

Festival Review

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Algerian Predicament and A Family Portrait



Their Algeria is a kind of film where the documentary and feature genre coalesced to present such a narrative, which, along with a family history, also unfolds the history of a nationality as well as countries of their root and living. Screened in the 4th El Gouna Film Festival (23-31 October, 2020) and unspooled with a Skype conversation and family video footages of the early nineties recorded by the father of the director Lina Soualem, *Their Algeria* looked pretentiously ordinary at the beginning. However, as layers continue to bare with the protagonist couple's past unraveling little by little, it goes forth to uncover painful memories of their immigration to France from

Algeria to live a life of exploited workers in post-war France, besides tragic anecdotes of the Algerian war for independence from being a French colony. The final picture turns out to be a wonderful mosaic of Algerian history as a French colony reflecting the status of Algerian workers, both in the colony and post-war France in the early fifties. As it also portrays the fate of Algerians during the war for independence and subsequent attaining of independence at great human cost in 1962 besides the lives of Algerians and their professional, social and cultural life in France despite many still living on the working permit, *Their Algeria* turns out to be a deeply

engrossing, poignant, and movingly nostalgic experience.



Daughter of renowned mime actor Zinedine Soualem, director Lina Soualem seems to be on a mission to trace her own roots and to start with she began visiting her grandparents Aicha and Mabrouk, who came to the small town of Thiers in France in the early fifties. While interviewing them from behind her camera, what appears to be a personal family discussion and a grand daughter's quest to understand what separated the couple in their ripe age, she gradually widens her restlessly inquisitive fold to reveal every aspect of their past or rather essentially the Algerian past since the forties. Her grandparents were still unmarried then and worked hard to earn a living in the colonized Algeria and thereafter as a worker in post-war France after their immigration. However, howsoever clever director Lina had been, it was not an easy task to extract the answers, particularly from the reticent Mabrouk despite being a reservoir of information while vivacious Aicha, stops short of the details in spite of breaking into occasional laughter. 'We have never spoken, it's not like we are going to start now', she exclaims. The couple, Mabrouk in his eighties and little frail and lively Aicha, still in her pink, have just separated and moved into two small apartments facing one another after living together for 62 years. But Lina Soualem's persistence gradually pays off

and bit by bit, she could bring together crucial anecdotes of Algerian past and the lives of immigrants in post-war France to draw a near-complete picture of what she had intended to bring into the fore.

The old couple still lives in Thiers, where they set foot on some seventy years ago and were well settled years after, however, after their separation their old house is now up for sale. The reason, as Aicha says, she has had enough of her stone-faced hubby's face and wants her own space. Their conjugal life began when she was barely past her teens in a farming village near Setif, which witnessed the bloody massacre by French colonial authorities in 1945 causing the death of 102 demonstrators and which obligated them to leave Algeria en-route post-war France in search of livelihood despite things were not rosy there either. Despite the separation, however, taking care of her feeble husband remains to be one of Aicha's preoccupations who prepares food for him and waits until he finishes his meal. While photographs of the past and the home movies invariably evokes emotions, Aicha says pretty little, but hides her face with both her hands while Lina rues, "I can never tell whether you are laughing or crying." Aicha responds by raising her two fingers and says 'both'. While conversing with Lina's father and her son, Aicha, however, explains about her husband to be a tough man of few emotions who also speaks little and worse, love to shun the social life. On the contrary, Mabrouk appears to exude many emotions at once and every expression of his seems to utter a thousand words. He is brief and precise, but it is he, with his deep-seated anger, anguish, grief and remorse, speaks a whole lot of things which became crucial for drawing the fullest picture possible about the Algerian root, their time of yore and present status in France. Mabrouk reminisces about

his early days as a worker in a cutlery factory in a sub-human condition which has since been transformed into a museum. In an extraordinary scene, when he visits the museum and listens to the unbearable noisy working atmosphere artificially being created now, he could be seen lost in nostalgia, but at the same time gripped by excruciating pain as if agonizing memories of the past gush in.

What is fascinating about Lina Soualem's *Their Algeria* is its very minimalist approach to narrate a long, painful account of

the colonial past of Algeria and the fate of an immigrant couple reflected in their response to a perseverant director's incessant queries who happens to be their grandchildren. It was indeed interesting to see how the director almost simultaneously goes about in narrating the corresponding personal stories of two individuals by shifting from one locale to another and gradually widens her net to cover wider issues with great ease and competence. Crisp editing, enchanting music and in certain places some amazing transitions also make *Their Algeria* a memorable experience.

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