

Gendering Decolonisation

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In the past twenty years or so, something of a revolution has occurred in the writing of British Empire history. Once the exclusive province of economic and of diplomatic and political history, studies which have since been dubbed the ‘new imperialism’ have transformed this field into a vibrant and diverse arena embracing histories of culture, gender, religion, art, sexuality and more.

The impetus for this new envisioning of the meaning of Empire came from a number of disparate sources, but perhaps most profoundly from feminist and from postcolonial theory, both of which sought to destabilise the hierarchies of power at the heart of colonial rule. They did so by pointing, among other things, to the fragilities of power and to the inadequacy of wholly metropolitan analyses of Empire which erased the agency (and indeed the histories) of those who experienced colonisation.

Early studies in this new register tended to focus on the nineteenth century, but have since edged both backwards into the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century and forward into the twentieth century. Yet oddly, while the twentieth century has become one of the more fashionable areas for scholarly study of the British Empire, the critical phenomenon of decolonisation has remained strangely immune, for the most part, to this new attention to resistance and gender. Among feminist historians, the argument that Empire was always and innately a construction reliant on the maintenance of carefully calibrated (albeit ultimately unstable) gender roles is nothing new. A good deal of contemporary writing on the British Empire is indeed premised upon this argument. Yet few who study decolonisation seem inclined to add gender to their analytical toolbox. The decolonisation literature rarely looks to the category of gender either as a case study, or for its explanatory theoretical framework. In this essay, I want to make a case for why historians of decolonisation would benefit from addressing a key contingency that remains stubbornly invisible in the field.

There is a famous segment in Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 landmark film, the *Battle of Algiers*, in which three Algerian women, committed to the nationalist cause, transform themselves into French women who can pass without danger through military checkpoints. Once through the barriers used by the French colonial state to cordon off the local population, they plant bombs in three key locations – a café, an airline terminal and a milk bar– before melting back into the Algerian quarter. More often than not, it is this central episode that people recall when they discuss the film,

and indeed one book about the film is entitled *The Battle of Algiers. Three Women: Three Bombs*.¹

This episode occupies some ten percent of the film (fourteen of its 146 scenes) yet it dominates people's recollections, in part because of its visual richness but also because it draws attention to the phenomenon of the woman freedom fighter. This is not the only moment in the film when the role of women in Algeria's decolonisation struggle is highlighted. Earlier in the film, we see a veiled woman out with her shopping basket, seemingly making her way to the market for the family's daily provisions. But in her basket is a gun and at a pre-assigned place and time, she stops to allow a male gunman to take the gun from her bag, shoot a French policeman and replace the gun before running. The woman proceeds unnoticed along the street.

Pontecorvo's depiction of the Algerian war –one of the key decolonisation struggles of the post-war era– has been widely praised for its gritty realism, enhanced by the use of ordinary Algerians rather than professional actors in many of the central roles. Pontecorvo has also been praised for including women as political agents engaged on dangerous assignments. Certainly, the scenes I have described here are remarkable and even now, few films depict women so conspicuously as political players. Yet these scenes betrays some interesting uses of women in a film widely regarded as highlighting women's activism. When the three women transform themselves from veiled Algerians to pert pretty French women, there is no dialogue; the soundtrack offers only percussion. Such dialogue as ensues after their metamorphosis into Europeans is wholly male-driven. They receive their orders from a male commando as to when and where to place their bombs, and in a series of nail-biting cameos they talk, sometimes flirt, their way past male French guards. Similarly the elderly woman who carries a gun in her basket speaks only briefly; she exchanges no words with her compatriot but merely stands to allow him quick and concealed access to her deadly basket. Crucial as their role is in this increasingly bloody colonial war, the women are virtually silent players. As Ranjana Khanna has noted: 'All forms of women's political consciousness are in fact entirely mute in the film.'²

Shocking and striking as the actions of the women bombers are even for twenty-first century audiences, the women are nonetheless bit players in a male-dominated conflict, carrying out someone else's orders, carefully using their femininity in different ways to conceal their actions. Pamela Pears points out that the militant women in the film are all defined by their dress, either veiled and traditional or overtly European and fashionable.³ For the women whose scenes in this epic are so mesmerising and memorable, clothing and its consequences are all. Men speak and direct; women model, albeit with lethal consequences.

But we are talking here, of course, about a film dramatisation, and we must grant its director a degree of creative licence –although it is worth noting that the script writer, Franco Solinas, was unhappy at the removal of dialogue from the scenes where the

¹ Robert Stam, *The Battle of Algiers. Three Women, Three Bombs*, n.p., Macmillan Films, 1975.

² Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008, p. 132.

³ Pamela A. Pears, *Remnants of Empire in Algeria and Vietnam. Women, Words, and War*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004, p. 59.

women render themselves European.⁴ One might be forgiven for coming away from the *Battle of Algiers* thinking that women were central and important to, and irreplaceable in, the liberation movement, and certainly their ability— veiled, or disguised as French women— to move about urban spaces more easily than men made them useful as *porteuses de valises*, whose job was to smuggle goods, especially weapons, through heavily-guarded checkpoints. Yet we know that the number of such activist women was, in fact, quite small. In reality not only were their numbers small, but the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN) mostly consigned them to roles considered suitable for women. Marnia Lazreg estimates that some 3 200 women can be classified as *moudjahidat* (fighters), some 200 in uniformed roles which included nursing and preparing food and the remainder in civilian arenas fund-raising, purchasing and distributing weapons, running safe houses and, from time to time, depositing bombs.⁵ In *Femmes au Combat*, Djamila Amrane lists provisioning, providing safe houses, acting as guides and contacts and passing and collecting information as tasks commonly undertaken by Algerian women nationalists.⁶ She estimates the number of women fighters at around 2 000, omitting women who acted as nurses or worked in the supply of food and shelter.⁷ Whether we accept Lazreg's larger count or Amrane's more modest one, women were scarce as well as restricted in what they could do, although not necessarily for want of trying. When Djamila Bouhired first tried to join the FLN, its leader rejected her, claiming he 'did not want mice in the movement.'⁸

What are we to make of this? Is it enough to conclude that times were such that the moment of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, and the areas where it was occurring—largely in under-developed areas of Asia and Africa— simply didn't allow for a significant female presence? Should we walk away from this topic and accede to a vision of decolonisation as a masculine space, a world, as Lazreg puts it, 'of warring men'? Or might we productively dig a little deeper, as feminist scholars of a number of anti-colonial national struggles have implored us to do? Pontecorvo's depiction does useful work in two ways: it never lets us forget that women were politically involved in the processes and struggles around decolonisation and, if a little less obviously, it shows how assumptions and beliefs about proper femininity—and indeed masculinity— were always also at work, shaping the lives and contributions of both men and women, colonised and coloniser, alike. In these respects, small numbers or not, there is much to be said for a gendered analysis of decolonisation and for exploring the roles of women in these struggles through that analytical lens.

⁴ R. Khanna, *Algeria Cuts*, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁵ Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 124; P. Pears, *Remnants of Empire*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁶ Djamila Amrane, *Femmes au combat : la guerre d'Algérie (1954-1962)*, Algiers, Éditions Rahma, 1993.

⁷ Djamila Amrane, *Les Femmes algériennes dans la guerre*, Paris, Plon, 1991, p. 218. The term 'fighter', although frequently used to describe activist women in Algeria, is misleading since women were almost never permitted to carry or use weapons, other than when delivering them to men. See Raphaëlle Branche, 'Sexual Violence in the Algerian War,' in Dagmar Herzog (ed.), *Brutality and Desire. War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*, New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 258, n. 11.

⁸ M. Lazreg, *Eloquence of Silence*, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

Moreover, these observations are not specific to the situation in Algeria; we will find such gendered traces wherever decolonisation struggles erupted.

The partition in the summer of 1947 of what had been British India into two separate nations –a predominantly Muslim Pakistan to the north and east, and a predominantly Hindu India– presaged tremendous outbreaks of sectarian violence. Novels and films as well as scholarly texts have explored and described the killings and the destruction that erupted, most vividly in the Punjabi borderlands, after independence was declared. In this instance, it was decolonisation from above, as the British beat a speeded-up retreat, which precipitated serious violence on a mass scale. Within a couple of weeks of the announcement of the new borders in August 1947, about 3,1/2 million Hindus and Sikhs had crossed into the new India. Almost 700 refugee trains transported people across the new border in both directions between August and early November, serving about 2 million people. There were foot convoys and a few flights for the privileged. All told some 8 to 10 million people transferred their national allegiance, and in the chaos that was necessarily precipitated between half a million and one million were killed. Convoys –rail and train– were ambushed, those in them massacred. Rioting, arson and looting were widespread across the Punjab, which experienced the worst of this sectarian strife. In the new Pakistan, it was Hindus and Sikhs who suffered and in the new India, it was Muslims. Yasmin Khan sums up Partition as ‘a history of broken bones and broken lives.’⁹

Although reports of rioting and violence appeared in the Western press, its gendered character was seldom mentioned. A search of the London *Times* for the period between 1st September 1947 and 31st December 1949 yielded only one (out of 312) article specifically on violence against women in the Punjab. Robert Trumbull reported in the *New York Times* in September 1947 that ‘among the bodies of the females left behind in the burning villages’ (meaning those not kidnapped), ‘every nameless mutilation can be seen.’¹⁰ His was among the only contemporary reports of what was happening to women. Yet despite this journalistic silence, women were foremost among the victims of this violence. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin offer a grisly catalogue of what women endured: ‘Stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans; amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping...; killing fetuses.’¹¹

Current reckonings put the number of women who were raped or abducted during this period of bitter communal strife somewhere between 75 000 and 100 000. Many did not survive the violence, and unknown numbers were killed by their own families

⁹ Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 133.

¹⁰ Robert Trumbull, ‘Bands Organise Massacres in India,’ *New York Times*, 14 September 1947.

¹¹ Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries. Women in India's Partition*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998, p. 43.

as a fate preferable to abduction by men of another religion.¹² Veena Das tells the story of 13-year-old Manjit whose older brother left her each day when he went to work with a packet of poison and instructions to take it if Muslim mobs should come to the house.¹³ Many women wore poison packets as necklaces, just in case.

'Hindus threw their young daughters into wells, dug trenches and buried them alive. Some were burnt to death, some were made to touch electric wires to prevent the Muslims from touching them... We saw many who had been raped and disfigured, their faces and breasts scarred, and then abandoned. They had tooth-marks all over them. Their families said, 'How can we keep them now? Better that they are dead.'... Their character was now spoilt. One had been raped by ten or more men –her father burnt her, refused to take her back... I saw it all– mothers telling their daughters they were ruined, bemoaning their fate, saying it would have been better if they hadn't been born.'¹⁴

In India and in Pakistan, the problem of female abduction was recognized early on in the violence, and by the end of 1947 the two countries had established an Inter-Dominion Treaty to facilitate the 'rescue', as it was called, of women. The recovery operation lasted nine years, returning about 30 000 women. The women affected had no say in their fate: recovery was forcible and in many cases devastating. When, in 1949, India followed up on the treaty with an Act for the Rescue and Restoration of Abducted Persons, abductees were *arrested* under its terms –which led to the invention of a new legal category officials termed 'protective detention.' The abductee was defined in the Act as a male under 16 or a 'female of whatever age... separated from... family.'¹⁵ In other words women *always* belonged in and were defined by family, while men once they reached the age of 16 were free agents. Women, then, were subject to the political will, and their own agency and preference was immaterial. A woman who had had sexual congress, whether forced or consensual, with men of another religion was often regarded as impure and dishonoured; in many instances natal or marital families did not want such women back, making recovery both a traumatic and a dangerous experience. Moreover, there was no provision for follow-up with women who did return; what happened to them in the long term is not part of the official record. Nehru and Gandhi both appealed to Indians to embrace

¹² Y. Khan, *Great Partition, op. cit.*, p. 131 and p. 133; Sukeshi Kamra, *Bearing Witness: Partition, Independence, End of the Raj*, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002, p. 138-140.

¹³ Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007, p. 73.

¹⁴ R. Menon and K. Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries, op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁵ Urvashi Butalia, 'Legacies of Departure: Decolonization, Nation-making, and Gender,' in Philippa Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 212. Pakistan followed India's legislative lead in this respect: Pippa Virdee, 'Negotiating the Past: Journey through Muslim Women's Experience of Partition and Resettlement in Pakistan,' *Cultural and Social History*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2009, p. 470.

recovered women and help them reintegrate, although to little avail.¹⁶ The sentiment that governed broad public opinion was little different than that which had seen women killed by relatives as an alternative to the 'dishonour' of sexual violation by the enemy. This indignity was compounded in India by post-independence laws which defined women's citizenship through their dependency on men. Women's nationality rested on the domicile of their husbands or fathers, so a woman who, for example, remained in India while her husband relocated to Pakistan had no rights to Indian citizenship. She was legally 'unauthorised' in India.¹⁷ Inevitably rape on such a scale produced what many regarded as 'impure' children. 'Swearing by God,' a short story by the Punjabi writer, Saadat Hasan Manto, is haunted by that question.

'When I used to think about these girls and women who were recovered, my mind only brought before my eyes swollen stomachs. What will happen to these swollen stomachs, I used to think? Who would be the owner of whatever there is in those stomachs? Would it be India or Pakistan? And the care for nine months. Who would pay for it? India or Pakistan? Or whether it will only find an entry in the account books of cruel nature and freak circumstances?'¹⁸

In India, where abortion was otherwise illegal, the state financed abortions for women whose pregnancy resulted from rape or abduction.¹⁹ Krishna Thapar, who worked in one of the women's camps just inside the Indian border from the late 1940s, recalled that families who took back abducted daughters were never informed of such abortions, and only some of the camp staff were in on the secret.²⁰ Where women chose not to abort or were unable to do so, India initially ruled that Hindu women who gave birth in Pakistan would have to leave their babies behind, although Muslim children born in India could stay.²¹

There is substantial evidence that the rape and abduction women experienced at the time of partition was not conducted exclusively across religious lines, but that men of the same religion also brutalised women sexually. But this element of violence was never a matter of political concern: the honour of the nation, of a religion or of its men-folk was not at stake as it was seen to be when 'other' men claimed propriety over women.²² Women, notes Shashi Joshi, are either 'trophy of victory or... blots

¹⁶ R. Menon and K. Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries*, *op. cit.*, p. 99; Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence. Voices from the Partition of India*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 126.

¹⁷ Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 107 and p. 209-214.

¹⁸ Saadat Hassan Manto, *Selected Stories*, Cosmo Publications: New Delhi, 1987, p. 330.

¹⁹ U. Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

²⁰ R. Menon and K. Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries*, *op. cit.*, p. 177-178.

²¹ In her recent article, 'Negotiating the Past,' *op. cit.*, P. Virdee notes the scarcity of work on Pakistani women's experiences.

²² Kavita Daiya, *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008, p. 80.

on collective honor.’²³ They were seen principally as ‘sexual and reproductive beings’ rather than as citizens of the new nation.²⁴

While the events in India and Pakistan unfolded after the moment of formal decolonisation, much of what occurred was the result of long-standing local tensions between different religious groups cynically exploited by the British during the colonial period, and of the ill-conceived way in which partition was hastily put together by the colonial state. Faced with a crumbling powerbase, Britain’s retreat from the sub-continent was hasty and poorly planned, and there can be no doubt that this compounded the suspicions and miseries which fuelled such intense violence. Women— as the bearers of children and the locus of the family —were made horrifyingly vulnerable as a result of the events precipitated by decolonisation and at the very moment of independence.

Let us shift continents once more to 1950s Kenya where Britain was engaged in an increasingly difficult fight against the nationalist Mau Mau, a bitter war of decolonisation dubbed ‘the Emergency’ by the British. Women rounded up under the colonial policy of ‘villagization’ lived in fear of rape and abuse by the guards who kept them under constant surveillance. Villagization —the policy of forcibly moving Kikuyu into emergency villages where they were under constant supervision— affected over a million Kenyans, moved into 800 villages they were forced to build themselves. Violence was a fact of daily life in the villages, and much of it was sexual and gendered in its nature.²⁵

Not all women were confined to these villages. Many were involved in supply work — weaponry, food and intelligence. Some scholars believe that, unless pregnant, women were involved in much the same work as Mau Mau men.²⁶ Elizabeth Gachika, who fought in the rebellion, flatly stated: ‘We were the ones who fought for freedom, not the ones who told you about the cooking.’²⁷ In a memoir of her days in Mau Mau, Wambui Waiyaki dubs intelligence gathering as well as distribution and supply quintessential women’s work in Kenya. Women, she claims, ‘normally look innocent and are able to change with every setting.’²⁸ In her account, however, women not only gathered information, but planned attacks based on that information, much as they

²³ Shashi Joshi, ‘The World of Sa’adat Hasan Manto,’ *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, Vol. 11, 1996, p. 145.

²⁴ V. Das, *Life and Words*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

²⁵ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning. The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya*, New York: Henry Holy and Company, 2005, p. 244.

²⁶ Luise White, ‘Separating the Men from the Boys: Constructions of Gender, Sexuality, and Terrorism in Central Kenya, 1939-1959,’ *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1990, p. 12; Marshall S. Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs: History, Memory, and Politics*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998, p. 42.

²⁷ Cora Ann Presley, *Kikuyu Women, the Mau Mau Rebellion, and Social Change in Kenya*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992, p. 136.

²⁸ Wambu Waiyaki Otieno, *Mau Mau’s Daughter. A Life History*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, p. 42.

did in Algeria. Yet when Waiyaki first left home for Nairobi to become an activist, her mother assumed that she had eloped, 'because in those days that was the only thing that could take a girl away from her home.'²⁹ Traditional attitudes were pervasive and shaped women's participation in politics critically.

These attitudes also shape how historians have represented the conflict in Kenya. When Kathy Santilli began to investigate women's role in the movement in the 1970s, she found they were a 'barely visible presence in the accounts of the Mau Mau revolt.'³⁰ In the 1990s, Cora Ann Presley found the record little changed: 'Women are credited with a minimal importance.'³¹ Tabitha Kanogo estimates that around five per cent of Mau Mau fighters were women, and while this small number may partially explain the invisibility of women, the colonial authorities were highly attuned to women's importance to the rebellion.³²

In 1954, Thomas Askwith, who was in charge of rehabilitation in the Mau Mau detention camps, advised the Colonial Office in London not to ignore the role of Mau Mau women. They were, he said, the 'eyes and ears' of the movement, bringing up their children as Mau Mau and encouraging their sons, husbands and fathers to fight.³³ Askwith underscored the importance of winning the 'confidence and co-operation of the women in the villages,' for he saw them as the key to creating 'enlightened and progressive' families.³⁴ In Algeria, General Massu ordered the French military not to neglect women, because the nationalist movement was actively recruiting them into the fold.³⁵ The French, like Askwith, believed that winning female support for colonialism would shift the balance of power in favour of the colonial state. In both struggles, it was women's traditional familial roles that made them important.

Yet the domestic vision of women did not deter colonial authorities from detaining women activists, often without trial. In Algeria, interned women were housed in Tefeschoun camp. Around 2 200 women fighters were arrested, and many of them were tortured.³⁶ Djamila Amrane details some of the abuse they suffered: they were stripped and slapped, drenched with cold water, deprived of sleep and screamed at, as well as sexually abused.³⁷ Both in Algeria and in Kenya, colonial authorities

²⁹ W. Waiyaki, *Mau Mau's Daughter*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³⁰ Kathy Santilli, 'Kikuyu Women in the Mau Mau Revolt: A Closer Look,' *Ufahamu*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1977-1978, p. 143.

³¹ C.A. Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, *op. cit.*, p. 123 and p. 156.

³² Tabitha Kanogo, 'Kikuyu Women and the Politics of Protest: Mau Mau,' in Sharon Macdonald, Pat Holden and Shirley Ardener (ed.), *Images of Women in Peace and War: Cross-cultural and Historical Perspectives*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Education, 1987, p. 78.

³³ C. Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, p. 222.

³⁴ Tom Askwith, *From Mau Mau to Harambee: Memoirs and Memoranda of Colonial Kenya*, Cambridge: African Studies Centre, 1995, p. 95-96.

³⁵ R. Branche, 'Sexual Violence in the Algerian War,' *op. cit.*, p. 250.

³⁶ Meredith Turshen, 'Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle and the Civil War: From Active Participants to Passive Victims?', *Social Research*, Vol. 69, No. 3, 2002, p. 891.

³⁷ Djamila Amrane, *Des femmes dans la guerre d'Algérie : entretiens*, Paris, Karthala, 1994, p. 190. These tactics follow what Kristin Ross has called 'domesticated torture,' in which household objects were used in rape and torture. Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995, p. 113.

employed sexual violence and torture on women prisoners. Violent genital penetration, genital electric shocks, rape or the threat of rape were all common techniques used against women militants, despite the fact that rape remained technically a crime when committed by soldiers.

In Kenya women activists were initially detained in the first all-female compound at the Athi River Camp. In 1954, most women detainees, especially those regarded as 'hardcore' Mau Mau women³⁸, were transferred to a former maximum security prison, Kamiti, where they endured an unpleasant mix of hard labour and brutality coupled with training in domestic skills and Bible study.³⁹

Violence was not limited to women detainees identified as activists. More than one scholar of the Algerian war has concluded that, 'rape and sexual violence against Muslim women perpetrated by the French military reached appalling levels during the... war.'⁴⁰ In Kenya, British security forces often targeted women related to male Mau Mau fighters. Molly Wairimu and her baby son were awakened early one morning by soldiers breaking down the door. She was beaten and her child killed as part of the British effort to terrorise and subdue the indigenous population. She was told her husband was dead, killed by the British.⁴¹

Alongside overt violence, colonial authorities wielded other gendered tactics. In an attempt to win support from Algerian women, in 1957 the French instituted health clinics and improved educational opportunities for women. A year later, in 1958, Algerian women gained the vote and reforms to marriage and divorce laws gave them greater rights. The thinking behind this strategy was that Algerian women would find western modernisation irresistible, and support the French. This project, which saw itself as 'pacifying' Algerian women, also involved training a small group of young Muslim women to live as Europeans under army supervision. In practice, living as a European meant living unveiled and in Western dress, reminding us once again that in this conflict the question of women's clothing was never far from the surface.⁴² This ideal culminated in May 1958 in an unveiling ceremony in Algiers where a cluster of Algerian women publicly took off their traditional veils at the bidding of the French authorities. This public relations exercise failed miserably; the rebels suggested that the women were prostitutes paid for the occasion or servants fearful for their livelihood and obeying orders from their masters.⁴³ The nature of the nationalist's dismissal is not insignificant, for it invalidated women's activities on specifically sexual grounds.

³⁸ C.A. Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

³⁹ C. Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, *op. cit.*, p. 230-231.

⁴⁰ Ryme Seferdjeli, 'The French Army and Muslim Women during the Algerian War (1954-1962),' *Hawaa: Journal of Women in the Middle East and Islamic World*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2005, p. 69.

⁴¹ C. Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁴² R. Seferdejli, 'The French Army and Muslim Women,' *op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁴³ M. Lazreg, *Eloquence of Silence*, *op. cit.*, p. 134-135.

The goal at Kamiti in Kenya –where some 8 000 women were detained during the revolt⁴⁴– of turning out domesticated Christian women reveals similar ambivalence. In this instance, the authorities viewed Mau Mau women through two seemingly contradictory lenses: as hardened political resisters whose spirit had to be broken through long hours of labour, foul conditions and verbal and physical abuse *and* as the raisers of children who, armed with domestic skills and a Christian outlook, could be integrated into colonial society. Domestic rehabilitation, turning women into upright housewives and mothers, was a major goal at Kamiti.⁴⁵ That these visions of women –as ruthless fighters and as nurturing mother figures– were essentially incompatible with one another seldom mattered.

In Kenya, female activism was also pathologised in gendered ways. British officials, aware of the central role played by women in Mau Mau oath-taking, connected women's support of Mau Mau to what they saw as an innately female superstitiousness.⁴⁶ Askwith labelled Kikuyu women backward and easily swayed, and his reforming zeal was aimed at breaking what he saw as a 'reactionary conservatism' that kept women in thrall to Mau Mau.⁴⁷

Women who were, whether actively or accidentally, drawn into these battles on the side of the resistance tell only part of the story, however. There were also women – albeit not great in number– who aligned themselves with colonial or governmental authorities. In India and Pakistan, it was women social workers along with the police who determined the fate of recovered Hindu and Muslim women; they had the authority to override the desires women themselves expressed. In Algeria, in late 1957, the French colonial State organised *Équipes médico-sociales itinérantes*, each team comprising a doctor and three female assistants, one French and two Algerian, directed by the army's psychological warfare section.⁴⁸ Strict rules governed the women's behaviour: no wearing of trousers, no public fraternisation with army personnel, no smoking in public.⁴⁹ Only a few hundred Algerian women were involved and their numbers always remained small, yet they were considered vital in winning over Algerian women.

In Kenya, the women's camp at Kamiti was run by a white Kenyan women, Katherine Warren-Gash, a presence hated and feared by the detainees who called her Mahuru, the Eagle. Warren-Gash was clearly a prodigiously hard worker and enthusiastic about her job, and she spoke fluent Kikuyu. She showed little mercy, routinely ordering beatings, reduced rations and other punishments she deemed necessary to maintaining control. There is, of course, no reason why women in positions of authority would behave any differently from men in the same positions. Warren-Gash was clearly cut from the same cloth as the soldiers who used violence to intimidate,

⁴⁴ C.A. Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, *op. cit.*, p. 130; David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2005, p. 313.

⁴⁵ Marina Santoru, 'The Colonial Idea of Women and Direct Intervention: The Mau Mau Case,' *African Affairs*, Vol. 95, 1996, p. 262-263. Cf. Catherine Hall on missionary ambitions in Jamaica.

⁴⁶ M. Santoru, 'The Colonial Idea of Women,' *op. cit.*, p. 266 or p. 268 –check.

⁴⁷ Tom Askwith, *From Mau Mau to Harambee*, Cambridge: Cambridge African Monographs, 1995, p. 95; p. 106 and p. 145.

⁴⁸ R. Seferdeji, 'The French Army and Muslim Women,' *op. cit.*, p. 46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

while her boss, Tom Askwith, was widely regarded as sympathetic to Kenyans, if alarmed by Mau Mau activism and dismissive of African women's acumen and intelligence. Askwith voiced considerable concern over the years at the tactics the British were willing to use in the fight against Kenyan nationalism. Neither he nor Warren-Gash fit stereotypes of masculine and feminine behaviour although such stereotypes frequently shaped policy and strategy on both sides of these decolonisation conflicts, as we have seen.

Assia Djebar's 1962 novel, *Children of the New World*, portrays an Algerian woman informer, Touma, who dresses as a Westerner and works with the French police. Touma's horrified brother, Tawfik, denigrates his treacherous sister in an explicitly sexual fashion. To their mother he says: 'At least prostitutes are still patriots; but your daughter!'⁵⁰ The taunt blames the mother for her 'tainted' daughter while exonerating the son who will in time shoot his own sister dead in a form of honour killing. Touma is identified by her brother not as a sister but as someone's daughter, distancing the sibling relationship. Touma's alliance with the French and her mode of dress and behaviour have brought shame on Tawfik, worse than that of having a prostitute as a sister. French propaganda in Algeria aimed at women claimed that the rebels casually prostituted women, in contrast to the civilising effects of French influence.⁵¹ Likewise in Kenya, Presley has noted that one of the enduring stereotypes in the literature on Mau Mau has been of the dangerous, lawless prostitute woman.⁵² The rhetoric deployed on both sides of the decolonisation struggles, concealed a deep and visceral focus on female sexuality.

In a famous essay on Algerian women and the veil, the psychiatrist and writer Frantz Fanon analyses French colonialism through the metaphor of the veil. France, according to Fanon, wanted to unveil Algeria, an act which would threaten the honour of the (male) nation. France, he said, dreamed 'of the total domestication of Algerian society.'⁵³ In other words, French victory constituted the emasculation of Algerian men, the humiliation of their manliness. This theme connects Fanon's analysis directly with a long colonial history in which populations brought under imperial control were regarded as, and sometimes regarded themselves as, weak and impotent. The French and British both distinguished among their colonised subjects, seeing some races as more manly than others. In British India, while Bengali men were often dismissed as feeble and effete, the northerly 'martial races' elicited a grudging respect. Likewise in southern Africa, it was the Zulus –who had shown their mettle against the British– who merited the description of manly. Fanon was tapping into a long-standing set of beliefs which re-emerged powerfully at the moment of rebellion and revolt. Aaronette White persuasively argues that nationalist conflicts allow colonised men to restore 'both imaginary and real status' they had held before

⁵⁰ Assia Djebar, *Children of the New World. A Novel of the Algerian War*, New York: Feminist Press, 2005, p. 171.

⁵¹ R. Seferdeji, 'The French Army and Muslim Women,' *op. cit.*, p. 76-77.

⁵² C.A. Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁵³ Frantz Fanon, 'Algeria Unveiled,' *Monthly Review Press*, 1965, p. 165.

colonial rule.⁵⁴ It was a revival which often necessitated articulating dominion over women.

Some scholars have argued that when women engaged in anti-colonial activity, they did so largely at the bidding of men, that it was a male decision to bring them into the fighting, and it was men who adjudicated what activities they could and could not undertake.⁵⁵ Men's memoirs of their years in Mau Mau, as Kathy Santilli points out, have tended to discuss women more in the context of their effect on men in the forest camps than their actual participation.⁵⁶ In the forest camps, leaders regulated sexual relations between men and women, a concern that again demonstrates the emphasis placed on women's sexuality over their political activism.⁵⁷ Uma Chakravarti has brilliantly demonstrated how anti-colonial Indian nationalism created a national identity for women focused on reproduction and self-sacrifice.⁵⁸ Yet women have long played a significant role in anti-colonial protests, even though their activities have frequently been neglected, misrepresented or misunderstood, in a word, depoliticised.⁵⁹ It would be surprising if women had played no role in decolonisation struggles. Representations of women's minimal role in decolonisation movements tell us far more about the active construction of gender roles by both the colonial state and male-dominated nationalist movements than about what women actually did.

This erasure of female participation and experience continued after independence was achieved. In the case of India and Pakistan, there was clearly a desire to dampen interest in what most people regarded as a shameful episode. It has only been in the last decade or so that the issue of female abduction and recovery in the immediate post-partition years has been explored. Novelists and short story writers have done most of the remembering, and where this episode remained in the public

⁵⁴ Aaronette M. White, 'All the Men are Fighting for Freedom, All the Women are Mourning their Men, but Some of us Carried Guns: A Raced-gendered Analysis of Fanon's Psychological Perspectives on War,' *Signs*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2007, p. 862.

⁵⁵ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon. Conflicts and Feminisms*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997; M. Lazreg, *Eloquence of Silence*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶ K. Santilli, 'Kikuyu Women,' *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Luise White, 'Separating the Men from the Boys,' *op. cit.*; Tabitha Kanogo, 'Kikuyu Women,' *op. cit.*; John Lonsdale, 'Authority, Gender and Violence. The War Within Mau Mau's Fight for Land & Freedom,' in E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale (ed.), *Mau Mau and Nationhood. Arms, Authority & Narration*, Oxford, James Curry and Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2003, p. 46-75; and M. S. Clough, *Mau Mau Memoirs*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi?,' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (ed.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990, esp. p. 56.

⁵⁹ T. Kanogo, 'Kikuyu Women,' *op. cit.*; M. Santoru, 'The Colonial Idea of Women,' *op. cit.*, p. 255; C.A. Presley, *Kikuyu Women*, *op. cit.*, p. 125; Fiona Mackenzie, 'Political Economy of the Environment, Gender, and Resistance under Colonialism: Murang'a District, Kenya, 1910-1950,' *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1991, p. 228.

imagination, it metamorphosed into a tale of self-sacrifice and courage rather than what the novelist Attia Hossein called the fear of 'hate-blinded revengeful men.'⁶⁰

The obliteration of women's presence was more than an act of willful forgetting. In India, in British and French Africa, and elsewhere, newly-independent nation States regarded women's rights as secondary to the task of rebuilding economies and infrastructures, rather than seeing these as mutually constituted necessities. Unfulfilled promises tended to be women's lot in the wake of successful decolonisation, as male-led governments faced the huge task of reconstructing war-torn and often impoverished economies and societies. In Algeria, where a post-war Ministry of Veterans helped former rebels find work as well as offering pensions, women's claims were often denied, underscoring Mrinalini Sinha's observation that 'political rights for men have flowed directly from their eligibility to shed blood for the nation.'⁶¹ Aaronette White claims that women activists have 'been pressured to disappear from history.'⁶² As those writing about the place of women in the Telangana struggle in South India in the 1940s and 1950s have remarked, 'to make distinctions that state that women supplied the stones and men used the slings is to create precisely the distinctions and hierarchies that make women invisible.'⁶³

The continued invisibility of the place, role and experience of women –colonised and coloniser, radical and conservative– in the written histories of decolonisation is a fine example of Partha Chatterjee's poignant notion of betrayal at the heart of decolonisation: 'The story of nationalist emancipation is necessarily a story of betrayal. Because it could confer freedom only by imposing at the same time a whole new set of controls, it could define a cultural identity for the nation only by excluding many from its fold.'⁶⁴ Too often what was excluded was women's rights, or women's actual participation in the fights for independence.

Pontecorvo's depiction of the role of women in the Algerian War, with which I began, may have its problems but it does at least –and in a mainstream medium– acknowledge women's significance and presence in anti-colonial nationalism. If we wish fully to understand the complex history of decolonisation, then we must follow Pontecorvo's example in acknowledging their centrality. Post-colonial gender roles – for men as much for women– were shaped in the crucible of nationalist struggle and no history of decolonisation can be complete without attention to the push and pull of gender, whether among colonists or those who sought to end imperial rule.

⁶⁰ Attia Hossein, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, London: Virago Press, 1988, p. 304. A play first staged in Delhi in 2001, *Aur Kitne Tukde* (How Many More Fragments?), explores the Partition experience of four women.

⁶¹ T.D. Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon*, *op. cit.*, p. 73; Mrinalini Sinha, 'Nations in an Imperial Crucible,' in P. Levine, *Gender and Empire*, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

⁶² L. White, 'All the Men are Fighting for Freedom,' *op. cit.*, p. 876.

⁶³ Ke Lalita *et al.*, *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1989, p. 17.

⁶⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 154.

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Abstract

This essay explores the contributions of women to decolonization struggles from the perspective both of women involved in anti-colonial movements and women who were part of the colonial authority structure. It argues that without a gendered analysis, our understanding of decolonisation remains partial, minimising women's roles and replicating masculinist political structures.

Résumé

Cet article présente les contributions des femmes aux luttes anti-coloniales, qu'il s'agisse des femmes impliquées dans les mouvements de libération ou des femmes prenant part à l'autorité coloniale. Il postule que, sans une analyse genrée, notre compréhension de la décolonisation reste partielle, minimisant le rôle des femmes et renforçant les structures politiques masculines.

Keywords: Decolonisation; Gender; Algeria; India; Kenya.

Mots-clés : Décolonisation ; Genre ; Algérie ; Inde ; Kenya.



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