

## **Female Identity In Algerian Writing: Malika Mokeddem's *Des Reves Et Des Assassins***

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study discusses the various ways in which Mokeddem's novel portrays female identity in post-colonial Algeria. Religious and other social fanatics carve out and impose their identity on women, shattering their dreams. Female identity in the novel is represented through social relationships, and metaphorically through symbols such as the sea and the desert. The study argues that the protagonist, Kenza, challenges the identity "inflicted" upon her in her relationship with the family members, and by a patriarchal system that denies post-colonial Algerians of their freedom. The life in exile in France is a quest to understand better her mother's identity and for that matter her own identity. The study concludes however, that the open-ended nature of the novel suggests that the protagonist has not necessarily found an answer to her quest to understand an identity that is complex and fluid much like the predicament of post-colonial Algeria.*

**KEY TERMS:** *Female identity, religious fanaticism, post-colonial conditions, identity in exile.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In a study on Malika Mokeddem's writing, Nadia Setti asserts that in Mokeddem's female protagonists, we find: "fréquemment l'acte ou le geste féministe d'émancipation et de revendication, le refus d'une 'féminité' coincée dans une représentation 'masculine', patriarcale, qui engage donc une rupture épistémologique, historique et politique avec les représentations sociales et culturelles du 'féminin'" (179). This assertion that Mokeddem's main preoccupation in her fictional work is to portray the predicament of women in post-colonial Algeria is also the focus of Belkheir Khaidia's short article in which she proclaims that: "Elle [Mokeddem] transpose dans la fiction des situations vécues par de nombreuses femmes, dont elle-même, bousculant des traditions séculaires, refusant une tradition misogyne qui repose sur l'opposition binaire homme/femme allant jusqu'à priver les femmes du droit à la vie" (102). This study focuses on Mokeddem's *Des Rêves et des Assassins* and seeks to explore how the female protagonist, Kenza, challenges patriarchal, social, and cultural epistemologies in a gesture of feminist emancipation in post-colonial Algeria with its historical and political complexities. In an edited volume entitled *Maghrebian Mosaic*, Mildred Mortimer expresses the hope that in the twenty-first century, "cultural pluralism will triumph in the Maghreb where historically conquerors have come and gone, and men and women have fought successfully to retain or regain their freedom of movement and self-expression" (Mortimer 308). The female protagonist in Malika Mokeddem's *Des Rêves et des Assassins* fights to regain her freedom in a post-colonial society that is often oppressive towards women. I therefore find it insightful when Yolande Helm observes that the novel "is articulated through a dialectic between peace and violence, dream and nightmare, lack and excess, and nomadism and sedentariness" (Helm 206). This study seeks to discuss the implications for female identity in the Algerian context when violence and excesses shatter dreams of freedom.

Mokeddem (of the Bedoin ethnic group) is a medical doctor who uses writing to communicate her revolt against the injustices and atrocities that have plagued her native Algeria. As she recounts in her autobiography *La Transe des Insoumis*, at the time she was finishing *Des Reves et des Assassins*, she was the target of death threats by religious fanatics. At an early age, she learned to revolt against oppression of women, and it started with her revolt against her oppressive parents. She would shout at the mother in a culture in which girls never shout (Mokeddem 2003: 143). Kenza, the heroine of her novel, learns to fight back at the father by screaming at him. When Mokeddem was fourteen years old, the grandmother's brother tried to marry her off without her consent. The marriage plans had to be discarded when she fled her home (Mokeddem 2003: 143). Kenza undergoes painful initiation rites to reach a higher state of consciousness, and through her character the author challenges the traditions that keep women in a subservient position (Mehta 4). Marina Lazreg has suggested that colonialism "helped to unify men's attitudes towards women as well as pave the way for the intrusion of religion in the political arena in contemporary Algeria" (Lazreg 2). Colonial heritage, outmoded traditions, and religious fundamentalism combine to aggravate the plight of women in Algerian society. Mustapha Hamil has observed that "the call for an authentic Islamic identity attests to postcolonial Algeria's inability to reconcile the forces of tradition and the demands of modernity" (Hamil 52).

Hamil makes a salient commentary on the history that inspires Mokeddem's fictional creation in *Des Rêves et des Assassins* when he laments that: "After more than four decades of independence, religious fundamentalists reactivate old dichotomies – or construct new ones – between East and West, past and present, French and Arabic, conservative and liberal thought. In the face of State and religious brutality, Algerian writers, artists, and enlightened segments of civic society have raised their voices against indiscriminate acts of violence, repression, and torture. Some are assassinated; others have opted for silence or exile" (Hamil 52).. Mokeddem's fictional heroine seeks exile in France in order to escape from authoritarian traditions and the religious fundamentalists. The initiation that the main character of the novel undergoes is testimony of how multiple and competing discourses are created in post-colonial Algerian society in an attempt to face the realities of a society constantly evolving. Who determines what are outmoded traditions or religious practices? The writer participates in this quest to understand and also to shape the destiny of her society by calling to action the belief of civil society in respecting fundamental human rights, and most specifically the rights of women.

Hamil further observes that the act of displacement cuts across the entire work of Mokeddem and that in *Des Rêves et des Assassins*, categories such as proper names, gender, identities, and social roles are constantly negotiated and transgressed (Hamil 53). We can understand the limitations and challenges that are inflicted upon the heroine of Mokeddem's novel especially as the religious fundamentalists attempt to reinstate in the present "a homogeneous essentialist discourse that is defeated by the realities of the postcolonial moment" (Hamil 57). Mokeddem herself has asserted: "I write in order to raise my voice from southern France, 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, a woman flayed alive, but also an angry woman" (Marcus IX). It is this anger that is portrayed through her female characters. The fundamental problem that Mokeddem raises in her novel is how people's destinies are hijacked by a portion of the society that illegitimately claims for itself the right to force others to accept its thwarted values that are based on certain interests.

In her writing on power and gender, French feminist writer Luce Irigaray talks about the exclusion of women in the collective imaginary (Irigaray 29). Borrowing a term from the Cameroonian writer Calixte Beyela, Irène d'Almeida calls it "destroying the emptiness of silence"-- "tuer le vide du silence" (D'Almeida 1). Mokeddem's fictional heroine breaks this silence against the norms of her society. Silence on the part of women would erase the possibility of rejecting the emptiness that the fundamentalists want to create in their voices and in their very existence and identity. Writing is one way the female member of post-colonial Algerian society challenges the male voice that attempts to suppress, indeed erase other voices that do not conform to their patriarchal agenda. Kenza represents this voice in the novel through her narrative strategy that questions male hegemony. The heroine of Mokeddem's novel, Kenza, refuses to be excluded from the collective imaginary, and through her Mokeddem challenges and rejects the male voice in post-colonial Algeria that persistently tries to exclude the female from the collective imaginary. Writing not only ensures that the female is present in Algerian and Maghrebian imaginary but also subverts the type of discourse that has always not just dominated but stifled the multiple voices that should comprise the collective imaginary of any civilized society.

Irigaray laments that mythologies have assigned the woman the role of mother, "lui reconnaissant une certaine puissance sociale pour autant qu'elle soit réduite, avec sa complicité, à l'impuissance sexuelle" (Irigaray 30). I would argue that though Irigaray's argument is relevant in the context of Algerian and Maghrebian women's predicament, one needs to also acknowledge that this Western perception of motherhood as something negative is a very questionable stance in the context of Maghrebian and African cultures. The problem is not motherhood in itself. It is the subservient role assigned to women in the guise of defending their role as mothers with certain responsibilities in their families and in society. Nonetheless, what Irigaray says about "impuissance sexuelle" is very helpful in understanding the predicament of the KENZAS of Maghrebian culture. In the novel, Kenza's father reduces women to sexual objects much like the meat that he sells in his butchery. However the daughter, Kenza, refuses to be reduced to "l'impuissance sexuelle". For Irigaray, one way for women to reverse their situation is by examining the factors that create an oppressive environment in their lives (Irigaray 30). It is in the same vein of thinking that the Algerian woman Fatma Oussedik lashes out at those who contend that in Algeria, women are not the only ones who suffer economic and political deprivations. She quips about "a history of women marked by an oppression that certain people still don't see or believe (Oussedik 48). In Mokeddem's novel, she uses Kenza's narrative voice in a sometimes exaggerated description of her predicament in order to examine and challenge that oppressive environment which is created mainly by the fundamentalist male voices that control her community. Meat might be for human consumption, but Kenza's father's obsession with the female flesh that makes him see women as objects for consumption brings into question the dialectics of male-female relationship and of the powerful versus the powerless in post-

colonial Algerian society. Following Irigaray's suggestion, we need to examine the factors that create such an oppressive environment in Kenza's life. Kenza's nameless father is a product of his society. What produced Kenza's father, and what factors in their society give him the power to dehumanize women including his own daughter? Mokeddem's fiction invites the reader to reflect on this conundrum. One reason why Kenza's predicament is possible in Algerian society is because, as Oussedik suggests, Algerian society does not want to see and acknowledge the oppression that its women suffer. It is not in the interest of the oppressor to acknowledge the servile condition of his oppressed.

The cover of *Des Rêves et des Assassins* has the picture of a woman. Even if the choice of the picture is a publicity strategy by the publishing house and not necessarily a choice made by the author herself, in my mind the picture takes on an extradiagetic significance that one can read into the motif of the novel. That picture seems to be a metaphor for all what the character Kenza experiences. It is the picture of a young very beautiful but angry lady much like Kenza whose beauty provokes sexual desires even from her own biological father. In other words, what I am reading into the cover picture is a strategy of the publishers to use an extra-novelistic device to entice the reader to reflect more deeply on the symbolism of a character in the novel—Kenza's father and his immoral behavior towards women. In the novel, Kenza rejects a male-dominated society that makes women objects of sexual desire, and teaches little boys to disrespect females, including those that are old enough to be their mothers. The brainwashing of little boys to see a world in which they can exercise power over women who are older than them will shape their concept of male-female relationships in post-colonial Algerian society. Mokeddem's novel suggests that people are not born with preconceived ideas about male-female relationships. Their minds are molded by the perverted values that sectors of the community such as religious fundamentalists can perpetuate.

From childhood, Kenza's family identity is determined by a raucous relationship with a father whom she describes as having "inflicted" several brothers and sisters on her. Her father is a sex maniac who has little respect for women in his sexual escapades. As a young girl, Kenza observed him several times in a sexual act with the women of the neighborhood: "Enfant, je l'ai observé à son insu. Maintes fois. Et maintes fois sans le vouloir, je l'ai surpris en train de culbuter des voisines (12). The innocent child gaze is transformed into a revolt in the adult narrator Kenza. She says of the father that "maintenant, il ne m'est plus qu'une caricature"(12). The narrative suggests that Kenza's traumatic experience with the father's attitude is a powerful influence in how she will see the world that is dominated by the immorality of characters in her society such as her father. If Kenza sees her father as a "caricature", the father is not just a caricature to her alone. He is a caricature of what a male figure and a father figure should be for a daughter. He is also a caricature of what a male figure should be in the social roles that society expects from parents and adults in general. In this sense, the novel invites us to examine behaviors and other factors in post-colonial Algerian society that distort and caricaturize individual and collective roles in society. The idea that Kenza's father "inflicted" brothers and sisters on Kenza is significant in many ways. The choice of the term emphasizes not just how repulsive Kenza finds his father's immoral behavior but also how the father breaks social taboos in his sexual escapade. Kenza's choice of words also underscores the abomination in the father's behavior and to what extent he represents the male gender that thwarts all decency in relationship with the female counterpart. Like Kenza's father, the fundamentalists "inflict" untold suffering on society and especially on women, and justify their acts by suggesting that society has made its own choice to practice a certain religion, of which they claim to be the ultimate interpreters of the doctrines.

Kenza's identity begins with "emptiness" and "excess". It is the emptiness of not having a mother or a father as a role model. The "excesses" of the father shape her childhood identity. Like the excesses of the father on the daughter, the excesses of the religious fundamentalists shape the nation that imposes a distorted identity on women. Indeed, the oppressive social norms developed by men are much like the dirty mattress that Kenza bribes the *concierge* to throw away for her. The *concierge* is disgusted at what he suspects to be a mattress that is filthy from illicit sexual acts that must have taken place between Kenza and his band of socially deviant educated male friends. In my mind, those norms that oppress women need to be thrown out in much the same fashion as the unwanted, old, dirty mattress. What does the *concierge* symbolize in this discourse? He represents the oppressive voice that imposes norms and values on a society that is held to ransom by extremist ideas that put into jeopardy the ideals that were set by the founders of the new nation that rose out of the ruins of colonialism. The *concierges* of Algerian society, who are themselves far from being morally upright people, have usurped the power to be the moral guardians of a society that should not have the right to "inflict" norms and values on people. The irony of the situation is that the *concierges* are hypocritical standard bearers of an imaginary morality that has pervaded post-colonial Algerian society.

Kenza's mother was forced to marry against her will at the time of the country's independence. Paradoxically, it is after the nation has gained independence and forged an authentic identity for itself that Kenza's mother loses her freedom and her identity. Kenza fights against the same fate but ironically has to flee her country in order to seek freedom in the country that had deprived Algeria of freedom—France. One can argue that this predicament illustrates the unbreakable relationship that exists between France and its former colonies, and that this bond can have rather complex and sometimes contradictory implications. For the character Kenza, as is the case for Algerians in general, France represents in the psyche the crisis of identity that comes with the conflicting physical, cultural, and psychological attachment to a people that once were colonial oppressors. It is ironical and indeed tragic that the only physical and psychological sanctuary that Kenza and her compatriots can find is in their former colonizing nation. Yet, at the same time Kenza's experience suggests that France's history of colonialism does not mean that we cannot move away from the past, from history, to embrace a present and a future that question how history was fashioned but also forges better relationship with former oppressors. Seeking refuge in a nation that once represented oppression is not accepting the values that determined its oppressive past. It is urging an acknowledgement of that history and a commitment to holding up high the ideals enshrined in France's doctrine of "égalité" and fraternité". It also suggests that Algeria must shed off the past and present values that betray the universal quest for human dignity in the face of the dehumanization of females in post-colonial Algeria.

Mokeddem mocks at the dehumanizing attitude that Algerian men have towards their women. In a sarcastic tone, the narrator (Kenza) says that "chez nous, l'arrogance rend les mâles aveugles aux ridicules" (14). Indeed, throughout his narrative, Kenza ridicules the male characters, and by so doing reduces them to caricatures of social values and norms. The men harbor the absurd notion that it is for the good of widows to marry them off. Women had fought hand in hand with the men for the independence of the country. Yet after independence was won, women were deprived of the freedom that the new socialist government of Ben Bella had promised "even though there were intellectuals, someone like Frantz Fanon, for example, who said that Algerian women had acquired through their use of weapons the right to equality between the sexes." (Marcus XV). Freedom is a right for every human being. So Fanon was not suggesting that Algerian women earned their right to equality only because they had actively participated in the liberation movement. Susan Ireland has commented on how the sense of betrayal of the *maquisardes* "is emphasized in Mokeddem's *Des Reves et des Assassins* in which the *maquis* has been transformed from a positive symbol of resistance into a place of gratuitous violence that now represents the violation of the liberation movement and of women's rights" (Ireland 2001: 177). Men like Kenza's father have no legitimate claim to patriotism especially when they deny women the right to determine their own destiny. In order to authenticate his own identity as a male, Kenza's father suppresses the female identity by treating women as sexual objects. In his butchery, he metaphorically hacks to pieces Algerian women's identity. For him, hacking meat is like making love with a woman:

Les femmes ne sont que ça pour lui: de la viande. Du reste, avec les plus demunies de ses clients, mon père excelle dans la pratique du troc, l'usage d'un corps contre un peu d'agneau, de mouton ou de chameau. Le bœuf est trop cher (Ireland 2001: 15). Ireland has commented on the symbolism in Kenza's father's character. She observes that; "his profession as butcher stands for his obsession with sex, and [that] the satirical descriptions of his manipulations of meat ("la chair") reflect his view of women as sexual objects (Ireland 184). Ireland is accurate in interpreting the relationship between Kenza and the father as symbolic of contemporary Algerian society's attitude towards women in general: "the father's role as a symbol of contemporary repression is underscored in the characterization of both him and the country as 'détraqué' and his conflictual relationship with his daughter reflects society's sacrifice of women" (Ireland 2001: 184). In the same relationship between father and daughter, we see the significance in the use of the image of the body to depict how the "assassins" destroy the "rêves" of women in Algerian society. The liberation fighters at the time of independence created the "rêves" that all Algerians, like the citizens of all formerly colonized African countries, yearned for. These dreams have been subverted and hijacked by a sector of the population that has reduced women to objects. This is what Kenza, and for that matter, the author Mokeddem, laments about Algerian society and Maghrebian society in general. It is the story of how the dreams of the Algerian people, and particularly women, have been stolen by male hegemony. In Ireland's opinion, the writer uses images of the body to address the sacrifice and psychological dismemberment of women. The opposition of "rêves" and "assassins" refers to the "rêve collectif de liberté", and to women's dream in particular. Commenting on how those who continue to fight for democracy are assassinated like their dreams, Ireland raises the question at the center of the novel "par quelle perversion la génération de l'indépendance s'est-elle transformée en hordes de l'aliénation et de la mort?" (Ireland 2001: 50). In another study, Ireland rightly observes that in Kenza's father's trade as a butcher, "the two types of flesh [meat and women] attain equal value-or rather lack of value".

She also rightly argues that Kenza's father's relationship with the daughter serves as a symbol of society's repression of freedom (Ireland 1997: 178). I would add that by employing humorous and sarcastic language, Kenza (and for that matter the author) subverts the phallic image imposed on Algerian women by their male counterparts. It is indeed significant that in Mokeddem's fictional writing, one of her main concerns is to lambast the institutions that prescribe to women a role that makes them sexual objects. She expressed this stance in an interview with Yolande Helm when she said that: "La femme dans ce système était considéré comme un objet sexuel. On lui apprenait la soumission et tout le monde avait l'œil rivé sur elle. Les femmes transmettaient ces traditions; personne n'était libre et les femmes encore moins que les autres" (in Helm 2000: 47). It is in the light of such pronouncements by Mokeddem herself, that in a study on her works, Yolande Helm observes that Kenza's father "manipulates meat with a machiavelean and insane pleasure [and that] his knife becomes a penis that rapes, digs into, and parts the tender and wounded flesh" (Helm 207). Though I find Helm's description of Kenza's father's behavior rather graphic, I also understand that she uses the same type of language that the author employs to portray her character. Helm herself comments that one could accuse Mokeddem of reinforcing the negative stereotypical view of the Muslim male by presenting this vile and primal character. She believes however, that a careful reader would not relegate Kenza's father to a culturally authentic type. Helm's hope might be wishful thinking in the light of an observation that Patricia Geesey has made, that Maghrebien texts are read for their exoticism by the French public, and that this is made possible because marketing strategies of publishing houses are linked to capitalize on cultural practices that are perceived to affirm their "exoticism" and their alterity (Geesey, 175). Helm also makes an insightful comment about Kenza's father's lack of a name. He is a nameless male character who "has an atavistic need to 'eat' the female, to swallow her, and to consume her [and that] the sadistic site of butchery is identified with the metaphor of rape and death" (Helm 207). Taking inspiration from Helm's use of symbols here, I would suggest that this attempt to "eat and swallow" the female protagonist is a metaphorical eating and swallowing of the female voice and of her identity.

In the social psyche, feminine identity is synonymous with powerlessness, the subaltern. Women are stripped of their identity by the gaze of men. In fact, Kenza's father's sensuous gaze on her body is symptomatic of how women are treated as objects. Kenza says she subverts the father's phallic desires by literally screaming at him. Her reaction to the father's behavior is a counter-gaze. In an article on subversion in the Algerian writer Leila Sebbar's work, Margaret Majudar argues that "the problematical status of the relation to the other in the gaze is compounded by the complication that the other is not simply the absolute negation or enemy, but can be also, and often at the same time, the object of desire" (Majudar 196). This observation would not be true of Mokeddem's character, because although Kenza's father is the absolute negation or enemy, he is not an object of desire. Indeed, Kenza's father's desire to turn women into objects of consumption makes him a most undesirable object in the eyes of his own daughter, and for that matter in the eyes of men and women of Algerian society who dream of a post-colonial society in which social and political justice prevail. In her autobiography *La Transe des Insoumis*, Mokeddem mocks at the sort of names that were given to girls in Algeria. She says: On disait qu'il y avait les Alger-Riens et les Alger-Rois. Moi, on m'a donné pour prénom Reine. Je n'y suis pour rien. C'est une perversion si répandue dans le pays que de donner des pré-noms sublimes aux filles pour mieux s'appliquer toute une vie à les asservir, les avilir Mokeddem 2003: 129).

We see this assertion in the novel too through the absurdity in the names given to girls. Girls born after independence are given symbolic names: "Houria: Liberté; Nacira: Victoire; Djamila: la Belle, référence aux Djamila héroïnes de la guerre...Moi, on m'appelle Kenza: Trésor. Quelle ironie. Des trésors de la vie, je n'en avais aucun." (28-29). Ironically, Kenza is not treated as a treasure but rather as an outcast. The treasures of Algerian society have been sacrificed on the altar of egoistic religious fundamentalism. Kenza blames Algerian women for accepting the status quo. Yet, as Kenza's brother Lamine remarks, their mother was a victim of social norms and customs: "Victime de toute une éducation et de l'ignorance, tu sais ça!" (33). Kenza's radical weapon of revolt is education, though, as was the case for Mokeddem herself, she develops a problem of identity not knowing to which world she belongs: that of her family or that of the school which exposes her even more to French and Western European cultures. What characterizes the life of Kenza during her stay in both Algeria and France is thus a feeling of alienation in which the "female heroine is endlessly caught in the struggle to negotiate two cultures, Algerian and French, with all of the attendant contradictions and differences" (Marcus XII). Mokeddem's novel problematizes this dilemma. However, Kenza not only develops an intellectual maturity that helps her understand the nation's and women's plight but also develops solidarity with both young men and women who have revolted against the oppressive social and religious norms. Consequently, she and her companions find themselves in conflict with a society that has forged a conservative identity for Algerian women. Fatma Oussedik's trepidations that we invoked above do echo here.

She says that in challenging the oppression under which women live, they necessarily challenge all forms of oppression. Religious violence creates so much terror in Algeria that Kenza says of her friend Selma that “elle n’était plus dans le chaos de l’Algérie. Elle était ce chaos” and that “elle me semblait porter la mort. La mort de l’Autre dans son corps”(72). Symbolically, it is a female that personifies the consequences wrought by the violence. The “death” that Selma carries in her is the death of freedom, but more significantly it is the metaphorical death of women’s identity. This is intrinsically linked to the death of a sense of humanity, of the sense of an Algerian national identity. For women in Selma’s fictional society, their identity as females is destroyed and reconstructed in the image of religious fanaticism much as the identity of the Algerian nationhood is distorted, indeed destroyed. Kenza is the voice of women in her society when she laments about religious and political violence: “Des hommes qui maintenant tuent tous les jours...Violent et tuent des adolescentes et des femmes. Tuent l’intelligence, nos différences, la confiance dans le genre humain (81-82). Rape and other forms of violence are used to erase the female voice and to force Algerian society into a state of anemia in terms of social, economic, and political development. Rape is a cowardly act through which the male attempts to force Algerian society into whatever identity the fundamentalists impose on the female sex. Kenza who has lost confidence in the humanity of Algeria’s post-colonial identity rejects this stifling predicament. The writer calls into question humanity’s cowardice in being docile in the face of religious and social fundamentalists. When Kenza rejects and questions this predicament, she is forced to escape into exile in order to live to continue the fight against social and political injustice in her society. Yet this choice to live in exile poses a dilemma in terms of what it means for her as well as for her society.

## II. EXILE AND IDENTITY

Another important dimension in Kenza’s identity as a female and as an Algerian is her life of exile in France; an experience which recalls that of Mokeddem herself. While in Algeria, Kenza experienced a life of emotional exile brought on by maternal absence and paternal disregard, and removed from Algeria’s political tension and violence, Montpellier becomes a space of discovery and self-expression for her (Connolly: 296-297). As Mehta has observed, “[Mokeddem’s] novels represent the problematics of racial, geographical, and cultural interstitiality whereby in-betweenness becomes a space of resistance, ambiguity, and exile as reflected by the author’s personal situation as an Algerian immigrant in France who nevertheless suffers from the existential angst of uprootedness”(Mehta 2003:1). Kenza represents the problematics that Mehta alludes to here. She represents a painful reality that Helm describes so well: “For Mokeddem’s protagonists, to leave one’s native country in order to take refuge in a land of exile results in a splitting of the self. These women [characters] have broken all ties with a painful past, and, most importantly, have allowed themselves to embrace another universe”(Helm 2001: 217).

For Helm, in spite of the challenges they face, the female characters continue to fight while in exile “and to move forward like the nomads, in search of new spaces to conquer and prohibitions to defy”(Helm 2001: 207). In my mind, there is some ambiguity in what Helm terms “enrichment”; at least in the case of Kenza. However, Helm is right in her comment about Kenza’s response to a taxi driver who asks her where she comes from. Kenza responds: “Je suis méditerranéenne” and Helm argues that Kenza is claiming a right to be a *métissée* (a cultural hybrid), since people from the Mediterranean, in spite of similar traditions, are profoundly diversified. Kenza travels to France to seek knowledge about her late mother in order to comprehend her own identity: “J’ai besoin de la reconstruire pour me retrouver un peu”(101). Like Kenza, her native Algeria needs to reconstruct itself in order to find its proper identity in a world in which cultures are constantly in contact and the powerful superimpose their identity on the weaker countries and societies. However, even though Kenza is in exile in France in order to reconstruct her own identity, the novel poses a dilemma because unlike Mokeddem the author, Kenza does not make France her home. Kenza and other Algerian refugees in France are still not free from the activities of the religious fanatics. Kenza’s identity as an Algerian, a North African, and a Mediterranean is inextricably linked to Algeria’s identity as a nation that terrorizes its citizens and stifles freedom. She flees Algeria because there is “désespoir du rêve, de tous les rêves brisés. On ne rêve pas dans un pays comme le mien. Surtout quand on est une femme”(158). As an educated woman, and one who rejects religious conservatism, she believes that she is free whereas Algerian men are not. It is not just about physical freedom but freedom of the mind; freedom to think as one pleases and to speak out freely. It is about the female identity in the collective memory and the collective will of the people. In France, Kenza is free to smoke and to go to the bar alone without being constantly stared at by men. Yet, the question is how meaningful this freedom is in the Maghrebian cultural context and in defining Kenza’s identity. As an exile in France, Kenza’s Algerian nationality defines who she is. She is a foreigner, a North African, a Muslim woman, and also a Mediterranean. Her ethnicity takes on significance in a way it did not in her native Algeria. After all, France is the country where Jean-Marie Le Pen’s extreme right Front National party exerts a lot of influence through its racist political propaganda; and the narrator makes allusion to this.

Racism and xenophobia paradoxically become forces that unite North African Arab and Berber immigrants. Though the novel does not develop the Mediterranean identity as an important leitmotif in Kenza's sexuality, Kenza herself seems to acknowledge the importance of this part of her identity. She muses over why she thinks of herself as a Mediterranean after a taxi driver asks about her origins. Being in a foreign country makes one more conscious of one's identity. Mokeddem herself recounts a similar experience she had, so she must have transposed that experience onto her fictional character. While living in exile, Kenza's experiences make her reflect over her individual, family, and collective identity as a female Algerian. Her identity is a fluid one, much like the identity of thousands of Maghrebians who have preceded her into exile in the former colonial country. Colonialism and Algerian cultural norms have both forced the female Algerian into a state of mental and physical exile.

To seek freedom in France, Kenza has to cross the Mediterranean Sea, and the sea is multiply symbolic. The sea is a metaphor for what Kenza is seeking in life. It is a symbol of freedom, but its vastness is also a metaphor for the loss of freedom in the "sea" of hopelessness that reigns in Algeria. Also, the Mediterranean Sea links colonized Algeria to the colonizing power, France, thus acting as a metaphor for European hegemony in Africa. Kenza seems to contemplate the different facets of the sea as a metaphor as she stirs at the sea and wonders if it will ever cure her of the trauma that Algeria has created in her psyche: "Je regarde la mer. Parviendra-t-elle jamais à me guérir des traumatismes algériens? De ma rage? Loin de tout. J'ai mes embrouilles d'origines, embruns de liberté" (222). The sea as a metaphor for freedom is also a death trap when Kenza's mother attempts suicide and is saved by a French soldier. Crossing the vast ocean is like making an attempt to cross into a world that potentially provides better alternatives to the world that has been created and "inflicted" by religious and cultural fanatics. Yet, this sea also creates a sense of uncertainty. It is vast and dangerous, but also creates a bridge that allows Kenza to travel into a world of uncertainties (France) as far as the identity of Maghrebians in exile is concerned.

While in Montpellier, one day Kenza watches a child by the ocean playing with a kite. At that moment, she has a flashback to the time little Alilou disappeared in the vast desert much like the thousands of Algerians lost in the desert of religious fanaticism. It is like metaphorically reconnecting with her past the way she had reconnected with her umbilical cord by researching the mother's identity. In his study on exile in Mokeddem's novels, Hamil is right in his observation that even if Mokeddem is determined to substitute her mother by other figures of motherhood, her mind nonetheless remains imprinted with the realities of violence and death in her country (Hamil 2004: 56). In my mind, one can never break the umbilical cord. Kenza can break away from the violence in Algeria, but she cannot break away from the maternal identity that her late mother has given her. Maternal identity is about birth; the process that brings one into the world and which also gives one a certain identity. Kenza's father with his dubious sense of male power and identity tried to nullify, to deny Kenza of that identity. He tried to alter it, and when he did not seem to be succeeding he attempted to deny the existence of this identity altogether. When he "inflicted" siblings on Kenza, when he tried to forcefully control her life beyond what the responsible duties of a father carry, he was denying Kenza of any right to live as a person with some form of dignity and identity.

Metaphorically too, there is a mother identity linked to Kenza's country of origin-Algeria. The nation's identity is imprinted in Kenza and all her compatriots, and essentially what Kenza and her like try to do to that identity is to reject its distorted and perverted version. In the process, they find themselves in conflict with religious fundamentalists and others who believe they can inflict a forced motherly nation identity on them. This is the problem with Algeria, and for that matter other post-colonial nations in the region. In Montpellier, Kenza comes into contact with a young man whose attitude toward his own identity makes her reflect on her own identity. Slim has a Malian father and an Algerian mother. Because of her black African origins, the mother suffered discrimination from the husband's family. Her experience has made Slim reject part of his identity. Significantly, Slim's experience is inspired by Mokeddem's own experience growing up in Algeria. She recounts in *La Transe des insoumis* her experiences with prejudice against her people who have a darker skin color than other compatriots. On her return home after many years of exile in France, to her bewilderment, the mother makes a racist comment about dark skin people: "Et même en France, tu t'arranges pour être plus noire que nous toutes" (Mokeddem 2003: 294). She fires back at the mother: "Mes pigments ne viennent pas de ton côté. J'ai la peau tannée, le cheveu tordu par une goutte de sang me descendant des aïeux de grand-mère" (Mokeddem 2003: 294). It is not surprising that Mokeddem's grandmother had a tremendous positive impact on her life. Not only was she a great influence on her interest in writing, she also represented a revolt against prejudice in all forms. Mokeddem recalls the grandmother's anger at Algerians' racism against Black people. She burst out one day and retorted at someone: "Si tu n'aimes pas le noir, tu n'as qu'à l'enlever de tes yeux" (Mokeddem 2003: 311).

What is telling is that as a woman, Mokeddem suffered discrimination from two fronts: as a woman and as a dark-skinned person. Mokeddem's fictional character represents the inner angst in certain human beings to deny any humanity in others who are unlike them. They create an "Otherness" in their own compatriots who in their eyes are less human because they have a darker skin color. Mokeddem's story calls into question the universal problematics of racial prejudice that deny women and men alike their authentic identity. The fictional Slim's mother is victimized twice: first for being the woman who marries into the husband's family by tradition and therefore exercises less power than her husband, and secondly for her Black African, Malian origin. The story highlights how victims can become victimizers themselves. After all, Maghrebians tend to be typical targets of xenophobia and racism in France. The racial statuses that French racists attach to ethnicity and skin pigmentation are played out by Maghrebians some of whom in turn may have stereotypes about Black Africans. This attitude jeopardizes solidarity among African immigrants in France. Slim defines himself as "motié malien, moitié algérien et moitié français" and declares his unfettered admiration for his mother (Mokeddem 2003: 137). Slim's revolt against oppressive social norms reinforces Kenza's stance vis-à-vis the oppressive nature of social and family relationships in Algeria. Slim's attitude is not necessarily the ideal reaction, but at least he has a sense of his self-identity; something which Kenza needs.

### III. CONCLUSION

*Des Reves et des Assassins* is a semi-autobiographical novel. Kenza's father's behavior towards the daughter is similar to the treatment that Mokeddem experienced under her own father. For example, as a young girl in school, when she was first in her class, she was obviously proud about it and thought the father would share the joy with her and want to see her grades. To her utter shock, the father scuffed: "Ce n'est pas la peine. Tu n'es pas un garçon, ma fille!" (Mokeddem 2003: 72). In writing, Mokeddem found an instrument to share with her readers the ignominies of political and religious fanaticism and oppressive traditions that have for decades conjointly oppressed women in her country. She says in her autobiography that before she experienced an awakening of the social discriminations, it was the discriminations of her parents that pushed her to revolt, and began her life as a dissident against all types of injustices. *Des Reves et des Assassins* is about the female identity that is the product of those social discriminations as well as the conscience of revolt that is the product of that oppression.

Kenza is the character that embodies the militancy in Mokeddem's critique of the factors that militate against women's emancipation in Maghrebian society. Through her character, Mokeddem has crafted a story about how women's "dreams" are shattered by "assassins". The "assassins" are not just religious fundamentalists who terrorize everyone and especially women. They constitute all the individuals and institutions that have declared a war on the female identity, depriving women of their religious, economic, social, and political rights. As we have seen in the reading of Mokeddem's novel, for African women, all the other "oppressive sites", (as Chikwenu Ogunyemi calls them) such as postcoloniality, totalitarianism, and religious fundamentalism are problems that women have to confront in their societies (Ogunyemi 109). In other words, these institutionalized attitudes victimize women more than they do their male counterparts because of the role assigned to women in Algerian culture, and because of outmoded traditions that men do everything to maintain to their benefit.

In conclusion, I would say that the open-ended nature of the novel leaves one to wonder whether or not Kenza really found the identity that she wanted. She decides she will leave France, though she is not returning to Algeria. When Slim the friend catches up with her at the train station, as the train is about to leave, he inquires to know why she has taken such a decision. Kenza's response manifests that even though she came to France to try to understand her own identity, she is not sure now where that will lead her. She says of herself: "Il me prend des envies de voyager. Des envies d'aller vers des pays où je n'ai aucune racine. Comme toi" (223). Yet we know that Slim's notion of identity is not an ideal one but an escapist stance. Kenza cannot shed her identity as a Muslim woman, an Algerian, or a North African. The open-ended nature of the novel seems to pose an important dilemma not just regarding the female identity but Algerian society in general. What freedom does exile bring to the individual fighting oppression? What would become of Algeria with the power of the religious fanatics who controlled the social and political life of the mass of the people? Mokeddem's novel does not necessarily provide complete answers to these questions. What Hamil says in his study of exile in Mokeddem's novels, lends credence to the conclusion that I draw about the open-ended nature of the novel. Hamil observes that "as a wanderer herself, Mokeddem engages through her writings with the various psychological and cultural effects germane to the condition of being an exiled writer" (Hamil 2004: 55). He believes that it is about a state of mind that has not achieved what it longed for. He observes further that if Mokeddem's heroines do not reach a final answer to their exilic condition, it is perhaps because Mokeddem sees this condition to be a generalized postcolonial paradox, not just her condition alone (Hamil 2004: 55).



Though Kenza does not seem to have found a final answer to her “exilic condition,” other Algerian women share the burdens of this unsettling female condition. It is also true, as Ireland asserts (2002: 60) that the lack of closure that characterizes Mokeddem’s and other Algerian fictional narratives characterizes the fact that the civil strife in the country has not yet come to an end and that these Algerian authors represent the voice of the dilemma of whose vision of Islam will prevail in post-colonial Algeria. Algerian fictional narratives highlight the conflict of discourses between radical Islamists and a more peaceful form of Islam represented by those who refuse to sanction the use of violence (Ireland 2002: 54). Susan Ireland has observed about Algerian women’s writing that: “although born of individual experience, the texts evoke collective suffering and a common struggle, and [that] each piece of testimony communicates a sense of solidarity with all those who have chosen to resist” (Ireland 2001: 178). Resisting is rejecting the identity that is imposed on women by society, and Kenza in *Des Réves et des Assassins*, as I have demonstrated in this study, represents that resistance. Feminism is a strong oppositional movement in contemporary Algeria and as Winifred Woodhull has argued, it is important to stress the importance of reading Algerian fiction “by attending to its subtle and fluid articulations of women as agents of social transformation, and of gendered social relations as both targets and forces of progressive change (Woodhull 52). I have demonstrated in my focus on feminine identity that Mokeddem’s Kenza represents such an agent of social transformation that Algeria needs. Kenza transgresses boundaries when she challenges norms that are imposed by a patriarchal system that does not always function in the interest of women in her society. Sandrine Teixidor’s (2009: 569) assertion that characters in Mokeddem’s *L’Interdite* redefine 20<sup>th</sup> century relationships and “construct their lives away from the imposed social and cultural limitations and required boundaries” is very relevant too for the protagonist of *Des Rêves et des Assassins* who battles to shape her own identity. In redefining her identity, Kenza represents such a figure. Mokeddem’s novel leaves us with much to ponder about the female identity in Algerian society; but it also suggests that the Kenzas give a sense of hope not only to women but also to society in general, because their lives are committed to fighting for equality and justice. Mokeddem’s novel is a critique of all forms of injustice prevailing today.

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