

## A contemporary Algerian Girl Tells her Story(1)

A French colony in the 19th century, Algeria was awakened to the ideas of independence in the early 20th century, particularly after the organization of the FLN (National Liberation Front) in 1930. Women were encouraged to participate in the political struggle but the era of independence did not bring them the liberation they expected. The spread of modern schools and contact with French culture helped the educated women to organize and claim their basic rights as did their sisters of the other North African countries and of the Middle East. Their claims were everywhere identical: Equality with men in the fields of education, work and pay, equality in civil and criminal laws, including personal status laws. Algerian feminists fought for the elimination of dowry traditions, polygyny and unjust divorce laws. In 1982, massive women's demonstrations rejected a proposed family code which did not meet their demands.

In telling her story, Malika, a contemporary Algerian young girl, says that she was privileged because she came from a family of educated people. Her maternal grandfather was a postman with a wide culture and also deeply involved in politics. Her father's family was of Turkish origin, the grandfather was in the antique business but was also a music-lover. Malika's mother passed the school certificate and took the entrance exam for the Women's Teacher Training College. Her father went to the Medersa, a school equivalent to the Lycée, then enrolled in the Law Faculty. He founded a theatre group and played a musical instrument.

Her parents were married according to traditions: they did not know each other before marriage. It was a simple marriage because they belonged to a Moslem sect which required no dowry. "They refused to sell women like cattle." In her early childhood, the girl lived with her parents. Their neighbours were a poor family whose women worked very hard to earn the family's living. They were supporters of a party that struggled for the liberation of Algeria. Their activities made a great impression on the young girl. They took part in the maquis or guerrilla warfare and joined Malika's father in organizing theatrical shows with a nationalist message.

Malika's parents went out together to take part in cultural activities at the Grand Maghreb circle. It was unusual at that time to see couples going out together.

The Algiers artistic circles included liberated women singers and dancers who took part in the nationalist struggle for liberation. Some of them were arrested and tortured.

After 1962, Independence Year, Malika who was then twelve years old, was sent to a French Lycée where she had for classmates daughters of French settlers, a few Arabs and more Kabyles (original inhabitants of Algeria) who, unlike Arab girls, did not seem to have a strong sense of identity and were perhaps more influenc-

ed by the French girls. Malika felt like a stranger in this environment where she was bothered by the weight of social differences. She accepted the constraints which prevented girls from walking alone in the street and from mixing with boys. Their only recreation was going to the cinema. She longed to go to the newly opened Algerian University where she expected to have more freedom but when she did go, it was a big shock. Boys and girls went together to the same classes but there was no communication between them. Though they studied together Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Malraux, Neruda and Nazim Hikmet, though they came in contact with the most liberal, revolutionary ideas, yet they all behaved traditionally. Boys seemed to prefer girls who came from good social backgrounds, who impressed them by their femininity. For most male students, the main attraction of a girl was her physical beauty. Intelligence did not matter much or rather it was disturbing. The brightest female students were the ones who were most put down.

Liberation for girls meant being able to do what their mothers had not been able to do, that is going out with boys on occasions; holding together intellectual debates, discussions and research. Yet in spite of the grim atmosphere which prevented normal relations between them, some progress was achieved, tension was gradually reduced. "My parents used to say to me" says Malika, "that I was no longer the same. It is true. I had begun to think seriously. The limited chance I had for outside amusement made me concentrate on work. I closeted myself in the library and devoured books that I tried to understand. I discovered Marx and psychoanalysis. Then I was invaded with ideas of going away. I can't go on living here! Either I leave or kill myself! Beirut or Paris! When I told my parents about my decision, my father was against, my mother for. They held a family meeting and found me a husband, young and good-looking, who had been studying in the USSR. I said no. After him there came a doctor, then an architect but I refused both. Finally I applied for a scholarship and, after a few confrontations, went to Paris for higher studies."

Malika's story acquaints us with a girl, who, since her early childhood, was exposed to progressive cultural influences because she came from an educated family and had contacts with modern-minded neighbors. Her contacts and her readings at school gave her an ideal picture of the university in her country. Instead, she was disappointed to find that boys and girls "play the sad comedy of seduction and the most progressive male students demonstrate the most reactionary attitudes toward women."

Higher education did not succeed in freeing the students' minds from entrenched stereotypes.

(1)Abridged from: *Women of the Mediterranean*, op. cit. pp.36-43.