

Silence and movement in Malika Mokeddem's *L'Interdite*

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During Algeria's war for independence, women assumed important roles in the interim government and in the successful revolt against France. This achieved, women were thanked for their courage and work and asked to return to their domestic roles. The interventions of men who advocated for their female colleagues to retain their posts were largely unsuccessful. *Le Code de la Famille*, instituted by the government in 1984 and heavily criticized by Algerian feminists, formally imposed regressive restrictions upon women's civil rights, especially concerning marriage, divorce, and childrearing. Despite this setback, education rates for women continued to rise; in fact, as of 2001, 53% of diploma-holders in Algeria were women (Stora 201). Since then, the Family Code has been reformed (most recently in 2007) and Algerian women have continued to make impressive gains. They now hold 30% of parliamentary seats (higher than the average in the European Union) and comprise 60% of all college graduates in Algeria (Ghosh). Still, nationalistic goals, a dominance of male-authored histories, and widespread corruption do not lend themselves to a plurality of perspectives. Therefore, female representation and educational parity do not necessarily lead to discourse that disrupts an authoritarian, patriarchal power structure.

Where, then, might one turn to for a more pluralistic history? Inspired by Assia Djebar and H el ene Cixous, I propose that we turn to what

these two French-Algerian thinkers call ‘feminine’ writing. In this sense, ‘feminine’ ways of telling are all those that contest and rupture narratives that collude with patriarchal power structures including colonialism. This essay examines how French-Algerian writer Malika Mokeddem’s novel *L’Interdite* (1993) closely attends to the body in order to provide a unique perspective of postcolonial relations between Algeria and France, blurring the boundaries between colonial and postcolonial through a series of intertwining personal relationships.

In particular, this essay considers two relationships from the novel as vectors for the themes of silence and movement in building postcolonial subjectivities. Although *L’Interdite* advocates for a self that extends beyond the limits of the body, the characters also use silence to establish boundaries between themselves and others. Thus, focusing on both the extension of the self and on silence in *L’Interdite* provides a means for examining Djebbar’s claim that feminine writing is an extension of the body and a silent word in motion as well as Cixous’ claim that continuity is a key ‘feminine’ quality. In the end, Mokeddem’s exploration of how bodies write upon and relate to one another demonstrates how the relational self is never truly independent, which in turn complicates narratives that neatly oppose colonialism and independence.

Djebbar’s conception of feminine writing poses itself as a contrast to colonial writing and affirms Mokeddem’s writing as feminine because not only does she write history through the stories of her characters’ bodies, she also focuses on individual relationships, refusing to focus her account on the colonial power, a focus that Djebbar considers male. Additionally, Mokeddem’s female protagonist Sultana experiences her self as extending beyond the limits of her body by framing her sensory perceptions as bridges allowing continuity between her body and her environment. This aligns with Cixous’s conception of continuity as a feminine quality (that people of any gender may possess):

Continuité, abondance, dérive, est-ce que c’est spécifiquement féminin ? Je le crois. Et quand il s’écrit un semblable déferlement depuis un corps d’homme, c’est qu’en lui la féminité n’est pas interdite. Qu’il ne fantasme pas sa sexualité autour d’un robinet. Il n’a pas peur de manquer d’eau, il ne s’arme pas de son bâton mosaïque pour battre le rocher. Il dit : « J’ai soif », et l’écriture jaillit. (*La Venue à l’écriture* 62)

Djebar creates an image of feminine writing as a bridge between physical and intellectual, verbal and written, public and private domains:

L'écriture serait, dès son surgissement, une parole silencieuse en mouvement, qui prolongerait un corps, visible autant à autrui qu'à soi-même. Aussi, une écriture véritable et au féminin, dans les pays musulmans de ce prochain XXI^e siècle, ne pourra s'approfondir et se développer qu'à partir du corps libéré (ou en train de se libérer) de la femme ... (*Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, 28)

This conception of feminine writing as an extension of the body (using the verb "prolonger") contrasts neatly with Fanon's conception of the colonialist as an extension of his home country (using the noun "prolongement"):

Le colon fait l'histoire et sait qu'il la fait. Et parce qu'il se réfère constamment à l'histoire de sa métropole, il indique en clair qu'il est ici le prolongement de cette métropole. L'histoire qu'il écrit n'est donc pas l'histoire du pays qu'il dépouille mais l'histoire de sa nation en ce qu'elle écume, viole et affame. (*Les damnés de la terre*, 53)

The two authors set up a feminine/masculine dichotomy, as Djebar explicitly discusses feminine writing as an extension of the individual body while Fanon describes writing from a male perspective as more universalizing; it is not just the narrator's history but the history of his country.

Even outside the colonial context, 'feminine' stories are seen as a particular individual's history rather than the history of an imagined, generalizable male narrator. Audrey Lasserre, a sociologist specializing in gender in literature, found through a 2009 study of author interviews that narratorial voices are more likely to be read as autobiographical when the author is a woman and that furthermore, female authors adjust their writing – or their pseudonym – in anticipation that the public will receive a female narratorial voice as their own (47). While the reader of *L'Interdite* will identify certain shared characteristics between the main character, Sultana, and the author, Malika Mokeddem, I diverge from other scholars who overlook the differences between Mokeddem's and Sultana's life experiences to highlight the autobiographical aspects of this story (Djafri 2014, Mansueto 2014, Messaoudi 2013). (Readers interested in Mokeddem's actual life experiences might turn to her book *Mes hommes* (Grasset 2005), for example.) After growing up in Algeria during

Algeria's war for independence, Mokeddem became a doctor specializing in nephrology in France before she gave up her practice to devote herself to writing. By writing the story of a woman some of whose experiences resemble her own – estrangement from her father, working as a doctor and writer, moving from Algeria to France – yet for whom many details differ, Mokeddem truly writes a 'prolongment' of her body.

However, *L'Interdite* is not a simple extension of Mokeddem's own body to bookshelves around the world, but from her own story to that of other Algerian women. In addition to putting bits of herself in Sultana, Mokeddem portrays other struggles she overcame – such as succeeding as a girl in a male-dominated school – through a young female character, Dalila. Mokeddem even represents the unrelenting infiltration of the desirous male gaze on a woman's subjectivity through a second narrator, the Frenchman Vincent who narrates chapters alternating Sultana's chapters. Though the title *L'Interdite* indicates Sultana as the subject, Vincent's subject position directs nearly half the content. Precisely by *not* writing a strictly factual autobiography and by extending her own experiences across multiple voices, Mokeddem disturbs the perceived opposition between Djébar's portrayal of feminine writing as writing the body and Fanon's portrayal of masculine writing as writing an entire country. The multiple perspectives of *L'Interdite* weave the story of the country written through the stories of bodies.

Mokeddem explores two principle relationships between bodies, which evoke characteristics of colonial types of power that persist after independence. These relationships further test the theoretical positioning by Djébar and Fanon of 'feminine' in opposition to 'colonial'. The first relationship represented as two bodies sharing the same space is Sultana and Yacine's. Sultana, the novel's protagonist, is an Algerian-born woman who immigrated to France after secondary school and became a doctor. As the novel opens, she is returning for the first time in fifteen years to her hometown of Aïn Nekhla, Algeria where the town doctor Yacine, whom she had loved, has just died. The second principle relationship is between Vincent, a Frenchman, and the anonymous donor of his transplanted kidney, whom he only knows to be an Algerian woman deceased after a car accident. Vincent travels to Aïn Nekhla because he is seeking to learn more about the origin of his transplanted kidney, so although he and Sultana retain alternating chapters (labeled by their names), their paths will eventually converge when they meet in Aïn Nekhla, revealing Vincent's conflation of his desire for his kidney and his desire for Sultana.

Unlike scholars who highlight the primacy of a potential relationship

between Sultana and Vincent (Djafri 2014, Jones 2007), I find that although she begrudgingly accepts his protection (Mokeddem 115, 159) as she accepts Salah's and Khaled's, Sultana's consistent rejections of Vincent's advances towards intimacy (110, 111, 123) highlight Vincent's dogged persistence more than a relationship. Despite ephemeral flickers of desire that she feels for Salah or Vincent at one moment or another, Sultana never hints at whom she might eventually choose. In the sole scene where Sultana and Vincent are physically intimate, it is not certain that she is capable of consent, as Vincent pushes forward even though he learns she has just been hallucinating that Yacine is alive once again and in the room with her (116) and he even notices that she does not seem completely lucid. From the moment Sultana opens her door and lets him enter the house, Vincent notes her absence despite her physical presence, remarking that « [s]es yeux me paraissent démesurés fixes, et déserts », and he is troubled by « [s]on air perdu, ses yeux absents » (117). Although Vincent does not use force, as he reports, « [e]lle me laisse entrer » and « [e]lle se laisse faire », he also admits she does not seem fully aware of who he is, since « [a]u moment où culmine notre jouissance, dans un soupir, elle dit : Yacine » (117). While other scholars refer to this as an “affair” (Jones p. 110) or “love” (Djafri 73, and even the back cover of Grasset & Fasquelle's 1993 “Le Livre de Poche” edition of *L'Interdite*), the reader's suspense only lasts the turning of the page to the next line, where Sultana takes back up the narration, beginning her chapter with the intimation that this was deeply regretted, and perhaps nonconsensual: « Je me reveille avec des vertiges et une grande envie de vomir » (119). Thus, my study of relations between bodies in *L'Interdite* privileges relationships between bodies that Mokeddem describes as not just physically, but intimately entwining. In particular, inspired by Djebbar's implication of silence in her definition of feminine writing, this paper focuses on relationships in which one party has been silenced by death.

Mokeddem draws upon Fanon's description of colonial relationships to describe Sultana and Yacine's relationship, further destabilizing the feminine-colonial dichotomy that seems to be established by Djebbar and Fanon. Yet, Sultana's description of their relationship evokes Djebbar's image of the feminine as an extension of the liberated body and Cixous's image of the feminine as continuity between the body and the environment without dispossession (*Le Rire* 115). Sultana doesn't recognize the continuity between their bodies as harmful to Yacine; she is only aware of how it healed her. She remembers meeting Yacine and finding her eyes in the depths of his transformed her after a traumatic childhood and adolescence:

Depuis si longtemps qu'ils étaient ainsi, mes yeux, comme deux fruits pourris sur leur branche. Je ne sais par quel hasard, un jour, je les ai retrouvés au fond de ceux de Yacine. Immergés dans les siens, ils s'y sont frottés, décrottés de l'abstinence ... Des yeux de Yacine m'est venue la lumière, sans que je l'y ai cherché ... Depuis, du fin fond de mes peurs, j'observe le monde à travers la lumière des yeux de Yacine. (46)

Although she did not consciously try to penetrate Yacine's eyes, Sultana is grateful to be changed by experiencing the world through the lens of Yacine's perspective. In fact, the image of fruits that have rotted by abstinence indicates that disengagement from the world and specifically from personal relationships constitutes disuse of the body. The sort of continuity experienced through personal relationships and by opening oneself to others' perspectives revived Sultana and unchained her from fear. Specifically, this passage could be seen as an argument for the necessity of physical relationships. Sultana's eyes seem to have their own will; she simply *found* them in Yacine's as if they understood that contact was necessary even when she did not, and the metaphorical image of penetration and continuity as a healing cure for their rotting in abstinence highlights that the sexual act is simply another example of continuity.

Yet, Yacine's best friend Salah describes Sultana as the controller of their relationship and of Yacine's body. Salah claims that she, as an infection, an 'abscess' (23), 'devoured' Yacine, killing him precisely because of a lack of boundaries. Similar to Vincent's unease with the 'other' and his revulsion at the 'death' within him, his transplanted kidney, the breakdown of barriers between Sultana and Yacine's body introduces an element of rejection, of the abject: « Il te portait en lui comme un abcès profond. C'est peut-être ça qui l'a tué ! » (23). His use of the verb « porter » emphasizes that this continuity was a burden for Yacine. Sultana, as an infection invading Yacine's body, thus devoured him and killed him: « Toi, tu as dévoré Yacine. Même absente, tu avais une mainmise extraordinaire sur sa vie, sur sa peinture. Tu étais en même temps sa 'dette' et son 'FMI', son Nord arrogant qui le rejetait au sud du Sud, dans le désert de ton indifférence » (49). When Salah refers to the way the IMF burdened African economies post-independence by lending them much more money than they would ever be able to pay back, thus ensuring their dependence, this recalls Fanon's depiction of colonialization as poisonous intoxication, an addiction from which the people can only 'rehabilitate' themselves through 'detoxification' (90). Once penetrated by Sultana, perhaps Yacine

felt he needed her in the same way that structural adjustment plans brought former colonies in Africa into debt with the IMF (see Peterson for an in-depth explanation of this history). Fanon and Mokeddem's images of dependency suggest that Yacine was never really independent of Sultana, even after she moved to France just as Algeria and other African nations, the 'global south' ("[le] Sud") never achieved true independence from the former colonial powers, the 'global north' ("[le] Nord arrogant") even after the colonialists' retreat back to the Hexagon. Even though Sultana had no colonial intentions and was surprised to find her eyes inhabiting Yacine's, Mokeddem reveals the ambiguity of Djébar's ideal of 'prolonging the liberated body,' since seeking continuity between oneself and the other brings different consequences for each party.

By giving voice to Yacine's perspective on his relationship with Sultana through Salah's character, Mokeddem reveals how the occupier and the occupied can live thoroughly different experiences in the same space. Sultana's shock and hurt at Salah's condemnation reminds the reader that those with relatively more power may not see another's perspective simply by pivoting in their shared space. Sultana only begins to realize the effect she had on Yacine when she displaces herself, not just by returning to Aïn Nekhla and Yacine's house but when she steps in front of an agitated and violent fresco he had entitled "L'Algérienne," where the tiny silhouette of a woman stepping over a sea of flames as she disappears into the distance (48). It is only after standing where Yacine must have once stood as he examined his work that Sultana begins to understand Yacine's experience with her, as she then steps towards Salah, who condemns her. Here Mokeddem embodies Djébar's concept of 'feminine' writing as « une parole silencieuse en mouvement, qui prolongerait un corps » (*Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, 28) as Sultana's silent new understanding is revealed through her motion, connecting her body with Yacine's across time as she faces his painting, and with Salah's as they embrace in front of the painting. Furthermore, Mokeddem thus helps the reader move beyond perceived ideas (as found by Lasserre 2009) about the personal nature of 'women's writing' because she reverses expected gender roles of penetration and control while telling a country's history through a person's story.

Vincent's relationship with his personified kidney, a synecdoche for his kidney donor, is the second relationship of *L'Interdite* in which one party is silenced. Vincent refers sometimes to a masculine, other times to a feminine other, seemingly alternating between his kidney and the female kidney donor. In several striking examples Vincent manages to either render the gender invisible using a contraction erasing the final

vowel that would indicate the word's gender, or include both female and male genders so as to confound the (feminine) donor and the (masculine) kidney, such as: « il m'arrive souvent d'ouvrir les bras pour l'accueillir » (31), and « Je la caressais dans ce rein » (32). Still, the kidney and its donor's subjectivity cannot be erased because Vincent notes that the kidney rebels against him at times, even if only silently: « Le seul signe pathologique que celui-ci puisse manifester est un gonflement, comme un mécontentement silencieux, quand l'organe se fait recalcitrant » (138). By admitting that he is only speculating about its donor's will, Vincent renders their silence even more conspicuous. It also creates a boundary between Vincent and the donor despite his desire to be closer to her. He describes this boundary as at once physical, medical, and social: « un entêtement à rester d'une sensibilité autre, une parcelle étrangère, une zone d'anesthésie, d'effacement du receveur » (138). If silencing can be a means of oppression, silence can also be a means of rebellion, and a space one creates to preserve or rehabilitate one's subjectivity. Yet, historical and cultural geographer James R. Ryan interprets Gayatri Spivak to suggest that although recognizing the existence of the subaltern's "hidden spaces and silent voices" is an important first step, it will be impossible to recover these, and instead our aim should be "exploring and decolonizing dominant discourses" because "any act of dissent is always entangled within the dominant discourses that it might be resisting" (Ryan 476). Thus, exploration and decolonization of Vincent's discourse about his kidney is of primary importance.

Vincent's relationship with his kidney is reminiscent of the relationship between France and Algerian-born French residents or citizens and explores the complications a "liberated" female body faces even after Algeria's independence, since the transplanted kidney, like so many Algerian immigrants in France, although necessary for the body, like the country, to function, is associated with toxins and rejection even after integration and filters out the torments of the body within which it resides. Vincent implies that integration is a mutual effort: « J'ai accepté le rein. Ou peut-être est-ce lui qui a fini par m'intégrer et par digérer, filtrer et pisser mes tourments ? Sans crise de rejet, sans raté. Assimilation et pacification mutuelle » (30). His questioning brings to light the subjectivity of Algerians post-independence, highlighting the work of not only the host country by complaining about his daily immunosuppressant treatment as a politician might complain about relaxed borders that allow a higher flow of immigrants, but also that Algerian immigrants must do to integrate, digest, and filter French customs, law, and stereotypes. The inability of

the kidney to survive outside of Vincent's body suggests that although this organ has been freed from its expired body and given a second chance at life, it cannot exist independent of the vestiges of colonialism built into the fabric of society and law (and vice versa).

Although Vincent claims a harmonious relationship with his adopted kidney, he continues to see the kidney as an 'Other' in the way that some people in host countries continue to see immigrants as 'Other' even though they study, live, and work together. Vincent admits his unease with the imagined otherness of his kidney's race and sex: « Mais cette tolérance ne pouvait empêcher l'idée qu'avec cet organe, la chirurgie avait incrusté en moi deux germes d'étrangeté, d'altérité : l'autre sexe et une autre 'race' » (30). Similarly, Vincent cannot forget the time when he lived in complete confidence of his body, without "ce germe de la mort" inside him (108). Thus, Vincent attempts to create the image of a coupling with the other while maintaining a separation between him and the desired Other.

Vincent attempts to understand his kidney donor during his travels in Algeria, but his displacement is less successful than Sultana's. Since she is the only woman he meets, he creates a false metonymy, conflating his desire for his (deceased) kidney donor with his desire for Sultana. Vincent thus displaces Sultana, rendering her an object of desire to be seduced and a placeholder for the imagined kidney donor. Furthermore, even though he begins to understand some of the difficulties Algerian women and girls face after seeing how many men disrespect Sultana and after talking with a young girl named Dalila, Vincent is unable to overcome his exoticizing and paternalistic ideas about Algeria. Even though the transplanted kidney is evolved and complex enough to work perfectly in his body, Vincent sees himself as crossing the boundary into the heart of darkness, as « [u]n enfant dans un berceau que le fil de l'eau ramenait vers le ventre primitif de l'Afrique. » (32). He prefers to see not only Algeria as primitive, but also its people as simple, deciding when he meets a friendly man named Tayeb that this is the 'true' Algeria even though he has not met any other Algerian like Tayeb: « Sa jovialité, sa convivialité, sa simplicité tout me réjouit en lui. Un visage bon enfant, serein, peut-être le vrai visage de l'Algérie » (114). Even when speaking with Sultana, whom he wants desperately to win over, Vincent belittles her affairs, reformulating them as "préoccupations" without realizing the gravity of her history in Aïn Nekhla or the weight of responsibility she carries (123). Vincent's attempts to share space with the 'other' are perhaps less successful than Sultana's because the distance between them is further. For instance, cultural, linguistic, and religious differences combine to make him feel threatened by

the call to prayer whose meaning is unknown to him: « Il m'est impossible d'échapper plus longtemps à cette voix. Elle monte comme une menace surgie d'un autre âge. Elle asphyxie mes poumons.... Il faut que je sache ce que dit cette prière. Je suis persuadé qu'ainsi, j'échapperai à cet étau » (27). Despite Vincent's admission that eating Algerian food cannot increase his tolerance for this new culture in the way that his immunosuppressants increase his body's tolerance for the transplanted kidney (63), he still claims to be « maghrébin par mon griffon et sans frontière » (62). As much as he would like to claim a transnational identity because of his kidney's origins, Mokeddem suggests that this cannot be so.

On the other hand, Mokeddem validates Sultana's transnational identity because she has built links with Aïn Nekhla, Oran, and Montpellier across time. Even though she has made France her home, Sultana still embodies Algeria through her strong connection to the physical space through memories formed since childhood. Cultural geographers Robins and Aksoy (2001) find that "it is no longer a question of cultural synthesis or syncretism, but of moving across" both cultural spaces (McEwan 503). While Sultana is portrayed as unusual in *L'Interdite*, her preference to "move across" the multiple spaces to which she belongs allows her « Sultana dissidentes, différentes » to coexist rather than to try to blend them into one (Mokeddem 14). Sultana experiences a positive relationship between her body and her homeland in a way that Hélène Cixous would mark as 'feminine' because of the images of continuity and completeness (Mokeddem 16, 26; Cixous, *Le Rire de la Méduse et autres ironies* 118). For example, upon returning to her hometown for the first time, Sultana is unintimidated by the sound of a flute that takes over her body, even before she remembers its significance from her childhood: « Un son de flûte, à peine audible, coule en moi. J'ai mis du temps à le percevoir, à l'entendre. Ses reptations me gagnent, me prennent toute. Je ne sais pas ce qu'il me dit » (16). Near the end of the book, as the older women in the community tell her stories of the deep love between her parents, the flute's music rises within her once again, reaching even the silent corners of her being ("tous mes coins silencieux") until she becomes the flute itself, drunk with the winds of time connecting her with her parents (173). Notably, she is unthreatened and even strengthened by these experiences. She also remarks upon the reassurance she gains from experiencing an interaction between her body and the sky: « Pour la première fois depuis mon arrivée, je vois le ciel. Il coule en moi, me remplit à ras bord. Une sérénité bleue étanche mon angoisse. Mon pas se raffermi » (26). In the moment that Sultana notices the sky she turns away from the other

mourners at Yacine's burial (where she is unwelcome as a woman) and toward the hospital where she had once worked, and where he had made his career. Thus, she only allows continuity between herself and the parts of Algeria she wishes to reclaim as her own. In both instances, the verb "couler" indicates a continuity between Sultana and the world around her, and she creates an image of fullness or completeness with the expressions "tout" and "à ras bord". Sultana feels a continuity that Vincent cannot due to her connection not only to the space, but across time.

Therefore, Mokeddem reworks the nationalistic image of the woman as the symbolic center of the nation. Postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri Gopinath explains that nationalist discourses tend to make women "a primary marker of an essential inviolable communal identity or tradition" using familial and domestic metaphors in which "'the woman' is enshrined as both the symbolic center and boundary marker of the nation as 'home' and 'family'" (206). As her Algerian surroundings flow into Sultana, filling her completely, she embodies and thus symbolizes the nation. Yet, Sultana does not reject the facets of her self that she developed while living in France and she is in constant movement. Instead, her "[t]ransnationalism brings about the displacement of culture and identity from the nation ... enabling a denaturalization of nation as the hegemonic form of organizing space" (McEwan 504). Mokeddem thus seems to suggest that Algeria does not need to maintain a static symbol or center, but that it can be strengthened and developed, like Sultana, through constant movement and openness.

Yet, the Algeria of *L'Interdite* is not yet ready to test this proposal. Sultana is unable to be herself and live in Aïn Nekhla. Sultana's body may appear as 'liberated' because she does not limit her movement or the spaces she occupies based on others' opinions, but her vacillation across boundaries set by the community is intolerable in a nation moving towards isolation, closing in on itself as Western nations close themselves off from Algeria during the early 1990's (Stora 22-23), when Mokeddem's narrative seems to take place. Sultana is thus moving against the tide that Magreb historian Benjamin Stora describes as sweeping the nation at the end of 1993: « les étrangers commencent à partir en masse. L'Algérie va se refermer sur elle-même, d'autant que comme nous le verrons plus loin, une série de lois et de décrets va interdire le regard extérieur et pousser les journalistes algériens au silence ou à l'autocensure » (26). Sultana refuses to remain a "static marker" of Aïn Nekhla's identity, and thus the residents reject her in order to maintain the stability of their "symbolic center" (Gopinath 206). Her final return to France reminds the reader that despite

the fluidity and motion celebrated by Djébar and Cixous, transnationalism is also a “strategy of survival” (McEwan 506), and movement takes place in “profoundly asymmetrical ways” depending on an individual or group’s power. This highlights the limited ways in which the women of Aïn Nekhla and even Vincent’s kidney (donor) are able to rebel due to their limited mobility. Mokeddem thus reworks a stereotypically nationalistic image of the woman as the symbolic center of the nation to focus on the consequences for the woman when the nation or home falls apart, rather than the focusing on the nation.

In the final scene of the book, Sultana watches the flames of the burning buildings – Yacine’s burning home, and the intolerant mayor’s office which the women of the town have burned in response (180) – thus, both the home and the nation seem to be falling apart in *L’Interdite*. However, in the book’s final line Sultana invites the reader to turn away and adopt her inner gaze as she says, « Khaled, je repars demain. Dis aux femmes que même loin, je suis avec elles » (181). Like Sultana who only understands Yacine by displacing herself, the reader too must displace themselves to see past the destruction forcing Sultana out of town and understand that she is occupying multiple spaces at once, leaving part of her inner self among Aïn Nekhla’s women. Sultana’s transnational identity has made her feel liberated to appropriate spaces that the townspeople do not see as belonging to her, including Yacine’s funeral, the hotel bar, and even the space of the silence. She thus incites Aïn Nekhla’s women to appropriate space as well, which they do by setting fire to the town hall. Mokeddem shifts the center of discourse about the nation to her female characters and their struggle to exist on both sides of their community’s limits.

Postcolonial theorist Veena Das’ explanation of subject formation in violent conditions demonstrates that as Sultana moves between physical spaces in France and Algeria, and as Aïn Nekhla’s women move across the limits of how they are expected to behave, they carry within them these tensions. The porousness of subjectivity feels quite dangerous in this formulation: “The formation of the subject as a gendered subject is then molded through complex transactions between the violence as the originary moment and the violence as it seeps into the ongoing relationships and becomes a kind of atmosphere that cannot be expelled to an ‘outside’” (Das 208). In *L’Interdite*, Mokeddem’s characters seem to use silence as a response to this problem, as if silence can build a barrier against threats of violence directed at the self.

In *L’Interdite*, as in Assia Djébar’s conception of feminine writing as a silent word in movement, the use of silence and the representation

of silenced perspectives are just as important as what is said. Through conspicuous silences in the text, Mokeddem shows how Algerian history, as any country's history, has been simplified by removing certain groups of citizens from positions of power and silencing their perspectives. Mokeddem disrupts narratives of egalitarian partnership between Algeria and France (for example, that of each country's Ministère des Affaires Étrangères news site) by inviting the reader to imagine postcolonial relations through silence in *L'Interdite*.

Mokeddem's ambiguous portrayal of continuity – as potentially strengthening and healing, yet requiring constant displacement to check that neither party is causing harm to the other – is coupled with an emphasis on silence. Sultana's silences represent rebellion for her Algerian interlocutors; for her they also represent self-preservation. Her silences as a means of separation from others become even more apparent when others express their frustration at this unexpected tactic. However, Sultana defends her choice as these silences are the space where she can safeguard and carefully rebuild parts of herself that could otherwise be marred by her interlocutor. The effectiveness of this strategy is supported by trauma theorist Elaine Scarry, who notes, "only in silence do the edges of the self become coterminous with the edges of the body it will die with" (33). While Scarry and other trauma theorists expound on the importance of telling one's story, especially through self-writing, to heal from trauma, Sultana asks her interlocutors to respect her silences as her personal choice. Furthermore, in writing silence, Mokeddem brings it to the foreground, rendering present the absence of all those who like Sultana left Algeria in search of more freedoms elsewhere. Like the kidney and its donor who are silent and spoken for, *L'Interdite* asks the reader to consider who might fill the silences left by expatriates like Sultana. Who speaks for them once they are gone? The close-minded perspectives that Sultana encounters upon returning to Ain Nekhla hint at the drawback of Algeria or any country considering the center of its nation to be a static symbol. If the nation can accept that even those in constant motion embody certain of its characteristics, the plurality of accepted perspectives may bring resilience.

Sultana's silences are not only a result of her exile, but a tool she uses to create space not only between herself and strangers, but even those she loves at times. Salah, frustrated, asks Sultana,

- Comment faut-il interpréter tes silences ?
- Comme des réponses. Comme des défenses ouvertes ou fermées, selon.
- Je crois que tu es une femme d'excès.

- ... Je suis plutôt dans l'entre-deux, sur une ligne de fracture, dans toutes les ruptures....
- ... Tu vois que tu es une femme d'excès : silence ou longue tirade. Les Occidentaux t'ont contaminée avec leur tchatche et leurs poses savantes. (47)

For Salah, Sultana's silences are unnatural boundaries that she has created between herself and her origins:

Même ton silence est calculé, calibré. Un comportement d'Occidentale ! Tu ne sais pas parler comme les vrais Algériens. Nous, on parle pour ne rien dire, on déblatère pour tuer le temps, essayer d'échapper à l'ennui. Pour toi, l'ennui est ailleurs. L'ennui c'est les autres. Tu as des silences suffisants, des silences de nantie. Des silences pleins de livres, de films, de pensées intelligentes, d'opulence, d'égoïsme ... Nous, nos rêves affamés nous creusent. (49)

Thus, Salah claims, silence is something that 'true' Algerians cannot afford, as if Sultana's self is made 'complete' because she is full of books, films, thoughts, etc. while those with less privilege need to extend their selves outwards to be complete. Yet, the borders erected by silence are not necessarily European; Sultana's refusal to reveal her identity or her exact destination frustrates an Algerian taxi driver who associates silent women with those who are veiled, giving weight to Sultana's claim that she lives « dans l'entre deux, sur une ligne de fracture » (47). He cries indignantly, breaking the boundary that which she erects between them by her silence, « La fille de personne, qui ne va chez personne ! Tu me la joues ou quoi ? Puisque tu refuses de parler, tu n'as qu'à porter le voile ! » (17). Sultana's own account of learning silence contrasts life in Oran, where she always had to be ready with a sharp retort when verbally attacked, whereas life in cities abroad, where people acted more indifferently to her presence, 'softened' her (17). Thus, she had to express her indignation, to shout back, in situations where boundaries between private and public were crossed; silence came to her when she moved to a culture where she could be in a public space yet retain anonymity and a private world within herself.

Like Sultana's resistance through long silences, Vincent's kidney donor dodges and escapes him, reclaiming power through refusal despite his attempts to seduce her. His imagined relationship with the donor, conflated with his new acquaintance Sultana as the representative of all Algerian women for Vincent, becomes more explicit as the narrative progresses: « Maintenant, à mon réveil, je pense à elle d'abord. À elle longuement ... Maintenant, je bande, tous les matins » (137). The kidney transplant seems to have blurred Vincent's vision of borders between

public and private, since « ce double métissage de ma chair me poussait irrésistiblement vers les femmes et vers cette autre culture » (30), but he suggests, in references to Paris's street corners at Barbès and Belleville that he has only known a 'public' version of women (30). Now Vincent sees himself as entitled, asking « Qui me prive, moi, de l'immersion dans cette féminité dont je porte un éclat ? » (31) even as he recognizes that upon awakening from nightly dreams of his kidney donor, she does not return his desire: « elle s'esquivait. Elle me résistait » (31). Even in death, a woman of Algerian descent must continue to dodge the unwanted caresses and sexual longings of a French man, with silence and absence her only means to establish boundaries. Anthropologist Emily McDonald points out that subjects do not only enact motion such as absence, "they are also caught up and enacted *by* motion, both generating and being moved within forces of momentum clearly in excess of any single body, object, or subject" (McDonald 483). Movement in this case is less a celebration of the kidney donor's subjectivity and power, but more a suggestion that the "silent word in motion" Djébar characterizes as feminine may be imposed as much as it may be chosen.

Although Vincent never loses his desire to be closer to Sultana and his imagined kidney donor, he recognizes that there remain barriers even when there is common occupation of physical space. The kidney, as the foreign actor in his body, 'occupies' his brain. Still, he recognizes a complex power hierarchy, since the kidney is physically 'occupying' his body, yet it has limited power. Vincent suggests that in this case, the power is displaced to him even though he is the 'occupied', noting that his nerve endings do not succeed in "colonizing" the kidney. This prevents him from fully knowing it and taking its perspective: « La greffe a ceci de paradoxal, elle a beau occuper, obséder le cerveau, les terminaisons nerveuses du receveur ne colonisent jamais le rein greffé ... Le rein n'est donc senti que par le toucher et par la métamorphose qu'il entraîne en nous » (138). Finally acknowledging that he cannot fully 'know' the "hidden space" and "silenced voice" (Ryan, cited above) of the kidney and its donor, Vincent can only recognize this 'other' through the change it brings about in him. Mokeddem reminds us that any self that extends beyond the limits of one's body enters into the unknown. In this way she complicates the ideal of feminine continuity put forth by Djébar and Cixous.

Through images of movement and continuity between the body and the exterior world, Mokeddem shows how our subjectivity as inherently relational necessitates movement and continuity outside of ourselves, but how this can also be problematic. Although Sultana and the kidney

donor each extend their self beyond the limits of the body, creating continuity with the environment and other people, this act brings about some instances of violence to the self, which they mitigate by building barriers with silence. By switching between some perspectives and leaving others silent, Mokeddem introduces yet another type of movement: she turns her gaze and the reader's. *L'Interdite* suggests that seeking new focalizers and displacement may lead to decolonization of dominant discourse and recognition of the other.

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