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2012

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Recommended Citation
Rohloff, Caroline, "Reality and Representation of Algerian Women: The Complex Dynamic of Heroines and Repressed Women" (2012). *Honors Projects.* Paper 6.
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Reality and Representation of Algerian Women: The Complex Dynamic of Heroines and Repressed Women

Honors Research Project –
French and Francophone Studies
2011-2012

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The Complex Dynamic of Heroines and Repressed Women

After a long and bloody confrontation, lasting from 1954 until 1962, Algerians were finally able to secure their independence. Although the 1962 constitution established numerous liberties, including the right of women to vote in national elections, the racial and gender hierarchies established during the colonial era endured into the development of modern Algeria. In spite of women's military participation during the war for independence and the equality of gender roles they experienced, women were expected to return to the traditional roles of wife and mother in the post-war era. However, over the next three decades the situation of women began to gradually improve, particularly as educational opportunities increased. By the 1990s, primary school enrollment rates for girls had reached nearly 90 percent and the percentage of women in secondary education had more than doubled.[1] In spite of these developments, women's rights remained severely limited by family codes, which were based on Sharia, Islamic law. The new millennium brought about Algeria's civil war (1991-2002) and unprecedented violence against women. After enduring this period of violence and terror, women began to press the Algerian government and society for the recognition and enforcement of their legal rights. The result of their initiative has been a general improvement of women's position in society by Western standards.

Through the use of feminist theory and analysis of film, this paper examines both how and why women's roles in Algeria have changed from the 1950s to present day. The tenets of feminist theory establish the framework to determine how the perceptions of Algerian women came about and why these views have maintained a dominating presence in Algerian society. When applied to film, feminist theory seeks to determine how women are portrayed on screen and whether or not those depictions

[1] Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, 1993), 128.

are accurate representations of the societal conditions. The theory aims to answer: "who is represented and who does the representing? Who is seen and who is looking? Whose interests does an image encode, whose eroticism and desire? Who becomes the object or sign of that desire?"[2] Films from both the war of independence period and the modern era provide an additional filter to examine how Algerian women have been and still are perceived by society, particularly by men. Finally, this paper addresses what steps must be taken in order for Algerian women to experience equality and respect in a society that has traditionally suppressed their rights and regarded them as inferior.

New Constructions of Womanhood: National Heroines and the War for Independence

In 1966, Gillo Pontecorvo directed and released a film entitled *The Battle of Algiers* that depicted Algeria's struggle with France for its independence, alternately known as the Algerian War for Independence or Algerian Revolution. The film was acclaimed for its documentary-like presentation of the war and the hardships that the Algerian people withstood. Although the film's primary characters were men who were involved in the resistance, the film also addressed the role of women in the independence movement. Pontecorvo presented the female characters as silent and obedient, but also as strong and courageous as they did their part to aid the nationalist movement. In one scene, a woman wearing a *haik* (a full-bodied veil traditional to Algeria and Morocco that may only leave the eyes revealed) slips a young resistance fighter a gun so that he may shoot a French police officer. Later in the film, the importance of women increases as the French security forces establish checkpoints throughout the city of Algiers to prevent the movement of the revolutionaries. In order to bypass these security obstacles, young Algerian women sympathetic to the resistance cut and dye their hair and don a European style of dress in order to pass as French women. Carrying purses or baskets containing bombs, these women are able to enter the European districts of Algiers and plant the bombs in high-traffic areas.

[2] *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 174.

In the film, the women of Algeria are presented as the unspoken heroes and silent victims who kept the resistance movement alive through their ability and willingness to transform themselves into tools of war. This concept is reiterated at the end of the film when a young woman chooses to die with Ali La Pointe, the last leader of the resistance movement, rather than surrender herself to the French authorities. While Pontecorvo's presentation of the Algerian war for independence is captivating and emotional, is it an accurate depiction, particularly concerning the role of women? Were Algerian women as militarily active as the film suggests and were they considered the silent heroes of the resistance movement?

Women did play a very significant role during the war for independence, a role that is only slightly misrepresented by Pontecorvo's film. It is estimated that upwards of 10,000 women participated in the Algerian Revolution; however, the majority of these women served in non-military roles as nurses, cooks, and laundresses.[3] While the average woman's involvement was typically limited to these traditionally feminine roles, approximately 2 percent of the 10,000 Algerian women involved were terrorists, serving as couriers and carrying bombs, as *The Battle of Algiers* suggests.[4] In the film, there is a scene in which an Algerian woman places a bomb in a café popular with the European youth. This scene is based on the woman Zohra Drif, a twenty-year old law student who, on September 30, 1956, planted a bomb in the Milk Bar café in Algiers.[5] The bomb killed three French youths and injured several others. One woman, Baya Hocine, a commando in the resistance movement, was arrested and sentenced to death by the French but was later released when Algeria gained its independence in 1962. Another woman, Aicha Bouazzar, was a member of resistance groups such as the "Rural Shocks" who

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[3] *Modernizing Women*, ed. Moghadam, 83.
[4] *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam (Zed Books Ltd: London, 1994), 47
[5] "Algeria: Capture of the Chief", *Times* (October, 1957), http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,809954,00.html (accessed February, 24, 2012).

were responsible for ambushing French forces in certain areas of Algeria.[6] In an interview for the documentary, *Algeria: Women at War*, Aicha Bouazzar explains how she was responsible for caring for the wounded but was also given a "big Italian machine gun."[7] Women were trusted with the transportation and utilization of weapons, as well as planning and carrying out military operations. These critical roles in the war ultimately diminished the perceived gender inequality between Algerian men and women. Although only a small percentage of women in Algeria were actively involved in the war for independence against France, women on the national scale were exposed to the violence of the war and were aware of the courage of those women who were involved. Algeria's female population witnessed how a small portion of women served during the war, in either a military or non-military capacity, and gained the respect of men. Thus, while only 10,000 women experienced greater equality and respect during the war, Algerian women as a whole began to hope that the transition to independence would bring about significant changes for their gender.

While *The Battle of Algiers* depicts the military involvement of women, the female characters are only on screen for fifteen minutes, and the complex roles that women such as Aicha Bouazzar adopted during the war are overlooked altogether. Furthermore, the film only briefly addresses how women aided the national liberation movement after the war, and in some instances the film distorts women's true involvement. For example, women are silent throughout most of the film, yet in reality "the atmosphere within resistance groups was usually characterized by a close camaraderie between men and women, sustained by lively debates."[8] In addition, many of the women activists, such as Zohra Drif and Hassiba Ben Bouali, had attained a university-level education. While both of these women are portrayed in Pontecorvo's film, their academic capabilities are not. Besides assisting the resistance

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[6] *Algeria: Women at War*, dir. Parminder Vir, Women Make Movies, 1992, videocassette.
[7] *Algeria: Women at War*, dir. Parminder Vir.
[8] Danièle Djamila Amrane-Minne, "Women at War: The Representation of Women in *The Battle of Algiers*", *Interventions* 9, no. 3 (2007): 347.

movement militarily, both of these women participated in debates concerning the political situation and publicly advocated for the liberation movement. Furthermore, they were also responsible for handling important correspondence that was sent to the *Front de Libération Nationale's* (FLN) underground newspaper *El Moudjahid.* As Zohra Drif explains, "Whenever something had to be written, I did it."[9]

Why did women become militarily active in the war for independence? Was it a natural transition that occurred because women were being exposed to the struggles between the French and Algerians, or were there other factors that drove women to participate and risk their lives? With the start of the war against the French, the "traditional social fabric was ripped apart, and women, often in the absence of their men (who had gone to war), took on new duties and roles."[10] In some cases, women joined the Algerian rebels because their husbands or other close male relatives were killed, and they needed some way to support their families. Although the women were not paid for their participation in the resistance movement, food and other supplies could always be found in the rebel camps and the resistance movement provided a security network for widowed and fatherless women. Houria Bouhired explains in *Algeria: Women at War* how her mother, Fatiha Bouhired, joined the resistance movement when Fatiha's husband was killed, leaving her a widow at the age of twenty-four with five children to support. During the war for independence, it was not uncommon for young women to find themselves without a husband, father, brother, or other male guardian.

Of the women involved in the National Liberation of Algeria, "51 percent were under 20 years of age and 95 percent were under 30 years of age."[11] In general, it was the younger women who were willing and physically able to take a more active role in the resistance movement. Their youthful vigor made these young women ideal for conveying messages and delivering messages to the different cells of

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[9] Ibid., 347-348.
[10] Mary Neville Blair, *Equal in War, Forgotten in Peace: The Changing Status of Algerian Women* (University Microfilms International: Ann Arbor, 1986), 37.
[11] *Gender and National Identity*, ed. Moghadam, 47.

the resistance movement. Another woman, Fatima Hakem, interviewed in *Algeria: Women at War* explains how she joined a local group of Moudjahidines, members of the FLN, in order to provide for her children. A farmer before the war began, Fatima became an informer for the resistance movement, was arrested three times and reports that she was beaten by the French guards before her release. It was not uncommon for Algerian women who were arrested to be treated in the same cruel manner as the men were. As one woman, a Mme Almnowar, who was active in the resistance and put in prison for over a year, explains: "they [the prison guards] were just as cruel to women as they were to men."[12] Algerian women who were arrested and detained were often beaten and even raped by their French captors. It was also not uncommon for women to give birth in prison; however their condition did not entitle them to better treatment. A Mme Hamdi observed the condition of Algerian women in French prisons and explained: "Once they started labour they were taken to hospital and as soon as they had delivered their babies they were brought back to prison again."[13] In the eyes of the French troops and security forces, all Algerians involved in the resistance movement were enemies of the state of France, regardless of their sex. The often harsh and brutal conditions of war created a sense of equality and respect between Algerian men and women that was manifested in other ways throughout the war.

While many Algerian women joined the movement because their male relatives had been killed, some women joined with their husbands. Mme Almnowar joined the FLN with her husband and became militarily active. Her husband recognized the service she could provide to Algeria; "he encouraged me to do what he couldn't do. I could carry arms under my veil and get to see his comrade fighters and exchange information with them."[14] As Pontecorvo's film shows, Algerian women were able to deceive the French security forces and deliver weapons and other supplies to the different cells of the resistance

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[12] Bouthaina Shaaban, "Algeria: Sharing the Struggle", *Both Right and Left Handed: Arab Women Talk about Their Lives* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1988), 185.
[13] Shaaban, *Both Right and Left Handed*, 196.
[14] Ibid., 185.

movement. For instance, as the film indicates, Algerian women would transform themselves with make-up and European dress to appear French. One woman, Farida, who was involved in the resistance movement explains, "I had to go unnoticed, be taken for a French person, so as not to arouse any suspicions, since anybody who looked like an Arab was searched and arrested. So, I used to put on make-up and dress in the French way."[15] Women proved they were capable of adapting to the circumstances of the war, and along with their determination and ingenuity, women helped the Algerians defeat the French and gain their independence.

While the temporary removal of societal barriers as a result of women's incorporation into rebel organizations enabled Algerian women to move about cities more freely, the traditions and religious customs of Muslim society also aided the nationalist movement. Although there is Christian influence in Algeria, mostly brought over by the French colonizers, the majority of Algeria's Arab population practices Islam. As a result, many Algerian women wear the veil as a symbol of their religious devotion. During the war for independence, the veil proved to be a useful military tool, as it easily concealed weapons and documents. In addition, through the process of colonization, the French learned that Muslim women must be treated with a certain respect and distance. In Muslim societies, it is generally deemed inappropriate for any man, except an immediate male relative, to touch a woman, especially in public. The resistance fighters used these customs to their advantage because women dressed in a veil, particularly the full-bodied *haik*, were able to pass through French checkpoints without being searched. Later in the war, women began dressing in the European style to more easily traverse the guarded streets.

Besides serving in the resistance as couriers and informers, some women became active in the organization of the movement. Particularly as the war progressed and the French forces tightened

[15] *Gender and National Identity*, ed. Moghadam, 27.

security in the cities, women's intellectual capacities became more important. One woman who was involved in the resistance, a Mme Rashid, explains how women were active in the planning as well as the carrying out of operations. While the men remained the authority figures, "we [women] were the only ones who planned operations. The men didn't have a clue . . . The men carried out *our* orders."[16] It was the women who devised the idea of changing their appearance to a more European style so that they could move around the French-occupied cities more easily. Mme Rashid recalls: "We were constantly changing men's clothes, dyeing their hair and ours too, and doing our best to reduce the risk of being found out by the enemy. All this was thought of and carried out by women."[17] Zohra Drif, who had been responsible for planting bombs in Algiers, explains in an interview that as the casbah – the neighborhood surrounding the citadel of Algiers – began to fall under French control, "our brothers wouldn't have been able to carry out their work without us [women] . . . because we could go out wearing the veil."[18] Based on the experience and accounts of various women, the move for independence would not have been successful without women's clever operations that were designed to outwit the French enemy.

The military involvement of Algerian women suggests that the mindset regarding the dynamic between men and women evolved during the war for independence. The women interviewed in *Algeria: Women at War* found this change to be true and explained that the mindset changed because the distance between men and women was reduced. By this, the women mean that the patriarchal society of Algeria was no longer able to hide the war from women because the war and the resistance movement were infiltrating Algerians' homes and businesses. As the war consumed Algeria, men realized they could no longer prevent their female relatives from joining the resistance movement; the assistance of women had become essential to the survival of the push for independence. The changing

[16] Shaaban, *Both Right and Left Handed*, 196.
[17] Ibid., 197.
[18] Amrane-Minne, "Women at War", 344.

relations between men and women were "due to necessity, the need to survive."[19] Men often recruited the services of their wives, sisters, and older daughters because refugees were frequently hidden in the homes of nationalist sympathizers. As women became increasingly active in the war effort, men's respect for women also grew because they understood that women in Algerian society could prove useful as active combatants. Houria, a *moudjahidate* (a volunteer female freedom fighter) who was militarily active, explains that during the war, "There was total respect between us, it was not like today, we were really united . . . the women were really respected."[20] The majority of women who were interviewed after the war for independence discussed the increased equality and respect that they experienced and hoped would persist after the war.

As Algerian men grew to respect women more, society's perception of a woman's proper role also changed. For instance, it became more acceptable for women to leave the house without a male escort. Women thrived in their newly-discovered independence, and in some cases women came to occupy a leadership role, as Mme Rashid did through the organization of operations for the movement. In addition to acquiring greater independence in society, Algerian women also obtained an increased level of freedom at home. During the war for independence women "forgot about domestic duties" and there was less expectation from men that women perform their traditional tasks.[21] The harsh conditions of the war created a sense of solidarity between men and women, with the result being that it "did not matter who did what; we [men and women] were all the servants of the revolution which was going to liberate us and restore our identity."[22] Although women enjoyed increased independence and respect from men, the power and influence they had during the war did not continue once Algeria gained its independence from France in 1962.

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[19] Blair, *Equal in War, Forgotten in Peace*, 37.
[20] *Gender and National Identity*, ed. Moghadam, 28.
[21] Shaaban, *Both Right and Left Handed*, 186.
[22] Ibid.

Shortly after the war for independence, women were dismayed to find that their contribution to the war effort was hardly recognized. When Algeria's Independence Day was celebrated in later years, none of the festivities or ceremonies recognized the participation of women during the war. One *mujahida* explained her disappointment: "we were all equal in the war – it was afterward that our citizenship was taken from us."[23] Besides losing the respect they had earned from the men, women also lost their social independence, as they were expected to return to their traditional roles of wife and mother. Although women felt that, as a nation and as a people, Algerians had become free, many women in general believed that their "domestic life did not change at all."[24] It was especially difficult for women who had been militarily active during the war to readjust, because they had grown accustomed to performing duties traditionally viewed as masculine through their involvement in the resistance. After having worked alongside men and having earned their respect, women resisters expected that this sense of equality would continue, and the gender divisions in Algerian society would be overcome. Much of women's political under-representation after the war for independence can be attributed to the very traditional view of women in Algerian society. This view assumes that it is "normal to help out with the kind of everyday tasks they [women] usually perform anyway."[25] Thus, women's help in a non-military capacity was simply expected of them by Algerian men, and because many women were nurses or laundresses as well as militiawomen, their participation in the guerrilla forces or their political responsibilities were easily overlooked.

While women were expected to return to the domestic sphere after the war, even these traditional roles were transformed. For those women who participated in the war, particularly in a military capacity, marriage and family life became difficult as the women struggled to readjust. Many

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[23] Meredith Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle and the Civil War: From Active Participants to Passive Victims?", *Social Research* 69, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 893.
[24] Shaaban, *Both Right and Left Handed*, 186.
[25] Amrane-Minne, "Women at War", 348.

women who were married before the war or became married shortly thereafter had confrontations with their husbands and many marriages ended in divorce. Houria, who was a *moudjahida* during the war, divorced her husband shortly after the war and began looking for a job, however she "could not do anything, [as she] had no qualifications."[26] Another woman, Farida, felt like a prisoner in her parents-in-law's house, where she was not accepted by her husband's family. After some time, a friend of Farida convinced her husband that she should be allowed to work. The result was that Farida's father-in-law expelled both Farida and her husband from the house, because "he [Farida's father-in-law] could not stand the idea of [Farida] working."[27] While many women were eager to work, particularly those who had been active in the war for independence, the traditional social norms and views on women's roles prevented most Algerian women from securing work outside of the household.

Although the new government failed to recognize women's contribution to the war for independence, the new constitution that was passed in 1962 did recognize the rights of women. The constitution guaranteed equality between the sexes and granted women the right to vote for the first time in Algeria's history.[28] In addition, ten women were elected as deputies to the new National Assembly and were able to push for legislation that would improve the status of women. In spite of the improvements that Algerian independence seemed to bring for women, the male-dominated government prevented women from gaining many liberties. Immediately after the war, women participants were respected and admired for their contributions. One participant, Djamila Bouhired, was "applauded when she addressed a crowd on the future of Algeria's women."[29] Yet by 1964, the mood in Algeria was changing and the promise of equality between men and women was fading. On April 16-21, 1964, the FLN drafted the *Chartre d'Alger* (Algiers Charter), which stipulated that "as soon

[26] *Gender and National Identity*, ed. Moghadam, 29.
[27] Ibid., 30.
[28] *Modernizing Women*, ed. Moghadam, 84.
[29] Blair, *Equal in War, Forgotten in Peace*, 71.

as possible a family code, in conformity with our traditions and our socialist position, be promulgated."[30] In 1968, the government refused to accept legislation that proposed additional rights for women, because increased equality did not serve the interests of the men. After having witnessed the strength that women possessed in the war for independence, the men who ruled Algeria "wanted women to remain tools in their hands. They didn't want laws which encouraged women's ability and potential."[31] By the 1960s, women were gradually becoming more educated and had higher expectations for their quality of life and the men perceived this rise of women as a threat to their positions of power.

Between Tradition and Progress: Depictions of Advancement and Suppression of Women in Algerian Society

Over the next twenty years, women continued to slowly gain power and influence in Algerian society. The primary cause of this empowerment was education, which was partly responsible for the reduction of gender barriers. In 1965, the primary school enrollment for girls was 53 percent, but by 1988 it had risen to 87 percent.[32] Secondary school enrollment rates also experienced a significant increase as they rose from 5 percent in 1965 to 46 percent between 1986 and 1988.[33] As more women became educated, literacy rates also improved; by 1985, approximately 37 percent of Algerian women were literate, compared to 63 percent of men who could read and write.[34] Education for women in patriarchal societies has had a revolutionary effect: "access to education seems to have an immediate, tremendous impact on women's perception of themselves, their reproductive and sex roles, and their social mobility expectations."[35] Although women became progressively more educated in the decades

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[30] Ibid., 72.
[31] Shaaban, *Both Right and Left Handed*, 198.
[32] "Table 4.6 Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary School Enrollments", *Modernizing Women*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam (Lynne Rienner Publishes: Boulder, 1993), 128.
[33] Ibid.
[34] "Table 4.3 Literacy, Education, Labor Force, and Fertility Rates, 1980s", *Modernizing Women*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam (Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, 1993), 122.
[35] Ibid., 129.

following the war for independence, the percentage of women in the workforce only increased marginally. From 1966 to 1987, the percentage of employed women in the labor force only rose from 1.8 percent to 4.4 percent.[36] However, these figures are deceptive. The low rates are partly indicative of the return of women to the private sphere after the war for independence. Once the war was over, women's active participation in the public sphere was no longer considered necessary for the survival of Algeria. As Algeria's economy developed, the low rate of women in the workforce also became indicative of a "socialist economy buoyed by the wealth of the nationalized oil fields."[37] As a result of the expanding economy, many middle class families could suddenly afford to have their wives and daughters stay at home.

Although the percentage of women in the workforce remained low, the 1980s brought about the belief that women's conditions were improving. In general, the 1980s brought about a great deal of change for Algerian society. First, in 1980 the government issued a ministerial order that "forbade any woman from leaving the country without a male."[38] However, the order was annulled after women protested in the streets. In spite of this small success for women, the government continued to propose restrictive legislation. In 1984 the government instituted a Family Code that significantly reduced the rights of women. The Code legalized polygamy, "retained unequal inheritance between women and men, and strengthened the legal prerogatives of husbands," including the right of husbands to divorce unilaterally and evict their ex-wives from their homes.[39] In addition, the code "made all women minors in education, work, marriage, divorce, and inheritance."[40] The Family Code also revealed that secret negotiations had been struck between political and religious leaders, as well as the "government's

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[36] "Table 2.3 Evolution of Labor Force Participation in Selected Countries", *Modernizing Women*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam (Lynne Rienner Publishers: Boulder, 1993): 44.
[37] Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle", 892.
[38] Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle", 894.
[39] *Modernizing Women*, ed. Moghadam, 112.
[40] Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle", 894.

willingness to sacrifice women's rights in order to stay in power."[41] The liberation and independence that women were gaining was seen as a threat to the status quo, particularly by Islamic religious leaders, and the only way to preserve their position of power was through the control of women's sexuality. The rise of Islamists in the 1980s and their desire for absolute power would lead to the civil war that began in the early 1990s and shrouded Algeria in a cloud of terror for nearly a decade.

The seeds of the civil war were planted in 1988 when riots and protests swept across Algeria as citizens expressed their discontent with high levels of poverty and poor economic conditions. In October 1988, thousands of Algeria's youth joined these "bread riots" and "demonstrated in the streets of Algiers against the effects of the structural adjustment program imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund."[42] In 1994, the Algerian government was forced to accept an additional IMF plan of economic restructuring. While the structural adjustment program of the IMF fiscally stabilized the government and began to restore GDP growth, it also "significantly lowered the already declining living standards of millions of its [Algeria's] citizens. Income inequality grew, social support systems were dismantled or deprived of funds, and unemployment levels of 30 percent or more became the norm."[43] These declining economic conditions worsened an already volatile situation and led to more protests, particularly of Algeria's youth.

The protests that began in 1988 had Islamist undertones that eventually developed into an armed civil conflict between the Algerian government and various Islamist rebel groups. The government of President Chadli Bendjedid initially made the situation worse by brutally repressing the protests; however, the government then initiated reforms, including the drafting of a new constitution in 1989. Just as the constitution of 1963, the new constitution established that "'Citizens are equal in

[41] Ibid., 904.
[42] Ibid., 895.
[43] John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 258.

the eyes of the law, without there being any discrimination because of birth, race, sex or any other condition or circumstance, whether personal or social.'"[44] These reforms included the freedom of expression, including freedom of the press, the right to organize the clubs and associations that form a healthy civil society, and the right to establish new political parties.[45] One of the new political parties that emerged was the *Front islamique du salut* (FIS) which received 54 percent of the popular vote in the May 1990 local elections.[46] President Bendjedid was removed from power in January of 1992 and the government quickly canceled the second electoral round because it feared the rise of opposition political parties, such as the FIS. Although the new constitution established the right to form political parties, the new government, led by President Mohamed Boudiaf, dissolved the FIS in March of 1992 but this did little good since President Boudiaf was assassinated in June 1992. Violence ensued in the following decade and an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 people were killed as terrorist groups competed for state power.[47]

While all of Algeria was affected by the civil war, women in particular suffered the greatest terror during this decade. Women quickly became both "targets and pawns in the power struggles between the Islamists and the government."[48] In April 1990, the FIS organized a march on the government where they demanded the application of the Sharia. This code would significantly curtail women's rights by giving male relatives more control over marriage, legalizing polygamy, and limiting a woman's divorce rights. The FIS also discouraged women from working outside the home and they pushed for the creation of separate public transportation and beaches for women and men. According to the FIS, women "do not have the right to work outside the home, become political leaders, or participate in sports. They should not wear makeup, perfume, fitted clothes, or mingle with men in

[44] Danièle Djamila Amrane-Minne, "Women and Politics in Algeria from the War of Independence to Our Day", *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 68.
[45] Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle", 896.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle", 896.
[48] Ibid., 897.

public."[49] For fundamentalists such as the FIS, the emancipated woman was representative of modernity and the decline of the patriarchal order, which was being hastened by the ratification of the 1989 constitution, which established that women "have access to all the professions, and with equal rights to work, they deserve to benefit from equal pay."[50] Women in Algeria were making significant social progress, but to conservative groups such as the FIS, women's progress threatened national and social stability.

The 1990s marked a transition period where women were caught between modernity and traditionalism. Two films, released in 2002 and 2004, capture this limbo phase and provide a poignant view of Algerian society in the late 1990s and early 2000s through the perspective of two Algerian women. The first, *Rachida*, tells the story of a young school teacher, Rachida, whose life is significantly changed by the religious terror that continues to plague Algeria. On her way to school one day, she is accosted by a former student and his cohorts who demand that Rachida deliver a briefcase with a bomb to the school. When Rachida refuses, they force her against a wall in an alley and shoot her. Although Rachida survives her injury, she is left physically and mentally scarred. In order to escape the Islamic fundamentalists and their reign of terror in the city, Rachida and her mother flee to the countryside. After some time, Rachida begins to feel alive again, and as she begins teaching at the local school, their lives regain a semblance of normalcy. However, their sense of security is quickly destroyed when a small band of Islamic fundamentalists begins to raid the town. Residents are forced to hide when the terrorists arrive and Rachida and her mother witness several men being assaulted by the fundamentalists on the side of the road.

One scene in particular demonstrates the extent of the terror and its impact on the women of the small village. A young girl is seen running through the woods and then collapses in the street when

[49] Ibid., 898.
[50] Amrane-Minne, "Women and Politics in Algeria", 68.

she arrives in the village. Although she is wounded and traumatized, she refuses to let any of the men touch her. The other women of the village surround her and cover her with their headscarves, a moving and symbolic presentation of the solidarity between women who are subjects of violence and oppression. This young girl, Zahra, was kidnapped by the terrorists and then beaten and raped repeatedly until she escaped. Upon her return, she is subjected to further humiliation when her father repudiates her. He declares, "She is not my daughter. I don't want her. I'd rather she be dead! She has humiliated us in front of the neighbors, in front of the family. She has dishonored us; I don't want anything to do with her."[51] If not for the help of her familial sisters, who resolutely stand by her side, Zahra would have been forced into the streets, where it is likely the terrorists would have abducted her again and killed her as punishment. During the Algerian civil war in the late 1990s, it was not uncommon for fathers or husbands to disown daughters or wives who had been raped by fundamentalists. Although these men did not necessarily agree with the ideology or the violent actions of the terrorists, they were raised in an extremely traditional era that taught them that women must follow a strict code of behavior. While the rapes and beatings were not the fault of the women, many of their male relatives believed that the women had brought dishonor upon themselves and thus were no longer fit to be a part of the family.

The climax of the film and the culmination of the terror occur at night during the wedding ceremony of one of the villager's daughters. During the celebration, the terrorists arrive and open fire on the villagers. As Rachida is hiding in some bushes with a small child that she found abandoned on the street, she witnesses the abduction of the young girl who was supposed to be married that night. The next morning reveals billowing clouds of smoke from burning houses, and streets littered with debris and a line of bodies. Ironically, it is Zahra, the young girl who was abducted and escaped, who surveys the damage and the despair of the village. With a large belly displaying her pregnancy, Zahra and her

[51] *Rachida*, dir. Yamina Bachir, The Global Film Initiative, 2002, DVD.

unborn child are both a symbol of hope and of the renewal of life, as well as a reminder of the horrors that the village, and particularly the women, suffered. The film ends with a defiant Rachida returning to the partly-demolished school where, for the children who show up, she begins the day's lesson. In spite of the atrocities that Rachida witnesses and is subjected to, she remains strong, demonstrating the resolve and determination to improve the social, political, and economic situation of future generations that has long characterized Algerian women.

The second film, *Viva Laldjérie*, set in 2003, depicts the lives of two women living in a world divided between modern society and Islamic fundamentalism. The primary character, Goucem, is a working woman in her late twenties. There is a great deal of conflict between Goucem and her mother, Papicha, who is more traditional and conservative. Although the film does not portray the horrors of the civil war the way *Rachida* does, *Viva Laldjérie* does depict how both women and society struggle to reconcile the differences between a traditionally patriarchal state and the freedoms of the new modern era. Goucem is an excellent representation of this struggle: a young woman who wants to enjoy the pleasure and liberties of life yet is constrained by the traditions and ideologies of a society that is still predominantly conservative. In preparation for a night at the clubs, Goucem puts on a short, blue velvet dress, yet before she leaves the apartment complex she dons a headscarf and a *haik*, a large robe or piece of fabric that covers her whole body. In spite of her desire to present herself as modern, chic, and sexually free and available, Goucem recognizes that she must obey the cultural and social traditions of visual presentation and dress in order to traverse the streets safely at night.

Although the civil war has ended and Algeria is once again relatively stable in *Viva Laldjérie*, the terror that the fundamentalists instilled remains constant in the minds of many Algerians, particularly the women. Papicha, Goucem's mother, is still extremely fearful of the terrorists and becomes frightened whenever she sees a man with a beard. Some of her fears stem from her past as a cabaret

dancer, a profession that is considered promiscuous and sinful by the Islamic fundamentalists. Yet when Papicha puts on her dancing outfit in a moment of nostalgia, it is Goucem who reminds her that if she leaves the building like that, it is likely that she will be assaulted and perhaps even killed by the fundamentalists or by traditionally-minded men.

While the film depicts the freedoms that Algerian women gained in the late 1990s, there are still indications that society is dominated by men and that women are still regarded as inferior. In an attempt to reopen the Copacabana club, Papicha goes to a public record building in search of information on the property. However, her gender prevents her from acquiring any information from the male attendant who addresses her in a patronizing tone, and makes it clear that he has no intention of helping her. Papicha approaches another man who initially treats her in the same patronizing and demeaning manner. It is only after Papicha uses her feminine charms and seductive qualities that she is able to acquire the information she seeks. She sweet-talks the older gentleman and implies through her body language that if he assists her, she will repay him with sexual favors. Her body language consists of batting her eyelashes, placing her hand on his chest, and leaning in close to the point where their faces are almost touching. Without this close physical interaction, the man would have remained obstinate and would have refused to assist Papicha. It is interesting that historically, Algerian men, particularly Muslims, sought to repress the sexuality of women through veiling and conservative clothing and behavior, yet the only time women can gain man's attention is through an open display of sexuality. Thus, although women themselves feel more liberated, it is the archaic attitudes of men that prevent women from becoming truly independent and self-sufficient in a modernizing society.

These sentiments are reminiscent of the colonial period when a "woman was a symbol and the last line of defense against the loss of national identity."[52] Fundamentalist groups, such as the FIS,

[52] Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle", 902.

feared that the emancipation of women and the modernization of society would result in the loss of the traditional Algerian identity, making the state more vulnerable to outside influences. While the FIS did oppose the presence of women in the workforce, their focus was primarily on establishing a strict Muslim society in Algeria. In 1994, the FIS issued a *fatwa*, a religious commandment, which "legalized the killing of girls and women not wearing the *hijab* (which in Algeria consists of a scarf that hides the hair and neck and a full-length robe)" and another *fatwa* which legalized kidnapping and temporary marriage.[53] Fundamental Islamists, such as the FIS, used a radical interpretation of jihad to justify their use of force to impose their extremist Islamic beliefs on Algerian women, including the legitimization of murdering girls and women who refused to wear the *hijab* or the traditional *haik*.

Many women and girls protested against the FIS and their radical suppression of women, however, these protesters then became the targets of extreme brutality. One seventeen-year-old girl named Katia Bengana openly opposed the FIS when she declared, "Even if one day I will be assassinated, I will never wear *hijab* against my will."[54] The FIS responded to Katia's opposition by ambushing, shooting, and killing her when she left school with her head uncovered on February 28, 1994.[55] Besides terrorizing girls and women who refused to wear a headscarf, the FIS also forced many young women and girls into marriages with their own members. In 1994, sixteen-year-old Yamina was forced into a temporary marriage with a member of the terrorist group that had taken over her village. On the night of the wedding ceremony Yamina was raped in her own home by her new "husband" while he held a knife to her throat and over the next two months, "he repeatedly beat her with a belt and raped her."[56] Seven months later she gave birth to a son who was considered illegitimate by both the village and the state, thus ostracizing Yamina from society. As depicted in the film *Rachida*, it was not uncommon for

[53] Ibid., 897-898.
[54] Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle", 898.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid., 899.

women who were abducted and abused by the terrorist groups to be repudiated by their own families if they were fortunate enough to return.

Although fear was pervasive in Algerian society during the civil war of the 1990s, many women remained strong and found ways to resist and protest the violent actions of the FIS. Throughout the terror campaign of the 1990s thousands of women demonstrated in the streets against the violence of the Islamic fundamentalists. In 1994, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) called for a boycott of schools; however, in spite of numerous school burnings and murders of teachers, women still brought their children to classes. Algerian women continued to defy the GIA and the FIS when, in November 1995, "women were the first to vote in the presidential elections, despite the FIS call for a boycott."[57] In addition to protesting and utilizing their political power through elections, Algerian women also began to establish NGOs to aid women affected by the terror of the civil war. RACHDA (Collective against Denigration and for the Rights of Algerian Women), founded in 1996, is an organization that provided psychological, medical, and legal help to women who were raped or beaten by groups such as the FIS. This organization is still in existence and continues to provide aid to women who find themselves in socially degrading conditions. Although NGOs such as RACHDA have been able to provide invaluable assistance to women for the past twenty years, support from the government has been severely limited. As of 2001, one issue that was still prevalent among Algerian women was the "government's failure to recognize . . . the 2,029 women who survived rape by terrorists . . . as legal victims of terrorism." [58] The solidarity of Algerian women has remained strong in spite of the suffering they endured during the 1990s, yet their pain remains relatively unnoticed by the government and the male population, just as their contributions went unnoticed after independence was won in 1962.

[57] Ibid., 902.
[58] Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle", 903.

Though the Algerian government did little to respond to the initial violence and instability of the civil war, afterwards the government began the process of legal reform. In 2005, the government initiated a partial reform of the 1984 Family Code, or "scandalous law," which significantly improved the position of women in society. The reform included strengthening the position of divorced women with children, outlawing forced arranged marriages, and required that polygamy be consented to by the first wife. In addition, the reform established that "women were no longer legally required to be obedient to their husbands."[59] Although women's divorce rights remained limited and the concept of *wali*, the stipulation "that an adult woman remains under the lifelong tutelage of a guardian," was maintained, the reforms liberated women from the restrictions of the 1984 Family Code and paved the way for further societal advances.[60]

New Perspectives: Modern Algeria, Modern Women

As a result of the civil war, a multi-party system emerged that liberalized Algerian politics. The more democratic and liberal tendencies of the new political system also brought about progressive changes for women. Algerian women were finally allowed to organize themselves politically and form organizations that could operate within the national system. Women took advantage of their new political activism and began advocating for women's issues, particularly education and women's rights within the family. Some organizations, such as CIDDEF, Centre d'Information et de Documentation sur les Droits de l'Enfant et de la Femme (Center for Information and Documentation of Rights of Children and Women), have launched campaigns to make women aware of the rights provided to them by the 2005 Family Code revisions.[61] Other organizations provide legal advice and aid to women who are struggling through divorce and custody battles. Aicha Bouazzar, who had been active in the movement

[59] Doris H. Gray, "Women in Algeria Today and the Debate over Family Law", *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 13, no. 1 (March 2009: 49.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Gray, "Women in Algeria Today", 51.

for independence, was the director of an organization called SOS Femmes en détresse (Women in Distress). This volunteer organization gives legal and financial advice, as well as material aid, to women who have been repudiated by their husbands. Due to the strict divorce rules established in the 1984 Family Code, which were hardly altered by the 2005 revisions and which stipulated that men could divorce unilaterally, women who are divorced or renounced by their husbands often become homeless.

Furthermore, the family structure continues to change as the younger generations become more educated and are able to obtain a more independent life. The shifting family structure has created tensions between older and younger generations about the concepts of family and gender roles. The result is that more and more young women who are unwanted by their husbands are becoming homeless because they are too ashamed to return to their parent's home. In 2007, SOS Women in Distress estimated that "at least 540 women throughout Algeria have been victims of the nation's family law and became homeless."[62] One young woman, who was interviewed in the documentary *Algeria: Women at War*, became homeless with her four children when her husband divorced her. Too ashamed to return to her parent's house and with no money or job to support her children, the young woman was forced to live on the streets. Fortunately, more organizations like SOS Women in Distress are being established to aid women who become victims of repudiation and societal estrangement.

Women's movements have increased significantly since the transition to a multi-party system in the late 1980s. These movements focus primarily on the education of women and making them aware of public issues, such as political rights and healthcare. There has been an especially large push for the transmission of information on contraceptives to the female population. As women become more educated and push to enter the workforce, the family structure is also changing and women are choosing to get married later and have fewer children. From 1970 to 1998, the mean age of a woman's

[62] Ilhem Rachidi, "New Law Leaves Divorced Algerian Women Homeless", *WeNews*, March 4, 2007, http://www.womensenews.org/story/the-world/070304/new-law-leaves-divorced-algerian-women-homeless (accessed December 7, 2011).

first marriage increased from 18.4 years to 27.6.[63] Predominantly for educational, economic, and personal reasons women are deciding to wait longer before marriage. In 1970, 16.5 percent of women aged 15 years or more were single whereas in 1998, the percentage of single women in the same age group was 61.8 percent.[64] Besides waiting longer to get married, fewer women are choosing to get married. 63.8 percent of women aged 15 years or more were married in 1970 but only 31.8 percent were married in 1998.[65] Many women are in fact choosing to postpone marriage in order to pursue further education or a career. However, these same ambitions are also preventing many women from finding a husband. The social structure of Algeria is evolving due to the liberation of women, and one of the results is that men are intimidated by their counterparts. Women have become increasingly independent through education and entry into the workforce, and one result is that many men feel women have surpassed them. While much of Algerian society embraces the liberation and advancement of women, the concept of a woman being the most educated or the highest-paid member of a household is still considered revolutionary.

However, it is not just the educational level of women that is preventing them from finding a husband. As Algerian women have become more liberated and independent, many have also adopted a more liberal sexual lifestyle. For example, in the film *Viva Laldjérie*, Goucem is very liberal in her sexual encounters. While having an affair with an older doctor, she goes out to the nightclubs and has sex with a stranger. At the age of thirty she fears that she is not marriageable because she is no longer a virgin and has had two abortions. By the 1990s and early 2000s it was not uncommon for women to partake in pre-marital sexual relations; however, society, especially the older generations, continued to emphasize the importance of female chastity, making it harder for some women to make marriage

[63] *Women and Men in Algeria: a Statistical Portrait* (United Nations Publication: Beirut, 2003), 10.
[64] "Table 5 Trends in the percent distribution of population aged 15 years or more by marital status, selected years in the period 1970-1998", *Women and Men in Algeria*, 12.
[65] Ibid.

arrangements. The price of female liberation comes at a cost; women may want to be freer in their sexual relations but this comes with consequences and may further alienate younger women from the older, more traditional segments of Algerian society.

A severe housing crisis has also contributed to the changing marriage rates and the shifting family structure. In 1998, there were approximately 5,021,000 housing units, out of which 81.64 percent were inhabited, a 30.6 percent increase between 1977 and 1987 and a 37 percent increase between 1987 and 1998.[66] In 1966, the average occupancy ratio of an inhabited residential unit was 6.10 individuals per housing unit, but it rose quickly to 7.54 in 1987.[67] With roughly 56 percent of the population between the ages of twenty and thirty-nine in 1998, finding adequate housing has become difficult for the younger generations who are preparing for marriage and a family of their own.[68] The divorce rules in the 1984 Family Code also exacerbated the housing crisis for women, particularly for divorced women. Traditionally, when a woman became divorced, neither her former husband nor the state was obligated to help her find new housing. Assia, who became divorced in 1995, was not provided any housing benefit in the divorce settlement even though she proved to the courts that her former husband had multiple housing units. The 2004 reforms to the 1984 Family Code now require the husband to "give up the conjugal residence or provide housing when the ex-wife retains custody."[69] However, many Algerian women are finding that the new law is not being enforced, and thus repudiated women are still ending up homeless.

In correlation with the changing trends in marriage, fertility rates are also shifting as Algerian women become increasingly independent. The crude birth rate declined from 50 births per 1,000 in

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[66] *Women and Men in Algeria*, 73.
[67] Ibid.
[68] "Figure 3d Population Pyramid, 1998", *Women and Men in Algeria*, 8.
[69] Rachidi, "New Law Leaves Divorced Algerian Women Homeless", http://www.womensenews.org/story/the-world/070304/new-law-leaves-divorced-algerian-women-homeless.

1970 to 22.5 births per 1,000 in 1997.[70] However, since 1997, the crude birth rate has only dropped to 20.43 births per 1,000 in 2009.[71] In addition to waiting longer to get married, women are also having children later in life. The age-specific fertility rates (ASFR) for women ages 15-19 dropped from 114 per 1,000 women in this age group in 1970 to only 21 per 1,000 in 1995, whereas the drops in ASFR were less significant for the other age groups.[72] While a portion of the declining fertility rates can be attributed to an increased percentage of women in secondary levels of education and in the workforce, increased access to contraception has also played a significant role in reducing the birth rates.

Education campaigns about contraceptives have enabled women in Algeria to have more authority in regards to when they decide to have children. Women's organizations have focused a great deal of their efforts on making women aware of the different options, especially since extra-marital relationships have become more common as both Algerian men and women choose to wait longer before marriage. In 1970, the use of contraceptives was 8 percent but use rose to 56.9 percent in 1995.[73] In the same year, 43.4 percent of women were using the pill, while only 0.8 percent used condoms.[74] These figures indicate that women are taking responsibility for their sexual health and they are also taking control of when they choose to start a family. In addition, it is not just younger women who are taking a more independent approach to life, but middle-aged women are also using contraceptives. In 1995, 43.5 percent of women ages 15-19 were using some form of birth control while 33.5 percent of women aged 45-49 were using contraceptives.[75] The percentage of women aged 15-49 using contraceptives has continued to rise and by 2006 roughly 61 percent of Algerian women were

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[70] "Table 7 Number of births and crude birth rates, selected years in the period 1970-1997", *Women and Men in Algeria*, 15.
[71] "Google Public Data", *Google Public Data*, March 9, 2012, http://tinyurl.com/7xueyg6 (accessed March 20, 2012).
[72] "Table 8 Trends in age-specific fertility rates (ASFR) and total fertility rates (TFR), selected years in the period 1970-1995", *Women and Men in Algeria*, 17.
[73] *Women and Men in Algeria*, 18.
[74] "Table 9 Trends in percent use of contraception by method, selected years in the period 1970-1995", *Women and Men in Algeria*, 19.
[75] "Table 10 Trends in percent use of contraception by age of women, selected years in the period 1970-1995", *Women and Men in Algeria*, 20.

using some form of birth control.[76] The educational programs promoted by women's movements and the availability of contraceptives have encouraged and enabled Algerian women to pursue a higher level of education as well as a career. While the use of contraceptives has risen steadily since 1970, there was a slight decline in the early 2000s as a result of the political turmoil of Algeria's civil war. In 2000, the percentage of women, aged 15-49, reached 64 percent, yet over the next three years the percentage declined to 58 percent.[77] Although the decrease was not particularly significant, it does indicate that even the personal aspects of women's lives were affected by the terror of the civil war and the Islamic fundamentalists.

In spite of women's increased level of societal independence, women still constitute a small proportion of the workforce. Between 1966 and 1997, the number of employed women rose from 95,000 to 890,000, an 8-fold increase over thirty years.[78] While this was a significant increase, compared to men, whose level of employment rose from just below 2 million in 1966 to about 5 million in 1997, women are still considerably underrepresented in the workforce.[79] However, women are gradually progressing into the upper echelons of the labor force, which is being facilitated by their increased levels of education. In 1987, 27.2 percent of wage-earning women were employed in the liberal and scientific professions and nearly 14.5 percent were employed as administrative personnel, while only 5.7 percent worked in the top levels of management.[80] In 2007, most women were employed in the educational sector (55 percent as primary school teachers and 50 percent at the secondary level), and in the health sector (50 percent of the medical profession, 66 percent as pharmacists, and 63 percent as dentists).[81] However, in the same year, approximately 65 percent of women were housewives, with 58 percent

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[76] "Google Public Data", *Google Public Data*, March 9, 2012, http://tinyurl.com/7wzqxsr (accessed March 20, 2012).
[77] Ibid.
[78] *Women and Men in Algeria*, 39.
[79] "Figure 9 Trends in the employed population (in millions) by gender, selected years between 1966-1998", *Women and Men in Algeria*, 40.
[80] "Table 22 Percent of wage-earning (paid) employees among the total employed population by type of occupation, year 1987", *Women and Men in Algeria*, 45.
[81] Gray, "Women in Algeria Today", 50.

under the age of 35.[82] While many women remain housewives because it is not financially necessary for them to work, others remain in the house because their position in the workforce would be looked down upon. A 2004 survey conducted by the Algerian National Office of Statistics revealed that "42.6 percent of professionally qualified women declared never to have worked outside the house because either their parents or husbands did not want them to."[83] While more women are active members of the workforce, traditional social values are causing other women to pause and consider whether they are willing to face criticism for challenging the acceptable social norms.

Conclusions and Future Directions: Unveiling the Representation of Algerian Women as Other

Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's roles and experiences in society. Through careful analysis, one of the feminist theory goals is to determine the conditions of women in society and how women have or might overcome the subordination they are experiencing. In the case of Algeria, much of the oppression of women can trace its roots to the misogynistic interpretation of the Koran and the colonial era. Islamist doctrine provided the rationale behind the family codes that restricted the rights of women and reasserted the authority of men. The racial and gendered prejudices of the French colonialists further reinforced the concept of the Algerian woman as an inferior being that is often perceived as a sexual object. These perceptions of women became ingrained in the minds of Algerian men and thus, even once independence was won in 1962, Algeria remained a patriarchal society. However, it was not just the men who held on to the colonial view of women, but Algerian women had also come to believe the stereotypes pressed upon them by the nation's cultural and colonial legacies. Although some women embraced the liberty and equality that they experienced during the war for independence, others were content to remain in their traditional roles and to not disrupt the status quo that had existed from time immemorial. In the

[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

ensuing years, women did become more eager to improve their education and even seek work; however, many still remained hesitant to challenge the male-dominated institutions of Algerian society. While men are certainly responsible for much of the oppression that Algerian women have suffered throughout the years, women must also be blamed for their passivity and their hesitancy to demand a greater level of liberation and equality.

When assessing film, feminist theory aims to ascertain whether the depiction of women on screen is a truthful representation of societal conditions. It seeks to determine through what lens women are being presented and what historical, cultural, or societal connotations are associated with that particular viewpoint. Feminist theory attempts to answer: are women being depicted in a negative or positive manner? Are they being portrayed as sexual objects, as Other, and if so, why? Are these representations interpretive exaggerations or are they precise reflections of the social situation?

The presentation of women in *The Battle of Algiers* versus the depiction in the more modern films, *Rachida* and *Viva Laldjérie*, is very different. The 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers*, portrays the women, although they are hardly on screen, through a masculine lens. While the women are not portrayed in a negative manner, their contributions to the independence movement are not given much emphasis. The women are shown assisting the revolutionaries by hiding weapons in their purses or under their *haiks*; however, they are placed into a silent role, one in which their contributions are hardly recognized. Through this depiction, the film captures the attitudes that pervaded society after the war for independence. Once Algeria became an independent nation in 1962, women were expected to return to their silent and submissive roles of wives and mothers, and the sacrifices they made during the war went unrecognized. The women in the documentary *Algeria: Women at War* explain how they felt neglected and unappreciated after the war. These women went from being militants on equal footing with their fellow male nationalists to housewives and mothers where they were considered inferior and

incapable of succeeding in the educational and work realms. Algeria's heroines would struggle for the ensuing decades to regain the liberty and respect they experienced during the war for independence.

By the 1990s, Algerian women had made significant advances in society through better and more accessible educational and work opportunities. In spite of the progress that women had made since the 1960s, they were still caught between traditional attitudes and modernity. The two films produced in the early 2000s, *Rachida* and *Viva Laldjérie*, depict this deadlocked conflict in different ways. *Rachida* places emphasis on the civil war of the late 1990s and its impact on Algerian society. While both men and women are affected by the terror of the conflict, the film focuses on the female characters and how they are physically and psychologically impacted by the violence. The film reiterates the fragile situation of women in Algeria; in spite of their advances, at any moment women can be returned to a state of submission and fear, where they are perceived as objects. Although the film does depict how some factions of society are continuously trying to subjugate women to the rules of man or religion, the ending of the film is optimistic about the future of Algerian women. Rachida's return to the school after the terrorist raid indicates the resolve of Algerian women to remain firm against opposition and to resolutely move forward towards gender equality and respect.

Viva Laldjérie also addresses the difficult transition between traditionalism and modernity but with a greater focus on how Algerian women are struggling with and attempting to overcome this transitional phase. Goucem, the film's main female protagonist, epitomizes this conflict as she strives to appear both young and modern while also maintaining a level of decorum to satisfy societal expectations. Although Algerian women did not feel compelled to always wear a veil or headscarf by the 1990s, there remained a chain of signification associated with the veil. The very structure of veils and *haiks* makes women unseen which also makes them unheard, and without a voice they have no way to express their point of view. The constricting nature of the veil is depicted through Papicha when she

seeks information at a public records office. Both her gender and the veil create a barrier between Papicha and the men with whom she is trying to communicate. Their refusal to listen and to acknowledge Papicha's request induces her to resort to a more sexual and promiscuous way of communicating. Many men, supported by societal expectations, insist that women dress conservatively and even wear the veil in some cases in order to protect and preserve the virtue of women. Yet when the women dress and conduct themselves in the way that men require, the women often lose their voice, their status and respect is diminished, and they are reduced to the notion of women as Other. Unseen and unheard by society, women are compelled to use their sexuality to gain the attention of men, the very quality that men try to control and protect through the use of the veil.

According to feminist film theory, "Looking contributes to the way in which the hierarchy of gender is fabricated and maintained."[84] This notion is evidenced through Papicha's character and her interactions with men. In one scene, Papicha is attempting to obtain information about the Copacabana property; however, her gender becomes a discriminating factor. The male clerk dismisses Papicha's interest and questions as childish and treats her in a patronizing manner. He looks at Papicha in a degrading manner, as an inferior being, incapable of understanding the logistics of running a business. Even in the early 2000s, some men in Algeria continued to view women predominantly as sexual objects that need to be supervised and sheltered by men. This manner of looking at women was influenced by a radical interpretation of Islamist doctrine and was further reinforced by French colonialists who emphasized the idea that women are sexual beings inept at governing their own lives. Particularly during the colonial era, the perception of Algerian women as exotic sexual beings was inculcated into society. Islamist doctrine combined with the colonizers' degrading view of women created the notion of women as object, as Other.

[84] *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, ed. Mary Eagleton, 177.

Yet not all perceptions of women are defined by their sexuality nor do all Algerian men perceive women as sexual objects. How women are viewed is partly dependent on their style of dress and particularly on their social comportment. There is a fine line in Algerian society that determines whether women are respected or degraded and it is the women who choose whether or not they cross this line. For instance, if a woman in Algeria dressed the way Goucem does when she is going to the nightclubs, she will be perceived as a sexual object that can be taken advantage of. Generally it is a woman's dress or behavior in the public sphere that influences how she is perceived by society. Therefore, the perception of a woman as a sexual object is not simply a matter of who is doing the looking, but is also dependent upon how the subject is being presented to the onlooker. The film, *Viva Laldjérie,* takes a very specific approach and presents the view that women are extremely sexual and that their sexuality is something that needs to be contained otherwise men will take advantage of it. The film also presents women's awareness of themselves as sexual beings which is exemplified through Papicha's character. For example, the male clerk at the public-records building is only willing to help Papicha once he becomes aware of her sexuality from which he hopes to benefit. In order to gain his attention, Papicha resorts to her feminine wiles and seductive charms, further reinforcing the pre-existing gender inequalities. The film presents this aspect of societal perceptions as a vicious cycle, because as long as women feel they are compelled to resort to their sexual qualities in order to gain some privilege or liberty, men and society will continue to view women as undeserving of equality and respect.

While women have progressed a long way since Algeria gained its independence in 1962, it has been a difficult process with numerous setbacks. Unrecognized for their contributions during the war for independence and repressed by a strict Family Code, Algerian women have been forced to remain in their traditional role of mother and wife for roughly two decades. However, the civil conflict of the 1980s began to initiate change for Algeria as a multi-party system came into existence. Although

women had been given the constitutional right to vote in 1962, it was not until 1988 that women were able to organize themselves politically. The 1990s witnessed a mass emergence of women's movements and organizations, such as SOS Women in Distress, which advocate for women's rights and encourage the education of women. Due in large part to the efforts of these organizations, Algerian women have become increasingly educated and are becoming more successful in the workforce. They are becoming more confident and socially independent, and are changing the traditional family structure that once restricted the social mobility of women.

Although women have made considerable progress, Algeria remains a patriarchal society and more improvements must be made before women will truly be on an equal level with men. While the patriarchal nature of Algerian society has certainly been responsible for the subordination of women, the effects of modernization in Algeria have also been an inhibiting factor to the advancement of women. In order to overcome the archaic perceptions of women and their proper role in society, women must not be afraid to confront and defy these societal norms. Over the decades, women in Algeria have been in the background, hesitant to push for radical and liberalizing reforms. To understand what the future situation of women in Algeria will be it is important to consider why women have remained so hesitant. Why have they not organized themselves en masse to demand for change? Is there hope that the situation for women will improve, and if so, does the hope lie in the economic or political situation, in the media, or in education? For now, as long as women are concerned about being criticized for their advances in the professional and social spheres, gender inequality will persist in Algeria.

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