**Who Made the Algerian Woman?**

Barâa Arar

The French Colonial and Algerian Liberation ideologies both stressed the significance of the issue of women and the feminine in their mission to assert their political projects. The art produced during the times these beliefs were most dominant, reflect these key notions associated with ‘the Algerian woman.’

French Orientalist paintings depict North African women as submissive, yet also primitively sexual. It demonstrates a unilateral power dynamic; an image created solely for the penetrative French male gaze. French painters of the 19th and 20th century, such as Matisse, Delacroix, and Renoir, all have renditions of *Algerian Women in their Apartment* that streamline this conception of the Algerian women into image. Moreover, they homogenize Algerian women so they are not seen as individuals but as a type of woman, the generic “Fatima.” These paintings are problematic because they are drawn from an orientalised imagined reality that is disseminated to the French collective to inculcate the idea of the uncivilized, perverse, and inherently inferior Arab.

These attitudes towards Algerian women conceived by French politicians and then expressed by French painters throughout the 132 years of French colonialism, purposefully shift during the War of Independence (1954-62) solely to serve French political interests. Instead of the submissive, adorned, Algerian woman, France began to champion Algerian women as instruments of change and political dissent. Algerian women were no longer the symbol of Arab animalism in the eyes of the French, instead, they were seen as a political tool to gain and maintain control of French Algeria. Campaigns of French psychological propaganda targeted young Algerian women urging them to leave behind their traditions, their country, and their religion in exchange of a more liberated and French idea of the ‘feminine.’

Simultaneously, and quite ironically, the National Liberation Front of Algeria (FLN) used very similar tactics to recruit and maintain women’s support. The FLN had an inherently traditional political outlook, especially in regards to the role of women, and would not otherwise have advocated for the emancipation of women. However, their fixated goal of a free Algerian state pushed them to promote gender equality in a manner that a time of peace would not have. This is one explanation for their acceptance of armed female fighters and female civilian contributions throughout the war.

This is how the two opposing sides of the Algerian War attempted to use the ‘issue of women’ strategically. However, Algerian women, especially those actively involved in the War, defied the presumptuous expectations of both the FLN and France. These Algerian women integrated parts of their French education with their Algerian nationalism, to create their own political identities. Many of the women were inspired by the French history of political dissent to oppressive regime that they were taught in school. They extrapolated these ideas onto their hopes for a free, though non-traditional, Algeria.

These politically active, freethinking women were a threat to both Algerian liberation and French colonial attitudes. Their legacies were not expressed in the visual culture of the time, because it did not serve the political ends of either dominant faction. In fact, these women who challenged the status quo of opposing ideologies were forgotten in post-Independence Algeria.

However, art is a powerful tool in memory. Just like it can be, and has been, used to shape national identities and disseminate political propaganda, it can be used to challenge these same notions. Although the women did not become emblematic of the struggle or the resistance, many contemporary artists, such as Asad Faulwell, are beginning to address this issue. This is particularly important to counter the French collective amnesia in response to the history of colonization and the War, the aftermath of which is being felt by both countries.