ALGERIAN WOMEN A GENERATION AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Alf A. Heggoy*
University of Georgia

In *A Dying Colonialism*, Frantz Fanon announced that a new Algerian woman had come of age. She was a partner who had earned rights equal to men because she had dared to break traditions and risk everything in the war of national liberation.[1] Unfortunately, Algerian men did not then recognize equality of women, nor are they yet ready to grant it.[2] Another keen observer of North Africa, Albert Memmi, effectively described the relationship between Algerians and the French in his book *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.[3] Memmi even generalized his analysis into another book, *Dominated Man*.[4] But he really ended up talking about males dominated by imperialism, and he failed to see that women in the colonial period were doubly subjugated. First, they were second class citizens because they were Algerians in an Algeria controlled by Europeans. Second, they were second class citizens in Algerian and Muslim society because that society rigidly separated the two sexes and gave practically all authority to the males.[5] Women, for example, had practically no choice in selecting their own husbands--a condition that remains the rule today. It is quite clear, therefore, that some older descriptions of the Algerian family and of the role of women in that family, are still correct.

Two novels, Djamila Debeche's *Aziza* (1955),[6] and Mouloud Feraoun's *Le Fils du pauvre* (1954)[7] are the clearest witness to the realities this paper attempts to illuminate. Scholars might scoff at the use of novels to illustrate social conditions, and prefer the findings of Pierre Bourdieu's *The Algerians*[8] or Germaine Tillion's *Le Harem et les Cousins*,[9] to name but two of the best sociological and ethnographic works on Algerians. But Bourdieu and Tillion are merely sympathetic outside observers. Debeche and Feraoun are Algerians writing about their own society in a genre that has been called the ethnographic novel. Debeche is an Algerian woman who gently chides her own society while she tenaciously holds to her own Muslim and Arabic culture. She does this in spite of her own modernity, for she was educated in French schools. In her mind, there ought to be no contradiction of terms in such a life. Feraoun's native language was not Arabic, but Kabyle. He is an Algerian man who sensitively describes the home and the village in which he grew up. He is also a modern man, a French educated

school master. But he has not rejected his traditions; nor did he flee to the city, preferring to work in the rugged rural mountains that Kabyles call home.[10] So here we have an Algerian woman and an Algerian man each representing different sub-groups of Algeria: the female and the male, the Arab and the Berber.[11] What each has to say about women and about the Algerian family is surprisingly similar. The composite picture of the Algerian woman that may be achieved through a careful reading of the two novels is amazingly accurate, even when compared to scholarly conclusions based on the careful field work of European sociologists.

In general terms, an Algerian woman is never free from male tutelage.[12] She is born and remains under the absolute mastery of her father or, if he is absent or dead, of an uncle, an older brother, or another close male relative. She escapes this male authority within her own family only when she comes under the similarly absolute control of her husband. Until she is married, she is often considered a burden, certainly a threat to the honor of the family, because she must be a virgin on her wedding night. This excessive concern with virginity before marriage naturally leads to early marriage for women. But men who are not married--especially if they get to be thirty or more--also represent a threat to the society because all must marry to continue the family line.[13] In a patrilinear society, men and women must marry and must have sons.

In traditional Algerian families, the only real chance a woman had to achieve a meaningful position in her husband's family was to have a son. She was, after all, the stranger who had been brought into the family to help perpetuate the male line. Through a son, however, she might gain influence even in community affairs, the preserve of the male-only *ja'maah*, or council of elders, in which all men had a voice. This influence, however, was predicated on her ability to influence her son. At the very least, the birth of a male child would establish a wife's position within the husband's family. The more sons she had, the stronger her position.[14] With male offsprings, a mother would gain relief from the more onerous duties assigned the younger women in a typical extended family. In time, especially in the agricultural regions, a woman who had given birth to surviving sons might rise to a position of real authority within the family circle. But no woman would rise to political power in the community. She could, no matter what, only get power within the family and in women's society. Being a wife was never enough.

Married, a woman had to wait until she became a mother, the mother of a son, before acquiring any authority in her husband's family.[15]

Some hope for improvements in the position of women within Algerian society sprang out of Algeria's revolutionary experience. Because women participated effectively in the War of National Liberation, some observers thought women would inevitably gain important rights in an independent Algeria.[16] The expected did not happen. The first president of Algeria, Ahmed Ben Bella, made many promises but these did not lead to substantive changes. The second president, H. Boumedienne, preferred to give a job to a man, and thus feed a family, rather than to a woman whom he saw as an individual. Finally, under the third president of independent Algeria, Chadli Ben Djedid, the first real promise of change has been delivered. In the 1984 Family Code,[17] provisions are made that allow women, in certain specific cases, to initiate divorce proceedings. Until this law was passed, only men could initiate divorce proceedings. However, it is still impossible for a Muslim woman legally to marry a non-Muslim.[18]

The small change will not alter the situation of women in any radical manner, but it does provide a start. In the end, only real improvements in Algeria's economy can be expected to provide women with the bargaining chips they need to negotiate a better position for themselves in Algeria's male dominated society. Recent changes in Algeria's economic and social planning clearly indicate that the leadership is aware of necessary change. For the first time, they are concerned about population increases that are much too high to be supported by existing resources. For the first time, the government is concerned about substantive changes in agricultural policies that will clearly put needs ahead of ideological consideration. They no longer care as much about socialistic agriculture, they want results that will make Algeria less dependent on outside sources of agricultural products.[19] Above all, they want more balance between the agricultural and the industrial sectors. These are also changes that should help women achieve a better position for themselves within Algeria's society.

NOTES

*Professor Alf A. Heggoy died shortly after this article was written. It is his last publication and reflects his dedication to his profession, discipline, and the craft of teaching.

[1]Frantz Fanon. *A Dying Colonialism.* Trans. by Haakon Chevalier. New York: Grove Press In., 1967, 107. Radia Toualbi. *Les attitudes et les representations du mariage chez la jeune fille algerienne.* Algiers: Entreprise nationale du livre, 1984, 45-46.

[2]Women's inequality continues to be the reality long after Algeria's independence. See, for example, Mohand Khellil. *L'Exile Kabyle.* Paris: L'Harmattan, 1979, 19. Even Algerians who have become French citizens have problems with the role of women. See Farid Aichoune et al., *La "Beur" generation.* Paris: Editions Sans Frontiere, 1986. 63, 72, 82-86.

[3]Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized.* Trans. by Howard Greenfield. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

[4]Albert Memmi, *Dominated Man.* Trans. by Jane Brooks et al. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

[5]Isaac Yetiv, *Le theme de l'alienation dans le roman maghrebin d'expression francaise: 1952-1956.* Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada: CELEF, 1972, 166-167, 209.

[6]Djamila Debeche. *Aziza.* Algiers: Imprimerie Imbert, 1955.

[7]Mouloud Feraoun. *Le Fils du pauvre.* Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1954.

[8]Pierre Bourdieu. *The Algerians.* Trans. by Alan C. M. Ross. Boston: Beacon Press, 1962.

9Germaine Tillion. *Le Harem et les cousins.* Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966.

[10]Mouloud Feraoun. *Jours de Kabylie.* Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968, 129-136.

[11]On the literary work of Debeche and Feraoun, see Jean DeJeux. *Bibliographie methodique et critique de la litterature algerienne de langue francaise.* Algiers: Societe Nationale d'Editions et de Diffusion, 1979.

[12]Even in many so-called "modern" marriages, women must wear the veil after marriage. See Khellil, *L'Exile*, 19. I have dealt with this issue in more detail in "Cultural Disrespect," *The Muslim World*, 62, 4(Oct. 1972), 323-334 and in "On the Evolution of

Algerian Women," *African Studies Review*, 17, 2 (Sept. 1974), 449-456. Also important is Toualbi, *Les attitudes. . .*, 49-61.

[13]Khellil, *L'Exile*, 13. On the excessive concern with premarital virginity, see Aichoune et al, *La "Beur" generation*, 85.

[14]Mouloud Feraoun was the only living son in his family. He was therefore the object of limitless affection, a boy who could do no wrong.

[15]Mohand Khellil. *La Kabylie ou l'ancetre sacrifie.* Paris: L'Harmattan, 1984, 41.

[16]Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, 35-67.

[17]*Code de la famille.* Algiers: Office des publications Universitaires, 1984. Article 8, p. 9 and articles 53 and 54, p. 27 and 28.

[18]*Code de la famille.* article 31, p. 17.

[19]See, for example. Christian Anderson, *Peasant or Proletarian Wage Labour and Peasant Economy During Industrialization: The Algerian Experience.* Goteborg, Sweden: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1985. Also good is Karen Pfeifer, *Agrarian Reform Under State Capitalism in Algeria.* Boulder, CO and London: Westview Press, 1985.