

Title—The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question

Author—Marnia Lazreg

Year—1994

Categories: Gender, Islam, Colonialism

Place: Algeria

Time: 1720-Mid-20th Century

Argument Synopsis:

Lazreg's book is focused on the experience of Algerian women under French colonialism and during the Algerian War for Independence. She strives to provide a re-examination of the perspectives on feminism and women in the developing world. Lazreg categorizes feminism as a project as opposed to an ideology. She is critical of colonial and Western feminist approaches to the topic as she argues that these approaches flatten out the complexity of Algerian women's lives due to an assumed powerlessness. In particular, she finds that Western feminist approaches tend to make Third-World women speak as embodiments of categories of race, ethnicity, color and nationality.

She reveals that French imperialism in Algeria was more pernicious than British imperialism in Egypt because the French ruled directly and sought to explicitly devalue and undermine the local culture. She argues that this colonial history helps to explain some of the differences between Algerian and Egyptian feminism. She highlights the association of French colonialism with modernity, which imposed new meanings on 'traditional' Algerian behavior that did not conform to European standards. An example of this is the French framing of what the headscarf meant, as it seemed alien and did not fit European cultural standards. The French colonial experience in Algeria was particularly difficult for women, Lazreg posits that French educational policy further lowered the position of Algerian women from a position already inferior to men. In particular, Lazreg highlights three areas of Algerian society that were profoundly changed by the imposition of colonial rule—education, prostitution and gender relations.

Lazreg surveys women's participation in the movement for independence and discovers a structural silencing of women's voices. She looks at two different groups of Algerian reformers, the Young Algerians and the religious scholars (ulama), noting an absence of women in these groups and public forums. Both the Young Algerians and the ulama advocated for women's education, but only to make women better and more effective guardians of male morality, cultural integrity, and authenticity. The topic of women and women's bodies became an item of public debate, due to the actions of both the Algerian reformers and the French interventionists who hoped to 'modernize' Algeria. She argues that the structural silencing of women's voices, especially during the period of independence, can be attributed to the battle over gender representation between the colonial state and the National Liberation Front (FLN). She concludes with a brief summary of the rise of academic feminism and women's studies in Algeria.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Assumption of powerlessness that colonial and Western perspectives ascribe to Algerian women led to an appropriation of Algerian women's moral outrage by others and to a structural silencing of women
- Women, like men, are beings whose autonomy is constrained by culture and circumstances
- The imperial economy made prostitutes out of some Algerian women, as the economic restructuring of society forced them to sell their bodies to support their families