

## **The North African Educator-Heroine on Film: Yamina Bachir-Chouikh's *Rachida***

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### Abstract:

*This article explores the trope of the educator-heroine in the 2002 Algerian film, Rachida. Yamina Bachir-Chouikh's film employs strategies of resistance to violence and oppression that are common to many works created by contemporary North African women artists. Bachir-Chouikh has turned a trite staple of English language filmmaking into a nuanced portrait of Algeria in the 1990s, making the case that the country's salvation rests in the empowerment of its female citizens and the courageous education of its children.*

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One of the most persistent tropes in American and British popular cinema from the mid-1950s to the present is that of the educator-hero, a category of role-type defined by Farber and Holm in their essay, "A Brotherhood of Heroes." Films such as *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), and *Dangerous Minds* (1995) exalt the selflessness of those who teach the downtrodden. This type of film relies on a formula that places the teacher-protagonist in a thankless job in a low-income area. The key to audience satisfaction is the teacher's brilliant success against apparently impossible odds. When the film has a female protagonist, as in *Staircase* and *Minds*, or if the race of the teacher is different than that of the students, as in the classic 1955 film, *The Blackboard Jungle* or its 1967 British relative, *To Sir With Love*,<sup>1</sup> the possibility of physical harm adds spice to the plot, making the classroom into a moral and literal battleground where the forces of good, embodied by the teacher, battle the evils of the students' social environment. In the history of the performance arts in the West, this particular genre has its origins in the medieval Christian morality tale. Post-Enlightenment, the teacher takes the place of the allegorical virtues, Satan is replaced by a degraded social environment, and the stakes to be won are not the souls, but the minds, of the students.

The unsubtle race and class bigotry built into this genre has not dimmed its popularity. The notion that education can save socially imperiled youths is seductive, particularly to real-life

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<sup>1</sup> It is no accident that Sidney Poitier appears in both *Blackboard Jungle* and *To Sir With Love*. As one of the earliest African American actors to break the color bar in film, he was a handy casting choice for films with a raced formula: a Black box-office draw. That he portrays the rebellious student in the former and the brave teacher in the latter speaks volumes about the interchangeability of the roles in the formula, and the persistent belief in the intractability of American race relations.

educators—indeed, that is why many are in the profession. Teachers would like to believe that they are ‘making a difference,’ that knowledge is a universal good, and that the people they teach will derive both economic success and personal satisfaction from their efforts. Obscured by these profound, but rather hazy, convictions is an even deeper truth: educators wield power. To influence the thoughts of another is to play at being god.

If this formula smacks of the ontological, it also partakes of the libidinal. The erotic charge of the teacher-student exchange has been parsed eloquently by Jane Gallop in her autobiographical essay, “Knot a Love Story.” Locating the transformative, pedagogical moment in the performing body of the female teacher complicates the formula, particularly when a student is male. The erotic located within the classroom exchange, actual or celluloid, is gendered, and calls into play the entire spectrum of gender relations, desire, sex, power, and violence. As Gallop notes,

...I suspect the particular gendering of female teacher and male student makes it possible to see an erotic play of pedagogy that is usually overlaid by oppressively real power relations. Here gender hierarchy crosses pedagogical position: teacher’s power runs counter to male prerogative. The contradiction between two hierarchies destabilizes the positions, makes each position seem, at least in part, playacting. (215)

Gallop’s analysis is useful on a number of counts. First, it illustrates the disordering of gender hierarchies that occurs when women teach men. Second, it calls attention to the performative nature of the teaching, and “pupil-ing,” acts. Finally, in an extended argument, it maintains that the erotic is inherent in the pedagogical moment. When this construction proceeds to a non-violent conclusion, as it did in Gallop’s own experience, it can be read through the

feminist lens of *jouissance*—a pleasurable free-fall of juicy intellectual exchanges, made hotter by the risk of violating the boundary that separates good pedagogy from sexual harassment.

What happens, however, when the atmosphere of risk includes the very real possibility that the exchange will end in the rape, imprisonment, torture, and/or murder of the teacher or, for that matter, the student? This is the question we must confront when the trope of the celluloid educator-hero is both gendered and grafted onto a context of national conflict. This essay explores the application of the formula in *Rachida* (2002), an Algerian film that places an educator-hero(ine) inside of the Algerian civil strife of the 1990s.

A useful analysis, one that has heretofore been applied to live performances and plays authored by North African women, is the notion of “strategies of resistance.” This model identifies the following concerns of North African women artists and the characters they create: the changing roles of women in dynamic family and social structures; the interaction of women with local, national, and sometimes international power networks, especially corrupt bureaucracies; cultural dislocation and disruption occasioned by colonization, migration, and exile; sequestration of women and gender inequity in general, particularly in the area of literacy; and the connection between violence against women at the domestic level and violence at the level of the nation-state. The strategies these artists use to address the issues are: direct refusal, often with serious consequences; acting out, or engaging in outrageous behavior that falls outside of the social norms; claiming the right not to have their movements restricted; using the textual device of meta-performance to stage subversions of the patriarchal hierarchy; ridiculing the oppressor; manipulating their own marginal status; cooperating with other female agents; and linking the unique female power of procreation to the project of redemption (Box, *Strategies* 195-196; Box “Outrageous Behavior” 79). It is clear that this analytical model also works for

North African films made by women, but in *Rachida*, directed by Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, it finds an extraordinary level of validation.

*Rachida* is an Algerian film, but it is not entirely without outside influences. Almost all films from francophone North Africa are produced with the cooperation of France or another European country. *Rachida* is no exception, but it is clearly an Algerian product first and foremost. The nuance with which it discusses the politics of being a professional woman in Algiers in the 1990s is entirely home grown, and takes the film far beyond a simple polemic against terrorism that one might expect from a European or American film. It is immediately apparent that the filmmaker is a woman: her work contains examples of almost all of the aforementioned strategies of resistance.

*Rachida*, the eponymous protagonist of the film, is a young teacher who lives in Algiers with her divorced mother. Her students, male and female, appear to be of about middle-school age. She wears makeup, modest Western dress (skirts to the knee, pants, and jackets that cover the upper arms), and does not cover her head. We first see her applying lipstick so that she can be photographed with her students for a class picture. The refusal of a co-worker, a Muslim sister in *hijab* [headscarf], to be photographed with her class for fear of terrorist reprisal hints at the violent tension in their work environment. The woman says, “I don’t want my kids to become orphans for a photo.”<sup>2</sup> The discourse of the veil is thus evoked in the film very quickly. This is a notable departure from the pattern found in North African plays by women, where the discussion of veiling is tangential, if not entirely absent. In *Rachida*, the veiling discourse intersects with an implied class analysis that is situated within the locales the film depicts.

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<sup>2</sup> All citations from the text of *Rachida* refer to the English language subtitles from the Global Lens DVD release.

In this respect, the film resembles its Anglophone counterparts in presenting a bourgeois solution—education—to the malaise of the underclass. It departs from the Western paradigm, however, by displaying the flaws in its own redemptive model. Rachida teaches in a *quartier populaire* [working-class neighborhood] in Algiers (Films, par. 1), but her education, mobility, employment, and comportment mark her as a member of Algeria's Europhile and relatively secularized bourgeoisie. In recent years, the profound cultural gap between these economic groups has been exacerbated by underemployment. Working-class youths who achieve a government-funded university education (Metz, par. 8) are often thrown back into the poverty of the *quartiers* because they cannot find work suited to their training. Obtaining a professional post in Algeria requires family connections, or at the very least the ability to negotiate corrupt governmental bureaucracies (McNaughton, par. 7-12).

When violence strikes, Rachida and her mother have the means to flee to the *bled* [countryside], where she teaches village children. Her urban and rural students, for whom the *quartier* and the *bled*, respectively, represent an economic dead end, have no such respite. The *quartiers populaires* of Algiers, particularly the district known as Bab El-Oued, have been sites of economic unrest and burgeoning religious fundamentalism since the late 1980s. At this writing, riots over housing shortages and the rising cost of living have again broken out in the capital, fueled by the successful ouster of the repressive dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, from neighboring Tunisia by means of massive protest demonstrations ("Fresh Rioting"; par. 1-2, 9, 19).

The connection between the discontent of the *quartiers* and the violence of the 1990s is made in the inciting incident of the film, when Rachida is confronted by a gang of thugs on the street. One of them, a young man named Sofiane, presents her with a brief case containing a

homemade bomb, and insists that she carry the explosive into her school. She refuses, citing her concern for the children. The men shoot her in the stomach at point-blank range. As she lies bleeding on the street, an old woman, wrapped in the traditional white, North African *haïk* [body-veil], holds her hand and prays over her, ignoring the bomb ticking in the brief case beside her. The bomb-squad, well practiced at the craft of urban anti-terrorism, diffuses the bomb, simultaneously restraining Rachida's mother, Aïcha, from going to her daughter's side. The old woman disappears, and we do not see her again.

At the hospital, the film code-switches into French, the language of the Algerian professional class. Aïcha, wrapped in a *haïk* like the mysterious guardian-figure of the elderly woman on the street, is prevented from seeing her daughter again, this time by the doctor and his team. Her *haïk* marks her as an outsider to the official power structure that purports to know what is best for Rachida. Ineffectual, and practically invisible to the professional men around her, she wanders the halls like a frantic ghost. When the doctor tries to send her home, she resists, sitting on the floor of the corridor with her legs splayed out before her like a child. This scene, like the previous one at the site of the shooting, operates at two levels: that of male officialdom, and that of female resistance and cooperation. The repetition of the *haïk* makes it apparent that Aïcha and the mysterious elderly women are linked. Aïcha cannot be with Rachida as she bleeds into the pavement, so another woman steps in to take her place. Men deprive a mother of her power to help her daughter, but she quietly refuses to move out of their way.

Tahar, Rachida's fiancé, arrives with Yasmina, the principal of the school. He snarls that he has warned Rachida not to keep working. Like the bomb-squad and the doctor, he is certain he knows what is best for these women. While it is obvious that he is generally supportive of Rachida and Aïcha, he does not provide them with a solution to the continuing danger they face.

The doctors save Rachida's life, the bomb-squad prevents wide-scale disaster, and the fiancé gives advice that would certainly keep Rachida safe in the short term. However, none of these men propose a way in which the women can conduct their lives with both safety and independence. The women are left to devise their own strategies of survival and resistance. This brief, initial section of the film sets into motion the conflict of the film's action and the strategies of the protagonist, which are, by extension, those of the filmmaker herself.

The erotic and its violent dimensions are immediately evident in *Rachida* and, as Gallop has noted, they originate in the classroom. During the hospital scene, Yasmina reveals that Sofiane is a former student of Rachida. He and his gang stalk Rachida before they approach her, and the camera gives us their point of view—we are led to anticipate a rape, not a bomb. The violation does indeed occur, but it comes in the form of a bullet to the womb. The question of whether or not Rachida is left incapable of bearing children after the attack is never overtly discussed, and remains one of the film's stark ambiguities. As a teacher, Rachida functions as a kind of public performer. This makes her socially and morally suspect in the patriarchal order of traditional Algerian society, where women who dance, sing, or act in public are still read as prostitutes. That she teaches male students on the edge of puberty makes her situation more dangerous still. Placed in the larger context of the Algerian civil strife of the 1990s, Rachida becomes a lightning rod for the misplaced energies and sexual longings of disaffected *hittistes* [young, unemployed men].<sup>3</sup>

The image of the lost child as a metaphor for the failure of redemption is *Rachida*'s leitmotif. After the attack, which she survives, Aïcha moves Rachida to Yasmina's village,

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<sup>3</sup> Literally, young men who hold up walls. *Hittistes* are the unemployed, angry, and idle male members of Algeria's extremely young population.

where they live in seclusion as Rachida attempts to work through her post-traumatic stress. Gradually, she comes out of her private hell, but as she does, she must confront the fact that there are *hittistes*-turned-terrorist in the village, too. As they become aware of her presence and her profession, she is once again transformed into a target. There are moments of relief. A new job at the country school teaching younger children reduces the erotic burden of her profession and its concomitant threat. Some neighbors invite the two women to a wedding. The house Yasmina has loaned them—note that she provides security where Tahar does not—has a lovely courtyard with a fig tree. But the cloud of violent threat posed by the terrorists looms. When Zohra, a young woman whom they have kidnapped, escapes, she returns to the village pregnant with a child conceived of rape. The same violence that has apparently deprived Rachida of her power to bear children has placed an unwanted fetus in the womb of Zohra, who is so damaged by her ordeal that parenting is out of the question. Indeed, the issue of when and where children have a place in this nightmare scenario inserts itself even into the passages of respite. Rachida cannot go to the *hammam*, the public bath, with the wedding party of her neighbors for fear that they will see the scar from her bullet-wound and assume that she has had a cesarean section from an illicit pregnancy. For the unmarried daughter of a divorced woman, even in contemporary Algeria, a good reputation is a difficult thing to maintain.

The film makes it clear that the terrorists it depicts cherish violence for its own sake. In the Algeria of *Rachida*, the mosque is a muted voice, and the terrorists are vicious youths who steal, rape, and murder indiscriminately, citing religion as their excuse. The film suggests several ways in which these youths have become what they are. For example, the primary pastime of the little village boys is identifying and trading ammunition shell casings. In one particularly disturbing moment, a group of boys sits on the roof of a darkened house during a terrorist raid,

gleefully distinguishing each gun by the distinctive sound it makes as it is fired. This expertise, learned through observation of, and close contact with, the terrorizing older youths, stands in contrast to the knowledge they are receiving in Rachida's classroom. We can see easily that these little boys will turn to the guns with which they are obsessed when they become a bit older and discover that the future of their country belongs, not to them, but to the wealthy and corrupt cronies of Algeria's one-party government.

Three sub-plots carry this theme of intergenerational dysfunction wherein traumatized boys become violent men. In the first, a young man pursues a girl who is promised to another man by her father. He is at the age where a cocktail of hormones and despair could push him into an alliance with the terrorists—so close is the resemblance that he could be Sofiane's brother—but he has chosen to chase his impossible dream instead. He is a fixture at the village's public telephone booth, where he feeds coin after coin into the machine in order to speak clandestinely with Hadjar, the object of his desire. Hadjar's father catches him at it, and beats him, but he persists, declaring that each coin is a dream and, "Only nightmares in this country are free." Hadjar's wedding plans move forward and her uninvited suitor, desperate and emboldened, pounds on the gate of her father's house demanding to see her. The father, fearing the terrorists are at the gate, cringes and calls out that he owns nothing of value. When he realizes that the disturbance is only Hadjar's admirer, he chases the unfortunate youth away, posturing and threatening, his honor and machismo restored.

Throughout all of this, Hadjar's own desires remain ambiguous. She receives the telephone calls and appears to enjoy the young man's interest. However, she also basks in the attention lavished upon her as a bride, and seems to derive equal satisfaction from it. Her unauthorized suitor follows her wedding party toward the *hammam*, as the couple exchange

longing glances, but Hadjar says nothing. The terrorists, with mind-numbing predictability, raid the wedding and abduct Hadjar. In the process, they sack the entire village. Because of the previous example of Zohra, the woman made pregnant through abduction and rape, we know Hadjar's fate. She will either be killed or discarded; if the latter, her father will reject her as damaged goods, as Zohra's father has done. After the raid is over, the youth who loved her in vain sits by his shattered telephone booth, flipping coins into the broken and bloodstained glass on the ground.

This subplot contains two scathing critiques: it deplores the character of the authoritarian and hypocritical father who sells his daughter to the highest bidder but is too cowardly to protect her. Hadjar's father is depicted as a blowhard, an ignoramus who fails to match her with the youth who loves her and will take care of her. The filmmaker's real scorn, however, is reserved for Hadjar herself. Having carefully set up the viewer's sympathy for Zohra, establishing that she is blameless for the violence that has been perpetrated on her, the film is thus able to make the point that Hadjar's fault lies not in the fact of her abduction, but in her passivity with regard to her own future life. Hadjar is a foil, not only for Zohra, but for Rachida, the film's conscience.

In the second subplot, we are given a glimpse of the married life of an elderly couple. Mokhtar and his wife of many years sit and drink tea outside of their home. She places a charm against the evil eye around his neck, and he teases her, avowing that she is more jealous of other women than fearful of the *djnoun* [potentially malevolent spirits]. They discuss the fact that their children are abroad, and sadly distant, but therefore safe from the violence. In this way, the theme of lost children is introduced again, but with a difference: one can also lose one's children to exile. The brain-drain from Algeria in the 1990s was tremendous, particularly in the arts, and it could be said that through negligence, venality, and cruelty, Algeria has discarded her best and

brightest offspring. The film follows Mokhtar to the local café, where he sits with friends of his own age. Word that the terrorists are coming reaches the café, and Mokhtar's friends urge him to leave. He refuses. The thugs arrive and demand security money from the owner of the establishment. Mokhtar stands up to them and they threaten him. Shortly thereafter, he is dead, murdered in a home invasion. His wife screams at the neighbors who look on in horror, "Why are you here now? Where were you yesterday when we called for help?"

This subplot contrasts the good father, Mokhtar, against the bad father of Hadjar. Mokhtar allows his children go into exile to protect them, treats his wife with love and respect, and stands up to the thugs. In almost every discussion of Algeria in the 1990s, the famous declaration of Amazigh [Berber] journalist Tahar Djaout is invoked. He said, "If you speak out, they will kill you. If you keep silent, they will kill you. So speak out and die" (Bennoune 190). Djaout was assassinated by the Groupe Islamique Armé [GIA] in 1993. In addition to being the film's "good father," Mokhtar is its tribute to Djaout, and the other Algerians who stayed in the country during the civil strife and lost their lives while speaking truth to power.

The third subplot concerning intergenerational dysfunction among men is the story of Zohra. Zohra's father rejects her and her unborn child, despite the pleading of her sister. In doing so, he acknowledges the damage her abduction has done to his reputation, and that of his entire family; and by casting her aside, he publicly fuels the cycle of cruelty and shame. Zohra's nephew, her sister's son, tries to play the shell casing game with the other boys of the village, and they humiliate him, telling him to go home to his disgraced aunt. A little girl, seeing his distress, brings him the gift of an orange, which he proceeds to pulverize in his fists. In his pain and confusion, we can see the next generation of terror in the making.

Countering the seemingly irresolvable cycles of violence illustrated in the primary and subsidiary plots are *Rachida*'s strategies of resistance. Aïcha and Rachida do not, for example, submit meekly to the restriction terrorism has placed on their mobility. In defiance of all rational concerns for security, they take a *grand taxi* [interurban transport] from the village back to Algiers to pick up gifts and supplies for Hadjar's wedding. They encounter a terrorist roadblock, and rather than turning around and heading back to the village, they encourage the taxi driver to evade it and continue to Algiers. While in the city, Rachida visits Tahar and they go swimming at what is undoubtedly a private beach club. This moment captures the paradoxes of Algeria's situation, illustrating the manipulations that Algerian women (and men) of the 1990s were forced to make, and the risks they had to undergo, in order to navigate the contradictions of their society. It also points to the cultural gaps between urban and rural Algerians. Rachida cannot go to the *hammam* in the village with a group of women for fear of losing her reputation, but she can don a bathing suit and swim with her boyfriend at a beach in Algiers. Of course, the beach could be bombed, and so could the *hammam*. No amount of veiling is enough to make one safe.

Aside from the scenes that take place in Rachida's village classroom, the film's employment of metaperformances is subtle. Rachida uses *rai*<sup>4</sup> music to console herself and dances alone in the courtyard of Yasmina's house. This points to the frequent appearance of the *hadra* ceremony in North African films about violence against women. The *hadra* occurs in Moroccan films by Farida Benlyazid (*Bab Al-Sama Maftuh*, 1989) and Nabil Ayouch (*Mektoub*,

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<sup>4</sup> *Rai*, a syncretic musical form that blends traditional North African modes and rhythms with reggae, rock, hip-hop, rap, R and B, and blues, is associated with youth culture, defiance of traditional mores, and an anti-terrorist stance. It originated on the streets of Oran, Algeria, where one of its primary proponents, the singer Cheb Hasni, was assassinated in 1994.

1997), and in a film by Algerian-born Romani director, Tony Gatlif (*Exils*, 2004). It is a Sufi performance ritual in which entranced women dance privately and with abandon to the rhythms associated with a particular Sufi saint or *djinn* [spirit]. While in the trance, women will dance to the point of collapse, and when they recover, they are healed of ailments and possess *baraka* [religiously-derived power/blessings]. Men also dance the *hadra*, in more public settings, but when women dance, the impetus of the ceremony is erotic, and violent, and must therefore be confined to private gatherings. Rachida's dance is not a *hadra*, but it references the *hadra*'s elements, and immediately brings to mind the *hadra* ceremonies depicted in the other films: Rachida dances with her hair unbound, the dance is private, and it is intended to heal.

Another of Rachida's metaperformances links her with the trope of the *hakawatiyya*, or female storyteller. The most famous of these in Middle Eastern culture is Sheherazade, who has been reinvented as a symbol of ingenuity and cunning for Middle Eastern feminists and female artists. Many of the women in the film display storytelling skills, usually in the strategic mode of ridicule, as when the married women of the village tease Hadjar at her pre-nuptial henna ceremony with tales of disappointing sexual performances by their grooms on previous wedding nights. Rachida herself demonstrates that she is a "sister to Sheherazade"<sup>5</sup> when a one of her students, daughter of a terrorist sympathizer, visits Yasmina's house after overhearing the terrorists plot to destroy the town. The child is something of a dreamer—she stares constantly toward the heavens—so Rachida spins her a tale about a princess in love with a shepherd who lives on the moon. They do not discuss what the girl has overheard. There is no need. In the environment of the village, terror does not come from the unknown, but from the familiar. The

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<sup>5</sup> The English-language title of *Ombre Sultane*, a novel by Algerian novelist, filmmaker, and playwright Assia Djebar.

story Rachida tells has no deep political message for her listener. She is simply creating a moment of beauty that the child may inhabit, however briefly.

The moments of beauty in *Rachida* are infrequent and striking. In one, Rachida fashions a moment of magical realism as she distributes bottles of soap bubbles to her students, transforming the workaday classroom into a wonderland of color. The film's most memorable image, however, is the one in which the women of the bridal party, who are dressed for an outing in diaphanous and brightly colored *haïks*, collectively uncover themselves on a public street in order to conceal Zohra, newly escaped from the terrorists, from the prying and wounding eyes of men. Cooperation of female agents against the ravages of male oppression is the hallmark of creative works by women in North Africa, and this moment, above all others in the film, marks it as the work of a female director.

The ability of liminal characters to defy social convention is another strategy mobilized by North African women artists. In *Rachida*, this ability rests with Zohra. The attack on Zohra has made her *meskina* [pitiable], *mahboula* [mad], and *majnouna* [spirit-possessed]. We see her in the *hammam*, scrubbing her arms with exfoliating mitts until they bleed. Oddly, the cooperation of women agents fails at this moment in the film, because the women of her family do not stop her from harming herself—this is left to Aïcha. Presumably, the women of Hadjar's family are beginning to resent the pall that Zohra's disgrace has cast on them and on Hadjar's wedding. After the village is sacked, at the collective funeral of the victims, Hadjar's madness allows her to break the gender barrier. Traditionally, women do not attend funerals in Algerian society. They visit graves at a separate time, usually on Fridays while the men are at the mosque. Hadjar, wrapped this time in a black *haïk*, moves freely through the cemetery while the men are

chanting *suras* from the Quran. No one has more of a right to be there than she, and no one can stop her. Having become a madwoman, she is finally beyond reproach.

As important as the figures of Hadjar, Zohra, Yasmina, and Aïcha are to the film, it is dominated by the struggle for self-determination and balance undergone by Rachida herself, and fittingly, the preponderance of the film's strategies reside with her and in her classroom. Teaching by women can be read, in the Algerian context of the 1990s, as a form of "outrageous behavior": an act of public performance that defies social convention. Rachida's return to teaching after the shooting is both an outrageous act and an act of outrage. Remarkably, her refusal to be driven into seclusion by the attacks is repeated at the end of the film. During the sacking of the village by the terrorists, she rescues an infant, singing him to sleep—a miniature metaperformance—so that the attackers will not find her hiding place in the bushes. Afterwards, as Aïcha, wounded, packs their belongings in preparation for another move to relative safety, Rachida sits in the courtyard, rocking rhythmically against a wall. It appears that she has finally succumbed to the terror, and has become *mahboula*, like Zohra.

In the end, Bachir-Chouikh's message of hope becomes clear. Algerian teachers are made of stern stuff, and the educator-heroine cannot be suppressed. Ignoring her mother's pleas for caution, Rachida tears herself away from the wall and snatches up her briefcase. Dressed only in a light, sleeveless summer dress—this is the only time we see her arms bared in public except for the swimming scene—she marches through the broken village to her school. As she passes, children emerge to join her and they become a procession through the violated streets. In the classroom, she notes that some students are missing. They are dead, we must presume, or being held at home by frightened parents. Having marked for one last time the space left by the lost children of Algeria, she begins to teach an ordinary class, and the film ends with a shot of her

writing “Today’s lesson...” on the chalk board. Perhaps unable to have children of her own, all of Algeria’s children become hers, and she will continue to teach them so long as she has breath in her body.

The character of Rachida is not only an exemplar of the educator-heroine, but a locus of North African women’s creative strategies of resistance. She, and the women around her, are an argument for, and celebration of, female courage, the education and protection of children, and the empowerment of female agency in Algeria and elsewhere. Bachir-Chouikh’s film, which avoids the formulaic traps of the educator-hero in its Western incarnation through its meticulous attention to detail and nuance, contains the suggestion of a just society, “signaling” to us “through the flames” (Artaud 13) of an Algeria in torment. Doubts remain: will education trump corruption and class resentment in Algeria? Will Algeria reclaim her lost children and care for them, or will Rachida and her sisters lose their struggle? Although Algeria’s civil strife has calmed in the years since the turn of the millennium, the question of Algeria’s future is open.

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