

Reading Trauma and Cultural Hybridity in Malika Mokeddem's *N'zid* (2001)

Traumatisme de lecture et hybridité culturelle dans *N'zid* de Malika Mokeddem (2001)

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Date of receipt:30-07-2021	Date of revision:07-10-2021	Date of acceptance:30-12-2021
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Abstract

This article deals with the effects of the Black Decade on the Algerian women's narratives. As an artistic response to the traumatic events, Algerian woman writers coped with the eventful Algerian history by writing to remember, heal, and construct their identities, as well as to revoke the image of Algerian women, limited to private space. Focusing on Malika Mokeddem's *N'zid* (2001), this article is to underline the connection between two common features, namely trauma and cultural hybridity. With reference to critical observations on trauma in exilic writings in general and contemporary Algerian female fiction in particular, it is necessary to demonstrate how Malika Mokeddem uses memory loss as a narrational trope to provide anti-amnesiac testimony of the trauma of the crisis in order to restore Nora's hybrid identity. In this case, it is capital to suggest that identities of trauma are not necessarily marked by compulsive responses resulting in dysfunctionality and rupture.

Keywords:

trauma, cultural hybridity, Algerian black decade, Malika Mokeddem, identity, memory loss

Résumé

Cet article traite l'impact de la Décennie noire sur les récits des femmes algériennes. En tant que réponse artistique aux événements traumatiques, les femmes écrivains algériennes ont fait face à l'histoire mouvementée de l'Algérie en écrivant pour se souvenir, guérir et construire leurs identités, ainsi que pour révoquer l'image de la femme algérienne, limitée à l'espace privé. En se concentrant sur *N'zid* (2001) de Malika Mokeddem, cet article vise à souligner le lien entre deux caractéristiques communes, à savoir le traumatisme et l'hybridité culturelle. En référence aux observations critiques sur le traumatisme dans les écrits exiliques en général et dans la fiction féminine algérienne contemporaine en particulier, il est nécessaire de démontrer comment Malika Mokeddem utilise la perte de mémoire comme trope narratif pour fournir un témoignage anti-amnésique du traumatisme vécu afin de restaurer l'identité hybride de Nora. Dans ce cas, il est capital de suggérer que les identités de traumatisme ne sont pas nécessairement marquées par des réponses compulsives résultant en un dysfonctionnement et une rupture.

Mots-clés : traumatisme, hybridité culturelle, décennie noire algérienne, Malika Mokeddem, identité, perte de mémoire

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1. INTRODUCTION

Algerian women's post-independence produced literature is meant to describe the psychological and physical consequences of the Algerian Dark decade on the population as a whole and women in particular. Among the repercussions, it is worth to mention trauma and exile. Assia Djebar, Maïssa Bey, and Malika Mokeddem are among those women writers who voiced the violence and fear that prevailed in this era. Fear and anger are two features that these female writers have

attributed to their female protagonists, with little emphasis on the way in which identity and experiences of trauma are linguistically and culturally structured. These protagonists are often dangling between two cultures, namely French (the culture that depicts modernity and focuses on the now) and the Algerian (the culture that projects extremist traditions and the traumatic past) culture.

Accordingly, one of the objectives beyond writing this article is to highlight the might be existing connection between trauma and hybridity in the novel of Malika Mokeddem because. In the process of doing so, one would show whether Malika Mokeddem uses memory loss in *N'zid* (2001) as a narrational trope to provide an anti-amnesiac testimony of the lingering trauma of the Algerian Black Decade in order to restore Nora's hybrid identity that is in-between two cultures, namely French and Algerian.

In this article, the scrutiny of the novel *N'zid* (2001) shows the relationship between trauma and hybridity. This relationship involves an implicit sense of connection which helps to understand the protagonist's multifaceted identity. Similarly, the relationship between trauma and hybridity can also be characterized as intrinsic and bearing essentially a sense *self-rebirth*. This theoretical conceptualization is reflected through the semantic dimension of the title *N'zid* – originally derives from the Maghrebian verb **zada**– that symbolizes both 'I am born' and 'I continue', a metaphor that embodies Nora's desire for an attempt to make sense of her cultural hybridity so she can heal and move on with her life.

The study of traumatizing experiences like amnesia is interesting in this respect for it highlights how, normally, does the sense of coherence, unity, and meaning prevail. Therefore, the disruption of this sense through trauma leads the individual to attempt to reconfigure a sense of order, meaningfulness and coherent

identity. Nora wakes up in a boat in the middle of the sea after undergoing a brutal physical act that led to a psychological rupture. Not aware of her name, or anything else, Nora tries to narrativize her trauma in an attempt to construct her hybrid self that overcomes limits and cultural boundaries set by two dominant cultures of Algeria and France. In doing so, the act of telling traumatic stories does not only provide resilience and empowerment, but it also makes it possible for Nora to use her trauma as a creative stimulus to rebuild her new identity.

With that being said, it would be necessary to ask about the process of establishing a connection between hybridity and trauma, and to ask about the way how Malika Mokeddem's protagonist attempts to reconfigure order in the face of traumatic incoherence. It is of equal importance to ask whether it is safe to say that identities of trauma are not necessarily marked by compulsive responses resulting in dysfunctionality and rupture.

2. The Algerian Female Voice: Writing against Trauma and Silence

In an introduction to the second edition of her book, *The Eloquence of Silence*, Marnia Lazreg wrote: "to the memory of all the Algerian women whose lives changed forever on July 3, 1830" (Lazreg, 2014). Change in this context might carry negative implications because Marnia believes that the process of colonization and decolonization has greatly effected the Algerian woman psychologically, socially, and politically.

With this in mind, it is interesting to investigate the psychological effects of the Algerian crisis (1980s-1990s) on women. Post-independence economic crisis

led to a socio-political chaos and societal casualties. This situation –sometimes referred to as a civil war, event, and crisis– generated a sense of psychological trauma among people. In this context, researchers such as Hamil (2004) and Khaled (2008) explained that two political¹ parties pursued completely divergent ideologies for the country: the democrats sought a modern secular society which is more open and totally transparent with women's rights. While the extremists² sought the reinforcement of the existing binary opposition of all what is modern/traditional, western/oriental, new/classical, French/Arabic, conservative and liberal, man/woman to mention just a few (Hamil, 2004; Khaled, 2008).

As far as this topic is concerned, and in accordance with the alleged gap existing between men and women, the latter were subject to assassinations, kidnapping, violence, and rape that caused a profound collective psychological shock. According to Salhi, "extremists issued death threats against feminist leaders who claimed the most basic civil rights for women in Algeria's misogynous culture" (Salhi, 2001, p. 103). Salhi's claim is pertinent in the novel of Maïssa Bey *Nouvelles d'Algérie* [Short Stories from Algeria] (1998) where she highlights the traumatic shock of the terrorist attacks. To use her words, Bey wrote:

To kill, to slaughter, to eliminate... how many words to say the same thing, words used having often been read and heard, like in those much too violent action movies that she refuses to watch. But this

¹ the FLN (National Front of Liberation) and FIS (Front of Islamic State)

² In the data that was used as a theoretical framework to this article, the term extremism, or extremist does not mean 'against' Islam. However, it is referred to as the misinterpretation of religion by a group of individuals who assassinate, rape, and bomb innocent people under the name of religion.

wasn't a film. She had before her a man, her husband, condemned to death by a phantom government before which he didn't even have to appear (qtd.in Belkaid, 2018; p. 129).

In fact, Algerian women were not only victims of political ideologies, but also the Family Code that subjugated women to the Algerian patriarchal customs. The Family Code of 1984 primary goal was to abolish Algeria's heterogeneous cultural identity and "purify the structure of the family from all its un-Islamic elements" (Lazreg, 2014; p.142-143; Hamil, 2004). However, the aftermaths of political regimes and the Family Code in Algeria included only social and political effects on the status of the Algerian women. Scholars like Hamil, Khaled, Lazreg, and Evans have usually described psychological effects as silence, neglecting the effects of the traumatic experience on one's identity.

By definition, traumatic experience is "an event that overwhelms the ordinary systems of care that gives people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 2015; p. 33). She further maintains that traumatized individuals are controlled by fear, helplessness, and horror. On a similar note, trauma theorists argue that the impact of cataclysmic incidents, be they personal or collective, dismantle the self and hinder free association, the "creative process through which experience, memory, and fantasy are woven into the texture of life—or culture" (Radstone, 2002; p. 457). Traumatic narratives, in Cathy Caruth's claim, are situated within a historical-cultural context. In other words, trauma is often resulted from collective experiences such as war and slavery, or personal ones such as rape and abuse (Hout, 2011). Moreover, in the postcolonial context,

trauma narratives convey a sense of sorting out the past, and serve as a “cultural testimony” of horrifying stories (Visser, 2011; p. 274). Writers in this case, transcend the silence resulting from the traumatic events, and attempt to transcend the sense of ‘unspeakableness’.

As far as Algeria is concerned, the task of narrativizing the psychological impact of the Algerian Black Decade is crucial for women writers in general. Malika Mokeddem, for instance, used writing as a tool to heal from trauma and to resist the political regime whose public discourse has been characterized by collective amnesia (Daoudi, 2016). Correspondingly, Hout adds, “forgetfulness becomes a strategy to suppress political/public memory” that is employed and estimated necessary by authoritarian government (Hout, 2011; p. 331). Indeed, the Algerian public policy has successfully omitted the Black Decade from the collective memory due to the Amnesty Law 2005. Daoudi remarks on this matter that this law “forbids Algerians from dealing with that period” (Daoudi, 2016; p. 42).

Similarly, the Algerian officials debated over the qualification of the events between 1980s and 1990s, and sometimes refused to qualify the period and the events as ‘civil war’; they preferred using, instead, attributes like “*crisis, national tragedy, and events*” (Daoudi, 2016; p. 43). Such argument had converted the Algerian crisis into a taboo, ignoring the psychological effects inflicted upon women, as the government refuses to inform its citizens about the past by adopting a law that buries traumatic memories. This may be interpreted as a form of imposed silence, as contends: “silence is prevalent via the institutional silence that called the war an “event”” (Schlosser, 2018; p. 8).

As far as writings about the Algerian events between 1980s and 1990s are concerned, Benjamin Stora (1999) holds that Algerian female authors were

determined to “overturn the image of women confined within the obscure silence of the private, domestic space” (81). Authors like Assia Djébar, Maïssa Bey, and Malika Mokeddem did not write to be ‘different’ from men; they used their pens to transgress the silence imposed on them. Dedier contends on this matter: “the more society prevented them from saying “I”, the more they wrote it in their texts” (qtd.in Stora, 1999; p.81). Likewise, Evans argues in *Tactical Silence in the Novels of Malika Mokeddem* (2010) that women writers like Malika Mokeddem used language tactically by re-appropriating the colonizer’s language—in this case the French language—for their own purpose. By doing so, Malika Mokeddem raises questions of what it is like to be a woman in Algeria in her novels.

In fact, Malika Mokeddem left Algeria in the 1990s because of the existential, and the psychological threats as well as the stress she had been undergoing by the Islamic fundamentalists (Orlando, 2011). She was forced into exile like many other Algerian intellectuals during the Dark Decade. Moreover, Malika Mokeddem felt that it was her duty to express the trauma and the acts of violence committed against civilians in general, and women in particular. In her writings, she unveiled the violence and atrocities committed against women by the failed political regime, and voiced the traumatic experience of women in the 1990s era. In all her novels, she shows female characters that try to challenge the patriarchal ideology set by the society they are brought in, and mostly these female characters are caught between two cultures, namely French and Algerian. The reason why all her protagonists are females is that she attempts to provide a multifarious interpretation of Algeria’s eventful history.

Like many Maghrebian francophone writers, Malika Mokeddem laimed an

exilic self-identification in her notion of belonging and not belonging because “the very ideal of nationhood and nationality have become problematic –even violent” (Orlando, 2011; p. 81). Similarly, Christopher Miller indicates in *Nationalists and Nomads* (1998) that the sociopolitical volatility of the postcolonial countries “have made issues of nationalism, nation, and nationhood come to the forefront of our attention” (118). Accordingly, Mokeddem delivers discontent with the postcolonial Algerian government in her writings by denouncing the violence that prevailed. She writes in *La Transe des Insoumis*:

Je noircis des pages de cahier, d’une écriture rageuse. J’en aurais crevé si je n’avais pas écrit. Sans ces salves de mots, la violence du pays, le désespoir de la séparation m’auraient explosée, pulvérisée. Les intégristes menacent de faire périr par le sabre ceux qui pèchent par la plume. Je fais partie de ceux qui, cloué à une page ou un écran, répondent par des diatribes au délabrement de la vie, aux folies des couteaux, aux trances des kalachnikovs (Mokeddem, 2003 ; p. 39)

I blackened the pages of notebooks with enraged writing.
I would have died if I hadn’t written. Without the balm of words, the violence of the country, the despair of separation would have exploded, pulverized, me. The fundamentalists threaten to kill with the sword those who sin with the pen. I’m one of those who, riveted to the page or the screen, respond with diatribes about the sorry state of life, the whims of knives, the trances of machine guns (our

translation)

In another context, this passage from Malika Mokeddem's novel only recalls a similar affirmation by Nawal Al Saadawi:

Writing is like killing, because it takes a lot of courage, the same courage as when you kill, because you are killing ideas, you are killing injustices, you are killing systems that oppress you. Sometimes it is better to kill the outside world and not kill yourself (qtd.in Guéye, 2010; p. 163).

Writing, according to Nawal Al Saadawi, is the only weapon that breaks silence and violence against women. Practically, Mokeddem's entire oeuvre, including *Des Rêves et des Assassins* (1995), *Le Siècle des Sauterelles* (1992), *L'interdite* (1993), *Mes Hommes* (2005), and *N'zid* (2001) expose the silence and the traumatic experiences that women go through to build their identity. However, what makes her protagonists different, is that they do not represent Miller called the "cultural purity" (Orlando, 2011; p.84), but they display different degrees of hybridity in which their new identities are nuanced. Malika Mokeddem's protagonists, thence, are ambivalent as they oscillate between two poles, "in-between the claims of the past and the needs of the present" (Bhabha, 1994; p. 219).

In fact, most of her protagonists are brought into a milieu in which identities are defined as definite and static. However, these protagonists are characterized with identities that are in the process of becoming, even after facing trauma. From

this perspective, a traumatized identity is intimately linked with the state of being an exile. Mokeddem's experiences of "unhomeliness", to use Bhabha's term, depict "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (Bhabha, 1994; p. 9). These experiences are thus defined by reasons for exile and traumatic memories.

Equally, Mokeddem writes from the vantage point of 'third space', i.e. she displays a state of cultural in-betweenness, she is not limited to the geographical setting in which she writes. Arguably, in Homi Bhabha's conceptualization, Malika Mokeddem develops a 'third culture' out of the already existing established cultures, namely Algerian and French. In this state of in-betweenness, she takes some aspects from one culture (Algerian) and other aspects from another (French), which makes her detached from both, and neither cultures are fully accepted nor rejected. In *N'zid* (2001), Nora heals from her trauma by creating her own identity that is in-between, neither fully Algerian, nor French.

However, a discussion on the question of the language is necessary. The use of the colonizer's language by most North African writers is still a debatable topic of discussion. Francophone writers molded the French languages to their own purpose, "rendering the French reader foreign in his own language" (Orlando, 2011; p. 86). In other words, the languages is not an ideology, it is a means for francophone Maghrebian authors to express the sociocultural multiplicity of their societies.

Moreover, Stovall and Van den Abbeele argue that the language employed by these authors delivers "something more protean, changeable, and diverse, something able to cross linguistic and cultural boundaries precisely because of its ability to assimilate an ever-increasing diversity of speakers" (qtn.in Orlando,

2011; p. 86). This argument parallels with feminist scholars like Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristiva's ideas on re-appropriating the language to construct new identities. Schlosser holds: "writers, and women writers in particular, must deconstruct linguistic rules and norms in order to make language work for them" (Schlosser, 2011; p.20).

Based on this theoretical background, Malika Mokeddem sought to cope with trauma by writing in French. In fact, writing in French may also be seen as a resistance to the oppression of Mokeddem's country of origin –that is postwar Algeria. Writing in French does not however make Mokeddem less Algerian; she chose to write in the colonizer's language to embody her 'Algerianess' that is a separate entity of the ensemble oppression in Algerian (tradition, patriarchy, neocolonial politicians, and islamist extremists) (Hamil, 2004; Miller, 2004).

In her novel *N'zid* (2001), Mokeddem presents Nora, a woman who lost her memory due a traumatic experience as a metaphor to the collective amnesia of the Algerian *crisis*. The palpable power of images of dead people, slaughtering, and bombing damage one's identity and sense of belonging. This is reflected in Nora's oscillation between two cultures, showing what Edward Said called "contrapuntal consciousness" i.e. the unescapable visions due to awareness of two or more cultures (qtd.in Hout, 2011; p. 334).

3. *N'zid*: Trauma between exile and the motherland

Vision Ette argued that in the postmodern era, temporal bases of writing became weaker and spatial ones became stronger. It is necessary, then, in Ette's

argument, that one should shift away from territorialized³ literary production and focus on migration and movement in order to understand the reality of cultures. Similarly, Vickroy highlighted the increased mobility of individuals and thoughts due to globalization, migration, and forced exile have led to displacement and made “conceptions of ethnicity less static and more mobile, fluid, and hybrid as they are subject to a greater variety of cultural influences” (Vickroy, 2005; para. 1). In light of this setting, one questions the relationship between culture and self, and whether the separation from the homeland is traumatic.

The case of the exiled Algerian woman writer Malika Mokeddem is exemplary, namely in her sixth novel *N'zid* where she displays the flux of identity in association with trauma and cultural hybridity. The novel opens with the protagonist, Nora, slowly emerging from a loss of consciousness after suffering a traumatic event on the deck of a boat that is the middle of the Mediterranean Sea: “entre deux eaux comme un poisson harponné ... elle flotte en totale apesanteur” (between two waters like a harponned fish... she floats in complete weightlessness) (Mokeddem, 2001; p. 8). Moreover, Nora is unable to refer to herself in the first person, which according to Herman is a symptom of post-traumatic disorder, since the traumatic event destroys the connection to one's self (Herman, 2015). Mokeddem's novel is, thus, the journey of a woman, in between two shores, navigating her way to recovery from a traumatic experience and reconstructing the pieces of her past memories in order to reclaim a hybrid

³ In *Literature without a Fixed Abode*, Ette argued that literature should shift away from place-bound literature by ‘vectorizing’ it. this “vectorization has comprised not only the themes and content of literature, their various presentations and representations of movement, but also their adoption by wide spectrum of readerships on a global scale” (Ette, 42)

identity. However, the reader faces several questions about the protagonist: Who is Nora? Why is she in the middle of the sea? Where was she, and where is she heading? In an elaborated work on Malika Mokeddem's novels, Evans holds that *N'zid* is Mokeddem's most enigmatic novel that "reads like a mystery" (Evans, 2010; p. 95).

Notably, *N'zid* is different from the other works of Mokeddem. While her early novels are set in land, either in Algeria or in France, the novel under scrutiny is set in an in-between place that is the sea, and carries the imprint of disruptive, overwhelming psychological events, in which Nora attempts to reshape a cultural memory of these events in her own artistic authenticity. The sea in this context "lends itself to metaphors of mobility in space that support life in ways that the desert does not" (Miller, 2004; p. 29). Mokeddem embraces the sea as the ever-changing space in which Nora awakes "since it carries an inherent potential for exchange, negotiation, and self-discovery" (Carlson, 2011; p. 344). Homi Bhabha describes these in-between space as "the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood...that initiate new signs of identity ... It is in the emergence of the interstices ... that the intersubjective and collective experience of nationness, community interest, or cultural values are negotiated" (Bhabha, 1994; p. 1-2). In this space of movement, Bhabha affirms "the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without as assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha, 1994; p. 4). In this context, Nora's recovery from trauma turned into a grueling self-searching experience in which she must face memories of the past.

According to Judith Herman (2015), traumatic memories are different from normal memories and are stored in the brain in a fragmented way. Herman further elucidates that traumatic memories "lack verbal narratives and context; they are

encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (Herman, 2015; p. 38). Nora’s amnesia is at its worse at the beginning of the novel. She is surrounded by internal and exterior silence: “autour d’elle, le silence semble avoir claqué le ciel sur la mer” (around her, silence seems to have slammed the sky on the sea) (Mokeddem, 2003; p. 9). Internal silence is a sign of the trauma she went through that is apparent on in the way Mokeddem describes her: “assise sur le rebord du cockpit, les jambes pendantes le vide, le visage dans les mains, elle ne parvient pas à réfléchir” (p. 9). However, Nora’s memory starts to return when she tries to invent a past to share with Loïc, another mysterious character that she meets in the sea. As she shares some stories with Loïc, she remembers that she is a professional artist: “je...je...suis peintre” (Mokeddem, 2011; p. 46). Evans contends that the ellipsis are a sign of Nora’s amnesia, which denotes her difficulty in remembering her past, as well as she is very protective (Evans, 2010).

It is important to mention at this point that Malika Mokeddem created a protagonist with multiple backgrounds: Nora Carson was born in French to an Irish father and an Algerian mother. She is able therefore to communicate in several languages, which promote cultural hybridity. At some point in the novel, Nora declares that she is running away from what Mokeddem calls ‘fundamentalists’ who end up assassinating her two friends: Jamil and the French Jean R. One suggests that perhaps losing friends to this act of violence is what made Nora amnesiac. Her amnesia can be read as a metaphor for the collective Algerian people, thousands of who were killed in the crisis.

Consequently, Nora is unable to return home, which is a “direct result of her fragmented identity that precedes her amnesia at the outset of the text” (Carlson, 2010; p. 346). Nora, thus, is destined to remain detached and fluid, just like the sea.

In fact, her transcontinental mobility make her the epitome transnational diasporic subject that cuts across the Algerian and the French cultures, but never belonging completely in neither. Nora is a displaced subject par excellence, and defined as a cultural hybrid woman who goes beyond cultural and linguistic borders in order to create a space her own self. Additionally, Nora's displacement between Algerian and France indicates a "nomadic" sense of self (Carlson, 2010; p. 350), a term that Bhabha defined as "a return to the performance of identity as iteration, the re-creation of the self in the world of travel, the resettlement of the borderline community of migration" (Bhabha, 1994; p. 9).

Nora's identity is linked, thence, to the sea, the mobile place that permits the (re)construction and the (re) creation of the self, even in the face of trauma. On similar notes, Miller argues that the sea in N'zid "is also the metaphoric "ground" or "field" that permits Nora's emerging, (re)unified identity, in all its multiple dimensions, to coalesce, to become visible, to be knowable and to remain in motion without disintegrating into the aimless vagabondage of alienation" (Miller, 2004; p. 33). To recover from trauma, and to regain not only her lost memory, but also her new hybrid identity, Nora breaks the cultural barriers and takes a symbolic and universal dimension.

4. Conclusion

As we have shown through the close reading of N'zid (2010), the narrative of the main character, Nora, is fragmented and not linear, which constitute the hallmarks of trauma writing. She lost her memory, which is a key component of identity. Consequently, she is on the quest of finding who she is. Instead, identity

components, namely trauma and cultural hybridity, serve to define the self, giving it a sense of wholeness. Additionally, Nora does not know who she is and lacks any firm and consistent identity, primarily as a result of a severe traumatic experience. Given the primary aim of this article that is shedding the light on how trauma can impact identity and self-understanding and dramatically alters a person's sense of selfhood. In her novel, Malika Mokeddem connects limitations of freedoms of women to the patriarchal Algerian culture and mostly to the misinterpretation of Islam by 'fundamentalists' in Algeria. In *N'zid*, she creates a narrative of survival, highlighting the connection between trauma and cultural hybridity. The latter is manifested in the language, setting, and theme, while the former describes Nora's psyche. *N'zid* centers on the notion of trauma, amnesia, and restoration of the self.

Through Nora, Mokeddem articulates her own psychological trauma and diminished sense of self that she links to her disconnection from Algeria. It is only through cultural hybridity that she could survive and create a new universal identity, that is neither linked to Algeria, nor to France.

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