

Accommodating Arabic: A Look at Malika Mokeddem's Fiction

Réda Bensmaïa relies on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization to discuss not only the physical uprooting of Algerians in the wake of independence, but also the nature of postcolonial literature and even of language usage itself. Bensmaïa points out that a vehicular language used for writing in Algeria (Arabic, French or English) implies a linguistic reterritorialization of that language because there are constant ties to an oral and written referential language through songs, proverbs, and sayings (16-17).

In the case of contemporary Algerian author Malika Mokeddem, French, her vehicular language for writing, has been reterritorialized, that is, made to accommodate her cultural backgrounds. She has stated that as a child in pre-independence French schools, the French language colonized her, but that now it is up to her to colonize it, "... pour y être nomade et, au gré de mes envies, lui imprimer la lenteur, la flamboyance des contes de l'oralité, l'incruster de mots arabes dont je ne peux pas me passer" (Noûn 183). This paper seeks to explore the ways in which Arabic, absent from Mokeddem's fiction at first glance, has indeed "colonized" her French. The subtleties of her characterization, tournures de phrase, and literary genres all reveal her Arab heritage. In addition to Réda Bensmaïa's terminology, critical works by Hédi Abdel-Jaouad and Lisa Lowe will underpin my analysis.

In Mokeddem's first two novels, Les Hommes qui marchent and Le siècle des sauterelles, the nomad predominates. The former novel includes stories told by Zohra, an ex-nomad septuagenarian. Called the lady «aux tatouages sombres» many times throughout the novel, Zohra appears readily in the reader's imagination. Her favorite

pastime is to recount tales concerning her unconventional family members and the “caravanes” (12) to which she belonged as a young woman. Storytelling becomes a way for her to continue a “nomadism of words” (11), despite her sedentary lifestyle. Zohra’s granddaughter Leïla is her favorite listener who shares her grandmother’s passion for words, albeit written ones. Leïla, a sheltered young Muslim woman, reads incessantly as a vicarious way of seeing the world. This common interest in words enhances the strong ties between Zohra and Leïla. Their mutual appreciation is further underscored at the end of the novel when the narrator reveals that **she** is Leïla and that she has been retelling her own stories in written form to her late grandmother. The protagonist Leïla thus pays homage to her grandmother Zohra and recasts the legendary figure of the Bedouin.

In an interview, Malika Mokeddem explained that she had originally written Les Hommes qui marchent as a first-person autobiographical novel, but that she had changed it to a third-person narration in order to make it less emotionally draining (Chaulet-Achour, Noûn 176). Critic Christiane Chaulet-Achour has posited that expatriate Algerian authors such as Mokeddem are freer to experiment with literary forms [than if they were writing in classical Arabic, my emphasis] (“Autobiographies” 293). Scholar Marta Segarra has explained that women’s assuming a public voice was traditionally seen as a transgression; women’s manipulating classical Arabic was seen as a fitna, or a threat to the structure and values forming the basis of traditional patriarchal society (18).

In any case, the nomadic figure inspired by her own grandmother pervades Mokeddem’s fiction in terms of characterization and plot. Her second novel, Le siècle des sauterelles, for instance, set in Algeria in the 1940s, contains the nomad characters Mahmoud and Yasmine, a father and daughter that travel with no fixed domicile through

the desert. Mahmoud is in pursuit of his wife's assassins, nomads themselves. What makes the novel's image of the itinerant traveler even more convoluted is the fact that Yasmine is fascinated by Isabelle Eberhardt, the Swiss writer who immigrated to Algeria in the 1890s, wandered in men's clothing throughout the Sahara, and became a well-known figure of Algerian legend at her death (Abdel-Jouad 93). Yasmine herself dresses as a man while in the desert and composes stories; this further superimposes the image of Eberhardt and the nomad on the text.

La Nuit de la lézarde, by contrast, incorporates an attenuated nomad figure in the character of protagonist Nour. She has traveled alone from the Algerian north to the south after being repudiated by her husband for a childless marriage. Dounia, a secondary character, compensates for her narrow-minded education at an ultra-conservative Arabic school of the 1990s by figuratively traveling throughout the world via books.

Like the preceding novel, L'Interdite presents an altered version of typical nomad wandering in the forms of mental flights and sea travel. Dalila's daydreaming in the dune echoes Dounia's imaginary getaways, as does protagonist Sultana's love of books. Vincent, another character in L'Interdite, has made the trip from France to Algeria by sea, as a kind of marine nomad. In a similar way, the novel N'zid perpetuates the image of the nomad at sea through its protagonist Nora, who is sailing aimlessly on the Mediterranean as the story opens.

Besides their nomadic characters and imagery, Mokeddem's novels point out language usage that is a reterritorialization of French according to Bensmaïa (16-17), or a "nomadism or journey into language," according to Abdel-Jaouad (94). For example, in

Les Hommes qui marchent, the accurate rendering of Zohra's pronunciation of French terms such as "el boulitique" 'politics' (82) and "tomobile" 'automobile' (29, 33), imparts realism to her character. One clearly understands that her use of French is limited.

In many instances in Les Hommes qui marchent, there is code-mixing (Abdel-Jaouad 113): expressions in spoken Arabic are immediately followed by their French translation. One such occurrence is when Leïla's family acquires its first air conditioner. Zohra's name for the device is "Rih el genna, l'air du paradis!" (187). A second example is when Zohra's niece leaves the market to the sound of "Alla kheir ya Zinna, au revoir (sic) la belle" (149). These expressions add detail and local color to the narrative while placing Arabic and French on equal footing visually.

Still another way that French is "colonized" is through the inclusion of Arabic turns of phrase translated into French, as when Zohra gives General De Gaulle her highest compliment: "Il a de l'allure, ce 'Général'. Avec sa tête qui se rengorge au-dessus des foules et ses yeux qui se plissent, je lui ai trouvé une superbe de chameau" (119). As an ex-nomad, Zohra knows firsthand the value of an excellent camel. Yet another occurrence of "nomadized" French is the promise that Leïla's mother gives to her sister-in-law that her next baby girl will be for the latter to raise as her own. She begins by saying: "Saâdia, ma soeur [...], moi, Allah m'a comblée. J'ai eu plus de filles et de garçons que je n'en aurais voulu. Que sa bonté me les garde tout en santé et en vie" (250-51). The formulaic expressions concerning Allah impart their Arab flavor to the French that conveys them.

In a like manner, Mokeddem's manipulation of French to include Arabic expressions authenticates a restaurant owner's speech in L'Interdite. The author also

indicates the rudimentary, imperfect spoken French of Dalila of the same novel, thereby underscoring French's status as langue étrangère in the Algeria of the 1990s. Mokeddem likewise gives Slim, a secondary character of Des Rêves et des assassins, the French of teenagers, including verlan, or reversed words, code-switching between Arabic and French, and lots of slang. Mokeddem thus enriches French from several different angles all the while that she challenges its hegemony.

Not only does Mokeddem reterritorialize her characters' French, she modifies literary genres as well. I have already mentioned her adaptation of the autobiography to include third-person narration in Les Hommes qui marchent. Des Rêves et des assassins is another case in point. Neither novel nor treatise, it is rather a combination of the two. In the first half of the novel, Kenza's first-person account of her life in 1990s Algeria alternates with passages in third person that decry her country's misogyny.

In certain instances, the genre modifications include intertextuality, or the inclusion of one text within another. Mokeddem's works are reminiscent of traditional Arabic literary forms. At the end of Le Siècle des sauterelles, for example, Yasmine and Bénichou ride off together across the desert. Whether or not they live happily ever after is left up to the reader's imagination. This lack of closure is reminiscent of the 11th century Middle Eastern Thousand and One Nights in which the postponement of a story's conclusion saves Scheherazade's life from one night to the next.

La Nuit de la lézarde also defies easy categorization as to genre. The novel has been criticized for its lack of action (Chaulet- Achour, "Mirage" 275). However, despite this lack, La Nuit de la lézarde has distinct poetic overtones. In its opening paragraph, for example, the negative expressions «aucune fumée», «pas d'enfants», «pas

d'hommes», «pas de femmes», and «pas de portes» (11) illustrate the silence rhythmically. Moreover, one of the favorite activities of protagonists Nour and Sassi who inhabit the abandoned ksar, or walled village, is to remember their former neighbors and earlier life with a mixture of fondness and regret. Nour frequently scans the deserted area as she awaits the arrival of an unidentified man from her past. Sassi passes his time by feeling sorry that he did not disclose his love for Nour sooner. This kind of pastime, conducted in lyrical language against the backdrop of the empty ksar, makes one think of the qasida, or classical Arabic poem in whose prologue the narrator revisits an important, but abandoned site from his past and laments a lost love.

Malika Mokeddem's unsettled nomad or nomad-like characters, as well as her modifications of both the French language and literary genres reflect what Lisa Lowe calls "literary nomadics" (56). According to Lowe, the literary text may use characters, language, and genre to call attention to itself as a site of contestation (61). The self-referential nature of Mokeddem's writings causes one to take more notice of her fictional plots, each centered on a Muslim woman's life.

At the beginning of her writing career, Malika Mokeddem considered it her duty to tell the truth about women's experiences in colonial and post-colonial Algeria. For this reason, Susan Ireland included Mokeddem in a list of Algerian women writers of the 1990s whose historical consciousness compelled them to write, thereby becoming "a new generation of moujahidate, combatants in the fight for democracy, equal rights, and a place for women in Algeria" (173). These authors have challenged and expanded ideologies regarding the role of the Algerian woman through their writings, especially since they have written about war. Benjamin Stora has referred to the period of civil

strife in Algeria during the 1990s as "the second Algerian war" (78), and has included Malika Mokeddem among the thirty-five women, most of them Algerian, who have written about the atrocities of fundamentalist terrorism. At this juncture, Evelyne Accad's notion of literature as ideological product and ideological producer has relevance. As she puts it: "... the novelist is at once a witness of society, reflecting it in her or his work, and an actor, an agent of transformation" (5).

Malika Mokeddem's words in a 1994 interview re-echo Accad's ideas:

All my life I have waged a battle to be whom (sic) I want to be in the face of a society that wanted to crush women. I dedicated my life to my studies, to the battle for women's rights, but I was suffocating. I had to leave [Algeria]. That is my failure. I write to raise my voice from the Midi, a voice other than that put forth by the [Muslim] fanatics, and to rid myself of this feeling of failure. I am from both coasts [of the Mediterranean, my emphasis], a woman flayed alive, but also an angry woman. (Forbidden vii)

Mokeddem further clarified her interpretation of her writer's role as a witness of society in 1997, when she said of the terrorists and of contemporary Algerian authors: «...eux [les islamistes armés], ils ont des mitraillettes et nous [les écrivains], on a des mots» (Marcus 226).

Malika Mokeddem depicted the plight of Algerian women until the mid 1990s, when death threats following the assassinations of fellow intellectuals Abdelkader Alloula and Tahar Djaout led her to reconsider the subjects of her novels. At this point, she opted for something diametrically different in order not to let herself be devoured by

the protest, “la contestation...” of Algeria’s misogyny (Marcus 225). As a result, her novels La nuit de la lézarde (1998) and N'zid (2001) mention the civil unrest in Algeria during the last decade, but only at a distance. Additionally, these works lack the politically charged paratexts that orient Mokeddem's first three novels.

What is clear in all of Mokeddem’s writings is that Arabic holds an important place. She has said that her readers await her next novel impatiently, although she does not presume that they will understand vocabulary from her mother tongue without help. In Le siècle des sauterelles and L’Interdite, for example, Arabic terms are defined in French in the glossary at the end of the novel in question. This interrupts our reading of the text, but nevertheless emphasizes the importance of Arabic to our understanding. In Les Hommes qui marchent, Des Rêves et des assassins, and N'zid, footnotes convey the meanings of vocabulary in Arabic, as do translations of the terms into French in the body of the text itself. The footnote method makes for a more continuous reading of the texts in question, since the reader does not have to lose his/her place in the text in order to check word definitions.

Mokeddem’s insistence on providing her readers with definitions of Arabic words gives them a very necessary comprehension aid. To satisfy my own curiosity, I consulted the Petit Robert dictionary from 2001 to see how many Arabic terms featured in Mokeddem's novels were defined in its pages. Only ten percent of Mokeddem’s glossary terms were included in this recent and common reference book. The Petit Robert did, however, contain many Arabic terms from the time of the Algerian War as well as from the colonial period. What I also noticed was that the Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun was listed among the authors cited. However, no Maghrebian female author, Mokeddem

or otherwise, was included. With about one million North African immigrants in France, and several prize-winning Algerian *écrivaines* on the world scene, including Mokeddem, this situation is hard to believe. Even the word hidjab, or headscarf, designating a strongly debated item worn by so many North African women living in France and elsewhere, does not figure in the Petit Robert. In other words, Mokeddem's definitions are essential for a complete understanding of her works and cultural heritage. The Petit Larousse Dictionary-Encyclopedia from 2004, however, did include hidjab in its lexicon.

What becomes apparent in Mokeddem's translations of Arabic into French is that she is targeting an audience other than that of her native Algeria, where it has been estimated that fifty-six percent of women are illiterate, although the education of girls has improved, albeit it in Arabic (Messaoudi, Unbowed, 61). This improvement in female education is the result of recent legislation stipulating that parents' allocations familiales will be stopped if their daughters do not stay in school until age sixteen. What is problematic for writers such as Mokeddem is that French in Algeria has been reduced to the status of a foreign language, whereas Arabic has become the required language of study in national schools (Aouadi 550-53); therefore, readership in French is limited.

Consequently, Mokeddem has chosen a *francophone* audience enabling her to acquire readers from around the world. Réda Bensmaïa states in Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb, that Mokeddem's status as an expatriate Algerian author exemplifies the unfinished nature of the myth of the Algerian nation (25-26). Mokeddem, in casting her female protagonists, has sought to reconfigure the historical image of the Algerian woman, thereby adding her piece to the interrupted myth. In 1995, Mokeddem affirmed this notion by saying:

Mais l'actualité du pays et le sort des femmes, me replongent sans cesse dans mes drames passés, m'enchaînent à toutes celles qu'on tyrannise. Les persecutions et les humiliations qu'elles endurent, m'atteignent, ravivent mes plaies. L'éloignement n'atténue rien...

(Chalet-Achour, Noûn 179)

Moreover, as an expatriate Algerian living in one the Arabic-speaking communities in the city of Montpellier, France, Mokeddem problematizes the idea that the Algerian nation, or any nation, is defined by its physical boundaries alone.

We might consider the redefinition of the nation to include its diaspora another kind of deterritorialization that blurs not only the borders between countries, but also the categories of the self and the Other. Writing and living in French, her second language, in an adopted city, yet working as a nephrologist with a large Arab-speaking population, (Mokeddem, Transe 205), Mokeddem has already transgressed the category of Otherness. Her literature, written in French that accommodates words and syntax from Arabic, variations on the traditional Bedouin figure, and intertextual references to classical Arabic literature such as the Thousand and One Nights and the qasida, blends the difference between native and foreign languages. Likewise, Mokeddem's modifications of both autobiography and novel genres in Les Hommes qui marchent and Des Rêves et des assassins, respectively, indicate that her literary imagination also exceeds conventional bounds. In short, we have seen that Malika Mokeddem's inclusion of Arabic in her writings bespeaks a re-appropriation of French with sociopolitical implications.

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