

University of Belgrade
Faculty of Political Science

Master's Academic Studies: International Relations
Module: Peace, Security, and Development

Master's Thesis

Unveiling Power: Gender, Identity, and the Politics of the Hijab in Algeria, 1954–2021

Mentor: Aleksandra Perišić, PhD

Student: Ines Jovanović, 3002/2023

Belgrade, 2025.

List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form / Meaning
BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
CFC-Algérie	Collectif Féministe pour le Changement – Algérie
DW	Deutsche Welle
FACE	Femmes algériennes pour un changement vers l'égalité
FIS	Front Islamique du Salut
FLN	Front de Libération Nationale
Hirak	Haraka (“movement” in Arabic)
MA	Master of Arts
AR	Arab Reform Initiative
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
POMEPS	Project on Middle East Political Science
UN	United Nations
Wassila Network	–

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Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance, support, and encouragement of many people to whom I owe my deepest gratitude.

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Aleksandra Perišić, whose invaluable advice, constructive feedback, and patience have guided this research from its earliest conception to its final form. Their insight and academic rigor have profoundly shaped my understanding of postcolonial theory, gender studies, and the politics of representation.

I am equally grateful to the faculty members of the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade for fostering a stimulating intellectual environment and for their generous support throughout my studies.

Special thanks are also due to my colleagues and friends who provided thoughtful discussions, shared valuable resources, and encouraged me during the most challenging phases of this work. Their friendship and intellectual companionship made this journey far more meaningful.

I would also like to acknowledge the unwavering support of my family. Their patience, understanding, and constant belief in me gave me the strength to persevere and complete this research. To my parents, who taught me the value of education and resilience, I dedicate this work with love and gratitude.

Finally, I wish to extend my appreciation to all the women of Algeria, whose courage, creativity, and perseverance inspired every page of this thesis. Their stories and struggles give meaning to the academic endeavor, reminding us that scholarship must always remain connected to life, justice, and human dignity.

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Abstract

In Algeria, the hijab has historically functioned as a deeply contested symbol, woven into shifting political, cultural, and gendered landscapes. Far from being a static religious marker, the veil has repeatedly been recoded to serve divergent agendas of resistance, nationalism, and reform. This thesis examines how Algerian women mobilized the hijab during two pivotal political moments: the War of Independence (1954–1962) and the Hirak movement (2019–2021). Through a comparative framework, the study highlights both continuities and ruptures in the hijab’s role as a tool of agency, identity, and dissent.

The research draws on postcolonial theory (Fanon 1965; Ahmed 1992), feminist critiques of nationalism (Lazreg 1994; Choi 2012), and Islamic feminist debates (Abu-Lughod 2013; Mahmood 2005) to analyze how the veil mediates power relations across historical contexts. Methodologically, it combines historical analysis of memoirs, testimonies, and films with discourse analysis of digital media, photographs, and protest reports from the Hirak (POMEPS 2020; Al-Raida Journal 2019).

Findings suggest that during the anti-colonial struggle, the veil became a weapon of subversion—both as a cultural emblem and as a disguise for FLN operatives—while in the Hirak movement, it symbolized broader negotiations over citizenship, democracy, and women’s visibility (MacMaster 2009; Vince 2015). The thesis argues that Algerian women have continuously redefined the hijab’s political significance, refusing reductive binaries of oppression or emancipation. By situating the hijab within both anti-colonial and contemporary democratic struggles, this study contributes to postcolonial feminist scholarship and demonstrates how symbols of faith and identity can be strategically transformed into instruments of resistance and national reimagining.

Keywords: Algeria; hijab; women; resistance; War of Independence; Hirak; postcolonial theory; feminist theory; Islamic feminism; gender and nationalism.

Introduction

This thesis examines how the political meaning of the veil (ḥijāb/ḥāik) shifts across different historical contexts in Algeria. It compares two key periods: the War of Independence (1954–1962), when the veil functioned as a tactical instrument of anticolonial resistance, and the Hirak movement (2019–2021), during which the veil became a means of asserting civic presence and democratic participation. I argue that the veil is not a fixed cultural or religious marker, but a politically malleable symbol whose meaning is produced through struggles over visibility, agency, and national identity. Understanding this transformation matters beyond the Algerian case, because it challenges both colonial and postcolonial narratives that portray Muslim women as passive symbols rather than active agents in shaping political life.

The relationship between gender, politics, and national identity in Algeria has long been shaped by negotiation and struggle. At the center of these debates stands the veil (ḥijāb), a garment whose meanings have consistently exceeded its religious or cultural associations. Across Algerian history, the veil has functioned as a political signifier and a symbolic terrain upon which competing visions of modernity, authenticity, and citizenship have been contested (Ahmed 1992, 144–147; Scott 2007, 159–163; Shirazi 2001, 22–25). The persistence of the hijab as a focal point of public and intellectual discourse reflects its centrality to women’s lived experiences and to broader projects of national meaning-making. This thesis examines how Algerian women have mobilized the veil as both symbol and tactic across two distinct historical moments: the War of Independence (1954–1962) and the Hirak movement (2019–2021). By adopting a comparative frame, it traces continuities and ruptures in the veil’s political function, arguing that practices of veiling and unveiling illuminate shifting conceptions of women’s agency, national identity, and citizenship (Lazreg 1994, 5–8; Vince 2015, 3–6). This study is important because it challenges dominant narratives—both Western and postcolonial—that continue to reduce the veil to a sign of oppression or static tradition. Instead, it demonstrates that the hijab is a dynamic, historically contingent symbol through which Algerian women articulate political presence, negotiate power, and claim belonging. By foregrounding women’s own strategies of representation and self-positioning, the thesis contributes to broader debates in postcolonial, feminist, and Islamic feminist scholarship about how subjects produce meaning under conditions of constraint and struggle.

This thesis examines how the political meaning of the hijab shifts across two pivotal moments in Algerian history: the War of Independence (1954–1962) and the Hirak movement (2019–2021). The central question guiding the study is: How and why does the hijab move from functioning as a tactical instrument of anti-colonial resistance to becoming a marker of civic presence and political voice in contemporary protest culture? I argue that while the hijab operated during the independence struggle as a strategic tool of concealment and insurgent mobility—allowing women to elude and manipulate colonial surveillance—it re-emerges in the Hirak as a self-authored sign of citizenship, used by women to claim visibility, belonging, and political agency in public space. This shift matters because it challenges both colonial and postcolonial narratives that have historically fixed the veil as either a symbol of oppression or of timeless cultural identity, revealing instead that its meaning is historically contingent, performative, and continuously renegotiated by Algerian women themselves.

During French colonial rule (1830–1962), Algerian women were positioned at the core of the colonial “civilizing mission,” where the veil became a metonym for resistance to assimilation. The dramatic unveiling ceremonies staged by the French in the late 1950s sought to demonstrate the supposed triumph of colonial emancipation (Flood 2016, 72–75; MacMaster 2009, 118–121). Colonial discourse framed the hijab as both a barrier to modernization and evidence of women’s subjugation (Thompson 2000, 48). Yet, these coercive interventions inadvertently politicized the garment, recasting it as a visible marker of cultural endurance and collective dignity. As Fanon observes in *A Dying Colonialism*, French obsession with unveiling inadvertently endowed the veil with new strategic value during the liberation struggle (Fanon 1965, 38–42). Women both veiled and unveiled tactically: veiling affirmed cultural identity, while unveiling enabled women to pass through checkpoints, transport materials, or participate in clandestine operations (Amrane-Minne 1999, 104–108; Heggoy 1974, 67). These practices illustrate the veil’s adaptability, demonstrating that its meaning during the war was not fixed but contingent and instrumental. Subsequent scholarship expands on this dynamic. MacMaster (2009, 131–136) and Evans (2012, 53–55) show how colonial propaganda celebrated unveiling as liberation while simultaneously silencing women’s own accounts. Clancy-Smith (1994, 273–276) further demonstrates that such ideological battles over women’s bodies were not unique to Algeria but characteristic of anti-colonial resistance across North Africa.

Independence in 1962, while heralded as collective liberation, did not translate into gender equality in political life. Women who had carried arms and sustained revolutionary networks were commemorated symbolically but excluded from institutional power (Cherifati-Merabtine 1994, 189–192; Lazreg 1994, 77–81). The 1984 *Family Code* formalized patriarchal authority and restricted women’s legal autonomy, despite ongoing activism (Charrad 2001, 142–147). As Vince (2015, 72–74) and Leonhardt (2013, 52–55) note, post-independence memorialization of women tended to reinforce, rather than challenge, patriarchal norms. The hijab, which once signified resistance, came to be associated with cultural authenticity and later became a contested marker within Islamist and secular nationalist discourses (Roy 1994, 65–69; Silverstein 2004, 204–208). The violence of the 1990s deepened this polarization.

The Hirak protests, beginning in February 2019, reopened debates on democracy, accountability, and gender equality. Women again emerged as prominent actors, not only in street demonstrations but also through digital media. Their visibility challenged state narratives and foregrounded the veil as a site of democratic agency rather than nationalist symbolism (POMEPS 2020, 81–83; *Al-Raida Journal* 2019, 37–39). In this context, the hijab did not function primarily as a marker of anti-colonial identity but as part of broader negotiations of civic belonging and generational political expression (Wassila Network 2019). The creation of the *carré féministe* (feminist square) on 22 March 2019 in Algiers is instructive. Led by Femmes algériennes pour un changement vers l’égalité (FACE), it gathered veiled and unveiled women together before they integrated into the larger march (Arab Reform Initiative 2021). The presence of veiled feminists carrying banners demanding legal equality directly challenged the binary—deeply entrenched in Algerian public discourse—that feminism is necessarily secular, urban, and Western. Here the veil was not a marker of conservatism, but a platform for articulating feminist demands. Women’s appearance in the veil reframed gender equality as internal to Algerian political tradition, not external to it. Yet these same banners were often torn, and these women verbally harassed, by male protesters who claimed feminism would “divide” the movement (Haddag 2021; IGG-Geo). In these confrontations, the veil became contested within the movement itself: for some, proof of authenticity; for others, invoked to justify exclusion. Digital media further amplified these tensions. Videos circulated online showing veiled young women leading chants or confronting police—images that circulated widely because they disrupted the post-independence iconography

of the veiled woman as a silent national emblem. These recordings were acts of self-witnessing, asserting “I speak, I appear, I claim.” Yet they also triggered backlash, particularly against unveiled activists, who were accused of moral transgression, and veiled feminists, who were accused of ideological contradiction (IGG-Geo). The veil, then, was a double-edged signifier: it could authorize political presence or be mobilized to silence political claim-making.

The hijab in the Hirak was neither simply traditional nor simply feminist—it became a tool through which women negotiated whether they were *seen*, how they were *seen*, and on what terms they could participate in public political life. Despite the temporal, political, and social distance between the War of Independence (1954–1962) and the Hirak movement (2019–2021), one of the most striking continuities is how the veil remains a charged site of symbolism, identity, and political mobilization. While the specific meanings, contexts, and discursive frames shift, underlying themes persist. This thesis explores these continuities along several axes: resistance and visibility, the veil as boundary/difference, gendered national imagination, and symbolic contestation. From the colonial era onward, the veil has been central to acts of resistance in Algeria—resistance in being, in refusing colonial prescriptions, and in asserting alternative visibility. During the war, women often used the veil tactically: to hide arms, pass through checkpoints, or evade suspicion. This practice converted the veil into more than a religious or cultural sign — it became a tool of covert action (Fanon 1965, 42–45; MacMaster 2009, 120–122). For example, the paradox of “seeing without being seen” was leveraged by veiled women in the colonial period (Tahir et al. 2021, 1838) — they moved in spaces where colonial surveillance assumed absence or passivity. In the Hirak, although the veil was no longer primarily a disguise, it continued to carry a thread of resistance. Women wearing the veil in protests asserted their right to appear in public political space on their own terms, confronting both lingering patriarchal expectations and state attempts to marginalize them. The act of being visible while veiled reclaimed that ritual of resistance — not in secrecy, but in open protest (POMEPS 2023, 82–84). The continuity lies in how the veil remains a medium through which women negotiate both presence and concealment in contested terrains.

Another continuity is the role of the veil as a symbol of cultural difference or boundary. Under colonial rule, the French framed the veil as marking the backwardness of Algerian women — a barrier to modernity to be stripped away (Alloula, in critiques, and colonial propaganda). The

forced unveiling campaigns (e.g. the 13 May 1958 event) sought to dissolve the boundary by coerced exposure (Fanon 1965, 32–34; MacMaster 2009, 116–118).

This notion of the veil as boundary continued to structure discourse in the Hirak. Even as the veil's meaning became more plural, it still demarcated who was perceived as “othered” inside and outside the movement. Women on either side of ideological divides—veiled conservatives, unveiled secularists—navigated that boundary in symbolic terms: “our difference is our strength” was a slogan used to insist that veiled and unveiled women both belong in the national protest space (Lassel 2020, 38–40). The veil remained a marker of difference — not as a barrier to participation, but as a locus of identity negotiation. Across both eras, the veil is woven into the gendered national imagination — i.e. how the nation imagines its ideal femininity, moral boundaries, and public virtue. In the independence struggle, the veiled woman was often constructed as the moral guardian of the national community: her purity and virtue stood in contrast to colonial vice and European corruption (Fanon 1965, 45; Alloula 1986). The unveiling campaigns sought to appropriate that moral terrain, recasting the unveiled woman as “modern” and the veiled as “traditional” (Perego 2015). In the Hirak, women protesters often mobilized moral symbolism in their dress. The presence of veiled women in protests was read by many as a statement of national legitimacy and a rebuke to those who would exclude religious identities from politics. As some participants put it, the veil could signal both piety and equal citizenship. The continuity lies in how the veil continues to operate as a moral canvas upon which national virtue, authenticity, and belonging are inscribed — even as its valuations shift (Ourahmoune & El Jurdi 2023, 3–5). Lastly, the veil has always been a contested symbol — a site of rhetorical struggle between opposing forces (colonial, nationalist, patriarchal, feminist). In the independence period, colonial authorities and nationalist propagandists fought over whether unveiling equaled emancipation or betrayal (Perego 2015; Alloula). The re-veiling by women after forced unveilings re-inscribed resistance (Fanon 1965, 34). In the Hirak, the veil was similarly contested. Feminist groups and protestors re-signified it: from colonial target to democratic symbol. They challenged both secularist critiques (that the veil is inherently oppressive) and conservative readings (that only veiled women can be legitimate). Social media activism, protest visuals, and feminist squares became arenas in which that contestation played out (Chaif et al. 2025; Hassani 2022). The continuity is that the veil never functions as a fixed sign — it is always subject to re-interpretation, appropriation, and resistance. While many symbolic meanings of the veil evolve between 1954

and 2019, these continuity threads show that women's relationship to the veil is not a rupture but a historical conversation — one that negotiates agency, presence, identity, and nation across time.

Theoretically, the thesis draws upon three intersecting frameworks. Postcolonial analysis (Fanon 1965; Ahmed 1992; Silverstein 2004) clarifies how the veil became a locus of colonial domination and anti-colonial resistance. Feminist critiques of nationalism (Lazreg 1994; Choi 2012; Vince 2015) reveal how women have been symbolically celebrated yet materially marginalized. Islamic feminist scholarship (Abu-Lughod 2013; Mahmood 2005; Wadud 1999) challenges binary readings of the hijab as either oppressive or liberatory, emphasizing situated agency. Taken together, these perspectives show that the hijab is not a static cultural artifact but a historically contingent and politically malleable symbol. This is important because when the hijab is treated as fixed—either as a timeless religious tradition or as a universal sign of women's oppression—it obscures the ways Algerian women themselves actively shape its meanings. Recognizing the hijab's mutability allows us to see women not as symbols onto whom political ideologies are projected, but as historically situated actors who negotiate power, belonging, and identity through their everyday and collective choices. Across both periods examined, Algerian women have actively reshaped their meaning, asserting themselves not as passive icons but as agents who contribute to the making of national identity and democratic life (Scott 2007, 172; Shirazi 2001, 58)

Literature review

The study of the hijab in Algeria sits at the intersection of postcolonial studies, feminist theory, and Islamic feminist scholarship. Rather than functioning as a stable cultural object, the veil has consistently operated as a political signifier whose meaning has shifted alongside historical and ideological transformations. Across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it has served alternately as a colonial object of scrutiny, a nationalist emblem, a symbol of religious piety, and more recently, a marker of civic participation and dissent. Understanding these layered significations requires tracing how different bodies of scholarship have conceptualized the veil over time.

The politicization of the veil enters academic discourse most prominently with Frantz Fanon's essay "Algeria Unveiled" in *A Dying Colonialism*, where he analyzes French colonial attempts to "liberate" Algerian women by staging highly publicized unveiling ceremonies (Fanon 1965, 38–42). Fanon argues that these spectacles aimed to demonstrate the supposed moral superiority of French rule. Yet, in response, the veil became a symbol of cultural resistance. Women strategically veiled to affirm collective identity and, at times, unveiled to facilitate clandestine operations, demonstrating the garment's tactical function during the liberation struggle (Amrane-Minne 1999, 104–108; Heggoy 1974, 67). Subsequent scholars expanded this analysis by examining how colonial authorities used gender to perform political domination. Neil MacMaster (2009, 118–121) shows how unveiling ceremonies in Algiers were deliberately choreographed as propaganda. Derek Flood (2016, 72–75) likewise interprets these events as staged assertions of colonial authority. Meanwhile, Martin Evans (2012, 53–55) and Elizabeth Thompson (2000, 48) situate Algeria within broader French imperial strategies, demonstrating how women's bodies functioned as ideological terrain. Collectively, these works show that during the War of Independence, the veil's meaning was neither fixed nor merely symbolic: it was actively mobilized within anti-colonial struggle as a flexible tool of concealment, communication, and identity.

Following independence, however, the meaning of the veil shifted. Feminist scholars argue that the nationalist narrative celebrated women as icons of revolutionary sacrifice while excluding them from post-war political structures. Marnia Lazreg (1994, 5–8) demonstrates how both colonial and nationalist discourse instrumentalized women's participation, elevating their symbolic presence

while marginalizing their voices and agency. Djamila Cherifati-Merabtine (1994, 189–192) shows how the post-independence state reasserted patriarchal norms, culminating in the 1984 *Family Code*, which institutionalized male guardianship. Natalya Vince (2015, 3–6; 72–74) adds a memory studies perspective, revealing the discrepancy between state commemorations of female fighters and women’s own recollections of marginalization. Adrienne Leonhardt (2013, 52–55) describes this as living between “two jailers”: colonial domination and nationalist patriarchy. Thus, where the veil once signified revolutionary defiance, in the post-independence era it came to index cultural authenticity and religious propriety, often within a framework that constrained women’s political participation (Roy 1994, 65–69; Silverstein 2004, 204–208). In other words, the symbolic capital accumulated during the war was not translated into structural political gains.

Islamic feminist scholarship broadens this discussion by challenging Eurocentric assumptions about veiling. Leila Ahmed traces the veil’s historical and political trajectories across colonial and postcolonial contexts, arguing that meanings attached to the hijab must be understood within specific cultural and temporal frameworks (Ahmed 1992, 144–147). In *A Quiet Revolution*, she documents the global resurgence of veiling and its varied motivations (Ahmed 2011). Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) cautions against the impulse to “save” Muslim women, insisting on analytic approaches grounded in women’s own experiences. Saba Mahmood (2005, 16–18) similarly argues that veiling can express ethical self-formation rather than subordination. Amina Wadud (1999) introduces feminist Qur’anic interpretation, while Joan Scott (2007, 159–163) and Faegheh Shirazi (2001, 22–25) examine the veil within global debates over secularism, identity, and state control. These perspectives are crucial because they unsettle binary frameworks—oppression vs. liberation—and instead foreground agency, negotiation, and meaning-making.

Recent scholarship on the HIRAK protests reframes the veil yet again. Research compiled by POMEPS (2020, 82–84) identifies women’s public visibility—veiled and unveiled—as central to HIRAK’s democratic ethos. Participation itself became a claim to citizenship. The *carré féministe* (Feminist Square) documented in *Al-Raida Journal* (2019, 38–40) shows how women carved out autonomous protest spaces while remaining embedded in the collective movement. Statements from the Wassila Network (2019) positioned women’s rights as inseparable from democratic reform, while documentary testimony (*DW Documentary* 2020) reveals the diversity of women’s experiences and motivations. Unlike during the 1950s, the veil in the HIRAK was not deployed in

opposition to a foreign colonial force. Instead, it became part of negotiations over internal political transformation: accountability, constitutional reform, state power, and generational identity. Appearing in public—veiled or unveiled—was itself an act of claiming political belonging.

Across these literatures, three patterns emerge:

1. The veil's meaning is historically contingent and politically malleable.
2. Women's agency has often been present in practice but obscured in narration.
3. The Hirak reopens questions of citizenship and visibility but has not yet been widely analyzed alongside earlier anti-colonial mobilizations.

The central gap, therefore, lies in comparative, cross-period analysis. Scholarship rarely examines the War of Independence and the Hirak together. This thesis fills that gap by analyzing how Algerian women mobilized the hijab across these two political moments and how these practices illuminate evolving notions of identity, agency, and citizenship. Examining its shifting meanings reveals how gender becomes a terrain of political contestation, and how women negotiate agency within—and against—dominant structures of authority.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis engages two central theoretical debates that shape scholarly discussions of the hijab in Muslim-majority contexts: *the nature of women's agency* and how it is theorized in Islamic feminist versus liberal feminist frameworks, and *the conceptualization of the veil as a symbol versus a practice*. These debates are not merely academic; they determine how women's actions are interpreted, how political participation becomes visible, and how the meaning of the hijab shifts across different historical configurations of power. By placing these debates in dialogue, this chapter establishes the analytical foundation through which the comparative analysis of the War of Independence (1954–1962) and the Hirak movement (2019–2021) unfolds.

Agency: Beyond the Binary of Resistance and Oppression

The first debate concerns agency. Liberal feminist frameworks often assume that liberation is achieved through resistance to tradition and that the veil signifies oppression. However, Saba Mahmood challenges this binary, arguing that agency must be understood not only as opposition to norms but also as the capacity to inhabit and re-signify them. As she writes, “*What may appear to be a case of women's submissiveness to patriarchal norms may in fact be a form of agency, a way of realizing moral and social ideals*” (Mahmood 2005, 15). This perspective reframes the hijab not as a passive inheritance but as an active ethical and political practice, particularly salient in contexts like Algeria, where women have alternated between veiling and unveiling strategically. During the War of Independence, militants veiled and unveiled tactically to manipulate colonial visual expectations (Drif 2017, 45–49). During the Hirak, women used the veil to assert presence in public space rather than retreat from it, demonstrating agency as negotiated civic participation rather than withdrawal (POMEPS 2023, 83–84). Mahmood's framework therefore enables us to see the hijab as a site of self-fashioning within political struggle—not a default sign of patriarchal control.

Much Western feminist scholarship has tended to interpret the veil through the lens of liberal emancipation narratives, in which unveiling represents freedom and veiling represents subordination. This was precisely the logic mobilized by French colonial authorities, who staged public unveiling ceremonies as symbolic proof of the “liberation” of Algerian women and the superiority of French civilization (Fanon 1965, 35–41). In this framework, agency is equated

with resisting tradition, religion, or masculine authority. Mahmood (2005) argues that liberal frameworks too narrowly define agency in terms of resistance. Her point is not that domination does not exist, but that agency can also take the form of inhabiting, modifying, or re-signifying norms from within. She writes:

“Agency is not the synonym of resistance to social norms, but a modality of action in the inhabiting of such norms.” (Mahmood 2005, 14)

This perspective is crucial for Algeria:

- During the War of Independence, women who adopted, retained, or removed the veil often did so strategically, rather than as expressions of piety or submission (Drif 2017, 45–49; Fanon 1965, 42–48).
- During the Hirak, veiled and unveiled women marched side by side, asserting citizenship through presence rather than through symbolic conformity to religious or nationalist scripts (POMEPS 2023, 83–84).

Thus, this thesis argues that agency is historically situated and expressed through the tactical appropriation of available cultural forms, including the hijab. Women’s political subjectivity must therefore be interpreted not by asking whether they resisted norms, but how they navigated and reworked them in response to shifting political landscapes.

The Veil as Symbol vs. Practice

A second central debate concerns whether the hijab is best understood as a *symbol* (representing identity, ideology, or morality) or as a *practice* (an embodied habit shaped by social, ethical, and relational contexts).

Western and national discourses have often treated the veil as a symbol:

- For colonial authorities, it symbolized “backwardness.”
- For nationalist leaders, it symbolized authenticity and dignity.
- For contemporary global media, it frequently symbolizes either oppression or piety.

Lila Abu-Lughod cautions against such symbolic simplification. She argues:

“We must pay attention to what women say about their own practices rather than assuming that we already know what the veil means.” (Abu-Lughod 2002, 783)

Her point is that symbolism is not inherent; it is assigned. Meaning is produced through use, repetition, gesture, and social context.

Abu-Lughod also warns against universalizing symbolic readings of the veil, emphasizing that such interpretations often reproduce Western rescue narratives. *“We need to be suspicious of portrayals of Muslim women as trapped or coerced, always in need of saving,”* she writes, arguing instead that veiling often reflects *“moral and familial commitments that are locally meaningful”* (Abu-Lughod 2002, 783–784). In other words, the meaning of the veil emerges not from the cloth itself but from how women wear it, when they remove it, and how it is read by others within specific political configurations. This insight is critical for comparing the War of Independence and the Hirak: in the 1950s, the veil functioned as a tactical disguise and nationalist emblem, while in the Hirak, it became a marker of plural civic belonging—a way to appear as a citizen among citizens, rather than as an icon of tradition.

Contribution

Bringing these debates together, this thesis argues that the hijab in Algeria functions not as a fixed cultural symbol but as a historically contingent political practice. By examining moments when Algerian women mobilized the veil strategically—in clandestine anti-colonial operations and in democratic protest squares—this study shows how women continuously reshape what political participation looks like. Understanding the hijab as practice rather than symbol allows us to recognize how women exercise agency not only through resistance but through embodied acts of presence, self-styling, and collective identification. This is essential not only for Algerian historiography but for challenging global discourses that reduce Muslim women to passive subjects of tradition or objects of Western emancipation. The hijab’s shifting meaning across these two periods demonstrates that the struggle over women’s visibility is inseparable from the struggle over who counts as a political subject. The core claim of this thesis is that the hijab in Algeria functions not as a stable symbol, but as a politically malleable practice that women strategically mobilize to negotiate their agency and citizenship across shifting historical contexts. This insight matters beyond the Algerian case because the veil continues to be a focal point of global debates

over gender, religion, nation, and public space. By demonstrating how meaning is made through practice rather than presumed through symbol, the study challenges universalizing narratives about Muslim women and contributes to broader feminist and postcolonial discussions of political subjectivity.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative qualitative methodology to examine how the hijab has been mobilized as a symbol of political resistance across two historical moments: the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) and the Hirak movement (2019–2021). The comparative design enables an analysis of both continuities and transformations in the symbolic and strategic uses of the hijab, attending to shifts in gender politics, national identity, and forms of public participation across time. The research follows an interpretive paradigm, which prioritizes meaning-making and contextual analysis rather than the search for generalizable or measurable variables (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). In this framework, the hijab is understood not as a static cultural object but as a dynamic symbolic form embedded in historically specific struggles over identity, visibility, and political legitimacy. Following Geertz’s (1973) conception of culture as “text,” the study reads veiling practices as signifying acts, whose meanings must be interpreted within their social and political contexts.

The primary method of analysis is discourse analysis, grounded in Foucault’s (1972) conception of discourse as the system through which objects, subjects, and meanings are made thinkable. The study therefore asks: *How is the hijab spoken about? Which narratives are repeated, authorized, or contested? Whose voices are amplified, and whose are marginalized?*

Because visibility plays a central role in both periods, visual materials (photographs, film scenes, protest images) are interpreted using semiotic and political-aesthetic analysis (Barthes 1977; Mirzoeff 2011). This involves examining composition, gesture, framing, symbolism, and embodied performance in public space. Visual analysis is not limited to identifying imagery, but explores how images construct meaning and emotional resonance, particularly in the circulation of iconic protest photographs.

Textual materials—including memoirs, interviews, and manifestos—are coded thematically, with attention to recurrent motifs such as: sacrifice, modesty, respectability, martyrdom, dignity, and national belonging. These themes are then traced diachronically across the two periods, allowing the study to identify enduring symbolic functions as well as significant ruptures.

The study maintains a reflexive stance, informed by Abu-Lughod's (2002) critique of representational authority. Rather than speaking for Algerian women or reducing the hijab to a metaphor, the analysis emphasizes:

- male director's own articulations of meaning,
- contradictions and ambivalences in their accounts,
- and the political significance of silence or non-disclosure.

Attention to positionality also means acknowledging that interpretation occurs within the researcher's own theoretical and cultural frameworks; therefore, claims are framed as interpretive, not definitive.

The first corpus consists of published memoirs, oral histories, political essays, and cinematic representations of women involved in the anti-colonial struggle. Because official FLN archives remain restricted and selectively curated, the study does not attempt to reconstruct events through state documentation. Instead, it treats fictional materials as narrative constructions, shaped by memory, political projects, and retrospective meaning-making. Following Howell and Prevenier (2001), these sources are analyzed for voice, silences, framing, and rhetorical strategies, rather than taken as transparent factual records. Particular attention is given to Assia Djebar's cinematic and literary representations, memoirs of former mujahidat, and ethnographic work by Amrane-Minne and Lazreg, which reveal the gendered tensions embedded in revolutionary narratives. Vince (2015) is central here: her analysis demonstrates how testimony operates simultaneously as historical evidence and as a means of claiming political identity. Accordingly, the study does not ask what "really happened" to women during the war, but how the veil became a symbol of resistance, sacrifice, and national memory in the decades that were during and after the war.

The second corpus draws on publicly accessible digital and media materials, analyzed through a digital ethnographic approach (Pink et al. 2016). Digital ethnography allows this study to analyze not only what women posted (images, slogans, or statements), but also how and where these materials circulated, who engaged with them, and what forms of interpretation, backlash, or solidarity they generated. For veiled women in particular, the act of posting or livestreaming from protests constitutes an assertion of visibility and authorship, challenging both state-controlled

media and Orientalist assumptions of Muslim women's passivity (Hassani 2022, 406–408). This approach therefore treats online self-representation not merely as commentary but as a practice of citizenship—a way of claiming the right to appear and to speak in the public sphere (Butler 2015, 33–35). Data sources include Twitter posts using key political hashtags (e.g., #Hirak, #AlgerieDebout, #FemmesDuHirak), Facebook and Instagram protest photography, YouTube interviews circulated by independent media collectives, and newspaper and online magazine features profiling women activists. These materials are treated as discursive artifacts, meaning they are read as performances of political identity shaped by platform norms, audience expectations, and emotional framing. The study does not interpret online statements as direct or unmediated expressions of personal identity; instead, it examines how the hijab becomes a visible marker of presence, belonging, and political legitimacy in contemporary protest space. The selection of digital materials was guided by purposeful sampling, prioritizing posts and media circulated widely within Algerian public debate and referenced across multiple platforms.

Case Study I: The War of Independence (1954–1962)

The veil did not remain a stable or singular symbol during the Algerian War of Independence. Rather, it emerged as a site of struggle in which competing political forces sought to produce, fix, or appropriate its meaning. French colonial administrators, military officials, and propagandists insisted that unveiling was the necessary precondition for moral liberation and entry into modernity, and they treated the veil as a visible marker of cultural backwardness that needed to be overcome. In response, Algerian women and nationalist activists reworked the veil's semantic field, transforming it into a tactical instrument of resistance and a powerful emblem of collective dignity. Yet this same emblem was later used by the post-independence state to domesticate women's political agency, even as it celebrated their symbolic contribution to the revolution. Therefore, rather than treating the veil as a fixed sign of oppression or authenticity, this chapter argues that its meaning was continuously produced and contested—through visual imagery, discursive address, tactical bodily practices, and postcolonial narrative memory. To show this, the chapter combines close readings of a colonial photograph, an FLN women's leaflet, a key scene from *The Battle of Algiers*, and a passage from Assia Djebar, situating each within the historical conditions of its circulation and reception. Together, these readings illuminate the veil not as static attire, but as an active medium through which visibility, subjectivity, and political belonging were negotiated.

Colonial Discourses on Unveiling and Modernity

From the early decades of French occupation, the veil was conceptualized within colonial discourse as the threshold that had to be crossed for Algerian society to be transformed. The French colonial project relied on the assumption that women's bodies served as both the foundation and the façade of social order. As Fanon observes, colonial policy followed the logic that “if we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil” (Fanon 1965, 32). In this formulation, unveiling was not simply an aesthetic or religious issue; it was imagined as the key to unlocking the intimate interior of Algerian cultural life. The veil thereby became a strategic object, the locus where the colonizer believed culture, dignity, and resistance were housed. Unveiling promised access—not only to the faces and bodies of Algerian women—but to the social fabric of the nation itself.

This logic extended beyond discourse into the visual and administrative practices of the French state. Jacques Soustelle, as Governor-General, repeatedly framed French intervention as the liberation of Algerian women from the “darkness of tradition” (quoted in MacMaster 2009, 118). The establishment of sections administratives spécialisées (SAS) and équipes médico-sociales itinérantes (EMSI) was central to this effort. Although these organizations were presented as providing education and healthcare, their deeper function was to penetrate domestic spaces, reshape social relations, and encourage women to abandon veiling as a sign of allegiance to France (MacMaster 2009, 152–178). The colonial gaze thus depended on the assumption that to see a woman unveiled was to confirm the success of the colonial mission, and that visibility itself was a measure of subjugation.



Figure 1. Women participating in a pro-independence demonstration, Algeria, c. 1960. Source: Gamma-Keystone

The photograph depicts a dense crowd of veiled women gathered in an open procession, during the surrounding independence (1960). The white haïk dominates the visual field, transforming individual bodies into a collective visual surface. This shared fabric covering recalls Frantz Fanon’s formulation of the veil as both barrier and bond—an embodied boundary that simultaneously conceals and unites (Fanon 1965, 42–45). Yet the stillness of the cloth does not signify passivity. Many faces are turned outward, directly meeting the camera’s gaze, resisting the colonial trope of the veiled woman as invisible or sheltered. Their visibility is intentional, not accidental. At the center of the frame, a woman holding a child stands beneath the Algerian flag.

The juxtaposition of motherhood, nation, and veil encapsulates the nationalist recoding of the veil as symbol of dignity and endurance rather than seclusion. As Marnia Lazreg argues, during the war the veil was transformed into “a sign of national authenticity and resistance,” even as women were later excluded from political agency (Lazreg 1994, 10–12). Here, motherhood is not domestic withdrawal but public presence—women’s reproductive and social roles are politicized, not privatized.

Meanwhile, the flag held aloft performs what Natalie Vince describes as the “gendered inscription of national memory”—women are cast as carriers of the nation’s moral integrity (Vince 2015, 117–120). But the photograph’s density complicates this idealizing symbolism. The women appear not posed, not allegorical, but actively moving, touching, climbing, claiming space. Their bodies fill the frame horizontally and vertically, suggesting that their presence is not added onto history but structurally integral to it.

Unlike the staged colonial harem postcards, where the veil was used to eroticize invisibility (Alloula 1986, 14–16), here the veil is self-directed and collectively mobilized. The gaze is reversed: the women look back; the camera does not dominate the scene. Thus, the photograph crystallizes a key tension: women as symbols of national struggle and women as agents within it. It visually documents the moment when the veil shifted from an object of colonial intervention to an instrument of revolutionary visibility.

This interpretation resonates with Leila Ahmed’s argument that veiling can evolve from patriarchal enforcement to agency and self-definition, particularly in postcolonial contexts where visibility becomes a terrain of struggle (Ahmed 1992, 221–227). The Hirak thus reframed the veil as a politics of presence — a visual grammar through which women negotiated belonging, citizenship, and protest ethics. Mainstream Algerian media often portrayed women protesters as symbols of moral legitimacy. State-controlled outlets such as *El Moudjahid* and *Echorouk* circulated images of veiled women marching with flags or chanting national slogans, framing them as guardians of familial and national virtue rather than as political actors (Arab Reform Initiative 2021; Lassel 2020, 40). The media’s selective use of imagery thus reinscribed the veil into a familiar repertoire of national respectability, where women’s public visibility becomes acceptable only when it reinforces state narratives of unity, modesty, and social harmony. However, this framing sits in

sharp tension with how many women in the Hirak themselves performed and interpreted the veil. For activists in feminist squares or digital spaces, the veil could signify political presence, civic belonging, and the right to occupy the street, rather than modest withdrawal. Some women deliberately veiled *in order to protest*—to assert that political expression does not require abandoning cultural identity. Others chose *not* to veil, insisting on an equally legitimate claim to Algerian citizenship. The slogan frequently seen on banners and social media—“We are all Algeria, with or without veil”—captures this negotiation: the veil becomes *one possible mode of appearing politically*, not a prerequisite for belonging nor a barrier to it. Thus, during the Hirak, the veil was not a stable symbol but a contested site of meaning, appropriated simultaneously by the state to domesticate women’s activism, and by women to assert self-determined visibility. This dynamic recapitulates the colonial and nationalist dialectic that Fanon (1965, 32–35) and Lazreg (1994, 1–3) describe: the veil becomes powerful precisely because it is a medium of struggle over who defines women’s political subjectivity. In the Hirak, women reactivated the veil as a tool of agency, refusing both the colonial-era fetishization of unveiling and the postcolonial demand that veiling symbolize silent virtue.

Close Reading: Colonial Visuality

This structure of looking is vividly reproduced in the widely circulated photograph of a veiled woman walking through the Casbah in 1961 (Keystone-France 1961).



Figure 2. Veiled Algerian woman walking in the Casbah of Algiers, 1961. Source: Gamma-Keystone

At first glance, the photograph that was published by Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone seems documentary, capturing a mundane moment in a narrow street. The aim was to portray the Casbah as exotic, traditional, “unchanged.” Yet its composition enacts a visual hierarchy: the woman is centered and solitary, rendered both hyper-visible and unknowable. Her haïk forms a seamless white surface that obscures her facial features, allowing only a single eye to appear through the adl. The spectator sees her, but her guarded gaze does not return recognition. The viewer is positioned to look without being looked back at, a dynamic that extends colonial mastery into the visual field. As Malek Alloula argues regarding colonial postcard imagery, the colonizer’s primary desire was to force revelation, to assume that the unseen is waiting to be unveiled (Alloula 1986, 24). However, the photograph also shows the failure of this desire. The veil functions here not as concealment, but as an assertion of opacity, a refusal to allow the colonial gaze to complete its circuit of possession. What appears as invisibility is, in fact, self-determined distance.

The unveiling ceremonies of 13 May 1958 attempted to transform this refusal into spectacle, staging unveiling as a celebratory performance of loyalty to France. Yet such events were often coerced, and Algerian women recognized the political charge of visibility. Thus, the very act of unveiling—intended to symbolize assimilation—exposed its own violence and insincerity. Algerian women increasingly re-claimed the veil as a sign of resistance, demonstrating that the

colonial gaze could not determine meaning (Fanon 1965, 35–41). In undermining the colonial fantasy of visibility as transparency, women transformed the veil into a weapon of symbolic counter-claim.

These visual materials demonstrate how the French state attempted to equate assimilation with emancipation, framing pro-French political loyalty as the natural desire of the Algerian population. The leaflet titled “OUI... à la France, OUI... à de Gaulle” exemplifies this discursive strategy, using sequential imagery to present acceptance of French rule as spontaneous, joyful, and universal.



Figure 3. French Government Propaganda Leaflets. Source: Service Historique de la Défense (SHD), Vincennes, Fonds Algérie, 1H

These propaganda posters, widely circulated in colonial Algerian urban centers during the late 1950s, function as a visual narrative designed to delegitimize the FLN and to frame loyalty to France as the only rational and modern political choice.

One of the posters is divided into four comic-strip-like panels, which give the impression of sequential inevitability: peaceful participation, celebration, punishment for dissidence, and final resolution. The layout itself naturalizes France’s authority by presenting colonial rule as not only orderly, but also desired.

The top-left panel depicts Algerian civilians lining up to vote “OUI” in a referendum—presumably the 1958 constitutional referendum or the 1961 self-determination referendum. The crowd is drawn

without distinct ethnic or cultural markers, suggesting a homogenized colonial subject. Notably, women are present but visually muted: they serve as background figures, undifferentiated and indistinct, reinforcing the colonial trope that women's political agency is inseparable from male or state authority. Their appearance here echoes what Fanon describes as the colonial attempt to construct the "docile native woman" as evidence of assimilation (Fanon 1965, 32–35). In contrast, the bottom-left panel depicts supporters of the FLN as disorderly, aggressive, and irrational—literally drawn as a chaotic, gesturing crowd. The opposition between the calm, voting citizens and the violent, uncontrolled FLN sympathizers works as a moral binary: France equals stability; Algerian nationalism equals chaos. The final caption—"LE F.L.N A PERDU"—does not merely state a political claim; it commands the reader to accept defeat as inevitable. The poster thus uses visual sequencing to collapse political choice into moral clarity. Following Alloula's critique of colonial visual regimes (1986, 11–15), this poster exemplifies how the colonial state sought to shape Algerian perception through images that normalize obedience and criminalize resistance. The poster does not persuade; it disciplines.

Women's Tactical Veiling and Unveiling in Resistance

If the colonial state attempted to fix the veil's meaning, Algerian women destabilized it. During the war, veiling and unveiling were not simply expressions of identity; they were strategic practices deployed to navigate surveillance, checkpoints, and the racialized geography of Algiers. Rather than representing women as cultural icons, the text calls upon them as political actors, emphasizing work, mobility, and risk. The imagery surrounding women is not passive: it invokes carrying messages, smuggling supplies, hiding militants, and sustaining daily life under siege. The leaflet therefore constructs a politics of auditory and affective solidarity, prioritizing hearing—the sounds of boots, explosions, mourning—over visibility.

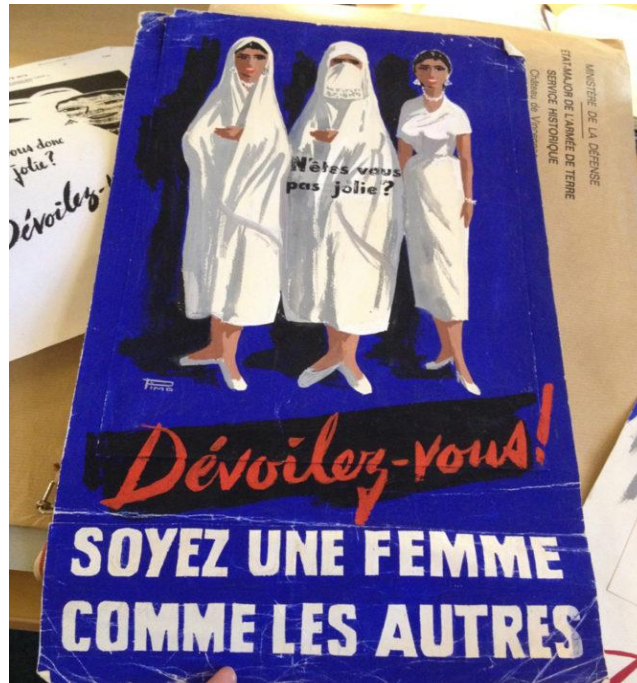


Figure 4. FLN propaganda leaflet addressed to Algerian women, c.1958–1959. Source: Service Historique de la Défense (SHD), Vincennes, Fonds Algérie, 1H

The call to action relies not on unveiling or self-display, but on an inward ethical call, anchored in response and responsibility (FLN leaflet, SHD c.1958–59). Women’s political presence thus emerges not through being seen, but through acting within and against structures that attempt to define them.

Alongside cinematic and testimonial accounts, printed propaganda circulated by both the French state and the FLN reveals how gendered bodies were central to narrative warfare. The following FLN leaflet, produced in France and addressed to Algerian emigrant workers and auxiliary police forces, illustrates how appeals to shame, kinship, and betrayal were mobilized to define the boundaries of national belonging. This leaflet is not relevant for the study of the veil but is important for better understanding of the atmosphere that was present.

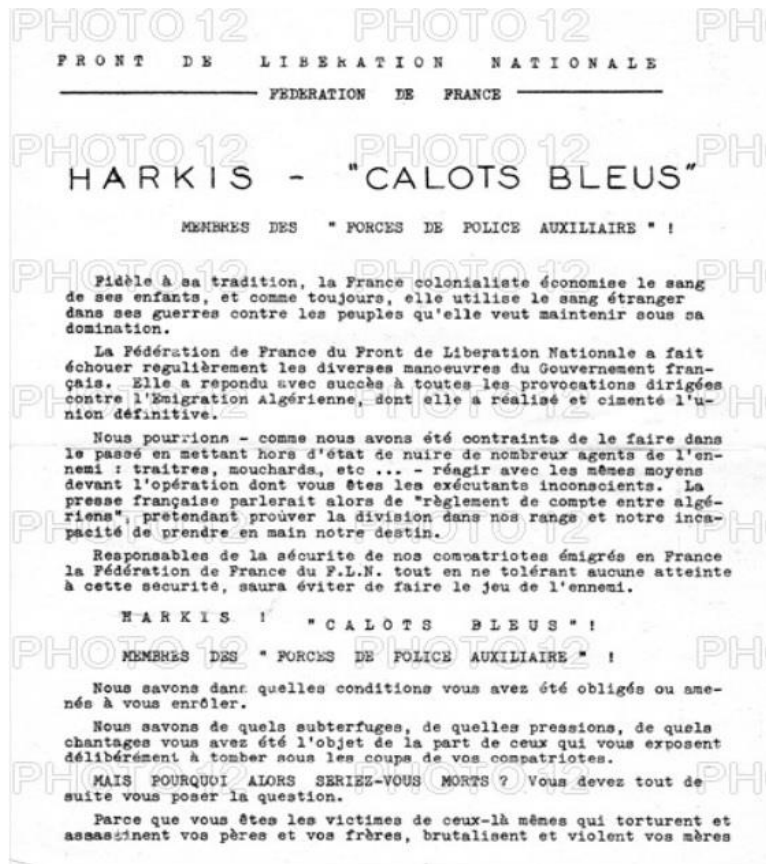


Figure 5. Leaflet from the French Federation of the Algerian National Liberation Front. Source: Service Historique de la Défense (SHD), Vincennes, Fonds Algérie, 1H

The leaflet opens not with commands but with an appeal to history and sacrifice, situating France as a colonial power that “economises the blood of its children” while expending the lives of others. This rhetorical inversion repositions Algerian auxiliaries—harkis and calots bleus—as instruments of colonial violence rather than autonomous subjects. The text repeatedly invokes kinship language (“vos frères,” “vos mères”) to frame defection as a betrayal of familial and national community. This is consistent with the FLN’s broader strategy of moralizing the political, transforming political allegiance into an ethical matter of belonging (Vince 2015, 117–119). Notably absent is any direct reference to women; instead, womanhood is mobilized by implication. The crimes attributed to France—“torturing your brothers, brutalizing and violating your mothers”—cast the female body as the ultimate index of national violation. The leaflet does not grant women agency; rather, it uses their imagined suffering to produce emotional pressure. This aligns with Lazreg’s critique that the FLN simultaneously used women symbolically while restricting their political voice (Lazreg 1994, 13–14). Here, the violated mother stands in for the violated nation.

The tone shifts in the second half of the leaflet from accusation to inevitability: “Vous serez morts”—you will die. Death is positioned not as threat but as logical conclusion of betrayal: if one fights against the nation, one forfeits the right to protection. This anticipates the post-1962 politics of memory, where harkis would be condemned as traitors and excluded from national mourning (Shepard 2006, 176–182). The leaflet thus constructs a narrow definition of national identity: to be Algerian is to be willing to die for Algeria. Agency, here, is measured through sacrifice—not through voice or political participation.

Close Reading: “*Letter to the Europeans of Algeria*” (1957)

The 1957 “*Letter to the Europeans of Algeria*”—issued in the midst of the Battle of Algiers—offers a significant articulation of how the FLN conceived political community as a *future-oriented belonging*, rather than an ethnic or religious category. The letter repeatedly addresses Europeans living in Algeria as *potential compatriots*, using inclusive pronouns such as “we,” “our country,” and “our future.” This rhetoric performs what Benedict Anderson calls the imagining of the nation: the text interpellates its audience into a shared political horizon, even as the war raged (Anderson 1983). Importantly, the letter establishes a distinction between *colonizers as a system* and *Europeans as individuals*. By framing French colonialism as a structure of domination rather than an ethnic identity, the FLN opens a conceptual space for coexistence. This rhetorical move dismantles the colonial binary of settler vs. native, echoing Frantz Fanon’s insistence that decolonization must not reproduce the hierarchical Manichean divide (Fanon 1961).

The letter’s tone is neither supplicant nor conciliatory: it is simultaneously accusatory and invitational. Europeans are urged to recognize the *violence of the colonial order*, but also to see themselves as capable of ethical alignment with justice. This moral-political appeal resonates with Judith Butler’s understanding of political community as constituted through *performative address*—the subject becomes part of the collective by being addressed as such (Butler 1997). The FLN here does not define Algerian-ness through religion, language, or ancestry, but through *ethical stance*: to be Algerian is to reject domination. This matters for your argument because the letter precedes and contradicts the post-independence exclusion of women. The FLN speaks in a universalist register of equality, shared struggle, and ethical fraternity—but after 1962, citizenship becomes gender-differentiated, and the veil is reabsorbed into domestic nationalism. The contrast highlights a rupture between revolutionary discourse and state practice.

Close Reading: “*To Our Sisters*” / Oct. 10, 1961 Appeal (*Women’s Role in the Struggle*)

The October 10, 1961 letter situates women not as symbols of the nation but as historical actors, emphasizing their indispensable role in sustaining the liberation struggle. The opening lines foreground *everyday labor*: nursing, sheltering fighters, transporting messages. This language rejects the colonial trope of the veiled woman as silent and secluded; instead, it frames women’s daily activities as forms of insurgent labor. Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s distinction between *labor*, *work*, and *action*, the letter elevates what is socially coded as domestic labor into the realm of political action (Arendt 1958). Notably, the letter does *not* call on women to unveil as proof of modernity, nor does it mobilize the veil as a cultural boundary. Instead, it casts the veil as already embedded in political practice—a garment that enables movement, concealment, and continuity of struggle. This resonates with Fanon’s essay “*Algeria Unveiled*”, where the veil becomes a *reversible sign*, capable of both hiding and signaling resistance (Fanon 1965).

The tone of the letter is imperative: “*We call upon you to continue the struggle.*” Women are interpellated as political subjects, not metaphors. Yet, this discursive empowerment foreshadows a contradiction: after independence, the state will commemorate women as heroic mothers but curtail their civic agency (Lazreg 1994; Vince 2015). The letter thus stands as a trace of political possibility that was later foreclosed.

Together, these two letters illuminate a moment in which citizenship was imagined as active, equal participation, irrespective of gender, religion, or clothing. The veil was not yet a sign of domestic morality, nor was it framed as oppressive. Instead, it was simply part of women’s presence in political struggle. The later re-domestication of the veil—and of women’s political voices—reveals that patriarchy was not inherited from tradition, but constructed by the postcolonial state.

Close Reading: Tactical Unveiling in *The Battle of Algiers*

The Milk Bar Café bombing sequence in *The Battle of Algiers* (dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) is one of the most visually precise renderings of tactical unveiling in anti-colonial struggle. The scene stages unveiling not as liberation, but as strategy—an active tactical modification of appearance in response to the colonial regime’s visual logic. The sequence begins in the Casbah, inside a cramped domestic interior shared by the women militants. The women sit in silence, framed in

close-up as they cut their hair, remove their haïks, and apply makeup. These gestures are not presented as spontaneous acts of self-fashioning or as transgressions against patriarchal dress codes. They are deliberate, calculated, and emotionally weighted. Pontecorvo uses long, slow takes on the hair falling to the floor and on the intimate act of drawing eyeliner to emphasize the gravity of the transformation. This is not a scene of unveiling as emancipation—as French colonial rhetoric claimed—but unveiling as camouflage. The women are crafting surfaces.

This aligns closely with Zohra Drif's own memoir, in which she recounts using European dress as a way to "pass" into settler spaces, exploiting the colonial belief that unveiled women were assimilated and therefore harmless (Drif 2017, 45–49). The unveiling here is a performance designed to deceive surveillance. Frantz Fanon describes precisely this dynamic when he writes that colonial authority "read the body of the Algerian woman as a site of its own victory" and thus assumed that unveiling signaled consent to colonial modernity (Fanon 1965, 35–36). Pontecorvo visually exposes the fragility of that assumption: the colonizer sees the unveiled woman as transparent and therefore trustworthy, but that transparency is illusory. The unveiling becomes a mask, a weapon.

As the women emerge from the Casbah and move through checkpoints, the film shifts into documentary-style realism. The handheld camera follows them as they walk, aligning the spectator with their movement. Their bodies no longer register to French soldiers as potential threats, because the visual cues that the colonial gaze recognizes as "dangerous"—the haïk, the lowered gaze, the gendered spatial withdrawal—have been removed. The checkpoint sequences hinge on glances: the soldiers' cursory, dismissive looks confirm that the unveiling has been successful. What the colonial state *expects to see* determines what it is unable to see. This is what Homi Bhabha would describe as *mimicry*: the repetition of colonial signs in order to expose and destabilize the authority that depends on them (Bhabha 1994, 86–89). The women are "almost the same, but not quite"—their similarity to European women is what gives them access, yet the difference concealed beneath the surface is what makes their presence explosive.

When the women enter the Milk Bar—a leisure space frequented by European families and colonial soldiers—the scene shifts tonal register again. Here, Pontecorvo emphasizes the violence of visual misrecognition. The café is light-filled, modern, and filled with children eating ice cream.

The women sit quietly among them, and the camera lingers not on the bomb or on the act of violence to come, but on their faces. One woman looks directly at a child across from her; another looks around the room with subtle apprehension. Their stillness is tense, controlled. They are present, but unseen—not because they are invisible, but because the colonial gaze presumes their harmlessness. The unveiled woman is legible only within a particular ideological field: she signifies docility and assimilation. Pontecorvo exposes the political construction of this visibility: it is not the face that changes, but the meaning assigned to it.

This invisibility-through-visibility also recalls Malek Alloula's critique of colonial harem postcards, in which the colonized woman was "made visible" only to the extent that the colonial gaze could recognize her as object, ornament, or fantasy (Alloula 1986, 11–15). The unveiled woman in the Milk Bar conforms to that visual script—she is tolerated because she appears as a decorative presence in a colonial space. But Pontecorvo reverses the direction of the gaze: the camera adopts the woman's viewpoint as she surveys the café. It is she who sees, and the colonizer who is seen without knowing it. The film thus momentarily inverts the hierarchy of looking. The unveiled woman is not displayed for the colonial gaze; she is the one conducting reconnaissance. Natalya Vince notes that many women militants during the war learned to navigate "multiple visual codes," shifting between veiling and unveiling to manage suspicion, mobility, and operational access (Vince 2015, 117–120). The scene dramatizes this fluidity: unveiling is not a rejection of tradition but a tactical response to spatial control. The bomb planted in the Milk Bar detonates this logic—literally and metaphorically. The explosion reveals the foundational instability of colonial visual authority: seeing is not knowing, and the appearance of assimilation does not signify consent.

The aftermath of the explosion is not shown; Pontecorvo cuts away before lingering on injury or death. Instead, his interest lies in the political meaning of the moment: the tactical use of unveiling interrupts the colonial epistemology that equates unveiled femininity with modernity and acquiescence. The unveiled woman becomes the agent of the colony's refusal. This aligns with Fanon's broader argument that the colonial gaze produces the veil as a sign, and that Algerian women's reappropriation of that sign constitutes a form of political counter-speech (Fanon 1965, 33–34). The meaning of the veil—and of unveiling—was never static; it shifted depending on who looked, from where, and under what power.

In this scene, unveiling is not a feminist liberation nor an expression of personal identity. It is a tactical performance of assimilation deployed to infiltrate the spatial and perceptual structure of colonial order. Visibility becomes a weapon, and misrecognition becomes strategy. The film thus reveals what the historical record confirms: the politics of appearance in colonial Algeria were never merely cultural—they were operational. Another good example is the scene where a woman in a burka is carrying a bomb because French soldiers are not allowed to touch her

The Veil as Symbol of National Liberation

As unveiling became central to colonial propaganda, the veil was reclaimed as a symbol of refusal and national sovereignty. Fanon describes this reversal as a “counter-myth” in which the veil, once a sign of backwardness in colonial discourse, became an index of dignity and collective endurance (Fanon 1965, 34). Yet this transformation was not purely affirmative. The veil became the figure of the nation, and with that shift came the risk of collapsing women into symbols rather than subjects. Literature offers a means of recovering the voices erased by the symbol. In *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1985), Assia Djébar works to reopen the archive of women’s participation. In a key passage describing women ululating behind closed shutters as French troops enter their village, the veil does not function visually at all; instead, it becomes acoustic protection. The women resist not through spectacle, but through sound that refuses to be contained (Djébar 1985, 133–137). Djébar shifts narrative pronouns from *elle* (she) to *ells* (they female) to *nous* (we), drawing the reader into a collective first-person that undoes the colonial historian’s presumption of neutrality (Moore 2007, 92–94). The veil is no longer a sign to be interpreted but a medium that shelters memory, an active instrument for holding experience outside the colonial record.

This section reveals that veiling was not simply symbolic, but experiential and expressive, shaped by the rhythms of women’s emotional and communal life. The veil, in the nationalist imaginary, did not simply represent the nation—it held the unarchived knowledge of women’s survival.

Post-Independence Memory and the Silencing of Women

After independence in 1962, Algerian women obtained full political citizenship—universal suffrage and eligibility for office were affirmed at independence and subsequently guaranteed in Algeria’s constitutions and electoral law. These openings later produced headline jumps in

representation when a 2012 quota law pushed women's seats in parliament to roughly 31% (up from single digits). Meanwhile, state investments expanded mass education; by the 2010s–2020s women became the majority at university level. Legal gains were uneven. The 1984 *Family Code* entrenched unequal personal-status rules (guardianship, polygamy, unequal divorce), but mid-2000s reforms brought partial redress. There wasn't a single post-independence regime but several with varying gender politics. Danièle Djamila Amrane-Minne writes that many women who fought “returned to silence,” celebrated publicly while excluded from institutional power (Armane-Minne 1996, 90–92). The postcolonial state transformed the revolutionary woman into an icon of sacrifice, elevating her while naturalizing her loss of voice. As Marnia Lazreg argues, this process functioned as a re-domestication of women, relocating them as guardians of moral order rather than political subjects (Lazreg 1994, 8–11). The 1984 *Family Code* formalized male authority in marriage and guardianship, embedding gender hierarchy into law (Charrad 2001, 32–35). State media reinforced this shift. Televised interviews with female veterans often showed them performing domestic tasks—stirring pots, arranging laundry—while narrating their wartime sacrifices. Their strategic acumen, logistical intelligence, and acts of defiance were reframed as expressions of patience, virtue, and maternal fortitude. In this narrative, the veil ceased to be tactical or insurgent and became a marker of respectable postcolonial femininity. The revolutionary woman was remembered, but not heard.

Yet feminist movements emerging in the 1980s, 1990s, and again during the Hirak protests challenged this silence. They reclaimed wartime memory not to honor sacrifice as an endpoint, but to demand the political emancipation deferred after independence. The veil remains a living site of negotiation, its meaning constantly rearticulated in relation to agency, visibility, and the right to self-definition.

Case Study II: The Hirak Movement (2019–2021)

Comparing these two historical moments is therefore essential because it illuminates three key transformations: From anti-colonial insurgency to democratic civic participation: the meaning of “struggle” shifts from armed resistance to persistent public presence; From women as icons of national sacrifice to women as political agents: visibility becomes self-authored rather than state-scripted; From the veil as strategic camouflage to the veil as expressive surface: the veil becomes a site of negotiation of citizenship, not merely identity. The chapter argues that the Hirak movement’s feminist dimension represents a reawakening of Algeria’s civic imagination. By fusing memory and innovation, women protesters transformed national symbols — the veil, the flag, the street — into democratic metaphors. Their activism revealed that the unfinished revolution of 1962 finds its continuation not in armed struggle but in the peaceful insistence on equality and voice.

The Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) and the Hirak movement (2019–2021) may at first appear separated by historical distance, ideological context, and political form. Yet placing them in comparative relation reveals a deep continuity in how women’s bodies, voices, and visibility have structured national political imaginaries. Both moments represent thresholds—periods when the legitimacy of political authority was contested and the meaning of “the nation” had to be renegotiated in public space. It is precisely in such threshold moments, as Benedict Anderson suggests in his theory of nationalism, that “collective identities are actively narrated, visualized, and performed” (Anderson 1983, 14–18). In the Algerian case, these narratives have consistently been gendered.

However, the post-independence period radically altered this relationship. While women’s participation in the revolution was celebrated symbolically, it was politically neutralized. The new state appropriated the image of the veiled militant as emblem of national authenticity while excluding real women from political institutions, culminating in the patriarchal 1984 *Family Code* (Lazreg 1994, 9–12; Engelcke 2017, 144–146). The veil here shifted from tactical ambiguity to moral-national ideal—a disciplinary symbol of domestic femininity and communal respectability. As Spivak argues in her critique of nationalist gender regimes, women become the “ground upon which the nation inscribes its own identity” (Spivak 1988, 290–293). Algeria exemplified this

dynamic: women's revolutionary agency was remembered, but their political agency was disavowed.

The Hirak movement re-opened this closed symbolic field. Women's participation in the protests, both veiled and unveiled, directly challenged the postcolonial state's monopoly on historical narrative. Their presence articulated what Charles Taylor and Joan Scott call "new grammars of visibility"—modes of appearing in public that assert political subjecthood (Scott 2007; Taylor 2004). The veil, in this context, was no longer a binary marker of tradition or modernity. Instead, it became a plural sign, capable of expressing religiosity, civic belonging, generational memory, or feminist defiance, depending on context (Ourahmoune & El Jurdi 2023, 3–5). This semantic openness reflects the Hirak's broader shift from unity-as-uniformity (1950s nationalism) to unity-as-plurality (2019 civic coalitions). Ultimately, the comparison reveals that women's visibility is not an accessory of Algerian political history but its ongoing engine. Tracing how the veil's meaning has traveled across these eras allows this thesis to demonstrate how struggles over women's bodies and voices are inseparable from the evolving struggle for Algerian democracy itself.

The Hirak movement, beginning in February 2019, stands out as one of the most significant popular uprisings in postcolonial Algeria. It was born from a convergence of socio-economic frustrations, political disenchantment, and generational impatience with a system that many viewed as closed, corrupt, and controlled by unaccountable networks of power. Although it succeeded in forcing the resignation of President Bouteflika, the movement aimed for much deeper structural change—namely dismantling the entrenched military-civil power nexus and reimagining state legitimacy (Ianni 2021, 2–3; Crisis Group 2020, 1–4). The immediate trigger was Bouteflika's announcement that he would run for a fifth term—despite his visible physical decline and legal questions about constitutional limits. That announcement broke a tacit consensus: that the presidency was effectively a closed circuit. On 22 February 2019, mass demonstrations erupted in Algiers and across Algeria, mobilizing youth, students, workers, and ordinary citizens in a wave of collective energy (Sawers 2014; Ianni 2021, 2). Protestors framed their demands broadly: not just for Bouteflika's departure but for the removal of the underlying political order—often summed up in the slogan *Yetnahaw Ga3* ("They All Must Go") (POMEPS 2023, 81–82; Ianni 2021, 4). One key feature was the nonpartisan framing of the protest. Rather

than endorsing a particular party or ideology, the bootstraps demands were directed at the system itself: the opaque power behind the scenes, sometimes called *le pouvoir*, encompassing elite networks, security services, economic cronies, and political intermediaries (Ghanem 2022, 5–7). Protesters refused to be anchored to existing parties, thereby preserving the movement’s broad, aspirational character.

Digital media played a central role in orchestrating the movement. Hashtags, WhatsApp groups, and Facebook communities helped coordinate marches, share slogans, and broadcast real-time updates—even in the face of state media silence or distortion (Chaif et al. 2025; POMEPS 2023, 83). The usage of social media by feminist groups during the Hirk, for example, allowed calls for reform of women’s rights to circulate widely, though often accompanied by harassment or pushback (Chaif et al. 2025). The Algerian state did not collapse under the pressure. Instead, it responded with calibrated concessions, elite reshuffle, and limitation on protest space. One of the most consequential maneuvers was the military’s decision to withdraw support from Bouteflika and champion his removal via constitutional channels—particularly invoking Article 102 to declare his incapacitation (Reuters 2019a). This move allowed the regime to pivot without wholesale transformation, transferring power within the same institutional orbit (Ghanem 2022, 5).

In April 2019, Bouteflika resigned under sustained protest pressure. In the months that followed, a caretaker government was installed, followed by a presidential election in December 2019. That election, however, delivered Abdelmadjid Tebboune a narrow victory with low voter turnout (39.88 %)—a result widely criticized by protestors as lacking legitimacy (BTI 2022, 6; Reuters 2020). Rather than conceding to protest demands, the regime sought to reinstate formal authority while preserving the core power structure unchanged. The state also offered limited constitutional reforms—culminating in a referendum on 1 November 2020. Though officially presented as structural change, the draft constitution was seen by many activists as cosmetic: low turnout (circa 23.7 %) and ambiguous provisions left key institutions (especially security and executive agencies) intact (Crisis Group 2020, 14–16; Reuters 2020). Protesters largely boycotted both the election and referendum, signaling refusal to legitimize a managed transition (Crisis Group 2020, 15). Moreover, post-2019, the state increasingly shifted to legal and coercive repression—targeting key organizers, tightening regulations on assembly, and enforcing protest

permit regimes (Axios 2021). By mid-2021, protests required prior authorization, narrowing the space for unauthorized mass action (Amnesty 2024; Crisis Group 2020, 17–20). Amnesty International later documented that, five years after the Hirak’s start, repression of dissent—including arrests of activists, suppression of expression, and judicial harassment—remained ongoing (Amnesty 2024).

Among the most significant dimensions of the Hirak was the prominent and sustained presence of women in protest spaces. While their participation inevitably evoked the revolutionary imagery of the War of Independence (1954–1962), it also challenged the inherited narrative that had long positioned women primarily as symbols rather than actors. As Natalya Vince (2015, 118–119) argues, post-independence memory has tended to commemorate women as iconic figures of sacrifice, while obscuring their political labor and decision-making. In the context of the Hirak, however, women asserted agency not simply through participation, but through the ability to shape the discursive terms of protest—determining how slogans were articulated, how alliances were formed, and how the movement defined its goals. Here, agency refers not to abstract autonomy but to the capacity to intervene in and reshape the conditions of collective life, even when operating within social and ideological constraints. In this sense, women were not merely present; they were constitutive of the movement’s political imagination. In this sense, the Hirak serves as both continuation and rupture with the revolutionary heritage. Continuation, because it drew on collective memory, reactivating narratives of resistance and dignity that date back to the anti-colonial struggle. Rupture, because it confronted a political order born from that same revolution—a regime that had long monopolized its symbolic capital while marginalizing dissent (Vince 2015, 120–121; Lazreg 1994, 10–12). As Dalia Ghanem (2022, 82) argues, the protests embodied “a generational effort to reclaim independence from those who claimed to have achieved it.”

The participation of women in the Hirak highlighted the re-politicization of citizenship after decades of depoliticization. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Algerian women had been at the forefront of social movements for human rights and against gender-based violence, but these remained fragmented and often constrained by state oversight (Lalami 2014, 16–17). The Hirak provided a rare platform for women from diverse ideological, regional, and class backgrounds to unite around shared democratic values rather than partisan agendas. As Seréna Nilsson Rabia (POMEPS 2023, 82–83) notes, women’s participation went beyond numerical presence—it

fundamentally altered the tone and texture of the movement. Female protesters infused the demonstrations with civic discipline and nonviolence, often mediating between police and crowds. Veiled and unveiled, young and old, urban and rural women all appeared together, challenging the state's gendered construction of "public space" as masculine. Their chants — "We are Algeria too!" and "There is no democracy without equality" — redefined what collective belonging meant (Lassel 2020, 38–39). This reoccupation of space recalls the spatial politics of the independence struggle but reverses its meaning. In the 1950s, veiling served as a tactical disguise; in 2019, visibility itself became an act of defiance. The public square, once a site of colonial surveillance, turned into a space of feminist presence (Fanon 1965, 42–43; Ahmed 1992, 225–226). The contrast underscores Algeria's historical trajectory — from liberation against an external oppressor to liberation from authoritarianism within.

The Hirak's feminist dimension cannot be separated from the historical memory of women's earlier struggles. During the War of Independence, women were instrumental as couriers, nurses, and combatants, yet their narratives were largely silenced in the post-1962 state discourse (Lazreg 1994, 11–13; MacMaster 2009, 369). That silencing persisted for decades, reinforcing a masculine conception of heroism. The Hirak, however, reactivated this suppressed memory. Many of the movement's feminist slogans explicitly referenced 1954. Placards reading "We were there in 1954, we are here in 2019" appeared in marches in Algiers and Oran, deliberately linking democratic protest to revolutionary legacy (Arab Reform Initiative 2021, 5). Yet, unlike the national liberation struggle, women in the Hirak were not merely reclaiming the nation from colonial rule but reclaiming citizenship itself from exclusionary postcolonial governance. In this way, the protests extended rather than replicated the revolution: they democratized its memory (Vince 2015, 117–118). Moreover, the symbol of the veil once again became central — though in an entirely different register. During the independence war, it represented secrecy and resistance; during the Hirak, it represented plurality and belonging. As Ourahmoune and El Jurdi (2023, 3–4) explain, veiled and unveiled women marching together embodied a shared demand for inclusion that transcended ideological divisions. The veil no longer signified submission or concealment but an assertion of cultural autonomy within a democratic framework. This re-signification of symbols illustrates what Judith Butler (1997, 15–16) calls the "reiterative power of performativity": meaning is never fixed but constantly renegotiated through social practice.

The Hirak thus re-performed Algeria's revolutionary lexicon, transforming the gendered imagery of the 1950s into the inclusive discourse of the 2020s.

Equally transformative was the emergence of new feminist networks and digital solidarities. Established organizations such as the Wassila Network and Femmes algériennes pour un changement vers l'égalité (FACE) provided institutional experience and legal support, while younger activists mobilized online through hashtags, livestreams, and visual art (Wassila Network 2020, 4–6). These collaborations produced what Nacima Ourahmoune and Hounaida El Jurdi (2023, 5) describe as a “multi-layered feminist geography” that linked cities, regions, and diasporas. The creation of the “Feminist Square” (*carré féministe*) in March 2019 exemplified this synergy between offline and online activism. Organized primarily by FACE and supported by the Wassila Network, these weekly gatherings near Algiers 1 University served both symbolic and practical purposes: they asserted women's right to occupy public space and functioned as a training ground for democratic deliberation (IGG-Geo 2021, 2–3). The Feminist Square became a laboratory of intersectional activism where generational, ideological, and linguistic divides were negotiated through dialogue. Media representation, however, remained ambivalent. State-aligned outlets framed women as moral guardians, focusing on veiled participants waving flags while ignoring their feminist claims (Lassel 2020, 40–41). Independent and diaspora media, by contrast, highlighted women as innovators and cultural producers. Digital platforms — especially Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter — allowed Algerian women to bypass censorship and narrate their own experiences. As Chaif, Sahraoui, and Abdelmalek (2025) note, online activism not only expanded feminist reach but also exposed women to harassment and surveillance, revealing the double-edged nature of digital visibility (pp. 3–4).

The historical arc from 1954 to 2019 reveals an evolution in the meaning of struggle. The war for independence was a battle for sovereignty; the Hirak was a campaign for dignity, rights, and inclusion. Yet both moments share a common thread — the indispensable role of women in redefining Algeria's moral and political horizons. If the revolutionary woman of the 1950s embodied the nation's sacrifice, the democratic woman of the Hirak embodies its renewal. Her voice challenges both colonial and patriarchal narratives, asserting that national liberation is incomplete without gender equality. In reclaiming symbols like the veil and the street, women

activists bridged Algeria's revolutionary memory and its democratic aspirations (Fanon 1965, 47; Ahmed 1992, 226–227).

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 forced the movement to adapt. Large street marches paused amid lockdowns and health concerns; activists shifted tactics—deploying digital protests, neighborhood organizing, and distributing solidarity aid in districts (Crisis Group 2020, i–iii). Once restrictions eased, demonstrations resumed cautiously, though against a backdrop of surveillance, policing, and legal challenge (Crisis Group 2020, 9–11). Even when physical momentum slowed, the symbolic and discursive momentum of Hirak endured. The movement's key demands—rule of law, civil control of military, transparency—remained resonant in media debates, university forums, and diaspora discourses (Ianni 2021, 8–10). In some sense, Hirak shifted from a street movement to a political culture—a reference point for legitimacy claims, civic expectations, and contesting regimes of silence. Yet by 2021, authorities had begun consolidating control. Broad arrests, constraints on NGOs, restrictions on assembly, and the continued dominance of the military in state affairs limited the movement's capacity for large-scale coordination (Amnesty 2024; Crisis Group 2020, 17–20). The result: a movement that had reshaped public imaginaries but had not succeeded in structurally overturning the regime. The Hirak was notable for amplifying women's presence—not as token participants but as visible, vocal actors. The POMEPS Women and the Algerian Hirak report indicates that women from diverse social and geographical backgrounds participated in Friday marches, feminist squares, and local assemblies; though they often refrained from overt feminist demands in the movement's public discourse to avoid divisiveness (POMEPS 2023, 81–82). These women negotiated between the collective movement's agenda and their gendered demands, sometimes relegating gender claims to “parallel” discursive spaces (POMEPS 2023, 83–84).

The feminist initiative Femmes Algériennes pour un Changement vers l'Égalité (FACE) was formally declared on 16 March 2019, calling for full equality and launching feminist squares during Friday marches in Algiers and other cities (IGG-Geo 2021) (Feminist space in front of Algiers University). In Béjaïa, Oran, and Constantine, versions of feminist squares appeared in subsequent months (IGG-Geo 2021; Lassel 2020). These spaces functioned as meeting zones for women to share grievances, display banners, and assert visibility before the main marches merged (Algerian Women in the Hirak, IGG-Geo). However, these efforts were met with

backlash. Some protesters accused feminist activists of fragmenting the movement; others verbally attacked them or tore banners, claiming this was “not the time” for gender demands (POMEPS 2023, 82–83; IGG-Geo 2021). Despite this, feminist actors persisted, navigating the risk of being seen as separate from the national agenda while pushing to integrate gender claims into broader political change (Haddag 2021; Arab Reform Initiative, Hirak and Feminism).

Academic inquiry also reveals these tensions. A recent article on feminist social media use during Hirak finds that feminist groups often faced online harassment, revealing how women’s public interventions remain contested even within broader democratizing movements (Chaif et al. 2025). Ethnographic work by Ourahmoune & El Jurdi (2023) underscores the dual dimension of women’s struggle: a spatial/physical dimension (street presence, feminist squares) and a temporal/historical dimension (seeking recognition across past silences) (Ourahmoune & El Jurdi 2023, 1–4). This helps explain why women’s participation was structurally vital but rarely fully integrated into the movement’s dominant narratives.

This case study therefore explores how women’s agency, representation, and self-expression within the Hirak movement reconfigured the boundaries of political discourse. It analyzes the ways in which women’s activism transformed inherited symbols of resistance into instruments of democratic participation — and how feminist networks, digital spaces, and visual cultures helped sustain that transformation.

Women’s involvement in the Hirak was both visible and contested, and this visibility was frequently mediated through the semiotics of the veil. Women did not merely follow male organizers—they shaped the movement’s public atmosphere, negotiated access to gendered space, and asserted new forms of political presence. Yet their participation was filtered through internal tensions, expectations surrounding modesty and mobility, and differing interpretations of what the veil should signify in a postcolonial democracy. In this context, the veil was neither a pre-existing cultural constant nor a simple symbol of identity. Rather, it became an active medium through which women navigated how to appear—and how to be seen—within the movement.

From the earliest weeks of the protests, veiled and unveiled women marched in significant numbers across cities and rural regions. According to the research report by POMEPS *Women and the Algerian Hirak: Resistance and Negotiation*, women from Kabylia and other regions joined the

marches as protesters, leaflet distributors, chant-leaders, and logistic organizers (POMEPS 2023, 81–82). Their presence in the veil disrupted the state’s longstanding narrative that public space was masculine and protest inherently militant. Drawing on Miriam Cooke’s analysis of the liberation struggle, these forms of feminized participation—distributing water, offering first aid, maintaining morale, gathering intelligence—again became central to sustaining the movement’s nonviolent discipline (Cooke 2002, 15–16). Yet unlike in the 1950s, the veil no longer functioned primarily as a tactical disguise against an external colonial enemy. Rather, it served as a claim to civic belonging, allowing women to enter public space with moral and cultural legitimacy, countering accusations that protest was “foreign,” “imported,” or “un-Algerian.” In this sense, the veil operated as a right to the street.

Moreover, women’s experiences with the veil in the Hirak were not homogeneous, but shaped by class, education, region, and Amazigh identity. In Kabylia, where feminist associations and Amazigh cultural activism are historically more rooted, women—veiled and unveiled—appeared more visibly in marches and online activism (POMEPS 2023, 84). In contrast, women in more conservative regions navigated positional veiling: veiling more strongly in mixed crowds to avoid harassment, unveiling in feminist-only spaces to assert equality. Rather than choosing one stable identity, women shifted how they veiled depending on space, audience, and risk—much like women fighters in the Casbah in the 1950s. The veil once again functioned as a flexible practice rather than a fixed meaning.

Women’s participation in the Hirak thus illustrates crucial theoretical dynamics. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, women’s navigation of the veil in the movement constitutes subaltern articulation: the work of speaking from within structurally constrained conditions (Mohanty 2003). Their activism contests the masculinized figure of “the people” on which national protest movements have historically relied. From feminist practice theory, the veil becomes not an identity symbol but a site of embodied negotiation, a way of configuring one’s own visibility in relation to power (Mahmood 2005). And from discourse theory, the conflicts surrounding veiling show how the Hirak movement was itself a space where the meaning of Algerian citizenship was being rewritten—not just demanded.

Ultimately, the Hirak demonstrates that the veil remains a politically generative symbol, not because it signifies one stable meaning, but because it is a field of struggle—a surface on which Algerian women continue to articulate, contest, and reconfigure their place within the nation.

The Feminist Square and the Role of Networks (e.g., Wassila)

One of the most distinctive features of the 2019 Algerian Hirak was the creation of a visible and organized space for women within the broader movement: the “feminist square” (carré féministe). The term referred to a physical area within protest marches where feminist groups gathered collectively before joining the main demonstrations. Its emergence symbolized both women’s inclusion in the national protest movement and their autonomous claim to visibility within public space.

The first feminist square appeared on 16 March 2019, following a public declaration by Femmes algériennes pour un changement vers l’égalité (FACE)—a coalition of women’s organizations and individual activists calling for “a democratic Algeria guaranteeing full equality between women and men” (Arab Reform Initiative 2021). The statement linked the Hirak’s goals of democracy and accountability to long-standing feminist struggles for reform of the 1984 *Family Code*, freedom of assembly, and social equality. The square assembled weekly at Place de la Grande Poste and Algiers 1 University, where women of different ages, social backgrounds, and political tendencies gathered under banners reading “Equality is not a privilege, it is a right” (Lassel 2020, 38). Similar spaces soon appeared in Oran, Béjaïa, and Constantine, demonstrating the decentralization of feminist activism across regions (IGG-Geo 2021). While feminist participation in Algerian street politics was not new, the feminist square formalized it, creating a gendered counter-public within the broader civic uprising.

The Wassila Network, established in 2000, played a crucial connective role in linking veteran women’s organizations with younger, social-media-savvy activists during the Hirak (Wassila Network 2020). As a coalition combating gender-based violence and promoting gender equality, Wassila provided both logistical and emotional support to feminist demonstrators.

According to the Institut du Genre en Géopolitique (IGG-Geo) report *Women in the Hirak* (2/2), Wassila members coordinated workshops and “solidarity circles” that addressed legal awareness,

feminist slogans, and safety during marches (IGG-Geo 2021). The network also acted as a liaison between offline and online activism, amplifying Hirak feminist messages on Facebook and Twitter while documenting harassment cases. This synergy between long-standing NGOs and newer digital initiatives proved critical. The Wassila Network's members brought institutional memory of the 1990s women's rights campaigns, while younger activists injected new repertoires—hashtags, artistic performances, and “digital posters.” Together, they constituted a hybrid model of feminist mobilization (POMEPS 2023, 83).

While the feminist square projected inclusivity, it also became a site of conflict. Reports document that feminist banners were often torn, participants verbally harassed, and some even physically threatened by fellow demonstrators who viewed gender equality as “secondary” or “Westernized” (IGG-Geo 2021; POMEPS 2023, 82). Activist Sonia Gassemi publicly shared on Facebook how her participation in the feminist square provoked online misogyny and social ostracism, illustrating the ambivalent tolerance of women's activism even within a pro-democracy movement (IGG-Geo 2021). Despite hostility, feminist squares persisted. Members of FACE and Wassila, along with independent feminists, framed these attacks as proof that the struggle for democracy must include gender equality. They used placards stating “No real democracy without equality” and “We were there in 1954, we are here in 2019,” directly referencing the legacy of women's resistance during the War of Independence (Arab Reform Initiative 2021). This intergenerational framing linked the Hirak to Algeria's liberation memory, transforming the feminist square into a living archive of women's political citizenship.

The feminist square thus performed a dual role: spatial and symbolic. Spatially, it carved out women's right to occupy public space. Symbolically, it challenged patriarchal narratives that framed women as passive supporters rather than active agents. By collectively chanting feminist slogans, wearing distinctive scarves, and reclaiming national symbols like the flag, these activists blurred the boundary between nationalist and feminist politics (Lassel 2020, 41). Feminist networks in the Algerian diaspora—especially in France and Canada—became critical allies in sustaining momentum. The Collectif Féministe pour le Changement (CFC-Algérie) and the Wassila diaspora chapters organized solidarity marches, published statements online, and coordinated with international NGOs such as Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML) to

monitor violations of women's rights during the Hirak (Wassila Network 2020; CFC-Algérie 2021).

Digital media also fostered coordination. Hashtags like #CarréFéministe, #FemmesHirak, and #WassilaNetwork linked feminist actions across borders. These transnational exchanges amplified visibility but also provoked backlash from conservative voices accusing the movement of importing “foreign feminism” (Chaif et al. 2025). This digital transnationalism illustrates what Nacima Ourahmoune and Hounaida El Jurdi describe as a “spatial and historical re-inscription of women's struggles”—the feminist square functioning both as a local protest space and as part of a global feminist geography of resistance (Ourahmoune and El Jurdi 2023, 2–4).

Beyond its immediate protest role, the feminist square can be read as a political laboratory—a rehearsal of alternative citizenship models. Through its participatory rituals, consensus-based organization, and intergenerational learning, it tested new forms of feminist leadership and negotiation. As Seréna Nilsson Rabia argues, the square's visibility forced the Hirak to confront its internal contradictions, compelling the movement to articulate whether democracy includes gender equality as a foundational principle (POMEPS 2023, 84). Lassel (2020, 42) similarly interprets these feminist practices as “silent revolutions”: they redefined protest from merely opposing the regime to embodying new forms of democratic coexistence. Ultimately, feminist networks like Wassila ensured that the Hirak's political vocabulary could not revert to gender neutrality. Even if the movement did not deliver legal reforms, it re-opened Algeria's public sphere to women's agency—reviving debates that had been silenced since the adoption of the *Family Code* in 1984.

The diversity of women's attire at protests — from veiled to unveiled, from traditional haïk to jeans and hoodies — mirrored the plurality of Algerian femininities and generational experiences (Lassel 2020, 38–39). Protesters often emphasized that the movement's inclusivity was measured not by homogeneity but by coexistence. Placards read “We are all Algeria — with or without veil”, encapsulating a post-ideological vision of civic unity. The placard « Nous sommes toutes l'Algérie — voilées ou non » / « كلنا الجزائر، محجبة أو غير محجبة » encapsulates a direct challenge to the binary frameworks through which Algerian womanhood has historically been interpreted. Its insistence on *collective belonging across differences of appearance* disrupts the long-standing

symbolic dichotomy between the veiled woman as the custodian of national authenticity and the unveiled woman as the figure of modernity. Rather than rejecting or privileging either position, the placard articulates a non-hierarchical relational identity, one in which veiling is neither a measure of moral worth nor a barrier to political participation. This is deeply significant in a political landscape where the veil has been repeatedly instrumentalized by the state, by Islamist movements, and by nationalist memory. The statement shifts the axis of meaning away from the veil as symbol and toward the woman as citizen, foregrounding shared political subjecthood: what matters is not whether she veils, but whether she is recognized as an equal participant in shaping the nation. The placard also performs a critique of the Hirak itself, calling out the subtle exclusions and frictions that emerged when women articulated feminist demands. By displaying this message prominently in marching crowds, women protestors redefined the public square as a space where plural forms of embodied presence could coexist without collapsing into opposition. It is not simply a message of coexistence; it is a reclaiming of Algeria from the visual regimes that have historically policed women's appearance, whether in the name of colonial emancipation, nationalist purity, or Islamist morality. In that sense, the placard makes a bold epistemic claim: *the nation is not one image, one woman, one way of appearing in public — it is a multiplicity made visible.*

In a 2021 Institut du Genre en Géopolitique (IGG-Geo) report, researchers documented how the veil ceased to be a divisive boundary and instead became a symbolic bridge linking women across ideological lines: conservative women defended unveiled peers' right to march, while secular activists emphasized their solidarity with veiled participants (IGG-Geo 2021). In practice, this was a powerful reversal of colonial-era and post-independence binaries that had framed the veil as a barrier to modernity (Fanon 1965, 32–34; MacMaster 2009). The Hirak's use of the veil as a pluralistic signifier cannot be understood without acknowledging its historical sedimentation. During the colonial period, French authorities viewed unveiling as a metaphor for domination, while Algerian women in the FLN transformed veiling into a revolutionary tool — concealing weapons, disguising identity, or asserting resistance (Lazreg 1994, 9–11; Fanon 1965, 45–47). By contrast, in the Hirak, veiling no longer marked secrecy or tactical necessity but rather personal autonomy and moral integrity. Women articulated the right to veil and not to veil as equally political acts.



Figure 6. Women participating in a pro-independence demonstration, Algeria, c. 1960. Source: Gamma-Keystone

The photograph depicts a dense crowd of veiled women gathered in an open procession, during the surrounding independence (1960). The white haïk dominates the visual field, transforming individual bodies into a collective visual surface. This shared fabric covering recalls Frantz Fanon’s formulation of the veil as both barrier and bond—an embodied boundary that simultaneously conceals and unites (Fanon 1965, 42–45). Yet the stillness of the cloth does not signify passivity. Many faces are turned outward, directly meeting the camera’s gaze, resisting the colonial trope of the veiled woman as invisible or sheltered. Their visibility is intentional, not accidental. At the center of the frame, a woman holding a child stands beneath the Algerian flag. The juxtaposition of motherhood, nation, and veil encapsulates the nationalist recoding of the veil as symbol of dignity and endurance rather than seclusion. As Marnia Lazreg argues, during the war the veil was transformed into “a sign of national authenticity and resistance,” even as women were later excluded from political agency (Lazreg 1994, 10–12). Here, motherhood is not domestic withdrawal but public presence—women’s reproductive and social roles are politicized, not privatized.

Meanwhile, the flag held aloft performs what Natalie Vince describes as the “gendered inscription of national memory”—women are cast as carriers of the nation’s moral integrity (Vince 2015, 117–120). But the photograph’s density complicates this idealizing symbolism. The women appear not posed, not allegorical, but actively moving, touching, climbing, claiming space. Their bodies

fill the frame horizontally and vertically, suggesting that their presence is not added onto history but structurally integral to it.

Unlike the staged colonial harem postcards, where the veil was used to eroticize invisibility (Alloula 1986, 14–16), here the veil is self-directed and collectively mobilized. The gaze is reversed: the women look back; the camera does not dominate the scene. Thus, the photograph crystallizes a key tension: women as symbols of national struggle and women as agents within it. It visually documents the moment when the veil shifted from an object of colonial intervention to an instrument of revolutionary visibility.

This interpretation resonates with Leila Ahmed’s argument that veiling can evolve from patriarchal enforcement to agency and self-definition, particularly in postcolonial contexts where visibility becomes a terrain of struggle (Ahmed 1992, 221–227). The Hirak thus reframed the veil as a politics of presence — a visual grammar through which women negotiated belonging, citizenship, and protest ethics. Mainstream Algerian media often portrayed women protesters as symbols of moral legitimacy. State-controlled outlets such as *El Moudjahid* and *Echorouk* circulated images of veiled women marching with flags or chanting national slogans, framing them as guardians of familial and national virtue rather than as political actors (Arab Reform Initiative 2021; Lassel 2020, 40). The media’s selective use of imagery thus reinscribed the veil into a familiar repertoire of national respectability, where women’s public visibility becomes acceptable only when it reinforces state narratives of unity, modesty, and social harmony. However, this framing sits in sharp tension with how many women in the Hirak themselves performed and interpreted the veil. For activists in feminist squares or digital spaces, the veil could signify political presence, civic belonging, and the right to occupy the street, rather than modest withdrawal. Some women deliberately veiled *in order to protest*—to assert that political expression does not require abandoning cultural identity. Others chose *not* to veil, insisting on an equally legitimate claim to Algerian citizenship. The slogan frequently seen on banners and social media—“We are all Algeria, with or without veil”—captures this negotiation: the veil becomes *one possible mode of appearing politically*, not a prerequisite for belonging nor a barrier to it. Thus, during the Hirak, the veil was not a stable symbol but a contested site of meaning, appropriated simultaneously by the state to domesticate women’s activism, and by women to assert self-determined visibility. This dynamic recapitulates the colonial and nationalist dialectic that Fanon (1965, 32–35) and Lazreg

(1994, 1–3) describe: the veil becomes powerful precisely because it is a medium of struggle over who defines women’s political subjectivity. In the Hirk, women reactivated the veil as a tool of agency, refusing both the colonial-era fetishization of unveiling and the postcolonial demand that veiling symbolize silent virtue.



Figure 7. Algiers demonstration with placard “Un seul héros, le peuple” (“Only one hero, the people”). Photograph by Walid Talbi for Amnesty International.

In Figure 6, a group of women and men move together through a crowded protest avenue, unified by chants and Algerian flags draped across shoulders and held aloft. At the center, a woman, who is hard to see due to the poster, wearing a white and green *hijāb* holds the national flag tightly around her, the fabric blending into the flowing movement of the crowd. Her posture is upright, steady, and forward-facing; she does not look at the camera, but outward, toward the direction of the march. This visual orientation matters: she is not positioned as an object of observation but as a political subject with trajectory and intention. The veil here is not a sign of withdrawal or domestic enclosure but part of a public-facing performance of citizenship—what Saba Mahmood

refers to as embodied agency that is enacted through, rather than despite, religious and cultural norms (Mahmood 2005, 15–18). The surrounding crowd is mixed—men and women, veiled and unveiled. No single sartorial form dominates. Instead, the visual field shows what Nilsson Rabia describes as “plural femininities in shared political space” (POMEPS 2023, 82). The woman’s *hijāb* does not isolate her; it integrates her into the collective body of protest. Yet, the flag wrapped around her shoulders complicates this integration. It recalls the historical iconography of the *moudjahidāt*, where the veil was repurposed as a symbol of national defiance (Fanon 1965, 33–35). Here, however, the gesture is neither tactical disguise nor didactic nationalist allegory—it is affective, assertive, and self-possessed. The placard visible behind her, “Un seul héros, le peuple,” situates the scene within a civic, rather than militarized, register. The slogan flattens hierarchies of leadership and foregrounds collective sovereignty. Her veiled presence beneath that banner challenges the long-standing postcolonial narrative in which women were memorialized but politically sidelined. In this moment, the veil signifies neither subjection nor symbolic motherhood—it signifies participatory citizenship.

In visual culture, the veil became a floating signifier: a national flag worn as a headscarf, a protest accessory, or a reclaimed heritage piece. Artists like Amira Bouraoui and photographers from the Feminist Square used social media to share images of intergenerational female protestors, reframing the veil as both cultural heritage and political statement (Ourahmoune and El Jurdi 2023, 5; POMEPS 2023, 83). Through social networks, women used Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to narrate their experiences. These digital archives counteracted the erasure of women from mainstream media, embodying what feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003, 45) calls “the politics of speaking in the first person” — a self-representation against dominant patriarchal framings.

Social media activism during the HIRAK redefined the veil not as a private symbol but as a public interface. Veiled bloggers, journalists, and artists produced livestreams and micro-documentaries asserting civic belonging beyond religious discourse. The most shared feminist slogans on Twitter and Facebook were #MaVoixCompte (“My Voice Counts”) and #FemmesHIRAK, often paired with images of women in diverse attire (Chaif et al. 2025; Wassila Network 2020). Feminist collectives like Wassila Network and Collectif Féministe pour le Changement (CFC-Algérie) used their online platforms to highlight harassment faced by women protestors and to

reframe the veil's meaning away from exoticism or pity. Their posts often used humor — memes showing veiled women telling men, “Go home, I’m protesting for you too” — as a strategy of discursive resistance (CFC-Algérie 2021). As Lydia Haddag (2021) and Ourahmoune and El Jurdi (2023) both observe, this kind of activism marks a shift from embodiment to narrative: instead of letting others define the symbolic weight of the veil, women produced their own digital archives. These online traces continue to circulate, shaping the memory politics of Hirak feminism.



Figure 8. Women in the Hirak holding a banner featuring Baya Touhami, Nabila Djahnine. Photograph circulated by the Wassila Network

This photograph from a 2020 Hirak march in Algiers captures a group of women holding a long banner depicting five iconic Algerian women: Baya Touhami (the painter), Nabila Djahnine (feminist activist), Fadhma N’Soumer (anti-colonial resistance leader of the 1850s), Hassiba Ben Bouali (moudjahida killed during the Battle of Algiers), and Amina Merabet (nurse killed in police repression in 2001). The caption below — “Nos droits c’est tout le temps et partout / حقوقنا في كل وقت و كل بلاصة / lahqiw di koul waqt di koul amkan” — asserts that women’s rights are continuous and omnipresent, not conditional or episodic. The banner functions as a genealogical map,

producing a feminist lineage that links anti-colonial resistance, post-independence activism, and contemporary protest. Instead of invoking a singular national heroine, the image deliberately assembles diverse, intergenerational figures: unveiled, veiled, Kabyle, Arab, artist, militant, martyr. This plurality counters the homogenizing nationalist figure of the “moudjahida” celebrated in official state memory (Vince 2015, 117–120). The women holding the banner reflect this same diversity. Some wear the haïk-style white wrap, others the green-and-white flag draped over the shoulders, while others appear unveiled and casually dressed. Rather than signaling ideological difference, this sartorial variation expresses co-presence within the civic sphere — an example of what Seréna Nilsson Rabia calls “plural visibility,” where the veil neither unifies nor divides but coexists within shared space (POMEPS 2023, 83). The image refuses the colonial binary veiled = oppressed / unveiled = liberated and the post-independence nationalist binary veiled = moral / unveiled = suspect. Instead, the veil here is one possible mode of presence among others, not the basis of political belonging.

The visual composition reinforces this claim: the banner is held at chest height, anchoring the collective body, while the faces on the poster look outward, meeting the viewer’s gaze. The women are not posed as symbols or icons; they are active historical claimants, asserting continuity between past struggle and present demands. The street behind them is crowded but the banner claims space — literally carving room for women’s history within the public square. The photograph thus captures what Judith Butler terms “performative citizenship”: identity enacted through visible, collective presence (Butler 2015, 73–75). Here, feminist memory becomes protest tactic, and the street becomes a site of historical rewriting.

Shifting Meanings: From National Liberation to Democratic Struggle

The transformation of the veil’s political meaning traces Algeria’s broader trajectory from revolutionary hope to disillusioned citizenship. During the War of Independence (1954–1962), the veil symbolized collective resistance: a protective cover, a tactical disguise, and an emblem of national dignity (Fanon 1965, 42–46; Lazreg 1994, 9–11). It united women under a shared nationalist ethos that transcended social boundaries, even as it reinforced gendered divisions of symbolic labor — women became icons of sacrifice rather than decision-makers.

Following independence, that symbolism was absorbed into official memory but stripped of agency. The post-independence state, even though being a long period that wasn't entirely homogenous, glorified the veiled woman as a mother of the nation, while silencing her political voice (Vince 2015, 117–120). As Marnia Lazreg argues, “the female body, once the terrain of colonial conquest, became the moral property of the postcolonial state” (1994, 12). This domestication of revolutionary imagery paralleled the broader authoritarian consolidation of the FLN regime. The 1984 *Family Code* codified patriarchal norms, transforming symbolic reverence into legal subordination (Lalami 2014, 15–18; Engelcke 2017, 143). In this period, the veil's public meaning was redefined: no longer revolutionary but moral and disciplinary — a marker of respectability serving to stabilize the patriarchal order. The state appropriated the veil's earlier anti-colonial legitimacy while voiding it of subversive content (MacMaster 2009, 371–372).

The Hirak movement reinvigorated and expanded the field of meaning around both the veil and women's visibility, building on earlier debates and struggles that had persisted since independence. For the first time since independence, Algerian women collectively occupied public spaces to reclaim their voices as citizens rather than icons (Lassel 2020, 37–39). The generational distance between 1954 and 2019 allowed for a reinterpretation of historical memory: slogans like “We were there in 1954, we are here in 2019” invoked women's wartime participation while demanding inclusion in shaping the new democratic order (Arab Reform Initiative 2021). This rhetorical bridge transformed the veil from a nationalist emblem into a democratic metaphor — symbolizing continuity of struggle rather than continuity of subordination. As Seréna Nilsson Rabia notes, veiled and unveiled women marching side by side signified a plural, inclusive Algeria where identity markers no longer dictated belonging (POMEPS 2023, 82–84). The Feminist Square, organized by FACE and supported by Wassila Network, became a living expression of this reclaiming. Within these gendered subspaces, women debated equality, personal freedoms, and representation. The veil, long trapped between colonial fetishization and postcolonial control, became a site of self-authored meaning — simultaneously personal and political, historical and contemporary (Ourahmoune and El Jurdi 2023, 5).

Social media deepened this transformation. Feminist collectives circulated images of veiled women holding protest placards, reframing visibility from a moral to a political register. Hashtags such as #FemmesHirak and #MaVoixCompte linked women's self-representation to a

wider democratic vocabulary (Chaif et al. 2025). This digital activism completed what Fanon could not foresee — women speaking for themselves, not through revolutionary allegory. The shift from national liberation to democratic struggle reveals a profound evolution in Algeria’s political culture. Whereas the 1950s revolution positioned women as symbols of purity and endurance, the Hirak positioned them as actors of deliberation and equality.

In the earlier paradigm, veiling and unveiling were oppositional acts loaded with colonial tension. In the Hirak, they became coexistent expressions of citizenship. Feminist participants rejected both the colonial narrative of unveiling as emancipation and the nationalist narrative of veiling as virtue. Instead, they articulated a new paradigm: democracy through diversity (Haddag 2021; Ahmed 1992, 221). This reframing also disrupts postcolonial patriarchal memory, which had silenced women’s agency in official historiography. By connecting their current activism to ancestral struggles, Hirak feminists reinserted women into the genealogy of Algerian democracy (Vince 2015, 118). As Lazreg (2019, 3) emphasizes, reclaiming speech is itself a form of resistance in a culture long habituated to silence. The movement thus performed a temporal dialogue: the revolutionary woman of 1954 spoke again through the democratic woman of 2019, not as an icon but as a participant. This bridging of epochs gave Algerian feminism historical legitimacy — rooting contemporary demands in the moral capital of the independence era while rejecting its paternalism.

From a theoretical perspective, this evolution exemplifies symbolic re-signification — the process through which marginalized groups reclaim and transform inherited signs. As Judith Butler (1997, 15–16) argues, performativity allows subjects to “re-speak” language from within domination, re-creating agency through repetition. Algerian women’s reclamation of the veil thus performs a counter-colonial and counter-patriarchal gesture simultaneously. From a postcolonial feminist viewpoint (Mohanty 2003, 42–44), the shift from liberation to democracy entails not abandoning tradition but reinterpreting it through lived experience. The veil’s democratic meaning stems not from Western secular ideals but from Algerian women’s insistence on self-definition within their sociocultural framework.

Finally, memory studies illuminate how the Hirak’s feminists turned remembrance into action. By linking Bouteflika-era authoritarian stagnation to the unfulfilled promises of 1962, they re-

politicized history itself (Zeraoulia 2020, 1015). In this sense, the veil operates as both a mnemonic device and a democratic symbol — binding past struggles to ongoing ones, turning memory into mobilization.

The veil's political meaning in Algeria has shifted across overlapping and often contested phases:

1. During the War of Independence (1954–1962), it was mobilized as a tool of revolutionary resistance—sometimes for concealment, sometimes as a symbol of anti-colonial defiance.
2. In the post-independence decades (roughly 1962–2018), state-led projects of national identity and moral order instrumentalized the veil, framing it alternately as a marker of tradition, religious propriety, or social control—though women's lived experiences and interpretations often diverged from official narratives.
3. With the Hirak uprising (2019–2021), the veil did not enter public discourse as a new site of negotiation, but re-emerged within a longstanding post-independence struggle over its meaning. Unlike the 1980s, when the veil became entangled with the politics of Arabization and state moral authority, or the 1990s, when veiling often signified protection amidst civil conflict, the Hirak articulated the veil within a civic and plural public sphere. Women used the veil (and the choice not to veil) to assert differentiated yet coexisting identities, challenging both state paternalism and masculinist nationalist authority while insisting that participation in the nation does not require aesthetic, religious, or ideological uniformity.

This evolution represents not linear progress but cyclical re-appropriation. Each stage redefines womanhood vis-à-vis authority: first colonial, then national, now democratic. The Hirak's women, by occupying public space with or without the veil, reconfigured both the nation's visual landscape and its political imagination.

As Natalya Vince (2015, 120) notes, memory in Algeria is never static — it is “a battlefield of symbols.” The veil's shifting meaning embodies that very struggle: from a cloth of concealment to a banner of citizenship.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how the veil, as both symbol and practice, has mediated Algerian women's relationship to politics, identity, and citizenship across two key historical moments: the War of Independence (1954–1962) and the Hirak Movement (2019–2021). Through this comparative lens, the research has shown that the veil's meanings are not fixed but historically contingent, socially negotiated, and politically charged. It has functioned alternately as a shield, a weapon, a banner, and a claim to belonging — a material sign of how Algerian women have both inhabited and transformed the public sphere.

From the colonial encounter to the digital age, the veil's evolution encapsulates the shifting parameters of female agency in Algeria's political history. During the colonial era, as Frantz Fanon (1965, 43) famously observed, the French obsession with unveiling revealed not concern for women's emancipation but the imperial desire to “possess” the Algerian body politic. The veil became a metaphor for colonized space — something to be opened, penetrated, and ruled. Yet Algerian women subverted this logic by turning the veil into an instrument of concealment, strategy, and defiance. As Neil MacMaster (2009, 117–119) and Marnia Lazreg (1994, 11–12) both argue, the “liberation” of women under colonialism was less a gift than a battlefield, and women responded by weaponizing the very object of their supposed oppression.

In contrast, during the Hirak movement, the veil no longer served as camouflage but as a means of visibility — a public assertion of belonging within a democratic imaginary. Women reclaimed both the street and the screen as sites of citizenship. As Seréna Nilsson Rabia (POMEPS 2023, 83–84) notes, appearing in the protests — veiled or unveiled — was itself a political statement: “to walk was to speak.” The continuity between these two moments lies in the enduring role of women as mediators between the private and the public, tradition and modernity, while the rupture lies in their ability to author their own representation.

The comparative framework of this research underscores a broader transformation in Algerian citizenship — from its exclusionary, colonial definition to a plural, participatory, and ethical conception. Under French rule, Algerians were denied legal citizenship; under the early post-independence regime, citizenship was granted in principle but curtailed in practice through patriarchal law. The 1984 *Family Code*, as Fériel Lalami (2014, 17–19) and Caroline Engelcke

(2017, 144–146) show, institutionalized male guardianship, effectively relegating women to moral rather than political citizenship.

The Hirak movement reopened this question by shifting citizenship from legal status to moral practice — performed through peaceful protest (*silmiya*), accountability, and solidarity. In this civic reimagining, veiled and unveiled women stood together under the national flag, not as embodiments of opposing ideologies but as symbols of shared dignity. Their activism enacted what Étienne Balibar (2015, 50–52) terms “equaliberty”: equality and liberty as inseparable. This redefinition of political belonging illustrates how women in the Hirak reanimated the emancipatory ethos of 1954 but reoriented it toward democratic ethics rather than sovereignty.

Another central contribution of this study is its analysis of visual and discursive transformations — how the veil’s image has traveled from colonial propaganda to participatory digital media. In the 1950s, French officials and photographers such as those described by Malek Alloula (1986, 5–7) produced eroticized postcards and staged unveiling ceremonies to dramatize France’s “civilizing mission.” The visual grammar of domination equated the exposure of women’s bodies with the conquest of territory.

Yet by 2019, the same visual field had been reconfigured. Women now documented themselves — through smartphones, livestreams, and hashtags — creating what Zahra Hassani (2022, 407–408) calls a “digital counter-gaze.” The camera, once a colonial weapon, became an instrument of self-expression and collective memory. This re-appropriation of visibility demonstrates the democratization of the gaze: no longer the prerogative of the colonizer or the patriarchal state, representation became a right exercised by citizens.

The emergence of feminist collectives such as the Wassila Network and FACE further amplified this transformation. Their bilingual online campaigns — using Arabic, French, and Tamazight — connected local activism with diaspora feminism, weaving a transnational narrative of belonging that transcends the binaries of East/West, secular/religious, modern/traditional (Ourahmoune and El Jurdi 2023, 3–4). The digital veil, unlike its colonial counterpart, signifies not erasure but self-authorship.

By juxtaposing the War of Independence and the Hirak, this thesis also illuminates the politics of historical memory in Algeria. The revolutionary generation of the 1950s bequeathed a heroic but rigid national narrative, one that glorified women as symbols yet silenced them as subjects. As Natalya Vince (2015, 121) notes, post-1962 Algeria celebrated the moudjahida (female fighter) in rhetoric but erased her voice from governance and public discourse.

The Hirak feminists re-entered this dialogue with history, not to deny it but to complete it. Their chants — “We were there in 1954, we are here in 2019” — bridged generations while exposing the unfinished nature of decolonization. Theirs is a memory activism: transforming nostalgia into critique, myth into dialogue. By reclaiming symbols like the veil and the flag, they reframed the legacy of independence as an ongoing democratic project rather than a closed chapter.

This act of historical reclamation also speaks to broader postcolonial debates about voice and authorship. As Gayatri Spivak (1988, 294–296) warned, the subaltern cannot speak when structures of representation remain colonial or patriarchal. Algerian women’s interventions — through protest, art, and digital narration — thus constitute not only political acts but epistemological ones: they speak back to both the colonial archive and the nationalist myth.

The overarching argument of this thesis is that Algerian women’s relationship to the veil mirrors the evolution of their political agency — from being symbols in other people’s narratives to becoming subjects of their own. In the 1950s, the veiled woman embodied the nation’s honor; in the Hirak, she embodies its conscience. Both moments demonstrate that the veil’s meaning is neither purely religious nor aesthetic, but political and performative, shaped by context and collective action. The transition from colonial subjugation to digital citizenship illustrates a deeper transformation: the movement from representation to participation. Where once women were represented — by colonizers, by the FLN, by state propaganda — they now represent themselves. This evolution reflects not only gender progress but the democratization of Algerian political culture as a whole. The comparative analysis therefore affirms that the hijab is not a static relic of tradition but a living discourse — one that continually negotiates identity, morality, and belonging. As Leila Ahmed (1992, 225–227) and Saba Mahmood (2005, 16–18) both argue, veiling practices cannot be reduced to symbols of submission; they often signify ethical self-

cultivation and political resistance. In Algeria, this holds especially true: what began as a colonial weapon has become a language of citizenship.

This study contributes to postcolonial and feminist theory by demonstrating how symbols of subjugation can be resemanticized through history. It also highlights the need for localized feminist frameworks — those attentive to specific historical trajectories and cultural logics rather than imported paradigms. The Algerian case challenges both Western secular feminism and Islamist conservatism by showing that gender equality can emerge from within indigenous ethical vocabularies of dignity (*karāma*), justice (*‘adl*), and solidarity (*mas’ūliyya*). At the theoretical level, the analysis bridges Frantz Fanon’s (1965) anti-colonial phenomenology of the body with Judith Butler’s (1997) performative theory of identity. Both perspectives help illuminate how political meaning is embodied and reiterated — how veiling and unveiling are not opposites but acts within a continuous spectrum of self-making and resistance. Politically, the thesis underscores that democratization is inseparable from gender inclusion. The Hirak movement’s ethics of peaceful protest, mutual respect, and visibility reimaged Algeria’s national identity not as a monolith but as a plural, dialogical community. If the war of independence liberated Algeria territorially, the Hirak’s women are liberating it symbolically — freeing its public imagination from patriarchal constraint.

What this comparative framework allows us to see—beyond either moment studied in isolation—is how the political meaning of the veil is shaped not simply by ideology, but by the structure of the public sphere itself. In the War of Independence, the veil’s political function emerged through clandestine movement, tactical invisibility, and the struggle to reclaim space from a foreign occupying power. In the Hirak, by contrast, the veil became a means of claiming presence in an already-national but restricted public sphere. The comparison therefore demonstrates that the hijab does not merely reflect shifts in cultural or religious sentiment, but rather mirrors transformations in the conditions of citizenship: from a revolutionary struggle against colonial rule to a civic struggle for democratic accountability. In other words, we understand the political agency of Algerian women precisely because we see how their practices of veiling and unveiling change across different political regimes. Without placing these moments in dialogue, this evolution would remain obscured.

This study is limited by several structural constraints. First, the archival record of women's militant participation in the War of Independence remains uneven, shaped both by colonial surveillance documentation and by nationalist-era memorialization practices that selectively recorded women's roles. Second, the digital ethnographic material used for the Hirak relies heavily on content circulating on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, which privilege voices that are urban, literate, and digitally connected; rural and economically marginalized women remain underrepresented in this dataset. Third, the linguistic diversity of Algeria—Arabic, French, and Tamazight—shapes both access to sources and their reception, and meaning may shift subtly across languages. These limitations do not undermine the argument, but they underscore the need for continued work that expands beyond state, digital, and urban archives.

The findings of this thesis have broader implications for how we understand political symbols and women's agency in postcolonial societies. The hijab's shifting political function across eras reveals how symbols are not fixed inheritances but dynamic instruments shaped by power, visibility, and collective memory. This suggests that feminist and political actors today can strategically resemanticize cultural forms rather than abandon them in the name of modernity. More broadly, the Algerian case demonstrates how democratization is not only a matter of institutional reform but also of reconfiguring the shared symbolic vocabulary through which communities imagine themselves. Understanding how symbols like the veil travel across historical regimes—colonial, nationalist, and democratic—offers insight into how social movements can reclaim meaning, rebuild political belonging, and articulate futures grounded in dignity rather than domination.

In closing, the story of Algerian women and the veil is not a tale of linear progress but of cyclical redefinition. Each generation inherits symbols of the past and reshapes them to meet new struggles. The veil, once the battleground of colonial propaganda, now frames debates about ethics, modernity, and citizenship. It endures not as a relic but as a living archive — a reminder that freedom is not achieved once and for all but continually reinterpreted in the face of new challenges. The comparative approach taken here — spanning from 1954 to 2021 — demonstrates that women's agency is both historical and anticipatory: grounded in memory yet oriented toward the future. As the chants of the Hirak declared, “The people want a new Algeria.” That new Algeria will only be realized when the voices of its women, veiled or unveiled, are heard not as symbols of virtue but as authors of history.

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