

Racism and Feminism in Algeria : a Few Response Elements

By Fatima Nabila Moussaoui

In this modest contribution, I tried to answer the questions I was asked based on my reflections and on what I have seen on the ground through the research I have been doing in the past years.

Questions of gender and race are central to the question of migration today. In this world in which people move and in which transnational movement becomes a means of mobility, the questions of otherness and racism are exacerbated and constitute a real obstacle to the acceptance and integration of the Other. Being a woman constitutes a double burden for people who are in transitory or wandering situations, because they are necessarily vulnerable because of their gender. Within the country or outside of it, the question of feminism in Algeria remains relevant, supplementing the issue of racism. In my eyes, the question of racism divides the country and plunges it into a kind of denial of its own children. Here I am referring to the Black Algerian community which is very important and numerous but at the same time marginalized and even concealed, which makes everyday life a constant struggle for visibility!

1) What are your personal trajectories in terms of feminist anti-racist activism?

I am an Algerian researcher with a PhD in Anthropology and I was trained in Political Science and International Relations at the Université d'Oran. I have worked on the question of borders in their informal aspect for a long time, more specifically the border between Algeria and Morocco which has been officially closed since 1994. After this first research project, which I finished in 2006, I started looking into the informal practices in the border zones, more specifically the question of 'suitcase' trade called *trabendo* and of 'clandestine' migration commonly called *harga* in the Maghreb. I defended a dissertation in 2014 which investigated these questions. I am now continuing my research in the optic of obtaining a second PhD in Anthropology which investigates the multiple migrations which are superimposed in Algeria, namely *harraga* and sub-Saharan presence, and aims to understand how the territory is shared between these candidates who have common aspirations but very different trajectories. This research led me to many reflexions but also to situations in which I

was faced with different forms of racism and xenophobia. The question of gender also quickly became important for me given that I saw that I have had more and more female respondents since 2012. This let me see different life stories and notice different phenomena: women's rape which falls silent in Algerian society, the denial of the Other, and the fear of Black people.

Personally, I am not an activist but I try to put words on a reality that the society, as well as the Algerian authorities, refuse to name. Taking in migrants, considering them as people in their entirety with rights and duties, finding solutions to put an end to the violence that migrant women and children are subjected to are questions that are fundamental to me as a researcher. These questions are also important to me as a woman in a society that struggles to consider women as actors of change and in which the importance of skin color remains essential since being Black limits the ambitions of many Algerians and Maghrebi people in their everyday lives.

2) How do the intersections of feminism and anti-black racism play out in the context you are active in? Are feminists more broadly aware of racism and engaged in it or is this generally a blind spot? Is there a wider anti-racist movement and is this gender conscious or generally gender blind?

The arrival of 'foreign' Black people, on top of the oil-centered Algerian economic crisis, revived the anti-racist discourse in the country. Oil deposits are mainly located in the South of the country, in Hassi Messaoud. The local inhabitants of these southern regions (who are now more aware of the situation and have university degrees) often do not benefit from this oil revenue as people from the North take petrochemical industry jobs. The discovery of shale gas in these regions in recent years was the last straw, and, for the first time, we saw people from southern cities protesting and chanting slogans such as "the cow is in the South and the milk is in the North!!"

Algeria is a very diverse country, yet we do not have Black ministers or senior officials! To address this issue and to face the anger of protestors, people from the South of the country were appointed as ministers for the first time in the history of independent Algeria, albeit mostly in the secondary sector such as tourism. We now also see a few Black journalists who regularly cover events and intervene in the national nightly news.

This is indicative of the racism that is latent in society as well as in national leadership.

3) What are the main challenges you are facing? What are the main sources of hope and inspiration?

You have probably heard of the election of Miss Algeria 2019 and the ensuing controversy. Social media saw a wave of racism following the beauty pageant as they considered the winner (translator's note: a Black woman) to not be representative of Algerian women and beauty standards.

In addition to this, there is also a foreign Black presence in Algeria, and migrants are considered to be sexual objects that can be used whenever in total impunity!

It was not until October 2015 with the rape of a woman from Cameroon in Oran by several men and the refusal of hospitals to take care of her and of the police to register her complaint that, for the first time, we saw the creation of a movement that said "no" to racism and violence against migrant women. For the first time, the feminist group FARD (femmes algériennes revendiquant leurs droits or Algerian women revendicating their rights) and the *collectif de solidarité avec les subsaharien(ne)s et réfugié(e)s à Oran* (collective of solidarity with sub-Saharan people and refugees in Oran) worked to publicize this inhumane and shameful incident.

My sources of hopes are young people as we are a country in which they represent more than 70% of the population, and they are becoming educated and open to the rest of the world thanks to emerging technologies and social media, as well as the changes in Algerian society as it is becoming a land of passage despite itself. Because of this, I think that racism will diminish with time. I insist on the word diminish as I do not think that racism can be eradicated from Algerian society given the importance of regionalism and communitarianism in our contemporary society. This is concretely visible in weddings, as the choice of the bride is a family affair. The bride must be from the same family (a cousin), from the same tribe ('*arch*'), from the same city. Marrying a Black Algerian person is controversial for families as they often see it as a failure or a daily struggle for the 'White' Algerian spouse and a path towards emancipation for the 'Black' Algerian spouse.

4) Are there some changes in wider people's consciousness where anti- black racism is concerned? Are people more aware or not? Has the global black lives matter movement made an impact?

The image of Black people in Algeria is often associated with disease, trafficking of all kinds, and famine. Being Black in this country means that you will necessarily be vulnerable and stigmatized, and when this is coupled with the fact that these people are foreigners, then they are even more marginalized. We hear on a daily basis words like *kahlouch*, *nigrou*, *camarade*, *la couleur*, *niguis*, *el khadam*, etc being used to say Black!

More than 70% of Algeria's territory is considered to be Saharan territory in which the inhabitants are people of color and a system of categorization based on skin color and social status exists in Algeria. We have words like *'abid* which means enslaved person and *hartani* which means freed person. In today's society, this word (*hartani*) has become a generic word that is used to refer to both freed and enslaved peoples and that remains relevant in a number of cities in the Algerian South, like Adrar or Timimoun. In addition to these two categories, there are a number of other categories that culminate in the category of *chorfas* which are "people who are often mixed-race and with pure, noble blood." They are descendants of the prophet Mohamed through his daughter Fatima and are affiliated to brotherhoods called *zaouias*. This religious affiliation makes them "out of category mixed-race people" who cannot be stigmatized as they descend from the line of the prophet.

Today, people are more aware of the existence of racism, especially in these southern cities as they are realizing the gap between the developed North and the South which is struggling to emerge. Young university graduates now realize that it is the South that is supporting the country with its oil fields and mineral resources. The country has thus seen protest movements that were asking for local recruitment instead of recruitment from the capital for large oil companies and even for local leadership.

Thus, the increasing presence of sub-Saharan migrants in Algerian confronted Algeria with its reality, with its Africanness. But here too, the emerging anti-racist discourse was justified and rooted in religious arguments. We accept the Other because of our religion and tolerance, but in this discourse, these migrants remain "Black people who came from elsewhere." I made this observation on-site, especially when Syrians arrived in Algeria, as the way they were welcomed and accepted was radically different from the way sub-Saharan people were treated. Between a Malian and a Syrian person, the Syrian will be more accepted, even though

both of them are in majority Muslim. We could explain this with the Arabness and the common history of Algeria and Syria, but field investigations show that Algerian people fear Malians and see them as the source of all of the problems in the country, from fraud to AIDS. More than that, the religious commonality is still debated as they consider Syrians to be more Muslim than Malians!

In order to get clear answers regarding the question of racism, I asked the question: “Could you marry a migrant today?” The answer I got was “sure, why not!,” but respondents’ choice quickly turned to migrants from Syrian communities.

It is true that the anti-racist movement had an impact on the mindset of Algerian society: we have witnessed the creation of solidarity groups with sub-Saharan migrants who are in Algerian territory, of awareness campaigns on social media, and even of artistic creations which aimed to say “stop” to racism. To cite just one example, the band ‘Democratoz’ made a music video for their song ‘*atini yeddek*’ in the summer of 2017 in response to the virulent social media campaign which was launched on the World Refugee Day (June 20th): #لا_للافارقة_في_الجزاير’ No to Africans in Algeria.