‘A Double-edged Knife’

Houria Niati*

Interviewed by Shakila Maan

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I was born in Algeria when it was still under French rule and was six years old when the war for independence broke out. For seven years of my life, I witnessed street battles, bombs everywhere, French army raids on homes and all the horrors of war. In 1962, independence was proclaimed at last. The French left Algeria. The death of my beloved father came soon after in 1964. He passed away from a heart attack while playing football. My dream of becoming an artist was shattered. At the age of 18 I became a bread winner for the family – I had six sisters and one brother to look after.

My father was a self-taught artist-painter, mainly landscape, inspired by Cezanne. During WW2 he had been called up to the French army and at the age of 22, badly injured by a dynamite blast that killed several of his mates. He started painting in the hospital where he was in convalescence for six months. When my father passed away, he left behind a lot of oil paintings. He was the one who taught me to paint and to read French Literature (Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir). He used to read poetry to us from the French classics, from Victor Hugo to Rimbaud. He was very happy teaching us Arabic songs as kids, so I grew up in this mixture of both cultures. When my father died, I took the pledge to carry on his work as an artist. But I wanted my art to scream to the world about what Algeria went through during the war.

It is not hard for an Algerian woman to be an artist. We have Baya who left an amazing legacy for women to follow. The government has never been against it. I had several good exhibitions touring Algeria. I think at the end of the day it is the will power of the women that matters and makes the difference. We have great female singers and poets. Algeria is very specific in terms of culture because we had a fusion of influences from French Culture and also Arab/Berber Islamic and African cultures – until we had the extremist movement that came from the Middle East that tried to kill freedom of speech and expression. There are a lot of female artists who fled the country after the so-called 'civil war' in the 1990s. But now they have massive voices as writers, singers, and painters! And they are allowed to go in and out of the country as they wish. Freedom of expression was very much part of the Algerian vocabulary during French colonisation. In the 1950s we all took to the street screaming our freedom. My most poignant recollection is from when I was only 10 and I took the streets with four classmates, all girls, to demonstrate against the horrific repression orchestrated by the French army. We were arrested and taken to the police station of my town. We were interrogated one-by -one and placed in dark cells. Our parents were called. We were lucky enough to be in French school so the school master insisted they should let us go, as we were under aged! The experience was very traumatic. Many people died for freedom of expression. I am very aware of what it means. It is not just words; their meaning comes from the heart. When I painted 'No to Torture' around 1982 and 1983 it was about freedom.

'No to Torture' is a visual commentary on a Delacroix work 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment' that he painted in 1834 and presented at the Salon of Paris in the same year. In 1832, Delacroix visited Algiers for three days when his ship (travelling from Morocco) had to stop for repairs. The chief of Algiers harbour invited Delacroix, who was visiting for the first time, for a discovery tour. He ended up in a 'harem' where he sketched women

inside wearing traditional outfits. The women seem to be doing nothing, reclining amid this incredibly beautiful Islamic interior design. The movement of Orientalism started developing in France after Delacroix's work was shown at the Salon of Paris and attracted tremendous interest. Several French artists, including Picasso, repeated the same 'tableau' but in their own way.

'No to Torture' Installation 1982

I was in a state of anger when I did "No to Torture". I treated the women in a very aggressive way, with primary colours to emphasise that women were repressed, and the Orientalist artists were not representing women who fought for their identity and freedom. During the war for independence, women were fighters and politically involved: they were jailed, interrogated and tortured by French power that was ruling Algeria. The French army and police were controlling the country everywhere.

Houria Niati's Art speaks loudly to the theme of free expression, from 'No to Torture' (1982) to recent work examining censorship after the revolution and following the civil war in Algeria. Niati challenges the world beyond representations of the civil war, reaching back to the country's brutal anti-colonialist struggles and condemning the silencing of women's voices in contemporary Algeria. An Algerian ambassador referred to Niati's intervention as a 'double-edged knife'. women's freedom of expression – from their experiences of the independence struggle to their critical 21st century voices – is seen as a threat that has to be controlled.

Niati came to London in 1977 to study English language and art. After graduating in fine art at the Croydon College of Art and Design (1979-1982) she exhibited at the Africa Centre gallery followed by an art residency at the Riverside Studio. In 1983 her work was exhibited in the show *From Two Worlds* at the Whitechapel Gallery, which focused on artists born 'somewhere else'. She has exhibited alongside well-established artists such as Lubaina Himid and Sonya Boyce. Since 'No to Torture' was exhibited four decades ago, she has shown her work at multiple exhibitions across the UK, US and Europe; this has included the Palazzo Mora in the 2015 Venice *Biennale* and she has been invited again in the next future (dates to be confirmed).

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