

Narrative Space as an Expression of Silence in Three Novels by Malika Mokeddem

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Abstract: The Algerian Sahara is one of the most long-standing myths and motifs in literature. This *locus* became the favorite geographical as well as cultural space in numerous reports and works by geographers, soldiers, explorers, adventurers, expeditors, poets, painters, and writers. The present paper proposes to study the representation of Algerian Sahara in three novels by Malika Mokeddem. The corpus includes *Le Siècle des sauterelles* (1992), *L'Interdite* (1993) and *La nuit de la lézarde* (1998). Many researchers have explored the politics and poetics of space in Malika Mokeddem's fiction; however, no one has commented on the use of the desert as an expression of silence. The study demonstrates that Mokeddem used this space to express the unsayable and to deconstruct the colonial representation of the Algerian Sahara.

Keywords: representation of space, silence, Algerian literature, Algerian Sahara

Résumé : Le Sahara algérien est l'un des plus anciens motifs et mythes dans la littérature. Ce lieu est devenu un paysage géographique et culturel favori dans de nombreux rapports et œuvres littéraires et artistiques des aventuriers, expéditeurs, peintres, militaires, poètes et écrivains français en particulier pendant l'expansion de l'empire Français en Afrique du Nord. Cet article étudie la représentation du Sahara Algérien dans trois romans de Malika Mokeddem. Le corpus inclut *Le Siècle des sauterelles* (1992), *L'Interdite* (1993) et *La nuit de la lézarde* (1998). Cette étude montre que Mokeddem a choisi ce lieu géographique comme espace pour exprimer l'inexprimable et déconstruire la représentation coloniale du désert.

Mots-clés : représentation de l'espace, silence, littérature algérienne, Sahara algérien

المخلص:

الصحراء الجزائرية من أقدم الأفكار والأساطير في الأدب. أصبح هذا المكان مشهداً جغرافياً وثقافياً مفضلاً في العديد من التقارير والأعمال الأدبية والفنية للمغامرين الفرنسيين والرسامين والجنود والشعراء والكتاب خاصة أثناء توسع الإمبراطورية الفرنسية في شمال إفريقيا. يدرس هذا المقال تمثيل الصحراء الجزائرية في ثلاث روايات لمليكة مقدم. تضم المجموعة (1992) *Le siècle des sauterelles* و (1993) *L'interdite* و (1998) *La nuit de la lézarde*. تنتظر هذه الدراسة أن تقدم اختارت هذا الموقع الجغرافي كمساحة للتعبير عما لا يمكن وصفه وتفكيك التمثيل الاستعماري للصحراء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تمثيل الفضاء، الصمت، الأدب الجزائري، الصحراء الجزائرية

Introduction

Time, a vital constituent of any story, has for a long time been considered more important than space. The supremacy of time in human and social studies in the

nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century ended in the late twentieth century with the spatial turn which led to the development of geo-centered approaches and disciplines like geopoetics, geophilosophy, cartography, literary geography, geocriticism, narratology of space, ecocriticism, and spatial studies (Ziethen, 2013 p. 1). A paradigm shift after the spatial turn occurred, and the impact was enormous; scholars and researchers in human sciences began reconsidering the position of space in the narrative.

Mikael Bakhtin, Henri Mitterand, Michel Butor, Youri Lotman, and A.J. Greimas, to name only a few, have extensively written about space and literary criticism; however, the real advance occurred in the nineties after the publication of books by geographers like Marc Brosseau's *Des Romains-géographes* and Bertrand Westphal's *La Géocritique* (Ziethen, 2013; Bourneuf, 1970). The main object of these studies is how urban space is represented in realistic novels and travel literature. It is important to note that space is reworked by language; this created a kind of discomfort among geographers who were interested in the representation of space in literary works. The space represented in a literary work is never real because it is idiosyncratic and reflects the writer's perception of space. Besides, some spaces are invented. In *Landscape and Power*, W. J. T. Mitchell explains that if "*a place is a specific location, space is a 'practiced place,' a site activated by movements, actions, narratives, and signs, and a landscape is that site encountered as image or 'sight'*" (Mitchell, 2002, p. x). The scholar adds that:

"Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role concerning something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world, as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site." (Mitchell, 2002, p. 2)

Many writers imagine the desert as a land of hardship, distress, and delusion, a place of nothingness, isolation, and solitude while others prefer to see this *topos* as the land of the Word of God and divine revelation. In Judaic tradition, the desert is associated with death, evil, exile, and punishment; but it is also a symbol of wandering and a place where Moses received the Tablets of the Law. In the New Testament, however, this *locus* refers to Christ's temptation and withdrawal. In Islam, the desert is both mystical and mysterious and a place of reverence and meditation.

The study of the imaginary desert and more particularly the Algerian Sahara is new territory in literary and cultural studies. The Algerian Sahara is one of the most long-standing myths and motifs. This motif/ locus was nourished by biblical stories, accounts by travelers, explorers, and romantic and post-romantic writers. In modern literature, this space continues to captivate both Algerian and foreign writers. While nineteenth century French writers and servicemen saw it as a *terra incognita*, a void, an empty and

shadowy space that must be explored and more importantly subjugated, Algerian writers called for a deconstruction of the literary myth of the Algerian desert.

It should be noted that the terms 'Sahara' and 'desert' are not synonyms. Sahara, in Arabic الصحراء, does not always refer to an empty, unplanted place; in contrast, the Latin words 'desertus', 'desertum' and the past participle 'deserere' suggest the idea of an abandoned, barren, isolated, and unoccupied place similar to the most dreaded place known as Tanezrouft, the desert of the deserts, or the land of drought¹. Sahara in Arabic means yellow ochre lowland; it is not a barren land like *al khla* الخلاء.

The desert as a sign is very rich; it is ambivalent for it offers to anyone a different meaning and imposes various meanings on it, sometimes steered by some partiality and prejudice. In "The Desert Fathers" in *Nature and Madness* (1998), Paul Shepard drew attention to the relationship between the desert and the senses. He claimed that:

"The desert is a powerful, unique sensorium. Silence and emptiness are ambiguous descriptions of sounds and landforms. The desert is at once a place of sensory deprivation and awesome overload—too little life, too much heat, too little water, too much sky. Its cool shadows offer "thermal delight," and yet the desert evokes the terrors of the inferno." (Shepard, 1998, p. 47)

The desert is an inexhaustible source of referents and metaphors as we will see in the following examples written by European explorers, travelers, and writers. In his definition of the desert in *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America*, Catri Gerdsdorf notes:

"Removed from its geo-ecological referent, the terrain became a trope, a cipher signifying deficiency, lack, absence. 'Desert' henceforth represented 'any place lacking in something,' so much so that it became a kind of Wittgensteinian *Urzeichen*, the semiotic sign for otherwise inexpressible apprehensions and concerns." (Gerdsdorf, 2009, p. 16)

Gerdsdorf's definition in the above-quoted passage conforms to the representation of the desert in sacred texts. However, he reminds us that it is vital to imagine the desert in "more realistic, corporeal terms" (Gerdsdorf, 2009, p. 17). The Landscape's ecology, according to Gerdsorf, must be accredited.

The Birth of Imaginary Deserts

The Algerian desert remained for a long time impenetrable and *unruly* because of its remoteness and isolation. Although known by Arabs and North African travelers like Ibn Battuta and Leo Africanus, the Sahara before the nineteenth century was not crossed

¹ The word 'Ténéré' in Tamazight means the desert. It is a flat and firm ground that lacks vegetation and does not have dunes.

by Europeans. Still undiscovered by Westerners, the Algerian Sahara captured the curiosity and imagination of many writers and adventurers. Before 1830, the French imagined Algeria as a wide desert; general staff officers with good topographic, ethnographic, and cartographic backgrounds were sent between 1840 and 1844 to explore the area and provide an exhaustive overview (Broc, 1987, p. 302). In 1844, they penetrated for the first time the Door of the Desert, Biskra. Many accounts from antiquity to the first quarter of the 19th century perpetuate the idea that the Algerian Sahara is the lost Atlantic island. The project was not purely literary or artistic; it was political. The land expeditions led by officers and topographers had one purpose: the conquest of the African Sahara.

Unable to go alone to the Sahara, the French officers decided later to send indigenous informers under the direction of General Daumas. Daumas interrogated travelers, traders, pilgrims, and chiefs of caravans to get more information about the region. The notes and observations were collected in the famous *Le Sahara algérien* (1845). A center called Ecole pratique d'explorateurs indigènes was created by General Carette in Algiers and included indigenous travelers. A new approach was formulated which was based on collecting information from people who were qualified. Under the administration of Maréchal Randon who governed Algeria from 1851 to 1858, France succeeded to control Laghouat in 1852, Ghardaïa and Ouargla in 1853, and Touggourt and El-Oued in 1854. Later, and with the help of Si Hamza and his son Si Boubkeur, the French could, at last, penetrate the Southwestern part of Algeria known as the South Oran (le sud Oranais). In January 1861, Colonieu failed to enter the region of Touat and decided to go back to Géryville (Al Bayadh).

French civilians also wanted to explore the Algerian Sahara. Eugène Fromentin is the first adventurer who was neither a missionary nor a serviceman. He is probably the first writer who introduced the theme and motif of Sahara in French literature. His *Eté dans le Sahara* (1856) marked the beginning of a new sub-genre known as Saharian literature. In 1847-48, he visited the Constantinois and Biskra, and in 1853 he went to Laghouat and visited Djebel Ammour, which is famous for the Tidjani brotherhood. Fromentin used Daumas's book; actually, he traveled with Mohammed Al Chaambi; one of the indigenous travelers who provided Daumas with information.

More and more explorers ventured into the Algerian desert. Henri Duveyrier, the youngest explorer, with the help of Oscar Mac Carthy, Chikh Othman, and Henrich Barth explored the South. He was the first European to visit El Golea (El Menia, Ghardaia) in 1859 where he was received with unfriendliness by the local people. Duveyrier created the myth of the good Touareg and the image of the knights of the desert that we find in his book *Les Touaregs du Nord* (1864). The importance of his book lies in the destruction of one of the most common myths which describe the Sahara as a sea of sand. One should also point the difference between Duveyrier and Daumas; Daumas has never visited the Sahara.

At the height of industrialization and political unrest in Europe and mainly in France, the so-called 'French Sahara' became a source of inspiration for many Western artists. Driven by the romantic fascination with the desert as an inspirational and awe-inspiring space and a figure and expression of the sublime, many writers and painters visited North Africa and wrote travel narratives. Travel literature is about space and describes the voyager's first encounter with the unfamiliar and mysterious; the result is not always an accurate account of the setting because the imagined landscape is a consequence of the subject's contact with the object. Translating perception and feeling into words is an elaborate task because it implies going *beyond* the physical or natural landscape.

Travel literature offers quite an interesting picture of the Algerian Sahara because it explains the Europeans' obsession with the remote, exotic, and unfathomable. Eberhardt's *Ecrits sur le sable*, for instance, demonstrates the mythification of the desert. The two aforementioned narratives are examples of ethnographic writing; they present the Algerian desert as a dreamland, a utopia. The writers are driven by a desire nourished by readings about the desert.

To the abovementioned list of travel accounts by Europeans, we can also add Guy de Maupassant's *Récits d'Afrique* (1887-1890), which is made of twelve travel stories set in Algeria and Tunisia, and *Voyages et explorations au Sahara* (1861-1864) by the German explorer Rohlf Gerard. Eugene Formentin, a painter and traveler, in his *Un été dans le Sahara* (1857), explained the difference between the two words Sahara and desert and referred to M. le general Daumas' *Le Sahara algérien*. The desert, he said, is the general term used to refer to a land composed of plains, inhabited at some points but overpopulated on others, which are also called *Fiafi*, *Kifar* or *Falat* depending on if the lands are occupied, momentarily inhabited, or not fit to live in (Formentin, D'jelfa, 31 May., p 47). Later in the book he gave aspects or what he called the vulgar traits which sum up all the Orient saying that a city in the desert is an arid burnt place, where Providence, has made water, and man has created shade, the fountain where women gather, and men sleep outside in shade (Formentin, 1853). The two examples from the narrator's observations and perceptions in Daumas' *Le Sahara algérien* and Formentin's *Un été dans le Sahara* demonstrate well the sensations of loathing and desire at the same time; they are not different from the images that we find in many fictional accounts written in the 19th and 20th centuries by European writers and travelers.

Isabelle Eberhardt's writings offer a kind of an allegory where the Algerian desert is described as bewitching and unique, a land of dream and hallucination. However, Eberhardt does not always define the desert as a land of drought and desolation; there are many references in her oeuvre to mountains, salt lakes (Chotts or Shotts), and mudflats (*sebkhas*). The imaginative geography created in the 19th century, which had as a basis the sacred writings, prolonged the portrayal of the desert as a *locus terribilis* the opposite of the Garden of Eden or *locus amoenus*.

Pierre Benoit's fantasy novel *L'Atlantide* takes place in a kind of *terra incognita*, the unknown and forgotten kingdom of Atinea in Hoggar, and evokes a mysterious place called "Blad-el-Khouf" or "the country of fear" (Benoit, 1919). Benoit's novel draws upon the myth of Atlantis and moves from the traditional portrayal of the desert as a wasteland to the surreal and fantastic. Pierre Benoit did not pay tribute to the Algerian Sahara; what is startling is that the writer described the Hoggar but has never set foot there. The Algerian Sahara is depicted as a lost continent/ empire; a disintegrated, philistine, and remote city and the antithesis of the flawless and refined city of Athena. I believe that Benoit was more concerned with the literary theme of the lost empire of Atlantis than the desert itself. The Algerian desert is employed as a metaphor of the inaccessible, invisible land which inspired many French writers like Jules Verne and Paschal Grousset. The Sahara plays the function of the island in its seclusion. The novel, a rewriting of the myth of Atlantis created by Plato, makes sarcastic references to Fromentin and even Maupassant, who thought that he reached the desert when he arrived in Bousaada (Benoit, 1919, p. 18). The narrator explains that the desert has replaced the sea; the *sebkhas*, Salinas, Lake Tritonis described in ancient texts are traces, oases, cascades, and the sand bear witness of a lost civilization.

One can also add the short stories of Albert Camus that offer a less romantic picture of the Algerian Sahara. A lover of Algeria, Albert Camus *in Exile and the Kingdom* (1957), "La femme adultere", "Le Renégat" and "Le Desert", employed the Sahara as a symbol of the absurd; his protagonists in his stories set in the Algerian desert feel disaffected, estranged, and lost.

What is clear from this brief overview is that the literature produced by Europeans was nurtured by the writings of servicemen, explorers, geographers, travelers, and even adventurers. Some sources gave specious portrayals of the Algerian desert as an infertile, lurid land with no ecosystem and no life. Other writings described the place as malevolent pushing travelers to act ferociously. More important, the desert is not described as a social setting. Most of the texts, including exploration narratives, demonstrate a fascination with thrilling and distant settings.

The collective idea of the desert began to change with the discovery of gas fields in Jbel Bergain, in In Amenas in 1954 and oil fields in Edjleh and In Amenas in 1956. The Algerian desert is a fantasized space and a literary heritage; many Algerian writers after independence chose the Algerian Sahara as a locus and also a theme in their writings. We can cite Tahar Djaout's *L'Invention du desert*, Mohammed Dib's *Le Desert sans detour*, Simough, Mouloud Mammeri's *La Traversée*, Rachid Boudjedra's *Cinq Fragments*, Rachid Mimouni's *Timimoun*, Hbib Ayoub's *Le desert et après?*, Yasmina Khadra's *L'équation africaine*, and of course many of Mokeddem's novels.

Algerian writers had one project: to deconstruct the myth of the Sahara. The two first writers who refused to use the desert as a space of escape are Malek Haddad who wrote *Je t'offrirai une gazelle* (1959) and Mouloud Mammeri, author of *La Traversée*

(1982). Both novels tell a tragic destiny where the protagonists Mourad and Moulay die in the desert. Mammeri and Haddad did not want to represent the desert as a site of purity and innocence, a paradise on earth.²

Mapping Silence

Mokeddem, a space-conscious writer, was well aware of the French writers' mythification of the desert said in "L'identité Traversière" (2010):

« Dans *Une Passion dans le désert*, Balzac écrit: « Dans la littérature du désert, il y a tout, et il n'y a rien... C'est Dieu sans les hommes. » Pour moi, le désert c'était plutôt les Romanciers sans dieu. Aucun. Tant de dévastations étaient imprimées sur ma rétine, dans mes pensées que rien de salvateur ou simplement pacifique ne pouvait me venir du désert. J'identifiais le désert aux traumatismes que j'y subissais, à cette conception rétrograde de la femme, à la défaite des liens familiaux - sauf ma grand-mère bien sûr. » (Mokeddem, 2010, p. 1181)

The desert in Mokeddem's novels is ambivalent and inconsistent: it is peaceful and pleasant, but sometimes it is horrible. This exciting space evokes silence and goes even beyond it. Mokeddem's novel *Le Siècle des sauterelles* (*The Century of Locusts*) is about the desert as both a space and symbol of absolute silence and internal turmoil and furor. While in biblical stories the desert is a privileged *locus* of the divine, the spiritual, and the mystic, in Mokeddem's text, it is the theatre of conflicting forces between good and evil. Before analyzing space in the novel, it would be significant to remind that the actions take place in different loci. We move from the Tell to the Deep South, and many places like steppes, *hamadas*, *ergs*, *regs*, *mechtas* are described³. We also see *ksours* and palm gardens; so Mokeddem does not always describe the desert as a *locus horridus*: an infernal, rough and savage land. Also, of importance is that space has nothing to do with alterity or otherness; the novel is not a travel narrative about some exotic places.

Mehta (2003) argues that spatial configurations in Mokeddem's novels represent colonial, patriarchal, and gender ideologies, which draw attention to, prolong, and dislocate spatial binaries that incorporate tradition/modernity, urban/rural, writing/orality, and colonial/postcolonial (Mehta, 2003, p. 2). Mehta's article considers the connection between space and the making of a narrative of origin in light of orality as the basis of archival reclamation; the desert is the elemental cultural space of "scripted knowledge that keeps 'memory alive' despite the internal and external threats of amnesia and obliteration" (Mehta, 2003, p. 3).

An analysis of the symbolism of the desert in Mokeddem's oeuvre in general and *The Century of Locusts* shows that space is used to refer to void and silence. As said earlier, the novel is about wandering, loss, and death. *The Century of Locusts* describes Mahmoud's odyssey; like Homer's Ulysses, which is about displacement, movement,

³ An *erg* is a desert of fixed dunes while a *reg* is a desert of rocks. A *hamada* is a high rocky plateau in the Tells.

mobility, and instability, the desert, like the sea, is a supreme geographical space of traveling. Visibly, although the critics studied the practice and poetics of space in Mokeddem's works, they have not commented on the subversive use of the desert as an antithesis of a *locus amionus*; a shared literary *topos* in travel literature.

In the opening page, the narrator refers to steppes as a place of 'great solitude' (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 9), the *regs* sleep in a tanned disproportion in their damnation of light (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 10). When Nedjma is frightened, she thinks of her best protection: the desert as a headlock of emptiness and the limitless horizontalities are our narrator says (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 11). The desert, using the words of Mahmoud, is an unchallengeable, impregnable land (11). The space after Nedjma's death is seen by Mahmoud as empty, a dizzying void up to queasiness and sickness, up to the sensation of imminent death (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 20).

Mehta's analysis of space in Mokeddem's *The Century of Locusts* highlights some points and misses others. When Mahmoud goes to the *Tell* to get back the remains of his ancestor buried in the Sirvant estate, he feels alienated (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 36). The narrator says that space only reminded Mahmoud of pain which became 'mythical' to his people (36). Mahmoud's grandmother was buried first in her land; the *Tell*, a hilly and green land, symbolizes roots and origins which no longer exist (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 45). The remains of the hero's grandmother lying in the domain are according to him only rubbles and fragments of a broken memory; they stand for the broken identity of the community (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 46). In one dramatic scene, when Mahmoud tried to close the grave, he interred his father's letter as a sign of entombing his memory, his people's moral principles, and 'cretinism' to be able finally to begin a new life (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 48-9). In his journey to the South, Mahmoud alone with his horse, Nassim, and the remains of his ancestor in his bag, defies the silence of the space by talking to himself. The narrator asks: why all this unexpected overabundance of words? Is it because he remained silent for a long time? (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 51) Or is it because of his fear of silence? Whether Mahmoud was afraid of stillness or he wanted to confront it, we are sure that the desert had a great influence on him. The awe-inspiring silence of the place caused delirium; Mahmoud dreamed of a strange silent woman and his ancestor's domain being caught on fire (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 55-56).

Even the High Plateau is portrayed in the novel as lonely; Mahmoud is soothed after his reunion with the place. The 'austerity' and 'silence' of the High Plateau suit Mahmoud's acerbity and grievance (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 58); the narrator says that the place holds sway on Mahmoud and he knows that (p.58). They are dull, bleak, silent, and limitless, the threshold of the desert and the *Tell*, a territory of expectation, and a sublime yet uncomfortable space (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 58-9). The Plateau is an opening, nowhere of truth; in other words, it is a space of duality and in-betweenness. Mahmoud is neither a true nomad nor a sedentary; he is caught between in-betweenness: between orality and writing, and between escape and rebellion (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 59).

But Mahmoud was also aware of the demonic effect of the empty spaces on his imagination, and he was prepared to fight this blankness and excess with words: “*Il n’était pas de vide qu’il ne peut habiller de leur relief. Il n’était pas d’absence, de manqué qu’il ne thésaurisat en riches sensations. Et du piédestal de ce savoir, il était comme au seuil de l’humain*” (Mokeddem, 1992, p.59). Mokeddem’s representation of space is neither romantic nor realistic.

As the story progresses, the space acquires other meanings. It is in the Tell that Mahmoud meets Al Madjnoun, the Demented; an abject, pervert person and whimsical companion that incarnates excess and folly. Mahmoud, who feels disgusted now after learning that it was Al Madjnoun who set fire in the estate, thinks of the satanic effect of the steppes upon his imagination. Again, we find the same adjective ‘evil’ or ‘demonic’ which are used to describe the place and the character (Al Madjnoun). The steppes are also referred to as the lands of all evasions; Mahmoud’s desert steppes (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 112). Just a few paragraphs later, Mahmoud, in one of his interior monologues, speaks of his only territory of refuge:

« Il me faut retrouver le seul territoire salubre, mon seul refuge, l’écriture. Il me faut le transporter hors d’atteinte du hasard, hors des avatars de ses rencontres. Il me faut lentement y égrener mes pensées pour leur éviter de tomber dans l’à-pic vertigineux de l’angoisse [...] Je veux retrouver les steppes et l’humilité, la sobriété de leur horizontale nudité, *leur langue de silence* [emphasis added]». (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 113-4)

We notice in the quoted passage, the personification of the steppes; they are silent and bare. The steppes for Mahmoud the poet represent quietude and healing. The silence of the world lies within the steppes. The image of naked, silent steppes challenges the common representation of the desert as a cruel space; the High Plateau, described as the ground of the desert and a no-where (nulle-part) is both a muse and a source of imagination: “Les mots et leur dérision, la marche et son exigence sur les hauts plateaux et le desert maitriseront [ma vie], me protégeront de ses excès aussi (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 114). Mohamed Boudjadja claims that “*le désert n’est pas un simple phénomène géographique frappé par l’aridité et la désolation, mais un référent culturel, un espace d’oralité où se réalise l’écriture qui témoigne d’une affirmation d’appartenance*” (Boudjadja, 2013 , p. 80). Mahmoud wants simply to find again the desert, the romantic and sublime landscape, which is identical with innocence.

The desert is the land of absence and excess, but it is vital for Mahmoud: “*J’ai besoin des steppes. J’ai besoin de retrouver le désert. Je ne veux pas mourir*” (Mokeddem, Le siecle des sauterelles, 1992, pp. 132-4). After his encounter with Nedjma, Mahmoud goes southward; the narrator says that they arrive to the “*monde de l’ultime, de la plus absolue des fuites*” and the “*nulle-part*” where the word holds the power of the gods (Mokeddem, Le siecle des sauterelles, 1992, p. 137). After discovering the body

of Nedjma, the desert becomes a symbol of death: “*chaque grain de sable, chaque Caillou perpétue a l’infini l’idée de la mort*” (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 139). Mahmoud and Yasmine quit the land and go on the trail of absence (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 146); the journey towards absence and healing starts from the desert, and only *calam* and *midad*, and not revenge, will help Mahmoud lift the pain (147). Writing, says the narrator, is the nomadism of Mahmoud’s spirit in the desert of his absences, on the dead-end roads of melancholy (Mokeddem, *Le siècle des sauterelles*, 1992, p. 147).

The desert in the novel is not only a physical space; it is also used to refer to the characters’ inner conflicts or what the narrator calls “*les deserts intérieurs*” and “*l’aride de la vie*” (164). The desert, described in the closing chapter as the kingdom of silence (Mokeddem, 1992, p. 276), and a land of enchantment. When Mahmoud dies at the end, he becomes a mythical figure and a hero of tales; his body disappears. The end is confusing because all the signs have been removed by the sandstorm. Boudjadja notes that :

« Le lecteur des textes de M. Mokeddem relève non sans difficultés qu’elle incarne, au moyen d’une écriture narrative, le langage oral de la mémoire dans celui de l’écriture et donne aux voix qui parlent, la force de briser leur silence et appréhender le néant du désert. Pour elle, le désert est le lieu fictif de l’oralité et l’écriture. Des refrains, des analepses, des accumulations, des paronomases, des allitérations structurent le récit. Le désert devient un objet de transgression et embrasse d’autres éléments dans le discours romanesque comme ceux de l’exil, la révolte et la liberté.» (Boudjadja, 2013 , p. 79)

The landscape is metaphorical and mirrors the psychological conditions of characters, and this is made obvious right from the opening passages of Mokeddem’s other novel *L’interdite* (*The Forbidden*) where the protagonist feels estranged. The outer desert is a mirror of the characters’ inner desert; the desert is more than an ocean of sand, golden dunes which come straightforwardly from orientalist tableaux and stories. *L’interdite* tells the story of Sultana, a doctor who lives in Montpellier, France, who returns to her native village, Ain Nekhla, in southern Algeria after fourteen years. The novel tells Sultana’s heartrending story of homecoming, return, and the (im)possibility to reunite with origins. The opening is very unusual as it makes reference to one of the most important themes and motifs in the literature of silence: the unnamable. Sultana, the first narrator in the story, immediately opens her heart to her readers: “*Je suis née dans la seule impasse du ksar. Une impasse sans nom [. . .] Elle couvre mon trouble d’une cascade de rires silencieux*” (Mokeddem, 1993, p. 11). The *cul-de-sac* defines the whole novel. As the plane lands, Sultana cynically remembers the circumstances of her leaving, followed by the permanent escapes and absences of exiles and fears; fears which are inevitable stuff of vagrancies and wanderings (Mokeddem, *L’interdite*, 1993, p. 12). The reasons of her return to the native land are soon questioned; why is she coming back to Ain Nekhla? Is it because she is an outsider and a stranger everywhere or is it because of

Dr. Yacine Meziane's letter? Both maybe. The narrator seems to be plagued by 'the *mal de pays*', and a deep, violent sandstorm of longing and melancholy that bluster inside her. Sandstorm and the desert are employed in the text repeatedly. The desert in Mokeddemian work always refers to nothingness, emptiness, exile, silence, and the sublime.

Mokeddem's *La nuit de la lézarde* (*The Night of the Lizard*) also portrays the desert as an immense space. The story opens with a description of a deserted *ksar* where silence is total (Mokeddem, *La nuit de la lézarde*, 1998, p. 11) because all the inhabitants have escaped the terror; only Sassi the blind and the beautiful and rebellious Nour have decided not to leave the place. Nour is haunted by the unsaid desperation; she is unable to name it, to understand it. The unknown evil is embodied in the desert (Mokeddem, 1998, p. 20). The emptiness is harrowing, and the *ksar* is compared to a necropolis. Nour is inhabited by silence, which is worse than absence, a threat of the void as the narrator says (Mokeddem, 1998, p. 21). Three years before, Nour, an outsider, a nomad without tribe, and a wanderer, has crossed the deserts to arrive to the edge of her interior void (Mokeddem, 1998, p. 42). Nour was married to a man and she has failed to give him children; she decided one day to run away; only the vastness of the Sahara seemed to carry her distress to excessiveness (Mokeddem, 1998, p. 42). Only in the deep desert Nour could find hope; she was the outsider, the insubordinate, and the remarkable. People in the *Ksar* respected and feared her, but she ended becoming an obstinate, free woman; her freedom was the payment of her loneliness (Mokeddem, 1998, p. 45).

At the heart of this novel is the theme of the unsayable. The unsayable is materialized through space. Nour, the protagonist, sees the aridity of the desert as a reflection of rogue humanity, and its silence as a mirror of our weakness. Numerous times does the narrator evoke the silence of the sand; the desert, according to the narrator, is bottomless and it is like an abyss and an interminable vertigo (Mokeddem, 1998, p. 103). Nour carries with her the desert; she always refuses to talk about her childhood and her marriage; the words which disclose her secrets are trapped inside her (Mokeddem, 1998, p. 70). Nour's childhood and marriage are therefore unnarratable; the desert is a reflection of the buried speech and what cannot be told. The immensity of the desert also represents Nour's expectation and the endless patience to see her lover (Mokeddem, 1998, p. 103).

The Mokeddemian desert is always open and natural; it also goes beyond the conventional desert as her heroine Nour says: "*Les deserts sont faits pour être traversés, pas pour s'y enterrer. Scruter l'infini ne l'a jamais fait bouger. L'infini ne vient pas. Il faut aller vers lui pour se délivrer. Sinon, il te fixe sur place et t'asphyxie*" (Mokeddem, 1998, p. 195). The unsayable is represented through space, and this is what distinguishes Mokeddem from other Algerian and French writers who wrote about the desert. We find in Mokeddem's novels an acquaintance with space; through her characters, who are not pioneers exploring *virgin* lands, we discover the mysteries of the Sahara.

Conclusion

Mokeddem's heroines, as seen before, are all transgressors and outsiders who go to the desert, their natural environment. The desert permits the characters to connect to their past to understand their present. The desert does not lack authenticity, but at the same time, it is expressive and carries meaning; it also symbolizes silence, speechlessness, and the unspoken. In Mokeddem's three novels *L'Interdite*, *Le Siècle des sauterelles*, and *La nuit de la lézarde*, as we have seen, the desert is familiar not exotic, real not psychedelic or phantasmagoric. Unlike the accounts and novels written by non-Algerians, Mokeddem's work suggests a novel and striving project of writing about the Sahara.

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