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Women as Keepers of Algerian and *Pied-noir* Identity?¹

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The Algerian War (1954-1962) was arguably the most traumatic war of decolonisation fought by Western colonial powers. As the 50th anniversary of Algerian independence approaches, this “War Without a Name” remains a problematic subject in France, in which the commemoration of the war, the teaching of colonial history and issues associated with North African immigration and French identity, are hotly contested subjects. An especially neglected aspect of the Algerian war has been the one million French of Algeria, now known as *pieds-noirs*, who fled to France near the end of the conflict. As a symbol of a failed colonial system, they were a group few were anxious to remember. This paper will examine the activism of *pied-noir* women in a significant way: writing and publishing their memories of colonial Algeria to prevent their story from being forgotten. Moreover, it will study the active participation of a *pied-noir* woman, Micheline Susini, in the OAS (*Organisation de l’armée secrete*), a terrorist group opposing Algerian independence. This paper will also outline the active role of Muslim women in the war, which was subsequently denied or marginalised by historians in Algeria, as women were encouraged to return to the domestic sphere. Like *pied-noir* women, Muslim women have tried to make their voices heard through writing. This paper will refer to Djamila Amrane’s account of the role Muslim women played in obtaining independence and suggest that they later found themselves constrained in the role of keepers of traditional Algerian identity. This paper will question whether traditional gender roles took on exaggerated significance in the colonial situation, not just for the colonised populations, but also for the *pieds-noirs*.

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Introduction

The Algerian War, 1954 – 1962, was arguably the most traumatic war of decolonisation fought by Western colonial powers. The French had occupied Algeria since 1830 and it had formed three *départements* of France since 1848. Thus, when conflict arose in 1954, the French administration could not conceive of a situation in which France was at war with itself and this “War Without a Name” was simply referred to as “the events”. Indeed, the war was only officially recognised in France in 1999. The war was particularly violent as Algeria was a settler colony in which one million European settlers or “French of Algeria” lived alongside ten million native Algerians. While the FLN (National Liberation Front) used guerrilla warfare to fight for Algerian independence, some French of Algeria became involved in the OAS (*Organisation de l’Armée Secrète* / Secret Army Organization), a terrorist group opposing Algerian independence. As the violence worsened on both sides at the close of the war, it became apparent that the French of Algeria, now commonly referred to as “*pieds-noirs*”, would not be able to continue living in Algeria and the vast majority fled to France. However, this migration has remained “invisible” to a certain extent and the *pieds-noirs* have been an especially neglected aspect of the war. Indeed, Andrea L. Smith has commented on the invisibility in academic literature of populations “repatriated” after decolonisation movements (Smith, 2003, p.9). Moreover, as the 50th anniversary of Algerian independence approaches, the war remains a problematic subject in France, in which commemoration of the war, the teaching of colonial history and issues associated with North African immigration as well as the broader issue of French identity, remain controversial subjects.

Pied-noir women have played a vital part in actively striving to prevent their story from being forgotten by writing about everyday life in Algeria and their traumatic departure from it, while some have also described their active roles in

the war. Moreover, *pied-noir* historian Benjamin Stora has asserted that between 1963 and 1981, at a time when France was trying to suppress traces of the war, “the voices of *pied-noir* women emerge in force”, with Anne Loesch, Francine Dessaigne, Marie Elbe and Marie Cardinal being particularly significant female writers during this period (Stora, Autumn 1999, p.78). In Algeria, meanwhile, women found that their role in the war was generally neglected by historians, while their rights were neglected by politicians. Like *pied-noir* women, they have actively sought to fight for their rights, to struggle against obscurity and to make their stories known through literature. This paper will examine the struggles of both Algerian women and *pied-noir* women against the patriarchal constructs of colonial and post-colonial Algeria and France.

***Pied-noir* women and war**

The role of women in fighting for Algerian independence has been elevated to iconic status by Frantz Fanon in his chapter “Algeria Unveiled”, contained within the book *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* (published in English in 1965, originally published as *L’an V de la révolution algérienne* in 1959) and in Gillo Pontecorvo’s film, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). Both Fanon and Pontecorvo present Algerian women who move from the domestic domain to public life by engaging in the war. Fanon suggests that colonial discourse encouraging native women not to wear the veil, and traditional body-covering *haïk*, infused such garments with exaggerated significance, and wearing them therefore became seen as a way of resisting colonial presence. He states, however, that the veil and *haïk* were transformed into weapons by women during the Algerian war. Thus, women found that their participation in the conflict propelled them into the public sphere, and many chose to take off the *haïk* in order to pass through searches at barricades and transport weapons or bombs into European quarters. Furthermore, once searches were carried out on Europeans and Muslims alike as

violence worsened, some women chose to cover their faces and bodies with the veil and *haïk*, using them to conceal weapons and bombs. The veil is associated with Algerian liberation and with the liberation of Algerian women in this anti-colonial text, as Fanon underscores the emancipation of women in fighting for their country. Similarly, Pontecorvo's film shows the active participation of women in the war at all levels, from hiding guns and providing shelter for militants, to typing pamphlets. The change brought about by the conflict is presented as being something embraced by all generations and both genders. Indeed, a role reversal is suggested as men are seen disguising themselves in veils in order to escape from the police. In the film's most iconic scene, three characters based on real life female militants – Hassiba Ben Bouali, Zohra Drif and Djamila Bouhired, remove their veils, dye their hair, put on make-up, and dress as Europeans, before planting bombs in the European quarters. As with Fanon, these women are presented as liberating themselves by moving from the domestic sphere of their homes to the outside world and their liberation is associated with the liberation of the nation.

In post-colonial Algeria, however, the role of women in the war was largely neglected or even denied by historians and the only scientific study of their participation was conducted by Djamila Amrane (otherwise known as Danièle Minne), who was imprisoned for four years for her role in the war. Amrane was granted access to military records and also collected the oral testimony of militants as part of her research. (Amrane's interviews were conducted twenty years after the war and she acknowledges the retrospective viewpoint of those interviewed, as well as the selective nature of memory). In her book, *Les femmes algériennes dans la guerre* (Algerian Women in the War, 1991), Amrane highlights the role of women as guardians of tradition by stating that their main role before the war revolved around marriage, and that they were largely excluded from public life. Moreover, Amrane goes on to highlight the

participation of women from the beginning of the war, in all fields, in both the country and the city, corresponding to the urban / rural population divide. Amrane states that the majority of female combatants (82%) were civilian militants, who carried out vital actions in everyday life, while the majority (59%), were also over thirty years old, and would have been excluded from public life up until that point. She paints a realistic portrait of the vital and dangerous tasks carried out by women on a daily basis, risking torture or death if they were caught. Women, for example, travelled with the militants in the *maquis* (places where militants organised themselves), acting as nurses, cooks, secretaries and dressmakers. Others transported arms, planted bombs and took part in FLN tribunals. Women risked their lives by harbouring combatants or by working as liaison or propaganda agents. Others supported prisoners by attending trials and bringing the prisoners supplies. Many organised and attended protests, while significant numbers broke with Muslim tradition by attending funerals. Furthermore, many women imprisoned between 1959 and 1961 organized hunger strikes to demand recognition as political prisoners.

This active participation of women in the Algerian war was seen to legitimize their equal status and official FLN texts published just before independence stated that:

“The participation of the Algerian woman in the liberation struggle has created favourable conditions to break the age-old yoke which weighed on her and to associate her fully and completely in the management of public affairs and in the development of the country” (FLN, 1964, pp.81-82)²

Moreover, the equal rights of men and women were safeguarded in the Constitution of the newly-independent Algeria (M'Rabet, 1979). While official documents stated that women had been granted equal rights, this was not the

² All translations my own unless otherwise stated

reality experienced by many women, however, and official discourse proclaiming equal rights for women discouraged further debate on the subject (M'Rabet, 1979). The status of women became increasingly undermined with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the country in the 1980s. In 1984, a Family Code was adopted which cast women as minors under the guardianship of their fathers or husbands. At this point, the Women's Movement was born and the women's groups seeking their rights draw legitimacy from the female combatants who fought for Algerian freedom. Cherifa Bouatta has also noted that women were "the most visible of those braving the wall of fear and descending onto the streets to demonstrate" at the height of Islamist terrorist violence in the 1990s (Bouatta, 1997, p.22). They have, however, found it difficult to free themselves from their perceived role as keepers of Islamic tradition and of Algerian identity, a role reinforced by Fanon and Pontecorvo's representations of Algerian women in anti-colonial discourse.

Women, war and writing

An important way in which Algerian women have fought against the constraints of this role is through writing. Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, as cited by Jean Déjeux, has stated that when a woman dares to speak, this is "already taking a stance in a society which refuses [speech] to women," (Déjeux, 1984, p.7) while Algerian writer Kateb Yacine, as cited by Danielle Marx-Scouras, has also expressed his view on the matter, stating that "Currently, in our country, a woman who writes is worth her weight in [gun] powder" (Marx-Scouras, 1993, p.174). A woman who has ignored a taboo attached to Algerian women expressing their subjectivity is Louissette Ighilahriz. Ighilahriz broke the silence surrounding the use of torture in the Algerian war by writing about her degrading experience of being tortured by the French army, an experience that Algerian women were generally encouraged to suppress. Another Algerian woman who has expressed her subjectivity through writing is Khalida

Messaoudi, who has published a book describing life as an underground activist for women's rights, having been condemned to death by a fundamentalist Islamist group, the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*). Other well-known female Algerian authors include Assia Djébar and Malika Mokeddem. Silence is a recurring theme in works by Ighilahriz, Messaoudi, Djébar and Mokeddem as narrators appear to break the silence imposed on women, a silence which compromises their identity. Indeed, as Birgit Mertz-Baumgartner has noted, "the notion of identity depends on the idea of memory, and vice versa; the core meaning of any individual or group identity ... is sustained by remembering...", and it is therefore essential that these women (and *pied-noir* women) lift the silence on their past (Mertz-Baumgartner, 2001, p.75). As Danielle Marx-Scouras has suggested, "women are exiled from discourse on war", and the theme of silence is therefore linked to the theme of exile (Marx-Scouras, 1993, p.175). Exile is a recurring theme for the aforementioned female Algerian authors as characters feel like foreigners in their own country, or as some are literally exiled. This feeling of exile or alienation is linked to a death-wish, and there was a wave of suicides among girls a year after independence (M'Rabet, 1979). Madness is also a recurring theme for Ighilahriz, Messaoudi, Djébar and Mokeddem, and this trope may be linked to a schizophrenic atmosphere brought about by the difference between official discourse on "liberty, equality, fraternity" in colonial Algeria, versus the rights of the colonized populations, and later by the gap between official discourse on women's rights and the reality faced by women whose rights were compromised by a rise in Islamist fundamentalism. Messaoudi, for example, describes a type of schizophrenia in post-independent Algeria as the state encouraged economic progress yet discouraged equal rights for women (Messaoudi, 1995). As Fanon showed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, originally published as *Les Damnés de la terre* in 1961, a book which draws on Fanon's

experiences as a psychiatrist in Algeria, madness is also linked to traumatic memories from the war.

Confronting Silence

Critics have argued that colonial discourse has been “written on the bodies of [native] women”, who become symbols of appropriated land (Sharpe, 1993, p.233). In books by *pied-noir* women, however, similar themes to those found in books by Algerian women suggest that, although clearly they were not oppressed in the manner of the colonized population, their identity was also affected by the patriarchal nature of the colonial system. Confronting a silence about their past in colonial Algeria is a major theme in the writings of many *pied-noir* women as, like many Algerian women writers, their identity is linked to traumatic memories. Like Djamilia Amrane, Micheline Susini in *De soleil et de larmes* (Of Sun and Tears, 1982) writes openly about the active participation of women such as herself in the war, this time on behalf of the OAS. She explains that she was expected to be submissive towards her parents, who told her not to start getting “boys ideas” when she expressed an interest in fighting for French Algeria (Susini, 1982, p.13). In writing about her experiences, she is breaking a taboo by openly describing her participation in a terrorist organisation and also by writing about her illegitimate relationship with a married man, Jean-Jacques Susini, who later becomes her husband. The prospect of her relationship with Jean-Jacques being brought into the public domain was something that the author admits was a source of acute anxiety for her mother. Susini also appears to be fighting against the silence imposed on her by the colonial system. At a demonstration in 1960, for example, Susini’s aim is to show that “we exist, 1,200,000 French not from France”(Susini, 1982, p.89). She later expresses anger at the censorship imposed by metropolitan France after the shooting of *pieds-noirs* by French soldiers at Rue d’Isly on 26th March 1962, while an allusion to the fact that “history is written by the winners”,

underscores the author's wish, twenty years after the war, to write the history of the losing side (Susini, 1982, p.246).

In the autobiographical *Journal d'une mère de famille pied-noir* (Diary of a *Pied-noir* Mother, first published in 1962, republished in 1972) by Francine Dessaigne and in Anne Loesch's 1963 autobiography, *La valise et le cercueil* (The Coffin and the Suitcase), both authors also express their wish to establish the truth about the history and daily lives of *pieds-noirs*, an aim which suggests they may see themselves as guardians of *pied-noir* tradition. Loesch gives a voice to her dead partner, Jean Sarradet, whom she fought alongside in the OAS by narrating some of the chapters as him. In the autobiographical *Les mots pour le dire* (1975, *The Words To Say It*), Marie Cardinal breaks the silence surrounding mental illness by describing seven years of psychoanalysis in Paris, which helped her regain her sanity. Madness also features as a recurring theme in these works by *pied-noir* authors and is linked to the trauma caused by violence, and to the type of schizophrenic atmosphere and questioning of reality evoked by the Algerian women discussed, as colonial discourse was founded on the illusion that Algeria was part of France. Exile is another important theme, with *pieds-noirs* presented as being twice exiled as their ancestors were exiled from Europe, while they are later exiled from Algeria. As with the Algerian women discussed, this feeling of being exiled or unwanted sometimes manifests itself in a death wish. Women are also shown to be exiled from the colonial system. Dessaigne mentions, for example, arguing with her husband over her role in domestic life, which she feels "stifles all intellectual effort" (Dessaigne, 1972, p.55). She also mentions a male servant looking at her with an air of condescension, because, although she is his boss, she is a woman. Moreover, Cardinal links this exclusion from the colonial system to her madness: she concludes that she suffered from mental instability as she had no role to play in the society she was born into.

Pied-noir women are therefore seen to be constrained by the patriarchal constructs of colonialism and they appear to have freed themselves from these constructs in some significant ways during the Algerian war. Anne Loesch, for example, describes how the safe, gentle atmosphere of her home is intruded upon by the exterior world when she receives a phone call asking her to participate in the conflict by helping her friend Jean. In a scene which echoes the iconic scene of the film *The Battle of Algiers*, Loesch describes feeling eyes staring at her as she sets off on her first mission and she later states that she has a “sensation of having to move forward / evolve (“évoluer”) in front of a public” (Loesch, 1963, p.54). She says goodbye to the interior world of her “bedroom” and her “childhood” and quickly has to move out of her home when her parents discover her relationship with Jean and her involvement in the OAS (Loesch, 1963, p.62). Similarly, Micheline Susini seems to have found a certain freedom through her participation in the war. At the beginning of the novel, she suggests that *pied-noir* women remain under their parents’ guardianship until getting married, something she sees as the result of a macho Mediterranean and Arab culture. Indeed, a man she is briefly engaged to at the age of seventeen, Henri, expresses regret that he cannot “lock [her] up” (Susini, 1982, p.25). The onset of the war therefore appears as a liberating force in her life. She enjoys the curfew imposed by the violence as it gives her an excuse not to return home some nights. Indeed, she claims that many young people enjoy the liberty from their oppressive families that the curfew provides, and both she and her friend Jacqueline use it to play at being emancipated. Moreover, her activism in the OAS, and her relationship with a married man, is enabled by the circumstances of the war. On her first mission, she draws inspiration and determination from the Arab women on the opposing side. Susini also suggests that European women used to borrow their Arab maid’s veils in order to follow wayward husbands, thereby implying a certain complicity between Arab and *pied-noir* women against male power. Her “mad desire to run” when passing through

several barricades also evokes the tension in Pontecorvo's film as Arab women disguised as Europeans pass through barricades (Susini 1982, p.218). Furthermore, like Pontecorvo, Susini underscores a role reversal at the time by alluding to Muslim men disguising themselves under veils.

Francine Dessaigne also alludes to a reversal in women's roles during the war. She describes, for example, how only women were allowed out during a blockade at Bab-el-Oued, and later at Belcourt in Algiers, as only they were authorized to buy food between 6 and 8 a.m. She also describes the efforts of mothers such as herself on behalf of the *pied-noir* cause. Like Ighilahriz, she refers to the taboo subject of torture, in this case discussing a woman she claims was tortured for suspected collusion with the OAS. Despite the risk of being arrested and tortured, however, ordinary women hung out red, white and blue laundry when French flags were confiscated by the army. She herself becomes involved by attending funerals and memorial services, donating food to those barricaded in Bab-el-Oued and warning young *pieds-noirs* painting slogans that they are about to be caught.

It is important to note, however, that gender roles are not presented as being completely reversed during the war. Just as Amrane alludes to dissension within the FLN, as well as Algerian society, regarding female combatants, Susini describes hostility towards her within the OAS, which led to her being denounced as a spy. Furthermore, she goes to great efforts to look elegant and feminine at all times, wearing make-up and high heels on OAS missions. During a particularly important meeting, the women take great pride in arranging snacks for the men, and this is also the case for Loesch, who describes cooking a meal for twenty men at a very important OAS meeting, at which she and her female friend were strongly encouraged to smile and "be nice" towards the attendees and to make sure they were well-fed (Loesch 1963, p.74). Thus,

female members of the OAS do not appear to have had a significant role in decision-making during the war. Loesch describes feeling like the character from a song, ‘Madalon’, a servant-girl popular with soldiers. One of her male colleagues also jokes that when she is no longer Jean’s “property”, he will make her into another Mata-Hari – a Dutch exotic dancer executed in France during World War I, having been accused of being a spy for Germany (Loesch, 1963, p.79). Moreover, although Dessaigne admits feeling restricted by gender roles, she only mentions her job twice, in passing, and her main preoccupation at the time of writing her diary is with protecting her innocent children and providing them with a moral compass with which to negotiate the violent scenes they witness.

Conclusion

It is clear that *pied-noir* women were not oppressed in the manner of the colonized population. Paradoxically, however, Susini, Cardinal, Loesch and Dessaigne express the same preoccupations with silence, madness and exile as the Algerian authors discussed and these themes can be linked to the patriarchal constructs of colonialism and to the silence surrounding *pieds-noirs*, who, as a symbol of failed colonialism, became a taboo subject in post-colonial France. Like Algerian women, their lives changed in significant ways during the war, which allowed for radical changes in gender roles. Despite being critical of their perceived role in the domestic sphere, however, the *pied-noir* women discussed here found it difficult or were even reluctant to extricate themselves fully from it, at a time when their identity was threatened. Marie Cardinal freed herself from what she saw as repressive constructs of power by reluctantly leaving Algeria and undergoing several years of therapy. It also seems that the women mentioned found it therapeutic to reveal their trauma and to leave a record of a story which would otherwise be forgotten. Their determination to preserve their stories for posterity, however, suggests that they may still consider themselves

to be the guardians of *pied-noir* identity, which continues to be under threat as the *pieds-noirs* have assimilated into metropolitan France. While *pied-noir* women have been to the forefront in striving to make *pieds-noirs* visible in literature, Algerian women have used writing to emerge from the role of keepers of Algerian / Muslim identity, a role reinforced by colonial discourse discouraging them from wearing the veil and by the anti-colonial works of Fanon and Pontecorvo, who associated the image of Algerian women with the Algerian nation. Although the role of women in the Algerian war was subsequently denied or largely ignored, the authors discussed have used literature to bring their memories to light and to evoke the harsh reality of their participation in the independence struggle. They have also used literature to demand their rights despite the threat of Islamist violence.

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