

# UNVEILED YET OBSCURED: ASSIMILATION AND DIFFERENCE IN *THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS*

SPENCER GRAYSON

Three women remove their long white veils to reveal chic, summery outfits that would not be out of place at a French Riviera resort. With almost clinical precision, one applies lipstick while another cuts off her braids. They watch themselves in the mirror, barely blinking, their motions accompanied by an ominous rattle.



Fig. 1. *The Battle of Algiers*, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, 0:41:46.

This scene occurs midway through *The Battle of Algiers*, Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film based on Algerian rebellions against the French colonial government in the late 1950s. The film is famed for its pseudo-documentary cinematography and nuanced portrayal of wartime morality, and it has been used as both a guide for anti-terrorism warfare by the Pentagon and as a training film by the Black Panthers (Rainer). The verisimilitude of *Battle* is emphasized by its close connections to real people and events from the movement for Algerian independence. Saadi Yacef, a leader of the FLN—the Algerian National Liberation Front [*Front de libération nationale*—was a writer and producer of the film and starred in it as well (Rainer). When watching the film, the viewer is aware that he, along with the other actors portraying members of the FLN, are performing a version of their own experiences. Distinctions between reality and performance overlap, and acts of uncovering and exposition can function as further layers of concealment.

*Battle's* scene of three women changing their clothes directly follows a scene in which a group of Algerians, mourning the victims of a bombing by a French extremist group, is promised by the rebels' leader that "the FLN will avenge [them]" (0:41:26).

However, the first-time viewer is not yet aware of how this dressing room relates to vengeance. The story progresses with the Algerian women transformed to resemble Europeans, and then they are revealed as members of the FLN. By removing their *haïks*—a kind of veil that covers the whole body—and donning French clothing, they can breeze past police checkpoints and plant bombs in Algiers’ European Quarter. The rattle that accompanied their process of disguise blends smoothly with the cheerful music playing in the cafés and dance halls they will soon reduce to rubble. In a comparable clash of expectations, the scene equates femininity with subversive, patriotic rebellion and stands out in a film that otherwise belongs to a long tradition of using masculinity as a symbol of explicit nationalism. How can gender influence definitions of patriotism in times of cultural and national upheaval? We can look at events like Algeria’s decolonialization movement, or the aftermath of the *September 11* attacks, which, according to scholars Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, became a site of masculinity symbolizing docile patriotism rather than rebellion. How has subversion, and thus femininity, been overlooked in certain studies of the patriotism of oppressed groups?

The process of unveiling in *Battle* allows women to play an indispensable role in the war. This idea is paradoxical: as political philosopher Frantz Fanon describes, much of France’s strategy to domesticize and subdue Algeria was also centered around unveiling. Fanon’s book *A Dying Colonialism* recounts the methods used by the Algerian revolutionaries in their fight to dismantle French colonial oppression. In the first chapter, he describes how the French attempted to demonize the veil, and in doing so presented Algerians as a primitive culture that required colonial oversight:

The dominant administration solemnly undertook to defend this woman, pictured as humiliated, sequestered, cloistered. . . . It described the immense possibilities of woman, unfortunately transformed by the Algerian man into an inert, demonetized, indeed dehumanized object. . . . Converting the woman, winning her over to the foreign values, wrenching her free from her status, was at the same time achieving a real power over the man and attaining a practical, effective means of deconstructing Algerian culture. (38-9)

Some Algerian women began to unveil, which the French regarded as a sign of submission to European morals: “the flesh of Algeria,” both literal Algerian bodies and metaphorical Algerian autonomy, was consequently “laid bare,” free to be exploited by the French (Fanon 42). By Fanon’s analysis, the veil represented the struggle of Algeria to maintain its cultural and national identity. And it certainly did to some extent. But, as shown in *Battle*, the veil—and its absence—could also represent women’s rebellion, a refusal to allow French colonialists to define the terms of female Algerian liberation. Women now Europeanized in appearance played critical roles in the FLN, assimilating to French values while actively undermining them. When French

officials tortured militants and learned of the importance of European-passing women to the FLN's actions, they could no longer define assimilators and rebels based on appearance: the demarcations between European and Algerian shattered as every civilian became a potential conspirator (Fanon 61). Consider a later scene in *Battle*, in which Colonel Mathieu, the French officer charged with dismantling the FLN's leadership structure, shows his colleagues footage of police checkpoints in the Casbah—the Arab quarter of Algiers—taken directly before the bombings. As the footage plays, he expounds upon the near impossibility of discovering the perpetrators:

It's a faceless enemy, unrecognizable, blending in with hundreds of others. It is everywhere. In cafés, in the alleys of the Casbah, or in the very streets of the European quarter. . . . Among all these Arab men and women are the perpetrators. But who are they? How can we recognize them? ID checks are ludicrous. If anyone's papers are in order, it's the terrorist's. (0:56:37-0:56:48, 0:57:22-0:57:41)

The film's use of dramatic irony proves the colonel's point. As Mathieu says "recognize," an unveiled woman briefly appears in the footage, smiling in response to the flirtations of a French guard. The audience knows she is an FLN member, the one who planted a bomb in a dance hall, but the guard does not. She has been misconstrued as fully assimilated. And yet Mathieu has also ignored the *veiled* women in the footage, women who could just as easily have been concealing weapons. A scene earlier in the film shows a *haik*-clad woman carrying a revolver, determining the best moment to attack a policeman, and handing off the weapon to a male rebel (0:14:27). She is the primary operative, while the man is told: "You just have to pull the trigger." Critically, his instruction is to pull the trigger, not to kill the policeman: his function is symbolic rather than active, facilitated by the female operative's ability to conceal and carry a weapon between Algerian and French spaces.

If a woman chose to wear her *haik*, she was explicitly resisting French attempts to overpower her; if she chose to Europeanize her appearance, she could further undermine the French's social and racial hierarchy that placed their understandings of feminism and freedom above those of Algerian understandings. Thus, the unveiling and veiling of Algeria blurred the differences between assimilation and differentiation in the movement for independence: "Removed and reassumed again and again, the veil has been manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a means of struggle" (Fanon 61).

Representative of both submission to and rebellion against oppressive agendas, the veil was crucial to the maintenance of Algerian identity amidst the crisis of French colonialism. Because a culture's uniqueness can be so quickly identified by its clothing traditions, garments are often the center of culture wars. However, their symbolic

significance is complicated by the historical moment's current crisis and the effect of the crisis on the oppressor's attitudes toward a specific garment. Fanon defines the veil in colonial-era Algeria as an instrument of camouflage and struggle, but Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai discuss another garment in their article "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots:" the Sikh turban. This turban is also intertwined with the dichotomy between assimilation and differentiation, but it served a very different purpose during a comparable crisis: America after the 9/11 attacks.

Following the 9/11 attacks, American Sikhs experienced horrendous racial profiling and violence, their turbans mistaken for those worn by some Muslims and Arab Americans; this discrimination occasionally escalated to murder, as in the case of Balbir Singh Sodi on September 15 (Puar and Rai 137). In response, Sikh activist groups sought to differentiate Sikhism from Islam for the (white) American eye, as well as to incorporate Sikh culture into ideals of American nationalism. They covered *gurdwaras*—Sikh places of worship—in American flags, sent lawyers to D.C. to confer with senators on the many Sikh contributions to American society, and carried out other methods of damage control meant to remove the association between Sikhism and the demonized "Other" that had been intensified by the events of 9/11 (Puar and Rai 137-8). While white Americans viewed the turban as a symbol of "the revived, erect, and violent patriarchy of the East, of Islam, and of the Taliban; the oppression of Afghan women; the castration and the penetration of white Western phallic power," they aimed to clarify the turban as a mandatory mark of the Sikh religion (Puar and Rai 137). By promoting discourse on Sikhs' contributions to American society, they sought to introduce the turban to mainstream American patriotism, a patriotism that Puar and Rai classify as distinctly masculine with their uses of phallic imagery.

By positioning themselves within the nationalism and Otherism that followed 9/11, American Sikhs employed the turban as a symbol of both differentiation from Islam and assimilation with America. The imperial state demands "docile patriotism," submission to its ideals without regard to the effacement of cultural identity that such docility will incur; in the two historical moments with which I am concerned, the imperial state takes the forms of colonial Algeria and post-9/11 America. In both moments, a garment of the group being oppressed by the state is vilified and treated as a primitive regression from the state's march of progress; in response, the oppressed group instrumentalizes the garment toward assimilation with the state. But in *The Battle of Algiers*, the women's assimilation is in fact a deliberate manipulation, its true nature veiled, if you will, from the eyes of the oppressor. In contrast, the Sikh assimilatory attempts were genuine rather than staged: they sought not to throw off the mantle of the imperial state but to achieve solidarity with it. Docility is demonstrative in both instances, but female docility, and consequently patriotism, is weaponized for anti-imperialist ends. The women present themselves as subdued and agreeable—they barely speak throughout the entire sequence—and their faces are unnaturally still. But

this docility functions as a subversive means of control. The French sought to subdue Algerian women indirectly by constructing a narrative in which the French were the liberators of women oppressed by the men of their nation, and this obsession with control granted Algerian women influence over the colonizers' perceptions of them (Fanon 38).

Puar and Rai effectively analyze certain dynamics of masculinity and patriotism, but there are several points in their article that demand further consideration of feminine subversion through veiling. They wish to deconstruct patriotism as a system of docility and heteronormativity supported by the state. In doing so, they mostly ignore the woman's place in such a system and do not cover the role she can occupy in dismantling it and achieving a different kind of patriotism altogether—a role visualized by *Battle* and clarified by Fanon. Puar and Rai anticipate this demand in their footnotes, acknowledging their erasure of “the subjectivities of women and the multiple acts of veiling and unveiling,” along with the part Fanon's theories could have played in complicating their thesis of heteronormative masculine-driven patriotism (140). As this footnote acknowledges, despite their interest in the state's demand of its citizens to become docile patriots, Puar and Rai overlook the mechanisms of resistance among women, who often present a special challenge to the state. As Fanon observes, “Hiding the face is also disguising a secret. . . . This woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer. There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself” (43-4). In contrast to Puar and Rai's association between performances of docility and garments of the Other, Fanon argues that the sexual denial implied by the garments of Algerian women is an act of disguise as well as rebellion. But taking off those garments to assume a Europeanized appearance, as I have discussed, replicates rather than negates such acts. Fanon's study emphasizes that Algerian women had the unique ability to perform assimilation while remaining differentiated from the oppressor, negotiating multiple layers of explicit and implicit concealment.

Through their analysis of the myriad uses of cultural garments and how such uses relate to power, rebellion, and separation from the state, Fanon and Puar and Rai engage with the complexities of gender presentation, sexuality, patriotism, and cultural agency in times of crisis. These texts illuminate the unique power held by *Battle's* three women, their cultural and sexual autonomy self-bestowed through a performative unveiling: they are the women of the Other, triply veiled from the oppressor, and in their separation from the masculine state can more fully embody a revolution against it.

---

## WORKS CITED

- Fanon, Frantz. “Algeria Unveiled.” *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier, New York: Grove, 1965, pp. 35-67. Web. <http://abahlali.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Frantz-Fanon-A-Dying-Colonialism.pdf>.

Puar, Jasbir K. and Amit Rai. "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots." *Social Text*, vol. 20 no. 3, 2002, pp. 117-148. [muse.jhu.edu/article/31948](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/31948).

Rainer, Peter. "Prescient Tense." *New York*, 12 Jan. 2004, [nymag.com/nymetro/movies/reviews/n\\_9697/](http://nymag.com/nymetro/movies/reviews/n_9697/).

*The Battle of Algiers*. Directed by Gillo Pontecorvo. Janus Films (The Criterion Collection), 1966. Kanopy.

---

**SPENCER GRAYSON '22CC** studies English. She is especially interested in devotional poetics and intersections between literary narratives and scientific writings. She is the Managing Editor of *The Columbia Review*, the oldest college literary magazine in the nation, and spends her free time obsessing over Marilynne Robinson.