Individual and Collective Trauma in Cartouches Gauloises

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the representation of trauma in Cartouches gauloises *in light of recent scholarship about trauma and memory. Without a preference for French-Algarian or Arab-Algerian, director Mehdi Charef explores trauma of forced displacement and witnessing the massacres mainly through children's perspectives. Charef also depicts the process of 'acting out' and 'working through' of individual and collective trauma among the characters, and the nation they represent, by use of camera language. Meanwhile, placing the film in its historical context highlights the collective trauma of two important groups in Algerian society after the war: the Pieds-Noirs (the French-Algerian) and Harkis (the pro-France Algerian warriors). They experience social trauma due to the exile and their lacking sense of belonging absent a national identity as they are not recognized as citizens of either government. A final section discusses the measures which the Algerian and French governments respectively took after the war. Unlike to the commemorative monuments and museums the Algerian built, the French government denied the existence of the war for a long time thereby aggravating the socially embedded trauma.*

Thesis and Objectives

In this paper, I examine the representation of trauma in *Cartouches gauloises* in light of recent scholarship about trauma and memory. By watching the film, viewers are not merely exposed to scenes recreating historical episodes of massacre and separation, viewers passively witness the process of traumatization. Although viewership is passive, the audience actively engages in remembering and re-memorializing the traumatic experience. My aim is to examine to what extent *Cartouches gauloises* illustrates the process of 'acting out' and 'working through' of individual and collective trauma among the characters and the nation they represent. Meanwhile, placing the film in its complex historical context, I also analyze the social trauma which the French government exerted on two important groups in Algerian society after the war: the *pieds-noirs* (the French-Algerian) and *harkis* (the pro-France Algerian warriors). Finally, I will discuss what the Algerian and French governments, respectively, have done in order to memorialize or to erase this period of collective trauma, as well as how both governments construct collective identities for these war descendants.

The first objective of my essay is to find out how individual trauma is presented in the film, as well as how the process of 'acting-out' and 'working-through' is shown for the main characters such as Ali, Aïcha and Nico. In the

second part, my focus will shift to a broader scale, by applying the theory of collective trauma to diaspora, I will examine how *pieds-noirs* and *harkis* warriors were traumatized after the Algerian War, and how their post-war identities were distorted by repercussion from trauma. The final section explores what the two governments have done either to memorialize or to obscure the warfare, and whether and how the governments helped the victims to overcome the trauma.

Brief Introduction to the Film and Director

Mehdi Charef is an Algerian-French director. When Charef was born in 1952, Algeria was under French colonial dominion. Charef and his family leftt Algeria for France after the Algerian War. This duality complicates Charef's national identity: he thinks of himself as both French and Algerian in heritage. His evolving self-awareness relative to his own heritage gives him a unique perspective empathetic to both Algerian and French characters. Although Charef spent his childhood in Algeria, his films and novels are produced for a French population, in France. His most prestigious film is his first film *Le thé au harem d'Archimède* (1985), based on his book published in 1983. As Michel Frodon describes, the film made Charef "le fondateur de la culture beurre (Wallenbrock 226)." *Beur* is a French slang standing for the second-generation immigrants from Maghreb in France. In Venturini's perspective, Chref's films not only reflect the Algerian nation, but also move beyond the issue of national identity: "Cependant, son œuvre est faite de bien d'autres choses que la simple retranscription d'un questionnement identitaire propre à ce que l'on a appelé, plus ou moins complaisamment, la génération beur (16)." His other filmographies include *Au Pays des Juliets*

(1992), *Aime-moi toujours* (1995), *All the indivisible children* (2005), *Graziella* (2015). As a reflection of his bi-national background, his films all show his connection with his motherland and France, which provide a unique perspective perceiving the war.

Released in 2007, *Cartouches gauloises* is a film that presents an unusual depiction of the Algerian War of 1954 to 1962 which mainly concentrates on the last period of the war. During its concluding phase, the two sides were desperate gain control over one another and caused numerous massacres and slaughters. The plot of the film can be summarized as follows: Ali, a native Algerian boy, is experiencing the last year of the war with his French-Algerian friends in X region of Algeria. At the start of the film, Aïcha and Hassan, Ali's parents, separate as a result of Hassan's decision to join the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale; The National Liberation Front). Through Ali's eyes, the viewer witnesses bombing attacks from both sides aimed at innocent civilians; the French troops' killing of innocent citizens out of sheer suspicion; the separation of families as French-Algerian individuals were forced to choose between moving to France and remaining in Algeria; friendships between native Arabs and French descendants collapse as youngsters flee with their parents. The film ends after Algeria has gained its independence from France. In the film's dramatic closing scene, Ali hears a sound of shooting which might be the execution of his father. The audience sees him through the perspective of an extended long shot as he runs wildly through a vast landscape, until he reaches a hill towards a hamlet at the top. The image of death among both the *Pieds-Noirs* and the Arab Algerian reveals Charef's ambiguity towards Algeria's independence.

The film reflects Charef's ambivalence towards both countries through its incorporation of scenes familiarizing the viewer to both Algerian and French life. Although set in an Algerian community, equal screen time is devoted to French characters among the Algerian locals, such as the train station manager, the owner of a local cinema, the senior *pieds-noirs* couple who confess their sorrow. This portrait of how the war escalates in its final stage to destabilize the region's demographics and the seemingly inevitable decolonization of Africa from Imperial France underscores how interethnic bonds are deconstructed by episodes of trauma.

Individual Trauma During the War

In the title *Cartouches gauloises*, the word "cartouches", originally meaning 'bullets' in French, refers to the children in the film. The film focuses on the perspective of a ten-year-old boy, Ali, through whose eyes we witness the atrocities of the war. Not coincidently, Charef was also ten years old in 1962. Furthermore, Charef sets *Cartouches gauloises* in his hometown of Oran, and concludes the film on the day of July 5, the Algerian Independence Day. It is reasonable to deduce that, to some extent, the film is a fictional autobiographical reconstruction of what happened in Charef's childhood in Algeria. As Charef spent his significant childhood years in Algeria and he gained his popularity in France, his sympathy for the *Pieds-Noirs* is the reflection of his bi-national identity and his childhood in his mother land.

In the film, there are four other boys who are Ali's friends from school: Paul, David, Gino and Nico. They are all white French born in Algeria, so they are all *pieds-noirs*. Among them, Nico is Ali's best friend and they spend the

most time together. However, their games are often interrupted by the war, such as when they hear shooting while they are cutting bamboos for their hut, or when Yashi the camp football team's goalkeeper's body is thrown from a helicopter in the middle of the boys' football match. According to Susan Suleiman, they can be called children of the "1.5 generation" of child survivors (277) because although they are too young to have a general understanding of the situation, which is the characteristic of first-generation. However, they do have witnessed and experienced the bloody massacre by which they will remain traumatized and this trauma will continue haunting them as they grow up, rather than inheriting the trauma from their parents. As a result, they do confirm what is called "1.5 generation."

As the narrator of the film, Ali witnesses many traumatic scenes which he shouldn't have to bear at his young age. He experiences a bombing attack in the swimming pool that causes the death of almost thirty *pieds-noirs* civilians. After hearing the sound of bombing, counter-intuitively, he runs towards the sound of violence, in order to discover what has happened. When he sees the broken statues and the mess in the square fountain, unlike others who stand back, he jumps over the bricks and stumbles in the pool (see Figure 1). The swimming pool represents upper-class life, as it is an honorific of white people, which is something alien to Ali. At that moment, he is traumatized by his inability to change his reality and the boy feels overwhelmed. The film later depicts how the French army and *harkis*, who have served as auxiliaries with the French army, casually slaughter civilians without reasonable suspicion. As a witness, Ali is so terrified that each time he hides helplessly and manages to run away.

In the film, Charef depicts the process of 'acting-out' and 'working-through' of different characters. By observing Ali's behaviour in traumatic scenes, his avoidance reveals his acting-out of his fear and sorrow. What's worse, he still has to go on with his life, pretending nothing happened. Although his situation is insufferable for anyone who relives their traumatizing memories in extremely emotional ways after the experience, the avoidance itself is one of the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As a newspaper and grocery boy, it is through Ali's work and play life that the quotidian of the war setting is presented. He witnesses countless similar situations, thus becoming emotionally numbed to his circumstance and uncharacteristically reticent in such situations. It is this continuous confrontation with violence that causes his trauma. Exposure to violence triggers symptoms of PTSD in trauma victims suffering from lack of acknowledgement (Hamburger 68), which explains Ali's inability to show his feelings. Therefore, Ali's unusual attitude towards horrific scenes can be explained by trauma theory.

Another way Ali acts out is by seeking comfort from his mother. He asks her to tell him stories, as happens after his meeting with his father, who has been tortured by the French. Although Nico, his best *pied-noir* friend, frequently condemns Ali's father as a terrorist, Ali firmly denies it. Ali believes that his father is earning a living for the family in France. Ali is shocked when he learns the truth, that his father is being tortured in a French camp among other *fellagha*. The foundation supporting his inner world collapses and he is unable to process the news. He needs to be consoled and reassured by his mother, despite the fact that the only thing she says is, "He is still alive" and otherwise remains silent again.

For Aïcha, Ali's mother, acting-out is more emotional. Because her husband Hassan participates in the FLN, it is impossible for them to meet during daytime, for the sake of their safety. There is one scene in the film when Hassan visits her unexpectedly. After a short hug and kissing, Aïcha resigns herself to compel Hassan to leave. After his departure she bursts into tears and yells heartbrokenly to the sky "Why?" (see Figure 2) This image constitutes the most powerful acting-out throughout the film. At the same time, Aïcha is the only character who shows any sign of working-through. After Ali tells her that Hassan is being tortured but still alive, feeling relieved, she smiles and says, "I am happy." She even plays music and sings with her neighbours on the second day following the news. However, I would like to regard this working-through as incomplete and temporary. After her sudden exposure to the war and the eventual loss of her loved ones, her trauma is a "trauma without agency" (Webb 533). Although she proudly shows the Algerian national flag to her son as Algeria has finally gained independence, temporarily "ignoring" the mystery of her husband's whereabouts, the trauma has been engraved inside her. Any future circumstance that evokes the wartime experiences by its similarity can trigger dormant symptoms (ibid.), making her revisit the trauma of her loss again.

Nico also shows this avoidance of trauma-evoking circumstances. When Ali asks him "Tu ne partiras jamais, n'est-ce pas?" and he replies "Non," both boys are ignorant of the extremity with the war which will tear their friendship apart. Nico's family will be forced to flee Algeria for their safety. His avoidance is a typical characteristic of trauma: denial. He denies the upcoming independence in Algeria but holds the firm belief that this land will always be French-Algerian. At the end of the film, when Algeria gains its

independence, Nico and Ali come to the hut where they live. However, as Nico notices the national flag hanging on the hut, he insists that Ali dump the flag and reiterates the supremacy of his nation. He shouts at Ali, "Maintenant, sois obéissant!" Realizing that his persistence is in vain, Nico finally acts out long-hidden trauma. As he feels betrayed by his nation, and by his faith as superior over the Arabs, he can never work through his trauma until his departure for France. After the quarrel with Ali, he runs past the farmland where he and Ali used to cut bamboo for their hut. Charef uses these familiar but related scenes to imply that Nico is still traumatized. Nico's sorrow and running away can imply that he is still preoccupied about the old days, when he was privileged by his French identity. The feeling of trust betrayed, or fidelity broken (however unjustified the feeling may in fact be) is one of the greatest impediments to the working through of his trauma (LaCapra 144). However, at the end of the film, before he leaves for France with his family, he gives his football, which they used for years, to Ali. Since he feels betrayed by both Ali and by France, it is hard to determine his ability to work through the trauma. But the football he left behind can be regarded as a symbol of his reconciliation with the past, showing that he is ready to transition to a new life in a new place.

Being part of generation 1.5, Ali, Nico and their friends are all traumatized to some extent by the war. As a native Algerian, Ali is traumatized by witnessing the massacres of both of *pieds-noirs* and his compatriots, the *harkis*, by the French. His expression of trauma is that of premature bewilderment and helplessness. This helplessness directly holds him back from working-through his trauma towards recovery, while in fact, his taciturnity also restricts his chances to act out his trauma. He is still traumatized by

the distant gunshot which might have been the execution of his father until the very end of the film. As for Nico, what prevents him from working-through his trauma is denial. He is reluctant to admit that he is abandoning his friends, he loses his sense of entitlement over class privilege, and his memory of childhood the Algerian lands is supplanted. After his departure, the football he leaves can be interpreted as a symbol of his discarded memory. For Ali's mother, Aïcha, it is impossible to say whether the forthcoming independence of Algeria is able to heal completely her scar over losing family members. As one of the main characteristics of trauma, belatedness is bound to show in her future life (Caruth 9). These three characters clearly exhibit individual trauma brought on by the war, demonstrating that it is an important concern of *Cartouches gauloise*.

Collective Trauma: Pieds-Noirs and Harkis

National trauma differs from personal trauma in that it is shared collectively, and frequently has a cohesive effect as individuals gather in groups to reflect on the tragedy and its consequences (Neal 4). After the outbreak of the war, the Algerian nation is divided into two parts: those who are pro-France, which includes *harkis* and *pieds-noirs*, and those pro-independence, including supporters of the FLN. During the war, both sides used different means of torture as forms of terror. Just like the bombing attack in the public swimming pool, the FLN targeted only Algerian officials and public figures under the French regime. As the war degenerated, they later coerced, maimed, or killed village elders, government employees, and even peasants who refused to support them, using inhumanely violent means such as throat slitting and decapitation (Horne 134-5). The French army, similarly, adopted cruel methods to suppress

rebellion. This persecution exerted on the whole nation from both sides created pervasive social trauma (Hamburger 80).

The tragedy of the Algerian War continued for eight years, ending in the undignified retreat of France from the African territory. Although the Algerian people gained their independence, the war imprinted an immeasurable and unforgettable historical trauma on the nation. The chief consequence was that it created lasting ethnic divisions within the society. While some of the Algerians were enjoying the fruits of their victory, those who fought for France were suppressed by the victors. *Pieds-noirs* and *harkis* are survivors of the historical trauma during and after the Algerian War.

Pieds-noirs, whose presence dated back to the late 1830s, considered themselves and the land both French and Algerian for more than a century. By the 1950s, over one million *pieds-noirs* lived in Algeria, comprising approximately ten percent of the population, many of whom had never set foot in France since their birth. For all those *pieds-noirs*, the nature of daily life in Algeria meant that their identities as French-Algerian never took root (Wise 123). After the outbreak of the war, most of these *pieds-noirs* held the firm belief that they stood on the victorious side. However, with the surrender of France they deemed that their lives would be untenable under the rule of the FLN and almost one million *pieds-noirs* (and *harkis*?) left Algeria over the course of the summer of 1962 (Eldridge 124). Gone et al. propose that one of the main characteristics of the historical trauma is the *collective experience* of those whose identities, ideals and interactions were thoroughly altered (301). The *pieds-noirs'* arriving in France were going through trauma, as they were exiled from their homeland, displaced, and living in diaspora. Even after their arrival in

metropolitan France, they were unwelcome and categorized as outsiders. The lack of belonging also gave rise to questions about their identities, which became the social trauma of lost collective identity in the end.

Cartouches gauloises depicts the postwar trauma and conflict among French-Algerian survivors. The French are continuously characterized as "colonizers" and the people who "made the natives sweat" (Eldridge 124) in the film. When Mrs. Rachel, member of one of the typical families of French origin who were born and raised in Algeria, is asked by her son to leave for France altogether, she rejects and insists to stay. Mrs. Rachel would rather stay and be killed by Arabs than be humiliated in France. In France, Algerian-born-French were categorized as inferior second-class citizens; they were both legally and socially not treated as "full citizens", so they belonged nowhere.

Although there were approximately one million *pieds-noirs* who chose to stay in Algeria, the residual hostility towards them and the Oran massacre that happened in 1962 accelerated the *pieds-noirs*' departure and the exile for the French-Algerian. In the film, Mrs. Rachel's husband Norbert is killed ruthlessly in their home before Independence Day. In Algeria, she and he husband were not considered Algerians but intruders. This remains the case after the war, even though victory belonged to the Algerians.

Unlike the FLN's clear purpose of liberating Algeria from colonial France, the motivation that drove *harkis* to fight for France was more complicated. The most significant motivation for *harkis* recruitment was revenge against violence committed against them by the FLN (Evans 124). By joining the French side, those people could not only obtain food and secure regular income to feed their impoverished families, they could also sample a small

measure of power, which they had never previously been accorded under the colonialist regime (125). As shown in *Cartouches gauloises*, while working under the privilege of the French army, *Harkis* could casually kill civilians. Ali's uncle was killed for being a member of the FLN, and the watermelon merchant is killed for a suspicion of hiding bombs beneath his clothes. In the summer of 1962 when the climate of hatred and violence reigned, countless *harkis*, even their children, were tortured. After independence, tens of thousands of *harkis* were massacred by their compatriots, with the intention of humiliating them and asserting their separation from the new Algerian nation. As depicted in the film, before the retreat of the French military, the captain of *harkis*, Djelloul, begged them to take him and his wife, but this request was mercilessly rejected. The captain is reduced to hiding in Ali's hut to save his life, but he is ultimately killed by vengeful villagers. The effects of trauma and loss are often experienced more intensely under conditions of isolation, loss, and displacement (Wise 2004).

Menaced by revenge violence that claimed the lives of tens of thousands, an estimated 25,000 *harkis* and their dependents went into diasporic life, officially immigrating to France between 1962 and 1967, while a further 68,000 entered the country by unofficial means (Cohen 169). Those who managed to escape to France were incarcerated in camps, forced to live in miserable conditions, subjected to abuse and humiliation and offered the lowliest of jobs (Crapanzano 60). Their descendants, nevertheless, lived under a veil of silence regarding their parents' experience with the violent regime. This second generation neither understood why they were ostracized and discriminated against as they were, nor were they told what their fathers had done in Algeria, and why. Even nowadays, though they

enjoy the rights of French citizenship, they are still not, just like the *pieds-noirs*, classified as "full-citizens" in France. They are deemed untrustworthy, marginalized and subjected to often virulent racism (61), thus the trauma continues.

Thus, when we place the film on the larger scale of the nation, apart from the suffering of Algerian Muslims among the *harkis*, the woes of those French-Algerian are also implied in the film. While the Algerian Arabs experienced an enormous loss, what should not be ignored when interpreting the film is the consequence for those who would end up living in France. Both the *pieds-noirs* and the *harkis* will experience exile, which in itself is very traumatic, and the experience of ostracism for their beliefs and positions during the war.

Aftermath—Algerian Commemoration and French Denial

The film finishes on the last day of the Algerian War. Trauma theory recognizes that an "after effect" is symptomatic of trauma (Linklater 22). The Algerian war has created deep fissures both in Algerian and French societies and the need to create collective understanding of the past is crucial to the building of a coherent community and national identity (McCormack 167), thus helping the victims of the war recover from trauma. The Algerian government has set Independence Day as a national holiday on July 5th annually. The Maqam Echahid monument (Martyrs' Memorial), a monument for veterans of the war, was erected in 1982 in the capital Algiers to mark the 20th anniversary of independence (see Figure 3). It is built in the shape of three palm leaves that shelter the "Eternal Flame" underneath and at the edge of each palm leaf there are statues of soldiers. With more than 6,000 testimonies, Le musée national du

moudjahid à El Madania was also built in 1997 in order to collect, preserve and display objects and memories during the period of struggling against colonialism (see Figure 4).

The commemorative national monument omits women's contribution to the war, and they played important roles in it. They were active participants in the war on either side, both among the FLN and the French. , They operated as combatants and in non-combatant missions, including as spies, fundraisers, nurses, and cooks (Turshen 890). It is estimated that during the war, more than 11,000 women took an active role in it (De Groot 247). However, they are nearly forgotten in its commemoration. In the Martyrs' Memorial, none of the statues portrays a female figure. As Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry indicate, regardless of their involvement and contributions to the conflict, women in Algeriaremained in their pre-war subservient position afterward as a result of the prevailing societal, religious, and cultural conditions (42). Although during the war women did to some extent emancipate themselves from the male sovereignty to enter the public sphere (Vince 97), their contribution became "invisible" after the war.

Unlike Algeria, which created festivals and established monuments in order to remember their uneasy independence, in France, participants of the war have been struggling for years through a long period of occlusion and repression of the painful and divisive memories (McCormack 2). As Hamburger notes, an aggravating factor in a socially embedded trauma is the fact that the public regularly fails to acknowledge or even actively denies its existence (82-3). At the same time, to work through trauma and to critically engage with the past, the various subject-positions such as victims and perpetrators must be distinguished and acknowledged among the society

(LaCapra 12). France, unfortunately, denied the war for a long time, creating a barricade for *pieds-nois* and *harkis* to work through their trauma over the Algerian war. For decades, the perpetrator nation was unwilling to address the war. The French government refused to call the Algerian War a "war", instead it was referred to as "peacekeeping operation", "a police action" or "les événements d'Algérie", which was a lasting impediment to recovery from collective trauma. The French soldiers who servedin the war (approximately 25,000 causalties and 60,000 wounded) were not recognized as veterans or honoured, since officially they didn't fight in a "war" (Cohen 225). Enmeshed in such semantics of denial, the French unease over acknowledging the Algerians national identity stemmed from refusal to acknowledge their role as colonizers and perpetrators (Lazreg 112). Although Algeria was occupied by the French for more than a century and despite the fact that *pieds-noirs* think of themselves as French descendants, the French considered the French-Algerians among them as not quite French, yet again calling into question their identities.

In 1977, fifteen years after the war, a national monument was erected in France to honour the French soldiers who served in the Algerian War. However, the war remained a "taboo" for the French government (cite). "Afrique du nord" served as a trope to mask this reluctance to address a disappearing memory. It was not until October 18th, 1999, thirty-seven years after the war's end, that the French government finally officially acknowledged the term "*la guerre d'Algérie*" (cite). In 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron finally admitted that France instigated a "system" that led to torture during the war (cite).

Historian Robert Aldrich indicates, "The Algerian war, and colonial history in general, has never before

galvanised public attention as in recent years" (14). In the past decade, a great number of films and works have been released in memory of the Algerian War. Also, with more previously classified archives being made available to the public, more in-depth historical research has emerged. Meanwhile, in order to seek to end their status as "les oubliés de l'histoire", the descendants of the *harkis* and *pieds-noirs* have begun to seek recognition for their parents' past, particularly the sacrifices they had made for France and the suffering endured as a consequence (Eldridge 88).

Conclusion

Through *Cartouches gauloises*, director Mehdi Charef tries to create a memorial to the Algerian War from children's perspective. If we connect the film to that historical period, we can see that it depicts individual and historical collective trauma. The film particularly stresses the trauma of separation for the *pieds-noirs*, which is compounded in the case of the *harkis* with diverse forms of rejection as they become newcomers of Muslim background in France. If we look beyond the film, we will find that social trauma continues decades after the war has ended. Both groups and their descendants continue to experience discrimination and were compelled to be silent for decades in order to suppress their narrative of the event, forcing them to "forget" that period of trauma. The long reluctance of the French government to acknowledge the war also aggravated the socially embedded trauma. However, what is fortunate for the survivors is that as victims decide to share this haunting memory and are creating testimonies such as this film, their narrative is combatting this forced forgetting. This is part of Charef's aim in filming *Cartouches gauloises*—to engrave this history forever so that the war and trauma will

not be forgotten. Also, by confronting this difficult history, the victims and the perpetrators can finally have the courage to work through the trauma, and this is the lasting social importance of this cinematographic narrative.

Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

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