

Violence in the Name of Allah: Algerian Women and Trauma in *Rachida*, a Film by Bachir-Chouikh

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Abstract: As the Islamic Salvation Front was stripped of its electoral wins elections in 1991, violence erupted resulting in the loss of many lives in Algerian society. While some Algerian artists/ writers addressed the situation with novels and other scriptural genres, Yamina Bachir-Chouikh uses cinema with a film *Rachida* to show the effects of this societal crisis on Algerian people.

Without rationalizing or legitimizing violence, this paper shows the effects of violence and/or terror on memory, the coping strategies deployed by terror victims, and eventually the political implications of the cinematization of one narrative, among others, of the Algerian memory of the troubled years starting from the 1991.

Keywords: Algeria, ISF, Islam, violence, trauma, coping strategies, film, woman.

Résumé: Quand le Front islamique du salut se voit dérober de sa victoire en 1991, la violence devient le lot quotidien des Algériens. Des artistes n'y sont pas allés de mains mortes. Alors que certains utilisaient l'écriture pour rendre témoignage de la situation, d'autres se servirent du cinéma. Ce fut le cas de la cinéaste franco-algérienne, Yamina Bachir-Chouikh dont le film sortit en 2002.

Loin de légitimer la violence, cette contribution décrit la violence et/ou la terreur subie par la mémoire, les stratégies de résorption des effets de la violence. Elle traite, enfin, des implications de la cinématization de la mémoire algérienne des années troubles depuis 1991.

Mots-clés: Mots-clés : Algérie, FIS, islam, violence, traumatisme, stratégies, film, femme.

Introduction

Yamina Bachir-Chouikh's *Rachida* takes a cinematographic swing at gratuitous violence done to womenfolk throughout the world in general and in North Africa's Algeria in particular. She thus attempts to reveal the reasons and consequences hidden behind the myriad social upheavals leading up to violence, which has finally become the modus operandi of various ideological and political groups aiming, they so say, to break the Western influence on the non-Western world. While some people take less forcible approach to affirming themselves in the new world order, others deem this approach ineffectual and elect to rely on force and violence.

Instances abound in this regard. The Nigeria-based transnational terror group called Boko Haram is a case in point. In Algeria, the ISF and its military wing going by the name "Groupe islamiste armé" or Islamic Armed Group (GIA) are to be inscribed in the wider web of violent trends impressed on the struggle to self-reaffirm in our world getting more and more globalized, which is none but the Euro-Americanization of the world. The point, for such ideologies and the groups living by it, is to instill fear by means of terror and its main carrier, violence.

Algeria, the setting of *Rachida*, is no real foreigner to violence both as a victim and perpetrator. The French colonial forces used violence to subdue the Arab and the latter learnt that violence was after all useful in struggle for liberation. To become independent from the French, the Algerian nationalist combatants within the Algerian vanguard movement for independence struggle, Front national pour la liberation (FLN) or National Liberation Front, used violence; it used what may called nowadays "terrorist tactics" to defeat the French colonial presence in their homeland. The violence necessitated by independence struggle is a form of counter-violence targeting the French invader. As in his groundbreaking *The Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon has it, violence is a precondition of liberation among the colonized and oppressed. That young bearded bandits tot guns, rape women, steal, and kill innocents with chainsaw in the countryside reveal that violence has gone scales higher than normal. It is violence impressed upon an Algerian by another one. Postcolonial violence, as Bachir-Chouikh portrays it in the film, has interpersonal form. Some persons kill others. Here, others kill

purportedly in the name of Allah.¹ A fundamental question arises, what is violence and what would it serve in a non-colonial situation?

Algerian politics has been involved with violence to the point one can reasonably argue that there is a culture of violence in this society. Yet, what happens in this society is no different from any other society. Violence once erupted there as a necessity. Its recent deployment was also instigated by political exigencies. This harsh reality has been mostly left out of the sphere of cinematic representation as if people were seeking to keep it repressed and hidden away from public acknowledgement. This is the view taken by Guy Austin who speaks about French-Algerian war. He writes,

The feeling of absence that surrounds French filmic representation of the Algerian War can be approached in terms of trauma theory. This suggests that traumatic events are never fully assimilated in the present but take time to manifest themselves, often migrating to a different place and a later time to make their impact felt. (Austin 19)

In other words, it is only later that stories of pain are told as if to leave enough time to the victims to process their grief and pain. This observation applies to the Algerian post-1992 electoral crisis, which is the basis for Bachir-Chouikh's daring film.

Without rationalizing or legitimizing violence, this paper shows the effects of violence and/or terror on memory, the coping strategies deployed by terror victims, and eventually the political implications of the cinematization of one narrative, among others, of the Algerian memory of the troubled years starting from the 1991 elections.

1/What Is the Film about?

There is a great deal of accounts on the trauma caused by the military and political situations in Algeria, abound even though most of them are male-authored and phallogocentric. This film is the account of an Algerian woman with a female protagonist called Rashida², a name derived from ar-Rush, this guidance such as given to those following the path of Allah. One of Allah's ninety-nine names is Rashid.

¹ Far from engaging in an exercise of self-justification in the middle of criminal acts posed by some people claiming to be Muslims, it ought to be added, and very emphatically so, that Islam is a religion of peace and that the Quranic text is clear about preservation and sacralisation of life –human and otherwise. There is no escaping from this: killing other human beings is a criminal act by Godly and human standards.

² The spelling is English here in order to ensure consistency with the language though the title of the film is written Rachida with a "c". To maintain this consistency, the protagonist's name will be written Rashida" with an "s" instead.

Released in 2003, Bachir-Chouikh's *Rachida* features among other actors, Ibtissem Djouadi, Bahia Rashedi, Rashida Messaouden, Zaki Boulenafed, Amel Shouikh, Abdelkader Belmokaden, Mohamed Remas, Aida Gueshoud, and Azzedine Bougherra.

Rachida is a film about a young schoolmistress, Rashida, who, was accosted one day by Sofian, her former student. To his former schoolteacher, Sofian hands out a bag of explosives to plant among school children. As Rashida understands what is going on, she refuses to take any part in the massacre. Sofian loses patience and consequently stabs her, which leaves the seriously wounded woman in a stream of blood. The young owes her way back to life the intensive care she receives from a poorly equipped hospital in a war-torn Algiers suburb. Traumatized and convalescent Rashida leaves the city and her job in order to take up residence in the countryside. This is where her trauma begins. Yet, what happens in the *bilad* is nowhere close to her bloody encounter with bloodthirsty and gun-toting bandits who kill innocent civilians purportedly for God.

This cinematic production does not echo feministic victimology –narratives of victimization and attempts to draw benefits from it– such as almost inherent to Western scholarship about things oriental. Instead, Bashir-Chouikh engages in recalibrating perspectives and in shedding light on the hidden parts of the horrors of the Algerian war as instigated by militants that the French derisively call “les fous de Dieu”(literally those who are crazy about God). For sure, they are religious fanatics using Islam as a political springboard. One untold of war accounts is the trauma as undergone by Algerian women aspiring to freedom, to foreign values as well, as a way to contemplate what lies beyond their closed-off universe as if to debunk the so-called clash of civilization as predicted by Samuel Huntington.³ Undoubtedly, fanatic violence (violence perpetrated on religiously political ground) proceeds from a rationale. At the same time, violence frustrates genuine combative efforts to rid Algeria of French neo-imperialistic allies.

Rachida builds on the backdrop of the tense relations entertained by the state of Algeria and religious party funded by Abassi Madani and his fellow Ali Belhaj in the

³ Huntington predicted that the next world war would rather be a clash between the Occident and the Orient, meaning an opposition between Arabo-Muslims and Christians of the West. He writes, “The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations”(Huntington 22). Of course, the different civilizations are the West and the East.

aftermath of the 1991 botched-up elections. The rule of terror and horror replaces the rule of law and peace when the Front is stripped of its electoral wins by the military with the backing of France. As violence generalizes, everybody becomes a fair game for radical militants. However, the main target of these radicals is women, who become almost irremediably marked by the pain endured. They are marked psychologically

In short, *Rachida* is one of the first cinematic accounts portraying war-torn Algeria with disconcerting realism. It provides a panoramic image of the gloomy days in Algeria. The militants with guns killed people in countryside by using fake military check-points. The film is an exhibition of violence overshadowing the existence of any kind of life in the Algerian society. Here, lack of life is made possible by terror/violence which left most of the people traumatized. Trauma is then the product of violence, which in several shapes and levels of importance.

2/Algeria and Violence

This film is about violence and the indelible imprint deployment of violence leaves on its victims. It reconnects Algeria with its own identity. In fact, Algeria was a French colony. When the people sought their independence from French dominance, a violent war broke in 1962 between the French and the people of Algeria. This war made the French capture the amount of courage stored up in the natives. The native wanted their freedom at the cost of their life. The Arab militants of the FLN defended themselves killing the French in retaliation to the French massacring the natives.

During the Algerian liberation struggle, Frantz Fanon attempted to disprove the argument that would sustain some atavistic disposition on the part Algerian males. These men are said to promptly pull out a knife against their own compatriots whenever insignificant acts by the latter infuriated whereas the French colonizer tried to humiliate him both with words and acts. Fanon's explications have it that the reaction of the Algerian is natural; it is a reaction that is triggered by long-stored anger. Fanon writes:

The combat waged by a people for their liberation leads them, depending on the circumstances, either to reject or to explode the so-called truths sown in their consciousness by the colonial regime, military occupation, and economic exploitation. And only the armed struggle can effectively exorcize these lies about man that subordinate and literally mutilate the more conscious-minded among us." (Fanon 220)

The liberation struggle of 1962 is thus translated by Fanon. The natives responded with corresponding violence to the French. Perhaps, this situation remained in the collective memory of Algerians. When the *Front islamique du salut* (Islamic Salvation Front of Salvation) or FIS won general elections 1992, the party's wins were denied as Hamas in the occupied territories of the Palestine was stripped of its win against Mahmood Abbass' Fath party. France was involved in this situation again like during the pre-1962 years. This state of affairs (France's meddling with Algeria's internal politics) unleashed the old memory of France presence and the methodology used to defeat France. When the ISF was stripped of its electoral wins, the religious party was humiliated by the military taking power.

The defensive of the military against the ISF triggered the defensive posture of the movement; it felt humiliated and vowed to defend those who fell during brutal campaigns and the psychological wars waged by the lay political parties and dubious associations. The ISF stretches its radicalization as far as to blur the line between the State and religion. The Front branches into an armed group –Groupe islamiste armé (GIA) – the main aim of which is to topple the government, and ultimately winds up harrowing anything that ostensibly helps the non-Islamic state in Algeria. Journalism and media mainly pattern after Western news propagation style, secular schools, and intellectuals are easy target. Ali Belhadj summarises his understanding of the redefined Algerian society and the establishment of an Islamic state as follows:

My attitude is that of a soldier of God who considers Islam to be both a religion of generosity and tolerance and a religion of power/force, of jihad and of the whip against anyone that is arrogant and does not care. It is a religion that couples the Book with the conquering sword [...]" (Al-Ahnaï et al 133)⁴

The so-called jihad undertaken by the ISF militants transcends the limits of its natural targets; it aims at anyone who fails to abide by the Islamic rule of law, thereby exposing themselves to the castigations that apply in similar situations.

Clearly, the defenders of the Islamic faith as a way of life and a model of

⁴ What follows is the original text in French.: "Mon attitude aujourd'hui est celle du combattant de Dieu qui voit que l'islam est en même temps la religion de la générosité et de la tolérance et la religion de la force, du *jihad* et du fouet contre qui est orgueilleux et n'en fait qu'à sa tête. C'est une religion qui allie le Livre et l'épée conquérante [...]" Henceforth, all original texts will be put in a footnote and the translation directly cited in the body of the text.

governance resorted to violence as a *modus operandi*, and such a choice would not be disgruntling if it were geared towards the military that allegedly persecuted the ISF. Violence in Algeria is so much peculiar as its target has been the defenceless and weak women. If “[...] no reference to Islam or Paradise can explain this spirit of self-sacrifice when it comes to protecting his people or shielding his comrades”(Fanon 221), the post-1992 period proves differently. In fact, the behaviour of the fighters carries any available potential that corroborates the French colonialist theory of the Algerian’s innate and instinctual urge to violence: “The Algerian is an habitual killer [...] The Algerian is a savage killer [...] The Algerian is a senseless killer” (Fanon 222). Or, the French colonizer also has it that “The North African is a criminal, his predatory instinct a known fact and his unwieldy aggressiveness visible to the naked eye [...] The Algerian is congenitally impulsive”(Fanon 223).

Admittedly, the French colonizer has to find details in the Algerian’s life and his social interactions in order to substantiate the claims according to which the latter has some animalistic behavior. The context of anti-colonial struggle disallows the above colonialist discourse because the violence perpetrated by the native counterbalanced the colonizer’s own violence in such a way that the two types of violence look logical. Does this logical nature of violence bestow legitimacy to post-1992-election Algeria?

3/(Gendered) Violence and Trauma

Violence in Rachida has a peculiar trait. It is directed at women. This form of violence can reasonably be looked at as being gendered. First, it is important to say a few words on violence, a term that has been given a multitude of definitions. According to Françoise Héritier, violence is

Any constraint, physical or psychological by nature, that is capable of triggering terror, displacement, mishap, suffering or the death of an animated being ; any form of intrusion aimed at deliberately or indirectly dispossessing the other. [...] Some forms of violence are legitimate. These are forms issuing from the law and the ensuing punishment prescribed for infringements. According to their nature and their diversity, these forms define the conditions of the legitimacy of revolt and insubordination. (Héritier 17)⁵

⁵ “Toute contrainte de nature physique ou psychique susceptible d’entraîner la terreur, le déplacement, le malheur, la souffrance ou la mort d’un être animé; tout acte d’intrusion qui a pour effet volontaire ou

Exerted on a human being or a thing, violence may take on various forms in such a way that immaterial and intangible harm can also be dubbed violence. Here, forms like psychological, economic and cultural violence among others, are definitional possibilities may be called metaphorical violence. Such violence is clearly figurative. Some forms of violence are condoned when they are exerted by the so-called appropriate body. Therefore, violence may be constructive or destructive.⁶

It may also be religious,⁷ political according as it takes, like water and its container, the form of the thing whose realization it makes possible. Violence may be deemed legitimate. It may also be considered destructive as Arendt has it.

Interpersonal violence leaves impact on the victim. This is the case of Rashida. Like the entire community and more precisely, the members who refuse to see through the same lenses as the ISF armed militants, Rashida is a victim of the atmosphere of extreme violence that traumatizes.

Trauma is a violent emotional shock that leaves the subject suffering it with a lasting shattering. Traits of trauma are anxiety, social isolation, anger or emotional numbing, and irritability. In this film, trauma has reached a national level. What can be called “national trauma” is a sort of shock having enduring impacts and that are connected to events one cannot easily dismiss because it will be appearing over again and again in the consciousness of the individuals in the community, thereby becoming ingrained in collective memory. Trauma here does not derive from the experience that causes the traumatic effect; rather, it is caused by the act of remembering the experience. That’s why there is always a lapse of time when the victim tends to forget the events that shocked him/her. It is only when another reminiscing event happens that the experience of trauma is set in motion. Clearly, trauma rests on memory, on remembering; it links the past to the present through making connections, representations or imagination.

involontaire la dépossession d’autrui [...]. Des violences se veulent légitimes: ce sont celles de la loi, et des peines appliquées à ceux qui l’enfreignent. Selon leur nature et leur diversité, elles posent la question des conditions de légitimité de la révolte et de l’insoumission.”

⁶ Sherman Stange’s notion of violatives needs to be considered here. See *Reason and violence: Philosophical Investigation*.

⁷ “Religion shelters us from violence just as violence seeks shelter in religion”(Girard 24).

Rashida becomes traumatized because of what happened to her. Like any traumatized person, she wants nothing to do with reality and/or what happened to her. This is the period of repression of reality. We see this in the scene where Rashida is taken by a friend of her family's to the countryside to get fresh air. Her mother, a divorcee, performs her Muslim canonic prayer, regains a sense of relative peace and delight while her daughter cannot stand the simple noise that kids make around her. Any banging sound is alarming and frightening to her. As if the noise was announcing another attack on her, she closes the windows to recoil in a corner of the room. This is reminiscent of the time when used to wrap white blanket around her in the hopes of shielding against the buzz and hustle of city life. Rashida has already experienced the kind of distrust that the traumatized exhibit.

Some of these traits are plausibly at work when Rashida relives the experience of the attacks through various events in the village where she takes up refuge. At first, as the news on the national television features the killings of some military allegedly by the armed groups, Rashida flies away from the reality. She retreats in a little hide-out in some corner of her house in Algiers before the visit of their benefactor (a woman) who comes to announce that finally she has managed to help Rashida relocate to a village in the mountains where she can continue her teaching commitments. Because she attempts to break away from her monotonous life of seclusion, she goes to a grocery store. There she runs into a customer. When the man bends down to heave up a package, Rashida's eyes catch the gun under his belt. This sighting triggers fear; she is taken back to the reason why she fled the city to the country, and consequently rushes back home. Lastly, some gun-toting bandits, seemingly members of the armed group, attack the whole village, leaving a trail of blood. The bandits' attack claimed nearly all the valid males of the small town. Apparently, the crime of these villagers is to the display of signs of merriment at a wedding in a war-torn country. This attests to the gratuitous nature of the violence at work.

Clearly, Rashida would have felt better if she had not been exposed to events that make her relive her shocking experience. As if those acts of aggression were concerted, they all happen at a time when the victim starts to regain confidence and composure. Determined to pursue her career without regard to the malestream view about Arab

women, Rashida pulls together the children of her class in guise of making the claim that the only way to undo the patriarchal and hegemonic violence against her gender is to educate the kids. Very interestingly, the class is a mix of boys and girls, which is indicative of promising future in a country where fundamentalists seek to establish a theocratic rule. Such a rule, as examples of women's condition in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and even Shi'ite Iran attest to it, precludes any chance of acknowledging women's actual competence in society save for the social role division crafted for them for ages. The roles society traditionally ascribes to women in the above societies include womanhood, wifehood and procreation. Any attempt at subverting male prerogatives and their deemed preserve is a declaration of war.

Rashida is a free-minded woman. She dresses like westerners; she wears pants, her chest is bare, and her hair is in the air. She does not wear any veil as Arab Muslim culture requires women to do. She challenges the phallogocentric system. No wonder why Sofian and a group of men stalked her prior to abducting and assaulting her. This may suggest that the assault on the main protagonist is a reaction that has been triggered by her stubbornness as well as her iconoclasm in a rigidly structured society such as hers. Sofian and his cohorts succeeded in instilling fear in Rashida.

Albert Memmi rightly puts it, "one has a better sense of domination when it is perceived and felt as a lasting aggression" (Memmi115).⁸ Rashida, her mother, and symbolically any subversion-oriented women are marked by the new chaotic order in the process of being established. Their being assaulted upon by men is indicative the rigidity of system, and the resourcefulness of the men who safeguard it. The victim's pain is hard to assuage. She is nagged by the assault and retrenches in a corner as if to keep safe.

The same traits are visible with the daughter who was abducted, raped, and possibly beaten by the bandits. She is can be seen attempting to get back to her village covered with bruises and dirt. Her trauma begins as the viewer sees her running and coming into the bled. It intensifies once she settles with her kinsmen. She bears indelible marks – psychological and physical. It gets even worse and more complexified for her when the victim is accused by the father of lust and promiscuity. The father of the violated girl says: "I don't want her any longer because she has shamed us in front of our

⁸ "Une domination n'est mal vécue que si elle est ressentie comme une agression durable."

neighbours.” This reality hints at the perfect reason to kill a woman in order to clean the soiled honour of the Arab family.

Hegemonic masculinity –the overarching power of man as it seethes through his every single action– builds on the notion of honor among Arabs. Honor mostly is at stake when the Arab woman is soiled by a man other than the one she is intended for by the family. As Douglass Jehl remarks, “[e]ven today, Arab Christian as well as Muslim men are often advised on their wedding night, only half in jest, to ‘slaughter the cat.’ The phrase is a reference to a tale in which a groom brutally beheads a kitten in the bed-chamber before having sex with his virgin bride. If she betrays, the man tells her, she will suffer the cat’s fate” (Jehl 338). It is clear that the life of the human is pushed aside in favor of honor, and yet as Brecht Bertolt puts it “[...] a better word than honor is human dignity; the latter tends to keep the individual in mind” (Bertolt 142).

The social unacceptability of the traumatized young girl speaks to the plight of women, which is far from being bright in the context of collective cataclysm into which religion-driven violence prompted Algerian society in the 1990’s. The Algerian woman that the character of Rashida allows to observe is unfortunate and forced to be the dreg of society. When she veers off the normative track of gender roles, she is called back to order. Despite his loving relationship and his display of concern for Rashida, her fiancé acts according to the very masculinist worldview that the protagonist nearly lost her life to. He recalls that he has advised Rashida to stop teaching as if this occupation is only meant for men. As she rejects the idea, but little does she know that her refusal of decisions made in her stead by men will be fatal. The very occupation she takes pride in as if to rival men is put to task. She is coerced into wreaking havoc on her trade by killing the children she so dearly teaches. Her refusal to obey one man’s words results into the action of a horde of men against her, which attests to the inescapability of the context by women. One can also recall the impregnated traumatized woman whose father disowns her. That’s why the question that Rashida’s mother asks is of a vital importance. During Rashida’s convalescence her mother hints at the peripheralization of women in Algeria asking: “For how long are we going to live at the periphery of society?”

Violence has also been a kind of sacrificial outlet in this film. In the Algerian setting such as fictionalized by Bachir-Chouikh in *Rachida*, violence also takes on some

symbolic shape. Users of violence claim that they are the combatants of Allah's cause. They purportedly work towards the establishment of Allah's will on earth and in Algeria in particular. Any opposition to God's will through the actions of those thought of as His followers results in a counter-opposition, which is mainly tainted with blood. Those pretending to defend the Will of God express themselves by resorting to violence. Thus, René Girard states that "[...] violence seeks shelter in religion" (Girard 24), and that is why he writes later on that "Violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred" (Girard 31). In other words, violence and religion are inextricably attached.

The inescapability of violence in religion harks back to the first religions that hinged on blood and sacrifice. Human sacrifice was in practice in South America (very notoriously so among the Inca and Maya) and some traditional African religionists. Latter religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are no exception to the use of violence. When Jews were in the company of Moses, they were repetitively summoned to slaughter animals in the name of God, and only for Him. Eucharist among Christians is a metaphorical eating of the flesh of Jesus Christ. Abraham's memorial sacrifice of his son Ishmael would not have been a tradition if he actually had cut the throat of his son for the fear of God. The celebration of the Eid-el-Adha in the Arab and Muslim world is a commemoration of Abraham's sacrificial act. How does Rachida's story relate to such a form of violence?

Rachida's story is a deployment of the metaphors of violence⁹ as well. Beside actual violence – i.e., the violence that physically harms – the assaults on the womenfolk aims at refusing the change that their habits and behaviour force on the mainstream society of Algeria. The fact that Rachida's hair is in the air, her chest literally exposed, and her pants show her body to the public is representative of the attempts of women to liberate themselves from the masculinist and patriarchal yoke of society. The move of the women is a form of violence that men in rigidly hierarchized societies, whether in a religious or a profane setting, counteract. As Girard aptly puts, "Only violence can put an end to violence, and that's why violence is self-propagating. Everyone wants to strike the

⁹ This phrase refers to the figurative and symbolic forms of violence. Of course, these forms are different from what we know violence to be, that is, the use of physical force and its implements to harm someone else. Giving any other significance to violence than appropriate – in the sense of proper meaning – contributes to mapping the metaphors of violence.

last blow, and reprisal can thus follow reprisal without any true conclusion ever long reached”(Girard 27).

The “law-breaking violence” and “law-preserving violence”¹⁰ that these contradictions bring about are probably the lot of the Algeria that Bachir-Chouikh portrays. Unfortunately for Rashida, her mother, and the other women in the film, the law-preserving violence of men prevail over the law-breaking violence of women. The only chance left for women in the war-torn Algerian society portrayed by Bachir-Chouikh appears to be education and enlightenment, which are symbolized by young girls and boys, hands in hands, treading the path to school even after the latter was blasted by the mountain riders with bombs and rifles. The chance for women consists in the young girl who develops some attachment to Rashida who equally returns the favour by getting closer and closer to her. The film closes with the boys and girls cleaning up the mess on the school yard, thereby positing a new day dawning on the village, and chaos-ridden fictionalized Algeria.

4/Coping with Trauma

Therapeutically, Rashida’s condition showcases a new approach in curing those with trauma. Among other approaches, abreaction has been in use in myriad instances. Here, the subject faces his or her experience, thereby coming to term with it. Rashida’s case belies the traditional method and begs for newer ones. Instead of positing the individual at the center of the cure, it is the situatedness (sociality) of the individual that carries the appropriate answer. Over and against the individual and his or her interests, culture, community and alterity (the Other) take precedence. This approach builds on the premise that culture informs the construction of identity. It leans on collective memory, social network and culture seen as “container” of the subject or individual. This approach antagonizes traditional psychotherapeutic methods that tend to maintain the individual’s specificity in an attempt to disrupt the confusion between the curative field and that of social action.

¹⁰ According to Walter Benjamin, “All violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity” (Benjamin 287). The violence deployed by political Muslims, otherwise called “Islamists”, bears a law-preserving value in that it prevents the collapse of the old order on behalf of a secular and Westernized society.

Rashida finds no salvation with the usual individual-oriented approach in psychotherapy. No solution, it seems, lies outside the community. As she leaves the city for the country, in search for peace and remission, she meets an even bigger cycle of violence than what she thinks she has left behind. She faces up even higher challenges. When she hides from violence, violence seems to unearth her. And yet, the war-torn community she lands in turns out to be a curative force. Within the community and along with other women who surround her with compassion, she finds a new force. Rashida singles herself out to face the violence and destruction of the paramilitary and bandits with guns in the mountainous regions. It can be safely stated that if she had stayed secluded in the city as the traumatized do, or if she had remained locked up in the house, she would not have found the truth that persistence is the solution. Such is what the author of “Culture et Trauma” writes: “All psychiatry is cultural. Also, any psychiatry is above all social and community-related because the individual taken alone, that is without considering the milieu where he or she has evolved, does not exist per se.” (Jacques 192)¹¹

According to Ron Eyerman, author of *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*,

“Individual identity is said to be negotiated within this collectively shared past. Thus, while there is always a unique, biographical memory to draw upon, it is described as always rooted in a collective history. This collective memory provides the individual with a cognitive map within which to orient present behavior. From this perspective, collective memory is a social necessity; neither an individual nor a society can do without it” (Eyerman 6).

Conclusion

From what proceeds, the best way of coping with stress and trauma as experienced by Rashida is learning to live with the community and acquire back the social strategies needed for the individual to be reinstated into society. The countryside serves this purpose even though the quiet is momentarily shaken by the violence perpetrated by militants in the village. Beyond Rashida’s story lies that of the entire Algerian womenfolk feeling oppressed, violated and dehumanized by culture-specific

¹¹ “Toute psychiatrie est psychiatrie culturelle [...] Par ailleurs, toute psychiatrie est d’abord psychiatrie sociale et communautaire, parce que l’individu pris isolément, sans son enracinement social et familial n’existe pas.”

behaviors some men seek to hide behind a fallacious religious cloak. What happens to Rashida and countless women certainly have nothing to do with Islam.

In the final analysis, it ought to be borne in mind that Bachir-Chouikh's endeavour is one that aims at uncovering the layers of pain that the hidden traumatic experience suffered by the protagonist. The type of silence observed by Rashida serves as a way to express the voicelessness of women in Algerian society. *Rachida* seeks on the one hand to defeat the agenda of building an ultra-religious society where fundamental and inalienable rights are not observed. On the other hand, it posits the necessity for societies that self-seclude to reach out to the outside world in order to be part of the world. At first sight, the young teacher seems to have been defeated by the violence that religious fanatics have mobilized against her. Her moments of vacuum or psychological imbalance read as a victory that bears the potential of silencing women who behave beyond the social norms of the Arab world in general, and the Islamic precepts that highly politicized Muslims intend to have Algerians live by in particular.

There are times when the main protagonist regains confidence and determination in the midst of forces that frustrate her stride toward finding a voice, thereby her emancipation. These moments close the film, signalling the rise of Rashida from among the dead where she is thought to be. That's why her story is a success account despite the blood that taints her narrative from beginning to end.

Lastly, it ought to be stressed that this film has to be considered as an exercise into abreaction, a cathartic move for the traumatized of the Algerian society in order for them to come to term with their past and learn from it and live a better life in the future. For as Austin writes, "These images are traumatic, since they are given meaning by death, but they are also welcome as a means of preserving a memory of the traumatic past" (Austin 24).

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