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Pauline de Noirfontaine's *Un regard écrit:
Algérie*

Unveiling Human Nature in Times of Crises

by

Abdeldjalil Larbi Yourcef



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Pauline de Noirfontaine's *Un regard écrit: Algérie*

Unveiling Human Nature in Times of Crises

Abdeldjalil Larbi Yourcef *

Following Covid19, the exceptional increase in sales of The Plague, penned by the Algeria-born philosopher Albert Camus, has ranked his novel among those whose revival is most asserted. Much less known, however, is Pauline de Noirfontaine's Un regard écrit: Algérie (1856), a collection of letters sent from Oran –1849 to 1851—which she hoped might gain in retrospective interest. Despite their generic difference—novel and correspondence—the thematic and actantial convergence of these two works published a century apart motivates their perception according to a form of literary communication in which Camus would probably have found some of his inspiration. This paper draws on De Noirfontaine's third letter. The argument is that her document, far beyond a description of an epidemic, actually exposes our nature in times of crises.

“And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city”
Albert Camus

*University Abdelhamid Ibn Badis Mostaganem (abdelyoucef@hotmail.fr).



Algeria was invaded in 1830, when French troops disembarked at Sidi Fer-ruch, twenty-five kilometers far from the capital. In 1962, she gained her independence after a hundred thirty-two year long rule. During the latter, innumerable Europeans visited the land for various reasons. Karl Marx went because of poor health; Isabelle Marie Eberhardt wanted to escape Geneva, and Frantz Fanon to escape racism. As per the French, we find Eugene Delacroix who painted *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*; the novelist Guy de Maupassant, etc. French women accompanied their husbands, who were settlers or military officers. Other, like the early feminist Hubertine Auclert, author of *Les Femmes arabes en Algérie*, went on their own for a visit to France's new colony. Some of these "women travelers" seized the opportunity to write about Algeria. This is the case of Pauline de Noirfontaine.

After the death of her husband, Castor Isidor Chas, Francoise Pauline Lafond (1799-1872), remarried in 1847 Alfred Jean Louis Bodson de Noirfontaine (1802-1891), a graduate of the renowned *École Polytechnique*, director of the fortifications of Paris and lieutenant-colonel of the *Engineers Regiment*. Little is known about her except that she was a woman of letters who ran a salon in Paris. She joined her husband in Algeria, where she lived for three years, 1849-1851. As she explains in the preface of her book *Un regard écrit: Algérie* (1856), she never contemplated the idea of becoming a writer. However, notwithstanding her making it plain that she had no "literary claim", she embarked upon writing a series of letters aimed to provide all those she loved with some distraction pertaining to Algeria.

In the course of time, De Noirfontaine's distraction crystallized in a book. The merit of her piece of writing lies in that it gives a quite detailed description of the various segments that composed the Algerian society and accurately reports on the calamity, a cholera epidemic, which befell the city of Oran (western Algeria) in 1840. I will argue that in addressing the disease this author, far beyond describing an event and its consequences, subconsciously exposes human mis/behavior in times of crises, in this case sanitary.

Shortly after her arrival in Algiers, De Noirfontaine headed for Oran, where

a cholera epidemic broke out on Thursday 4, October, 1849. It was neither the first nor the last to hit the population of Oran and that of other Algerian cities (see appendix). According to estimates, within approximately five weeks, more precisely, between October 11 and November 17, 1849, 1817 people were dead. Given the spiraling tolls, and unexpectedly, a blatant shortage of gravediggers, the alternative for the civil authorities was to request the military to send their convicts. At this point, De Noirfontaine's nights would flow in quite disturbing "dream[s] of cemeteries, funerals, and plague convoys".¹ But even though dismayed by the terrific events unfolding in front of her eyes, she managed to give a comprehensive idea about the situation in progress in the hope, as she put it in her African impressions, her "letters [could] gain in retrospective interest".

The conspicuous proper of history is that it repeats itself. Innumerable epidemics/pandemics have so far broken out, Covid 19 being the latest, but her letter suggesting a lockdown, quarantine etc., slightly more than a century and a half ago unfortunately did not gain in retrospective. This absence is probably due to her being a little known author or to our failure to learn from past mistakes. Didn't Camus, after the plague had disappeared, point out: "those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books?"² In fact, reading her document is a golden opportunity for a look in the mirror of a colonial society; the way its segments reacted to the disease and therefore, the best policy to avoid its far-reaching consequences.

Reading De Noirfontaine's letter also helps notice that epidemics/pandemics not only determine similar solutions (in exile, in flight, in the supernatural), but also bring up the most opposite moral poles: the basic evil of human nature like individualism, social inequalities, hypocrisy etc., and the noblest and most heroic attitudes (e.g. dedication of a hospital staff). All of these were addressed and highlighted approximately a century later by the Algeria-born philosopher Albert Camus in a world famous and presently bestselling novel *The Plague*.

It is worthy to note that Camus may have found inspiration in the letter/book of this 19th-century French travelling woman. This can be grounded in the fact that the topic and the events in his novel, the nature of the narrator, the location, the characters (a dedicated doctor, human reaction) appear in De Noirfontaine's

¹Pauline de Noirfontaine, *Un regard écrit: Algérie* (Havre: A. Lemale, 1856-1857), 82.

²Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 150.

too. At this juncture, it is possible to approximate their works according to a broad conception of “influence” as a subtle and indefinable process whereby one would participate in modifying or in generating another.

The events narrated in Camus’ *The Plague* and De Noirfontaine’s *Un regard écrit: Algérie* are both located in Oran, at the height of colonization for the former, in its laborious beginnings for the latter. In both, the voice is that of chroniclers. In *Un regard*, it is a question of reporting the real: “I merely said things as I saw them, as I felt them, as they offered themselves to me”.¹ In *The Plague*, the task of the narrator confines to saying: “This happened” when he knows that this has indeed happened and that this has interested the life of an entire people. Camus and De Noirfontaine also share the same disillusioned view of Oran.

Camus writes that Oran “is merely a large French port on the Algerian coast (...) The town itself, let us admit, is ugly. It has a smug, placid air (...) a town without pigeons, without any trees or gardens (...) a thoroughly negative place, in short?”.² For De Noirfontaine, Oran is “a kind of ladder-shaped suburb (...) improvised for squirrels, goats or other small climbing animals”.³ Regarding the inhabitants, most French literature and politics offer a comparable picture.

The Spanish and the Italians, who had settled in western and eastern Algeria respectively, were seen as leeches. The French government, deeming that the conquest had cost it blood and treasure but those who were having the upper hand on its colony were Spanish and Italians, resolved to show it was in no manner prone to “hatch an Italian egg in the East and a Spanish one in the West”; it encouraged French settlement. As per the native Jews, the novelist Guy de Maupassant, for instance, denounced their presumed practice of usury, which he considered as the “plague, the bleeding wound of our colony, the main obstacle to civilization and to the Arabs’ welfare”.⁴ Under this head, in terms of sociology, De Noirfontaine tells us that Oran consists of manifold communities with different culinary recipes and mores.

In one district, we find the Spanish, who “ (...) fond of garlic and chili, with

¹Camus, *The Plague*, 3.

²De Noirfontaine, *Un regard écrit*, 7.

³De Noirfontaine, *Un regard écrit*, 20.

⁴Guy de Maupassant, *Œuvres complètes de Guy de Maupassant. Au Soleil* (Paris: Conard, 1908),

their abundance of gestures and luxury of southern physiognomy, bask in historic filth". Another is inhabited by Jews, who "mercantile by profession (...) trade with hereditary disloyalty".¹ A third is peopled by the French. They are merchants, who "driven by speculative ambitions, had resolved to plant the banner of colonization on the African soil".² Camus comes to the same; he writes "Our citizens work hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, "doing business".³ In a fourth district, we find Arabs about whom De Noirfontaine says: "one has to observe them some time to see which they prefer, misery with indolence, to the ease that one does not acquire except at the cost of a tiring work or active industry"⁴. But her remarks, unlike numerous fellow countrymen and women, went along surprising farsightedness insofar as the colonization of Algeria is concerned.

The author of *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, went to Algeria twice (1840, 1847) to report on the progress of colonization. He warned in his first report that France had better give up the idea of leaving this land, otherwise it would "visibly enter the period of its decline". In order to subdue the hostile Arab population, he condoned the "burning of harvests; emptying silos, and seizing unarmed men, women and children".⁵



De Noirfontaine, who arrived in 1849, had actually no colonial gaze. A journey into her letters shows that she was utterly stripped of hatred and prejudice in those harsh times of the beginning of the conquest of Algeria. Importantly—"very much ahead of her time" and challenging "the myth of Europeans' supe-

¹De Noirfontaine, *Un regard écrit*, 20.

²De Noirfontaine, 21.

³Camus, *The Plague*, 4.

⁴De Noirfontaine, *Un regard écrit*, 194.

⁵Alexis de Tocqueville, *Travail sur l'Algérie (1841)*, ed. Jean-Marie Tremblay [online], 4, accessed December 28, 2020. <https://eweb.uqac.ca/bibliotheque/archives/13866127.pdf>.

riority”¹—no sooner had she arrived than she concluded that France’s venture was doomed to failure. What comforted her in the correctness of her judgment lies in that both warring entities, French and Arab, were in truth civilizations. In other words, although France “paid the best of [its] blood, emptied the treasures (...) the Arabs will neither have adopted [its] religion, [its] tastes, [its] customs (...) believe in a word Algeria is defeated but not conquered”.² De Noirfontaine’s farsightedness is also embodied in her letter to Julie Lallemand in which she suggests the best approach to fight the epidemic which broke out in Oran.

De Noirfontaine’s book consists of six letters she sent to her friends while in Oran. They are quite interesting in that they come from a rather cultured and sensitive woman. Three of the recipients were novelists namely, Léon Gozlan, Virginie Ancelot, and Eugène Chapus. Julie was a doctor’s wife; Marnier, a colonel in the army; little is known about one Madam Daullé who appears in her fifth letter. Even though De Noirfontaine had no official position, she was received by the dominant caste, be it French or Arab. In her third letter, sent to Julie, dated November 1849, she explains her long silence by a cholera epidemic, which all of a sudden “melted down on [her] poor city like a vulture and covered it with its black wings” to the point of having “paralyzed (...) speech, pen, and thought!”.³ Then, she describes an unforgiving disease that ended the existence of people no matter their age or wealth, and in so doing, bred unspeakable despair among families.

De Noirfontaine writes about a man who lost two of his three children and feared he would lose the last. Having been informed that a doctor was in her home, begged for help and told her: “if you knew how much I prayed to God to make them live longer than me but this disease; it’s hell; it destroys everything; it takes everything away!”.⁴ Surprisingly, although not a doctor, she was through her readings—she mentions Volney and knows perfectly the methods

¹“Pauline de Noirfontaine”, Département de Lettres de l’Université de Western Australia, *Lire les femmes écrivains et les littératures africaines*, accessed December 28, 2020, <https://aflit.arts.uwa.edu.au/noirfontaine10.html>.

²De Noirfontaine, *Un regard écrit*, 314.

³De Noirfontaine, 21.

⁴De Noirfontaine, 21.

of prevention of epidemics¹—sufficiently impregnated by the medical culture of her time to grasp the therapeutic interest of insulation.

Being in presence of a merciless disease, which after six weeks succeeded in “mowing the eighth of the population and the third of the garrison, seven doctors, eighty-five nurses and twelve sisters”,² she suggested a quarantine that would prevent the cholera from spreading. She also advised to put the infected people in “a special room located far from the center, instead of transporting cholera infected patients to ordinary hospitals”.³ Last, she pointed out that since the very fear of death was a cause for more victims, it was preferable not to inform the population about the number of those who passed away and the peril that threatened it. Along the peril that she was describing stood others of which the human being was the sole responsible: individualism, social inequalities etc., in short, what today is labeled modern individualism and poverty pandemic due to people we may call ‘Covidbaggers’.

Insofar as individualism, De Noirfontaine explains how relieved she was after the evacuation of an infected woman to Oran civil hospital. She came to her home in the hope of receiving help but De Noirfontaine admits that she behaved in, so to say, a cowardly manner. Feeling guilty, she writes:

It seemed to me that I had for the first time set foot in selfishness (...) There was in me one of those terrible struggles that break the heart (...) Twice I opened my mouth to revoke the fatal order; twice I stretched out my arm to stop the sad convoy but as there are few decisive circumstances where we do not attach to our existence and to that of our relatives an interest which will prevail over all others I let things go, however, only praying to heaven not to put my heart to such a test because, although this action seemed cowardly, it took me great courage to accomplish it.⁴

In much the same vein, Chanoine Mathieu (Oran archbishop; 1900), writes in *La Vierge de l’Oranie au XIX^e siècle*: “When the threat of a horrible and prompt

¹Constantin-François Chasseboeuf Volney, 1757-1820. Historian, linguist, specialist in Oriental languages, author of *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte, pendant les années 1783, 1784, and 1785*, and founder in 1803 of the Prix Volney/Volney Prize for the best book on Oriental languages. Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France/BNF Gallica.

²De Noirfontaine, *Un regard écrit*, 83.

³De Noirfontaine, 121.

⁴De Noirfontaine, 91.

death was everywhere (...) into a thought of personal preservation we sometimes forgot the respect due to the dead (...) the prolongs roamed the various districts of the city to pick up the victims of the plague, lying on the roads abandoned by their own”.¹ Two centuries later, human nature would show a surprising permanence. For fear of infection by Covid19, innumerable people showed reluctance to bid farewell to those they were presumably deeply attached to. They let them leave this world in the most total solitude; they let them end up alone and lonely. And manifold examples tell of the military in Spain, Italy, France etc., finding elderly people abandoned dead in retirement homes.



In her letter to Julie, De Noirfontaine addresses social inequalities. The outbreak of the epidemic exacerbated the prevailing heavy consequences of colonization. In Algeria, two people, colonized and colonists lived “separate and unequal”. Fearing death due to three years of drought, the Arab rural population “flocked to the hearth of the epidemic which had become for them the last asylum of abundance”.² The asylum was short-lived because in Oran death, this time due to cholera, was awaiting this population with wide open arms.

De Noirfontaine also points to the artificial strength of the human being easily reduced by a microscopic enemy. It is too clear for dispute that in wars, man may show courage to fight his fellow man; the cholera epidemic showed him his limits and the vanity of his so-called courage. It is no wonder then to see her say that she saw in Oran “men who had courageously endured the fire of enemy batteries, whose souls had never trembled in war, die of fear at the approach of cholera”.³

¹Mathieu Chanoine, *La Vierge de l’Oranie au XIX^e siècle. Histoire du pèlerinage de N.-D. du Salut à Santa-Cruz. Oran*, (Oran: D. Heinz, 1900), 9.

²De Noirfontaine, *Un regard écrit*, 111.

³De Noirfontaine, 122.

Last, De Noirfontaine addresses moral hypocrisy. Helpless in front of a disease of which they knew the symptoms and the consequences but hardly the origin and still less the remedy, Oran dwellers ultimately remembered God. They hoped that He would save, if not their bodies, at least their souls. The prevailing clergy rooted this moral hypocrisy in a century, the eighteenth, conspicuous for its fostering naturalism, a movement that gave wings to man so that he could dethrone God.¹ Helpless Oran population, including the military, eventually resorted to Him. The bishop of Algiers was asked for permission to make a procession in honor of the holy prelate whose immense charity had been put to the test by the plague of Milan a few centuries earlier.² Among those who demanded for a procession, one finds Oran Governor, Marshal Aimable Pelissier (1794-1864).

Marshal Pelissier participated in the invasion of Algeria and would order the notorious “enfumades” (slaughter by smoke inhalation) of the Dahra about which the Algerian Arabic daily *El Akhbar* wrote extensively. The English daily *The Times*, on July 14, 1845,³ relayed the facts; its next issue sharply condemned the atrocities.⁴ Angered now by the daily horror and the thin prospects of a cure, Pelissier sharply lectured the bishop of Oran. He said to him in crude words:

But what are you doing Father, are you sleeping? So you no longer know your job? The Cholera? We can't do anything about it: neither you, nor I, nor anyone else can stop it. I am not a parish priest, and yet it is I, Pelissier, who tells you: make processions! F---g

¹De Noirfontaine, 10.

²De Noirfontaine, 111.

³The Akhbar of Algiers, of the 5th, has the following from Orleansville: “There has just occurred in the Dahra one of those terrible events (...) Colonel Pelissier was busy in pursuing the Ouled Riah, who have never yet submitted, as they live in immense caverns where it would be madness for the troops to enter (...) whe, losing all patience, and no longer having a hope of otherwise subduing these fanatics, who formed a perpetual nucleus of revolt in the country, the fire was renewed and rendered intense. During this time the cries of the unhappy wretches, who were being suffocated, were dreadful, and then nothing was heard but the crackling of the faggots (...) The troops entered and found 500 dead bodies. About 150, who still breathed, were brought into the fresh air, but a portion of them died afterwards”. Source: “French Atrocities in Algeria”, *The Times* (July 14, 1845): 7.

⁴“But the struggle which had been going on in Africa for fifteen years in the north of Africa is not war—it is a contest between armed invaders and a whole people. War has its conventional rights and laws of mercy, but in Algeria it is waged within discriminating license against the private possessions and the lives of every native tribe which still dares to feed its flocks in freedom amongst its native mountains”. Source: *The Times* (July 15, 1845): 4.

bring the Virgin up there on the mountain; she will see to throw the cholera into the sea.¹

The next day heavy rains fell carrying with them the cholera epidemic. There remained, however, colonization with its plunder, poverty, inequalities, hypocrisy etc. These scourges have not disappeared. UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, in his *2020 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture*, called the attention of the audience to the fact that “Covid-19 ha[d] been likened to an X-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built” and put into question “the myth that we are all in the same boat because while we are all floating on the same sea, it’s clear that some are in superyachts while others are clinging to drifting debris”.² It will be interesting to see whether after such a lecture the human being will resolve to make his global village free of individualism, materialism, and hedonism or continue not “to learn from books”, and in so doing, fail to understand that the “bacillus never dies”.

*Cholera Epidemics in Oran 1834-184.*³

1834	Oran. Brought by immigrants from Gibraltar and Cartagena; spread quickly due to malnutrition, poverty, and lack of hygiene
1835	Broke out first in Marseilles and Toulon; was brought by passengers aboard two ships, <i>Le Triton</i> and <i>La Chimère</i> ; broke out in Algiers; spread to Oran.
1846	Broke out in Marseilles and brought by passengers on board <i>Le Pharamond</i> ; spread to Oran. Casualties: 2001 dead.
1849	Broke out in France; spread to Oran. Casualties: military: 882 civilian 2472 out of whom 1512 Arabs

¹Véronique Palomar, *Fait du jour, pèlerinage Santa Cruz nouvelle version*, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.objectifgard.com/2017/05/26/fait-du-jour-pelerinage-de-santa-cruz-nouvelle-version/>.

²António Guterres, “Secretary-General’s Nelson Mandela Lecture: ‘Tackling the Inequality Pandemic: A New Social Contract for a New Era’”, *Euronews* July 18, 2020.

³Source: Abid Larbi, “Les épidémies de choléra en Algérie au cours du 19^e siècle”, *Santemaghreb.com. Le guide de la médecine et de la santé en Algérie*, accessed December 28, 2020. <http://www.santetropicale.com/santemag/algerie/poivue46.htm>.



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*Pierre-Ambroise Richebourg (?), View of Oran, 1857-1863, stereograph,
albumen print (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam,
<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/RP-F-F12843>).*