

## **Cinema and Revolution: Reinforcing National Identity through Ammar Alaskri's Film "Patrol towards the East."**

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### **Abstract :**

There is no doubt that Algerian cinema reflects a rich history and diverse experiences that have shaped the features of national identity and its extensions, Through the creative cinematic styles that accompanied the Algerian revolution, it draw a clear and vivid pictures of the reality of colonialism on one side, and what accompanied it in terms of preserving the national memory on the other side. This preservation came to emphasize identity and strengthen national awareness and sense of belonging. It is from this standpoint that our research paper came to shed light on cinema and the Algerian revolution; the latter of which was the voice of the Algerian cause domestically and abroad. So, did cinema have a positive effect on the liberation revolution, and to what extent was cinema able to solidify national identity and memory?

**Keywords:** Cinema - Algerian Revolution - Identity - Patrol Towards the East.

### **1- Introduction:**

Many Algerian critics acknowledge the Algerian Revolution's role in giving birth to Algerian cinema, "which began as documentation of the Algerian resistance during the revolution against the French colonizer<sup>1</sup>." According to specialists and film critics, the emergence of cinema in Algeria can be divided into three stages: before the revolution, during the revolution, and after independence.

### **2- Before the revolution:**

The first appearance of Algerian cinema can be traced back to the late 19th century when Louis Lumière sent a group of photographers and directors to Algeria to capture images of Algerian cities. This led to the production of the first films about Algeria, such as "Le Musulman Rigola" (The Laughing Muslim) by Georges Méliès in 1897. Félix Mesgich also directed a number of films, including "Rue Bab El Oued," "Souk El Arab," and "Prière du Muezzin" (The Muezzin's Call to Prayer<sup>2</sup>).

The primary purpose of introducing cinema to Algeria was to serve propaganda purpose showcasing the solidarity and the extent of unity in perspectives between the military and civilians, we must mention her that military control over this sector was fundamental.

Algerian cinematic activity did not stop with the works mentioned above, but was followed by other cinematic works. Looking back, we find that with the dawn of the twenties of the last

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<sup>1</sup> "Al Jazeera website, an article titled 'Algerian Cinema: The Faithful Echo of the Revolution of the Country of a Million Martyrs,' accessed on May 4, 2024."

<sup>2</sup> - Fatiha Tahari, "Algerian Revolutionary Cinema -1957-1962-," *Asur al-Jadida* Journal, University of Oran, No. 21-22, 2016, p. 354.

century, there was a presence of colonial cinema and a development in the field of production and filming. Among the most prominent films that were shown and received great acclaim was the film "Atlantide" (L'Atlantide) by director Jacques Feyder in 1921.<sup>3</sup>

The series of films mentioned earlier, and even those that came after, did not portray the suffering of the people oppressed by colonialism until the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution. Instead, their focus was on conveying idealized images of a picturesque Algeria, which ultimately obscured and erased the identity and belonging of the Algerian individual.

What was documented in these films often portrayed the Algerian individual as naive and foolish, with no connection to civilization. Algerian women were also depicted in the most derogatory terms, likened to concubines and courtesans who tarnish their honor. We mention here the film "Visage voilé, âmes closes" (Veiled Face, Closed Souls) by director Henri Roussel, which portrayed the Algerian man through the character of the Caid as frivolous, pleasure-seeking, and engaged in trivial love affairs. The focus was on this Caid's collaboration with the colonizers, giving them everything he possessed, even his women. Here, women are symbols of identity and land<sup>4</sup>.

This ideological and intellectual falsification of colonial cinema is considered the fruit of the first films and their first stages that it experienced before the outbreak of the great liberation revolution, in which cinema drew another different and revealing landmark of the truth that is the axis of the cinematographic work accompanying the revolutionary work at that time. Therefore, in general, we can summarize the characteristics of cinema for this era as follows:

- Indeed, cinema in pre-colonial Algeria was firmly under the control of the French colonial administration, and the films produced during this era reflected the prevailing colonial ideology. These films often presented a distorted and stereotypical image of Algerian society, culture, and individuals.
- All the works that appeared in the era before the Algerian Revolution were far from addressing the fundamental issues of the Algerian people, namely colonization.

### 3- During the Algerian revolution:

The Algerian Revolution was compelled to disprove the propaganda media constructed by the oppressive colonizer against Algeria, countering it with unbiased information. Therefore, the primary material for cinematic production at the time was the reality of colonialism, along with honest documentation of the Mujahideen's struggle. This was done while not forgetting to raise awareness of the just Algerian cause in international forums and bringing it to the attention of global public opinion. An American critic once classified it as "without a doubt, the richest and most creative cinema in the Arab world. It has gained worldwide fame and is the only rival to Egyptian cinema<sup>5</sup>."

As the Algerian Revolution progressed and the desire to preserve the nation's memory and document the heroic deeds of the Mujahideen (freedom fighters) intensified, the need for cinema grew alongside the growing recognition of the power of images to influence and

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<sup>3</sup> - Abu Al Qasim Saad Allah, *History of Algerian Culture (1983-1954)*, Vol. 5, 2nd Edition (Beirut: Dar Al Gharb Al Islami, 2005), p. 303.

<sup>4</sup> - Abdelghani Merhebri *Algerians in the Mirror of Colonial Cinema: A Contribution to the Sociology of Colonization*, edition S.N.E.D 1982, pp 41-42

<sup>5</sup> - Al Jazeera Documentary, previous reference.

inspire. In 1956, a group of revolutionaries, led by the Frenchman René Vautier, ventured into the mountains carrying filming equipment. In 1957, following an agreement between Vautier and Abane Ramdane, the first Algerian film school was established high in the mountains in the first wilaya of the fifth region, specifically in Tebessa, under the name "Farid team<sup>6</sup>. ( groupe de Farid)<sup>7</sup>".

The revolutionary cinema of that time produced grinding films from the heart of the event, true, despite the harshness of the historical and field conditions that Algeria was experiencing at that time and which the liberation revolution adopted with its honorable Mujahideen, and we mention what it produced at that time:

- "L'école du cinema" (The School of Cinema) - Or the Film Training School, 1957, is a documentary film directed by René Vautier.
- Une nation, L'Algérie- (Algeria: A Nation), directed by René Vautier, is also a documentary film in which the director "aims to emphasize that Algeria is completely different from France, whether in terms of history and geography, language, culture and civilization..<sup>8</sup>
- L'Algérie en flammes" (Algeria ablaze) is another documentary film directed by the "Groupe Farid"
- The Attack on the Wonzer Mines" and "The Nurses of the National Liberation Army" are short films directed by students of the Film Training School.
- Among the films that we can mention that were produced during the Algerian Revolution, but this time produced by the Cinema Service of the National Liberation Front, we can mention the following two films: "Laji'oun" (Refugees) and "Sakiat et Sidi Youcef.
- Among the cinematographic releases this time, but produced by the Cinema Service of the Provisional Algerian Government, we can mention the following films: "Benadiq el-Houriya" (Les fusils de la liberté), "Sawt el-Cha'b" (La voix du peuple), "Yasmina", "Khamsa Rijal wa Chaa'b" (Cinq hommes et peuples)<sup>9</sup>.

Cinema emerged as a powerful tool during the Algerian Revolution, effectively disseminating the revolutionary cause on a global scale. Algerian playwrights significantly contributed to the production process, particularly in short films, showcasing their talents in both production and cinematography. This treasure trove of revolutionary cinema continues to resonate at international events, serving as a historical record and a cherished legacy passed down through generations.

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<sup>6</sup> - Sharifi, Amna, Developments in Revolutionary Cinema and Its Role in Shaping Algerian Identity: An Analytical Reading of the Film 'The Well,' Afak Cinematic Journal, Volume 8, Issue 3 for the year 2021, p. 363

<sup>7</sup> - Referring to Rene Vautier, who was nicknamed "Farid" during the Algerian revolution, this school included a group of artists who formed the first nucleus of filmmakers. They are: Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina, Ali Ghalem, Jamel Shandarli, Rene Vautier, Pierre Clément, Ahmed Rachedi, Valetin Paulset, later joined by Lakhdar-Hamina, Mansour Karimah, "Trends of Algerian Cinema in the Third Millennium," a doctoral manuscript in dramatic arts, University of Oran, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> - Murad Waznaji, The Liberation Revolution in Algerian Cinema (1957-2012): An Analytical and Documentary Study of Algerian Semiotic Films, Dar Al-Ummah, Algeria, 2014, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> - Fatima Tahari, Revolutionary Algerian Cinema (1957-1962), Assour Magazine, previous reference, p. 362, paraphrased

What can be said here is that the Cinema has emerged as a powerful tool during the Algerian Revolution, effectively disseminating the revolutionary cause on a global scale. Algerian playwrights significantly contributed to the production process, particularly in short films, showcasing their talents in both production and cinematography. This treasure trove of revolutionary cinema continues to resonate at international events, serving as a historical record and a cherished legacy passed down through generations.

#### **4- After independence:**

Additional Enduring Works that Established and Chronicled Algerian Revolutionary Cinema Following Independence

- "The Battle of Algiers" (1966) is a historical film depicting the events of the Battle of Algiers in 1957.

- "The Winds of the Aures" (1966) is a dramatic film depicting the lives of Algerian revolutionaries in the Aures Mountains.

- "The Sacred Land" (1967) is a film depicting the struggles of farmers under French colonial rule.

- **Patrol Towards the East (1971)** :is a war drama film that depicts the heroism of the Mujahideen during their revolutionary missions

• **Events of the Years of Embers (1975)** is a feature film that portrays the life of an Algerian family during the revolution.

In the era of independent Algeria, cinema remained centered on the revolutionary theme, giving it a unique character that defined that period. It is noteworthy that Algerian cinema did not hesitate to preserve the national memory, but after this period it decided to move towards a more critical cinematic realism, especially since Algeria had overcome the colonial era and embarked on a path of construction and foundation.

#### **5- Cinema's Role in Shaping National Memory**

Algerian revolutionary cinema, from its inception, has been committed to visually documenting the human history of the Algerian people's struggle. The power of visual imagery in film has had a profound impact on audiences, particularly in its ability to solidify historical events, akin to World War II, while conveying these events in a smooth and engaging manner. Undoubtedly, Algerian historical cinema is not devoid of dramatic elements that have inspired many followers of this art form. To delve into some of these themes, we will analyze the 1971 film (Patrol towards the East).

#### **6- Film Review:<sup>10</sup>**

Country of Production: Algeria

Director: Ammar Al Askari

Genre: Drama - War

Film Synopsis: Portrays the reality of the Algerian War of Independence and the missions of the freedom fighters.

Language: Arabic, in black and white.

Duration: 2 hours and 12 minutes

Production Company: National Office of Commerce and Cinematographic Industry.

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<sup>10</sup> - An Algerian film produced by the National Office of Commerce and Cinematographic Industry (ONC) in 1971. Directed by the Algerian filmmaker Amar Laskri, it stars a number of prominent Algerian actors, including (but not limited to) Antar Yahia, Brahim Hadjadj, Hassen Ben Zerari, and Mohamed Hamid.



The film "Dawriya Nahwa al-Sharq" (patriote Towards the East) is considered one of the most influential revolutionary movies, especially since its production was not far from the era of independence a profoundly influential and emotionally charged tribute to the sacrifices and unwavering spirit of the Algerian people during their struggle for liberation, the film has garnered immense critical acclaim and enduring popularity, particularly amongst Algerian audiences, solidifying its position as a cornerstone of Algerian revolutionary cinema.

The film opens with a captivating portrayal of life in the Algerian countryside, the setting from which a group of Mujahideen (freedom fighters) will embark on a perilous mission towards the east, These scenes depict the Mujahideen engaged in their daily routines. A farmer is seen tilling the land, followed by a scene of a Quranic school where a teacher is instructing students in memorization using the traditional method of repetition and recitation. The scene then shifts abruptly to enemy aircraft circling overhead, bombing indiscriminately.

The film's central plot revolves around a mission undertaken by a group of Mujahideen to transport a captured French colonist from the eastern Algerian mountains to the command headquarters of the National Liberation Front. As they traverse the mountainous terrain, the revolutionaries encounter two individuals who have escaped a colonial massacre in their village. The patrol decides to deviate from its original mission to seek revenge against those responsible for the atrocity. They continue their journey towards eastern Algeria, where events unfold amidst heavy artillery shelling of civilian villages in the region. One of the Mujahideen, enraged by the attack, opens fire on the enemy. The scene then shifts to the home of an Algerian villager in the mountains, who hosts the Mujahideen, depicted as exhausted and weary from their arduous journey. The narrative progresses as the guard changes and the Mujahideen are alerted to the approach of a large colonial force. They press on towards their objective, which now requires them to cross the Charles and Maurice Lines. However, misfortune strikes as the patrol falls into a minefield and engages in a fierce battle with the colonizers. The commander instructs one of the recently joined Mujahideen to take the French prisoner with him and cross the valley to reach their destination.

After a grueling and exhausting journey, the individual manages to find a group of Mujahideen transporting weapons. These Mujahideen bear the same names as the members of the patrol who were martyred while attempting to cross the electric fence and minefield, a symbolic gesture by the director to convey the message that determination and revolution are passed down from generation to generation. The individual is then taken to the command headquarters, marking the end of the film.

### **6-The underlying dimensions and hidden meanings surrounding the film:**

Artistic, literary, and cinematic works have always served as mouthpieces for societies. During and after the Algerian Revolution, there was a pressing need for cinema to convey the noblest form of expression, reflecting the voice of the people in their struggle for liberation, followed by a period of reconstruction and development. The fervor of the revolution ignited the patriotic zeal that the people had always possessed, both during the revolution and in the subsequent period of construction and development.

Ammar El Askry was able to depict a significant part of the course of the revolution and the just liberation causes. Here are some of the themes that can be discerned from this film:

- The film emphasizes the deep religious convictions that served as a powerful motivator for the revolution's pursuit of self-determination. This religious dimension is evident throughout the film, from scenes depicting Quranic education for children in traditional schools to the unwavering commitment of the fighters (mujahideen) to prayer even amidst the hardships of war. The film's rich use of religious vocabulary, including words like "shuhada" (martyrs), "mujahideen" (fighters), and expressions of faith like "Allah yerham" (may God have mercy) and "Allah أكبر" (God is greatest), further underscores the centrality of religion in the struggle...
- The exemplary humanitarian dimension is epitomized by the mujahideen's treatment of the captured French soldier entrusted to their care for transport to command headquarters. They displayed remarkable compassion by sharing their food and drink, treating him with dignity and respect. Their conduct was guided by their moral compass and unwavering commitment to humanity.
- The film prominently portrays the dimension of solidarity. This solidarity is evident within the Mujahideen themselves, as exemplified by the scene where a family shelters a Mujahideen patrol in their mountain home, providing them with food and lodging. The unwavering commitment to the cause is further emphasized when, during the perilous crossing of the "Ligne Charles" (Charles Line) and subsequent ambush, the commander instructs a soldier to safely escort the captured French soldier to headquarters at any cost, even if it means sacrificing himself and his comrades. This act prioritizes the mission's success and demonstrates the profound sense of solidarity that binds the Mujahideen together.
- The overarching theme that binds all the aforementioned aspects is the unwavering devotion to the nation and the resolute pursuit of liberation from all forms of colonialism. This theme finds its quintessential expression in the revolutionary anthem showcased in the film, which serves as a powerful emotional catalyst for the audience:

**My brothers, do not forget your martyrs, Who sacrificed their lives for the nation's sake.**

إخواني لا تنساو شهداكم      اللي ضحاو على حياة البلاد

**With tears and blood, protect your land, Leave behind your family, friends, and children**

بالدموع والدماء احموا ترابكم      خلو الاهل والصحبة مع الاولاد

**Their voices from the graves call to you, Hear this sound, O servants.**

صوتهم من القبور يناديكم اسمعوا لهذا الصوت يا عباد

**Unity is our motto, sacrifice our slogan, Freedom our ultimate goal, long live the homeland!**

الاتحاد عنواننا التضحية شعارنا الحرية غايتنا يحيا الوطن

**For the homeland, we sell our very souls, We refuse to live in humiliation.**

للوطن نبيعوا كل انفسنا لا نرضى ان نعيش الهوان

**Unity is our motto, sacrifice our slogan, Freedom our ultimate goal, long live the homeland!**

... الاتحاد عنواننا التضحية شعارنا حرية غايتنا يحيا الوطن

#### **Conclusion:**

Algerian revolutionary cinema, alongside the armed struggle, played a pivotal role in shaping the contours of an independent Algeria. While each contributed significantly in their respective spheres, the focus here remains on the transformative power of revolutionary cinema. It is essential to acknowledge the instrumental role of cinematic imagery in supporting the armed struggle and safeguarding the legacy of our ancestors. This rich heritage served as a cornerstone for unity, solidarity, and unwavering resistance against any threat to the land of martyrs, the beacon of revolutionaries, and the inspiration for freedom-seekers.

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