

**Maghrebi women in exile: exploration of utopia in *Fritna* by Gisèle Halimi and  
*Mémoires d'immigrés* by Yamina Benguigui**

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This paper focuses on representations of Maghrebi women as immigrants in exile, and on their quest to find a better life for themselves and their families. This is a utopian dream in the sense that it cannot be fully realised since the women find themselves torn between, on the one hand, the cultural conditioning of their North African origins and nostalgic attachment to an oppressive homeland, and, on the other, a complex mixture of opportunities and disappointment held out by life in France. The two works through which this theme will be explored are *Fritna* by Gisèle Halimi and *Mémoires d'immigrés* by Yamina Benguigui. In both texts, whether presented as victims of patriarchy and oppression within Maghrebi society, or displaced figures who have left the homeland to support their family in search of a better life in a new world, Maghrebi women are represented as oppressed, in conflict, and excluded. They suffer multiple oppression as a result of their gender, race, culture and religion. In each case, the mother figure is the embodiment of an irreconcilable conflict, oppressed as a woman by a patriarchal culture and yet often oppressive in turn to her own daughters. Her role is crucial as she is charged with transmitting a cultural and religious heritage to the next generation. This is true of Halimi's work *Fritna* in which the maternal figure is described thus: '[...] elle représentait l'ordre judéo-arabe de cette Tunisie des années 40-50.'<sup>1</sup> And elsewhere in the text: 'Dans sa carapace de "commandeure", elle était la norme religieuse, donc la loi morale, donc la loi'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Benguigui in *Mémoires d'immigrés* portrays the mothers of the Maghrebi community living in France as the guardians of the culture and traditions of the family's homeland in spite of their relative integration in French society:

Certaines d'entre elles apprennent à se diriger dans la ville, suivent des cours d'alphabétisation, mais elles continuent d'assumer leur rôle de gardiennes de la culture d'origine.<sup>3</sup>

In both works, the woman's utopic yearning to find a place within the family and society which would permit self-fulfilment is embodied in the conflicts that surround the mother figure. In *Fritna*, the mother is at once both victim and perpetrator of a world order that oppresses women. For her daughter, utopia lies in the yearning for the prospect of a more loving and nurturing mother figure. This, however, is to prove impossible and only exile from home and homeland will ensure the daughter's liberation. In Benguigui's work, the focus is slightly different. Here, it is the Maghrebi mothers themselves, much more than the men or children, who embody the longing for a utopic reconciliation of their home culture and that of their adoptive land. In both cases, experience of multiple oppression makes the dream impossible.

The first part of this analysis will focus on *Fritna* by Halimi—a text inspired by the author's own relationship with her mother, but also written from the point of view of being a mother herself. The second part will draw both on Benguigui's documentary film and her associated book about the Maghrebi community living in France, *Mémoires d'immigrés*. We shall focus in particular on the

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<sup>1</sup> G. Halimi, *Fritna* (Paris: Plon, 1999), p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> *op.cit.*, p. 138

<sup>3</sup> Y. Benguigui, *Mémoires d'immigrés – L'héritage maghrébin* (Paris: Canal+ Editions, 1997), p. 76.

section devoted to the mothers of the first generation of immigrants who recount the dilemmas of being torn between their country of origin and their adoptive home.

Gisèle Halimi is well-known as a prominent lawyer with socialist sympathies, and a committed feminist who was influential in French women's struggle for the legalisation of contraception and abortion in the mid-1970s, the definition of rape as crime and, more recently, the campaign to achieve parity between men and women in political life.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps less well-known, however, are her autobiographical writings: *Le Lait de l'oranger*<sup>5</sup> in which she explored her relationship with her father and described his death; and its counterpart *Fritna*—the Arabic translation of her mother's first name, Fortunée—a book written again in reaction to the death of a loved parent, in which Halimi constantly moves between the past of her childhood memories and the present of her mother's agony. Halimi was born in 1927 to a poor Jewish family in Tunisia, at the time a French protectorate, a status she sees as encouraging discrimination and exclusion as the European masters took advantage of their privileged position in order to divide communities. She emphasises the dual nature of her roots which combined the judeo-arabic community in which she grew up with the French education she received at school. Indeed it was her academic success at the Tunis *lycée* which was to prompt the realisation that her future as a girl from a poor family was not necessarily predetermined. She decided to become a lawyer to defend the poor, the victims of colonialism, but also to advance the cause of women:

[...] l'injustice première, l'inégalité fondamentale, pour moi, étaient liées à ma condition de femme bien plus qu'à ma pauvreté.<sup>6</sup>

Halimi had already explored this theme of early rebellion against a woman's fate and the discrimination inherent in girls' education, in previous autobiographical writings. Indeed, in *La Cause des femmes*, she had made her first attempt to recount her childhood—all subsequent and more obviously autobiographical texts rework the same anecdotes and themes—in a chapter entitled 'Enfance d'une fille',<sup>7</sup> which was very reminiscent of Beauvoir's 'Enfance' in *Le Deuxième Sexe*. She openly declared her debt to Beauvoir's work in choosing as an epigraph the now famous opening sentence by Beauvoir: 'On ne naît pas femme, on le devient'.<sup>8</sup> This is not surprising in view of the friendship and professional collaboration between the two women in the 1960s and 1970s.

However, perhaps because Halimi wrote *Fritna* after she had been freed by her mother's death, a new theme emerges in this book, that of the absence of maternal love in her childhood and her life-long quest for it, or at the very least, for explanations as to why this love was denied her. This becomes the central theme for understanding her childhood and subsequent rebellion. Rather than merely writing a psychological study of her mother, however, Halimi also strongly links her inability to love her daughters to the cultural environment in which the mother-daughter relationship is embedded. She suggests that the reason for this lack of affection stems from the judeo-arabic culture of the time, in which to be born a girl was a curse. Whereas male children represented the true descendants and guardians of the family's honour, it was assumed that it was only daughters who could bring the family name into disrepute :

[...] j'allais avec mon frère, gardien de l'honneur de la famille, suivant l'une des règles sacro-saintes de notre milieu. Inutile d'ajouter que le déshonneur ne pouvait venir que par les femmes.<sup>9</sup>

In several of her autobiographical texts, she tells the story of how her father, who is described throughout her writings as loving and encouraging to his daughters, nevertheless could not bring

<sup>4</sup> See G. Halimi, *La Cause des femmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); also *La Nouvelle Cause des femmes* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), and *Femme: moitié de la terre, moitié du pouvoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> G. Halimi, *Le Lait de l'oranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> *La Cause des femmes*, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> *op.cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> S. de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe II: l'expérience vécue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *La Cause des femmes*, p. 28.

himself to acknowledge her birth for two weeks after receiving the news : ‘Quinze jours pour se faire à l’idée qu’il a cette malchance: une fille...’<sup>10</sup> As for her mother, Halimi is at pains to prove that she was not incapable of affection. In contrast to her attitude towards her daughters, always dutiful but never tender, she lavishes demonstrations of pride and sensual maternal love on her sons, at the risk of turning them into incompetent and infantilised adults, if we are to believe Halimi’s account. In her daughters, Fritna’s cold and deliberately repressive attitude will only bring rebellion.

Halimi analyses how her mother, married at sixteen and a mother at seventeen, and not allowed to study or work, was condemned to financial dependence and domestic drudgery within a marriage that often failed to fulfil her ambitions and desires. The daughter of a rabbi, her religious beliefs were nevertheless limited to a series of superstitions and prohibitions, since girls were not allowed to study religious texts. Halimi is in fact, in several of her autobiographical texts, repeatedly critical of Judaism and its practices, which she obviously sees as discriminatory towards women.<sup>11</sup> All these elements combine to make Fritna regard herself as a virtuous victim :

Ma mère ne se vivait qu’en victime. Une victime tout à la fois du devoir religieux, de la morale conjugale, de l’abnégation maternelle.<sup>12</sup>

This is of course reminiscent of Beauvoir’s analysis of motherhood, in particular the passage on the ‘mater dolorosa’, in which she describes the almost sadistic manipulation that a masochistic mother figure may exert over her children, inducing in them great feelings of guilt.<sup>13</sup>

As Beauvoir also pointed out, the mother-daughter relationship can be particularly conflictual, depending on the mother’s negative or positive view of her own femininity, and on whether she seeks revenge by imposing on this *alter ego* the same oppression that she experienced as a girl, or whether she encourages her daughter to gain the emancipation she was denied.<sup>14</sup> Fritna, as described by Halimi, belongs to the first category and makes it her mission in life to ensure that her daughters do not escape the fate that she sees as common to all women:

Tout ça ne sert à rien: j’ai vécu comme ça, ma mère a vécu comme ça, ma grand-mère a vécu comme ça, toi, tu vivras comme ça.<sup>15</sup>

Halimi describes herself as having rebelled early and violently against this accepted status quo, leaving her parents seemingly puzzled and helpless in the face of their atypical offspring. Throwing herself into a hunger strike at the age of ten in protest against what she saw as unacceptable discrimination within the family between sons and daughters, she intuitively rebelled against the values advocated by the society in which she was growing up. Values embodied, as was mentioned earlier, by her mother. Halimi is thus aware that in rejecting these values and rebelling against a world order which Fritna had made her own, she was also denying everything her mother stood for, and she wonders whether she gained emancipation at the cost of her mother’s love. One might attribute Halimi’s liberation to her ability to conceive of a different future and adopt a utopian mode of thinking, in contrast to Fritna for whom the patterns of the past determine the present.

*Fritna* is therefore the painful story of a love that is not returned, of the child’s quest for maternal love and a nurturing female role-model. This takes the form of a utopic longing for a harmonious mother-daughter relationship which Halimi presents as indispensable in shaping a girl’s own identity, but which she is denied. The mother figure as model which the little girl seeks to emulate is an idea already explored by Beauvoir, but Halimi also introduces a strong sensual element. For her it is not only in the everyday familiarity with another woman that a girl discovers how to become a woman, but it is very much in the sensual, almost erotic, intimacy with another female body that the girl comes to fully apprehend her own body and develop a positive self-image :

<sup>10</sup> *op.cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> See *Le Lait de l’oranger*, pp. 26–27 and p. 412 and *Fritna*, p. 208.

<sup>12</sup> *Fritna*, p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> S. de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe II*, Chapter ‘La Mère’, p. 329.

<sup>14</sup> *op.cit.*, p. 332.

<sup>15</sup> *Fritna*, p. 124.

La mère est cette autre, modèle sublimé, à la fois mis sur un piédestal et mêlé à votre chair, à votre quotidien. Elle est la femme que sera la fille. C'est par l'amour maternel que se construit le rapport au corps.<sup>16</sup>

Yet the maternal figure in *Fritna* is portrayed as negative and repressive. It is strongly suggested that she herself is the victim of a culture that is eminently oppressive to women. Conditioned entirely by the past and unable to envisage a better future, rather than questioning this state of affairs, Fritna becomes its most inflexible representative, acting in turn as her daughters' oppressor and preventing their emancipation.

We shall see that a very different picture emerges from Benguigui's work. This may be attributed in part to the fact that her study focuses on Maghrebi women in the 1990s, as opposed to Halimi's account of childhood set in the 1940s. Although the works discussed here are contemporary, both being published in the late 1990s, there are nevertheless obvious differences in terms of the periods of history described. In her book Halimi evokes childhood in the Tunisia of the 1930s and 1940s, that is before decolonisation. Her mother figure was born in the early part of the twentieth century, and was therefore conditioned by values that belonged to a different culture and era. Benguigui's work, in contrast, describes the Maghrebi immigration to France which started before World War II, and gradually increased throughout the 1950s and 1960s as it began to include women and young children. The women whom Benguigui interviews were born between ten and twenty years after Halimi and, as young women, were part of that second wave of immigration. Crucially however, Halimi and Benguigui's anonymous women all experienced exile and discovered a different, less oppressive culture at a tender age. The important difference between them is one of education. Benguigui describes uneducated Maghrebi mothers in exile as follows:

Analphabètes pour la plupart, les mères ne pourront que recréer, à l'intérieur de ce logement temporaire, l'univers de la société maghrébine, avec ses traditions, sa religion ...<sup>17</sup>

As women, they enjoy a measure of emancipation in their adopted country. Yet, being illiterate, they also experience social exclusion and racism. If they gain some degree of emancipation through work, they have nonetheless to struggle against humiliation and social rejection in their adopted land.

Halimi, in contrast, benefited from the colonial system in place in Tunisia when she was growing up and, although her family could not afford to subsidise their children's studies—certainly not those of a daughter for whom the accepted fate was an early arranged marriage—she benefited first from free education provided by the French educational system in Tunis and, subsequently, secured a grant available for poor but academically gifted children in order to attend the fee-paying *lycée*. She explains how her academic success at school went, at best, completely unnoticed by her parents, who were prepared, however, to devote the little money the family earned to helping the lazy and academically untalented eldest son to secure a career. At worst, her parents regarded her high grades as some form of abnormality, feeling that she was usurping her eldest brother's prerogative. Nevertheless, and in spite of all obstacles, she seized the chance to continue her education, for she suspected very early on that it might be her means of liberation from what, as a child, she intuitively felt was oppression. She describes her childhood thirst for reading and knowledge as a source of growing self-assurance and resistance:

Avec mes premières lectures, m'est venu un certain apaisement. C'est un peu ça la connaissance. J'y trouvais l'assurance que j'avais un long chemin à parcourir, j'y puisais les forces nécessaires pour résister. Résister au poids accablant d'être femme.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> op.cit., p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> Y. Benguigui, *Mémoires d'immigrés*, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> La Cause des femmes, p. 34.

At the end of her secondary education, faced with family pressures to marry, she left Tunisia to go to University in Paris, in what she saw as exile from the land of her childhood, but also the necessary condition of her liberation: ‘Cet exil qui était pourtant la condition de ma liberté’.<sup>19</sup> And here lies another difference between Halimi and the women studied by Benguigui. Probably thanks in part to the education she received in Tunis, Halimi chose to leave an oppressive culture and settle in France, whereas Benguigui’s women usually had little say in the matter, being compelled to do so by a father or husband. Perhaps because of their lack of independence and education, they yearn for the support of a community with familiar values and traditions, and remain more strongly attached to the home country than Halimi. Although she describes exile from Tunisia as an insurmountable absence, the terms in which Halimi evokes this loss are more reminiscent of a sense of gentle nostalgia than the deep yearning expressed by Benguigui’s interviewees. For Halimi, the expression of attachment to her roots mostly takes the form of passages about climate and landscape that sometimes recall travel brochures, or it is symbolised by the cooking of traditional dishes. In *Fritna*, it is the ritual of preparing and pouring mint leaf tea for the assembled family that provides the link to her ancestors; in *Le Lait de l’oranger*, it is the cooking of traditional *couscous* which brings back childhood memories:

Chaque couscous me relie à l’enfance. A l’écart de mon agitation quotidienne, je mesure le chemin parcouru. De ma grand-mère à moi. De sa vie aux mille enfermements, à la mienne aux mille occupations. De son univers clos, protégé, à mon monde réel.<sup>20</sup>

This may suggest why Halimi does not display the same feelings of anguish at having left the home country. Education awakened her to her oppression, and made it possible to imagine a different future, a utopia that could only be realised in exile. For the uneducated women whom Benguigui portrays, however, it is only exile that triggers a degree of awareness and emancipation, leaving them with unresolved, conflicting loyalties. Nonetheless, exile and exposure to a different culture do bring benefits, leading them to question past values and practices, and to forge more positive relationships with their own daughters.

Benguigui’s documentary film, *Mémoires d’immigrés – L’héritage maghrébin* tells the story of Maghrebi immigration in France through the accounts of the immigrants themselves, punctuated with contributions from representatives of the ruling class—politicians, civil servants or employers. The film is organised in three parts, each part representing a new stage in the chronology of Maghrebi immigration to France. The first part is thus entitled ‘Les Pères’ and focuses on the first phase of this influx of population, that of the men who came alone, seeking work in a country rebuilding itself after a World War and in desperate need of cheap labour. This constituted, according to one official voice in the film, ‘une immigration conjoncturelle’.<sup>21</sup> When the women, sometimes accompanied by young children, followed and settled in France, this type of immigration was regarded rather as ‘une immigration structurelle’ in that it made the return to the homeland much more problematic. This is indeed the main theme of the second part of the film entitled ‘Les Mères’, in which exile and conflict between the home culture and that of the adopted land form a leitmotiv throughout.

These poor, and mostly illiterate, Maghrebi women had been forced into exile by husbands and the French government as a result of the introduction in 1974 of a policy of ‘regroupement familial’. The newly elected President of the Republic, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, had declared it inhumane to keep family members apart and for men to live alone, separated from wives and children. However, good intentions were not supported by long-term plans. The infrastructure necessary to accommodate growing families was lacking, and this meant that some Maghrebi families lived for years in temporary housing, the infamous ‘cités de transit’. No one had really thought through the

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<sup>19</sup> *op.cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> *Le Lait de l’oranger*, p. 357.

<sup>21</sup> Omar Samaoli, (Directeur de l’observatoire gérontologique des migrations), interviewed in Y. Benguigui, *Mémoires d’immigrés – Héritage maghrébin*, ‘Les Mères’, Canal+Video, 1998.

NB. In the interests of clarity, the title of the book is given in italics, whereas that of the documentary is underlined.

implications of a Maghrebi population settling in France. Neither the government, as Benguigui's film clearly shows, nor the immigrants themselves, who clung for years to the utopian belief in their eventual return to the homeland and therefore refused to put down roots. What became known as 'le mythe du retour' is poignantly evoked by Benguigui in the book accompanying the film, in which she describes her own childhood in the north of France :

Je revois ma mère, allant et venant dans la pièce principale, où s'entassaient des cartons qui contenaient nos vêtements, de la vaisselle, des draps, des serviettes... Je l'entends encore se dire à elle-même: 'l'année prochaine, on s'en va! On repart au pays.' (...) Le temps a passé. Mon père n'a pas demandé l'aide au retour, mais ma mère a continué d'empiler les éternels cartons. Mes frères et soeurs ont grandi, les mains sur les poignées des valises. Moi aussi.<sup>22</sup>

For these women, the emotional wrench of leaving the homeland and parting from relatives was relived intensely years later when the illusion of a possible return to their native land was finally shattered. This section of the film in particular is imbued with nostalgia and the heartache of displacement, expressed through images of ports and departing ships, and by songs in Arabic, subtitled in French. Yearning for the native land is often associated with the mother figure : 'Mère, ô mère adorée, (...) toi qui es ailleurs...' The theme also figures in the book associated with the film, through the recurrent evocation of 'déracinement', 'arrachement', 'écartèlement', terms which underline the rift between lands and cultures.

Once in France, lured by the prospect of economic prosperity, the women often experience a brutal awakening. This is described in the film by a contributor who highlights the contrast between the prevalent myth of the French paradise and the harsh reality encountered, that of the shanty town or slum which too often turns out to be their first home in the adopted country—what this woman refers to as 'le trou', a truly dystopian place. At the same time, over the years, the possibility of returning home becomes ever more remote. The women interviewed by Benguigui offer two reasons for this, one being that their children were brought up, and often born, in France. They do not speak Arabic and, however dissatisfied they may be with life in France, they do not harbour any desire to return to their parents' homeland, even if they value their dual cultural identity. The mothers therefore share a common dilemma, torn between the pull towards their native land and the unthinkable consequences, namely leaving their children, something which most of them explicitly describe as inconceivable :

Je suis obligée de rester avec mes enfants ici en France, je peux pas vivre toute seule, je saurais pas. Ma vie, elle est ici, je peux pas vivre ailleurs.<sup>23</sup>

Another source of conflict is their ambivalent relationship with the adopted country. On the one hand, France is associated with the painful experience of exile and presumably—although Benguigui, in her attempt at reconciling communities, does not dwell on this—subjection to exclusion and racism. Yet, it is also synonymous with emancipation. As women in France, they have been able to build a new life for themselves which would have been unimaginable had they stayed in the Maghreb. Several women talk of having gradually abandoned use of the Islamic veil since living in France, and now cite pressures on women to wear the veil in their home country as a reason for not returning there permanently. One sixty-three year old talks of the freedom of movement acquired in France: free to go where she pleases, to Bordeaux, Paris or the seaside, she enjoys spending the afternoon in a swimming costume without attracting attention.

Above all, however, it is as mothers that these women's lives have changed dramatically. Often because of the extreme poverty that Maghrebi families had to face during their first years in France, but also thanks to the liberal climate and greater opportunities for social mobility, mothers started to work outside the home. Several state specifically that this was in order to allow their children to stay

<sup>22</sup> Y. Benguigui, *Mémoires d'immigrés*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>23</sup> Y. Benguigui., *Mémoires d'immigrés*, second interview, 'Khira Allam' [The following are my own transcriptions of the filmed interviews.]

on at school. This has a crucial impact in developing their self-awareness, their growing independence and, unlike Fritna, the realisation that life could be different. Some, forced into marriage before their arrival in France, once they gained a measure of financial independence, found the strength to divorce. Others stayed for the sake of the children, but, in contrast to the negative mother figure in *Fritna*, they determined to offer their children a better life, especially in terms of access to schooling:

[...] à douze ans, j'ai quitté l'école pour faire le ménage, pour me mettre le voile (...). Mes parents, ils n'ont pas voulu que je continue mes études, c'est pour ça que je me suis vengée sur mes enfants: je voulais que mes enfants, ils arrivent à faire ce que j'ai pas fait.<sup>24</sup>

It is especially in relation to treatment of their daughters that the women depart most noticeably from the experience of their own upbringing, probably similar to that described in *Fritna*. One of those interviewed echoes the conflicts described in *Fritna*, and admits to giving her sons a different education from that received by her daughters:

J'ai été très dure avec les filles et sympa avec les garçons. Les garçons, j'ai donné tout [*sic*].<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, this interview is the most negative as far as the woman's appreciation of life in France is concerned, and, unlike other interviewees, her spoken French is so poor that it needs to be subtitled. This suggests a limited degree of integration into French society and therefore a continuation of practices, such as the discriminatory character of girls' education, which would match those in place in the Maghreb.

The other women, however, assert that they have broken the cycle of oppression from mother to daughter described in *Fritna*. Rather than wanting to cut short their daughters' studies in favour of an arranged marriage, as in their own case and in *Fritna*, they have shown fierce determination in encouraging daughters in particular to continue their studies. Khira Allam, for example, whose eldest daughter, Shéhérazade, was the focus of a short film by Benguigui for a national television channel on the successful integration of second generation Maghrebis, states that she brought up her daughters in this spirit of emancipation and aspiration for a better life:

J'ai pas été ni à l'école, ni français, ni algérien alors je suis restée comme une bête (...). Toi, essaie de voyager, d'étudier, essaie de passer ta vie mieux que nous [*sic*].<sup>26</sup>

Having remained within an arranged marriage devoid of romantic love, she also declares she has positively encouraged her daughters to find love and marry the man of their choice:

A mes filles, j'ai toujours dit, vous voulez se marier, ne faites pas de bêtises, choisissez un mari qui vous plaît, pourvu qu'il est intelligent, il vous aime, c'est le principal [*sic*].<sup>27</sup>

Another woman, whose arranged marriage at a young age took place in the home country, and whose wedding night borders on rape committed with the assent of the community, states her determination to avoid the same fate befalling her daughters: '[...] mais jamais je n'aurais fait à mes filles ce qu'on m'a fait à moi.'<sup>28</sup>

It is worth pointing out that this statement appears as part of the woman's reappraisal of the Muslim religion and what might be seen as an acceptable version of Islam for French Muslims: the

<sup>24</sup> *Mémoires d'immigrés*, first interview: 'Aldjia Bouachera'.

<sup>25</sup> *Mémoires d'immigrés*, fifth interview: 'Yamina Amri'.

<sup>26</sup> *Mémoires d'immigrés*, second interview: 'Khira Allam'.

<sup>27</sup> *Mémoires d'immigrés*, second interview: 'Khira Allam'.

<sup>28</sup> *Mémoires d'immigrés*, third interview: 'Yamina Baba Aïssa'.

observance of Ramadan from the age of fourteen, and prayers five times a day when old enough and if work allows. The less repressive attitude to daughters on the part of a mother who, nevertheless, claims Muslim identity for herself, is also conditioned by the new French context. The woman clearly links the process of self-awareness that leads her, after years of domestic physical abuse and imprisonment in the marital home, to find a job and seek a divorce, with the experience of her teenage daughter running away from home. In a kind of osmosis between mother and daughter, she explains how she was given a second chance to relive her teenage years, cut short by a nightmarish arranged marriage, through the experience of her daughter's adolescence. The daughter's struggle for emancipation inspires the mother to follow her example, and in turn she becomes a better mother: 'Et la liberté, moi je l'ai prise mais je l'ai donnée à mes enfants.'<sup>29</sup>

It is interesting to note here how Benguigui stresses different elements of the same story in film and book. The woman, known in the book simply as Yamina, and as Yamina Baba Aïssa in the film, gives an account of the barbaric practices to which she was subjected when married very young in the homeland, which is considerably toned down in the film. The documentary, first shown on cable channel Canal Plus in May 1997 and, unusually for a documentary, shown in cinemas the following year, received enormous media attention and was acclaimed by critics as having given a voice to those who had been silent for so long. Benguigui, who toured France to show the film and encourage communities to debate the issues it tackled, also made a concerted effort to unite rather than divide, which is one reason why the question of the war of independence is barely touched upon. Similarly, it can be assumed that the more shocking sexual episodes condoned in North Africa are omitted in the film in deference to the cultural sensibilities of a French audience, whilst being retained in the book where the different medium ensured that damage would be limited. This exercise in damage limitation only serves to emphasise the acute cultural conflicts which surround women's status, conflicts which the mother figure in particular seeks to reconcile.

For this is indeed what the women strive for, a utopian reconciliation, both geographical and cultural, between their country of origin—which they almost never name but simply call 'le pays' or 'là-bas'—and their adoptive home. This, however, remains an impossible dream, first because of the geographical distance which necessitates journeys to and fro between the two countries, and is encapsulated in a powerful metaphor used by one woman who compares the mothers of the first generation of immigrants to the waves of the sea: sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other, in that liminal space characteristic of utopia.<sup>30</sup> Probably more crucial still to the rift are the cultural conflicts of which the women themselves are well aware, yet cannot reconcile. Zorah, for example, after praising the beauty of the landscape in Southern Algeria, nevertheless concludes by saying :

Seulement voilà, on ne peut pas vivre là-bas. Rien qu'avec ces histoires de voile, on ne peut pas, nous ne sommes pas habituées.<sup>31</sup>

The same point is stressed in the film by two friends who explain that when they go back to the Maghreb for a long holiday, they eventually feel bored and unable to breathe freely, and only start to feel better when they go through Algerian customs and know that two hours later they will be in Paris. They pursue the image of suffocation by an oppressive culture, commenting that when the plane starts its descent towards Paris, their breathing gets easier.

This ambivalence towards the native country, combined with the roots they have put down in France through their children and through their own new life-style, means that the best they can hope for is to live 'moitié-moitié',<sup>32</sup> as one of the women expresses it; or to be at home neither here nor there, in no-place, to put this in utopian terms. Perhaps the only possible reconciliation is in death, and Benguigui ends both book and film with the concept of the sacred resting place, focusing on the final choice the women are forced to make. Having struggled through life to achieve an utopian

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<sup>29</sup> *Mémoires d'immigrés*, third interview: 'Yamina Baba Aïssa'

<sup>30</sup> Y. Benguigui, *Femmes d'Islam* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), p. 155. This first book by Benguigui, also accompanied by a documentary film, gave her the idea for a film focusing more closely on Maghrebi immigration in France.

<sup>31</sup> *Mémoires d'immigrés*, p. 98.

<sup>32</sup> *op.cit.*, p. 114.

fusion between two lands and two cultures, few remain indifferent as to their burial place. However well integrated they appear to be in their adopted country, most choose to prepare actively for the organisation of the final journey home to North Africa for their mortal remains. This is demonstrated by the existence of associations to which many Maghrebi workers have paid subscriptions throughout their working lives so that the cost of this final journey is covered. One woman in the film states her determination to stay in France as long as she lives, however badly she and her fellow countrymen may be treated. With death, however, comes the ultimate opportunity for the excluded to exercise their freedom of choice as to their future resting place :

Même si les Français, ils nous renvoient, jusqu'à la mort on restera là. Quand on meurt, ça y est, ils nous ramènent dans le cercueil, on revient plus.<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, in Benguigui's work, the recurrent theme of the choice of burial place symbolises the progressive integration into French society of the Maghrebi community. For parents, the first generation immigrants, there is little doubt about where they want to be buried. The men, less torn between two cultures than the women, look resolutely towards their homeland. Even the women, with all their ambivalence toward the oppressive culture of their homeland and their relative emancipation and empowerment discovered in their adopted country, are nevertheless loath to bestow on French soil this sacred role. However determined they may be to be integrated in French society when alive, in death their wish is in most cases to return to the country of origin, as Benguigui states in her book:

Rares sont celles qui envisagent de sacraliser la terre de France comme terre de sépulture.<sup>34</sup>

This is such a powerful theme in Benguigui's work that she chooses to conclude her film with it, explored now through the words of the second generation, since the last part of the film is devoted to 'Les Enfants'. Over images showing a Muslim cemetery, a child of Maghrebi immigrants, now a grown woman obviously well integrated in French society, analyses the gradual symbolic process of a whole community putting down roots in the following terms:

Les immigrés maghrébins qui meurent ici continuent quand même à renvoyer les corps pour sépulture au pays. On voit de plus en plus de gens qui meurent et qui se font enterrer ici. Et certainement, il y a quelque chose de l'ordre du symbolique qui est en train de se passer où on accepte que le retour à la terre, il se passe ici. Cela veut dire que l'inscription, elle est faite. Quand on en sera là, ça veut dire qu'effectivement on a décroché par rapport au pays d'origine mais je crois qu'on est dans quelque chose qui est en train de se défaire et de se refaire ici mais on n'a pas fini; c'est un mouvement qui s'amorce et qui s'imposera forcément.<sup>35</sup>

Benguigui's greatest achievement is probably, as has been acknowledged by most critics, to have given a voice to otherwise silent and anonymous immigrants, particularly women, for whom she shows most empathy. Exiled from their homeland, excluded because of their difference and poverty in their adopted country, these displaced women have experienced the pain of being torn between two cultures, that of their native land that oppressed them as women, and that of the country of exile where they have nevertheless found emancipation and new freedoms. It is this very process of continuing to be exiled in a less repressive environment that has forced upon them a reappraisal of their home culture which the dominant male is not forced to undertake to the same extent. As a result, they have often achieved a more positive reconciliation than that depicted in Halimi's *Fritna*, between their role as guardian of the family's traditions and home culture on the one hand, and their maternal duties on the other. And yet in the first pages of her previous book, *Femmes d'Islam*,<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Mémoires d'immigrés*, fourth interview: 'Zohra Flissi'.

<sup>34</sup> *Mémoires d'immigrés*, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup> 'Les Enfants' in *Mémoires d'immigrés*.

<sup>36</sup> *Femmes d'Islam*, pp. 9–10.

Benguigui describes the education she received as a girl, brought up in a Maghrebi family recently arrived in France. The imprisonment within the home and family, the subservience to the men of the family that was expected of her, the religious upbringing that is limited to a series of taboos and interdictions, the forced marriage and her rebellion are very close echoes of Halimi's description of childhood in *Fritna*. Although some thirty years may have elapsed, their lives mirror each other in that both need to run away from their families in order to escape the fate assigned to them; and both subsequently find fulfilment in their professional lives. For Benguigui, the question that dominated her adolescence, namely how to be both a woman and a Muslim, is equally applicable to Halimi's Jewish background in Tunisia. Thus, through the two works studied here, it is the question of a utopian reconciliation of these two aspects of their identity that is addressed.

In the end, both writers needed to remove themselves from their family's suffocating clutches in order to build a successful life and career. In the case of Halimi, this also meant exile from her homeland as the basic precondition of her independence. But if she was able to relinquish her native culture without experiencing the anguish described in *Mémoires d'immigrés*, her particular quest took the form of longing for a utopian mother figure who could have served as role model and helped her understand her identity as a woman. Interestingly, *Fritna* was a contemporary of Simone de Beauvoir, whom Halimi describes as 'la libératrice, l'exemple', and 'l'une de mes références essentielles'.<sup>37</sup> Halimi contextualises her first reading of *Le Deuxième Sexe* as providing the key to comprehend and reject the numerous taboos and traditional practices surrounding femininity in the Tunisia of her childhood years:

Venant d'où je venais, escortée de rabbins dans un pays d'islam, plongeant dans les tabous de la virginité, de la fécondité, de la maternité, je reçus la dénonciation de ces mythes comme le miracle de mon identité révélée. On m'avait volé la mienne, menti, fabriqué un imaginaire. Je découvrais mon existence, comme un sujet libre, transcendant mon avenir, mes projets.<sup>38</sup>

This enlightenment from a positive female figure contrasts with Halimi's description of how her mother welcomed the news of her first period. The young Halimi is portrayed as ignorant of the changes taking place in her body, but seeking reassurance and explanations. Hungry for knowledge, and confident of her mother's ability to elucidate this new mystery, she encounters instead a series of incomprehensible warnings and prohibitions, with the result that she describes herself as being denied the means to understand—and move beyond—her biological condition:

Je restai sur ma faim de savoir, sans rien oser demander. J'ai fait connaissance avec tous les rites du silence, de la clandestinité, de la culpabilité.<sup>39</sup>

This galvanised Halimi into fighting for herself and for other victims of oppression. With the publication of *Fritna*, however, she makes clear that it is above all her life-long quest for her mother's love which determines her entire adult life. A direct link is established between the commitment she has shown in public life to defending the oppressed, notably women, and her problematic relationship with the key female figure of her early life. *Fritna* evokes the impossible reconciliation of her need for maternal love and for personal emancipation and fulfilment.

This is echoed by Benguigui who, despite the age difference between them, shares with Halimi the experience of access to a good education and a rewarding career, and remembers with similar sadness her childhood and the supremely negative and oppressive attitudes of female relatives:

Toutes ces femmes qui se penchaient sur la petite fille ne ressemblaient pas aux gentilles fées des contes: elles passaient leur temps à interdire. Elles énuméraient tout ce que la petite fille n'avait pas le droit de faire, et elles affirmaient que ces interdictions venaient toutes de Dieu lui-même, par l'intermédiaire d'un grand livre qu'elles appelaient le Coran. (...) Pourquoi cette honte d'être née fille?

<sup>37</sup> *Le Lait de l'oranger*, pp. 326–8.

<sup>38</sup> *op.cit.*, p. 330.

<sup>39</sup> *La Cause des femmes*, p. 36.

Pourquoi était-il impossible de poser ces questions aux autres femmes de la famille, qui ne lui parlaient jamais de tout cela, même à sa propre mère?<sup>40</sup>

Eventually forced to run away from an arranged marriage at the age of eighteen, estranged for many years afterwards from her family, especially her father, she cut herself off from a home culture which, even in exile in France—or perhaps all the more so if return to the homeland was ever to be possible—insisted on marriage as the only acceptable future open to girls.

Here Benguigui too describes her escape from family and cultural background as the source of her empowerment and successful career as a film maker. Significantly, she sees her interest in working in a visual medium and assuming a public profile as originating in a repressive cultural background in which girls were meant to obey and never had a voice:

Je me suis enfuie... Je me suis jetée à corps perdu dans un univers professionnel où j'ai utilisé la caméra, l'image, peut-être pour remplacer cette parole que mon éducation ne m'avait pas habituée à prendre, pour raconter d'autres histoires que la mienne, et je suis devenue réalisatrice de films documentaires.<sup>41</sup>

Both women, then, were forced to move away and experience their own form of exile from family and Maghrebi culture in order to achieve emancipation and professional fulfilment. During childhood, both had been denied a relationship with a close female relative who could act as a positive role model, or might, at the very least, strive for a better life for the next generation than she had known herself. The result is that, for both authors, the reconciliation of cultural conflicts surrounding the mother figure proves impossible, utopian. However, most of the women portrayed in Benguigui's film suggest there is hope of more positive mother-daughter relations within the Maghrebi community, and a more optimistic vision of the future. As for the prospect of a harmonious fusion of two lands and cultures, this remains an impossible dream in both the works studied. Yet, for the individual, utopianism is shown to be a constructive, liberating force.

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<sup>40</sup> Femmes d'Islam, pp. 9–10.

<sup>41</sup> *op.cit.*, p. 10.