Women Warriors and the Search for Identity in Post-colonial Algeria: *La Grotte éclatée* by Yamina Mechakra

Pamela Pears

In Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott's introduction to *Gendering War Talk*, they explain the importance of war in the production of gender meaning:

> *A culturally produced activity that is as rigidly defined by sex differentiation and as committed to sexual exclusion as is war points to a crucial site where meanings about gender are being produced, reproduced, and circulated back into society. After biological reproduction, war is perhaps the arena where division of labor along gender lines has been the most obvious, and thus where sexual difference has seemed the most absolute and natural* (ix).

Through a closer look at Algerian women writers and their depiction of women's wartime roles, we see a reinterpretation of prescribed gender roles, and a negotiation of gender boundaries. Because a successful revolution against a dominant colonial power necessarily requires mass participation, it stands to reason that all members of society will be touched by it, and that many previously accepted societal roles will be reconsidered. In Algeria, war provided an arena in which women could transgress boundaries, and were, paradoxically, also further mired in the traditional divisions of a patriarchal society. What do specific fictional war accounts, written by women about women's wartime roles tell us about war's transformative effects on gender roles? Are they altered or reinforced through war? And, how do women confront these roles?

Algeria provides us with a very interesting case to examine, because it was subjected to long periods of French colonial rule and a particularly brutal war for independence. The French invaded Algiers in 1830 – and didn't leave until they were forced out in 1962. The war ultimately altered the way in which post-colonial Algerian women would perceive themselves and would understand their lives.

Both fictional and non-fictional works (written by men and women) often point to the war as a mythologized moment in which sexual equality was not an ideal, but a reality. Women who fought in the 20th century were not, however, the first to be considered heroic warriors in Algeria. As early as the eighth century A.D., the Berber queen known as *La Kahina*, fought against Arab invaders. Marnia Lazreg points out in her study on Algerian women, *The Eloquence of Silence*, that *La Kahina* possesses a much disputed identity which has in fact served the

purposes of many different groups. Her real name is widely contested, as is her religion, and her origins (Lazreg 20-21). Lazreg also mentions several other legendary heroines in precolonial and colonial Algeria, proving that women throughout history have played a role in armed struggles (Lazreg 21).

Although women have participated in wars for centuries in Algeria, it is women in the twentieth century who have captured people's imagination. This is due in part to media influences, but also to women's articulation of these wartime roles. Increased literacy and better access to publishing houses have enabled Algerian women to document their experiences either through fiction or non-fiction.

While the Algerians struggled to free themselves from the colonial grasp of the French, the National Liberation Front (FLN) actively enlisted women to fight alongside the men. Although not always in the same capacity or performing exactly the same duties, history documents that women did participate in the war. One of the most well known depictions of women's participation in the revolution can be found in Gillo Pontecorvo's 1967 screen version of Yacef Saadi's *La Bataille d'Alger*. Spanning the brutal years of 1956 and 1957, the film, commissioned by the Algerian government is based almost entirely upon Saadi's personal experiences. Filmed in black and white on location in Algeria, the movie also stars "actual FLN rebels", all of which gives one the sense of watching a documentary in spite of explicit indications to the contrary (*La Bataille d'Alger*). Controversial and originally banned in France, the film has become a highly regarded source of reference for the Battle of Algiers and is especially relevant to our discussion here of women's roles.

Throughout the film women are portrayed as playing a key role in the urban battle of Algiers. Two different tactics are used and both deal with dress. Firstly, veiled women are permitted a kind of freedom due to the relative anonymity provided by their traditional dress. In the film, they hide weapons destined for the hands of FLN assassins. When security becomes very tight following repeated assaults in the European quarter of the city, it is the Muslim women who pass through barricades much more easily than the men. The French soldiers avoid bodily searching these women because of the highly offensive nature of such a search.

Following a period of violent ambushes of French law enforcement officials, the French police retaliate with a brutal attack on civilians in the Kasbah. Crying out for vengeance, the people protest; subsequently, the FLN promises retribution. An elaborate plan is devised in which three women will play key roles as agents of terrorism. This time, rather than use the Algerian dress as a cover, the women don European clothing, dye their hair, and apply makeup. The FLN is aware that the barriers between the Kasbah and the European quarter are open to Europeans; therefore, they use European prejudice to their advantage. Since the soldiers at the barricades judge mostly on appearance, the women stand a good

chance of passing. Each woman carries a bag containing a bomb to a specific destination in the French quarter of the city. According to the filmic representation, each of the three women we follow through this transformation is successful.

Women like the three in Pontecorvo's movie became known as the "porteuses de valises" [porters] and have obtained a mythical status in discussions of the Algerian war. While sources will definitely corroborate the fact that women did actively wage war in the urban setting of Algiers, and did participate in violent bombing attacks, according to Danièle Djamila Amrane-Minne, their numbers were minimal. In the film *La Bataille d'Alger* only the details of that specific battle are examined; therefore, only a few representative women are depicted. In reality, the female *fidayine*, or urban guerilla fighters, do not represent the majority of the female war effort in Algeria. As a former member of the FLN herself, Amrane-Minne has done personal interviews along with archival research in order to attest to the reality of female participation in the revolution. Depictions like the one seen in *La Bataille d'Alger*, while important, tell only part of the story.

Amrane-Minne is quick to note that women were present in the revolutionary war from the very beginning of the movement for liberation, but their roles were in fact very often confined to those of caretakers, cooks, or recruiters. Lazreg echoes this, stating: "It is clear that women's participation in the war was instrumental to its success. Yet, with a few exceptions, the nature of this participation fit in a 'traditional' pattern of gender roles, where men held positions of responsibility and command, and women executed orders" (124). Women also aided in forming political organizations that would become instrumental in the outcome of the war. Through organizations such as the AFMA (Association des femmes musulmanes d'Algérie) and the UFA (Union des femmes d'Algérie), Algerian women promoted the war effort and gathered support for the work of political parties seeking independence from France. Amrane-Minne posits that the war "… marks the beginning of women making their presence felt" (1999: 62).

However, the level of women's activism remained on the sociocultural level, never attaining the same prominence as that of men. Only 0.5 percent of women participated in political positions within the FLN (Lazreg 125). Winifred Woodhull explains that post-revolutionary Algeria was faced with the task of establishing a modern Socialist nation, which is what the leaders of the FLN had set out to do from the beginning of the revolution. In addition to creating this new entity, they were also attempting to resurrect the indigenous culture that French colonial power had annihilated through 130 years of occupation. According to Woodhull, women, as a group, "…are the victims of this tension [created out of the

confrontation between the modern Socialist state and the resurrection of the indigenous culture], and their present condition might be seen as its symbol" (113). Marnia Lazreg condemns an ill-fated revolutionary rhetoric and lack of concretely formed definitions of women's roles:

> *Herein lies the apparent failure of the F.L.N. to transcend the sacrificial view of women, and replace it with a view that emphasizes control over one's life through action, as befits a woman revolutionary. Instead, women's involvement in the struggle for decolonization was presented as requiring some feminine qualities. Self-transformation through voluntary action for the national good was not brought up as an advantage for women in the movement. Rather, the abstract notion of 'freedom,' equated with entry in the war, was seen as the sum total of a presumed change in women's lives* (130).

In her view, women did not engage in the war out of a desire for social change; rather, they believed in an overriding notion of national freedom. Once independence was gained these women did not have the tools with which to transform their lives; thus, they returned to the same roles they had known prior to the revolution. The FLN and the revolutionary struggle had not actually rendered them capable of "self-transformation" or self-motivated action. Transgressing boundaries imposed by a phallocentric Algerian society and the French colonial ideology became an ongoing post-colonial struggle. Nevertheless, the Revolutionary War forever changed the way Algerian women would see *themselves* and their roles in Algerian society. Regardless of social, political, or cultural transformations within Algeria itself, or the lack thereof, and regardless of the *reality* of women's participation in the war, ensuing generations of Algerian women have been forced to reconcile conflicting societal expectations that came out of the war.

One illustration of this forced reconciliation surfaces in Yamina Mechakra's 1973 novel, *La Grotte éclatée.* Too young to be a member of the war generation herself, Mechakra nonetheless chooses the Algerian War of Independence as the background for her work. First published in 1979, and republished in 1986 it remains an oft-cited text today. We know little about the author herself, only that she was born in Meskiana, Algeria, in 1949 and that she has studied both psychiatry and medicine (Achour 166). Her body of work is limited to this narrative, one novella, entitled "L'éveil du mont" published in 1976 in

El Moudjahid culturel (Caws 169) and a novel published in 1999 in the review, *Algérie Littérature/Action*, entitled *Arris: roman*. For the 1979 publication of *La Grotte éclatée*, Kateb Yacine wrote the preface in which he discusses Mechakra's dedication of the book to her father, who was tortured and killed before her eyes. In the preface, Kateb writes: "Elle est née à la veille de l'insurrection. Quand elle entend parler de guerre, pour la première fois, elle croit à une tempête. En arabe populaire, 'guirra', c'est à la fois un orage et la guerre de libération, un déchaînement de la nature" (7). [She was born on the eve of the insurrection. When she hears talk of war, for the first time, she thinks it is a storm. In popular Arabic, 'guirra', means both a storm and revolutionary war, an unleashing of nature.] *La Grotte éclatée* is a narrative that translates this storm/war in a dismal yet poignant way. Mechakra renders this storm called war tangible for the reader through the words and eyes of a female narrator who suffers through its tumultuous course.

Unlike Pontecorvo's film, Mechakra's novel is set in the "maquis", the primary battleground for most of the war. While decisive battles such as the Battle of Algiers were fought in an urban setting, the majority of Algerians participated in the daily struggle in the countryside, the mountains, and the woods. The narrator of *La Grotte éclatée* is a young Algerian woman who volunteers in the forces of the FLN as a nurse. We follow her story, which spans the years 1955 to 1962.

Although we are tempted to read this as a chronological novel that has the style of a personal diary or *témoignage*, Mechakra makes it difficult to define the genre. Firstly, the text we read is marked by dates; however, the novel reads less as a journal and more as a series of stream of consciousness-like recollections. Sometimes the dates are very specific (4 juin 1962 on page 170); others are merely months and years (septembre 1958 on p.84), or seasons (automne 1960 on p.119). Some passages are not dated at all, and yet others repeat dates that have already been given. On several occasions Mechakra ignores her relatively linear chronology and jumps back in time by a month or forward by a year. Some of the most important events in the narrator's life, such as the birth of her son, do not coincide with specific dates, as one might expect. Rather, it seems that the dating process is somewhat arbitrary.

This lack of a clear temporal structure functions in two different ways. On the one hand, it makes it impossible for the reader to neatly categorize this text as an historical novel. On the other, it makes us question the validity of the dates and their significance. In other words, Mechakra does not recount all of the events in the exact order they happened, nor does she emphasize certain

moments as more or less important than others. Rather than following this straightforward narrative technique, she ventures in and out of linear history and focuses on the way in which different moments impress ideas upon her. At times, the text consists of dialogue, flashbacks, and poetic verse. It is a combination of various literary techniques and even genres, juxtaposed to form one woman's story. Significantly, Mechakra's text represents an obvious foray into fragmentation as a literary technique. She presents us with fragments of dialogue and scenes that symbolize her role as a nurse in the revolutionary army. She deals with literally fragmented bodies, possesses a somewhat fragmentary memory, and loses her son in an accident that will forever fragment her life.

In the opening pages of *La Grotte éclatée* the author writes the following:

> *Langage pétri dans les nattes tressées au feu de l'amour qui flambe depuis des siècles au cœur de mes ancêtres et dans mon cœur vers lequel souvent je tends mon visage gelé et mon regard humide pour pouvoir sourire. Langage pétri dans les tapis, livres ouverts portant l'empreinte multicolore des femmes de mon pays qui, dès l'aube se mettent à écrire le feu de leurs entrailles pour couvrir l'enfant le soir quand le ciel lui volera le soleil; dans les khalkhals d'argent, auréoles glacées aux fines chevilles, dont la musique rassure et réconforte celui qui dort près de l'âtre et déjà aime le pied de sa mère et la terre qu'elle foule* (13).
>
> [Language formed in the braids woven at the fire of love that has been burning for centuries at the heart of my ancestors and in my heart to which I often offer my frozen face and my moist eye to be able to smile. Language formed in carpets, open books carrying the multicolored imprint of women of my country who, at dawn begin to write the fire of their wombs to cover the child in the evening when the sky will steal the sun; in the silver *khalkhals*, chilled rings on their slender ankles, whose music reassures and comforts he who sleeps near the hearth and already loves his mother's foot and the earth that she treads.]

Two readings of this passage are possible. First, if we read the text in a purely ethnographical sense, we find an ode to women's work. This dedication reveres traditional language, which is an expression through activity rather than through linguistic means. *Langage* is repeated at the beginning of the two sentences that

form the entire paragraph. Both times it is a language that is *formed* in something. In the first sentence, the language is formed in the woven mats created out of love. The passionate quality of love is evoked through this language and is emphasized with the vocabulary: *feu* [fire]*, amour* [love]*, flambe* [flames], *cœur* [heart] (twice in the first sentence). The dry warmth and comfort of the fire is placed in opposition to the narrator's cold and wet face. The practice of forming this language is traditional (*ancêtres*) and therefore provides familiar solace. This language is not defined by words printed on a page; rather, it is formed with the toil of hands creating a work of art, as is further elaborated in the second sentence. This traditional language is formed in carpets, which are *livres ouverts* (open books), in which dissimulation does not take place B all the details are laid bare for everyone to see. These carpets are books in the same sense that the text we are about to read is one. Here, we read a specifically textual reference in the terms Mechakra uses: *langage, livres, écrire* [language, books, writing]. Mechakra seems to be setting up an opposition between two different forms of communication. Her own work, this book, is a text, written in French. She therefore juxtaposes French language with Algerian traditions. For the author, language, and precisely, what is written with that language, serves to warm and comfort. …*écrire le feu de leurs entrailles pour couvrir l'enfant le soir quand le ciel lui volera le soleil* […write the fire of their wombs to cover the child in the evening when the sky will steal the sun]. Note that these women do not *translate* the fire of their womb; rather, they *write* it directly to protect and comfort the child. The mother is acting here as the child's teacher and protector. In order to guide the child, she must teach him/her the language of her people. Paradoxically the text we read is in French, but tradition dictates that the language used here should be Arabic. The symbolic passing of the torch is caught up in the indigenous textuality (carpets) in opposition to the French textuality (books). The child speaks neither language yet, and it is the job of the mother to impart one of the two upon him/her.

Finally, Mechakra describes the music of the jewelry worn by women. This music is another form of comforting language that enables the child who sleeps next to the hearth (once again this idea of warmth and fire) to do so peacefully. The paragraph ends with the following phrase: *… et déjà aime le pied de sa mère et la terre qu'elle foule* […and already loves his mother's foot and the earth that she treads]. It is the jewelry on the mother's foot, which will create the music of home, the language of comfort. But the earth that she treads is even more significant, because it is the land of Algeria. This language and all of the ways in which it is formed within this one paragraph laud Algeria and her traditions, especially those carried out by women. Language is a decidedly comforting

element here, which seems to speak in sharp contrast to the powerfully violent account of war we are about to witness.

At the same time, a second, less ethnographically centered reading of Mechakra's opening text can give an interpretation that recalls the post-structuralism of the 1970s. Language is formed out of a braiding of threads that can be read as *codes* or *Voices* in the sense that Roland Barthes indicates in *S/Z*. "… chaque code est l'une des forces qui peuvent s'emparer du texte, l'une des Voix dont est tissé le texte" (28). [Each code is one of the forces that can take possession of the text, one of the Voices from which the text is woven"]. Mechakra, like Barthes, emphasizes the polysemy present in language – these open books carry the *multi-colored* imprint of her country's women. This idea of *multi-coloring* indicates the plurality of language in much the same way that Barthes describes the "writable" text as one that does not have a unique plastic-coated system; rather, it manifests "… la pluralité des entrées, l'ouverture des réseaux, l'infini des langages" (11) [the plurality of the entries, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages].

The carpet that is created in the opening pages of *La Grotte éclatée* serves as a metaphor for the literary project that the author is about to undertake. She plans to create a form of literary language that will combine all of the women's voices heard here, not in order to unify them and create one interpretation of their lives; rather, she wants to use this book to articulate their multiple opinions. She is in a sense acting as the interpreter of the text of the *tapis* [carpet or tapestry] of these women's voices. Thus, she echoes Barthes once again, who states: "Interpréter un texte, ce n'est pas lui donner un sens, c'est au contraire apprécier de quel pluriel il est fait" [To interpret a text is not to give it a meaning, it is on the contrary to appreciate of what plurality it is made](11). The woven layers present a plurality that creates a sharply modern text, complicating Mechakra's play on tradition in yet another manner. More than an anthropological study of women's work, this passage manifests a modern notion of writing within a traditional subject matter or context. In other words, the explicit theme masks an implicit message that completely contradicts it. This analysis seems ever more appropriate upon reading further into Mechakra's novel. Her narration is neither entirely logical, linear, nor univocal. Thus, the opening passage on women's work acts as a harbinger for her modern text.

Mechakra ties together the role of language, women's work, modern textual interpretation, self-reflexivity, and the reality of war. As Karin Holter says: "… *La Grotte éclatée* est en même temps concrètement ancrée dans une tradition culturelle donnée et universelle, en même temps ancienne et très moderne" (196).

[*La Grotte éclatée* is concretely anchored in a given, universal cultural tradition, which is both ancient and very modern]. Throughout *La Grotte éclatée*, Mechakra pays tribute to tradition. As we have seen, she uses an ostensibly 'traditional' motif as the means by which to allow modernity to enter into the picture. Neither her narrative strategy nor her narrator herself falls into the binary trap of tradition against modernity. She deftly weaves the reader's conceptions of these two opposites together, proving that they can and do work together. Mechakra questions these boundaries and what they mean for Algerians and especially Algerian women.

Throughout most of the text, the narrator resides and works in a cave. Although actively participating in the war, she provides an example of the kind of female activism we noted earlier: women remained primarily caretakers throughout the war. Her role as a nurse, and not a soldier, is emphasized in an early scene where she and a group of male soldiers are traveling through the mountains. She is the only woman among the group and is singled out as such. When she is forced to drink a jackal's blood in order to survive, she resists, only to succumb eventually to the men's orders. It is clear that the men hold the positions of power. This is further clarified by her role as a surrogate mother figure for the wounded. She tries to heal the injured soldiers by whatever means she can, although from the very beginning it is clear that her supplies and expertise are lacking. Part of her job also consists in comforting the dying. She performs all of these duties from within the cave, which surfaces here as a symbol of the womb. In addition to carrying out her revolutionary mission from within the cave, she gives birth to her own son while there. It is a place symbolizing maternity, and the maternal role of the narrator. When the cave explodes at the end of the novel, the narrator's son is forever maimed, her comrades in battle are killed, and she is hospitalized elsewhere. She can no longer return to the cave (the womb), and by extension cannot re-appropriate the maternal role. The explosion of the cave has forever altered her life and, symbolically, women's lives to come. No matter how many or in what way women participated in the war, they all will now confront new realities.

Mechakra's project is one of uniting multiple realities for women. The narrator is constantly aware of the predicament into which women in her country have been placed due to the revolution. At various moments within the novel, she expresses a desire to connect everyday lives of Algerian women to the war. Even if these women are not participating in the way she is, she valorizes their thoughts and visions. The following passage presents one such example. In this excerpt

the narrator contradicts officially sanctioned press releases with women's interpretations of current events:

> *Quelle serait, par exemple, l'opinion de ma sœur, pliée en deux par le poid d'une huitième grossesse, ayant mis à l'abri dans son corsage une lettre apportée par le facteur, le matin (ma sœur ne sait pas lire; il la lirait, lui, s'il rentre ce soir sain et sauf), les doigts roulant un couscous arrosé de larmes et l'oreille attentive à des voix algéroises, françaises, tunisoises, cairotes, des voix étrangères qui parlaient de l'Algérie, qui criaient leur colère, citaient des chiffres, disaient tout, absolument tout sauf ce qu'elle voyait, elle, ce qu'elle pensait, elle* (35).
>
> *[What would be, for example, the opinion of my sister, bent in two by the weight of an eighth pregnancy, having tucked away in her bosom a letter brought by the mailman, that morning (my sister doesn't know how to read ; he will read it, him, if he comes home this evening safe and sound), fingers rolling a couscous sprinkled with tears and the ear attentive to the voices from Algiers, from France, from Tunis, from Cairo, foreign voices that spoke of Algeria, that cried out their anger, that listed numbers, said everything, absolutely everything except what she saw, her, what she thought, her].*

More than an indictment of the manner in which information is diffused to the masses, this passage focuses on two important aspects of women's lives in the Algeria of the 50's and early 60's. Firstly, the narrator describes a woman whom she calls her "sister," implying a fraternity between the two and highlighting the rhetoric of the FLN (Brothers and sisters in revolution). This woman carries out a daily routine completely alien to the nurse living in a cave. While the nurse, our protagonist, embodies one gender role that is born out of the Revolution, this other woman's role is equally the product of war. She is responsible for the care of her home, presumably her children, and herself; however, she is completely uneducated and illiterate. In this passage, it appears that illiteracy among women is the norm, and this illiteracy leaves women powerless. This is depicted in the image of the letter the woman holds for her husband/son/brother/father to read to her. Not only is she illiterate, but she is also mute. Her voice is not expressed in spite of a plethora of languages surrounding her. None of it serves to interpret her

thoughts, hopes, and worries. Rather, her opinion remains silently within her. The narrator seems to be reminding the reader of this forgotten woman. *La Grotte éclatée* attempts to acknowledge her voice and identify her, but not to place her in a reified category.

Throughout the novel the narrator makes explicit references to the uselessness of categorized identity. She questions the way we interpret ourselves according to specific barriers. Her status as an orphan places her outside familial constraints of lineage. Until her enlistment in the FLN, the narrator's existence as an orphan and ward of the state is governed by childhood service agencies. Authorities in these various agencies shuffle her around from home to home, leading to various parental figures attempting to construct an identity for her. "Chez les uns on m'appelait Marie ou Judith, chez les autres Fatma" (33). [For some I was Mary or Judith, for others Fatima]. None of these attempts succeed; if anything, all of the competing forces create a subject who defies categorization. Religious divisions, as implied in the naming choices above, are manifestly ignored by the young girl: "Pour moi, le ciel comprenait trois grands mondes où je n'avais pas de frontière: celui de Moïse, celui de Jésus et celui de Sidna Mohammed" (33). [For me the sky included three large worlds where I had no border: that of Moses, that of Jesus, and that of Mohammad]. She sees herself as a person who can easily transgress boundaries created by and for others. "J'étais heureuse de n'appartenir à aucune communauté. Je m'inventais des hommes et un pays aussi libres que moi" (34). [I was happy not to belong to any community. I invented my own people and a country all as free as me]. The narrator expresses two very important concepts relating to identity in these two sentences. One is the idea of not belonging to a *community*, which is normally conceived of upon lines of identity (racial, religious, national, and sexual). The narrator's belief in not belonging to a community serves as a catalyst to her participation in the war for independence. In her childhood wanderings from one community to another, she witnesses the violent cohabitation of Algeria's population.

As Benjamin Stora illustrates in *Algérie: Formation d'une nation*, it is the exclusivity of the *pied-noir* (Europeans who were born and raised in Algeria) community, which is the direct result of French colonizing practices, that leads to an identification among Muslim Algerians. In other words, he sees the formation of the nationalist movement as the product of a "phénomène d'exclusion" [phenomenon of exclusion] (16). One of the most effective methods of colonization used by the French in Algeria was to exclude Algerians by populating their soil with French citizens. By 1962, there were a million Europeans in Algeria (Stora 23),

most of whom had been given land by the French government. This land, was, obviously, taken from the Algerian people. Thus, the end result was a group of land-owning Europeans who saw themselves as belonging to an exclusive community within Algeria. In reference to this phenomenon, Stora explains that the indigenous people are stripped of their possessions, excluded from land ownership, and relegated to an inferior status by a European minority. Politically, thus, power has been re-appropriated to the colonist elite, allowing them to form an identity of "other-ness" in relation to the native Algerians. Mechakra's narrator stands as an example of someone who has internalized these politics of colonization and now is dispossessed of identity. She waits for someone to name her, but this name will mean nothing to her, only to the person who is trying to categorize her, based upon demarcation lines established by and as a result of European colonialism.

Confirming Stora's thoughts on the creation of nationalism and the dispossession of identity, Benedict Anderson examines the concept and delves into its origins in his book *Imagined Communities*. Anderson explores the historical processes that created the belief in belonging to one larger community, the nation. In his introduction, he states that "… all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are *imagined*" (6) [my emphasis]. Consequently, if we place Mechakra's narrator within this context, we begin to understand her predicament more clearly. She describes her identity as it has been conceived through colonialism for her. She has not been the agent in the creation of her identity; rather she has passively been forced to observe borders that have been erected between each given community, creating an ever-deepening bond among those dwelling within certain boundaries. While the narrator believes that she is fortunate not to belong to any one definable community, she also knows that every individual community will try or has already tried to form her according to its own customs. The communities to which she makes explicit reference are those centered on religion. The narrator, through her irreverent attitude toward Judaism, Christianity, and Islam takes a stand against organized religious communities that define themselves in opposition to other religions. Nationalism was born out of this very divisiveness, allowing for people to find a unity where they previously only saw differences. The Nationalists who fought to gain independence from France did not fight for the Algeria of the 1950's or 1960's. They envisioned a future nation in which they all had a stake. This *imagining* allowed for the formation of the FLN.

In order to escape all bonds of community, Mechakra's heroine invents a country for herself. In doing this, she symbolizes Algeria's fight for its own unique

identity; she metaphorically creates the new nation. In *La Grotte éclatée*, the narrator explains that her childhood identity could not be defined through the traditional, bureaucratic means propagated and enforced by colonialism. Existing outside the norms of society she resisted colonial domination, even if this was not her conscious intention as a child. Her current role in the novel, as a militant for the Algerian Nationalist cause, is the logical outcome of her rebellious childhood. Likewise, the ultimate explosion of the cave is the logical outcome of her experience as a woman in the war. Just as the pre-war communities in Algeria have been annihilated, so too have pre-war gender roles. The destruction of established communities leads to the ultimate destruction of established gender roles. War produces a series of new meanings for both community and gender.

As we mentioned earlier, the fragmentary techniques employed by Mechakra serve to metaphorically depict the war and its impact upon both the narrator and her family. The dismembering of fellow soldiers, as portrayed in scenes of amputation, further expands upon this notion of fragmenting the individual. Through these various examples, the author enables us to begin to refute divisions and oppositions inherited from colonialism's desire to categorize individuals in the "Self" vs. "Other" dichotomy. She destroys barriers and shows how the *imagined* communities created by colonialism – communities that thrived upon exclusionary practices – cannot survive the Algerian war for independence. Individual identity is eventually exploded by way of the scenes of amputation, leaving only the *imagined* community of a future Algerian nation. This community binds together those who believe in a nation that does not yet exist, disempowers colonial divisions among classes and races, and devalues the importance of each individual's identity. The main character's struggles against division throughout the text demonstrate how she perceives individual identity. It is not the product of one global, all-encompassing category; she is a much more fragmented individual than society would normally comprehend. However, while she does not neatly fit into the categories created by colonial divisiveness (remember her criticism of the barriers erected among the Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Algeria), she does manage to identify with the Algerian revolution. In it, she does not discover an intact, preconceived notion of who she *is*, rather she confronts the fragmentary nature of existence. The narrator shows the failure of many concepts of identity, because those she has witnessed try to define the individual as a whole, an impossibility for a post-colonial woman in Algeria. She reinforces what Iris Marion Young explains: "The self is a product of social processes, not their origin" (45). The woman about whom we read in *La Grotte éclatée* does not have a unique

origin; rather, she is the product of linguistic, historical, and practical interaction (Young 45).

In Mechakra's narrative, the fundamental element of transformation is war. It brings into conflict accepted notions of gender roles. She depicts a woman who is engaged first-hand in the armed struggle in Algeria (although as we have seen, she functions less as a warrior and more as a caretaker). She does not aim to render an account of the situation that is purely referential; she focuses either explicitly or implicitly on the more important legacy of revolutionary war rhetoric surrounding women. Were they indeed warriors who were liberated thanks to socialism? Has the role of women changed within this society? And, most significantly, *should* it change? Without discussing contemporary Algeria she still brings to the forefront the ambiguous responses to these questions. Transformations caused by the wars do not provide clear-cut answers, but their repercussions are profoundly felt today. While colonialism itself created a divide, its demise led to the further fragmentation and destruction of categories formed by Europeans and adopted by the former colonized peoples. *La Grotte éclatée* shows the complete breakdown and literal destruction of the community, and gender roles.

Works Cited

Achour, Christiane, ed. *Dictionnaire des œuvres algériennes en langue française*. Paris : L'Harmattan, 1990.

Amrane, Djamila. *Les Femmes algériennes dans la guerre*. Paris : Plon, 1991.

Amrane-Minne, Danièle Djamila. *Des Femmes dans la guerre d'Algérie*. Paris : Éditions Karthala, 1994.

---. "Women and Politics in Algeria from the War of Independence to Our Day." *Research in African Literatures*. 30:3 (1999) 62-77.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. Rev. ed. London & NY: Verso, 1991.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970.

La Bataille d'Alger. Dir. Gillo Pontecorvo. Casbah Films-Algiers, 1967.

Caws, Mary Ann et al, eds. *Ecritures de femmes: nouvelles cartographies*. New Haven & London : Yale UP, 1996.

Cooke, Miriam and Angela Woollacott, eds. *Gendering War Talk*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.

Lazreg, Marnia. *The Eloquence of Silence*. NY & London: Routledge, 1994.

Mechakra, Yamina. *La Grotte éclatée*. 2e édition. Alger: Entreprise nationale du livre, 1986.

Stora, Benjamin. *Algérie, Formation d'une nation*. Biarritz : Atlantica, 1998.

Woodhull, Winifred. "Unveiling Algeria." *Genders* no. 10 Spring 1991. 113-131.

Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NY: Princeton UP, 1990.