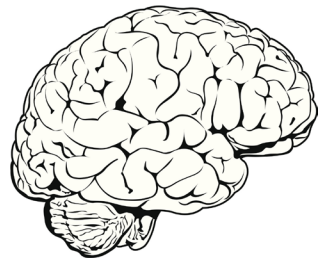


**BOUTELDJA, A
“SISTER” WHO
WISHING YOU
WELL**

LALA MLIHA (2017)

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BOUTELDJA, A “SISTER” WHO WISHING YOU WELL

I wrote most of this text about a year ago, when Houria Bouteldja’s book *Whites, Jews and US. Towards a politics of revolutionary love* came out. I did not want to make it public so I would not contribute to the media plan of the author: the more she’s being discussed, the more she exists in the public sphere. The reason why I am now decided to break the silence is the publication of an op-ed by 20 intellectuals in *Le Monde* on June 19th 2017[1] to salute her “*courage to adress the daily struggles of women of color and the decolonial feminist struggles*” as well as “*her unwavering determination to refuse the essentialization of indigenous men*”. Which is precisely the contrary that Bouteldja does in her book, more specifically in the chapter “*We, the Indigenous women*”. A brilliant feminist critique has already been provided by Mélusine[2]. This text has been widely publicized and approved in the social media. Why are the critics formulated by women of color like Melusine being voluntarily erased? By implying that Houria Bouteldja is a feminist, the op-ed is just an insult to all women of color who daily struggle against sexist violence. That is the main reason why I decided to share this critical reading of Bouteldja’s chapter “*We, the indigenous women*”, to show that her project for “her sisters” is sexist and incredibly violent and

[1] “Vers l’émancipation, contre la calomnie. En soutien à Houria Bouteldja et à l’antiracisme politique”, in *Le Monde*, June 19th 2017.

[2] “Bouteldja, ses ‘soeurs’ et nous” was published on the Mediapart website in June 2016. It was published as a brochure by *Tout mais pas l’indifférence*, in French in October 2016 and in English in June 2017. See infokiosques.net/tmpli.

that in her book, “indigenous”[3] men are being essentialized and both their subjectivity and complexity are totally annihilated.

THE GLORIFICATION OF A PATRIARCHAL RITUAL OF PROTECTION OF VIRGINITY

In her introduction to the chapter, “*We, the indigenous women*”, Houria Bouteldja displays the marks left on her thigh by a “patriarchal ritual” to tell us that her body does not belong to her. Her description of *r’bit*[4], a ritual of protection of virginity whose meaning is to “close” women to any sexual intercourse before marriage, is imbued with orientalism. It is actually the adjective “closed” in its two meaning, *marbouta* and *m’sakra* in the Algerian dialect, that is being used to qualify women who have been subjected to it.

R’bit is being practiced in certain rural regions of Algeria on 4 and 5 years old little girls by an older woman from their family, at the mother’s request, before they go to school. The ritual described by Houria Bouteldja, while less and less common is still being practiced in eastern Algeria. It consists of scarifying the little girl’s thigh with a razor blade while asking her to repeat a ritual sentence that symbolizes her “closure”[5]. The scarifications are then dried with khôl or tattoo ink. They are permanent. Later, on her wedding night, the woman is once again subjected to the ritual, her mother by her side, and she pronounces the ritual sentence to get “unknotted”[6]. People in the women’s entourage are aware she is *marbouta* and that is supposed to persuade men not to approach her. The reason why I personally heard about such ritual is thanks to private discussions between women in Algeria.

But, from what I heard during these discussions between mothers, grandmothers and elderly neighbors, I vividly remember the general and uncompromising condemnation of *r’bit*, considered to be a form of non Muslim spell and curse. They mentioned the tragic fate of several women for whom the prohibition of pre-marital sex had evolved into an impossibility to have sexual intercourse, period, including after being married. They cursed the mothers who had inflicted such suffering to their daughters. What I heard in

[3] I want to specify that I only use the term “indigenous” because it is the one used by Bouteldja in her book. I do not agree with such terminology to socially label postcolonial immigrants nor their children.

[4] Closure.

[5] *Ana hitt ou oueld ennass khitt*, translation: I am a wall and the son of people a thread.

[6] *Ana khitt ou oueld ennass hitt*, I am a thread and the son of people a wall.

their words, without a doubt, was the traumatic nature of such ritual in which originated a number of psychological problems related to sexuality, including vaginismus[7].

While old Algerian women, whose existence is very far from the ones of “white feminists”, unequivocally condemn such ritual, Houria Bouteldja embellishes it. Above all, she reinterprets it, so it can fit her general argument and illustrate her refusal to “assume a creed made by and for white feminists”, (read the freedom to control your own body). Supposedly, the scar symbolizes the fact that her body does not belong to her. It belongs to her parents, her grand-parents, her ancestors, her descendants: “it’s a patriarchal ritual that seizes your body, that chains it up to your whole ancestry”. However, *r’bit* is a patriarchal ritual of protection of virginity, not an initiation rite nor an affiliation one, contrary to what Houria Bouteldja asserts. After her marriage, a woman belongs to her husband and she leaves her family. If you follow Houria Bouteldja’s logic, her body should belong to her husband, not her ancestry. She quotes her grand-mother or her mother and it’s crystal clear: “Once you get married, in cha Allah, you’ll say : *Ana khitt ou oueld ennass hitt, (I am a thread and the son of people is a wall). Then, you’ll belong to your husband*”. “*The blood is dry. The scar is indelible. I belong to my family, to my clan, to my race, to my neighborhood, to islam, to Algeria*”. Here is precisely the heart of her project when she shamefully exploits a ritual of protection of virginity: to transform a scar into a “Indigenous of the Republic” stamp. She refuses the freedom to control her own body and calls for a form of alienation to the family and the neighborhood.

AGAINST “MIXED” UNIONS

Houria Bouteldja’s decolonial perspective does not stop there but also deals with unions and weddings. Don’t even think about freely choosing your partner. The only option is to get married to an “indigenous” “*because, well, we are not bodies available to white male consumption*”. In case some of us are still tempted by a “white”, she warns: what will happen when you are dumped? When you suffer from disgrace and precariousness? To convince, she raises the specter of dishonor. Choosing a “white” equates to : “*a spell that cost them a trifle : separation from the family, the stigmatization of their mother, guilty of badly educating them, the shame that spills over onto the whole community, and, as a bonus, a bad reputation*”.

[7] Vaginismus is characterized by painful contractions of the vagina muscles during sexual intercourse.

Edifying! Houria Bouteldja serves us up the same old vision of the North African family in which women are oppressed. The vision that she reproaches social workers in the 1970s, tv shows in the 1980s, the organization *Ni Putes ni Soumises* and France, a country that “declared war to her parents” for developing. She tells us how much the North African family is odious. Go figure !

Keeping quiet about the very common situation of “indigenous” women being left by “indigenous” men is deeply dishonest. Especially as they too can find themselves isolated and in very difficult situations. Allegiance to the community is not a token of unwavering solidarity. She also keeps quiet about the situations in which “sisters” who chose to live with a “white” and who, overtime, overcame family conflicts, thanks to the strength of emotional ties, whose couples last and who themselves started their own families. Let’s not even mention the “little sisters” for who living or not living with a “white” is not even an issue any more etc.

INDIGENOUS GAYS OUT: LOUSY HEROES

Bouteldja’s violent remarks against who did not choose the “community” is not limited to “indigenous” women but also target “indigenous” gays who chose to come out, thus giving white people the opportunity to rave about these “lousy heroes”. To Houria Bouteldja, “indigenous” gays must be discreet and do whatever is in their power to hide their lives. Aspiring to live as an homosexual, freely and openly can only be an idea suggested by “white” people. As for “indigenous” lesbians, don’t mention them, they’re simply invisible in Bouteldja’s chapter “*We, the indigenous women*”[8].

EMANCIPATION BY SUFFOCATION

In front of the masculine domination and sexist violence, Bouteldja asks us to patiently “suffocate”. “*It’s not by attacking the symptoms of masculine violence against us that we are going to transform our reality. It’s by attacking the structures. In that struggle, our mobilization as non white women will be key. You’ll tell me that’s all very all but meanwhile, we suffocate. Well, yes*”. She then adds: “*true feminism could only be born to the winding and sinuous paths of a paradoxical movement based on an allegiance to the community. At least as long as racism exists*”.

[8] See on this subject the text : *Les gouines of color sont-elles des indigènes comme les autres* ʅ by Malika Amaouche, published in the magazine *Vacarme* n°72, Summer 2015.

When you know – just like Bouteldja does and claims – that racism is structural, we are sure that suffocation is guaranteed for generations of indigenous women. Except that, in France, every three days, a woman is beaten to death by her partner and among these women, there are “sisters” as the issue exists in all social groups. What does Houria Bouteldja want? Does she want her “sisters”, who are struggling to get to the end of domestic violence, to be included in the statistics for domestic violence until the Indigenous of the Republic overthrow the colonial order ?

What am I saying ! According to Bouteldja, the fight against sexist violence lies on divinatory speculations and the transformation of “indigenous” men into “lab rats”: *“in the display of masculinity and testosterone by indigenous males, we’ll have to figure what part constitutes a resistance to white domination in order to channel it, neutralize the violence against us to redirect it towards a project of collective liberation”*. How so exactly? Does Houria Bouteldja intend to use a scalpel and dissect them one by one ?

THE SEXIST AND HOMOPHOBIC “INDIGENOUS” MAN

In *“We, the indigenous women”*, the “indigenous” men presence is pervasive, especially the Arab boy, when Houria Bouteldja draws on her personal trajectory. Once again, he’s crushed and dominated by the generalization of the vision she has of her brother and her father: *“my brother is ashamed of his father. My father is ashamed of his son. Neither of them stands on his feet. I pick up the pieces of there fallen masculinity”*. Just like Fadela Amara and *Ni Putes, Ni Soumises* did years ago, she essentializes him.

It’s surprising how close Fadéla Amara and Houria Bouteldja’s political visions of males in poor neighborhoods are : the “indigenous” man is more sexist and homophobic than average. But when the former conjures up the family, culture, Islam to explain it, the latter talks about a consuming and emasculating oppression. When the former argues in favor of repression and stigmatization, the latter turns it into flattery to mobilize and recruit more activists. When the former suggests that the Republic and its values are the solution, the latter dreams of a decolonial Revolution lead by the “thugs from the hood” as revolutionary subjects[9], being herself the mastermind of the revolution, of course !

[9] *En finir avec le soralisme. En défense des “lascars de quartiers” comme sujets révolutionnaires*, by Houria Bouteldja, published on the Parti des Indigènes de la République website in July 2017.

MEN EGALITARIANISM AS WHITE PRIVILEGE

The “indigenous” man who seeks more egalitarian relations with women and less domination comes under fire. Naturally sexist, his only will to radically transform itself has to be a white injunction: he puts his “*white mask*” on. Houria Bouteldja deprives him of his free will, his agency, his capacity to be, to think autonomously: “*They’re ugly because they surrender and give up their masculinity just to please white people. Because we are subjected to their violence. Because they capitulate in the face of power. When they lust after white women, they are chivalrous, thoughtful, romantic. Such qualities are nowhere to be found in the intimacy of our social housing and neighborhoods. I’m coming to prefer straightforward big macho men*”.

Romanticism is a “white” prerogative and privilege. Go tell the “indigenous” men who displayed creativity and imagination to charm and love “indigenous” women in the “*intimacy of our social housing*”. What about the beauty of these relationships in Bouteldja’s argument ?

Bouteldja gives us a hint of her most accomplished project in the excerpt in which she mentions the alliance to “*big macho men*”. Her fantasy is to lead this masculine, supposedly sexist, masculinist and homophobic “indigenous mob”.

But what Houria Bouteldja seems to be forgetting is that we, “indigenous women”, we know and stand alongside these “indigenous” men: they’re out brothers, our cousins, our friends, our neighbors and we have a sense of nuance. We’re in a good position to assess the role of sexism in our relation to them but we also know that reality is far more heterogeneous, complex just like any human reality. By denying such complexity, she dehumanizes them. She uses the term “sister” in a vain effort to create a fake sense of sisterhood but it’s not enough to fool us and essentialize, infantilize and despise our “brothers” the way she does. There’s such contradiction in pretending to deconstruct the contemptuous and condescending colonial imaginary while building an equivalent one.

CANNON FODDER : NO WAY !

Houria Bouteldja thinks that her “sisters” are both deprived of the intellectual resources and experience and manipulable enough to concur with her project whose main orientations are worth reminding (shout out to the 20 intellectuals who signed an op-ed in *Le Monde* and more specifically to sociologist and feminist Christine Delphy), to expose how much compromise of intellectual

principles they are willing to put up with in order to defend her:

- To refuse the freedom to control your own body, because that's a "white feminist" watchword, while such refusal actually paves the way to the denial of other rights such as refusing physical violence, the right to get an abortion, or wear an head scarf or a burkini on a beach;
- To favour alienation to the family and the neighborhood;
- To limit the choice of a partner to the "community";
- To sacrifice and accept sexist violence, in the name of collective emancipation even though it goes against our physical and moral integrity.

Houria Bouteldja intends on emancipating us by using as cannon fodder. But is she willing to do the same sacrifices than her "sisters"?

On a facebook post published on April 10th 2017, written in reaction to an op-ed published on the website *Quartiers Libres*[10], Houria Bouteldja asserts: "*As for me, I kind of know who I am: and I do not fit their. I do not smoke weed, I don't live in a poor neighborhood any more and I'm not trying to do so, my parents raised me so I could escape my condition and I have no romantic vision of the poor neighborhood whatsoever.*"

The "Indigenous of the Republic" finally drops the mask. Her body is her own and does not belong to the neighborhood any more, and she demonstrates a great deal of contempt for the poor neighborhoods where a significant number of inhabitants have no choice but to live there. How ironic for someone who keeps formulating claims on behalf of said neighborhoods. Sisters: do what I say, not what I do!

Fortunately, women of color have other options that are both more promising and that fit our realities.

FEMINIST AND ANTIRACIST

In a text entitled "*Bouteldja, her 'sisters' and us*" Mélusine makes a strong suggestion: "*neither blind allegiance to the community nor white knights*". She shows how Bouteldja's decolonial project for her "sisters" is crooked and her demonstration was approved and welcome by a number of women of color on social networks. That's probably the reason why it was simply ignored

[10] *Deux ou trois trucs sur Quartiers Libres*, on Houria Bouteldja's facebook page, and *Ils ont commencé indigènes, ils sont maintenant indigestes, ils finiront indignes*, published on the Quartiers Libres website, March 17th 2017.

by those who signed the op-ed in *Le Monde*. These “white” intellectuals in search of a clear conscience are eager to defend and feel compassion for Houria Bouteldja who reveals in her book how much she was ashamed of her parents and who introduces herself as a victim, bullied by the media – actually a well-oiled media plan to publicize her organization[11], – instead of actually considering the critical thinking of women of color. The op-ed exudes paternalism[12].

To be part of political antiracist struggles without sacrificing nor renouncing to their freedom and fundamental rights has been possible for several generations of activists. There are several examples of women from poor neighborhoods, who are children of immigrants and who took part in important struggles for equality, against racism, against police brutality, against the exclusion of women who wore a headscarf...and who did not make concessions with such principle, who paved their own ways to emancipation. Some call themselves feminist, other don't. But they did not wait on neither Fadela nor Houria and their “mentors” (such as those who signed the op-ed). They were always suspicious of such moralizers who exploit their conditions in order to get self-promoted or some media attention.

From the theater company *la Kahina*, to the women organizations in poor neighborhoods, as well as the numerous young women of color that are very active online, they create, lead daily struggles, develop mutual aid actions, get involved etc. They have always reinvented feminism so it can fit their lives, their aspirations, their conditions. The paths they choose are so diametrically opposed to a blind allegiance or self-denial. They share a sense of combativeness, solidarity, creativity and are, for some of them, at the intersection of several forms of oppression (race, gender, class and sometimes sexual orientation), which allow them to better unveil their singularity and fight against them. No need for grandiloquent and grotesque watchwords such

[11] On the investment of the media field by the Parti des indigènes de la République, see the article *Nouvelles figures et mutation des luttes de l'immigration*, by Abdellali Hajjat, published in *Histoire politique des immigrations (post)coloniales France 1920-2008*.

[12] It is written in this text: “she expresses with modesty the humiliation she felt in front of her parents who ‘were too poor, too immigrant’, our shame is that this shame is possible”. The vocabulary used to speak about Houria Bouteldja and her book is eloquent, she appears in great suffering: “Houria Bouteldja evokes her own tearings”; “In his important book, complex and torn”...

as “loyalty”, “community allegiance” nor “clannish affiliation”. They know exactly how to display solidarity to the mothers, fathers and brothers subjected to Islamophobia, police violence and all other forms of racist oppression.

July 2017,
Lala Mliha

“Bouteldja’s project for ‘her sisters’ is sexist and incredibly violent and (...) in her book, ‘indigenous’ men are being essentialized and both their subjectivity and complexity are totally annihilated.”

TOUT MAIS PAS L’INDIFFÉRENCE