

Sex and Politics in Albert Camus's *La femme adultère*

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All his life, Albert Camus felt a strong tie with Algeria. Through articles, letters, and speeches, he tried to improve the lives of the diverse people of Algeria. Yet, it was often thought that he neglected to treat the subject of Algeria in his literary works.¹ Nevertheless, some critics have noticed that not only do many of Camus's novels and stories take place in Algeria, but they reflect his political orientation.

I want to insist that one finds in Camus's novels what they once were thought to have been cleared of—detail about that very distinctly French imperial conquest begun in 1830, continuing during Camus's life, and projecting into the composition of the texts.²

In this way, *La femme adultère* reveals many of Camus's sentiments toward Algeria. Camus's political orientation as seen through *La femme adultère* is the focus of this article.

The first thing that one notices about any text is the title. Often, it gives us some idea of what we will find if we choose to read the text, thus creating expectations in the reader. In other cases, the title helps to deepen our understanding of a text once we have finished reading. Consequently, *La femme adultère* begs the question: What adultery? The story is brimming with sexual imagery, but the fact remains that the main character, Janine, did not have extramarital relations with any man. So then, what adultery are we talking about?

Marriage and Politics

Before examining the question of adultery, one must note that any adultery implies a marriage. In many of his texts, written both before and after *La femme adultère*, Camus compares the relationship between the Pieds-Noirs and the Arabs to a marriage.³ The marriage between Janine and Marcel recalls these numerous allusions to a political marriage.⁴ Thus, through the metaphor of marriage, Camus subjects both his fictional characters and real people to societal expectations.⁵

One of Camus's first and most striking allusions to marriage can be found in the *Lettre à un militant algérien*, first published in October 1955. Here, marriage and violence are inseparable.

On dirait que des fous, enflammés de fureur, conscients du mariage forcé dont ils ne peuvent se délivrer, ont décidé d'en faire une étreinte mortelle. Forcés de vivre ensemble, et incapables de s'unir, ils décident au moins de mourir ensemble.⁶

The violence of war permeates *La femme adultère*. Through a subtle literary technique, either using words endowed with a double meaning or describing innocent things using violent words, Camus allows his reader to feel the atmosphere of violence without directly talking about the political situation in Algeria. For example, the word *grenade* denotes a fruit when in fact it usually refers to a weapon, and the word *ensanglanté* is used to describe fallen fruit on rooftops when in fact images usually associated with blood are quite violent. Moreover, in traditional warfare, one does not see women on the front line. Likewise, Janine finds herself in a sea of men. "On n'y rencontrait pas une seule femme et il semblait à Janine qu'elle n'avait jamais vu autant d'hommes."⁷ (24)

In *L'Algérie déchirée*, a series of articles published between October 1955 and January 1956, Camus again refers to the relationship between the Pieds-Noirs and the

Arabs as a marriage. As he was unwilling or unable to imagine an Algeria without the French or without the Arabs, only two solutions seemed to exist—a marriage of convenience or the violence of war.

[L]e choix en Algérie n'est pas entre la démission ou la reconquête, mais entre le mariage de convenances ou le mariage à mort de deux xénophobies.⁸

In fact, the marriage between Janine and Marcel is strongly suggestive of a marriage of convenience. Janine married Marcel because she needed to feel wanted, not because she loved him.

Elle avait fini par l'accepter [Marcel], bien qu'il fût un peu petit et qu'elle n'aimât pas beaucoup son rire avide et bref, ni ses yeux noirs trop saillants. (13) [Maintenant, e]lle suivait Marcel, voilà tout, contente de sentir que quelqu'un avait besoin d'elle. Il ne lui donnait pas d'autre joie que de se savoir nécessaire. Sans doute ne l'aimait-il pas. (29)

Daily life has become a matter of habit. Janine and Marcel exist without love and there is no passion in their physical relations. Janine tells us that “Ils n'avaient pas eu d'enfants.” (13) This marriage, like the one between the Pieds-Noirs and the Arabs, is “sterile,” a word often employed by Camus in other texts.⁹ In this light, it is possible to read *La femme adultère* allegorically by examining how sexual discourse relates to political discourse.

La poétique du corps féminin devient pour Camus un biais par lequel il ose aborder la politique du pays, tout au début de la guerre d'Algérie. ... En effet, si on n'évacue pas la sexualité de ce texte—une lecture autorisée par le titre—on ne peut éviter la politique.¹⁰

Body and Politics

In *L'Algérie déchirée*, after mentioning the marriage of convenience, Camus immediately states that “En refusant de reconnaître la personnalité arabe, l'Algérie française irait alors contre ses propres intérêts.”¹¹ Similarly, Janine does not truly recognize “la personnalité arabe.” For her, most of the Arabs look alike.

Quelques-uns, sans paraître la voir, tournaient lentement vers elle cette face maigre et tannée qui, à ses yeux, les faisait tous ressemblants... (24)

Frequently, she describes them as a group “les mains maigres et le visage brûlé des Arabes” (14), “la masse haillonneuse” (17), “le cercle de burnous” (18), “eux” (23).

Janine realizes that she is not in harmony with her countrymen and she is not at ease. We learn that she did not even understand Arabic, a language that she had been hearing all her life. (16) From the beginning of the story, she feels the heaviness of her body in relation to the thin Arabs who “semblaient au large, malgré leur amples vêtements, sur les banquettes où son mari et elle tenaient à peine.” (14)

Through Janine's perception of her body, “trop grande, trop épaisse, trop blanche,” (28) we can imagine how Camus perceived the position of the Pieds-Noirs in Algeria—a position strongly influenced by economics. In this respect, the heaviness of Janine comes also from her economic wealth.¹² She notices that only the French seem to have luggage. (17) Janine and Marcel's wealth is represented by the trunk of merchandise that they have brought with them. Moreover, the sole objective of their trip south was for economic gain.

This penetration into the depths of Algeria is symbolic of the marriage act. Like the love making of Janine and Marcel the trip south is passionless and sterile. Marcel wants his business to be profitable and feels he must make an effort to communicate with the Arabs on whom he relies financially. While selling his wares, Janine tells us,

“[Marcel] avait l’air d’une femme qui veut plaire et qui n’est pas sûre d’elle.” (22) When he finally starts to sell, his humor improves. “[I]l commençait à vendre, et devenait aussi plus conciliant: il appelait Janine “petite”, le voyage ne serait pas inutile.” (23) In Janine’s eyes, Marcel’s reaction reaffirms the fact that there is no love between them. She has discovered that his true passion is money. (15) Nevertheless, she knows that he needs her. (30) In this respect, Marcel’s business relationship with the Arab merchants is much like his marriage relationship with Janine.

Sexual Attraction and Politics

Despite her tendency to view the Arabs as a homogenous group, Janine’s relationship to her fellow countrymen is more complicated. Her sensitivity to nature creates a link between her and the Arabs, who at the beginning of the story seem to be in communication with the surrounding environment. “[Ils] semblaient écouter la voix du vent.” (17)

Throughout the story, Janine notices both the Arabs and the land. Her attraction to them is made clear through highly erotic descriptions of her surroundings. Camus uses both feminine and masculine imagery. The feminine imagery is more discrete. The sky is like a woman who gradually reveals herself. At the beginning of the text, “Le ciel restait couvert.” (18) Finally, “Le ciel se découvrait par endroits.” (23) And at last, “Le ciel [était] tout entier découvert.” (25) When Janine returns to the fort for her orgasmic experience, the sky is full of stars; “les étoiles tombaient, une à une, ... et à chaque fois Janine s’ouvrait un peu plus à la nuit.” (33)

The masculine imagery revolves around phallic symbols that literally assault us from page one of the text. Interestingly, the first phallic image is of Marcel’s “épis de cheveux” (11), tufts of hair strongly reminiscent of a cuckold’s horns. In fact, the images range from the soldier’s face “longue et pointue” (14), to the “minaret jaune et gracieux” (18), to the “pain de sucre ... entamé au sommet” (22).

One of the most prominent masculine images in the story is the palm tree.

The apparently serendipitous appearance of palm trees at precisely the juncture when Marcel’s own penis has been displaced for a valise of goods introduces one of Camus’s more consequential phallic symbols.¹³

Indeed, images of palm trees appear throughout the text. “Elle imaginait ... une mer de palmiers droits et flexibles, moutonnant dans la tempête.” (19)

When she arrives in the oasis, “elle aurait voulu aller vers eux.” (18) Here “eux” refers to the palm trees. Further into the story “eux” refers to the Arabs. Janine remarks, “il vaut mieux s’entendre directement avec eux.” In both sentences, “eux” is the last word and is therefore strongly accentuated causing readers to take note. The parallel grammatical structure highlighting “eux” creates a link between the palm trees and the Arabs allowing the reader to imagine the focus of Janine’s desire.

Though alluded to strongly, Janine’s attraction to the Arabs is never openly expressed. Even when her sexually charged gaze is focused directly on them, her desire is not candidly expressed. Instead, her sexual preoccupation is conveyed in terms of inanimate objects, such as the *swelling* lights and the *enormous* burnouses.

Elle s’arrêta, perçut un bruit d’élytres et, derrière les lumières qui grossissaient, vit enfin d’énormes burnous ... Les burnous la frôlèrent. (32)

In addition, Janine’s desire is translated into a certain respect for Muslim traditions that her husband does not share. She feels embarrassed after having eaten pork and drunk wine. (21)

At this point, one wonders if Janine has evolved. We have noted how she views the Arabs as a homogenous mass while at the same time secretly desiring them. Eventually, she does notice the individuality of one man. The only Arab that she describes in a detailed manner is the “general” who crosses the square and for whom Marcel is obliged to move his trunk. She admires this man, but clearly her admiration falls on traits that are, in her eyes, French. She describes him as “un officier français d’Affaires indigènes.” (23)

One could argue that merely recognizing someone’s individuality is a sign of character development and that Janine’s detailed description of the “general” is a symbolic recognition of “la personnalité arabe” by the Pieds-Noirs. One could also argue that at this point in the story, the character of Janine is static. Whatever the case may be, Camus declares in *L’Algérie déchirée* that any French recognition of the Arabs is futile if in turn the French are not recognized by the Arabs. “La personnalité arabe sera reconnue par la personnalité française, mais il faut pour cela que la France existe.”¹⁵

Clearly, the “general” does not provide the occasion for Janine to recognize him.

Il avançait régulièrement dans leur direction, mais semblait regarder au-delà de leur groupe Alors que l’espace vide de la place les entourait, il avançait droit sur la malle, sans la voir, sans les voir. . . . L’autre passa, sans paraître rien remarquer. (24)

His manner indicates that Janine and Marcel’s existence is not even worthy of his notice. Essentially, he renders any possibility of an outreach null and void even before it is thought of. The link created between Janine and the Arabs through their mutual sensitivity to nature is denied by the Arab “general.” “Elle détestait la stupide arrogance de cet Arabe.” (24) Nevertheless, Janine’s desiring gaze follows him to the ramparts and she immediately suggests going up to see the view. (24)

Adultery and Politics

The most provocative descriptions of nature in *La femme adultère* are found in the sections in which Janine is on the rampart wall. She is absolutely fascinated by the view. Camus too has been fascinated by a view. In 1939 in the *Misère de la Kabylie*, he wrote about overlooking the expanses of Kabylie with a friend. He waxes poetic, but finishes by remembering that those suffering from hunger could not share his appreciation.

Là, nous regardions la nuit tomber. Et à cette heure où l’ombre qui descend des montagnes sur cette terre splendide apporte une détente au cœur de l’homme le plus endurci, je savais pourtant qu’il n’y avait pas de paix pour ceux qui, de l’autre côté de la vallée, se réunissaient autour d’une galette de mauvaise orge. Je savais aussi qu’il y aurait eu de la douceur à s’abandonner à ce soir si surprenant et si grandiose, mais que cette misère dont les feux rougeoyaient en face de nous mettait comme un interdit sur la beauté du monde.¹⁶

A bit later in the same series of articles, Camus has another similar experience. While contemplating the breathtaking beauty of the scene, he is profoundly moved and understands the bond between the Kabyle and his land.¹⁷

Janine’s fascination with the view from the fort is reminiscent of Camus’s experiences in the above texts. However, Janine does not feel the pain of others, only her own.

Il lui sembla que le cours du monde venait alors de s’arrêter et que personne, à partir de cet instant, ne vieillirait plus ni ne mourrait. En tous lieux, désormais, la vie était suspendue, sauf dans son cœur où, au même moment, quelqu’un pleurait de peine et d’émerveillement. (27)

She claims, if only for an instant, this communion with Algeria for herself. “Elle savait seulement que ce royaume, de tout temps, lui avait été promis et que jamais, pourtant, il ne serait le sien, plus jamais, sinon à ce fugitif instant.” (27) Janine’s desire for something she feels she will ultimately not have is suggestive of the Pieds-Noirs’ desire amidst growing political tensions to maintain their lives in Algeria. Moreover, her feeling that the *royaume* had been eternally promised to her brings to mind the one hundred years of history of the Pieds-Noirs in Algeria.¹⁸

Faced with an immense and beautiful view, Janine’s perception of the environment resembles (is) an erotic experience culminating in orgasm. However, the orgasm does not arrive immediately. Janine must descend from the rampart, sneak away from Marcel at night, and return to culminate her experience.

On her first trip to the rampart, after a long lustful look at the horizon, “son regard se déplaçait lentement, ... tout le long d’une courbe parfaite,” (25, 26) Janine notices a Nomad encampment. Despite the fact that she cannot see the men who live there, “elle ne pouvait penser qu’à eux.” (12) Here, “eux” again highlights the Arab people as the focus of Janine’s desire as it is placed in a position of stress at the end of a grammatical cluster. Moreover, the phrase is curiously reminiscent of the common French expression, “Je ne pense qu’à ça,”¹⁹ which indicates obsession with the sexual act. Thus, through her thoughts, Janine has already committed adultery.

Indeed, the desire for a relationship with the Arabs, represented by her erotic attraction to nature, is portrayed as illicit. After all, she must *sneak back* to the fort during the night.

Les souliers à la main, elle gagna la porte. Elle attendit encore un moment, dans l’obscurité, puis ouvrit doucement. Le loquet grinça, elle s’immobilisa. Son cœur battait follement. Elle tendit l’oreille et, rassurée par le silence, tourna encore un peu la main. (31-32)

During this second visit to the fort, the description of Janine’s surroundings and perceptions resembles a sexual encounter.

[L]’air froid qu’elle avalait par saccades coula bientôt régulièrement en elle, une chaleur timide commença de naître au milieu des frissons. ... [U]ne sorte de giration pesant entraînait le ciel au-dessus d’elle. ... à chaque fois Janine s’ouvrait un peu plus à la nuit. ... [L]’eau de la nuit commença d’emplir Janine. (33-34)

The intimacy and detail of Janine’s intercourse demonstrates the bond between the Pieds-Noirs and Algeria and by extension between the Pieds-Noirs and the Arabs. As we have already seen, Janine’s sensitivity to nature creates a link between her and the Arabs, even if the other has no desire to recognize this connection.

It seems as if Camus is using the intimacy of the sexual act to suggest that the attachment of the Pieds-Noirs to Algeria is as legitimate as the attachment of the Arabs. Two peoples united through their ties to a land does indeed resemble a marriage. Whether they harbor feelings of love or feelings of hate the bond remains, at least until a separation or divorce.

If the Pieds-Noirs are intimately attached to Algeria, and consider it their historical home, what then is their tie to France? As Janine relied on Marcel for financial support, so too the Pieds-Noirs were economically tied to France. Janine’s weight is symbolic of her economic position and by extension that of the Pieds-Noirs in general.²⁰ She follows the trunk, an icon of economic prosperity. “[Elle] suivait la malle qui, à travers la foule, lui ouvrait un chemin.” (21) Indeed, Camus seems to have agreed with

Sartre that the Pieds-Noirs, whether or not victims of a system, followed the lead of France in economic matters.

La contrepartie de cet impérialisme colonial, c'est qu'il faut créer un pouvoir d'achat aux colonies. ... Le colon est d'abord un acheteur artificiel, créé de toutes pièces au-delà des mers par un capitalisme qui cherche de nouveaux marchés.²¹

Janine is attracted to the Arabs and the land, but follows Marcel and the trunk. In marrying Marcel, she was unfaithful to herself. She traded her freedom to feel needed.

[I]l lui semblait que c'était hier qu'elle hésitait entre la vie libre et le mariage. (13)
[Maintenant, e]lle suivait Marcel, voilà tout, contente de sentir que quelqu'un avait besoin d'elle. (29)

Janine essentially embodies the Pieds-Noirs and their historical ties to Algeria. She clearly disregards this intense bond to follow her economic interests, represented by Marcel and the trunk. The story suggests that she effectively commits “adultery” by sneaking out to the fort at night, unknown to her husband, to indulge in erotic pleasures with the land she has always loved. Deception was inherent and guilt apparent as she tearfully says to Marcel upon returning that nothing happened. “Elle pleurait, de toutes ses larmes, sans pouvoir se retenir. “Ce n'est rien, mon chéri, disait-elle, ce n'est rien.” (34)

Janine is married to Marcel whose “épis de cheveux” (11), as we should recall, are reminiscent of a cuckold's horns. We have no knowledge of his thoughts, except through her eyes. As we have seen, she believes his true passion is money. Although she is the direct beneficiary of his business efforts, “Après tout, elle en profitait,” (15) she yearns for a people and a land that he disdains. This is clearly a moral and spiritual infidelity if her primary bond is to Marcel. She seems to affirm this point when upon returning to the hotel room she fails to mention where she has been. After all, why hold back the fact that she went out to look at the sky, why cry, unless this act implies a deeper meaning—an infidelity.

Camus was himself torn between two loyalties. Like Janine, he found himself positioned between two extremes and unable to wholly support either side.

Une telle position ne satisfait personne, aujourd'hui, et je sais d'avance l'accueil qui lui sera fait des deux côtés. Je le regrette sincèrement, mais je ne puis forcer ce que je sens et ce que je crois. ... [Je me trouve] dans l'impossibilité de me joindre à aucun des camps extrêmes.²¹

Perhaps Camus felt a bit like the fly at the beginning of the story. Its comings and goings are noticed by Janine, but have no effect on either her or Marcel.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, Camus's personal perspective on the “Algerian question” permeates *La femme adultère*. In this respect, the fact that the story is located in Algeria becomes significant as Janine's longings are translated into visions of nature—of Algeria.

Notes

¹ “The tendency is for readers to associate Camus's novels with French novels about France, not only because of their language and the forms they seem to take over from such illustrious antecedents as *Adolph* and *Trois Contes*, but also because his choice of an Algerian locale seems incidental to the pressing moral issues at hand.” Edward W. Said, “*Camus and the French Imperial Experience*,” *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, Random House, 1993, 175.

² Said 176.

³ To simplify references, for the purposes of this article, to the many groups of people constituting Algeria and the fact that they used different labels during different periods of history, the term Pieds-Noirs will be used to refer to the French colonists of Algeria and their descendants, and the term Arabs will be used for all peoples whose ancestors were present in Algeria before the arrival of the French.

⁴ Albert Camus, *Actuelles III*, Paris, Gallimard, 1958, 128, 146, 155, 164, 177, 179.

⁵ “[E]n se servant de la métaphore du mariage, à la fois dans ses textes politiques et dans sa fiction, Camus soumet encore une fois le personnel à un système social et donc à une idéologie.” Danielle Marx-Scouras, “Comme une femme : Camus à la lumière de Roüan,” *Littératures et temps colonial : Métamorphoses du regard sur la Méditerranée et l’Afrique : actes du colloque d’Aix-en-Provence, 7-8 avril 1997*, sous la direction de Jean-Robert Henry et Lucienne Martini, Aix-en-Provence, Edisud, 1999, 306.

⁶ Camus, “Lettre à un militant algérien,” *Actuelles III*, 128.

⁷ Albert Camus, “La femme adultère,” *L’exil et le royaume*, Paris, Gallimard, 1957.

⁸ Camus, “L’Algérie déchirée,” *Actuelles III*, 146.

⁹ Camus, *Actuelles III*, 129, 149, 156, 176. and Albert Camus, “L’avenir algérien,” *Albert Camus éditorialiste à l’Express: mai 1955-février 1956*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987, 52.

¹⁰ Marx-Scouras 301, 306.

¹¹ Camus, “L’Algérie déchirée,” *Actuelles III*, 146.

¹² Marx-Scouras 306.

¹³ Simon P. Sibelman, “The Anguish and the Ecstasy: Camus’s Use of Phallic symbols in ‘La femme adultère,’” *Dalhousie French Studies*, 45 (1998): 45.

¹⁴ Camus, “L’Algérie déchirée,” *Actuelles III*, 151.

¹⁵ Camus, “Misère de la Kabylie,” *Actuelles III*, 41.

¹⁶ Camus, “Misère de la Kabylie,” *Actuelles III*, 73.

¹⁷ “Les Français d’Algérie ... sont en Algérie depuis plus d’un siècle et ils sont plus d’un million.” Camus, “Lettre à un militant algérien,” *Actuelles III*, 126.

¹⁸ Jean-Loup Chiflet, *Sky my husband! Ciel mon mari! Guide de l’anglais courant, Guide of the running English*, Paris, Hermé, 1985, 23.

¹⁹ Marx-Scouras 306.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Le colonialisme est un système,” *Situations V*, Paris, Gallimard, 1947-, 29.

²¹ Camus, Avant-Propos, *Actuelles III*, 12.

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