**Title:** ‘“The Very Worst Things”: Maternal Violence and Vulnerability in Djamila Sahraoui’s *Yema* (2012)’

***The ones we love are enemies of the state***

**Antigone**

**Abstract:**

This article explores the connections between vulnerability, gender and terrorist violence, drawing on Algerian filmmaker Djamila Sahraoui’s *Yema* (2012). The film will first be situated in relation to Sahraoui’s oeuvre, and within a wider context of debates around the changing nature of political violence and its representation in Maghrebi, Hollywood and European cinema. This comparison underlines *Yema*’s innovatory formal and thematic focus on slow narrative time, sparse aesthetics, and fragile, intimate images. The article then examines the concept of vulnerability in relation to terrorism, in particular linking Sahraoui’s choice of formal techniques to the film’s thematic staging of various modes of physical and psychical vulnerability to violence. Finally, the allegorical and mythological motifs used in *Yema* will be considered in relation to the gendering of the figures of victim and agent in both the film and wider cultural imaginaries of political violence. Finally, the article shows how Sahraoui offers a feminist reconfiguration of the myths of Medea and Antigone, discussing the relation between maternity, the nation, and the state in the Algerian context, suggesting that, in the film’s dramatization of a mother who inflicts suffering, larger questions are raised about personal and political responses to the feelings of exposure that terrorist violence engenders.

I am not completely convinced of the reading of Ouardia's refusal to allow Ali to help her as a refusal of vulnerability. She does allow the guardian to assist her, so the refusal appears to be less about her sense of self than about her sense of **whom she should and shouldn't allow to participate in community building work and ritual**. The author also might want to think through whether the **ideal of self-sufficiency** described by Butler applies to a rural Algerian context, one in which a sense of selfhood may be closer to the **relational self** described by Suad Joseph than the independent individual.

She only accepts help from the guard when she absolutely needs it

**Keywords:**

*Yema*, violence, Algerian Civil War, Algerian film, gender, vulnerability, myth, mother.

**Article (xxx words):**

**Screening Terrorism: Contexts**

Djamila Sahraoui has long been engaged in a politically potent filmmaking practice. Her work draws on both documentary and fictional genres to consider various moments of violence in Algerian history and the impact that these narratives have on present day Algerians. The 1990 documentary *Avoir 2000 ans dans les Aurès* (the title a play on to Réné Vautier’s *Avoir vingt ans dans les Aurès,* 1972), examines the how memories of the French-Algerian War impact contemporary narratives in the pre-civil war context of Algeria in the late 1980s. *La moitié du ciel d'Allah* (1996) reflects on the role played by women in the French-Algerian War, and the subsequent disavowal of their participation in the dominant national narrative. Later works like *Algérie, la vie quand même* (1999) and *Algérie, La vie toujours* (2001) examine the chronic unemployment faced by young people. She addresses particularly the problem faced by young men, who represent the generation known as the ‘hittistes’, which translates as ‘those who hold up the walls’, a reference to their daily activity of lounging against walls in city streets. Sahraoui’s first feature length fiction film, *Barakat!* (*Enough!*, 2006) takes place during the fraught and dangerous atmosphere of the Algerian Civil War and ittracks the emerging friendship between two women, Amel and Khadidja, doctors and colleagues at a hospital in Algiers. The women embark on a journey to recover Amel’s husband, a journalist who has been kidnapped by fundamentalist terrorists. Khadidja is a veteran of the French-Algerian War, and through this choice of characterization, the film evokes comparisons between the tactics and strategies of the FLN in the 1950s and 1960s, and the FIS (Front Islamique de Salut) fundamentalists in the *décennie noire* of the 1990s. The women embark on a journey to recover the Amel’s husband, a journalist who has been kidnapped by fundamentalist terrorists. Khadidja is a veteran of the French-Algerian War, and through this choice of characterization, the film evokes comparisons between the tactics and strategies of the FLN in the 1950s and 1960s, and the FIS (Front Islamique de Salut) fundamentalists.

Although *Barakat!* is undoubtedly a politically important piece of filmmaking, it adopts several familiar motifs on the level of characterization, narrative structure, and formal techniques. The film, constructed around the motif of the journey or quest, is mostly in French, the action is chronological, and its thematic presentation of the opposition between the two central female characters and the FIS terrorists offers no major challenges to the viewer’s ideological presuppositions regarding terrorist violence. The spectator is presented with women who resist terrorists and are vulnerable to violence, aggressive and shadowy terrorists, and a frightened population. For Thomas Elsaesser, the formal and thematic tropes of a film like *Barakat!* place it squarely within the bracket of what he terms the new ‘world cinema’, which he calls ‘art house cinema “light”’ (2005: 509). He suggests that worldwide film markets dictate themes and ‘what matters is how well local/national provenance can communicate with global/transnational audiences’ (2005: 491). Films are no longer (if they were ever) being made within a national context for display in that context; more and more, what has come to be called ‘world’ cinema addresses an international audience, particularly on festival circuits and in art house cinemas, rather than the local community these films represent. According to Elsaesser, this is a cinema that ‘others’ the other, with the collusion of the ‘other’, engaged in what he calls ‘auto-ethnography’ and ‘self-exoticization’, portraying what the ‘native’ thinks the observer wants to see (2005: 509-510). In terms of genre, Elsaesser cites the universality of the road movie and the motif of the journey in the ‘world cinema’ film. He also formulates a list of common preoccupations of world cinema, and the each of these themes feature in *Barakat!*: identity politics, women’s rights, nationalism, terrorism, contested spaces, everyday lives in harsh national conditions and difficult political circumstances, human rights, conflicts between tradition and modernity, and social exclusion (2005: 509).

However, for many filmmakers, the most pressing concern remains the creation and diffusion of films that speak to immediate social and political circumstance and that are designed to reach a broad spectatorship. Material, social, and financial considerations can constrain the aesthetic and directorial choices of many filmmakers operating, as Sahraoui does, between cultures and languages. Funding that comes from external, i.e. non-national, sources often carries specific terms and conditions relating to form, themes, characterization, and language. Walid Benkhaled addresses these issues in relation to Algerian cinema, the verisimilitude of which he describes as being subject to a ‘double distortion’: firstly, through the influence of European, and principally French, funding bodies, and secondly, through Anglo-American academic criticism which takes these works as a form of factual ‘evidence’ of Algerians’ lived experiences.[[1]](#endnote-1) Benkhaled notes that *Baracat!* was funded the Centre national de la cinématographie, a body run by the French Ministry of Culture, through their *avance sur recettes avant realization* mechanism. This financial grant offers an advance payment, given to directors based on a script before they secure funding from other sources (Benkhaled 2016: 91). The films that receive this funding are described as being ‘of French initiative’ (Benkhaled 2016: 90), a rather ambiguous phrase which suggests that directors are pressured to convey a desirable and marketable ‘Frenchness’ in their formal and thematic choices. Moreover, accessing this funding requires that directors fulfill a language clause in the *avance sur recettes* contract: the majority of the film must be in French, or in another regional language of the *métropole* (Behkhaled 2016: 91). For Benkhaled, the linguistic and cultural limitations of the *avance sur recettes* mechanism fundamentally constrain the characters and themes represented, and this has an impact upon ‘what “types” of Algerians (in terms of socio-economic profile and geographic location) can be represented cinematographically’ (2016: 93). Benkhaled suggests the Algerian filmmakers might overcome this impasse by privileging the interaction between innovatory formal techniques and socio-political content. Writing about Algerian directors Tariq Teguia and Malik Bensmaïl, he says that they ‘reflect on how the subject with which they are dealing might be transposed and politicized in terms of form and aesthetics’ (2016: 98).

*Yema*, Sahraoui’s second feature length fiction film, counters some of the concerns raised about Algerian filmmaking, and world cinema more broadly, by Benkhaled and Elsaesser respectively. Sahraoui did not access the *avance sur recette* mechanism, and although the Agence algérienne pour le rayonnement culturel (AARC, Algeria) was the primary financial backer, funding for the film was also obtained from multiple French sources: Les Films d’Olivier (France), Neon Productions (France), Fonds sud cinema (France), the Ministère de la culture et de la communication (CNC, France), and the Ministère des affaires étrangères et européennes (France). In *Yema*, the socio-political subject is terrorism in the Algerian Civil War (1991 - 2002), and the structuring action of the story charts the grief of a mother, Ouardia, at the loss of one son, Tarek, a soldier in the Algerian army, to terrorist violence, while presenting her disgust and rejection of another son, Ali, who is a terrorist. The film presents only three central characters: Ouardia, Ali, and ‘le gardien’, another young fundamentalist who has been sent by Ali to guard his mother. The dialogue is entirely in Algerian dialectical Arabic (*derja*), and the film’s sparse *mise-en-scène* further grounds it in Algeria, made as it was on location in a remote farmstead on the bleak and beautiful ochre slopes of the mountains of Kabyle. By resolutely denying spectacle, while simultaneously advancing quasi-universal allegorical themes, the film draws form into the realms of the political. The simplicity of *Yema*’s narrative lends it an abstract, universal quality, offering a tale that is at once deceptively simple and highly abstruse, foreclosing the possibility of a (self)-exoticizing or auto-ethnographic gaze.

*Yema*, in both form and content,differs significantly from other representations of terrorism from the Maghreb, particularly through its focus on a female protagonist who is at once the agent and the victim of violence. While works like Tunisian filmmaker Nouri Bouzid’s *Making of* (2006) and Franco-Moroccan director Nabil Ayouch’s *Les Chavaux de Dieu* (2012) depict male vulnerability as a factor in radicalization, in both cases, the agents of violence are men. Moreover, the terrorist acts these characters undertake are embedded within a narrative that is careful to construct an extended explanation for their actions: poverty, familial discord and homophobia in *Les Chevaux de Dieu*, and youth, rebellion, and humiliation in *Making Of*. *Yema*, by contrast, offers scant narrative causality, neither in relation to Ali’s and the guard’s extremist ideologies, nor for Ouardia’s temperamental volatility, her behavioural fluctuations between extreme hostility and extreme tenderness. Moreover, while films like Yamina Bachir-Chouikh’s *Rachida* (2001), Nadir Moknèche’s *Viva Laldjérie* (2004) and Sahraoui’s *Baracat!* (2006) treat the experience of women during the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s, they foreground images of women as victims and figures of resistance to violence, rather than agents, an issue to which I will return in the final section of this article.

The innovative depiction of terrorism and its consequences in *Yema* also contrast with popular treatments of the theme, particularly in Hollywood and European cinema. John S. Nelson addresses the power of popular cinema to shape the social perception of terrorist acts, and he suggests that films have the capacity not only to represent (and re-present) terrorism, but also to structure and shape personal and political responses to the violence. He argues that the cinematic conventions in Hollywood films mean that audiences already recognize something familiar in actual acts of terrorism. Nelson writes:

Popular films play prominent roles in our political cognition. Hollywood gives us figures for even beginning to sense political events. This is always already a beginning for our response [...] movies do help prefigure our political experiences and responses.

(2006: 183)

For Nelson, spectators approach real-life terrorist events through the prism of Hollywood spectacle, which rely on a well-worn set of motifs: genre films (thriller, dystopia, noir and horror), teleological narratives, and ethically marked and narratively unequivocal heroes, heroines, victims and perpetrators. Nelson thus suggests that when we begin to apprehend the terrorist event in actuality, it has already been contaminated by Hollywood’s aesthetic of spectacular excess: we treat it as less real.[[2]](#endnote-2) In contrast to the spectacular nature of popular Hollywood treatments of terrorism, *Yema* remains resolutely understated and profoundly realist in both form and content. This focus on quiet intimacy can be aligned with one of the major themes of the film: a consideration of the affect of vulnerability. This emotion can be aligned with both the personal and the political realms: we experience vulnerability in our private relations to our most proximate/intimate others, but also on a national level in relation to threats (or perceived threats) to the borders of the nation-state: through the introduction of heterogeneous and ‘unknown’ others, as in migration, and through violent incursions like terrorism.

*Vulnerability and Violence*

The feeling of vulnerability can be aligned with the Derridean or Platonic *pharmakon* (1981: 98-118): both a gift and a curse, vulnerability is at once both the condition and the ground of our connection to others, as well as the source of our exposure to their violence. The word ‘vulnerability’ comes from Latin *vulnus* meaning ‘to wound’, and constitutes our exposure to the touch of others, and at one end of this spectrum of human contact, is, of course, the violence of a touch that kills. As Judith Butler writes, ‘the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of being the agency and instrument of these as well’ (2004: 26). Vulnerability’s problematic intersection with violence, and in the 21st century most particularly with terrorist violence, has tended to lend weight to the accursed aspect of this state or feeling. The essence of modern terrorism lies not in the destruction it causes, the lives lost (for these are all correlative with war) but in the mental fear it induces: if anyone can be a target, anywhere, at any time, the delineated mental and physical space of the war-zone no longer exists, and dread and danger become ever-present realities. This situation creates heightened feeling-states of vulnerability: as Charles Townshend notes, ‘war is in essence physical, terrorism is mental’ (2011: 14). The spectacle of terrorism may produce shock, fear, and even awe, but, Townshend continues, its ultimate aim is the creation of feelings of vulnerability:

Terrorism upsets people. It does so deliberately. That is its point, and that is why it has engrossed so much of our attention in the early years of the 21st century. Insecurity can take many forms, but nothing else plays quite so sharply on our sense of vulnerability.

(2002: 2)

While the intensity of fear and horror may fade in the weeks and months following a terrorist attack, the feeling of vulnerability lingers, due to the aleatory nature of the terrorist event. Feelings of vulnerability are primary grounded in possible bodily harm: threatened violence can create as much psychical anxiety as real and present physical danger. Cavarero expands upon this theme, highlighting the factors that contribute to feelings of increased vulnerability to terrorist violence in the 21st century. Firstly, she suggests that the ideology of Salafism draws no distinctions between the civilian and the warrior. Everyone who is not a jihadi is an enemy, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, so the scope for potential victimhood expands exponentially. Secondly, although the human body in its fleshiness is always killable, and therefore vulnerable, the warrior or soldier is at least prepared, in some sense, for attack. By contrast, the civilian is not only vulnerable, but also defenseless: ‘although war also kills the defenseless […] modern terrorism tends to slaughter them exclusively. It makes a precise strategic choice […] in which the killing of some produces a terrorizing effect on everyone’ (2011: 73).

In *Yema*, theexploration of the vulnerability of the central characters is paired with its consistent focus on everyday life, conveyed cinematographically through the sparseness of its dialogue, the barrenness of the setting, its silence and lack of diegetic music, and sharp contrasts between sombre interiors and the stark brightness of sun-drenched outdoor scenes. Indeed, Sahraoui states that she wanted to purify the film, in order to preserve ‘l’essentiel’, and this elemental simplicity augments the mythological texture of the film. She writes that, ‘dans les éléments constitutifs du film, j’ai évité les faits prosaïques pour laisser s’exprimer des éléments primordiaux comme l’eau, le feu, la terre, l’air’ (quoted in Anon., 2013). Sahraoui worked to find a filmic form that would highlight forms of touch, both tender and violent: ‘il fallait trouver une manière de filmer ces corps à corps […] les affrontements physiques […] l’intensité des gestes’ (Sahraoui: 2012). These formal elements work to highlight the physical and emotional vulnerability of each of the characters, including (and perhaps particularly) that of Ali. The vulnerability staged in *Yema* is screened on multiple and intersecting levels: increased vulnerability due to age, gender, and physical injury or disability; vulnerability to terrorist violence; the vulnerability of grief and mourning; and finally, perhaps, the vulnerability to disappointment, hurt and loss that caring deeply for another living being inevitably produces. Refusing any easy dichotomy between victim and agent of violence, the film places the viewer in proximity to vulnerability through a *mise-en-scène* that highlights touch, intimacy and fragility, as well as demonstrating what happens when we, in the words of Adam Phillips, ‘get helplessness wrong’: we do ‘the very worst things […] punishing/exploiting other people’s vulnerabilities’ (2010: 144).

Exploring the interface between mental and physical vulnerability, and the opening scene of thefilm establishes corporeal fragility as a key concern of the text. Moving from a close up of overturned earth – clods of dry soil, wounded and raw, mottled like bruised skin – the central female protagonist appears on the horizon of the frame. A woman in her sixties, the deep grooves of Ouardia’s face are captured in close up, as she moves in and out of the static long shots, her joints cracking, her body ambulating slowly and haltingly over the uneven ground. The spectator gradually perceives that the dead weight she drags is a human body. The scene cuts to a close-up of Ouardia digging into the hard, unyielding earth to make a grave for her lost child, an officer in the Algerian army. A young man advances towards her, carrying a gun, in order to reproach her for burying her son’s body: this is the task of men. He is there to guard her, although again, rather like the ambiguity of vulnerability itself as exposure to both care and violence, whether he is protecting and defending her, or imprisoning her, is unclear at this point. IMAGE Yet this guard, only called ‘le gardien’ in the credits, could nevertheless offer only minimal assistance at a burial: his arm has been severed just below the elbow, and the next scene cuts to him delicately washing the stump of his exposed limb. IMAGE Ouardia’s age is consistently highlighted through close-ups of the deep ravines of stress and age carved into her face. The landscape itself initially seems barren, exposed and unyielding: almost too hard to dig a grave in, and at the start of the film, it cannot even nourish plant life.

*Yema* dramatizes multiple regimes of corporeal engagements, displaying the various forms of touch to which our bodies are exposed. Throughout the film, moments of bodily tenderness are punctuated by violence, and then the narrative returns to the seasonal rhythms of everyday life. In one scene, Ouardia tries to remove the guard’s machine gun from around his shoulders as he lies in sleep. He abruptly awakes and immediately the defenselessness of sleep cedes to violence: he grabs her throat with his uninjured arm, and threatens her. IMAGE The tight grip of his fingers around her throat bunches the loose skin of her neck, curling the lines of her face into deep grooves, again reminding the spectator of her age. Degrees of vulnerability, and the range of touch allotted to living beings, are further outlined in the following scene. The guard has set traps around the property to catch birds for them to eat. Undoing one of the traps, he removes a tiny, trembling creature, too small for sustenance. The camera lingers in close up on his face, the skin of his cheek brushing against the soft, shuddering feathers, as he moves to stroke the bird’s head with the fingers of his remaining hand as it sits in his palm. He releases the bird, and this sequence underscores the fine distinction between death and life, between the touch that kills and the touch of care.

The opening sections of *Yema* dramatize Ouardia’s grieving process, and these sequences highlight the fragility of this balance between mortality and existence. In one particularly affecting sequence, Ouardia carefully washes her dead son’s body by candlelight. The scene is infused with a profound stillness, an auditory quietude that seems to amplify the few sounds that interrupt this silence: the buzzing of a fly, flitting briefly across the screen, the soft splashing of water as she squeezes out the cloth, and the brushing of her hands over his hair, chest, and feet. The camera dwells on the smooth contours of her son’s body, the skin taught over his bones, glowing with an eerie vivacity and the sheen of the water under the candlelight. His dead youth contrasts with the living age of Ouardia’s hands and face: the veins, tendons and bones of her hand protrude as she runs her fingers over his skin, as if through this action she might transmit some of her life to him. Although her emotions remain muted throughout the scene (and indeed, we never see her cry), this enduring image of mother and child percolates through the film: alone in the depths of the Algerian countryside, a mother, preparing her son’s body for burial. For Butler, the experience of grief, whether personal or national, radically displaces the subject’s sense of a coherent, bounded identity. Grief, Butler writes, takes the subject back to a form of that primary vulnerability we experienced as children, when we were utterly dependant on others, but unable to understand or articulate this need:

Grief displays […] the thrall in which our relations to others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.

(2006: 23)

Grief’s unpredictability, inevitability, and protean manifestations remind us of our own fallibility, and it challenges our sense of ourselves as bounded, sovereign beings. As Ouardia grieves, the rhythms of the seasons cohere with her internal state, confirming her connection to the land and as an embodiment of the Algerian nation: it is winter, the ground is hard and dry, the sky dark. Ouardia conforms to the traditional forty days allotted to mourning in Islam (a particularly important tradition in the Maghreb): she wears black, eats very little, and does not adorn her eyes with kohl. The forty-day mourning period also coincides with the period between the sewing and eventual germination of the seeds she has planted, as if cycles of death and life moved at the same pace. For Ahmed Bedjaoui, the film can be divided in a lunar and a solar cycle (2015: 117): a medium take of a full moon, with clouds scudding over the surface, marks the transition from aridity to fruition, mourning to the continuance of life. Yet despite these outward adornments and echoes, she stoically continues working the land, tirelessly, obsessively, in endless cycles of movement, hacking, hoeing, and cutting. Ouardia’s desire for radical emotional and physical independence, even in the face of extreme loss and material hardship, points to her desire to be invulnerable. She is shown to be physically exposed, yet she consistently refuses help. She tries to work the land alone, to bury her son alone, to grieve alone, striving, in spite of her age, the geographical isolation of her environment, her grief, to survive alone, and to be invulnerable. Yet only when she accepts aid from others does her situation improve: eventually she allows the guard to aid her in cultivating the land. Working with the man who is keeping her prisoner, together they redirect the flow of water from the well, he scrabbling in the earth with one upper limb, she kneeling in the mud grappling with veined hands, and eventually the earth yields tomatoes.

On the fortieth day of mourning, Ouardia’s second child, Ali, living as a guerilla fighter in the mountains, visits her to share their grief at the son and brother they have lost. She prepares a meal as a symbol of the end of the mourning period, but she refuses to eat this food with him or to speak to him. She then insists on carrying the large tray up the hill herself, refusing his offer of help, and the camera tracks her slow, faltering steps, as he marches away from her. This scene highlights the problem of attempting to be invulnerable: by choosing to remain closed off to the help of others, we may think we can reduce the damage of violence, but in fact we close ourselves off to other forms of connection, and sometimes, from love itself. As Simone Drichel outlines, ‘getting helplessness wrong, then, means fleeing from and defending against the very relationality that, to be sure, is always a potential source of pain and wounding, but that is also the condition of possibility for pleasure and satisfaction, and ultimately for ethical life’ (2013: 13).

There is an abruptness in the visible transition from grief to apparent acceptance of loss, and the fact that Ouardia refuses to share a meal with Ali problematizes the fortieth day tradition of evaluating the life of the deceased both figuratively (via praises and anecdotes by relatives and friends) and literally (his possessions are revealed and his inheritance supposed to be dealt with). Ouardia insists on grieving alone, surmounting her loss alone, and this self-imposed seclusion isolates her further from her living child. For Butler, sharing grief allows us to connect with the losses of others, whereby mourning becomes, in Butler’s words, ‘the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself’ (2006: 30). By foreclosing vulnerability, we also close ourselves off to a range of intimacy and exchange: all the forms of touch, both physical and emotional, that we would surely characterize as profoundly human. Indeed, Butler and Phillips, drawing on Freud, relate forms of ethics and morality to our experience of a primary vulnerability as infants. As newborns, we are utterly dependent on our caregivers, constituted by others in ways that we do not understand, ask for, or even remember. From the start we are bound to others in a primary relation that is at once both unwilled and secures our survival: we are tied to others in ways we cannot control. For Freud, the care we are (hopefully) subject to as infants prompts the first stirrings of the moral impulse, as we learn to give and receive care from others: ‘the original helplessness of human beings is thus the *primal source* of all *moral motives’* (1971 318; emphasis Freud’s). Philips, drawing on Freud, suggests that ‘our helplessness involves us with others, it weaves us into the human community’, yet it also ‘makes us abject and infinitely exploitable creatures’ (2011: 147). Striving for invulnerability is therefore a mythic pursuit: while we may overcome our initial helplessness, the corporeal exposure in which it is grounded never leaves us – our bodies remain open to being killed or wounded by others, as well as to receiving their care.

Ouardia’s hasty grieving process, her refusals of assistance, and her attempts to be physically and emotionally invulnerable close her off to the suffering of Ali. Indeed, the film makes the bold move of inviting the spectator to empathize with the suffering of a terrorist and it transforms a politically dubious character into an anguished individual, with a childhood, grief, and his own vulnerabilities. Thus, when her living son returns from the mountains with a wounded leg, Ouardia refuses to give him morphine, and leaves him lying on the ground outside the perimeter of the house, writhing and wailing in agony. The blood on his trousers hardens, and droplets of sweat, mixed with tears, bead his skin as he grimaces and contorts his face in pain. Mingling personal and political motivations, Ali accuses Ouardia of always preferring his brother, of never treating them equally as children, and even adds ‘tu sèmes la mort’ – ‘you sow death’, an image which contrasts sharply with her slow, patient, and loving cultivation of the land. She sits, just several feet away inside the house, listening impassively to his cries of pain. Her son’s physically weakened state reminds us of the fatal exposure of the body to being both an agent and a victim of violence. From the angry, virile terrorist, the young man is reduced to a crawling, hobbling being who cannot even urinate or change his clothes without assistance, as his mother remains unmoved. Ali plaintive calls for his mother remind us that when we are physically weakened, we are projected into a vulnerable, child-like state, desiring the kind of parental care that cocoons us from pain.

Ouardia ignores the agony of her own child, mere meters away, and this produces the ‘very worst things’ that happen when the individual ignores their own vulnerability: they become insensible to the pain of others. As Butler writes, ‘one seeks to preserve oneself against the injuriousness of the other, but if one were successful at walling oneself off from injury, one would become inhuman’ (2005: 103). In the end, Ouardia gives Ali a low dose of morphine, but continues to withhold it from him intermittently. Wild with pain, he raids the house for medication, and afraid that he will harm the infant, his child and her grandchild whom he has entrusted to her care, the guard takes him to the mountains and shoots him. Ouardia, as a mother and a grandmother, comes then to embody the spectrum of vulnerability as wounding and caring: as the shot that kills her son is heard, she sits rocking her grandchild.

The violence that Sahraoui stages is not only the violence of terrorism, but the violence of retaliation and the refusal of vulnerability that can lead to further hatred. Ultimately, the film invites us to consider what it might mean to recognize vulnerability not only in those we love, those we can identify with, or even those who are different to us, like ‘le gardien’ and his little birds, but also in those who seek to hurt us. This is not an area that Butler’s reading brings us close to, for she, like Cavarero, invites us to develop points of recognition with the victims, rather than the agents of violence. Of course, arriving at such an understanding is most challenged when we ourselves are exposed to and menaced by violence, or when we have suffered the destabilizing effect of loss. Writing about Lynne Ramsay’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (), a film which also focuses on a mother’s relationship to a son who commits a mass shooting at his school, neuroscientist Simon Baron-Cohen, echoes this troubling problematic: … Moreover, in Ramsay’s film, told from the perspective Kevin’s mother, there are strong hints that the mother’s lack of affection for the infant boy and her preference for his sister have contributed to, if not precisely caused, the teenager’s eventual violence. In a similar sense, Ali mixes his political actions as a fundamentalist with a personal account of his mother’s lack of affection for him, and her love for his brother when he states ‘’. In the following section, I consider the role of myth in the depiction of maternal violence in *Yema*. By myth, I mean both the dominant cultural narratives that position certain assumptions as self-evident truths, as well as the stories and archtypes that have been passed down in the Classical tradition. I link the violence of Ouardia as a mother to dominant constructions of female violence in the political realm, before considering how *Yema* draws on the myths of Medea and Antigone in its representation of female agency in the political sphere.

*Motherhood and Myth*

Although the account of the film I have offered thus far has focused on the interpersonal dimensions of vulnerability, Sahraoui’s film invites a political reading that is at once specific to Algeria and carries wider political ramification for how societies treat the issue of terrorist violence and its perpetrators. ‘Yema’ means ‘mother’ in *derja*, and the film can read as a political parable of the ‘motherland’ Algeria, caught in endless cycles of mourning for her ‘sons’, lost to both state and guerilla violence. Bedjaoui, referring to Modern Standard Arabic, suggests that by naming the film *Yema*, Sahraoui ‘deploys a semantic confusion between the word *oum* (mother) and the root of the concept of *umma*, which means “the nation”’ (2015: 117). Sahraoui reiterates that ‘Yema, c’est la Mère […] la mère biologique et la mère patrie, l’Algérie’ (Sahraoui: 2012). Sahraoui interweaves the personal and the political in her consideration of Ouardia’s violence. She states that the terror of Algeria has come to inhabit her, and that while the central character Ouardia does not take up arms, she expresses violence in a different way, by denying love to a child who is begging for care:

La violence de l’Algérie m’habite […] Traditionnellement, dans toutes les cultures les femmes ne tiennent pas les armes. Si mon héroïne est violente, elle l’est autrement […] Pour la guerre civile, elle apparaît à travers l’affrontement des deux frères. Leur mère, l’Algérie, est atroce avec eux. Elle les a élevés dans un climat de violence. Sans les aimer de la même manière.

(quoted in de Rochebrune, 2013).

However, Ouardia’s actions can be read within one of the common dominant patriarchal constructions of motherhood and violence: as Åhäll writes, ‘in stories of violent women where motherhood is key, it usually forms part of either a revenge or a ‘protecting-the-family’ narrative’ 85. Ouardia’s violence towards her son Ali can be read as both revenge for the death of her other son, the beloved soldier, and as an act that ensures the security of her grandchild. Ouardia appears to transfer a maternal drive for protection from son onto grandson (who may be the other, beloved son’s child), and her actions appear to be situated in the realms of personal, rather than political, violence. Finally, women in the film appear to be profoundly linked to their roles are mothers and givers of care: Ouardia, of course, nurtures both the land and her grandchild, while the only other woman mentioned in the film, the wife of both of Ouardia’s sons, is also a mother, and dies in childbirth, as though she can pass out of the narrative having fulfilled her only significant function.

The representation of a woman, who is a mother, a grandmother, and a participant in violence against her progeny, contrasts sharply with other depictions of women and mothers as victims of violence, agents of care, and figures of loss. Sjoberg and Gentry have suggested when women do commit acts of proscribed violence (violence that is not sanctioned by a government or state power), that violence is situated within discourses that deny the woman’s agency in the act. Instead, Sjoberg and Gentry argue, women’s violence is placed within one of three explicatory categories, which they memorably describe as ‘mother, monster, and whore’ narratives. While the monster woman is she who encapsulates a kind of pure, radical, and ultimately insane evil, and the whore commits acts due to sexual desire or deviance, the mother figure is cast into a role that assumes an ethics of care. They write: ‘the mother narratives describe women’s violence as a need to belong, a need to nurture, and a way of taking care of and being loyal to men; motherhood gone awry’ 13. Linda Åhäll expands upon Sjoberg and Gentry’s work, arguing that in discourses about women who engage in acts of political violence, there is always a tension ‘between life-giving and life-taking’, and she reads underlying ideas about motherhood into all interpretations of women’s political violence. Dominant cross-cultural discourses around women and political violence fabricate what Åhäll calls a ‘Myth of Protection’ which ‘is about vulnerability’ 57: it casts women into the role of ‘victimised objects’, foregrounding female vulnerability to sexual violence, physical weakness and excessive emotion.[[3]](#endnote-3)

However, by representing Ouardia’s sanctioning of her own child’s murder, *Yema* disrupts the potent figuration of the mother as a locus of security and protection. While the power of the maternal figure as a site of care certainly extends beyond an Algerian imaginary, the nurturing mother or grandmother is a consistent feature in many works by Algerian authors and filmmakers. *Rachida*, *Viva Laldjérie* and *Baracat!* all foreground intimate real or symbolic mother-daughter relationships, just as Assia Djebar’s depiction of a lineage of grandmother’s telling stories to their grandchildren in *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* (1979) evokes the matrilineal transmission of culture in Algerian society. Kateb Yacine, writing in *Parce que c’est une femme*, perhaps most powerfully eulogizes the wide embrace of maternal influence:

La question des femmes algériennes dans l’histoire m’a toujours frappé. Depuis mon plus jeune âge, elle m’a toujours semblé primordiale. Tout ce que j’ai vécu, tout ce que je fais jusqu’à présent a toujours eu pour source première ma mère. C’est me mère qui a fait de moi finalement ce que je suis. Je crois que c’est vrai pour la plupart des hommes […] s’agissant notamment de la langue, s’agissant de l’éveil d’une conscience, c’est la mère qui fait prononcer les premiers mots à l’enfant, c’est elle qui construit son monde.

(2004: 37)

Like the all-encompassing mother of Yacine’s inspiration, Sahraoui’s mother Ouardia is primordial, elemental, linked to the land, fertility, and cycles of life. Yet while for Yacine the Algerian mother leads the child into language, consciousness and the world itself, Ouardia represents the primitive natural forces that both nurture and destroy. Ouardia thus encapsulates the vulnerability at the heart of the mother-child relationship: the capacity for both parties to wound and be wounded physically and emotionally.

In the Algerian context, the association between motherhood and victimization is so powerful that it led to the false assignation of maternity by news outlets to the woman at the centre of one of the most widely distributed photographs of the Algerian Civil War, Hocine Zaourar’s *La Madone de Benthala*, 1997. A false and widely distributed rumour circulated that the woman who cries out was grieving the loss of eight of her sons in the conflict; in reality, the woman was childless (see Flood 2016: 8, and Hanrot and Clévenot, 2012: 117). Alongside the neo-Orientalist prejudices that evoke a non-Western space as one of extremely high birth rates, the interpretation of the woman at the centre of the image as a grieving mother shifts focus away from her suffering onto invented male victims, which results in a ‘reading [of women as] merely as pawns, ciphers, or intermediaries in a sphere where male violence and male victims retain priority’ (Flood 2016: 9). In relation to female suicide bombers, Cavarero echoes this association of women and victimization, suggesting that the troubling reality of a woman as an agent of terrorist violence requires a radical reconfiguration of what agency means in this context, whereby the woman becomes a victim of external circumstance. Of the women who study female suicide bombers in Chechnya and Palestine, she writes that:

They view them as objects on whom suffering is inflicted rather than subjects of an active choice […] Rather than the weapon that explodes, it is the body itself that is foregrounded – a female body that age-old tradition, both in the East and West, has always regarded as extraneous to the masculine realm of violence and historically destined to undergo it rather than perpetrate it.

(2011: 100)

Thus, even when women do inflict violence, they are viewed as passive victims of male domestic violence, colonial or state violence, economic hardship, religious persecution, oppression, or brainwashing. The paradigm of women as suffering victims and givers of care to the wounded leads to a disavowal of women’s capacity to commit atrocity or inflict suffering, instead situating it within an ethics of victimhood. In criticism of *Yema*, we find the familiar desire to read female victimization and resistance into narratives of female violence. Critic Olivier Barlet, writing about the film for *Africultures*,suggests misleadingly that Ouardia is ‘une femme face à la folie des hommes’, further misreading the film when he proposes that ‘seule cette conscience des femmes peut briser le cercle vicieux d’une violence toujours renouvelée’ (Barlet 2013). Barlet has here fallen prey to the dominant myth of ‘woman’ as ever-nurturing giver of care, and failed to see Ouardia’s violence, instead reading her actions as resistance and redemption.

Vulnerability, as Åhäll suggests, has often been associated with women as physically weaker beings, residing in societies where patriarchal violence and norms predominate. Indeed, the frequent evocation of the necessary protection of ‘womenandchildren’ in times of disaster, war and mass migration infantilizes women, situating them as beings with pre-adult abilities and vulnerabilities. Yet by staging Ali’s physical vulnerability and his mother’s emotional and physical violence towards him, *Yema* undermines the widely-held assumption that women are natural peacemakers, which Sara Ruddick argues is the outcome of a ‘maternal practice’ that is a ‘natural resource’ for peace politics 19. While the personal may be political, in the case of women’s participation in violence and their roles as mediators, the political is always *primarily* personal – it is the female practice of maternity, according to Ruddick, that enhances their political skills as peacemakers. Ruddick’s argument implies that the practices of empathy developed by women in child rearing make them less violent and better practiced in the arts of peace, a position which films like *Yema* (and *We Need to Talk about Kevin*) discomfortingly interrupt. Because of the myth of woman-as-peacemaker, even when women do commit violence, it is explained primarily in ‘personal rather than political terms’ Åhäll 24. In both cases, therefore, women’s political activities as either agents of violence or peace are believed to emerge principally from personal and emotional attachments, while men are seen to be motivated by ideology, intellect, or morality.

By tying Ouardia’s familial drama to the political situation of Algeria, Sahraoui draws her evocation of maternal violence into the sphere of contemporary Algerian politics. By employing the gendered rhetoric that ties Algeria-as-nation to the maternal, Bedjaoui and Sahraoui participate in a semantic construction of the nation as female. This position that has a long history of critique, most notably by feminist thinkers such as Partha Chatterjee (1994) and Floya Anthais and Nira Yuval-Davis (1989). This metaphor is also exemplified in relation to Algeria by Frantz Fanon’s essay, *L’Algérie se dévoile* (1959), whereby the unveiling of female suicide bombers comes to stand in for the liberation of the country as a whole. However, in transforming Ouardia-as-nation from a cultivator of life and a source of protection and care into an agent of violence, Sahraoui is not participating in the elegiac formulation of the Algerian motherland. Rather, *Yema* points to the ways in which women and maternity can be recruited for the service of a state, and Sahraoui reconfigures Classical myths to ‘de-nature’ narratives about maternity and feminine care in times of political conflict. Sahraoui ties the tragedy of *Yema* to a trans-Mediterranean imaginary, noting that the film deliberately evokes ‘la Grèce, berceau des tragédies antiques que je lis et relis depuis mon enfance’ (Sahraoui: 2012) and the archetypal and primal aspect of the film, its sparse settings, limited cast of characters, and its universal themes of familial and national discord, ground it in the narrative structure of myth.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The film abounds with potential allegorical and mythological readings, echoing director Ula Stoechl’s claim that ‘there is never just one myth you are going to tell; there are as many as there are subjects in your film’ (1985: 48). The conflict between Ali and Tarik and the differential treatment of the son’s bodies recalls the Biblical and Koranic narrative of Cain and Abel. While Tarek is accorded a grave and a shrine, the other child’s body is left unmarked and unburied in the mountains. In the Koranic version of the tale, Abel, the ‘righteous’ son, killed by his jealous brother Cain, is buried and grieved, while Cain, rather like Ali the terrorist, is condemned to wandering the mountains endlessly and without relief. The figure of the nameless guard, who exists in the interstices of the conflict between the mother and her sons, merits consideration in this respect. Initially aggressive towards Ouardia and violently chastising her for burying her son, he is presented as firmly aligned with the fundamentalists at the beginning of the film. However, his amputated arm immediately marks him as a victim as well as an agent of violence, and the scenes of tenderness we witness as he cares for the bird and later for the baby, as well as his eventual shielding of Ouardia, highlight the character’s oscillation between Ouardia and Ali, and between aggression and care. In this sense, the guard comes to represent a kind of Grecian chorus, especially when considered in line with Stoechl’s claim that ‘the chorus always was the *vox populis* – the people’s voice’ (1985: 48). The guard, with his severed elbow and his gun slung across his shoulder, is both an agent and a victim of violence and he comes to embody both of Ouardia’s sons and both sides of the conflict in Algeria. His oscillating loyalties capture the profound ambiguities felt by many civilians in Algeria, living in proximity to an intimate and familial violence.

QUOTE ABOUT HOW PEOPLE DON’T KNOW WHAT SIDE TO TAKE

The myths of Medea and Antigone, evoked specifically as inspirations by Sahraoui (REF), can shed light of her problematic evocation of maternal filicide as well as the political implications of her actions throughout the film. In Greek mythology, Medea is a sorceress, daughter of King Aeëtes of Colchis, a region that roughly approximates with present-day Georgia. When the hero Jason comes to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece, Medea agrees to help him by using magical potions, on the condition that he marries her and takes her with him to Greece. Once in Greece, Jason abandons Medea in order to marry a Grecian princess, thus gaining power and authority in the state. In Euripides’ version of the myth, *Medea*, the spurned wife kills her children in order to take revenge on their father. Medea thus becomes a locus of patriarchal fears around women and the female body: she is associated with magic, and the power of the maternal to both give and withhold care, and even to kill.

Medea uses potions, *pharmaka*, to help Jason attain the Golden Fleece. *Pharmakon*, meaning poison or cure, can also as previously mentioned be tied to the concept of vulnerability as the ability to wound or care for another, just as Medea has the power to kill or care for her children; as Cavarero argues, ‘given that [Medea] is a mother, the vulnerable ones whom she terminates with a mortal wound, even at the very moment of the homicidal act, are also recognized by her from the standpoint of care’ (2011: 27). In this sense, we can tie the Medea’s *pharmaka* to her power as a woman to the ‘life-giving or life-taking’ powers of women in political narratives: Kerényi notes that she is a figure who takes “the newly born back to death” (1979, 32). This points to the difficulty of reconciling both care and violence in the figure of the mother, and to a collective horror at the female body as a site and source of violence. Ouardia’s tenderness, as she nurses, rocks and strokes her infant grandchild, jars incongruously with her stony refusal to offer even the most basic care to her adult son. Moreover, Medea is an outsider, a barbarian in Grecian society, and therefore more vulnerable to expulsion and destitution when Jason rejects her. In this sense, her killing her children can be marked as an act of violence on the part of the vulnerable against the helpless. Similarly, Ouardia is vulnerable, through age, grief, and the environment, and she sanctions the killing of an adult child who has been made defenceless by injury in order to create security. Medea slides between the mother and monster poles of Sjoberg and Gentry’s analysis, and Sahraoui echoes this terminology when speaking of Ouardia: ‘la mère, la vieille, reste vivante, alors que la jeunesse est morte. Voilà à quoi mène la violence! À cette inversion monstrueuse du cours des choses’ (quoted in de Rochebrune, 2013).

Yet it is worth pointing out that for Sahraoui, it is not Ouardia-as-Medea who is monstrous, but the violent situation that englobes her, and just as Medea’s violence s a consequence of her status as a political outsider and Jason’s politically motivated betrayal, the use of the Medea myth in *Yema* also has political ramifications. To return to the structure of ‘woman as nation’ in relation to *Yema*, I would like to untangle the construct of the ‘nation’ from that of the ‘state’. The nation, in Benedict Anderson’s memorable definition, is an ‘imagined community’, one more aligned with structures of kinship, feeling, and myth than with a concrete socio-political polity. Anne McClintock notes that the word nation comes from the Latin *natio*, to be born, thus underscoring the ties between maternity, family and the mother/fatherland (90). Cudworth et al, on the other hand, define the state, as ‘a compulsory political *organization* with a centralized *government* that maintains a monopoly on the *legitimate* use of *force* within a certain *geographical* *territory’* (my italics). If the nation is about feeling, emotion, and the feminine, the state is structured, bounded, controlled and retains the right to use violence under certain circumstances. If the nation as spiritual feeling has been constructed as feminine in nationalist discourses, the state, and particularly the militarized state, can be read as masculine. Indeed, Fanon, who constructed a notion of the Algerian nation as tied to the feminine, links patriarchal authority in the domestic sphere to military control in the political realm: ‘militarization and the centralization of authority in a country automatically entail a resurgence of the authority of the father’ (in McClintock 93). Indeed, metaphors of the state that lay emphasis on a parental function are primarily negative: the paternalistic state or the ‘nanny’ state are seen to be intervening in the private realms, beyond the bounds of protection, organization and governance that are its primary functions.

ALGERIAN CONSTITUTION

If, as McClintock argues, ‘women are typically constructed as symbolic bearers of the nation but are denied any direct relation to national agency’ (90), where agency relates to political citizenship, lawmaking, and state-building. *Yema* reiterates the figure of mother-woman as nation, while radically reconfiguring that woman-mothers relation to agency and the state. The conflict in Algeria during the Civil War was between a military state and its opponents, and women serve a pivotal role in militarized nations are bearers of children, i.e., producers of soldiers. This is what Cynthia Enloe describes as a ‘militarised maternalism’ 21, whereby a society becomes controlled by or dependant on the military as an institution, an institution which needs (most often) male soldiers to fulfil its functions. A militarized society must cultivate female support, as mothers pose a potential threat to the smooth functioning of the machine of war: ‘for militaries at war, mothers are potential opponents as their children are drafted with the risk of being killed – and thus a potential threat to the war effort’. Images of proud, grief-stricken mothers, furthering the war effort, are therefore used as propaganda tools to dissuade women’s opposition to the war effort: ‘the womb as a recruiting station in nationalist discourses of “heroism”…the ‘Patriotic Mother’ is the ever-ready womb for war’. In this sense, Ouardia can be said to have fulfilled her role as a ‘Patriotic Mother’: she has brought a son into life, a son who died in the service of the state. In killing Ali, she might be said to be aligned with a state that also seeks the death of her son as illegitimate anti-state outlaw.

Ouardia’s actions be tied to the failures of a patriarchal father-state, just as Medea’s ‘crime’ can be tied to Jason’s failure to fulfil his bond of kinship to his children and their mother by his absence. Jason becomes a “perversion of the hero” (Beye 1969) by breaking his pact to Medea, a pact that ensured protection for her and her children if she helped him win political power.

‘the story of nationalism is a story of betrayal’

Women in Algeria helped win independence, Family Code, state betrays them

Both the Medea myth and *Yema* are about absent fathers, and the role of a father (or allegorical patriarchal state) who cannot protect their own children. The Social Contract theory of Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau states that there is a pact between a state and its members that hinges on protection, a protection that is tied to the vulnerability of individual members: the individual pledges allegiance to the state and in return, the state protects its citizens. However, as Foucault points out, the state retains the ‘right to kill’ dissenting individuals. By providing one son for war, Ouardia has fulfilled her side of the contract, but when that son is killed, it is as if she refuses to allow that state to further intervene in her kinship circle. Indeed, when state soldiers arrive and question the kinship ties of the guard and her grandchild, she refuses them entry onto her property and pretends that the guard is her son, thus refusing what Enloe describes as the pressure on mother’s ‘to do certain things judged useful to the state’ Enloe 2000a: 260 / 16. Moreover, if the militarized state intervenes to destroy families, Ouardia assumes this agency by killing Ali, rather than allowing him to be killed by the military. Ouardia, like Medea, assumes the authority of the state (its ‘right to kill’) and refuses to follow the laws of a state that has lost its legitimacy by breaking its pact of security, and kills her son before the state has the opportunity to do so.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Medea refuses to give Jason the children’s bodies so that they may be buried and mourned properly, and this refusal of burial and mourning in both the Medea myth and *Yema* can be further tied to the myth of Antigone. Antigone’s brother Polynices has been killed in a battle to assume control of the city of Thebes. Antigone’s uncle Creon assumed control of the city following Polynice’s death, and he refuses to allow Antigone to assure a respectable burial for her brother, or to even mourn him. Antigone defies his order, and when brought before the King to explain her actions, cites the legitimacy of divine laws over those of man. There is evidently quite a direct parallel to the Ouardia’s actions in *Yema*: she defies the orders of the guard, and of social convention, and buries her son. This situation was achingly rendered in Amor Hakkar’s *La Maison Jaune* (), a film about a father who travels xxx kms on a tractor to recover the body of his son, a soldier in the Algerian army, and steals it illicitly from a state facility that does not want to release the body. The prohibition on mourning in the Algerian context can be tied to the lives lost during the Civil War which were not recognized by the state. XXXX.

Yet Antigone, as Butler points out, is also about certain ‘feminist efforts to confront and defy the state’ and by defying the King’s orders, Antigone ‘transgresses both gender and kinship norms’ and embodies a figure of resistance to the state. Women in Algeria have often been perceived as potentially problematic opponent to state control. During the colonial era, Algerian women were believed to be the ‘hard nucleaus of anti-colonial militancy’ in the family, and French authorities believed that ‘if you could reach the women, you could reach the men’. Moreover, in the wake of Independence, the Algerian state recognized that networks of ‘family and kinship served as the bases for social formations striving to remain autonomous from the state’ and the control of women was a central component for maintaining social harmony, as ‘women were key resources for the alternative centers of power resisting the state’. Antigone’s refusal to follow the dictates of Creon’s state centres on the question of legitimacy, and this can be linked to women’s relation to the state in Algeria. If the legitimacy of the modern state resides in its power to ensure the security of its citizens, the Algerian state failed to do this for its female citizens both in the private and public spheres. The aforementioned Family Code…Moreover, in the violence directed against women in the 1990s by fundamentalist groups…

Creon, as Antigone’s uncle and the king, commands more political authority from Antigone that her dead brother, yet she privileges the tie to her sibling above loyalty to the state. Yet as Butler points out, the language in which Antigone claims her right to bury her brother against the orders of the state comes in the language of the state. She ‘unmans’ Creon, by using masculine rhetoric, and rather than being a figure of family and kinship that remains in the private sphere (and Hegel and Irigaray read her), Anitgone in Butler’s interpretation ‘her agency emerges precisely through her refusal to honor his command, and yet the language of this refusl assimilates the very terms of sovereignty that she refuses’. In a similar sense, this contradictory position plays out in *Yema*, for in sanctioning her child’s death, Ouardia seizes power away from what she perceives to be an illegitimate authority and wrests maternal control of filial life back, away from the state and into the sphere of the family. Antigone also forges a new hierarchy of kinship: she notes that she would not have defied the state for any other member of her family, even her parents, or a future husband or child. In Butler’s reading of the myth, Antigone’s privileging of her relationship with Polyneices above the state and above all other familiar relationships opens the possibility of recognizing in the political sphere many emergent forms of ‘equally if not more legitimate, healthy and functional types of kinship without recourse to conventional family structures’ (Brewis 2002: 354). At the end of the film, Ouardia has lost both of her sons, one fighting a ‘legitimate’ war on the side of the state, the other killed ‘illegitimately’ with the tacit consent his own mother and she has also gained two new ‘sons’: the guard and her grandson, a young man who is neither her son nor her lover, husband, or relative, and a child of partially unknown parentage. In forging new kinship ties, Ouardia may have saved the life of the guard, and his gentle nursing of the tiny bird might be read as a tentative sign of hope and the restitution of Ouardia’s role as mother might point optimistically to the possibility for intergenerational regeneration and change.

Within the context of mass youth unemployment, migration, state violence, and increasing radicalization in contemporary Algeria and North Africa more broadly, the death of Ali and the new familial ties formed seem instead to signal the endless renewal of vulnerable bodies in a context where economic and corporeal security cannot be assured (see Bayat and Herrera 2010, 3-26). Moreover, the endless quest for complete security on the national level in relation to terrorist threats ‘is **the favored political response to the experience of vulnerability’ 6.** During the Civil War, the Algerian state sought to limit information about the conflict to the outside world, and a UN …notes that ‘the problem of terrorism in Algeria is to be dealt with by Algerians alone’. The refusal to bring the conflict to an international stage highlights the state’s desire to construct an image of strength and inviolability, but it also shields the extra-legal practices of the state from international scrutiny. State responses to the vulnerability that terrorism causes, in the US, the UK, and Algeria to name but a few, can often lead representatives of that state into murky ethical and legal realms. As Butler notes of the US after 9/11, echoing Sahraoui’s personification of the nation in the figure of Ouardia, **‘nations are not the same as individual psyches, but both can be described as “subjects”, albeit of different orders [in the US] a subject has been instated at the national level, a sovereign and extra-legal subject, a violent and self-centred subject’. The extra-legal activities that states engage in as part of counter-terrorism operations, such as torture (Abu Ghraib), Guantanamo Bay, or the 4000 individuals who went missing in Algeria in state custody during the Civil War, undermine the state’s legitimacy and may contribute to further cycles of violence (XXX).**

*Yema* thus poses questions about the capacity of the Algerian state itself to care for its own children by dramatizing a mother who effectively sanctions the killing of her own child, in order to create security for herself and for a new generation. *Yema*, as a maternal, mythological and national allegory, thus invites reflection on the interweaving of personal and political vulnerabilities in the face of violence and serves as reminder of the price that is paid by the individual and the collective for the denial of vulnerability. By seeking to ensure our own security and inviolability, either personally or politically, we may in fact reproduce the violence that we are attempting to shield ourselves from. As Drichel writes, ‘the fear that one’s own vulnerability – openness to wounding – will lead to the experience of violation is warded off by pre-emptory or retaliatory violence against the other who may (or may not) violate and wound’ (2013: 6). In attempting to protect herself from her son’s potential aggression, Ouardia ends up ominously fulfilling his prophetic words, ‘tu sèmes la mort’, and Ali’s dead body is ‘sewn’ on the mountainside, decaying and nourishing the earth.

In the Euro-American context in recent years, it has (and continues to be) relatively commonplace to brand the attackers as outsiders, marginal through markers of race, ethnicity, religion and/or socio-economic status. Instead, like other Maghrebi films about terrorism, including *Rachida*, *Les Chevaux de Dieu*, and *Making of*, *Yema* foregrounds the problematic reality that terrorists are children, and vulnerable children at that. In Algeria, the agents of fundamentalist violence were sons, fathers and brothers, members of the Algerian community, and in the US and Europe, more and more terrorist attacks are committed not by shadowy outsiders, but by British, French, and American citizens. Terrorists are no longer products of other cultures and societies which we can abject beyond our borders but the result of a transnational violence that is close to us, violence that in many cases we may have helped to produce, just as *Yema* hints that Ali’s hurt is intertwined with (if not precisely caused by) the fact that Ouardia loved her children differently.

SOMETHING ON HOME FIRE

Having cast out Antigone, the opponent of the state who exposed the vulnerability of his rule, and sentenced her to be buried alive, Creon, the state’s representative, discovers they are bound together; as Hegel writes, they are ‘gripped and shattered by something intrinsic to their own being’ xi. The denial of vulnerability, therefore, is not without dividend. Creon in the end retains his power, but his actions produce ‘the very worst things’: he loses his son and his wife to suicide. In killing her son, even though she forges a new community, the allegory of *Yema* does not solve the problem of how we treat perpetrators without undermining our own personal integrity, or at the state level, political legitimacy. What do we do with those who threaten us? How do we deal with the children, familial or national, that we cannot love?

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1. A note on methodology. The concept of vulnerability that Butler elaborates is taken to be universal. Certainly, I in now way wish to suggest that every society conceives of vulnerability on a social level in the same way, but Benkhaled argues that in many Western academic readings of Algerian film, ‘films become transcripts of the nation’s session on the psychoanalyst’s couch’ (2016: 95). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Something on Baudrillard – examples of films like this? Draw on French example? [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Vulnerability itself as a gendered concept [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Defining the word myth and mythology – ‘suggests a connection between universal *ma*, the sound the baby makes at its mother’s breast, which is also the Indo-European root for *mother*, and the root sound *mu* out of which emerges the Greek word *mythos*, literally ‘to make sound with the mouth’ or ‘word’. Cited in **William Doty** [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Beloved Morrison article [↑](#endnote-ref-5)