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A Book Review of Inside the Battle of Algiers, by Zohra Drif: A Thematic Analysis on Women's Agency

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***Abstract*—**This paper explores Zohra Drif's memoir, *Inside the Battle of Algiers*, which narrates her desires as a student to become a revolutionary activist. She exemplified, in her narrative, the different roles, she and her fellows performed as combatants in the Casbah during the Algerian Revolution 1954-1962. This book review aims to evaluate the concept of women's agency through education and language learning, and its impact on empowering women's desires. Close-reading method and thematic analysis are used to explore the text. The analysis identified themes that refine the meaning of agency which are social and cultural supports, education, and language proficiency. These themes aim to contribute to the representation in *Inside the Battle of Algiers* of a woman guerrilla who engaged herself to perform national acts of resistance.

***Keywords*—**Agency, education, learning, women.

I. Introduction

THIS review is about Zohra Drif's book entitled *Memoir of a Woman Freedom Fighter: Inside the Battle of Algiers*. Zohra is born in 1934 in Tiaret, a city situated in the west part of Algeria. She was a Law student at the University of Algiers. She conducted several revolutionary acts. This book is an autobiography of her life in which she used the first pronoun 'I' to portray her story. She published this book in French in 2013; then, it was translated into English by Andrew Farrand and published in 2017.

This book is worth being published, as it tells a story of two young educated women, Zohra and Samia, who sacrificed their lives for the Algerian cause of independence, and gained the honor to be known as volunteers of death. Zohra demonstrated how their strong faith and their determined wills to free themselves and the people of the country had reinforced their activism. Women's activists were called in Arabic, El Mujahidat, which refers to women as resistance fighters.

In the text, education was presented as an aspect that raised Zohra's and Samia's national consciousness. However, there were other women who had not been fortunate enough to have access to education; however, one aspect they all shared was their notion of patriotism. Events in the text were presented from a sociological understanding in order to exemplify the omnipresent fear of the 'the colonizer', which intensified the sense of patriotism and yearning for unification. Aspect which motivated Zohra to write this book was that she was accused of killing European civilians in the Milk Bar Café. The Milk Bar Café was one of the targets where Zohra planted a bomb during the war of revolution. Now, Zohra is convinced that violence and bombs were the only options that could cease the war, and invite the colonizer to the negotiating table. As a result of nine years of continuous violence shared by two powers, the French military and the National Algerian Army (ALN), the war ended with negotiations and independence was realized.

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II. Content of the Book

This autobiography is a testimony to Zohra's revolutionary experience in depth. She thrived to tackle the Algerian struggle against the French colony from 1954 to 1962. She also showed, through the narrative of the story, how she had developed a sense of activism from an early age. Zohra is known by her devotion to the Algerian revolution and her conduct of operations that attracted the attention of the international community.

The title of her book *Inside the Battle of Algiers* was featured in the movie of The Battle of Algiers (1966) by the Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo. The film was co-produced by Jean Martin and Saadi Yacef, who was a leader of the National Liberation Front (FLN) movement of the Autonomous Zone, Algiers. The FLN was created in 1954, and unified the different political tendencies during the war of liberation with the aim of achieving independence. Although this movie received worldwide recognition, this book represents its events from a feminist point of view. By this, there was a focus on representing the myriad ways of male, female and adolescent participation in the revolution, and how women played equal roles to men in the war of liberation. The book is broken down into nine parts which chronologically fit the purpose of the story. Each part of the book discusses one topic, including Zohra's role in the events which are presented chronologically. She illustrated her narrative with photos of the revolutionaries and with the dialogues she had with some of them.

III. Summary of the Book

A. Part One

In part one, Zohra showed that her family supported her education and allowed her to pursue her university studies. She was fortunate to receive a French education from the age of six, as her father was a judge, desired her to become an

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educated woman. Thus, in class, she found that she was the only Muslim girl surrounded by European and French pupils. She recognized that school was a different place from her cultural and linguistic backgrounds. At school, she developed a national consciousness that Algeria belonged only to Algerians. Therefore, her investment in the revolution was inspired by the events she witnessed at primary school and later in secondary school.

B. Part Two

The second part showed Zohra's internal attitudes towards educational success that she wanted to achieve to be able to identify her culture to the colonizer. She said, "I am not and will never be you; you are not and will never be me" [1, p. 36]. She met her friend Samia Lakhdari; they studied together and attended their university course in Law, and then became prominent ALN fighters.

C. Part Three

In this part, Zohra described the change in the social behaviors and perceptions of the colonized people. During the outbreak of the revolution in the 1st of November 1954, people rebelled against the colonizer. In 1955, violence increased from both the French militants and the ALN group. The colonizer undertook different types of punishments to control the rebellions, who were also known as the Novembristes (referring to those who organized the outbreak of the war of liberation). For instance, people of Constantine city had firmly believed that it was "Better to die fighting, than to die for nothing" [1, p. 56]

Ultimately, Zohra met Boualem Oussedik (an ALN leader during the war of independence) at university. She told him that "…as students, it is our duty to invest ourselves in the national activities such as army…" [1, p. 61]. Boualem carefully listened to her; then replied "which movement would you like to fight with; the National Algerian Movement, the FLN, or the Parti Communiste Algérien". She replied: "if I say FLN, could you put me in touch with them?" After that meeting, Zohra and Samia together began their first mission wearing the Haik, which Zohra defined as "classic veil of Algiers". The Haik covers women from their heads to calves. Both Zohra and Samina wore haik in their mission to appear similar to the women of Belcourt (a city near the capital), so they would not be recognized as foreigners. In this mission, they transmitted solidarity allowances to the FLN's families whose husbands or children were missing, killed or executed. This part summed up how they found a link to join the FLN, and how they began their first missions of carrying packages from one place to another. This was the beginning of Zohra's and Samia's journeys, taking into account the example of the martyr Zabana, who wrote to his mother: "I am not dying for nothing, and thus, I am not really dying at all" [1, p. 93]. Zohra and Samia continued their goals consolidated with different acts.

D. Part Four

This part covered Zohra and Samia as ALN fighters recruited as volunteers for death. They met with prominent figures of the revolution such as Djamila Bouhired, Ali La Point and Yacef Saadi. The role of Le petit Mourad (small Mourad) also appeared as an example of teenagers' participation in acts of resistance such as delivering reports between the El Fida'iyn (urban bombers). Zohra argued that it was time to react against the violence perpetrated against Muslims in the mountains. She insisted on bringing the rural war into urban cities, such as the capital, where the majority of residents were Europeans living under the protection of the French army. Descriptions of how Zohra, Samia and Djamila prepared themselves prior to placing the bombs were particularly expressive and engage the reader to continue reading the story to its end. After the bombing event, these three women gained the status of Mujahidat.

E. Part Five

In this part, Zohra narrated how she hid in private homes of La Casbah, and continued her acts as a courier, along with Hassiba Ben Bouali and Djamila Amrane. In describing their move between these houses, Zohra was amazed by the flavors of the hand-made sweets and food presented to them by the women hosted them. In addition, she described their traditional ways of living, their weekly visit to the Hammam (Turkish bath). She expressed how well they were treated by their hosts, who also overwhelmed them with prayers. This part told of the Mujahidats' persistence to continue their acts challenging the French police.

F. Part Six

This part displayed her conversation with Larbi Ben Mhidi (one of the leaders during the revolution) about the similar roles women had to men in the revolution. She argued that all fighters honored their lives to gain independence, as well as many Algerian families offered their homes to feed, treat and hide revolutionaries such as Bouhired's family. However, the war started to draw back as most of the planted bombs failed to explode. Besides, a number of revolutionaries were arrested and tortured to death. In response, the revolutionaries sought to gain international recognition of the national cause.

G. Part Seven

In this part, Zohra explained the purpose of the Eight-Day Strike which revealed the anguish of the Algerian people. Due to the unity of the people, the United Nations acknowledged the Algerian cause, and the FLN became a legitimate organism.

H. Part Eight

In this part, Zohra recounted the subsequent missions she had with Djamila Bouhired, and how Djamila's arrest had raised a worldwide consciousness about the injustice that the colonized people witnessed. The arrest of Bouhired and the escalated crimes accelerated the activism of Yacef Saadi, Ali La Point, Hassiba and Zohra.

I. Part Nine

This part is the last section of the book. It told about the dissolve of the Autonomous Zone, the arrest of the Algerian

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guerrilla leader Yacef Saadi and Zohra. She expressed her sorrow on the loss of Ali La Point and Hassiba Ben Bouali who were bombed within their place.

IV. Book Analysis

Zohra Drif's book entitled *Memoir of a Woman Freedom Fighter: Inside the Battle of Algiers,* contributed to the contemporary definitions of the concept of agency in postcolonial studies. This analysis on this book discusses three emerging themes to explain women's agency during the Algerian war of liberation. These themes are: social/ cultural aspects, education and language learning which have relatively empowered Zohra's identity, and led her to become a national guerrilla. She demonstrated how education and the literary books she read about the French civilization had helped her to construct her own reflections about power and the possibility of fighting the colonizer. For this, thematic analysis was used along with close reading to find the main key words from the text. This paper reflected on the textual details, and it also focused on passages where the author's voice was explicitly showed through the personal pronoun 'I'. Extracts from the text were used to formulate arguments about the themes. Several references were used to discuss these themes in relevance to other theories.

A. Overview of the Concept of Agency

Human agency is defined as a dynamic process which can cause change into the structure of the social context. Agents as doers of the action communicate their past social habits, they reflect on their choices, and then they take actions to realize them. Agents' desires reinforce them to shape the social practices through imagining a new practice. Although the book accounts a colonial experience, this paper provides an analytical summary of the concept of agency from a postcolonial stand point. It also explains the relationship between individuals' agency and language in achieving their goals from a poststructuralist perspective.

It is essential to consider the relationship between power and desire before explaining how agency emerges as a social action [2]. The relationship between agency and power is postcolonial, as according to Foucault [3], the theory of desire does not give a priority to who is the master, and it does not exclude the other. Foucault's theory of power views that agents have the ability to be productive and transformative [4]. Bignal [2] used Deleuze's interpretation of the 'will to power' as a constructive principle which organizes relations between two forces - the dominant and the dominated. These forces have an unequal power which then constructs one political body [2]. Foucault [3] defines power as a political relation between two forces. However, Said [5] criticized Foucault's analysis of the representation of these two power forces as being inequivalent. He argued that one body had more control over the other; to mean that in a colonial context, it was always the colonizer who had more power than the colonized. This claim constructed a critique on the postcolonial theory, as it raised a controversial stance in sharing the role of the subject's power in discourse. Feminist's interpretations of Foucault's power argued that it lacked a clarification of how an individual's agency is constructed, as the subject can be dominated by this power, and the same subject can also take a position through power [4]. Then, Allen [4] views that the concept of agency is paradoxical. He questions when the subject can be suppressed by power relations, and when the same subject can have the ability to act upon this power. However, others are in favor to render space for agency and the inclusion of the subject in the political discourse [6]. Therefore, agency in postcolonial theories encountered issues. First, it focused on the political power of the colonizer within, which produced a deceitful political practice due to the lack of the value of arguments in the colonial discourse. Second, agency was entangled with the definition of power in colonial and postcolonial theories. Third, it also has not been deeply discussed [6]. The critics of agency in the postcolonial theory had brought a highlight to the poststructuralist theory to trigger new interpretations to the concept of agency in the social theory. Butler [7] argued that discussing human agency can provide an explanation to political agency which is not constrained to cases of subordinations. This claim had expanded the meaning of agency in relation to many other areas such as education and sociology. Poststructuralist theories regard agency as fragmented and discontinuous [8]. According to Davies [8], agency is about 'making choices' and this places the subject to take action.

Contemporary research on agency explained that individual's agency is structured by discourse. Discourse is social and based on individuals' interactions through language. Thus, individuals construct their identities in social contexts when they interact with each other. Nevertheless, the poststructuralist theory regards individuals' identities fragmented and discontinuous [8]. Nevertheless, individuals' desires of changing their statuses in the social institution can lead them to position themselves differently, and this can be applied to a colonial context since language creates individuals' purposes, and not their use of language which enables them to achieve them [9].

According to Fanon [10], colonized people had a national consciousness which embodied their desires to retrieve their national culture that was different from the colonizer's imposed culture. Fanon [10] defines "The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor". The persecution and oppression that natives experienced, had reinforce their imagination of the possible methods to defeat the colonizer. Their imagination was indeed based on action [10]. The poststructuralist's agency is significant to El Mujahidats' actions revealed in Zohra's book.

B. Agency Supported with Social and Cultural Aspects

This theme looked at how the social background supported individuals' directions in life. In an interview in Columbia University published on YouTube [11], Zohra said that mothers taught their children about their identity and that Algeria was occupied by a colonizer. Zohra's claim is linked to the feminist point of view. McLeod [12] explained six categories that identify the role of women in a nationalist

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literature. Three categories are selected from this model to discuss the status of Algerian women during the revolution. The first category is women as transmitters of culture: women are deemed to be the primary source of information to their children and responsible for introducing them to the heritage and traditions of their country. The second category is the role of women as signifiers of national differences. Due to the effects of transmitting the national culture, women gain experiences that enable them to contribute to anti-colonial nationalism, they then become subjects of nationalism. The third category is women as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles. These categories are put to elucidate the roles that women played in the revolution a similar way to men. In the same vein, Zohra illustrated that her family was the primary input from which she knew about her origins. She explained that even though she lived in a patriarchal society within which women played perfectly their domestic roles, her parents were different and they supported her education. Besides, they allowed her to travel to Algiers to pursue her studies in Law at the University of Algiers. She felt responsible for maintaining her parents' trust, and for being a role model for other girls from her village. She expressed that "I was carrying the immense hopes that came along with this combat in service of all our girls" [1, p. 13].

C. Agency Supported with Education

During her primary school years, Zohra discovered that she was surrounded by two different understandings. She said: "At school, I was taught a language which differed from my language, and a history which was not similar to which I was recounted at home" [11]. "I had friends at school for five years, and what awakened me is the remarkable event I had with my friend Roselyne who failed in her exam, while I succeeded" [11]. She explained that she attempted to comfort her friend, however, Roselyne replied: "You understand nothing, my mother will never understand that an indigene received a higher average than her daughter", to which Zohra responded by asking her to inform her mother that "The Arabs were the ones who invented Mathematics" [1, p. 9]. This event made her think that she was perceived differently by the other (the colonizer). This example illustrated how Zohra developed her national consciousness at school. Another example was accounted from other events she had experienced at secondary school. She said: "The deep sense of injustice stirred in me by the teachers who treated me differently simply because I was a 'native' girl, and the ludicrous attacks from my peers, helped me make a rebel earlier than my time" [1, p. 26]. There were several sections in the text that illustrated that Zohra's agency to fight was accumulated due to the events of discrimination she experienced at school. These events had empowered her to invest in her studies in order to pass her baccalaureate exam, and to join university.

D. Agency Supported with Language Proficiency

The relationship between agency and language has a focal point in the poststructuralist theory (as mentioned above). This theme was supported by Zohra's investment in learning the colonizer's language, which was itself a performance of resistance [10]. She expressed that: "As students, it is our duty to invest ourselves in the national activities such as army" [1, p. 61]. Thus, Zohra had a language ability to mimic the French accent in the police checkpoints. As Fanon [12] in Black Skin, White Masks argues, language gives natives a social authority and allows them to demonstrate their master of the colonizer's culture. Zohra said: "We were both women with a European air and allure and perfect mastery of the French language" [1, p. 48]. Language had a significant role in reinforcing the agency of these combatants (Samia, Zohra and Djamila). According to Mazrui [12], "European languages served the ends of colonialism". French was implied through education to assimilate Algerians to become French. However, the mastery of language was used in the Algerian case as a weapon of struggle in the war of liberation [13].

To sum up, these analyses demonstrate that although the society was patriarchal-based, in the army (ALN), however, men and women played similar roles. To illustrate, in an interview in Columbia University published on YouTube [11], Zohra mentioned: "Without women, it was hard to guide, women transmitted arms and fed members of the FLN". Zohra's agency was depicted from the goals she set during her early school years, and which she later developed at university when she eventually became a revolutionary. She presented herself and other comrades as women of determination. In the narrative, the roles that women played were varied, for example, they hid the guerrillas and they treated their wounds. They planted bombs. These roles enabled them to reach equal status with men as they performed similar duties.

V. Critical Evaluation

This book has an informative aim; it accounts how Zohra was raised and how she developed a national consciousness from an early age. This memoir is a relevant source for curriculum designers to raise students' awareness about the perseverance of Algerian women in the revolutionary period. Zohra emphasized on depicting two main roles of women; women who had agency to organize and even to bomb European places, and women who were vulnerable to violence (rape and torture). These two representations of women could be added to enrich knowledge of Third World women's literature.

There is a sense of enthusiasm in reading the events which were chronologically told, and exemplified with a detailed description of time, place and characters. Readers of pages [1, p. 117-129] feel engrossed to follow the successive events drawn as a plot of the narrative. The extensive use of descriptive language put the reader into different positions, such as feeling of pride about the characters' acts, the reader can feel the danger that these characters were put through, and then they feel relief when they come to the end of the plot. There was a focus on the social, as well as the communal sharing between members of the family. There were several sub-plots in the narrative of the whole story. The conversations between characters were very realistic, and this could enable the reader to understand details of the story.

Every prominent name of the FLN was identified in the text with no prior signposting.

There were also few points that would make this book more enjoyable and culturally informative. It is assumed that the author used a significant description of food and meal times that they had in houses of La Casbah. These notable descriptions might distract the reader's focus on the event instead. More photos could be added in the book to illustrate some of the remarkable events. The French copy of the book was 608 pages, longer than the usual length of an autobiography. Some words that were used in Arabic dialect were not translated into English, and also are not explained in the footnote, like barham [1, p. 262].

VI. Conclusion

In Zohra Drif's book entitled *Memoir of a Woman Freedom Fighter: Inside the Battle of Algiers*, the author encompassed her story with other brave fighters: Samia, Djamila, Le Petit Mourad, and Yacef. In many occasions, Zohra justified her bombing of the busy Milk Bar café as a reaction to the massive destruction and murder that occurred in La Casbah on August 9th, followed by another bombing at La Rue Thebes on August 10th, 1955. This book reminds everyone living under subordination and an unpredictable future that they need to reflect upon the conditions they live through and take action. The author's decision to share her personal experience gives a voice to those women who died in the war, and also to those who are unable to write their stories. Vince [14] argued that there is an absence of women in the written works of Algerian history. This book adds knowledge of Algerian women from an educated former combatant's experience.

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