

What Future for Women? Re-constructing Feminine Space in Post-independence Algerian Cinema

Marzia Caporale

University of Scranton

French-Algerian cinema in the past ten years has deservedly earned world-wide critical accolades thanks to the cutting-edge work and creative endeavors of indigenous film-makers. These talented directors have used the artistry of the cinematic medium to underscore the social and cultural struggles of a country attempting to find its identity after decades of colonial domination and terror spread by fundamentalist Islamic groups. In a representative study on pre-and post-colonial visual narratives, titled *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present*, feminist author Ranjana Khanna describes Algerian film history as evolving from the anticolonial sentiment of Third Cinema,¹ as exemplified in Gillo Pontecorvo's highly acclaimed *Battle of Algiers* (1966), to the construction of a native-centered form of cinematic enunciation seeking to articulate an original discourse on the formation of the post-colonial subject in Algeria today. Khanna places special emphasis on the role of the female subject and defines such filmic discourse as "a Fourth Cinema that moves beyond the guerrilla cinema . . . a cinema that could give voice, silence, and image to women in the revolution" (124). The argument that Fourth Cinema reacts to the silencing of women's voices provides a good starting point for a feminist-based semiotic critique of Algerian film today. However, such a definition appears limiting when applied only to instances of women in revolutionary cinema, as it fails to address the implications of non-political woman-centered filmmaking.

The renegotiation of post-revolution, post-terrorism female space and imagery appears especially worthy of investigation and is explored in depth in two particularly exemplary Algerian films: Yamina Bachir-Chouikh's *Rachida* (2002), and Nadir Moknèche's *Viva Laldjérie*

(2004). In *Rachida*, Bachir-Chouikh offers an effective and poignantly accurate portrayal of the daily violence affecting Algeria in the 1990's, at the height of the Islamic fundamentalist¹² terrorist movement. Yet, rather than providing a politically charged commentary on the horrors of those years, or calling for women to become militant activists in the anti-terrorist movement, the director's cinematic analysis is aimed at presenting one woman's attempts to create a space for herself and others while resisting the destruction that affects her country and her life. Similarly, Nadir Moknèche's *Viva Laldjérie* highlights the dialectic tension characterizing the lives of three women (a mother, a daughter, and a prostitute friend) who strive to construct a viable feminine space in a still strongly patriarchal society not yet recovered from years of terrorism and civil unrest. Through an examination of the relation between cinematic space and female subject formation in these two highly representative films, the present analysis argues that current Algerian filmmaking is moving beyond the restrictive labels of both Third and Fourth cinema, which inevitably politicize woman and limit her to questions of nationalism, war and decolonization. Rather, I contend that new Algerian cinema contributes to the conversation on gender politics by constructing female characters that refuse to be confined to the enclosed, private spaces where patriarchy and fear relegate them, and set out to affirm their presence as public subjects of cultural and social enunciation in a country struggling to find its own post-colonial identity.

In *Rachida*, Yamina Bachir-Chouikh reflects back on Algeria's bloody experience with nationalistic terrorist attacks by telling the story of a young school teacher in Algiers who, despite the dangerous climate surrounding her, chooses to claim her freedom by dressing in Western clothing and working outside the home. Soon after the film begins, Rachida becomes the target of a group of her former students turned terrorists, and is shot and left for dead on the street. Wounded nearly to death both in body and in spirit, Rachida begins a slow recovery, but is forced by circumstances to go into hiding with her mother in order to stay alive. The rural village where the two women establish their new residence is a seemingly safe space, far from alarm sirens, bombs and deadly attacks. In what appears to be an oasis of peace, with birds singing, beautiful plants and flowers and the scent of fig trees pervading her new home, Rachida gradually overcomes her fear of the outside world and resumes her work as a school teacher.

Soon, however, mother and daughter discover that no space is immune from the destructive forces of the nationalist militia. Eventually, the small village also falls under siege: men, women and children alike are murdered, houses are destroyed, and Rachida is confronted with the dilemma of whether or not she can continue educating others when no future seems possible for Algeria and its people.

Despite the political and social hypertext in the film's narrative, the director's goal is to tell a story of resistance to fear from a woman's point of view. And while she states in an interview with Olivier Barlet at the Cannes Film Festival that "not only women are affected by [terrorism]," she also adds: "I chose a woman as my main character because I am a woman, and a mother, and because women give life, not death" (qtd in Hillauer 281). While Rachida herself is not a mother and does not give life in the strict sense of the term, her role as a teacher symbolically signifies a birthing process for her young pupils. Through Rachida's agency, the new generation of Algerians will be (ideally) reborn, ready to fight obscurantism through knowledge and to build a better future for the country. Rachida's public role as a female educator, however, constitutes a threat to fundamentalist terrorists who viewed working women in the public sphere as dangerously subversive.

Bachir-Chouikh's fast-moving camera in the Algiers scenes visually translates the all-encompassing sense of fear of a city in which violent attacks were often carried out against visible public or semi-public individuals, particularly women (journalists, teachers, school principals). At the same time, the choice of cinematic techniques that emphasize Rachida's proud walk in the opening sequences underscores the protagonist's determination to not succumb to such fear. Throughout the film, the camera focuses almost continuously on the young school-teacher, registering her physical and psychological reactions and her character's evolution as she experiences life before, during, and after terrorism. The opening scene introduces Rachida as a self-assured, modern woman living in an urban space (Algiers), getting ready for the school photographer to take a picture of her and her class.

An extreme close-up focuses on her hands slowly opening a tube of bright red lipstick and subsequently applying it to her lips. This scene, with its emphasis on the protagonist's mouth, metonymically foregrounds her desire to use her lips/voice to state her freedom through her profession as an educator who speaks to/teaches children. The visual detail of Rachida's lips is immediately followed by another extreme

close-up, this time of her hair, originally held by a ponytail, but let lose in preparation for the photograph. Before a complete frontal view of Rachida is presented to the spectator, the protagonist is revealed through this brief sequence of semantically charged partial segments. Applying make-up specifically to her mouth and letting lose her beautiful hair highlight the character's choice to co-opt her freedom and stand against the Islamic fundamentalist diktat that women should hide their beauty, be passive and silent, and remain confined within their own domestic space.

The attention given to these ordinary feminine gestures underscores Rachida's choice to continue living her life despite the threats of deadly terrorist attacks. The camera's gaze follows her as she goes about her day smiling and unveiled, dressed in a pantsuit, with a briefcase in hand, a walkman, and headphones in her ears. A climactic point and a dramatic shift in the character's perception of her position within a space occur during the diegetic sequence of the nearly fatal attack on her life. When a group of her former students approaches her in the street, demanding that she place a bomb in the school, Rachida firmly refuses. Such refusal is perceived by the young male terrorists as an act of female insubordination to an extreme form of patriarchal domination. A woman who rebels must be put back in her place. As a form of punishment, Rachida is shot in the stomach. Rather than showing the scene in its entirety from a wide angle, the director chooses to simply, yet effectively, frame Rachida's scream of terror in a close-up of her face as she is being shot and then falls to the ground. This pivotal moment in the film's narrative marks the protagonist's new battle with fear. Following the attack, Rachida is forced to confront herself with the consequences of her noncompliance to the terrorists' demands: psychologically paralyzed and unable to resume a normal life, she apparently has no choice but to abandon the public space she had occupied until that moment and to relegate herself to the private space of a home in the country.

After moving to a rural village away from Algiers, Rachida is no different than an animal in a cage, spending her days almost in solitary confinement, despite the reassuring presence of her mother. The character's body language in several scenes, portrayed as she is sitting on her bed, lounging around in her pajamas, staring into a void, or rocking rhythmically back and forth, seemingly suggests failure for herself and other women who have dared resist the system. A first

attempt to re-enter the public space through a brief visit to the local grocery store leads to a rushed, tearful return home after a potential terrorist appears, hiding a gun in his pants. Rachida, as she painfully admits to her mother, is an exile in her own country. No safe zone exists; and the character's identity as a woman and an educator is, at least temporarily, frozen in time and space.

Yet, Yamina Bachir-Chouikh's intent in this film is not to tell a story of defeat but one of courage and survival. With the help of her former school principal, Rachida is granted a new teaching assignment in the village and slowly begins her healing process by regaining access to the public space (that of education) which she had occupied prior to the attack. While fear remains a daily part of her life, she continues to teach her class and to stand firm with regards to her convictions as seen in an exemplary exchange with local women who strongly support complete conformity to Muslim customs (e.g., the veil). When the women judiciously ask her why she is not veiled, stating that "God is severe in his punishment," Rachida quickly answers, quoting the Quran itself: "Only to those who substitute themselves for him."² Despite the initial diffidence on both sides, a sisterhood with the local rural women gradually develops. Rachida and her mother begin to leave their secure yet isolated domestic space and seek out human contact, especially with female neighbors. Day by day, mother and daughter slowly work to rebuild a new life for themselves in this originally "foreign" rural village, but the newly found peace and hope are short-lived. The spatial representation of the countryside as a safe haven is quickly invalidated by a series of escalating violent events. After the murder of an apparently harmless older citizen, a young woman, Zohra, is seen running back from the woods to her native village in search of help. Kidnapped and raped by fundamentalist militia until she becomes pregnant, Zohra eventually manages to escape, her face scarred, her clothes torn, her body exposed.

The camera follows her frantically from different angles as she desperately makes her way back to what she perceives to be a protected space, her former home. In a poignant scene that underscores mechanisms of female solidarity, Zohra stops running and is surrounded by local women who take off the colorful scarves on their heads and place them on her shoulders, her legs, her head, in a symbolic embrace and in an attempt to restore the dignity she had lost as a woman and as a human being victimized by militia gang rapists.

The village quickly loses its peaceful oasis status and undergoes a dramatic semantic reversal. In a scene, deliberately set at night, Rachida's neighbors celebrate their daughter's wedding. In the midst of the music and dances associated with the festivities, terrorists appear, imitating the sound of wolves, and literally start hunting for their prey. The spectator once again follows the camera's rapid movements and shifts of focus as it tries to capture the terror of this invasion. The camera's gaze follows Rachida as she frantically runs for safety in the dark, hiding from the "wolves" that have specifically identified her as a target. Ultimately, Rachida and her mother survive the attack, as does Zohra who walks through the devastation, veiled and pregnant but proud and conscious that, despite being repudiated by her father for (unwillingly) losing her virginity, she is neither tainted nor guilty.

In the final takes of the film, the camera continues to follow Rachida in the foggy daylight hours immediately after the terrorist killings. While her mother is sitting in front of the house, ready to abandon it and move again, Rachida looks through a pile of her things in search of her walkman and her briefcase. Accompanied only by the gentle sound of a musical score, the spectator's gaze sees Rachida slowly walking towards the school building, followed by the surviving children. Among them is Kalima, a young girl who dreams of going to the moon, a hopeful image of Algeria's future. Indeed, despite the destruction in the village, only a couple of broken doors and papers scattered on the floor are indicators of the tragedy that took place outside. Almost miraculously, the school, a place of learning, has been preserved. The desks are nearly intact, as are the seats and the blackboard. Rachida's pupils can re-enter the classroom, take their seats and begin a new lesson and a new day. Preservation of the school is central to the director's didactic intentions in this film: in this space, where young girls like Kalima are educated and allowed to develop a voice, lies the future of Algerian women. New generations of female teachers will be formed and they, in turn, will contribute to the liberation of the Algerian people.

The last camera shot is a close-up of Rachida herself who has resumed her role as a teacher and has re-occupied the public space that was once hers. As Denise Brahimi comments in an article on the use of space in contemporary Algerian cinema, through Rachida's renewed commitment to return to her ravaged school, "une sorte de reconquête de l'espace est amorcée, dans le cadre de l'école saccagée mais non

complètement détruite. Ne plus se terroriser est déjà une immense conquête, et l'on est autorisé à voir dans cette volonté le mouvement qui historiquement a mis fin à la période du terrorisme en Algérie" (42).³ In the end, Rachida may no longer be smiling but she is not defeated either. Her final, tearful yet determined look into the eye of the camera confirms her agency and her resistance to terrorism, thus affirming her place as a woman who is not afraid to work for the education and the future direction of Algerian children.

Women's search for their place as active subjects in the new Algeria is also explored in the 2004 film *Viva Laldjérie*, albeit under less dramatic circumstances. Director Nadir Moknèche tells the story of Goucem, a 27-year-old woman who works in a photography shop and lives in a *pension*, in a seemingly safe neighborhood in Algiers. Goucem's paycheck helps provide for her widowed mother, Papicha, a former dancer who dreams of reopening the club where she used to perform, the Copacabana, currently under the "threat" of being turned into a mosque. On the surface, Goucem is an emancipated woman who holds a regular job, goes to night clubs in provocative Western clothing and does not let men exploit her. Goucem is sexually liberated and does not subscribe to the rules of chastity and virginity that Arab culture demands of honorable women. Yet, she is not a prostitute, unlike her neighbor Fifi, who must sell her body in order to survive, and is ultimately killed by one of her clients.

Although Nadir Moknèche's cinematic narrative does occasionally reference terrorism, the director's attention is less towards the history and more towards the present and the future of Algeria, particularly with regards to women and their role in a society in cultural and political transition. Indeed, despite being the artistic work of a male director, the film thoroughly explores feminine and feminist issues such as sexuality, gender equality, and women's freedom. By the time the film was made, large-scale terrorism in Algeria had greatly died down. While occasional attacks were still being carried out in the city of Algiers and elsewhere, the country was slowly beginning to put the pieces of its history back together and look to the future rather than the past.

The complex issue of female sexual liberation in a Muslim post-colonial, post-terrorism society is explored through the main female character, Goucem. In the first few minutes of the film, the camera follows the seemingly self-assured young woman as she proudly walks

into the hospital room where her lover of three years, Aniss, a wealthy doctor, is waiting for her. While sex and nudity (especially female) are generally infrequent in Maghrebi cinema, the director chooses to portray Goucem as she engages in sexual relations, subsequently framing her in a shot of frontal nudity which presents her sitting on the bed, smoking and engaging in a nonchalant conversation with her partner. This visually destabilizing and unexpected detail is not intended to create a voyeuristic effect in the spectator, nor does it confirm the binary feminist theory of scopophilia, elaborated by Laura Mulvey in her ground-breaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In the section of her article titled "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look," Mulvey contends that "in their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to be looked-at-ness*" (19).

In *Viva Laldjérie*, a strictly Mulveyan approach to explain the directorial choice to show the female protagonist's frontal nudity would be reductive. Goucem's body does not semiotically function as an erotic signifier which conventionally codes woman as the object of pleasure to the male gaze. Rather, the scene underscores Goucem's self-perception as a free subject and as an uninhibited woman whose body signifies outside a strictly patriarchal economy of female (sexual and cultural) subjugation. While the lover-doctor does indeed give her money as a "gift," to pay for rent, Goucem does not view her body as a sexual commodity to use as a tool in an economic exchange. Unlike traditional Muslim women who are respectful of tradition, Goucem pursues sexual encounters, with Aniss and with other men at the night club. Though a rebel by traditionalist standards, this seemingly uninhibited Algerian woman does not yet have the tools necessary to construct a life outside the conventions of marriage. Instead, she continues to rely on a male presence in her life and dreams of marrying her lover, thus subscribing to traditionally patriarchal laws that see women's future inside the domestic four walls. However, when Goucem shares with Aniss her desire to make their relationship more official, the latter suggests that they are just as happy as a "clandestine couple" and that they should continue just as they are. After all, Goucem, who is certainly not a virgin and, by her own admission, has had two abortions, cannot be considered "marriage material" in the Arab world where purity remains an absolute value. Not surprisingly,

when Aniss, who already lives with his wife from whom he is formally separated, chooses to remarry, he bypasses Goucem, who must turn elsewhere to pursue her myth of love and domesticity as a means of social and economic progress for herself.

Indeed, both Goucem and her mother are in search of self-realization in a mythical space outside the minimalist and shabby four walls to which they must return every night. Goucem, Papicha and Fifi all live in a modest hotel, which by definition is a temporary housing arrangement. None of the three protagonists occupy a permanent space, and such fluidity is specularly reflected in the women's transitional identity. Papicha belongs to a past generation of women dancers who were forced to abandon their careers during the years of Islamic fundamentalist terror. As a true artist who views dance not as a tool for seduction but rather as a form of self-expression, Papicha is adamant about reiterating the concept that she may have danced half naked for men but she "was never a prostitute," as she tells Goucem who does not share her mother's enthusiasm for such a career.

While Goucem's realization as a woman is directly linked to marriage and therefore dependent on a male presence, Papicha claims her right to happiness by working to reopen the old dance club and resume her previous career. Her efforts at the end of the film are, at least, partly successful. Papicha's body has aged but the artist (i.e., a public female agent) has remained alive. With the help of M. Fares, the former Copacabana owner, the dancer is metamorphosized into a singer to create a new beginning. Among the guests who have come to watch Papicha is Tiziri, a young girl who also lives at the *pension* and dreams of one day becoming a performer like her friend. Tiziri's presence and her enthusiasm for music and dance suggest that female artistry may continue through new generations of freer women, in a time when terrorism has subsided and music clubs are no longer considered a threat.

Despite what appears to be a fairly optimistic outlook on women's de-objectification process in a still strongly patriarchal culture, the film does not provide a definite answer as to whether Algerian women truly own their future. Papicha and Goucem are dissatisfied with their lives of solitude while Fifi, who appears to be happy in the company of men and in complete control of her destiny, falls victim to a violent client who wrongly believes she has stolen his gun and therefore has her killed. The sense of uncertainty and fragility which still characterizes

women's lives today is reinforced by the director's choice to film most of the outdoor scenes either at night or under a dark and gloomy sky. Papicha's sadness as she sits on the beach and reflects on her life as a widow who must depend on her daughter for financial support is mirrored in the stormy sea and the gray sky over her. Similarly, the final segment in *Viva Laldjérie* shows Goucem joining her friend Samir in a field where a game of *boules* is being played. When asked if she ever got married, she replies "c'est pas facile, j'attends."⁴ Her closing words suggest that while her spirit is not broken, the younger generation of Algerian women still occupies a grey area, much like the sky over Goucem, who, despite her recent failures, approaches a new man and hopes for a new beginning. The camera's gaze does not allow the spectator to capture the conversation between the two. Rather, it shifts to a side scene where a group of boys are playing soccer, the same grey sky looming over them. As the eye of the camera slowly moves away from the protagonists and on to a panoramic shot of the people playing in the distance, the viewer is left waiting, much like Goucem, for an answer that may not come.

The analysis of these two recent films shows that the formation of a female-centered public space in contemporary Algeria remains an intricate issue and one that is not likely to be solved without further struggles. At the present time, as Doris Gray argues in an article about the current socio-cultural and political battles of Algerian women, "the debate about women's rights in Algeria can best be described as anarchic. Straddling differing identities, many of which are imposed from outside, women in post-independence Algeria have at times seen remarkable progress, followed by setbacks, starts, and turns" (46). Through the women portrayed in the two films, *Rachida* and *Viva Laldjérie*, the directors highlight the multilayered process of feminine subject formation within the fluid space of post-colonial Algeria. Ultimately, while both filmmakers address the question of women's agency from two different thematic and narrative standpoints, they both convey the (mildly) hopeful message that women can be active subjects in the process of rebuilding the future in a culturally and historically broken country. The construction of a safe gynocentric space in the Franco-Arab world is still a painful work in progress but it is not an impossible accomplishment.

NOTES

¹ Third Cinema is a term first introduced in 1968 by Argentinean writers and filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino who defined it as a revolutionary "cinema of subversion" (46), and one that strives to achieve the "decolonization of culture" (47) through militant artistic engagement. According to Solanas and Getino, Third Cinema places itself in direct opposition to both First Cinema (Hollywood and Hollywood-style commercial films) and Second Cinema, exemplified by art, new wave and independent films.

² This exchange is in Arabic. The translation quoted here is the one provided by the film's subtitles.

³ "A type of re-appropriation of space is sketched out, within the frame of a school which is wrecked but not completely destroyed. To no longer hide is already a great accomplishment and one dares to see, in [the character's] will, the movement which historically put an end to terrorism in Algeria." This and all translations from the French are mine.

⁴ "It is not easy, I'm waiting."

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De l'Apocalypse Biblique à la Transpoétique Babélique : Étude de la Geste Chamoisienne

Marine Piriou

CELSA – Université Paris Sorbonne

Dix ans après avoir remporté le prix Goncourt pour son œuvre *Texaco*, Patrick Chamoiseau publie en 2002 un cinquième roman intitulé *Biblique des derniers gestes*. A travers ce livre monumental, long de 788 pages, l'écrivain créoliste tente de reconstituer l'histoire mythique de l'origine du monde contemporain et des rapports de forces qui l'ont engendré, une entreprise ambitieuse qu'il s'applique à réaliser *via* la narration a-chronologique de la vie de Balthazar Bodule-Jules, personnage quasi prophétique « né il y a de cela quinze milliards d'années »¹ (52) et compagnon de route des plus grands révolutionnaires de notre ère. Mais la singularité de ce projet romanesque repose avant tout sur l'adéquation parfaite entre son fond fantasmagorique et sa forme biblique, et plus particulièrement sur le dialogue permanent qui s'établit entre son récit légendaire et la présence latente du genre apocalyptique du Livre de Saint Jean. Le recours à cette stratégie diégétique offre en effet un double avantage : d'une part, elle renforce la portée thaumaturgique du texte fictionnel en le sacralisant et d'autre part, légitime le plaidoyer chamoisien qui vise à démontrer la nécessité d'accéder à un au-delà *postmoderne* en son sens à la fois transcendant et atemporel, *i.e.* hors de l'esprit du temps comme l'entend Milan Kundera dans *La Lenteur*. Ainsi, veillé par une multitude de fidèles dont les écrivains Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant et Patrick Chamoiseau lui-même, Balthazar Bodule-Jules se remémore en silence ses nombreuses épreuves initiatiques traversées depuis l'enfance jusqu'à ses derniers jours tout en aspirant religieusement à la refondation du monde qui ne pourra se faire, d'après lui, que dans la communion des forces poétiques que ces hommes de lettres, bien que de lignes de pensée différentes, ont en partage. En d'autres termes, l'entrelacement des génies créateurs serait l'unique source de salut pour