Building the Nation: Narrating Women and the Algerian War

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Abstract:
Traditional accounts of war define it as a masculine enterprise and war narratives thus as the work of men. Such accounts have been used to justify a special role for men within the nation, as wartime experience supposedly makes them eminently qualified to be not only military but also civilian leaders. While one might begin by challenging the premise that war experience qualifies one for a special civilian status, readers of European literature have also challenged the idea that war narratives are the work of men alone. As critics rediscover and re-place women's narratives of war within the canon of war literature, they have focused in particular on redrawing the boundaries between the frontlines and the home front. [...] Where women have joined in opposing colonial occupation of their homes and land, such as in the Algerian Revolution, the 'frontline' involves entire regions, and women are often in the middle of combat.

1 Traditional accounts of war define it as a masculine enterprise and war narratives thus as the work of men. Such accounts have been used to justify a special role for men within the nation, as wartime experience supposedly makes them eminently qualified to be not only military but also civilian leaders. While one might begin by challenging the premise that war experience qualifies one for a special civilian status, readers of European literature have also challenged the idea that war narratives are the work of men alone. As critics rediscover and re-place women's narratives of war within the canon of war literature, they have focused in particular on redrawing the boundaries between the frontlines and the home front. Such redrawing is particularly appropriate in the context of civil war and other conflicts fought within national borders. Where women have joined in opposing colonial occupation of their homes and land, such as in the Algerian Revolution, the "frontline" involves entire regions, and women are often in the middle of combat. One might expect therefore that such conflicts would necessarily accord a larger place to women's narratives, but official Algerian national memory of the war (as manifested in memorials and the paying of veterans' pensions, for example) has proven short-lived, in large part because it only considers those men and the extremely small number of women who held military positions in the war. Rather than focus on such famous, but unrepresentative military women, Algerian writer Assia Djebar rewrites the story of the Algerian Revolution, interweaving official, written histories of Algeria with the oral stories of ordinary women who participated in the struggle for independence. Valorizing women's contributions in non-military roles and acknowledging their sacrifices, these latter stories imagine women as central to national history and suggest a vision of nation building that might include both men and women.

2 Much scholarly work on war narratives has focused on literature about the two European World Wars. The typical writer of war stories has been seen as a male soldier-poet who writes his experiences from the front and who is "understood to be a gifted veteran who responded to the test of his masculinity by shaping realist texts about the trenches, blood brotherhood, and political disillusionment" (Higonnet, "Cassandra" 144-45). Women who wrote of men's experiences, or more significantly, women who wrote about their own experiences in war went unpublished, or if eventually published,[1] faced harsh criticism, as "critics have dismissed women's writings about the war as inauthentic, neurotic or unfeminine", as Margaret R. Higonnet notes ("Cassandra" 149). Women who wrote enthusiastically of war were accused of jingoism and women who showed the hypocrisy or day-to-day misery of war were criticized for writing works that were demoralizing to the very men who were defending them.

3 Feminist criticism of war literature in European contexts often seeks to redefine the idea of the "war novel" in terms of both location and content, including not only the supposedly masculine and public spaces of the trenches and battle, but also the feminine and private spaces of the "home front" and economic deprivation. Such criticism looks at stories by and about women serving on the front as nurses, ambulance drivers, cooks and so on, as well as at narratives where women at home cope with food shortages and illness, even as their work in industry and agriculture provides the necessities of survival for both home and front. In civil wars, in particular, any distinction between home front and frontlines largely disappears as do, to some extent, distinctions between masculine and feminine spaces. The "front" may be the market, the streets outside one's school, the fields one works in to provide food for a family, or even one's own home. In the case of Algeria, the domestic spaces traditionally occupied by women were often more of a frontline than the mountains where the largely male resistance took refuge, far from the reach of French troops. As one of the narrators in Djebar's novel *Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade* describes a guerilla attack against the French, she notes that following the attack, "[O]ur men ran away: they didn't want to wait for the enemy's reprisals. We women were left to bear the brunt!" (206). Given this unavoidable involvement for women and their courage in confronting the French, it is not surprising that they might have expected some formal recognition of their contributions after Independence. As Higonnet argues, "[C]ivil wars, which take place on 'home' territory have more potential than other wars to transform women's expectations […]. Once a change in government can be conceived, sexual politics can also become an overt political issue" ("Civil

[1] Jane Marcus provides a wealth of information on little known or recently rediscovered women's narratives of the first World War and contemporary responses to them.

Wars" 80). Even though the Algerian War is not usually thought of as a civil war, but rather as a struggle to overthrow an occupying power, Higonnet's comments hold true in that the Algerian War took place on 'home' territory, at least as far as the Algerians and French settlers (if not the French army) are concerned. War narratives of the Algerian Revolution suggest the possibility of change as they show women crossing the previously rigid boundaries of male space and taking on "male" roles and responsibilities.

4 Sexual politics, however, were definitely not part of the agenda in the Algerian War, or perhaps it would be better to say changes in sexual politics were not on the agenda. Women's participation in the recognized military arm of the resistance was actively discouraged, and only a very small number of women actually left their families to join the maquis. Once in the maquis, women found family structures recreated with their comrades named brothers and their paternal commanders who were quick to insist on marriage at the slightest hint of impropriety. When women did participate, it was in a decidedly traditional capacity. As historian Monique Gadant points out, "Women's presence was tolerated only in so far as they were confined to 'feminine' tasks" (84, my translation), such as providing shelter, food and medicine or working as nurses. Because women carried out many of the same tasks they might have had in peacetime circumstances, their efforts were not recognized as special war efforts:

> If a man carried food to the armed fighters at great personal risk, he was called a 'fighter.' A woman doing the same was called a 'helper.' If a man risked his life to hide armed fighters or wanted political leaders, he was called a 'fighter.' A woman doing the same was simply performing the female task of 'nurturing.' Nor was she considered a fighter when she collected fuel or food for the fighters, or carried their guns, or guided them through the mountains. She was merely helping the men. (Helie-Lucas 106)

Thus, anecdotal accounts suggest that many women were involved in such "support" positions, but because they were not part of the formal military structure, their contributions went largely unnoticed and were quickly forgotten after the war. Helie-Lucas notes that women made up only 3.25% of registered veterans (105), although "[w]e can consider that most peasant women were involved in the Algerian Revolution" (106).

5 Assia Djebar's novel *Fantasia, An Algerian Cavalcade* gives an individual voice to this history, recounting and recreating the narratives of women who participated in the Algerian War. Juxtaposing them with official written histories, she gives the two kinds of narratives equal importance. Djebar's novel accords the space and the opportunity to recount the experiences of women members of the resistance in the Independence War who, although they may have participated as fully as their brothers, fathers and husbands, were never

decorated, rewarded with veterans' pensions or asked for their stories, but on the contrary, were encouraged to return quietly to their traditional domestic roles. Miriam Cooke argues that Algerian women were unaware of the transformative nature of their participation in the revolution, and were therefore unable to put it into writing, or I would add, use it to consolidate permanent gains in civil rights:

> [L]iterary evidence affirms that during the Revolution the Algerian women were not conscious of their opportunities […]. Consequently, it is not so surprising that they made no attempt to inscribe into the war text experiences that may have been transformative. When they had written, they had done so with little awareness of what military participation had meant. […] The Algerian Revolution came too soon in the history of modern Arab women's discursive activism to serve as a catalyst for the inscription of feminist issues into the nationalist agenda. […] [T]he difference between the Algerian and the Lebanese women who participated in their two wars was that the Algerian women did not have a feminist context, for example, no indigenous, independent feminist organization, within which to situate their struggle. ("WO-man" 185-186)

Many representations of women's experience in the war only surfaced years after the end of the war. Even in the case of Djebar's novel, published in 1985, such experience is presented in a mediated fashion. First of all, although women do tell their own stories, they are orchestrated within a larger structure in which a semi-autobiographical narrator has the dominant voice throughout the novel. Secondly, despite the narrator's frequent intervention, the reader learns very little of her own wartime experience. Just one chapter details her preparations for marriage in Paris, as she and her fiancé dodge the police and plan to join the resistance organizing in Tunisia on the Algerian border. In a novel which includes long passages concerning the narrator's childhood and adolescence, this paucity of information about her time in the war, as well as the geographical distance, is striking.

6 Making a case for the inclusion of women's experience in the national narrative is important if women's demands for full citizenship and equality are to be met. Djebar's novel, however, also suggests the existence of narratives that remain unheard either because their tellers themselves have chosen silence, or because they are told in a language incomprehensible to their audience. In one instance, a woman providing food and shelter for combatants describes how she had instructed her adopted daughter to behave if she were ever questioned by the French. She told the girl, "If they question you, begin to cry! If they ask, 'Who comes to visit your mother? What does she do?' you must begin to cry immediately…If you say a word, they'll ask more questions! Just cry! That's all you must do!" (160). The woman then describes the girl's actions: "And that's what she did. She burst into tears, she rolled about in the sand, she ran way in a flood of tears" (160). Of course, this scene is not,

strictly speaking, one of silence, but rather of communication that the men in power are incapable of understanding - the language of the body. While the soldiers interpret the girl's actions as meaningless hysteria, from the women's point of view, it is anything but meaningless. Significantly, her actions are learned (non-)communication taught to her by the older woman. The young girl's cries constitute a protest against an oppressive power that affords her no other acceptable "language," in Djebar's terms, than that of the body. While it may not be a permanent solution or a means to secure concrete political rights, it nonetheless has a strategic, contextual value.

7 Thus it becomes clear that while women's narratives of the war have been ignored, misinterpreted, or silenced by the cultural and political climate following Independence, women themselves may have chosen and may continue to choose silence. Sometimes, as in the case quoted above, remaining silent is a refusal to give information to the enemy. In others it is necessary to protect themselves against informers. More importantly, however, even when a woman is politically on the winning side of a war, her personal story may be one of defeat: rape, loss of family and friends, or disappointed hopes for a better life after the war. The women whose stories Djebar gathers describe how they organized their lives in the villages, when the men had fled to join the maquis, the threat of rape becomes apparent, but is almost never voiced directly: "As soon as we young women saw the French coming we never stayed inside. The old women stayed in the houses with the children: we went to hide in the undergrowth or near the wadi. If the enemy caught us we never said a word" (206-207). Rape itself is the great unspoken in these narratives, referred to by the women only as "damage" (202). The only direct reference to rape is, in fact, mediated through the narrator, who, as she reflects on one of the stories she is told, imagines what the storyteller has not said:

> Once the soldiers were gone, once she has washed, tidied herself up, plaited her hair and tied the scarlet ribbon, all these actions reflected in the brackish water of the wadi, the woman, every woman, returns, one hour or two hours later, advances to face the world to prevent the chancre being opened in the tribal circle […] rape will not be mentioned, will be respected. Swallowed. Until the next alarm.(202)

By not speaking, the women "seize on the silence and build a barrier against misfortune" (202). Djebar's work both recovers women's lost stories and valorizes chosen silence. While one might object that these are indeed restricted choices, given a context in which "the woman who raises her voice" is "the only really guilty woman, the only one you could despise with impunity" (203), Djebar's work shows the value of strategic silences in confrontations not only between colonized and colonizer, but also between women and men. Perhaps, Djebar suggests, in contexts where one's voice cannot be understood or can only

bring harm, silence itself becomes a kind of power, albeit a defensive rather than offensive power. Unlike the silence that withholds information from enemy soldiers and thus contributes to the physical safety of the fighting forces, silence in these cases has to do with protecting the honor and image of the family, at whatever cost to the woman - not unlike the way women themselves silenced their claims to equality in the interests of national unity following Independence.

8 It is true that war experience, whether told by men or women may defy telling, but the silence of women in Djebar's novel is very different from the kind of silence sometimes seen in men's war stories. In contrast to the propaganda and jingoism of the home front, male writers may find it difficult to put their experiences into words without falling into cliché. As Higonnet notes, "By contrast to the braggart civilian, the mark of the real soldier who has witnessed the war may be silence" ("Not So Quiet" 209). But Higonnet's comments are in the context of the literature of World War I by men, whose participation in the war was never in doubt. Since most women are presumed not to have contributed to the war effort in any special way, their silence serves as confirmation of this view. As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes in another context, "[W]e face the danger of inscribing femininity as absence, a lack and blank interjecting the importance of enunciation" (59). This, of course, has consequences when it comes to dividing up the spoils and responsibilities in the new nation. One of Djebar's narrators reminds the reader of this. During the war, her own home and farm were burned to the ground by the French, a common practice against those thought to be supporting the rebellion. After the war, a man whom she had hidden from the French is in charge of re-assigning abandoned houses, but he denies her request for a house. As the woman explains, "They didn't give me a thing…You can see where I'm living now, I have to pay to occupy this hut. 'You pay or you don't put a foot inside!' they told me" (200).

9 While the examples of women denied pensions and other material rewards for war service are numerous and of great importance for the individuals concerned - especially where the war resulted in the destruction of their property or the death of husbands and sons- at a national level, women's access to vote and civil rights takes center stage. In postwar contexts war narratives are also accounts of nation building and a way of talking about national identity and defining who deserves to be counted as a citizen. When these narratives exclude women as tellers and characters, nation building itself becomes a masculine endeavor. In Europe, for example, following the first World War, women's service during the war is seen as one of the reasons women were finally granted the vote, often decades after the beginning of suffrage campaigns (Vining 369). In contrast, in France where the military strongly resisted

any official role for women in the war, women were among the last in Europe to receive the vote (Vining 363), having to wait for and serve in another world war before finally receiving the vote.

10 Marnia Lazreg points out that the 1963 Charter of Algiers and the 1976 National Charter in Algeria "reiterate the state's commitment to women's rights as a result of women's participation in the war. In other words, women's rights to citizenship are presented as compensation for their struggle for the independence of their country rather than as unqualified rights" (133). In contrast to the European example, however, these rights did not turn out to be irrevocable, and in practice, were often ignored even from the beginning. When the Algerian parliament passed the infamous Family Code in 1984, therefore, it came as no great surprise. The Code enshrined in law a host of conservative practices supposedly in keeping with Islamic law, including unequal divorce rights, polygamy, and the obligation of a woman's submission to her husband (Lazreg 135). The timing does not seem coincidental. As the Code was passed, young women who had been children or who had been born after the end of the war were reaching adulthood. If political rights are perceived as a reward for service during the independence war, then those who had not participated in the war could hardly expect to enjoy those privileges. Monique Gadant, however, argues that the Family Code actually changed very little in women's lives, "but it fixed in law what had been customary, a fundamental inequality of which women, conscious or not, were victims" ("La situation" 24, my translation).

11 Some observers of the situation in Algeria, in fact, argue that women's subordinate status came to be seen as a mark of Algeria's difference from the French colonizer and thus as the foundation of Algerian identity. Since the French had used women's liberation from the supposedly oppressive customs of Islam (in particular, the veil) as one justification for colonization, Algerian women who claimed such rights for themselves were inevitably accused of siding with the colonizer. Winifred Woodhull and Monique Gadant both argue that women's status could not be changed in the newly independent nation because their subordinate status defined the new nation in opposition to the colonial power. Woodhull even suggests that, in the context of Algeria, gender difference is not only an important category for considering nationalism, but that it actually constitutes the Algerian nation:

> As the embodiment of conflicting forces that simultaneously compose and disrupt the nation, women are the guarantors of national identity, no longer simply as guardians of traditional values but as symbols that successfully contain the conflicts of the new historical situation. At the same time, women are the supreme threat to national identity insofar as its endemic instability can be assigned to them. [. . .] women symbolize and are called upon to stabilize Algeria's irreducibly contradictory identity

> in and through their 'present condition' of subordination. [. . .] women's exclusion increasingly constitutes the Algerian nation after independence. (11, emphasis in the original)

This is not unlike the experience of women in other revolutionary or wartime contexts, in which women's demands are either postponed until the "real" struggle is over or put aside on the assumption that their issues will be solved when independence or victory is achieved. Obviously, this ordering of priorities which subordinates women and their rights to the cause of nation building means that these issues are always left for another day. And those women who persist in seeking their rights during and even after the war are labeled disloyal since their criticism is seen to provide support to detractors of the new nation.

12 The narrative must change so that women as equal partners can take part in constructing national identity. War is such a foundational myth of most nations that if women's narratives are excluded, women themselves are excluded from the process of nation building. Rewriting and rediscovering women's war stories is necessary if women's symbolic role within the nation is to change. In the case of Algeria, rather than trying to invent a past for women as military heroines which is largely false, narratives like Djebar's valorize women's other roles and sacrifices during war, even while acknowledging those few women who did serve in traditional military roles. Rather than insist on being counted in as one of the men, Djebar's narrative serves as one example of how "female writers have challenged the fundamental definition of war itself" (Higonnet, "Not So Quiet" 208), thus redefining the terms for membership in the national club replacing women within the national struggle and re-claiming women's legitimate active role in rebuilding the nation.

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