

# The Role of French-Arab Women in Constructing a Postcolonial France

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In the years following 2000, French society finally started to address problematic issues emanating from its colonial past (massacres, slavery, and forced labor) and to question what it means to be a postcolonial nation. The discussion of such pointed and problematic subjects had for so long been repressed by successive French governments who feared civil unrest among France's postcolonial immigrant communities and who were often composed of and influenced by powerful and nostalgic ex-settler pressure groups. The concept of "postcolonialism" also challenges the fundamental ideals of the French Republic whereby citizens should meld into the dominant social norms of French society and renounce their respective individual history or culture. Members of the first generation of postcolonial immigrant groups were themselves unwilling and unable to evoke their own memories of the colonial period because of their low literacy levels, their fear of retribution in the form of expulsion, or because of the sheer material difficulties that they faced in their everyday lives.

Both historians and members of local and national associations (immigrant, army veterans, and anti-racism groups) led the movement to reexamine France's colonial past. At the very forefront were young French

women of Arab origin, members of the second and third generations of immigrant families from the countries of the Maghreb (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco), which were colonized by the French until 1956 (Morocco and Tunisia) or 1962 (Algeria). Some of these young Franco-Arab women arrived in France at a very young age, but the majority was born in the country and virtually all have passed through the French school system. These women belong to families who emigrated from their homeland in search of work, the fathers first, bringing their families to live with them later on. Such groups arrived *en masse* in the postwar economic boom period (called the thirty glorious years, 1945-1975); however, workers from the Kabylie region of Algeria are documented to have been involved in building the Parisian metro as early as the turn of the twentieth century.

This article will study the involvement of these women in the debates surrounding important political and historical events after the year 2000, including the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) in 2002 and the Stasi commission on secularism in French life and the resulting so-called 'headscarf' law in 2003/2004. Much of these women's struggle has been imbued by French colonial

stereotypes of Arab women, both in their native homeland and as part of the immigrant population in France. Such ideas have continued to influence both official and popular French interpretations of their postcolonial populations; therefore, analysis of these stereotypes is important and recurrent in this article.

An explosion of shocking revelations<sup>1</sup> about France's last and bloodiest war of decolonization, the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), marked the beginning of the new millennium in France. This conflict has strongly influenced France's postcolonial mindset. Officially, Algeria was not an actual colony, but rather an integral part of France, in both an administrative and an emotional sense, with a large and longstanding colonist community. Following Algerian independence, not only did France lose international prestige and a large part of its territory, it also faced an influx of more than a million people; French settlers (*Pieds-Noirs*), "Harkis"<sup>2</sup> and Algerian economic migrants, causing severe financial and logistical strain. The first two groups were to differing extents fleeing persecution under the new regime, whereas the Algerian economic migrants were encouraged by their government to seek work in the territory of the former colonial power in order to remedy the substantial problems of unemployment, poverty and famine that beset the newly independent state.<sup>3</sup>

The story of the Algerian War of Independence has long been dominated by the highly divisive and ideological official histories written on both sides of the Mediterranean, stories of heroes and traitors. Members of the second generation, led by a woman, Fatima Besnaci-Lancou, president of the *Association Harkis et Droits de l'Homme*,<sup>4</sup> have sought to bridge the ideological divide between the Algerian populations on both sides of the conflict (Algerian nationalists versus Harkis). Such a rift was fostered by both the French and Algerian governments following independence: by the Algerians in order to foster their own national myth that the country rose up as one against the colonial oppressor (a concept which the position of the Harkis would at first glance seem to challenge) and by the French in a policy of divide and rule, which would keep both groups confined in their own respective low socioeconomic status. In order to foster reconciliation, *Le Manifeste pour la Réappropriation des Mémoires Confisquées* — or the Manifesto for the Re-appropriation of Confiscated History — was launched at the French Parliament on September 23, 2004. The location of such a declaration is itself highly symbolic; these second-generation authors can be seen to be situating their démarche at the very center of the French Republic, in its seat of power. The signatories, descendants of both Algerian economic migrants and Harkis, promised to promote understand-

ing between the two groups by commemorating days central to each others' calendars; October 17, 1961 (the day on which numerous Algerian demonstrators were attacked and thrown into the Seine by Parisian police, causing them to drown, as well as hundreds more rounded up, imprisoned, tortured and often deported)<sup>5</sup> and the National Day of Homage to the Harkis, held annually on the 25th of September. Their stated aim is to 'inscribe [their] common history in the collective memory of both Algeria and France, to rewrite [their] history, a history recognized on both sides of the Mediterranean'<sup>6</sup> and therefore to combat the ideologically motivated rewritings of historical truth that have come to personify the commemoration of French colonialism.<sup>7</sup>

The Algerian conflict and its aftermath have always been inextricably linked in the two national consciousnesses with men; both the soldiers (French and Algerian) involved in the fighting and the Algerian economic migrants, whose numbers increased dramatically both during and immediately after the war. As the female descendants of the Algerian families directly involved in the conflict (both nationalist fighters and the Harkis) have gradually staked a claim to this part of their heritage, they have chosen to highlight other aspects of the war and its aftermath. The most important of these is the involvement of Algerian women in combat operations on both sides, a historical truth so long minimized, if not totally ignored. While Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers*, depicted women placing bombs in the European quarter of Algiers, most Algerian war literature and cinema subscribed to the view voiced by Frantz Fanon (the Martiniquan psychiatrist and intellectual who became deeply involved in the Algerian independence struggle) that an Algerian woman was "deepening her consciousness of struggle and preparing for combat" best by limiting her social scope, thereby restricting herself to the domestic sphere and avoiding all contact with the colonizer. French authorities claimed that colonial rule would enfranchise the Algerian women and so were unwilling to depict dissent amongst this group, which may have called into question France's 'civilizing mission'. To alter such a stereotypically passive image, the Franco-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar has chosen to document the important presence of the wives of Algerian migrant workers in the demonstrations of October 17, 1961 and the subsequent all female demonstration on October 20, called by Algerian women to protest against their husband's imprisonment. In Sebbar's novel *La Seine était rouge*<sup>9</sup>, one of the main protagonists is a Franco-Algerian teenage girl Amel, who is given a photograph of her mother and grandmother participating in the first march. Although Amel suspects that the two older women discuss this era regularly (Amel does not understand many of their conversations,

as she does not speak Arabic), it is never openly mentioned in the family circle, reflecting the fear and trauma caused by these events. Other female viewpoints abound, including another female character of Amel's mother's generation, Flora, who describes nostalgically the period of imprisonment that she shared with French women in Algeria, while the mother of Amel's friend Louis recounts her role as a '*porteuse de valise*', one of the Frenchmen and women who provided logistical help to the Algerian nationalists during the war. Although Amel is shown to have scant knowledge of the events, maybe from school considering that October 17, 1961 has appeared in French school history textbooks since the mid-1990s, she is utterly unaware of the level of female participation. Yet again, a highly gendered depiction of the Algerian war had to be challenged by young Franco-Arab women. The novel also serves to inscribe Algerian history on the very geography of the city of Paris, as the characters visit the locations from which the marchers started and in which they were held and tortured by Parisian police. This is a groundbreaking act, as the novel was published before a plaque had been erected in the city to commemorate the event.

Second generation Harki women have sought through public appearances, documentaries and autobiographical writing to stress the difficulties faced by their mothers in the conflict's aftermath. Not only did they, like all immigrant women, have to raise a family in a foreign country, but they also had to negotiate with husbands broken by warfare, racked by guilt that they had fought against their own people and infantilized by the patronizing and paternalistic attitudes of the French army officers who controlled the camps in France in which the Harki population was forced to live for more than twenty years. The daughter of a Harki, Dalila Kerchouche, has recently widened the scope of her writing, from journalism (she writes for the weekly newsmagazine, *L'Express*) and autobiographical works to screenplays and books of photographic portraits. Her television drama, *Harkis* (France 2 - October 10, 2006), was the first major production of this genre exclusively featuring the story of a Maghrebi immigrant family, it being screened in a prime-time program slot on a major French television channel. The drama openly criticized the brutal and overwhelming control of the French authorities over the Harki population in the camps, whilst demonstrating how it was the second generation, especially the girls, who were finally able to liberate their families, through their knowledge of France and the French language, which they had gained at school. The review of the drama in the leading French daily newspaper *Le Monde*, while praising the work's courage, criticized it for possibly reviving contentious arguments and suggesting that the Harkis' history prior to their arrival in France was not all

together glorious.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it can be seen that second-generation Franco-Arab women are working in a society that often believes that it would be better if they put up and shut up in order to protect harmony in France as a whole.

Yamina Benguigui, another second-generation French-Arab woman, has chosen the 'seventh art' in order to undertake the process of inscribing her community's story into official French historiography. Her documentary, *Mémoires des Immigrés, l'héritage maghrébin* (1997), is a series of filmed autobiographies, which was subsequently released as a book. This work is groundbreaking as it was an audiovisual text that gave a voice to the first generation of both men and women North African immigrants. In the past, French officials had always been called upon to speak on behalf of these immigrants, if the subject was raised at all. The extent to which the fathers have been downtrodden is evident in the film and is manifested in the silence that these men have succumbed to concerning their lives and emotions. Benguigui describes immigrant life in France as 'a society that does not speak, where speech is taboo', a situation she has observed first hand, coming as she does from a family of Algerian immigrants in the mining region of Northern France. She has sought through her work to break this taboo. In the interview that accompanies the documentary on the DVD, Benguigui, at public screenings of her work, calls on immigrants and their children to 'appropriate the film and begin to tell their own story'. She describes how this is especially necessary for immigrant women, who had very rarely sought to speak out publicly before, even in front of their immediate families, but who took strength from seeing their female compatriots speaking in the film. Benguigui's first feature film, *Inch'allah Dimanche* (2001), again focused on the struggles of these first generation women to adapt to life in France, portrayed through the story of Zouina, who arrives in Northern France in the 1970s to join her husband with her mother-in-law and three children. Benguigui's later documentaries have focused on a variety of subjects, from the situation of young people from immigrant communities in the French army, in *Aïcha, Mohamed, Chaïb, engagé pour la France* (2003), to the glass ceiling that restricts young Franco-Maghrebins and Franco-Africans in the French workplace in *Le Plafond de Verre, les défricheurs* (2006). Notably, these works have always sought to highlight a female viewpoint.

Why should all of these cultural works by French-Arab women have appeared in the last six to ten years? In addition to the increased interest in historical events surrounding decolonization, this period also marks the arrival in positions of social and economic power of this specific group of women, meaning that they finally have

the resources to undertake such projects. The fact that the first generation of North-African economic migrants and Harkis is becoming an increasingly ageing population may also have motivated these authors and filmmakers. Mary McCullough describes, borrowing a phrase from Foucault, how Leïla Sebbar's first-generation immigrant characters are "speaking so as not to die",<sup>11</sup> death being a metaphor for the disappearance from "the collective memory [of their own community]."<sup>12</sup> These novels, documentaries and fictional films, through the importance placed on the history of the parents, demonstrate how the second generation has decided to write so that the life stories of the parents will not die.

It is not only in the cultural but also in the political sphere that French-Arab women have been becoming more visible. The appointment of a French-Arab woman as France's first minister from an ethnic minority was a strong symbol of the increasing political activism of members of this community. Tokïa Saïfi was named as Minister for Overseas Development in the initial government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin, in June 2002. The daughter of Algerian economic migrants from the industrial north of France, she had joined the right-wing *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR) [later the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP)] after becoming disillusioned with the unfulfilled promises made by French left-wing political parties towards voters from immigrant communities. However, the ministerial position to which she was appointed was itself very telling, as development politics has become the latest means for former colonizers to continue to exert political and economic influence over their former colonies.<sup>13</sup> In the same round of governmental appointments, a woman (Michèle Alliot-Marie) was named as Minister of Defense; therefore, claims that Tokïa Saïfi was relegated to such a secondary ministerial role because she was a woman are difficult to substantiate. However, the highly unusual act of a right-wing government appointing a minister of immigrant origin had the positive effect of highlighting the question of the place of members of the second generation, especially women, in French politics. The months following June 2002 were marked by numerous public debates on how to encourage members of ethnic minorities, especially women, to stand for election,<sup>14</sup> and how such candidates might then alter postcolonial French politics. In practice, however, it is only the French Green Party that has championed young Franco-Arab women and placed them sufficiently high up on the candidate listings in order for them to stand a real chance of being elected at the local, regional or European levels.<sup>15</sup> Despite the debates, there is still only one ethnic minority MP, Christina Taubira, sitting in the French Parliament, and she represents one of France's former colonial terri-

tories, French Guyana. Is this a case of enduring colonial stereotyping, where it is acceptable for a (post) colonial candidate to be elected as long as they represent their own group? As for Tokïa Saïfi, she lost her ministerial post within two years, returning to her seat as an MEP (Member of the European Parliament).<sup>16</sup>

More grassroots political activism is also evident among young Franco-Arab women. While French feminist groups have been extremely vocal in society since the 1970s, the winter of 2002/03 was marked by the creation of the first such group to be dominated by young women of immigrant origin, especially Arab origin. It appeared against the backdrop of increasing debate over the wearing of the hijab by young French Muslims and what the association claimed was an increase in violence towards young women in deprived housing estates. In October of the same year, such violence was brought to the attention of the French media with the death of Sohane, a young woman of Tunisian origin burnt alive by her boyfriend in Vitry-sur-Seine, a southeastern Parisian suburb. The first of these newly formed feminist associations chose the highly controversial name of *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises* — or Neither Prostitutes, Nor Submissive women.<sup>17</sup> This title reflects the way these young women feel about how their own housing estates view them (as prostitutes) or how the Franco-French public views them (as submissive women). This second image is a reflection of colonial stereotypes, which claim that indigenous Arab women are submissive, crushed by the weight of local tradition and by Islam. The need for this group to include and therefore challenge such stereotypes in their title can only suggest that such ideas are still present in contemporary French society. The French right-wing government that came to power in June 2002 has adopted the concept of *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises*. Photographic portraits of its leaders dressed as the Marianne, the female figure that symbolizes the French Republic, were displayed on the facade of the French parliament building for the national holiday, Bastille Day, July 14, 2003. The symbolic importance of this gesture cannot be underestimated, it was a highly courageous and controversial act to depict the French Republic as an Arab or Black woman only a year after the far-right candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, had won an unprecedented number of votes, which allowed him to reach the second round of the French Presidential elections. The association's leader, Fadela Amara, has been appointed to several national commissions<sup>18</sup> and is rumored to be a confidant of Nicolas Sarkozy, who at that time was the likely candidate of the French right in the 2006 Presidential elections.<sup>19</sup> However, such a close working relationship between the association and the government has also been highly problematic. The association has also been accused of demonizing young Arab men who come

from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds,<sup>20</sup> a fact that has been picked up on in the rhetoric of French politicians of both left and right and which has been widely relayed in the national press. Such men have fought back against this image of petty criminals and gang rapists by creating their own association named *Ni Proxo, Ni Macho* — or Neither a Pimp, Nor a Macho. Equally, the then French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin justified the law against the wearing of highly visible religious symbols in French schools, passed in 2004, by the fact that he had the support of Muslim women from *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises*. The association itself remained largely silent on the subject, when it could have exerted its influence in order to provide a female Franco-Arab, French-Muslim viewpoint on the issue. Such a viewpoint was largely ignored by the Stasi commission, established to make recommendations on the role of secularism in French life.

Large-scale demonstrations against the proposed 'headscarf' law took place in several French cities, on December 20, 2003 and on January 17 and February 7, 2004. These demonstrations provoked outrage among the political community and in the French press, both concentrating on the predominantly male leaders of the Islamic groups that had organized these protests and very rarely on the young women who were demonstrating, whom the newspapers claimed were being manipulated by religious extremists. The Parisian newspapers headlined with '*La manif qui fait peur*' or — the demo that provokes fear<sup>21</sup>, which accurately reflected French public opinion. One of the most striking visual images to emerge during these demonstrations was that of a young Franco-Maghrebi woman wearing a hijab in the tricolors of the French flag. She seemed to be proclaiming with pride that she saw no contradictions in her identity as a devout French-Muslim, an opinion of young Franco-Arab Muslim woman that had great difficulty being heard during this period. This law has split women's groups in France. Two leading French feminists, Anne Vigerie and Anne Zelensky, even called — in a newspaper article published in *Le Monde*, — for banning the wearing of the hijab in the streets. They believe that the hijab is a sign of the oppression of women in Islamic societies, which, as it has been illustrated above for the French case, is an idea that originated in colonial propaganda. The divisive nature of this issue was also evi-

dent in the numerous parallel demonstrations organized to mark International Women's Day, which was celebrated on March 6, 2004. The main march through central Paris was led by *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises* under the banner '*Laïcité, Égalité, Mixité*' - or 'Secularism, Equality and Gender Diversity'. There were press reports noting that women wearing the hijab were prevented from participating in this march. A collective composed of a number of feminists groups, in which Franco-Arab women were again well represented, held another demonstration in the city under the slogan '*Une école pour tou-te-s/ Contre les lois d'exclusion*' - or 'Schooling for all, Against the laws of exclusion'. Several of the feminist groups represented in this collective were *Femmes publiques, Femmes plurielles, Les sciences potiches se rebellent, Les Blédardes*, and *Collectif des féministes pour l'égalité*. While large-scale marches to mark International Women's Day are indeed a recent phenomenon in France, this is considered the first time that a single issue has prevented a unified march from taking place, which can only highlight the highly divisive nature of debates over the hijab and French secularism. The final report of the Stasi commission recommended that a law should be passed in order to ban the wearing of highly visible (ostensible) religious symbols in the French state school system. This legislation was passed in March 2004 and went into effect at the beginning of the 2004-2005 academic year.

This article has sought to demonstrate the increasing visibility of French women of Arab origin in both the cultural and political arenas in contemporary France, as well as their important role in creating a truly postcolonial nation. Having been born and educated in France, these women have been able to stake their claim to being full members of French society, in a way in which their parents, downtrodden by colonial stereotyping, low socio-economic status and poor literacy levels, were unable to do. Such women have decided to use their position to champion the hidden history of their mothers and to repair ideological divides created by colonial politics. In the political sphere, the challenging position of being a French-Arab woman reflects the difficulties faced by the French establishment in envisaging the place of immigrant communities in such an arena. Maybe the election of a female president in June 2007 could open up new and interesting opportunities for such women.

## Endnotes

1. These revelations focused on acts of torture and rape committed by French soldiers during the conflict.
2. The Harkis were the Algerian soldiers who fought for the French army during the country's War of Independence.
3. The French settlers were said to have faced a choice between the suitcase and the coffin. The victorious nationalists massacred the Harkis, who were seen to have chosen the wrong side during the war, if the French army did not repatriate them. While most Algerian

economic migrants came to France for financial reasons, some, which belonged to different nationalist groups (such as the MNA), also fled Algeria for political reasons.

4. The association *Harkis et Droit de l'Homme* has a website, [www.harki.net](http://www.harki.net).

5. House, J. & MacMaster, N. (2006). Paris 1961. Algerians, State Terror and Memory. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

6. The full text of this manifesto can be found at [www.harki.net/article.php3?id\\_article=6](http://www.harki.net/article.php3?id_article=6).

7. The French law enacted on February 25, 2005, which sought to dictate how the history of French colonialism should be taught in schools, demonstrated this.

8. Fanon, F. (1972). *Sociologie d'une révolution - L'an V de la Révolution Algérienne*. Paris : Maspéro.

9. Sebbar, L. (2000). *La Seine était rouge*. Paris: Thierry Magrier.

10. Kerviel, S., & Psenny, D. (October 8-9, 2006). Les harkis sortent de l'ombre. *Le Monde*.

11. This phrase of Foucault is taken from *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice* (1977). Ithaca: Cornell University Press quoted in Mary McCullough (2003). No more silencing the past: first generation immigrant women as bricoleuses de mémoire in *Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère and Fatima ou les Algériennes au square* by Leïla Sebbar, *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 6 (2)

12. This addition is my own, as the experiences of the first generation of immigrants cannot disappear from French collective memory, in which they have never existed.

13. See Brauman, R. (2005) (Brauman was President of Médecins Sans Frontières until 1994). *Indigènes et indigents: de la "mission civilisatrice" coloniale à l'action humanitaire*. In Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire (Eds.), *La fracture coloniale - La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial* (pp 165-172). Paris: La Découverte.

14. Bourtel, K. (2003, December). *Grandes manœuvres politiques autour des Franco-Maghrébins*. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, pp. 12,

15. The shock of the Jean-Marie Le Pen's presence in the second round of the French Presidential elections of the same year also caused Franco-Arab communities, like many other groups in society, to question their voting apathy.

16. Tokai Saïfi was in fact first elected as a Green local councilor in Lille. Alma Thiéry-Boumediène, a Green MEP for the North-West in the Ile de France constituency, detailed the position of the French Green Party at a conference on the place of descendants of immigrants in French politics. *Quelle existence politique pour les Français d'origine étrangère ?*, Mouloud Amokrane, Patrick Braouezec, François Rebsamen, Alima Thiéry-Boumediène, Catherine Withol de Wenden, *Le Forum Bastille-Nation - Maison de l'Amérique Latine*, Paris, October 21, 2003.

17. [www.tokia-saifi.com/fr/portrait/default.asp](http://www.tokia-saifi.com/fr/portrait/default.asp).

18. [www.niputesnisoumises.com](http://www.niputesnisoumises.com).

19. *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises*, Une arme à double tranchant. (2005, February 23). *Respect Magazine*.

20. Fadela Amara: l'enfance d'une insoumise. (2006, October 19), *Le Monde*.

21. Guénif-Souilamas, N. & Macé, E. (2005) *Les féministes et le garçon arabe*. Paris: Editions de l'Aube.

22. (2004, January 16). *Le Parisien*.

23. "Laïcardes", puisque féministes (2003, May 30), *Le Monde*.

