

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## The Other World / L'Autre monde (2001)

Merzak Allouache

### OVERVIEW

Seven years after *Bab-el-Oued City*, which deals with the rise of fundamentalism in Algeria, Merzak Allouache made this film, entirely devoted to Algeria in the cauldron of civil war, where blood and death are presented without any reserve. Indeed, the Algerian civil war, also known as the Dirty War, claimed at least 200,000 victims. It is therefore without modesty that the Algerian filmmaker presents the horror that his country experienced during the tragic years from 1991 to 2002. The film was shot in Algeria.

### CHARACTERS

<i>Yasmine:</i>	Rashid's fiancée
<i>Rashid</i>	Yasmine's fiancé, a deserter from the Algerian army
<i>Hakim</i>	A young Islamic fundamentalist
<i>Aldjia</i>	The host of Abdallah and Rashid

### SYNOPSIS

Yasmine and Rashid are two young French citizens of Algerian descent who live in Paris. In 1999, while watching the terrorists' cruelties in Algeria on television, Rashid is overcome with guilt and, on a whim, abandons his fiancée, Yasmine, and joins the Algerian army to fight the terrorists. Having no news of Rashid, Yasmine decides to go search for him in Algeria. Her journey takes her through all sorts of horrors in a world that is completely different from the one she knows. She finally finds Rashid, but their moment of happiness is short-lived.

### SCENES

**Flight to Algeria** Yasmine receives a phone call from her airline confirming her trip to Algeria. She goes to the migrant district of Belleville, in Paris, to buy a black hijab. She tries it on in the store and decides to wear it right away. Her friend Patricia visits her and is surprised to see her veiled. Yasmine explains to Patricia that she is going to Algeria. Patricia tells her that her decision scares her. Yasmine admits that she is scared, but she must go.



**Uncle's house** Yasmine takes a cab to her uncle's house in Algeria. The maid who opens the door for her does not understand French, and Yasmine does not speak a word of Arabic. The cab driver offers to help her. Her uncle is surprised to see her in a hijab. He asks her if it is the fashion in Paris. She answers that people advised her to blend in. He tells her that she is free to dress as she wants, but that he does not care about hijabs, beards, and religion. He advises her to never go out alone, only with her cousin Thouraya.



**Cousin Thouraya** Yasmine and her cousin Thouraya decide to visit Algiers. Yasmine has abandoned her hijab for a casual outfit. The two cousins walk through the city and sit on the terrace of a bar in the port to drink a beer. Thouraya tells Yasmine that it does not look like it now, but bombs used to explode on the streets of Algiers every day. Yasmine asks her cousin if she was ever afraid of violence, and if she ever thought of



fleeing Algeria. Thouraya tells her that amnesia is fashionable in Algeria. People quickly forget the violence and life goes on. The main thing for them is to make money quickly. Yasmine makes a phone call to meet with someone.

**Train to Medea** Yasmine wears her hijab for a trip to a remote area. Her cousin tells her that she is crazy to go there because the area is dangerous. She suggests that Yasmine take her gun. Yasmine reassures her that everything will be fine. She boards a train. After a few moments, armed men burst into the train and kill a young man and take the bag he was carrying. The journey resumes in silence.



**Yasmine at the army camp** Yasmine arrives at the gate of a military camp and asks to be received by the person in charge. A beggar sitting not far from the camp observes Yasmine's movements. Yasmine meets the camp commander, who is surprised that she has come all this way to find her cousin. He asks Yasmin if this cousin is her lover. He gets no answer. He explains that a group of his soldiers on a reconnaissance mission was ambushed by terrorists, who decimated them. Only two of those soldiers were not found but he doubts that they are still alive. Yasmine sobs. She wants to know the location of the ambush. The commander gets angry and asks that Yasmine be escorted to the door.



**The commander** On his way home, the commander sees Yasmine still waiting on the corner, not sure where to go. The commander turns around and takes Yasmine in his car. At home, his wife, Aïcha, tells him that it is unwise to invite a stranger to the house, that she might be a terrorist. He reassures her that Yasmine has come from Paris to look for her cousin. The commander finally agrees to reveal to Yasmine the location of the ambush, near Bordj Khriss. Yasmine decides to go there. Another night, on his way back from the military base, the commander falls into an ambush set up by the terrorists. He is brutally murdered while his wife and three-month-old daughter wait for him at home. The television broadcasts the president's frustrations about the families who complain about their dead, while the situation of the country demands that people look at the collective interest.



**Captured on the way to Bordj Khriss** The taxi driver, fatalistic, tells them that one only dies once, that the foreigner in his cab has written on a piece of paper that she wants to go to Bordj Khriss, and he will take her there. Besides, he tells them, the army has cleared the area of all terrorists. Minutes later, however, the taxi falls into an ambush. The passengers are shot. A young fighter named Hakim asks that Yasmine be spared and taken to the Emir to be his companion..



**Emir** Yasmine is held naked in a hut. A woman arrives with a can of water and tells her in Arabic to wash herself, because the Emir will come to see her. Yasmine doesn't understand a word she is told and just sobs convulsively. The Emir comes into the hut, looks at her, then tells her he will come back after prayers. During the prayer, Hakim, the young man who asked that Yasmine be spared looks at the Emir in disgust as he plays with his knife. The Emir notices this.

**Yasmine escapes with Hakim** A helicopter suddenly arrives with its lights on the terrorists and starts shooting at them. The terrorists rush to their weapons to answer the shots from the helicopter. In the commotion, Hakim, enters Yasmine's hut, throws a *djellaba* (a loose-fitting robe) at her, and asks her to get dressed quickly and follow him. They run away into the forest. At daybreak, they arrive at the home of a peasant couple who offer them food and drink. Hakim treats the couple with contempt. He suspects Yasmine of being sent as a spy for the army. He does not understand how she ended up in the middle of the Algerian forest from France, without a word of Arabic. She reassures him that she is not a spy. She tells him that she is looking for her brother who has been ambushed. Hakim tells her that he was in that battle, and that two of the soldiers were able to escape.



**Yasmine travels with Hakim** Yasmine takes a bus to Timimoun. She turns around and sees Hakim a few rows behind her, waving and smiling at her. Soon they arrive at a police checkpoint. The young man panics and comes to sit next to her, holding her hand. She pushes his hand away. But when the soldiers come up, and she feels the fear in Hakim's eyes, she takes his hand. A soldier comes up to them, looks at them, and orders the young man to let go of Yasmine's hand, asking him if he is not ashamed to show affection in public. The soldiers get off the bus, and the trip resumes. Yasmine asks Hakim why he is following her and he replies that he wants to protect her. She tells him she needs no protection from him, and that he should go about his life and leave her alone.



**Hakim's story** Hakim talks about his life. He tells Yasmine how he learned French by watching French movies, how he liked foreign shows and movies. He tells her that he was a carefree boy, who didn't even say his prayers. He joined the terrorists when the army killed his two brothers. With the terrorists, he committed unforgivable horrors. For a month now, he has wanted to stop and surrender because he doesn't know what he is fighting for anymore. He asks Yasmine to tell him about her and insists that he will stay with her.



**Yasmine finds Rashid** The property of Aldjia is a mud building, like the houses of Medea, isolated in the mountains. Aldjia runs a café and a two-girl brothel. When Yasmine arrives and greets the girls, they take her for Aldjia's new recruit. Yasmine hears screams coming from the courtyard and rushes there. She sees Rashid in one of the rooms trying to comfort Abdallah. Rashid sees her. He stands up, and they throw themselves into each other's arms and kiss. The old woman speaks French very well. She is not happy that Yasmine is there. She tells her that it is too risky with Abdallah and Rashid, who are deserters, and whom she already hides with enough difficulty. She asks her to leave with Rashid, but that Abdallah can stay because she promised his father to take care of his son.



**Rashid explains why he left** Yasmine asks for explanations from Rashid. He tells her that he felt like a coward to see all these innocent people killed without reacting. So, he came to Algeria to fight the terrorists without any experience of war. As soon as he arrived, they put a rifle in his hands and sent him to fight. It was Abdallah who made it possible for him to survive, Abdallah who was driven mad by the terrorists. Yasmine is happy to be with Rashid. She watches him cook and smiles at him. She finds herself alone on the dunes writing notes in her diary, smiling.



**Hakim follows Yasmine** On his way back from Timimoun, Omar gives the young terrorist a ride to Aldjia's. Hakim sits on the rocks overlooking the courtyard and watches every move of Yasmine and Rashid. From his vantage point, he sees Rashid running after a screaming Abdallah on the dunes. The young terrorist watches her from afar and smiles too. While going down the dunes, Yasmine loses her diary that she had put in her pocket and does not realize it. The young terrorist rushes to recover the diary, in which he immerses himself for long hours.



**Hakim gets jealous and murders all** From his hiding place, the young terrorist sees Aldjia in the arms of Omar the trucker. He also sees Yasmine and Rashid kissing. He takes his bag and runs down the mountain, towards the courtyard, enters discreetly and starts to search the rooms. He discovers Yasmine and Rashid in full frolic. He takes out his gun and shoots them. Then, he searches the other rooms and kills everyone who is there.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **Yasmine** (Optimistic, Courageous, Loyal)

Yasmine is an optimistic, courageous, and loyal woman who has lived through atrocities in the Algerian forest and crossed the desert to find the man she loved. Unfortunately, her joy was cut short by the jealousy of a psychopath.

*Optimistic* Yasmine left Paris convinced that she would find Rashid in Algeria. When the commander of the military base told her that two of his soldiers were missing, she refused to believe that they were dead, and she became convinced that one of these two soldiers was her fiancé. She was right to trust her instincts where others would have easily given up, in fact, Rashid was one of those two soldiers, and he was alive and well.

*Courageous* Yasmine is a woman of exceptional courage. Most people in her place would have considered themselves lucky after the experience in the terrorist camp and would have stopped taking more risks. However, she left as soon as she recovered her breath in search of Rashid, braving other difficulties in Timimoun and on the road to Bechar.

*Loyal* Yasmine is a loyal woman. Rashid left for Algeria without telling her and stayed there without sending her any news. However, as soon as she learned that he had gone to Algeria to enlist in the army, she gave up her studies and her job and went to look for him. There is some foolishness in her attitude, but also determination and loyalty.

### **Hakim** (Remorseful, Violent, Self-deluded)

Hakim is a violent psychopath who feels remorse for his misdeeds and the next minute relapses into brutality. He helps Yasmine escape from the terrorists only to turn his gun on her.

*Remorseful* Hakim told Yasmine that for a month now, his heart was no longer in terrorism, and that he wanted to leave the mountains to surrender to the authorities. He confessed the crimes he had committed and said that it would be difficult for him to be forgiven by Allah. It is a man deeply touched by remorse who talks to Yasmine. However, it is also a man psychologically scarred by the war who can only find himself through professional intervention. He did not have time to receive this help before plunging back into violence.

*Violent* Hakim himself says it: he is a man of unprecedented violence. We see this violence when he attacks the peasant couple who sheltered him and Yasmine during their flight. We also see it when he attacks Abdallah's brother in Timimoun. But it is in his execution of Yasmine and Rashid, as well as the other occupants of Aldjia's villa, that Hakim shows us the extent of his violence.

*Self-deluded* Hakim lived in the illusion of a mutual love with Yasmine. From his hiding place in the mountains, where he watched her from afar, he imagined that it was with him that she laughed when she laughed, and that it was words of love that she wrote to him in her diary. When he realized that Yasmine's joy came from Rashid, his illusions were shattered against reality, and he went down to take revenge for what he regarded as Yasmine's great betrayal.

### **Rashid** (Idealist, Coward, Grateful)

Rashid is an idealist who, although grateful to his friend who saved his life, is disloyal to the army and his fiancée. Did he really deserve for Yasmine to put her life in danger for him?

*Idealist* Rashid is an idealist who romanticized war until the day he really experienced it. From his couch in Paris, in front of his television set that showed him images of the terrorists' atrocities, he convinced himself that he could make a difference. The reality was harder than he thought.

*Coward* Rashid is a coward and a deserter. As soon as he heard the first shot, he froze and could not participate in the fighting. And when he had the opportunity to disappear, he did so without returning to the military camp, preferring to live the life of a reclusive deserter than that of a combat fighter.

*Grateful* Although disloyal to Yasmine, whom he abandoned in France for a life as a soldier in Algeria, Rashid showed gratitude to his friend Abdallah. As he told Yasmine, it was thanks to Abdallah that he was alive. He owed it to him to stay by his side in his moments of psychological vulnerability. This he did, and this is what kept him in the Algerian desert.

## THEMES

### **SOCIETY** (patriarchy, gender, language, religion)

*Patriarchy* The military base commander is not necessarily an overbearing husband. However, when Yasmine asks for a cigarette, he tells her that he will not allow a woman to smoke in his house. His wife intervenes that she does it all the time and offers Yasmine a cigarette. Nevertheless, he asks them to smoke discreetly, without being seen by the neighbors. The commander wants to present an image of himself that conforms to an ideal of Algerian machismo, whereas in the privacy of his home, he is a liberal man. On this superficial hard shell depends his authority as an army officer supposed to command troops in a country that puts a particular emphasis on the domination of men and the separation of spaces between men and women. When Yasmine takes Hakim's hand on the bus to protect him by passing him off as her boyfriend, they are scolded by a soldier who sees their posture as a transgression of the rule of spaces. Therefore, the commander cannot afford to appear feminized. Rather, he must be as chauvinistic as Abdallah's old father in Timimoun, who forbids Yasmine to raise her voice in his house.

*Gender* When Yasmine's bush taxi was ambushed by the terrorists, they spared her to offer her as a sex slave to the Emir. Yasmine's case is illustrative of what happens to women in conflict situations. They are often the first victims of human rights violations. In the case of the so-called holy war waged by Muslim fundamentalists, the rape of women is justified as permissible under Islamic law. Hundreds, if not thousands, of women and girls have been raped under the pretext that it is part of the holy war, and a morale booster for the fighters. Some fighters even claimed that raping a non-believer brought them closer to Allah. Whether in a religious or secular context, women have always been the first victims of the atrocities committed in armed conflicts.

*Language* People feel safer around those who speak their language. The day after their escape from the terrorists' camp, while recovering their strength at the home of a peasant couple, Hakim asks Yasmine if she is not a spy. He doesn't understand that she has come from so far away, from France, in the middle of the Algerian bush, when ['why' might be better here] she doesn't speak a word of Arabic. That, he says, seems fishy. Language brings together those who share it by immediately giving them the benefit of the doubt, and it divides those who do not share it by setting up an immediate suspicion between them, which they must work to eliminate. Thus, although Hakim suspects Yasmine of working with the enemy because she is incompetent in Arabic, the fact that he speaks French like her breaks the barriers of distrust, to the point where Yasmine falls asleep with her head on Hakim's shoulders and even kisses him goodbye at the Timimoun station. The language they share has created an affinity between them.

The same thing happens with the old woman, Aldjia, who at first demanded Yasmine's departure. It was only when Yasmine told her that she excelled in French that a complicity developed between the two women, to the point where they ended up cooking and celebrating New Year together. A common language breaks down mistrust and creates an empathy and attraction between those who speak it. On the other hand, a language barrier creates distrust and suspicion between individuals, who are tacitly required to prove their good faith.

*Religion* The conflict in which Yasmine, and before her fiancé Rashid, found themselves caught was a conflict between the Algerian army and armed Islamist groups. This conflict, called the Dirty War, lasted from 1991 to 1998 and resulted in more than 200,000 deaths. Yasmine's cousin Thouraya tells her that Algerians continue to live only because amnesia is fashionable, for the streets were always littered with victims. As Hakim, explained, it was the conflict between the faithful and the unbelievers. In the mountains he did horrific things. As he himself said to Yasmine, no amount of prayers could absolve him of his crimes. And yet, these crimes were committed in the name of Allah.

### **POLITICS** (leadership, intrigue)



*Leadership war* The Algeria in which Yasmine immerses herself in search of her fiancé Rashid is an Algeria of conflict between the government and various armed factions of the Islamist Salvation Army. It was the army's coup d'état to prevent the imminent victory of the Islamist Salvation Front that triggered this conflict, which came to be known as the Dirty War. In the film, the commander and the Emir are parts representing the whole. The Emir epitomizes all the fundamentalist factions of the conflict, and the commander the government. It is difficult to say who won this conflict [in the film or in history?], but at least we can say that the Algerian people came out of it as the traumatized victims. Yasmine and her fiancé Rashid, as well as all those who were assassinated by Hakim at the home of Aldjia, represent the people martyred by this war of leadership. They will unfortunately be part of the statistics. Here, the film is an attempt to put names and faces to those anonymous victims.

*Intrigue* The Algerian Dirty War, which pitted Muslim fundamentalists against the Algerian government, involved two forms of armed struggle. On the one hand, there was the conventional form of battle, fought by an institutional army, trained in the art of national defense, and wearing identifiable uniforms. These are the kind of fighters who are under the orders of the commander of the military base. The military tactic of this army is characterized by securing national territory, undertaking offensive actions against the enemy and punitive strikes of the kind that allowed Yasmine and Hakim to escape from the terrorist camp. Opposite this identifiable, conventional army are the terrorist fighters, less identifiable, whose method is to blend into the crowds in an underground rural or urban guerrilla struggle, and to sow terror and instability in order to deter support for the government. The targets of this guerrilla warfare are not necessarily the military. While in the conventional method, civilian populations are only hit by accident, in terrorist warfare, the populations as well as the civilian and military infrastructures constitute privileged targets by means of attacks, hostage-taking and mass killings. The brutality of the terrorist method can be seen in the summary execution of the passengers in the bush taxi and in the slaughtering of the family of farmers by the Emir's men

#### **RELATIONSHIP** (friendship, Love-loyalty)

*Friendship* When the army put a gun in his hand without giving him proper training and threw him and other soldiers into the Algerian mountains to hunt terrorists, Rashid was able to negotiate fear and inexperience through Abdallah's friendship. However, Abdallah himself did not escape unscathed. The savagery of the terrorism he witnessed left him mentally challenged. Out of friendship and gratitude for what Abdallah did for him, Rashid made it his mission to help Abdallah find himself. How could he do this without the help of mental health professionals? How could he go to a specialized institution without putting himself in danger, without revealing that he was a deserter and therefore liable to be executed? Rashid decided to live with Abdallah at Aldjia's house. Together, these two friends found their death when Omar came shooting from his hideout.

*Love-Loyalty* Omar the truck-driver asks Aldjia if it is fate that makes him meet Yasmine in different places: on the plane from Paris, on the road to Bechar, and now at her home. Aldjia tells him that it is simply love that makes them meet. And she is right because the engine that propels Yasmine from Paris to the Algerian desert is simply her love for Rashid, her loyalty to this man who left her life without warning and zombified her. For him, she lived the most appalling moments of her life, sank into a world of hell, another world, as the title of the film says, where death lurks at every turn, to live only a few days of pleasure with him and die in his arms. To Omar, who attributed his encounters with Yasmine to fate, Aldjia said that love and loyalty were the rudders that could lead to the worst of follies.

#### **QUEST** (introspection)

*Introspection* Aldjia asks Yasmine when she intends to return to France. Yasmine replies that it's a question she hasn't taken the time to consider. She confesses to Aldjia that with Rashid gone, she was living like a zombie. This trip to Algeria is, therefore, for her a quest, an attempt to reconnect with the pleasure of living.

#### **PSYCHOLOGY** (psychosis, regret, self-delusion)

*Psychosis* The Algerian civil war had serious mental repercussions on the populations as well as the combatants of the various belligerent parties. Thouraya, Yasmine's cousin, symbolises the people who have seen and experienced so many atrocities that they are numbed, amnesic of the recent past, blasé, or distrustful. She walks around with a gun in her bag, ready to defend herself, because she no longer believes in the possibility of the army to protect the people. On the side of the regular army fighters, Abdallah, and to a lesser degree Rashid, have emerged mentally affected. Rashid lives in fear of being caught and executed by his comrades-in-arms for desertion, and Abdallah, for his part, has found refuge in hallucinations and madness. Among the terrorists, Hakim has become a violent angry man who recognizes that no prayer can absolve him, and who in an excess of self-delusion and misplaced jealousy shoots Yasmine, Rashid, and the occupants of Aldjia's house just when he was thought to be on his way to social reintegration.

*Regret* "In the mountains I have seen and done horrible things. No matter how much time I spend praying, Allah will never forgive me." Here are the confessions of Hakim, someone who committed the worst crimes against innocent civilians— kidnapping, sexual slavery and murder. These are also the words of a person who seems to express regret for his actions and who says he is ready to surrender to face the law. And everything about Hakim's behavior suggests that he feels remorse for his actions and is determined to reform. Yasmine, therefore, gives him the contact of the commander of the military base so that he can begin his rehabilitation. However, his obsession with Yasmine is stronger than his desire for repentance. Convinced that Yasmine is as attracted to him as he is to her, he follows her, protecting her from afar, until he sees her kissing Rashid, which drives him back into violence.

*Self-delusion* Hakim fell in love with Yasmine and deluded himself into believing that she, too, was in love with him. Yasmine's gestures towards him, such as, holding his hand on the bus, sleeping with her head on his shoulder, or kissing him goodbye on his cheek at the Timimoun bus station, must have made him believe that his feelings for her were reciprocal. He did not understand that it was only an empathy that had developed between two characters who shared the same language in a hostile world and had gone through a difficult ordeal together. So, he followed her, without her noticing, to Aldjia's compound, spying on her every move, laughing when she laughed, living her emotions with her from a distance until he saw her kissing with Rashid. It was then, seized with anger and jealousy, that he went down the mountain to the courtyard and eliminated all its occupants.

#### **FLAW** (Greed, anger-jealousy)

*Greed* One of the effects of the war, as Thouraya confides to her cousin Yasmine, is the greed that grows in the population. Everyone wants to make money as quickly as possible because they are uncertain of what tomorrow will bring. We can see this greed in Abdallah's brother, who, in exchange for some information, wants to strip Yasmine of all her money. This greed is also observable in the two prostitutes who stay with Aldjia. They take enormous risks in selling their charms in the dangerous environment of war, making the rounds of military bases, and taking no precautions to protect themselves from diseases. Aldjia has to remind them often to buy condoms when they go out to do their business.

*Anger-jealousy* It is difficult to say exactly what motivated Hakim to kill Yasmine and Rashid. Was it anger or jealousy? We can say that it was a mixture of these two emotions that led him to this ultimate gesture. When he came running from his hiding place, after seeing Yasmine and Rashid kissing in the courtyard, it could well have been anger at being lied to by Yasmine, who had told him that Rashid was her brother, that drove him. It could also be the feeling of being betrayed by this girl, whom he considered in his self-delusion as his lover, which animated him. And when he saw them naked, intertwined, making love, he closed his eyes at first, refusing to see this scene which, in the brainwashing he had received in the camps of the fundamentalists for whom he fought, contravened the laws of Allah. The naked body was *haram* (sin), and the naked body offered to the sight of others was an even greater sin. His anger at seeing Allah's law transgressed in lies and dishonesty was certainly unbearable for this psychopath. Hakim, therefore, acted in an excess of anger, jealousy, and bigotry

#### **APPEARANCE** (dishonesty, betrayal)

*Dishonesty* Yasmine has not been forthright with Hakim. She told him that she came to Algeria to look for her brother, while in fact she came after her fiancé. Perhaps Yasmine sensed that the terrorist felt

something for her, and that telling him the truth at a time when she was still vulnerable and under his control would put her life in danger. In any case, she hid her true relationship with Rashid from him, which may have contributed to giving him hope that a romantic relationship could develop between him and her.

*Betrayal* The violent side of Hakim, which he revealed to Yasmine and for which he was seeking repentance by going to the authorities, reappeared as soon as he saw Yasmine and Rashid kissing. Hakim experienced this scene between Yasmine and her fiancé as a betrayal. Worse still, he surprised them naked, making love ostentatiously and without any restraint. He shot them and everyone who was in the villa that day in revenge for Yasmine's betrayal.

## QUESTIONS

1. Yasmine's adventure, traveling from Algiers to Aldjia's place, passing through Medea and Timimoun, is an educational trip for the viewers of *The Other World*. What three things has this trip taught you about Algeria?
2. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you were glad to meet someone who spoke the same language as you? What was the context? What made the experience agreeable?
3. Does Rashid deserve Yasmine? Justify your answer.
4. In countries that have gone through a period of war, post-conflict reintegration of combatants is important.
  - a. Explain why combatant rehabilitation into the social fabric is necessary.
  - b. What reform program would you consider for an individual like Hakim?
5. What do you make of the president's complaint that Algerians focus too much on their individual losses instead of focusing on collective interests?