



**The Symbolic of Women in the Algerian Cultural Heritage as Represented in Malika Mokeddem's L'interdite (1993) and La nuit de la lézarde(1998)**

**La Symbolique de la femme dans l'héritage culturel Algérien tel que représenté par Malika Mokeddem dans L'interdite (1993) et La nuit de la lézarde(1998)**

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**Abstract:**This article investigates the symbolic of women in Algerian cultural heritage as represented by Algerian novelist Malika Mokeddem in her L'interdite (1993) and La nuit de la lézarde(1998). It aims to study the ways into which Mokeddem depicts her females not as victims but as rebels against the patriarchal cultural codes imposed by the Islamist upsurge of the 'Black Decade', that is Algeria of the 1990s. We will demonstrate that through reading and breaking the cultural fundamentalist code of marriage, Mokeddem's female characters overcome their subjugation in the conflicting political and cultural situation in Algeria of the 1990s. It will be shown that the novelist created her female characters as an allegory of her own defiance and denunciation not only of the 'retrograde' 1984 Algerian Family Code, but of the hegemonic fundamentalist rule as well.

**Keywords:** Cultural representations; Mokeddem; Algerian women; Algeria of the Black Decade ; Defiance; Empowerment.

**Résumé:** Cet article explore la représentation de la femme algérienne en tant que symbole culturel dans les deux œuvres de l'écrivaine Algérienne Malika Mokeddem notamment L'interdite (1993) et La nuit de la lézarde(1998). Le but est de montrer que Malika Mokeddem ne décrit pas ses personnages féminins comme victimes mais plutôt comme des rebelles contre une culture patriarcale imposée par l'intégrisme Islamiste pendant la décennie noire en Algérie. Cet article démontre aussi qu'à l'image de sa propre expérience, Malika Mokeddem a crée des personnages féminins

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qui défient et qui dénoncent la subjugation des femmes par le code de la famille de 1984 et des lois fondamentalistes des années 90.

**Mots clés :** Malika Mokeddem ; Représentation culturelle ; Décennie noire ; Femmes-Algériennes ; *L'interdite* ; *La nuit de la lézarde*.

Malika Mokeddem committed herself to write about Algeria of the Black Decade from a feminist stand point. Her literature voices the harsh patriarchal dictum exerted on women by the Islamist fundamentalists in Algeria. More than that, Mokeddem's novels represent empowered and defiant women who go beyond their emotional trauma and physical illness and challenge their fate through reading, escape to open spaces and the re-appropriation of the public sphere.

One of the most interesting pieces of literature which I came across is Jane Elizabeth Evans thesis entitled *Tactical Silence in the Novels of Malika Mokeddem* (2001). In this thesis, Evans examined many subjects in the novels of the author throughout different angles. As far as *La Nuit de la Lézarde* is concerned, Evans argues that in this novel, "Mokeddem presents a new form of writing. Even though it shares many themes and issues with her former novels, but in this one she presents a calmer subject, far from denouncing the crimes of the religious fanatics in Algeria during that period."<sup>1</sup>

The same critic Adds: "unlike Mokeddem's previous works that I have examined, *La Nuit de la Lézarde* does not focus on tactical silence as it relates to the feminine condition in Algeria, rather, it has moved beyond that point."<sup>2</sup> The novel deals with two main characters, Nour and Sassi who try to survive in an abandoned ksar in the Algerian desert. The two protagonists try to enjoy their daily life which is resumed to gardening and selling their products in the market.<sup>3</sup>

The critic focused on the role of silence, its force and impacts on the life of the two protagonists Nour and Sassi. In fact, silence is very relevant in the novel; Evans calls it "the third protagonist."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, "silence is characterized as a sinister, a heavy force



capable of razing both sky and earth” 5 Evans examines how the two protagonists are exposed to that silence, and how together, they try to fight against it by discussing to fill the emptiness and break the silence that surround them. Nour the main character of the novel falls as a victim of that deadly silence as Evans says.

In Malika Mokeddem’s *La Nuit de la Lézarde*, the protagonist Nour suffers from religious repression. She lives a difficult situation that caused her degeneration to prostitution and rejection of cultural and social norms. She challenges the patriarchal society of Algeria of the Black Decade. She has been repudiated by her husband for a childless marriage three years ago. The Islamic religion favors men to marry four times, but Nour does not accept the second marriage of her husband. She fled to the South to forget her traumatic past and to seek for her liberty. She tried to accept the role that society imposed on her but her desire for freedom was stronger. She seems rebellious and indocile. This is well illustrated in the following passage:

Nour s’était aperçue des regards et des propos tantôt intrigué, tantôt abasourdit des habitants du ksar. On l’appelait l’étrangère .On la qualifiait de rebelle, de singulière. On balançait à son égard entre crainte et respect, entre compassion et condamnation, ou diffamation... elle était une femme libre! Elle en fut la première étonnée car ce mot, liberté n’était pas dans son langage<sup>6</sup> .

Nour defies all the social norms and tries to construct a new identity as a free and independent woman far from male domination “D’abord cabrée d’indignation, Nour fini par s’installer dans ce statut de femme réfractaire comme dans une identité enfin reconnue et pacifiée”<sup>7</sup>. In a conservative society that sticks so much to religion and its values, the honor of the family depends on the good image of the daughter. To be more explicit, women should be virgin till their wedding, day and even divorced she should respect herself by not having sexual relations outside matrimony. The female protagonist Nour transgresses these norms as she does not conform neither to the principles of society nor to what is dictated in the religious principles. This is displayed with the conversation between Nour and Khadouje

Je ne t'ai jamais vue, de quelle tribu es-tu?

J'ai répliqué que je n'étais d'aucune tribu....

On ne cache sa tribu que lorsque l'on a mis son honneur en danger...

J'ai répondu sèchement : "je n'ai pas d'honneur non plus. Je ne peux pas malmener ce que je ne possède pas. Mais j'ai de l'orgueil, ça oui! Et je ne le vends pas, même pour manger!"<sup>8</sup>

Nour is rejected by the Islamic culture because she is a prostitute. She has many sexual intercourses with different man outside marriage and it is forbidden in her religion. She is viewed as a dangerous woman because she is attractive and desired by many men in the village especially Sassi her faithful friend who falls deeply in love with her. In their discussion about Nour, the two characters Oualou and L'explication affirm

- Il ya tellement de rumeurs sur Nour... Tu la trouve belle toi?

- Elle a beaucoup de charme et un sacré caractère.<sup>9</sup>

Mokeddem refers to the free sexuality of Nour in order to stress the inner desires that are resulted from the oppressive situation of individuals who seek to transgress the laws of the Fundamentalists. As Nour Mokeddem, lived many love stories that seemed to be fruitless as she each time fails to get stability in her personal life. Mokeddem seeks refuge from the burden of her conservative society that limits her liberty. In one of her interviews, she states 'Je suis un être de transgression. Un être qui a toujours était du côté de la rébellion et jamais du côté de la soumission'<sup>10</sup>

Through her novel *La Nuit de la Lézarde*, Mokeddem implicitly explores the role of religion in society and the danger of radical Islamic extremists that threaten and oppress the Algerians. The novel is set during one of Algeria's most critical periods which is the Black decade. The Algerians tried to resist the Islamists who killed in the name of "Allah" and reject the traditions imposed by the patriarchal society.



Reports of the murders committed by fundamentalist fanatics up North reach the characters from distance. The horror of the massacres echoes them and the effects of the violence are psychological. As Sassi avowes “Seuls les échos de ses ravages nous parviennent, plus calcinant que le sirocco et dessèchent sur pied” 11. Many Algerians lost faith in Allah because of the deeds of the Jihadists known as Les combatants du Prophet. La Nuit de la Lézarde supports this idea with Sassi’s words :

La foi était la seul force des gens, fulmine Sassi, leur seul sanctuaire contre les offres et la misère ...Et maintenant, ceux que tu nommes les fréros nous tuent la croyance en Allah dans le sang de ses créatures 12

Mokeddem refers to the injustice of the Muslim fundamentalists who use religion to mask their immoral practices, vice and lack of faith. She is also, critical of the hypocrisy of people who pretend to preach Islam, but who at the same time, are disrespectful of it:

L’appel à la prière le fait sursauter. Il s’étonne de ne pas avoir entendu les rares fideles se pressant vers la mosquée quelques minutes auparavant. Personne l’ayant salué, il en déduit que ces derniers ne l’ont pas vu non plus... Selon les prescriptions religieuses, la prière de l’aube doit avoir lieu dès qu’il est possible de ‘distinguer un fil blanc d’un fil noir !’. ‘C’est l’heure ou tous les croyants sont gris. Ou, arraches de leurre de la nuit. Leurs rêves virent en horreur au contact de la réalité’ ironise Sassi 13.

Moreover, the Islamic religion recommends women to be veiled, accompanied with a ‘Mehrem’ that is a male relative either father or husband whenever they are out, as they should also be obedient, submissive and faithful not only to their families but also to the Islamic ‘Sharia’.

In La nuit de la lézarde, the protagonist Nour wanders alone in Ain Enakhala desert. She remains silent and mysterious over the reasons of her escape. She never tells Sassi about her past, family and her former husband. This is what raises the curiosity of the dwellers of the Ksar question her presence in the tribe. Sassi tells her :

Tu es restée dans le Ksar, suscitant des rumeurs contradictoires et la convoitise de bien des hommes. Une femme sans mari, sans enfants, sans aucune famille et qui, de surcroit, leur affirmait qu'elle n'avait pas de même de passé...14

Sassi tries relentlessly to know about her hidden past but he never succeeds

-Tu ne veux toujours pas me parler de ton enfance, de ton mariage, de cet homme avec qui tu as vécu?

-Il n'y a rien à dire.

-Rien à dire de tout ce temps.

-Non rien.15

It is noticeable that Nour suffers all along the novel, as she cannot express it because she is unable to understand what happens for her. In this sense Freud states" they (patients) feel ill from not being able to consciously recall and work through the trauma or traumas of their past"16. Nour all the time, complains from chest pain and she associates it to the massacres that took place in the North.

Depuis quelques temps, par moment ma poitrine me serre et la tête me tourne.

voilà ce que c'est de se laisser emballer les viscères à ce point. Ce n'est pas ça. C'est cette sauvagerie...17

Mokeddem refers to the impact of the radical Islamist repression on people's freedom and their psychological state mainly women and young people. This is evident with doctor Zeineb's confession to Nour about her niece who tells her about what she has learnt at school:

Tata, tu dors dans des draps fleuris, c'est péché ! ... Je me suis assise sur mon oreiller C'est péché ?! Qui t'a mis ça dans la tête ? Toujours d'un ton sentencieux, elle m'a rétorqué : ' la maitresse dit que c'est péché pour une femme de dormir dans des draps avec des fleurs dessus! ' Vous vous rendez compte ? Elle a huit ans. Elle fait partie des privilégiés. 18



Zeineb replied to her niece ‘...ce qui devrait être péché, c’est qu’à quarante ans je dors seule, sans homme, sans amour... et selon toi, je n’ai même pas le droit d’avoir des fleurs imprimées sur mes draps ?’<sup>19</sup>

For the Islamic religion, it is a sin for women to live alone without a harem or a male guardian but it is not the case for Zeineb who is living alone. Furthermore, we may notice that people received a false interpretation of religion by the Islamists who issued Fatwa’s that aims to restrict and deprave their thinking. Those Islamists proclaim themselves to be clean and faithful by showing their loyalty to religion while committing all what is forbidden to do. Zeineb goes further to say “Le pire reste à craindre, quand l’école se met à former des censeurs”<sup>20</sup> .making reference to the corrupted educational system and the oppression that the youth endure to corrupt their thinking.

We may say that Mokeddem’s protagonist Nour is her mouthpiece as she herself rejected the social codes and the traditional norms. Mokeddem was rejected by her family especially her father, since she transgresses and rebels against the social conventions of her society as being the first girl of her village to attend school and to further her studies.

In the introductory section of Malika Mokedeme’s third novel *L’Interdite*: (Grasset,1993), Dr.Salah Akli, , the best friend of the recently deceased Dr.Yacine Meziane , inquires of Dr.Sultana Medjahed , Yacine ‘s former lover :” How should we interpret your silences?” She replies:”As answers, as open or closed defenses, it depends” .This verbal exchange provides insight into Soltana’s manipulative use of language. She and the other female protagonists in the novel choose silence over speech in order to defy the patriarchal discourse of the 1980s and 1990, create a protected “space” in which to explore their memories and ideas , and furnish themselves with a domain in which to yield to their emotions.

Sultana returns to her native region Ain Anakhla following an absence of fifteen years in order to attend her friend Yacine Meziane’s funerale . Her renewed contact with the place shocks her once again because of the discrepancy in the treatment of men and women; its

masculine plural and its injustice towards women . The taxi driver whom Sultana encounters epitomizes the attitude that women, as men's dependents, should be neither seen nor heard in public. He persists in asking her whose daughter she is and why she has come to Ain Nekhla. Sultana thinks of his meddling in the following terms:

Je n'ai rien oublié. Ni cette curiosité qui cingle. Ni cette ingérence qui s'arroge tous les droits. Quand l'inquisition est érigée en civilité, les questions sont des sommations et se taire devient un aveu d'infamie<sup>21</sup>

Sultana does not fully answer the taxi driver's questions. She rather utters only one sentence: " I am no one's daughter, going nowhere" . She remains resistant even when he aggressively says: " Since you refuse to speak, you should be wearing the veil"<sup>22</sup> . She has found the way to escape her fate, she has emerged victorious. Through Sultana, Mokeddem found the key to making the female dominate the situation and fulfill her assigned role as protagonist. Once in Ain Anakhla, Sultana is confronted again to another male, Dr. Salah Akli, who though literate, questions her return to attend the funerals of her friend Yacine. She also quickly becomes the subject for discussion to the other women in Ain Anakhla who find it abnormal to see Sultana, a female like them, coming alone without husband or children.

When she starts exercising as a physician in Ain Anakhla, she realizes that most of her female patients are unable to describe their physical and psychological discomfort which attests of their subjection in a male dominated society. As a physician, this is what she diagnoses the following:

Acute distress, an inflammation of the soul and the being of a young woman of sixteen years old who is newly married, Chronic physical discomfort, a mute and gangrenous cry from a prolific mother about the daily toil; a lot of children and the husband still will not hear of contraception:

Une koulchite aigue, une inflammation de l'âme et de l'être chez une jeune femme de seize ans. Elle vient de se marier ; une koulchite chronique, cri muet et gangrène du quotidien chez une mère prolifique





; onze enfants et le mari ne veut toujours pas entendre de contraception.<sup>23</sup>

What Sultana diagnoses and then tries to heal is the outcome of an imposed patriarchal order imposed on women by traditions and perpetuated by the Islamist upsurge in Algeria of the Black Decade.

Patriarchal societies, of which Ain Anakhla is an example, distinguish the public arena from the private. In the public sphere, power relations involved male household-heads that is the patriarch. This arrangement left no basis for collective action by women "24. In contemporary Muslim societies, family laws derive from the code of personal conduct or the 'Shari'a' contained in the Quran , as well as pre-Islamic Patriarchal customs. In the case of Algeria, the conservative family code adopted by the government in 1984 has been detrimental to women in that it "strengthened the legal rights of husbands, retained unequal inheritance between women and men, legalized polygamy , and reconfirmed the principal of matrimonial guardianship." 25. Moghadam calls the current subordination of women to men through legislation 'neo-patriarchy'. According to him whatever concession neo-patriarchal Algeria may have made in terms of urbanization , industrialization , and improved education , its infrastructure remains rooted in the patriarchal values and social relation of kinship, clan, religious and ethnic groups<sup>26</sup>. Through the symbolic representation of her protagonist Sultana as a doctor or physician, Mokeddem empowers her women and endows them not only with the capacity of defiance, but she also gives them agency to heal their own trauma and ills

It follows from the above analysis of the symbolic of women in the Algerian Cultural Heritage as represented in Malika Mokeddem's *L'interdite* (1993) and *La nuit de la lezarde* (1998). In both novels, the novelist gives agency to Algerian women besieged by a patriarchal system whose main ideology was to govern Algeria not through democracy but rather through Islamic law 'Shari'a'. Their aim was to plunge Algeria in an absolute obscurantism by ordering the population to stick to the religious values and to maintain the traditional way of life. In doing this, any attempt to modernity and progression is banned.

While this system issued 'fatwas' that targeted women to be locked in the domestic sphere and not to appear in public unless veiled, Mokeddem symbolically re-appropriates the public sphere to her protagonists in both novels . Her main concern is the Black Decade, which was a stage of suffering and violence imposed upon the population who lived under fear and oppression of the daily terrorist massacres. However, thousands of Algerians mainly intellectuals, including men and women writers, opted for life in exile. It is the case of Malika Mokeddem who was exiled to France because her writings depict the ills of independent Algeria. In this regard, Kamel Igoudjil in his book *Post colonial Algerian Writers in French* declares:

During the Algerian civil war between 1991-1999, a new Feminine literature emerged in the literary space called "the literature of urgency" the rise of female Algerian literature at that time was due to the fact that women had been condemned before and during the civil war. Women were the specific target of Islamism; therefore Algerian women novelists took up the pen not only to testify to the horrors of "unrest". But also to condemn the physical violence exerted against women, and particularly, to reclaim the public space from which religious fundamentalism wanted them to be excluded.<sup>23</sup>

Mokeddem lived as an exiled nomad just like her protagonist Sultana in *L'interdite* and Nour in *La nuit de la lézarde* and this gave her the liberty to write. Through reading and escape, her female protagonists are empowered in their daily quest for salvation in a nomadic southern patriarchal environment that seeks to nullify their existence.

End Notes:

- 1- Evans, Jane Elizabeth, "Tactical Silence in the novels of Malika Mokeddem". The University of New Mexico,(2001),86.
- 2-Ibid.,87.
- 3-Ibid.,88.
- 4-Ibid.



- 5-Ibid.,90.
- 6-Mokeddem, Malika, La Nuit de la Lezarde. Paris : Grasset, 1998,16.
- 7 -Ibid : 152.
- 8-Ibid : 142.
- 9-Mokeddem, Malika, La Nuit de la Lezarde. Paris : Grasset, 1998,36-37.
- 10-Ibid : 36.
- 11-Ibid:50.
- 12-Ibid 139.
- 13-Mokeddem, Malika, La Nuit de la Lezarde. Paris : Grasset, 1998,41.
- 14-Ibid: 37.
- 15-Ibid : 55.
- 16- Smith, Evans. Freud Complete works: 1890-1939.published in 2000,2007,2010. Accessed on September 22nd, 2022 available on : [http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud\\_Complete\\_Works.pdf](http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud_Complete_Works.pdf).
- 17-Mokeddem, Malika, La Nuit de la Lezarde. Paris : Grasset, 1998,44.
- 18-Ibid 154.
- 19-Ibid
- 20-Ibid:155.
- 21-Moghadem, Valentine. Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Changes in the Middle East. Boulder: Lynne Rienner,1993,107.
- 22- Ibid: 112.
- 23-Igoudjil, Kamel: PostColonial Algerian Writers in French: Language as representation and Resistance Viewed on December 25th ,2015. Available on : [http://www.academia.edu/7962576/Postcolonial\\_Algerian\\_Writers\\_in\\_French\\_Language\\_as\\_Representation\\_and\\_Resistance](http://www.academia.edu/7962576/Postcolonial_Algerian_Writers_in_French_Language_as_Representation_and_Resistance)

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