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LE WENT DES AURÈS



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MOHAMMED LAKHDAR-HAMINA

Either Triumph or Martyrdom: representation of women in the Algerian Revolutionary-War Movies, the case of *The Battle of Algiers*

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Tracing back the **history of the Algerian Cinema** would certainly lead to the blur during the period of the French colonization. Nevertheless, a clear cut should be made between the post-revolution Algerian cinema and the French cinema of the same period, whose main subject was the Algerian War (*La Guerre d'Algérie*)¹.

In *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (2012), Kuhn and Westwell explain the history of the Algerian cinema, highlighting three major historical periods: the colonial period, post-revolution Algeria and the period from the 1980s to the present, which was practically a period of political violence. According to Kuhn and Westwell, there was no Indigenous cinema, although the popular old city of the *Casbah*² was the perfect setting for crime movies like the 1937 Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko*. After the end of the Liberation War, the government of the newly independent country developed a national moviemaking strategy under a number of infrastructures championing the *Mujahid* (Veteran), the national hero. This trend continued till the mid 1980s as mentioned by Kun and Westwell. The authors argue that the growing of Islamic fundamentalism and the political imbroglio ended with the withdrawal of the government funding, and that new generation directors undertook the task of providing explanations for all the political violence that was taking place.

Cheira Belguellaoui tackled Rachid Boudjedra's explanation of the different phases that the Algerian cinema went through in his *Naissance du Cinéma Algérien (The Birth of Algerian Cinema, 1971)*. There are three major phases, each one goes with a specific thematic concern. The first phase starts from the early days to the early 1970s and deals with the theme of the Independence War trying to provide a different perspective while building up a national identity. The second phase was characterized by governmental reforms in the different fields of life under Boumedienne's presidency. The third phase, the late 1970s, stressed the position of women, young people, unemployment, popular culture(s), etc. (pp. 1-2). Belguellaoui showed that the period from the 1980s up to the 1990s had witnessed a wide range of new themes, such as sexuality, social justice and traditional cultures (p. 2).

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¹ The French perspective of the military struggle that took place in Algeria (1954-1962) between the French colonization army and Algerian National Liberation Front (*FLN*).

² A unique kind of medina, or Islamic city. It stands in one of the finest coastal sites on the Mediterranean, overlooking the islands where a Carthaginian trading-post was established in the 4th century BC. There are the remains of the citadel, old mosques and Ottoman-style palaces. <<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/565>>.

By juxtaposing the aforementioned timelines of Algerian cinema, it becomes clear that both analyses meet each other halfway. The difference lies within the perspective from which every analysis is done; mainly the reference to the colonial period which led to the controversy of Algerian Cinema Vs Cinema of Algeria. The issue of nation-building process is at the heart of the ongoing debate about having a consensus on a cultural identity in cinema as well as in all other fields.

Cinema was a means of resistance during the Algerian War of Independence, a war that was the main theme for certain French *Nouvelle Vague*³ moviemakers. The Algerian Independence War was not even recognized by the French elite, it was labeled as *La Guerre de l'Algérie* (Algerian War). General de Gaulle's attempt to convince his army with the idea that the Algerians would choose an "Algerian Algeria tied to France" witnessed a total failure (Ageron, 1991: 121). The Algerian War was absent in the French cinema, it was after the Evian Accords that the war was addressed in several French movies (Austin, 2009: 18). The year of 1957 witnessed the creation of *Groupe Farid*, the first cinema unit which was affiliated to the *FLN* and the *Wilaya 1* (Military District of the Aures Mountains) in particular. French director René Vautier and Algerian feature movie director Ahmed Rachedi were members of this group (Qtd. In Shafik, 2007: 18). This cinema unit or the *Tebessan Unit* (assembled in the region of Tebessa, east Algeria), was annexed to the Ministry of Information of the GPRA (Provisional Government of the Republic of Algeria) in Tunis and it was called *Service du Cinema National* (p. 18). The Mission of the unit was to gather as much material as possible so as to use it to enlighten the people and promote the nationalist propaganda (pp. 18-19).

The governmental support via its specialized institutions such as the ONCIC⁴ resulted into some distinctive movies such as Ahmed Rachedi's *L'Aube des Damnés* (*Dawn of the Damned*) (1965), Gillo Pontecorvo's *La Battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*) (Italy/Algeria 1966) and Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina's first African movie to win the Palme d'Or *Chroniques des Années de Braise* (*Chronicles of the Years of Fire*) (1975) (Kuhn and Westwell, 2012: 9). Directors like Lakhdar-Hamina and Mohamed Bouamari had a big impact on African cinema, mainly in Morocco and Tunisia paving the way to many other moviemakers such as Mohamed Zinet, Merzak Allouach and Asia Djebar, the feminist writer and the first female director in Algeria (p. 9). After the golden era of the 1970s, one of the most powerful African leading cinemas with a network of 500 movie theaters witnessed a terrible degradation (Dacbert, 1997: 1). By the end of the 1980, the threat of fundamentalism, the emergence of a new social division, the linguistic dilemma and the devastating globalization became the dominating themes. Merzak Allouache's *Bab Eloued City* is the best example (Benziane, 2001: 88).

Women were at the heart of the Revolutionary War, they fed, clothed and nursed, they were also couriers and soldiers on the front lines and in the battle fields. The Ministry of Veterans reported in 1974 that 11 000 women had fought in the war, almost 3 % of all fighters (Qtd. In Turshen, 2002: 890). *Mujahidat* such as Zohra Drif, Hassiba Benbouali and the *Djamilas*, Djamilia Bouhired, Djamilia Boupacha, Djamilia Bouazza and Djamilia Amrane-Minne (of French Origins) were a valuable asset to the *FLN* leaders in the Autonomous Zone of Algiers. These young women who dressed like Europeans could have access through the many checkpoints established by the French Special Forces in the

3 The French New Wave was a group of trailblazing directors who exploded onto the film scene in the late 1950s; revolutionising cinematic conventions by marrying the rapid cuts of Hollywood with philosophical trends. Lindsay Parnell explores how this group of young directors reshaped cinema. <<http://theculturetrip.com/europe/france/articles/the-french-new-wave-revolutionising-cinema/>>.

4 *Office National du Commerce et de l'Industrie Cinématographique* (National Office of Commerce and Cinematic Industry).



Figure 001 – From left to right: Samia Lakhdari, Zohra Drif, Djamila Bouhired and Hassiba Ben Bouali
– Picture taken by an FLN Militant in 1957.

Casbah and carry out successful missions. The Algerian Cinema championed the role of women in the bloody War of Independence. *The Battle of Algiers* is a good example of that. *La Battaglia di Algeri (The Battle of Algiers)* (1966) is a master piece in the Algerian cinema. The movie is an Algerian-Italian production; it was directed by Gillo Pontecorvo and produced by Yacef Saadi and Antonio Mussu, based on an idea by Yacef Saadi, the head of the FLN in Algiers who was one of the main characters of the movie. In an interview with Charline Jao, Saadi answers a question on the role of women in the battle and how he chose to portray them in the movie saying that:

We wanted to film the fact that women really did play a role in the war. That they themselves went and placed the bombs. The role they played, they played a very big role. They helped us in so many ways, they would help the people who had nothing to eat—they would find food for them. They would hide us in their homes when we needed, they would make food so everyone was fed. They would also look out for soldiers and let us know what was happening, so truly, I have to tell you that women played such an important role that without them we would not have won (Jao, 2016).

The *Golden Lion Laureate* (La Mostra de Venise, 1966) and the twice *Academy Awards* nominee (1967 and 1969) has been adopted by so many revolutionary movements all over the world. The movie presents in a dramatized way the crackdown of the French military on FLN militants in Algiers and the way it has affected the civilians, it provides insights to the organization of the FLN cells and the political motivation of the movement (Roberts, 2007: 388). Algerian women are presented as supporters and providers of refuge for FLN militants but the most noticeable depiction of women is in the famous sequences where the

fdayate (sacred martyrs) dress in western clothes to pass through the army checkpoints and put the bombs in the European neighborhoods of Algiers (p. 388).

Unlike female militants, male militants as depicted in the movie do not lack depth; they are psychologically well motivated with clear actions within a defined paradigm of submission, alienation then revolt, such as Ali La Pointe, the protagonist who is described by a voice over in newsreel-style at the narrative's inception as an illiterate draft-dodger who becomes politicized and recruited in prison by the FLN militants (Roberts, 2007: 389). The use of sound is brilliant in *The Battle of Algiers*. To highlight the bloody drama Pontecorvo had recourse to indigenous drum-beat on the soundtrack as an affirmation to the interconnection between women's activity and the cause and replaces the original dialogue with what the director called "a heartbeat like a liturgy of war" (Qtd. In Eid *et alia*, 2008: 152-153).

Haider Eid and Khaled Ghazel in their *Footprints of Fanon* in Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* and Sembene Ousamne's *Xala* provide an interpretation to the scene of masquerade as consonant with Fanon's conception of the "young Algerian women carrying the struggle to the heart of the metropolis" (p. 153). The authors explain the political significance of the veil, showing how Fanon perceived it as one of the many codes of resistance against the French coloniser when he wrote "The colonised, in the face of the emphasis given by the colonialist to this or that aspect of his traditions, reacts violently" (p. 153).

In 2003, *The Battle of Algiers* was screened in the Pentagon, the aim was to encounter the terrorist tactics and the guerrilla warfare in Iraq (Kaufman, 2003). In the US, the government was not the only party interested in the movie, Pontecorvo's classic was released in an enhanced DVD format with ongoing runs at the New York Film Forum and movie houses in Washington, Chicago, LA and San Francisco, it was subject to reviews and reports in major newspapers and magazines (O'Riley, 2010: 1). In this movie in particular, the FLN propaganda was seen by many critics as being that of terrorism.

During the French colonization, the FLN saw the acceptance of the advancement of women's rights as compliance to the reforms introduced by the colonial authorities (Qtd. In Leonhardt, 2013: 9). The relationship between Algerian women and the colonial authorities was characterized by a gap between the image and the reality of the "Other". For the colonial state, the French educated young women should have been collaborators; for these women, the admiration for France had collapsed with the atrocities they had witnessed firsthand (Vince, 2009: 158).

The conceptualization of women in the cinematic masterpiece *The Battle of Algiers* as female freedom fighters who took a long way to get their independence was characterized by the sacrifices they have made. The image of those young, European-dressing and beautiful girls is still etched in the minds and hearts of generations of rebels worldwide. The sacrifices of those legendary *Mujahidat* were an oath of allegiance to their nation and their country. Although they were labeled by many as 'bomb carriers' and 'terrorists', the *Djamilas* of Algeria gave birth to hope for a better life and a better tomorrow to the millions of indigenous people who were meant to give up their freedom and stay forever under the rule of the "Other".

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