

The Self-Exiled Other: A Feminist Response to the Black Decade in Malika Mokkedem's Novel of *Dreams and Assassins*

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Abstract

Malika Mokkedem, among the foremost Maghrebian Francophone women writers of the 1990s, is known for her feminist and political writing drawn on her own experiences as an Algerian woman and writer. Against the backdrop of male domination and increasing religious fundamentalism, the Algerian woman finds herself as the Other in her own land. The theme of self-imposed exile as resistance to patriarchy, political oppression and religious fundamentalism is central to her writing, especially in the novel Of Dreams and Assassins. This paper explores the relationship between exile and family, society, education and nation in Of Dreams and Assassins, this "literature that calls to witness" the Black Decade in Algeria.

Keywords: Exile, Francophone, Feminism, Algeria, Protest Writing



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Introduction

Postcolonial Francophone writing is a rich terrain, spanning cultures and continents. Writers from the erstwhile French colonies of the Caribbean, Africa, the Maghreb, the Indian Ocean and Asia have delved deep into the questions of identity, culture, language, displacement, migration, war, socio-political issues after decolonization and colonialism. Negritude, Créolité (Creoleness) and Antillanité (Caribbeanness) are some important themes that have emerged from these literatures. Exile, assimilation and cultural alienation, hybridity, transnationalism, rewriting of history and memory are notable characteristics of these literatures, challenging historical and current Western approaches in literature.

Women's writing too occupies an important place in postcolonial Francophone literatures, at the intersection of postcolonialism, feminism, subaltern studies, migration studies and even ecocriticism. Women authors from Africa and Asia have particularly played a pivotal role in developing the landscape of Francophone literature over the past few decades. Ananda Devi and Natacha Appanah from the Indian Ocean, Mariama Bâ, Calixthe Beyala and Fatou Diome from Sub-Saharan Africa, Assia Djebbar, Leïla Sebbar, Malika Mokkedem and Leïla Slimani from the Maghreb and Kim Thúy from Vietnam are some of the major women writers whose works have challenged not only patriarchal but also dominant postcolonial narratives. Their works, set across continents and generations, address intersecting themes of identity, emancipation, exile, memory, orality and personal expression against the backdrop of decolonization, nationalism and transnationalism. They reflect the evolving societies of the erstwhile colonies, where the role and space traditionally attributed to women

has been rewritten over the past few decades. Maghrebian Francophone women writers of the postcolonial era bring together their ancestral heritage with French, the language of the colonizer, to create a powerful form of resistance through writing 'prendre la parole' against both Western and traditional societal norms. They focus on the themes of gender, identity, exile, language, colonialism and patriarchy. The trail blazing women writers of the 1960-80s 'gave a voice' to Maghrebian women doubly silenced by patriarchy and Eurocentrism. In the words of Assia Djebbar, arguably the most well-known Algerian woman writer and the first writer from the Maghreb to be elected to the Académie Française in 2005, "to refuse to veil one's voice and to start 'shouting,' that was really indecent, real dissidence. For the silence of all the others suddenly lost its charm and revealed itself for what it was: a prison without reprieve." (Djebbar, 1993, p. 204).

With the next generation of women writers, which include Leïla Sebbar, Malika Mokkedem and Nina Bouraoui, this voice becomes bolder, exploring transgressive and diasporic themes such as cultural hybridity, exile, political and personal freedom and sexuality in the 1980s-90s. In particular, Malika Mokkedem's writing stands out for her preoccupation with the 'Black Decade' of Algeria. Her novel *Of Dreams and Assassins* is of particular interest as a "literature de témoignage" – "literature that calls to witness" in the words of Aïssa Khelladi (qtd in Mokkedem, tr. Marcus, 2000, p. xx). It evokes the exile from Algeria, self-imposed or otherwise, of Algerian intellectuals, including women, under the threat of religious fundamentalism in the 1990s. Like Tajar Djaout, Algerian writer and journalist assassinated in 1993, for Mokkedem, continuing to write is of

critical importance in the face of extremist threats. In an interview with translator K. Melissa Marcus, she says, “*They* have machine guns, we have words. That’s it.” (qtd in Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000, p. xiv).

In this present study, we explore the theme of exile as an outcome and tool of personal and political rebellion for Algerian women in Malika Mokkedem’s *Of Dreams and Assassins*.

Background

“The collapse is so great. Thirty years of lies about our identity. Thirty years of falsification of our history and mutilation of our languages have killed our dreams, made us exiles in our own country.” (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. 60).

The abrupt Arabization of Algeria following Independence in 1962 created a fecund ground for religious fundamentalism to grow in the social and political spheres. Over the next thirty years, authoritarianism and growing religious sentiment brought political organisations such as the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) to the mainstream of Algerian public life. A violent civil war erupted between state forces and Islamist insurgencies after the military annulled the 1991 elections to prevent the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) from taking power. This was Algeria’s “Black Decade” (1992–2002), a deep national trauma, a period was marked by severe repression, disappearances, village massacres and assassinations, and resulting in well over a hundred thousand deaths and thousands of ‘disappeared’ according to some studies (Stora, 2001). Recent studies emphasize how the memory of this violence continues to shape Algeria’s political culture and public consciousness (Naylor, 2024). The brutality of this conflict is demonstrated not only by the vast number of civilian victims, but in the perverse

nature of the violence employed to kill and torture victims, by such means as throat-cutting, decapitation, disembowelment and rape. A 2002 report on mental health in the aftermath of the conflict concluded that the ‘effect of the violence on the [...] functioning of the Algerian society is immense: a lack of trust, feelings of hopelessness, and a decline in social cohesion and support threaten [...] the population’ (Sidhoum, 2002, 402).

As nationalism and religious observance took over Algerian society, restrictions on women continued to increase from the time of Independence. As K. Melissa Marcus (2000) explains in the Introduction to the English translation of *Des rêves et des assassins* (*Of Dreams and Assassins*) the erstwhile active participants of the Algerian War of Independence were marginalised and had no space in the public sphere in post-Independence Algeria. Women came to be seen as guarantors of the stability of family, religion and tradition in post-independence Algeria that was in the process of reconstructing its identity after over a century of brutal colonial rule. The Family Code of 1984 further exacerbated the situation by empowering men over women legally in most areas (Salhi, 2003). During the Black Decade, repression and violence against women in the private and public spheres reflected the misogyny of the state and religious fundamentalist organisations in Algeria.

It is in this context that Mokeddem argues that exile is the only rational answer for women to survive and resist sociopolitical oppression. In *Of Dreams and Assassins*, Kenna, and through her Mokeddem, says of the ‘disappeared’ childhood friend Alilou, that he must have “Fled in the face of independent Algeria’s barbarity, which, little by little, darkened men’s minds. [...] And in this drama

of ashes and blood, the most abominable violence is the destruction of hope. It is the failure of thought that makes women who succeed in getting an education exiles in their country, as in their society. That's what exile is! For the latter, to cross borders, to put the biggest distance between themselves and a country that refuses them freedom is a release." (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 pp. 43-44)

Exile, Education, Love and France

As Edward Said asserts, exile can be "actual/metaphoric" or "voluntary/involuntary". (Said, 1994, p. 39). We see that physical violence is not the only reason for exile, but more subtle reasons can cause exile as well. This is the case of intellectuals living outside their own country for education or research. Exile, according to Said (1994), is fundamentally tied to the notion of the intellectual because exile serves as a political action to separate intellectuals from those who give in to the to the authorities. Said calls them "the nay-sayers, the individuals at odds with their society and therefore outsiders and exiles in so far as privileges, power, and honors are concerned." (Said, 1994, p. 39). Mokeddem takes up this idea in her life and her writing. She eventually settled in Montpellier, France saying that she 'was suffocating' and that 'she had to leave' Algeria 'in order to raise her voice' in an interview in the newspaper *L'Humanité* in 1994 (qtd in Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. ix). The heroines of her novels are wandering Others in their own land and their host countries, for example Sultana in *The Forbidden Woman* and Kenza in *Of Dreams and Assassins*.

Two major areas of alienation emerge in Mokeddem's works – women are othered and therefore (self-) exiled through knowledge/ education and from their family and lovers. In

Mokeddem's novels, women become the Other and exiles as an act of feminist resistance. Mokeddem explores this theme with finesse through the character of Kenza, the protagonist of the novel *Of Dreams and Assassins*.

Self-exile and Education

"School- the only glimpse of another world. Learn the language of the other, first step towards originality. Toward a deeper and greater solitude." (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. 14). Kenza first moves away from her home by boarding at school and later by living in university housing. Later she fights to live alone in the city, even giving up a third of her salary to her family stop demands for marriage.

"When Knowledge is the first exile"- this is the title of the fifth chapter of this novel. In an interview, Mokeddem underlines the complex relationship between exile and education in her life: "knowledge was my first exile . . . exile for a nomad occurs when he has been excluded from his tribe, that's all" ("James Dean Le Sueur Interviews" qtd in Kistnareddy, 2023, p. 219). As a child and adolescent, French language, books and knowledge become Kenza's escape and weapons to combat misogyny. It creates a protective wall between her and her father and half-brothers who seek to restrict her at every turn. Later with other university students Kenza becomes a part of the group of intellectuals who are critical of the authoritarian state and religious extremists, and therefore under threat from both. She wanders from city to town with her friends, seeking refuge from surveillance and control, in a state of nomadic exile in her own country. Even this does not make her feel secure in the face of harassment and threat as an intellectual and as a woman, rather it is fear that drives her. For Mokeddem and for Kenza, the only solution is

to “go over”, cross the Mediterranean to France. Her friend Selma echoes her sentiments when she says “What is this country saving for women?” (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. 52).

Self-exile and Love

Malika Mokeddem says that “In Muslim societies, the individual does not exist: he exists only as a member of a tribe, he does not have the right to take the initiative. When it is a girl who takes the initiative to say 'I,' to affirm herself, to be free, it is even more dramatic” (qtd in Chaulet-Achour, 1998, p. 178).

The young Kenza is disgusted by father’s promiscuous nature. She has no memory of her mother and is alienated from her step-mother and hostile half-brothers. She thus to distance herself from her family, physically, by living at school and psychologically, by closing herself off from anything to do with her father and his family. This causes her to miss her half-brother Lamine’s attempts to befriend her. Even upon understanding that the sensitive Lamine, like her, is troubled by their familial situation, she expresses her resistance to forming a connection with him, “The nausea I experienced from just hearing the word “family” had separated us since our youngest age.” (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. 20). The young Kenza isolates herself from the society around her in study, indifference and laughter.

“Algeria has produced so many orphan girls with parents.” Mokeddem explains the price that post-colonial Algerian women have paid for personal freedom, that is alienation from their families in the face of societal pressure.

Cracks appear in her armour of indifference and self-exile from family and society with her relationship with her half-brother Lamine and her romance with Yacef. Her relationship with Yacef ends in failure when Yacef marries his

‘virgin’ cousin under familial pressure. Speaking of the misogyny and betrayal of Algerian men, Kenza acknowledges that in Algeria ‘no woman is spared. Not even the best off among us, the students!’”. Her reaction to this betrayal is a rejection of not of love itself, but of giving herself to an particular lover. She rebuilds her mental walls: “Moan for months? No. I don’t want to. Can’t. My pride wounded, I rebelled against and cut off my feelings. The pain of self-mutilation is so violent that it had gotten rid of the earlier one.” (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. 50). Kenza express the impossibility of connecting with others in an atmosphere of suspicion and fear in Algeria, “We are states of solitude condemned to uncertainty.” (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. 50). This leads her to take the final step of exiling herself to France, in an attempt to find out about her mother’s life in exile in France.

Exile and France

At first, she is filled with hope that Montpellier will offer freedom from her past and she describes it as “Solitude in a state of freedom.” (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. 69). However, as soon as she visits the places where the Algerians have settled, the city begins to mirror the situation back in Algeria. It is also the place of her mother’s tragic demise. The same patterns are recreated here, political cleavages with death threats to intellectuals, hostile and lustful male gazes she begins to fear.

For Mokeddem, exile in France is intricately linked to the image of the Mediterranean Sea that bridges the North (Europe) “up there” and the South (Maghreb) “down there” as a liminal and hybrid space in the Algerian psyche, that not offers escape but also permanently connects two cultures. The Mediterranean Sea which seemed to evoke endless freedom on the voyage

to France now reminds Kenza of the Algerian desert of her childhood that while boundless, imprisons. The protagonist is pulled in both directions, by her connection to Algeria, the desert, her friends, political concerns, concern for Algerian women and also by her need to distance herself as a sign of resistance. She wonders if the sea “will ever manage to heal me of Algerian traumatisms?” (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. 119). The sea is not calm; it reflects her inner turmoil and Algeria’s discontent. Kenza says that it “carries me away toward other white lands. Far from everything.” (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. 119). She finds solace only in ‘metisé’ (hybrid) encounters, such as her encounter with the half Algerian and half Malian teenager, Slim in Montpellier whose acceptance of his problematic racial and cultural identity inspires her with hope. Not wanting to repeat painful patterns of her Algerian past, Kenza opts for a permanent nomadic exile, with her resolution to visit ‘other white lands’ like Canada. At the end, Kenza seems to accept that not putting down roots would be the only way to not ‘re-live Algeria’.

Conclusion

Edward Said defines exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and the true home” (Said, 2000, p. 173). “exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past,” thereby feeling “an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives” (Said, 2000, p. 177). In *Of Dreams and Assassins*, we see the Algerian woman, the Other in her own country, reconstructing herself through self-exile, both metaphoric and physical. This is a conscious, willful strategy of survival and protest on the part of the postcolonial Algerian woman in a time of extreme threat and misogyny. Rather

seeing this as ‘giving up’, for Sara Ahmed (2014) willfulness is empowerment as “willful subjects” fight for their ideals and individual freedom. It is embracing dissent as a mode of living and fighting against imposed values and structures. According to Mokeddem, for the Algerian woman, who was denied participation in the public sphere in post-independence period, one recourse is willful exile and distancing, especially in response to the Black Decade. The dreams of Algerian women, in the face of assassins can only find expression in far-off lands, where, as Kenza puts it “there’s no danger of fundamentalism catching up with me” (Mokeddem, tr. Marcus, 2000 p. 54).

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