



Keltoum's daughter

Director: Mehdi Charef

Country: France/Tunisia

Date: 2001



This season is supported by Film Hub North West Central, proud to be part of the BFI Film Audience Network.

A review by Anthony Nield for *TheDigitalFix.com*:

Algeria has rarely been seen on UK screens of late. The past decade or so has relied almost solely on the talents of Merzak Allouache (*Bab-El Oued City*) and Mohamed Chouiak (*L'Arche du désert*) and even then only small audiences have been attracted. Mehdi Caref's *Keltoum's Daughter*, gaining a DVD release in the UK four years after its completion, is likely to suffer the same fate. It's a low-key venture despite its 'scope' photography revolving around minimal dialogue and briskly sketched characters. In narrative terms *Keltoum's Daughter* could be described as Fernando E. Solanas' *The Voyage via Jafar Panahi's The Circle*. It tells the story of a Swiss woman, Rallia, who heads to Algeria to find her biological mother. At first she goes to her remote village (a world cinema mainstay from Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Samba Traoré* to Jamshed Usmonov's *Angel on the Right*) only to be told that she isn't there or seemingly returning, before heading off with her aunt on a road trip towards the city.

It is this road trip which turns *Keltoum's Daughter* into a record of female existence in Algeria. The opening act – set in the barren landscape of the village – is actually quite deceptive. We are informed, and can see, that it is a “hellhole” and much is made of the differences between it and Rallia's European experience: the unforgiving weather, the poverty, the lack of education and access to medical treatment. Moreover, the village is framed in such a manner so as to seem fully inhospitable – an aspect enhanced by the subtle soundscapes. Yet once we begin to get closer to the city and the oppression of the women who populate, this earlier setting seems almost inviting; the women aren't so subservient, they don't have to wear their headscarves at all times, etc. etc.

Being a road movie, *Keltoum's Daughter* of course communicates its ideas through the characters our pair meet along the way thereby allowing a bigger picture to emerge. We see a woman from Brussels, for example, attacked in the street for not wearing a headscarf, whilst another is killed for recognising a freedom fighter. Indeed, this is a film which contains numerous big scenes and as such could come across as being overly episodic. Or at least it could if Rallia wasn't there to hold it all together.



Rallia is immediately positioned as the outsider and therefore assumes the roles of observer and questioner. We later learn that she's a model (a nice irony considering that it her distinctive Arabic looks which have most likely earned her the job) yet she possesses a blankness which makes her easy to identify with. Moreover, in doing so we keep a distance from the events in the film and as such simply take

them in. It's an approach matched by *Keltoum's Daughter* as a whole: there's nothing tricky about it, rather it's been filmed so soberly as to seem almost invisible.

Yet there is a flaw inasmuch as Charef has made things a little too tidy in narrative terms. With the dialogue being so minimal it therefore becomes loaded with meaning and there's a similar situation with the various events; the significance of it all is just too apparent. Furthermore, the neatness doesn't allow the film to breathe quite as it should. Whereas *The Circle* documented the lives of its Iranian women through a *La Ronde*-style structure so as to emphasise the fact that this is always going on, *Keltoum's Daughter* never lets us see beyond the film itself. It remains an interesting work nonetheless, but this key difference prevents it from being quite as good as it could be.

From: <http://film.thedigitalfix.com/content/id/59141/keltoums-daughter.html>