Le siècle des sauterelles

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January 2005

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The Fairy Tale Element in Malika Mokeddem's Le Siècle des sauterelles

Artists say that the right picture frame enhances the contents of their paintings, whereas the wrong frame can detract from their tableaux. Poets equally claim that the titles of their poems are really the first lines, framing what follows. In the case of expatriate Algerian author Malika Mokeddem, whose fictional and autobiographical works have appeared at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, narrative framing predominates in her second novel, Le Siècle des sauterelles (1992). Instead of observing a one-to-one correspondence between the 'real' order of the events that are being told and the order of the narrative, Mokeddem relies on the "explanatory flashback" (Richardson 25-26) in order to convey information about her characters' earlier lives.

Diegetic or narrative shifts underscore the fairy-tale elements of Mahmoud the Poet's young adulthood, as well as his daughter Yasmine's non-magical childhood. Essentially, Yasmine's "story" is a postmodern version of her father's in that it defies the fairy-tale mode as well as the conventions of colonial Algeria in the 1920s and 30s. The limits of Mahmoud's existence as fairy tale and the continued subversion of this genre by the portrayal of Yasmine's mode of life provide the focal points of my discussion. The way that Le Siècle des sauterelles refers to other texts through intertextuality (Wilson 4-5) further supports my subject.

As Le Siècle des sauterelles opens, Nedjma, a beautiful black nomadic woman and Mahmoud's wife, is tending the fire in front of their tent as her infant son sleeps and her six-year-old daughter Yasmine plays nearby. Nedjma's thoughts turn to Mahmoud, who has spent the day in a neighboring village and should be returning home soon. As Nedjma's eyes scan the distance, she sees what she believes is her husband, but she is mistaken: there are two riders instead of one. The imminent arrival of strangers shatters the peaceful scene. We as readers

share Nedjma's apprehension as the impending unknown rapidly overtakes the present moment. The intruders' initial civility towards their hostess gives way to cruelty. The larger man calls Nedjma a slave because of her blackness, attempts to rape her, and then kills her when she fights back. His companion watches with complicity. Yasmine, hidden behind a pile of rocks, has witnessed her mother's brutal murder and has become mute as a result.

Upon his return, Mahmoud discovers his dead wife, traumatized daughter, and feverish infant son. He holds Yasmine in his arms as he reminisces about his earlier life and subsequent marriage to Nedjma. The events that he remembers, told by a third person narrator, comprise chapters two through five, or the first half of Le Siècle des sauterelles, with only occasional returns to the present. The recent upheaval in Mahmoud's life renders his memories all the more poignant. This narrative and temporal shift from present to past also provides a necessary respite from the novel's opening atrocities. Mahmoud's account is metadiegetic, that is, it is contained within the main diegesis, or story line.

As we follow the thread of Mahmoud's past, we are struck by the unusually charmed quality of his experiences. He left Algeria to attend the university in 1920s Egypt in order to pursue a secular career as a poet, rather than a religious one as a holy man. Moreover, both his father and mother approved of his departure. The latter parent defied tradition herself by refusing to marry her brother-in-law or rejoin her clan once Mahmoud's father had died.

When Mahmoud has completed his studies, he arrives home to find his mother is deceased. She has left him a letter from his late father written many years ago. The letter instructs Mahmoud to journey to the lands formerly belonging to his father's family, to unearth his grandmother's remains, and to carry them to more recent family property in Labiod-Sid-Cheikh to be re-interred. Mahmoud sets off immediately.

At this point, Mahmoud's life takes on fairy -tale characteristics: he is a young man on a specific quest, unstoppable in his filial duty. In this way, his actions illustrate the «functions» elaborated in Vladimir Propp's analysis of the folktale (21). According to Propp, the first function common to all folktales and fairy tales is that the protagonist is sent on a quest (26). Appropriately, Mahmoud considers the country that he traverses to be « des lieux féeriques étrangers», or strange, magical places, and his driving force to be supernatural (36). The several additional challenges that await him, besides, add to our impression that he could be a fairy-tale hero.

Mahmoud learns that the Sirvents, a French family, now own the land that had formerly belonged to his relatives. Receiving permission from the Sirvents to dig up his relative's bones, Mahmoud does so. He then addresses his grandmother's remains aloud and imagines her life. He chases away a curious elderly female member of the Sirvent family so that he can be completely alone. The image of a dismounted horseman who laments the loss of a loved one recalls the Arabic poetic genre of the *qasidab*. In this type of poem, the speaker is a rider who returns to the site of a previous encampment, gets off his horse, and expounds on what the place no longer offers him.

This image, as part of Mahmoud's remembrances, reconnects the reader to the present picture of the protagonist comforting his daughter Yasmine at their ruined campsite. With his wife and son newly buried, Mahmoud figures as the main character in yet another unspoken *qasidab*: he reflects on his previous life rather than tell his daughter Yasmine about it. The repeated image of Mahmoud's lamentation from one narrative level to another (metadiegetic to diegetic) draws our attention once again to the narrative frame, the present moment, grievous to both Mahmoud and Yasmine.

Mahmoud's further recollections include the vision of a "happily ever after" ending: he dreams of marrying and having a daughter (59, 93). His avowal causes us, the readers, conditioned by the wish fulfillment of other magical tales, to look for other fairy tale tests that Mahmoud must confront. We find them in a series of odd coincidences: Mahmoud is wrongly accused of having set fire to the Sirvents house. He escapes before the police can find him, but takes time to assist a man in danger for his life. This kind gesture backfires, however, because the man that Mahmoud has saved follows Mahmoud everywhere in order to protect him. This "protector", known as El-Majnoun, or the Demented One, manages to free Mahmoud from prison following the latter's capture by the police. He also shelters Mahmoud during the deluge of grasshoppers that pummels the region.

Unlike the fairy tale hero who outwits a series of challenges in order to earn the woman that he loves, Mahmoud does not complete his requisite tasks. He neither reaches the town where his ancestor's remains will be laid to rest nor confronts El-Majnoun directly to be rid of him. Instead, he uses stealth to elude his deranged "protector". In addition, Mahmoud's discomfort in bad weather sets him apart from the typical fairy tale protagonist who remains undeterred in his quest. Under teeming rain, Mahmoud finds shelter from the elements in the hut of a nameless, beautiful black woman, whom he calls "Nedjma," or "Star" (127). Here, Mahmoud is warm, protected, and physically attracted to his hostess. Better yet, she reciprocates his feelings. They thus decide to leave the village in pursuit of a nomadic life as husband and wife.

Despite the tenderness of Mahmoud and Nedjma's love scene, we readers acquainted with the traditional fairy-tale format harbor misgivings about this turn of events. Since Mahmoud has assumed his "happily ever after" ending prematurely, we sense that his hasty

actions will bring suffering to him and his spouse. In fact, our foreboding has already been confirmed by Nedjma's murder in the opening pages of Le Siècle des sauterelles.

Not only does Mahmoud interrupt his responsibilities to experience love, he analyzes his feelings at every step of his quest. For example, after escaping from El-Majnoun, Mahmoud goes on at length about his desire to restructure his life, away from any danger: "Il me faut retrouver le seul territoire salutaire, mon seul refuge, l'écriture. Il me faut le transporter hors d'atteinte du hasard…" 'I need to find again the only healthy territory [for me], my only refuge, writing. I need to transport it out of the reach of chance…' [All translations are mine.] (113). Mahmoud's preoccupations with his future contrast sharply with the single-mindedness of the typical folkloric hero on a quest.

Mahmoud similarly contemplates being sheltered in Nedjma's hut in the following terms: "'Quel bonheur que d'être là, sous la protection de cette femme. Quel bonheur d'être seul avec elle. D'où me vient cette merveilleuse sensation d'avoir enfin atteint mon but?'"(118). "'What happiness to be here, under the protection of this woman. What happiness to be alone with her. Where is this marvelous feeling of having finally attained my goal coming from?'" Once again, we are aware of the novel's framed narration: Mahmoud's personal recollections, told in third-person, underpin the third-person account pertaining to the present.

The tendency to analyze his every move sets Mahmoud apart from the traditional fairy tale protagonist (Harries 12), who is "programmed" to pass all his tests without much soul-searching before living "happily ever after." We need only consider the plot summary of two eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fairy tales, respectively, to know that this is true. In "The Three Feathers," by the Brothers Grimm, a king sends his three sons out to perform three tests before deciding that the least intelligent but most willing one, Dummling, will inherit his

kingdom at his death (Franz 33-35). In the case of Jeanne-Marie de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast," Beauty agrees to leave her father's house and become Beast's wife. She feels that it is her responsibility to make amends since it was at her request that her father took a rose from the Beast's garden and was caught. (Ashilman, "Beauty"). By contrast, the account of Mahmoud's past denotes a "literary meta-fairy tale" at best because the protagonist takes a wife before completing his familial duties towards his paternal grandmother; further, the characterization of Mahmoud as a self-indulgent thinker makes him unsuitable as a true fairy-tale hero (Wilson 31).

Both Mahmoud's meta-fairy-tale past and Nedjma's murder frame the second half of Le Siècle des sauterelles, as the story continues into the future. Yasmine's muteness is also a constant reminder of what she and her father have suffered. We realize that in a fairy-tale context, Yasmine's muteness would probably be cured by the Prince Charming, as in "La Belle au bois dormant" 'The Sleeping Beauty' by Perrault, and "Little Snow-White" by the Brothers Grimm, in which the heroines are awakened once the prince has arrived. This cure, however, is not to be had in Le Siècle des sauterelles, whose seventh through eleventh chapters take a realistic turn in focusing on Yasmine.

In the ensuing years since her mother's death, Yasmine's handicap has sharpened rather than compromised her intellect. First of all, Mahmoud has taught her to read and write in Arabic to express her thoughts. This is a skill unheard of for an Arab woman in 1930s colonial Algeria. At that time, only six percent of girls received an elementary school education. The vast majority remained at home to learn domestic tasks and to be married, at the onset of puberty, to a member of their clan (Messaoudi 61). Mahmoud has also told his daughter many legends, folktales, and personal stories to stimulate her imagination (156-58). He has even dressed her in men's clothing as they cross the desert in order to keep her femaleness a secret (166).

As a result of her father's encouragement, Yasmine has developed a mind of her own. She is proud of her resemblance to Isabelle Eberhardt, the foreign writer who immigrated to Algeria and also dressed in men's clothing (Abdel-Jaouad 93). As a mixed race child, Yasmine often feels like an outsider. Like her idol Isabelle, Yasmine decides to become a writer, too. This is an example of intertextuality, in which one text mentions another (Wilson 4-5). Not only has Yasmine compared herself physically to Eberhardt, but she foresees that her future writings will also be comparable to the latter's journals and stories.

It is intertextuality rather than framing, as in Mahmoud's case, that drives Yasmine's story forward. When her father leaves her with the Hamani clan so that he can finally pursue his late wife's murderers, he instructs Yasmine to record the stories and poems that she has heard. Yasmine exceeds her father's orders by revising and rewriting her favorite stories, such as "La Fille de la chienne" "The Girl belonging to the Dog" (227). She inserts her mother into the narration and makes it a tale of vengeance rather than the account of her parents' first encounter. She even plans to collaborate on a collection of poetry and stories with Mahmoud when he returns.

Ironically, the female members of the Hamani clan consider Yasmine to be a supernatural, dangerous presence. Since they are illiterate, they mistrust her writings and perceive of her as an evil spirit capable of casting a spell on them. For them, her mother's murder confirms Yasmine's dubious nature. Yasmine's worst fault of all, though, is that she has bewitched a suitor and refused to marry him.

Sensing the dissatisfaction of those around her, Yasmine fills her writings with the traditions that "mutilate" Arab women from a very young age on, and the masochism with which the same women perpetuate their abusive living conditions (256). We understand that with her

observations grounded in the reality around her, Yasmine will never be drawn to marriage, the so-called "happy ending" for young Algerian women; nor will any "magical" being or force, other than her own determination, break the "spell" of her muteness.

In selecting a limited number of fairy tale elements for her characters in Le Siècle des sauterelles, such as Mahmoud's quest, his wish to live happily ever after, Nedjma's bewitching beauty, and Yasmine's lack of speech, Malika Mokeddem takes her place among postmodern authors who rework the fairy-tale genre for their own purposes. According to scholar Donald Haase, "women have - for three hundred years at least – quite intentionally used the fairy tale to engage questions of gender and to create tales spoken or written differently from those told or penned by men" (viii-ix). Cristina Bacchilega concurs with Haase that fairy tales have provided "creative writers" with "well known material pliable to political, erotic, or narrative manipulation" (3).

Mokeddem's criticism of the general lawlessness in Algeria under French colonial rule overshadows the magical aspects of Mahmoud's young adulthood in the novel. El-Majnoun, the Demented One, has been both marauding and murdering with impunity for a long time. Mahmoud, a wrongly accused fugitive from the law has this to say as he sets out with his daughter: "Que faire puisque je ne peux avoir recours à la justice? Et d'ailleurs, qu'attendre de lois coloniales, elles-mêmes entachées des pires iniquités?" (146) 'What should I do since I have no recourse to justice? And besides, what can I expect from colonial laws, so corrupted themselves by the worst evils?' In addition to being virtually lawless, the 1930s, marking a century of French colonization, are also a period of racism and misogyny, as illustrated by Nedjma's death, taunts against Yasmine's mixed race, and Yasmine's oral and written protests against women's hardships.

Elizabeth Harries explains the kinds of modifications that fairy tales have exhibited at the hands of late twentieth-century women writers in particular, including several narrative voices, frame narratives, and intertextuality (5, 32). The use of framing and intertextuality are not new, however. The former technique dates from the Thousand and One Nights, first recorded in Arabic in the 14th century, in which Scheherazade's stories are made more complex by the other tales that they contain (Zipes 14). The latter technique can be seen in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the French *conteuses* or female fairy storytellers referred to their own works from one fairy tale to another, and mentioned each other's works besides (Harries 17, 32).

As in the Thousand and One Nights, narrative framing in Le Siècle des sauterelles complicates the story line emotionally, culturally, and historically. Through Mahmoud's memories, framed by the present and future events that he and Yasmine experience, we learn much about Mahmoud's psychology and the socio-historical conditions of nomadic life under French colonialism in the early twentieth century. We also have a means to understand Nedjma's previous life as a slave: her husband's flashback allows her presence in the novel to linger after her death. Additionally, Mahmoud's memories of Nedjma as well as his recitation in honor of his grandmother's bones illustrate the *qasidab*, or Arabic poetic form.

Intertextuality in Le Siècle des sauterelles goes hand in hand with the development of Yasmine's character. From learning to read and write under Mahmoud's tutelage, to rereading and rewriting her favorite poems and stories, including "The Girl belonging to the Dog" (227), Yasmine questions Algerian women's living conditions and social conventions. Her fascination with stories about legendary author Isabelle Eberhardt adds to Yasmine's desire to write polemically. As a result of this process, she arrives at a definition for her own life that eschews female submission through marriage and motherhood.

According to critic Sharon Rose Wilson, "'[Intertextuality is] the continual play of referentiality between and within texts. This means that intertextualilty …defines a text as always in process, continually changing its shape'" (4, O'Donnell and Davis ix-x). In this light, not only do Yasmine's literary efforts refer to other texts, Le Siècle des sauterelles itself exceeds its narrative bounds because of its intertextuality.

No true ending closes the novel. Instead, when Yasmine hears that her father has died in his pursuit of El-Majnoun, she leaves by train, accompanied by a male friend. In the last few pages of the Le Siècle des sauterelles, the third-person narrator loses his omniscience. He begins seven out of the final ten paragraphs with "On dit que…" and "On murmure que…" "People say that…" and "People whisper that…" (276-79). The narrator's lack of definitive facts concerning Yasmine's fate contrasts sharply with his previous informed remarks about the characters in the novel. This unexpected turn catches the reader by surprise: it is as if Malika Mokeddem is reasserting herself as the author of Le Siècle des sauterelles, thereby reminding her readership that **she** manipulates the narrator.

With its non-closure, Le Siècle des sauterelles echoes other postmodern literary works whose endings are not conclusive, such as Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel, L'Enfant de sable, making it a statement on the writing process. Le Siècle des sauterelles defies classical narrative **and** fairy tale conventions as it spins off fantastically into the unknown. Moreover, we cannot help but notice that Mokeddem, an exiled writer and physician who has lived in France since 1977 (Mes hommes 89), ends her novel with a feminist, rather personal image: Yasmine, whose life (like the author's) has defied societal norms, is making her way through the desert. Mokeddem thus leaves the reader with the picture of the unconventional Algerian woman who

not only questions traditions, but seeks her own satisfaction beyond the restrictive cultural parameters of marriage and motherhood upheld by the patriarchal society of 1930s Algeria.

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