusion of the Algerian women is a result of cultural and social reasons.

The marginalization of Algerian women from written history is, therefore, due to several factors, including cultural factors that gave men greater importance and a higher status in society, making them the center for recording historical events.

In societies that adopt this culture, priority is given to the role of men in wars and revolutions as warriors and leaders. Consequently, their role is glorified and their achievements are emphasized while the role of women is marginalized. The traditions and customs may then be a reason in determining the role of women and their contribution to documenting historical events. This marginalization is also caused by women's limited access to education and political and social opportunities that are supposed to enable them to participate in writing history on an equal basis with men.

One of the key factors that has contributed to the marginalisation of Algerian women is the influence of literature. Many novels and books celebrate the role of men in the Algerian revolution, which has led to a perception that women are not as important as men in the country. Literary production is regarded as a fundamental reason for this neglect, as historical records were often written from a male perspective, which leads to the marginalization of women's role in the events. This dominance over literature had a negative impact on the depiction of the participation of Algerian women in the revolution or the documentation of their role in it, which is reflected in recorded history and the literature produced after it. Ignorance of women's role in the Algerian revolution resulted from a lack of documentation and research on women's stories and contributions in that period.

In recent times, there has been a growing trend towards rewriting history in a way that more accurately reflects the role women have played in the shaping of civilization and culture. These efforts include highlighting women's artistic, literary, and scientific works that have often been overlooked in traditional history. Therefore, directing the spotlight on the role of women in the Algerian Revolution and in other historical events requires efforts to rewrite history in a comprehensive manner to re-evaluate and correct things that are dismissed or fabricated.

2. The Representation of the Algerian Women

The image of Algerian women in colonial and post-colonial literature was often represented in a distorted, offensive, or incomplete way. It was often influenced by stereotypical and misleading depictions of the authentic Algerian culture. It was both during the French colonialism and after the independence; the Algerian women had been represented in different forms that are regarded as unfair and discriminatory.

2.1. The Image of Women during French Colonialism:

Women were presented in the colonial era in two different forms. The first one is offered by the colonizer whereas the second by the Algerian writers.

The French colonizer aimed to falsify the image of the Algerian women in a way that suited the colonial objectives and ideology. In many colonial works, the Algerian women were portrayed in a weak and vulnerable manner, suffering from social and cultural restrictions from which the colonizer must free them. Algerian women were also represented in some other colonial works as seductive characters who used their sexual appeal to serve the interests of French men.

Algerian writers on the other hand presented a different image of Algerian women, yet a deceitful one. According to this portrayal, women are viewed as fragile and naive. At that time, Algeria had a strong culture of family honor, in which women were often associated with purity and modesty and were expected to be subordinate to men.

In *Le Fils du Pauvre*, Mouloud Feraoun (1913 -1962) depicts the experiences of the Algerian people in the Kabylie region, with a lot of poetic realism that skilfully conveys and recounts the daily stories of a group of characters facing poverty, hunger, ignorance, and backwardness.

Feraoun referred to the situation of the Kabyle women describing the bitter reality, difficult life, and shortcomings these women are suffering. Feraoun portrayed the Algerian women as having “good heart”, “naïve” and with “limited ideas” (1954, p.23). This representation is in fact an inferiorisation of women's capacities, their freedom of thought and their ability to make decisions. The Algerian woman is therefore still a helpless person who is considered a minor in need of help or protection.

In addition of considering women as weak, emotional, and naïve, which reflects the traditional gendered categorization, Feraoun raised the issue of children. The woman will not feel her presence and will not occupy her position unless she gives birth to children. Not having children means the end of her life.

This traditional thought of associating women only with housework, giving birth, nurturing, and taking care of their husbands is in itself hindering women from having the freedom and the value they deserve outside marital life.

2.2. The Image of Women After Independence

In *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), Frantz Fanon offers a detailed account of the Algerian War in which he champions the revolutionary nature of the Algerian individual. Fanon glorifies women's vital role in this war. Fanon argues that:

Despite the inherent, subjective difficulties and notwithstanding the sometimes violent incomprehension of a part of the family, the Algerian woman assumes all the tasks entrusted to her. [...] She is a link, sometimes an essential one, in the revolutionary machine. She carries weapons, knows important points of refuge. And it is in terms of the concrete dangers that she faces that we must gauge the insurmountable victories that she has had to win in order to be able

to say to her chief, on her return: "Mission accomplished ... R.A.S."
(pp. 54-60)

Fanon believes that women's liberation is one of the chief nationalist projects of the Algerian revolution and hence he expects cultural and political changes concerning women's position in the Algerian society:

This is because Algerian society reveals itself not to be the womanless society that had been so convincingly described. Side by side with us, our sisters do their part in further breaking down the enemy system and in liquidating the old mystifications once and for all. (p.66)

After independence, Algeria witnessed efforts to achieve legal equality between men and women, and many laws were issued to protect women's rights in various fields, such as family law, labor laws, and education. The period after independence witnessed trends towards empowering women socially and economically, by encouraging their participation in the labor market and enhancing their role in decision-making in society such as politics, culture, arts, and sports.

Literarily speaking, we find that some literary and artistic works have begun to focus on the strength of Algerian women and their steadfastness in the face of challenges, thanks to the development of feminist awareness and the women's movement in the country. Algerian women began to participate in international and regional feminist movements, which contributed to expanding their horizons and enhancing their roles. Nevertheless, the situation had not changed much. Unfortunately, Fanon's vision was approved only for some provinces and only for a small group of women. This, in fact, reflects the failure of the national project that Fanon foresaw. The influence of the stereotypes of Algerian women in literature and media continued as it did before but from a different perspective.

Assia Djebar is an Algerian essayist, novelist, and academic, known around the world for her anti-colonial and feminist views on Algerian society, and therefore in most of her writings, she discussed the difficulties

and problems faced by women during and after colonialism. Ismail Mahnana, professor of philosophy at the University of Constantine and a researcher in Algerian literature written in French, says:

Assia Djebar epitomizes for Algerian culture what Djamila Bouhired epitomizes for the liberation revolution. She is a high symbol in the sky of history, and an icon of Algerian women in their long struggle for emancipation, freedom, and presence in its global and human dimensions (2015).

Among Djebar's works that won the admiration of readers and critics, and proposed her name for winning the Nobel Prize several times, are *Thirst* (1957), *Al-Qalqoun* (1958), and *Children of the New World* (1962).

In 1980, Djebar published her famous novel, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*. Her novel is divided into two parts, the first titled "Today" and the second titled "Yesterday". These two parts represent the two periods in the history of Algeria focusing on Algerian women who lived under both the dominance of the French brutality and the very strict patriarchal system.

In fact, this novel is a rewriting of a painting by the French painter Eugene Delacroix. Delacroix painted his first portrait of Algerian women in their apartments in 1832, and his second was on the same subject in 1849.

Delacroix's painting is very symbolic and has a historical background. It raises various questions about Orientalism and colonial representation (Aude, 2008). It depicts four Algerian women in their apartment, wearing traditional clothing and sitting on a bench covered with a rug. They are surrounded by oriental decorations, including a fountain and a hookah. The painting aimed to glorify the French victory and reinforce the image of France as a civilizing power. The painting is regarded as a beautiful work of art that embodies the splendor of Eastern culture. However, it carries exploitative and humiliating meanings, as it stereotypically sketch Algerian women and depicts them as sensual objects.

This painting was an inspiration for many other works of art, including paintings, films, and books. Among them is *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* by Assia Djebar. This novel translates and rewrites the painting from a feminine Algerian perspective that reflects the feminist thought of the writer.

In *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, Djebar describes the massacres and humiliation women faced during French colonialism. For Djebar, there is no doubt that Delacroix painted a fabricated scene because it is impossible for him to have actually been allowed to enter the inner world of Algerian women to paint it. As for her, she described that world in her book.

Fatima, Arbia, Sakina, and Maryam are women in their apartments, but not as Delacroix portrayed them, enjoying the luxury and comfort that men provide them. They are steadfast women in the face of past and present injustice, the injustice of the colonialists, and the patriarchal society that denied them their virtue. Djebar not only revolted against the oppressive colonizer, but she fought her hardest battle against the backwardness of society that is still inferiorizing women: “Is it me they have excluded, me whom they have barred... me they have humiliated ... me they have caged in... me whom they have sought to subdue” (Djebar, p.39).

Many years after their country gained independence, Algerian women feel that despite their continued efforts, they have not seen any change in their circumstances following the departure of the colonizer. There has been a dearth of historical, literary, and cinematic works since the country's independence more than fifty years ago that have presented Algerian women as heroic figures or challenged the long-standing stereotypes that have constrained their portrayal.

Conclusion

During the Algerian War of Liberation, men and women played important roles in attaining freedom and justice. Their roles varied according to culture, time, and political context, but their cooperative participation was essential in achieving the Algerian nationalist project. Men and women

participated in the resistance and struggle against colonialism and social injustice in various ways, from participating in armed battles to supporting political movements and contributing to cultural and educational activities. Historical books highlight these roles and shed light on the sacrifices of men and women.

In history and literature books, the role of Algerian women is highlighted in many aspects, whether in preserving cultural identity and traditions in raising new generations during French colonialism, or through their participation in the process of rebuilding the country and developing society after independence. However, according to the opinion of many activists in politics, literature, and art, the role of women has remained bound to conventional roles such as domesticity and standing behind men. The sentence “standing behind men” in fact is rejected by many women who believe that this expression belittles them. They believe that Algerian women participated in the revolution against French colonialism, whether as fighters in the field or as political activists and women's organizations, consciously and by a personal decision that reflects their independence and their entity.

Therefore, most of female writers intend to establish a new thought that emphasizes the role of women as independent and equal to men. Meanwhile, they praise the Algerian women for preserving the Algerian identity and confirming the traditional roles of the Algerian society.

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