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Rupturing Metanarratives in Malika Mokeddem's *The Forbidden Woman*

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the portrayal of women and their societal roles in Mokeddem's seminal work, *The Forbidden Woman* (1993). Drawing on postmodernist and existentialist frameworks, particularly theories by Jean-François Lyotard and Simone de Beauvoir, the analysis discloses itself through the lenses of Sultana and Dalila's experiences. Mokeddem's novel depicts the dissolution of selfhood, the impact of societal norms, and the resistance against oppressive codes.

Keywords: *Metanarratives; Postmodernism; Mokeddem; Feminism; De Beauvoir*

Introduction

The portrayal of women and their societal roles has been a poignant and recurrent theme in Algerian fiction. This present study delves into its larger dimensions through the lens of Malika Mokeddem's seminal work *The Forbidden Woman* (1998). Mokeddem, hailing from a small Algerian village in the western desert, examines the challenges faced by women within the Algerian social framework. Drawing inspiration from her own life, she crafts narratives that articulate the constraints and tribulations imposed upon women by stereotypical perceptions rooted in gender bias. Mokeddem's literary work serves as a canvas for explicit denunciation and resistance, vividly portraying the injustices perpetrated by patriarchal norms. Through her storytelling, she unveils a compelling narrative that not only exposes the shackles endured by women but also advocates for a subversive call to action. Relying on Jean-François Lyotard's postmodernist theories well as Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, my examination attempts to shed light on how *The Forbidden Woman* unravels the layers of societal constraints, and instates a persistent theme of resistance against ingrained gender inequalities.

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1. Metanarratives in *The Forbidden Woman*

Defining postmodernism proves to be a contentious endeavor, marked by a notable absence of consensus regarding its precise meaning or reference. Multiple opinions emanate from historians, philosophers, and literary critics, contributing to a complex and multifaceted discourse surrounding the intellectual essence of this movement. Ironically, the elusive definitions we may provide actually reinforce one of the main tenets of the movement: there is no prescribed meaning to anything. Postmodernism is consistent in its inconsistencies, so to speak. A prominent figure in postmodernist theory, Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodern thought in his *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (14). This implies a profound skepticism towards any overarching assumptions about an ultimate truth or reality. Metanarratives, encompassing domains such as religion, science, and politics, face repudiation by postmodernists like Lyotard, who contest the validity of their alleged universal values. While not all postmodernists outright deny the existence foundational concepts, a prevailing sentiment among them suggests that the grand narratives purporting to explain modern society have become antiquated. As Lyotard writes, "our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies" (14). In essence, postmodernist thought reinstates a skeptical philosophical stance characterized by suspicion towards the "inconsistencies" of metanarratives. Rather than accepting these narratives at face value, postmodern society is encouraged to adopt an attitude of negation concerning the beliefs these narratives seek to establish. In thoroughly interrogating these metanarratives, Lyotard's postmodernism emerges as distinctly anti-essentialist, advocating for a shift from consensus to dissensus. Consequently, postmodernism actively questions the notion of epistemological archetypes. "The status of knowledge" Lyotard articulates "is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter the postmodern age" (3). In simpler terms, there is a new proliferation of discourses previously silenced by metanarratives. In this regard, Malika Mokeddem's *The Forbidden* Woman crystalizes some of the ways in which individuals reject societal metanarratives in hope of freeing oneself from the cultural constraints they engender.

The novel unfolds as Sultana, an Algerian woman, previously in exile in France, makes a return to her small village in the western region of Algeria. It marks her first visit in over two decades since her initial departure. Her initial motivation for the return was to reunite with her former lover, Yacine, with whom she had been silent for many years. She discovers upon her return that he has passed away. The shocking news of Yacine's death intertwines with the nostalgic landscape and merges with the painful memories that grip her in Tammara, her native village. As she grapples with the resurgence of agonizing past events, her stay becomes challenging, further complicated

by the unfolding political turmoil in Algeria during the 1990s. In *The Forbidden Woman*, Mokeddem presents religious constructs as metanarratives that plague Algerian society with prejudices against women. Consequently, these narratives pose substantial political and cultural obstacles, severely limiting women's autonomy and freedom. In a conversation with ten-year old Dalila, Sultana is told how some of these narratives are perpetuated. In the following passage, the little girl voices her anger against school's expectations to mimic the lives of Prophet Muhammad's wives

> These stupid things from the Hadith that want to make you live the way the prophet Muhammad's wives and daughters lived. How many Muhammads have there been since that one? But if you refuse to follow this path, you're promised every kind of hell. The schoolmasters are so happy to tell you how they're going to boil you in a big vat of bad people. How they're going to have you torn like horses… (75).

Dalila's frustration sheds light on the societal constraints imposed on women through religious metanarratives. We can also note Dalila's rejection of these prescribed roles as she labels women's expected emulations of the Prophet's wives as "stupid things." She also highlights the changing times, thus questioning the idea of a fixed and unchanging narrative that should be followed unquestioningly. The threat of punishment, as described by schoolmasters, mirrors the authoritarian nature of such narratives, attempting to control individuals through fear. In the novel, the root of such depreciative discourse against women resides in school. Moeaddem writes: "school is no longer a space where you learn. She says that now it's a factory for morons and little Islamists" (74). The passage encapsulates a critical perspective on the educational system, particularly its impact on shaping individuals' beliefs and ideologies. Mokeddem questions the assumed authority of this system to present unbiased knowledge.

The novel consistently denounces a repressive stance towards women, illustrating persistent biases deeply embedded in these narratives. On one occasion, the gender is vilified: "you're a woman… it's a sin" (105). Similarly, it is also presented as a source of trouble: "girls" are "just worries full of worries" (80). Further still, Sultana is asked to imitate the "real" Algerian women (110). To which she replies: "The real! The real ones! Always this same word! Do more false, more underhanded qualifiers than that one exist?" (111). The notion of "real" is rooted in the metanarratives that Sultana refuses to abide by. Consequently, she is seen as the transgressor. Simone De Beauvoir's seminal work on feminist theory, *The Second Sex* (1949), describes women suffering from this antagonistic process as the "absolute Other" (80). De Beauvoir's influence on postmodernist thought cannot be overstated. In fact, much of what she argues in *The*

Second Sex resonates in Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. De Beauvoir's central thesis is that women have been systematically defined by prevalent "myths" that relegate them to an inferior status (1). From this perspective, one can easily read Lyotard's hypotheses as subtle reaffirmations of the same arguments already advanced by De Beauvoir. Accordingly, what Lyotard calls "metanarratives "and De Beauvoir "myths" relegate women to the status of "Other." This is further demonstrated by Sultana's questioning of her own identity.

> I'm no longer Algerian, nor am I French. I wear a mask. A Western mask? The mask of an emigre? The height of the paradox is that the two often merge. By virtue of always being elsewhere, you inevitably become different (112).

Ostracized by her village and family, exiled in France, Sultana no longer knows who she is. She constantly plays the role of "the Other." Her predicament is hardened by her own confession that she is "multiple and torn apart" (111). Needless to say, such recurrent feelings of unbelonging will have long lasting impacts on Sultana's perception of the world.

Postmodernist thought also stipulates that our notion of selfhood dissolves when we acquiesce to the futility of metanarratives. The state of marginality in which individuals find themselves, by virtue of their recognition that there is no ultimate truth, is celebrated and valorized. Postmodernism thus destabilizes our quest for meaning as purposeless. Peter Reed describes postmodernist vision as "existential….with no identifiable meaning or purpose… where man comes from, why he is here, where he goes to, remain unanswerable" (206). Mokeddem's *The Forbidden Woman* probes into this issue of finding oneself. "Who am I, with such a situation?" asks Sultana, "I don't know very well. It's an indescribable sensation" (88). Her rhetorical questions underscore a sense of confusion and disorientation. This resonates with posmodenist dissolution of a fixed and stable selfhood in the absence of overarching metanarratives. She then continues "you lose your cohesion. You become several beings that can't be grasped, like exaggerated metaphors of yourself, projected into what is possible, what is tolerable" (86). Now marginalized, Sultana grapples with the absence of an ultimate truth. This is notably highlighted when Dalila asks Sultana about the "true" identity of Algerians, whether Berbers or Arabs held the better claim. "A mix is the only truth…all the rest is only hypocrisy or ignorance" (78). She expresses her skepticism towards fixed notions of identity, thus reaffirming her postmodern anti-essentialist stance against grand narratives. In this case, the rejection of a singular identity in favor of multiplicity undermines the attempt to assert one as superior or more authentic than the other. By stressing the "ignorance" of such quest, Mokeddem further underscores the

postmodernist critique of dogmatic viewpoints. It suggests that any insistence on one "true" identity fails to recognize the fluid and diverse nature of Algerian ancestry. Consequently, Sultana feels “listless” (113).

2. Resistance in *The Forbidden Woman*

We have seen so far how “metanarratives” and “myths” considerably restrain women’s blossom in *The Forbidden Woman*. One critical issue subsists: is there a way out? In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir suggests a number of attitudes to endorse in hope of prevailing against prejudices towards women. First, she asserts the absence of an essential, predetermined nature specific to women. “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman” (283). Womanhood is thus a learned construct shaped by societal expectations nurtured by prevalent metanarratives. From early childhood, societal norms dictate women's behavior, confining them within a predetermined circle of identity. Rejecting the notion of a fixed and limiting female essence, de Beauvoir contends that there is no predefined female character. In *The Forbidden Woman,* the young girl Dalila deplores the prevailing views that limit her to submissive housework.

> They're always saying to me, "You're not going out! Work with your mother! Bring me something to drink! Give me my shoes! Iron my pants! Lower your eyes when I talk to you!" and on and on and you multiply it by seven. They yell and do nothing but give me orders. Sometimes they hit me. My mother, she's happy when I'm with Ouarda because I can read and do schoolwork. But she also says, "Obey your brothers. If you don’t, you’re not my daughter (27).

Dalila's account of being beaten further underlines the physical and emotional abuse she has to endure, suggesting the harsh consequences of deviating from her prescribed role and expectations. While Dalila's mother appreciates her engagement in reading and schoolwork, her directive to "obey your brothers" indicates her stubborn belief in the metanarrative of gender roles within the family. The ultimatum, "If you don’t, you’re not my daughter,” reinforces the societal pressure on women to conform to established norms, even at the cost of their autonomy. In essence, Dalila's arc illustrates the lived experiences of women in the face of societal expectations, portraying a concrete manifestation of de Beauvoir’s concerns. To this problem, de Beauvoir urges women to reject the way their societies define them. She stresses the importance of women’s responsibility to rebel against their predicaments. “This downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it” (16). In other words, women must take their courage and act against the societal forces that reduce them to stereotypical positions.

Like men, they have the agency to define themselves through their actions. We see this enacted in the novel in three ways. First, it is implemented through Sultana's refusal to abide by Tammara's societal codes. She rejects the dress code being imposed on her, drinks alcohol openly, and meets with foreign men carelessly. But above all, she chooses to stay in her native village after Yacine's death – signaling her ultimate motivation to fight against the tide. In so doing, Sultala echoes Audre Lorde's "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own (87.) Secondly, Mokeddem imbues Dalila's characterization with a sense of hope and resistance. In one particular scene, Dalila describes to Sultana one of her dreams in which she metaphorically reimagines her native town.

> Sometimes in my dreams, the palm trees are red and there's lots of pretty clouds in the sky: white ones, clear gray and dark gray ones, a lot of violet-colored and even black ones. They make shadows on the whole earth. There's water sleeping in the wadi. A transparent dream. You can see its outside and its inside. You see brilliant pebbles, like wet stars, at the bottom, you also see clouds that dance in the water and palm trees dancing (81).

The dream sequence presents itself as a vibrant canvas of hope, employing a rich imagery of colors that paint a picture of a promising future. It suggests newly acquired vitality, renewal, and a perhaps a departure from societal norms. It does leave us with an optimistic impression marked by liberation and authentic self-expression, features of human life insofar unknown to Dalila and many other young women. Finally, the theme of resistance is epitomized by the novel's ending. The grim and oppressive atmosphere conveyed by Mokeddem gives way to a redemptive vision. Many of Tammara's women visit Sultana at the hospital of the town in order to declare their support. One of them proclaims: "we must speak. We must give ourselves solidarity. One hand alone cannot applaud, and we can't take anymore! We are so worn out" (143). Another one follows with: "they have to know that we won't let them push us around anymore. That we're even ready to take up arms again if we have to" (143). Further expressions of resistance are voiced: "we don't want to fall under an even more ruthless yoke, that of the fundamentalists" (141). Things have thus come full circle. Not only have Tammara's women faced the myths that subjugate them, like de Beauvoir has hoped women would, but they also decided to take action against them.

Conclusion

Malika Mokeddem's *The Forbidden Woman* examines the challenges faced by Algerian

women through the reverberating pains of Sultana and Dalila. They embody the pervasive impacts of societal norms and religious metanarratives on Algerian women's autonomy. The novel aligns with postmodernist and existentialist thoughts by exploring the dissolution of selfhood, symbolized by Sultana's disorientation and Dalila's dream of hope and renewal. Simone de Beauvoir's call for women to rebel against societal definitions finds resonance in Sultana's refusal to conform to Tammara's codes. The novel conclusion's is a powerful depiction of active resistance against oppressive norms, reflecting a collective call for change. Mokeddem's work, navigating the complexities of gender inequalities, offers a moving portrayal of women's resilience and the quest for self-discovery within a societal landscape dominated by prescriptive assumptions.

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