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The Condition of Women in Patriarchal and Postcolonial Contexts, A Sociocritical Analysis of Malika Mokeddem's Forbidden Woman and The Sand Child

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Abstract

This research looks at Malika Mokeddem's The Forbidden Woman (1995) and Tahar Ben Jelloun's The Sand Child (1985) from a sociocritical point of view, focussing on how patriarchal and postcolonial frameworks affect women's identities and ability to act. Using qualitative interpretive methods based on feminist literary theory, postcolonial criticism, and intersectionality, the study looks at how personal stories connect with larger social and political realities in Algeria and Morocco after independence. Sultana in The Forbidden Woman stands up to repressive religious and cultural conventions, whereas Ahmed/Zahra in The Sand Child shows how brutal it is for women to lose their individuality when men demand that they have male lineage. Both books use several points of view, symbolic locations, and acts of transgression to show how hard women fight for their freedom. The results show that literature may be a strong way to fight against deep-seated gender norms and colonial legacies, allowing people to reclaim their identity and speak out.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Postcolonialism, Algerian literature, Moroccan literature, Feminist literary theory, Identity, Gender oppression, Sociocritical analysis.

1 Introduction

The condition of women in patriarchal and postcolonial settings has been a major focus of sociocritical critique, especially in Algerian Literature. When patriarchy and postcolonialism come together, they produce a system of oppression that is even worse for women. Mohanty (1988) says that women go through "a double colonization—first by the coloniser and then by their own culture." In both Malika Mokeddem's Forbidden Woman (1993) and Tahar Ben Jelloun's The Sand Child (1985), the authors look at how patriarchal standards, colonial legacies, and cultural traditions work together to control women's bodies, limit their freedom, and take away their identity. Agar-Mendousse (2006) says that North African literature typically tries to "decolonise" by getting back both political and gendered identities.

The Forbidden woman (1995), is Malika Mokeddem's third novel, and it tells the narrative of Sultana, a young North African lady who is forced to confront the difficult reality of exile. Her visit to Algeria amid periods of state and religious violence teaches her/us about her predicament as a "foreign" woman and exile. The novel's first phrase covers the whole theme

of the narrative and sets the tone for Sultana's future life of errance: *"I was born on the ksar's solitary dead-end street. "A nameless road"*. The dead-end street—at once geographical and metaphysical—is skilfully imposed on the reader via the repeated allusions to the ksar, which is portrayed as a type of jail beyond which extends the enormous emptiness of desert. Born inside the ksar, Sultana's future existence evolves into a metaphoric escape from confining definitions of identity, whether geographical or metaphysical.

1.1 *"The Forbidden Woman"*

Malika Mokeddem's "The Forbidden Woman" was originally released in 1993 under the title l'Interdite. The story portrays the sexist Algerian culture during the harrowing dark decade of the Algerian Civil War (1991-2002). The narrative of the book revolves on Sultana Medjahed, an Algerian nephrologist exiled in France, who finished her medical education there. She returns to her hometown of Ain Nakhla to attend the burial of her old boyfriend, Dr. Yacine Mediane.

In The Forbidden Woman, Mokeddem depicts an Algerian society permeated by fundamentalist Islamism, which directly impacts and jeopardises the rights and freedoms of Algerian women. Mokeddem illustrates the sexist hardships endured by Sultana and other women in Ain Nakhla, perpetuated by the patriarchal system rooted in narrow-minded religious fanaticism. With the assistance of her two admirers, Salah, a companion of Yacine, and Vincent, a French traveler, Sultana confronts the animosity of the male town authorities over her "sinful" westernised lifestyle, rather than escaping like she did two years before. Furthermore, Sultana receives unexpected support from other women in her area whom she believed were destined for subservience to men (Kahina & Lydia, 2017).

Through the character Sultana, Malika Mokeddem urges her people, particularly women, to advocate for their freedom to establish a more accepting nation for their children. In her story, she depicts the characters Dalila and Alilou as symbols of an optimistic future (Gagiano, 2013). (Bhagwat & Arekar, 2018).

2 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretative methodology, integrating both narratological and sociocritical analytical frameworks to explore the literary construction of female subjectivity in two seminal works of postcolonial Algerian literature: "*The Forbidden Woman*" by Malika Mokeddem (1995) and The Sand Child (1985) by Tahar Ben Jelloun. The methodology is designed to examine not only the structural elements of the narratives but also their socio-historical and ideological implications

2.1 Research Design

The research design is based on textual analysis, with emphasis on two complementary axes:

Sociocritical analysis, informed by feminist literary theory and postcolonial criticism, to situate the literary texts within the broader socio-political and cultural context of post-independence Algeria. The method of Claude Duchet (1971), which places literary texts in their socio-historical contexts, informs the sociocritical framework. This makes it possible for the research to relate fictional stories to the actual repercussions of gender inequality, colonial dominance, and cultural taboos in Algeria and Morocco.

This multidisciplinary approach allows for a multi-layered interpretation of the texts, as well as the simultaneous investigation of form and content.

2.2 Corpus Selection

The main texts were chosen because they deal with women's oppression, loss of identity, and resistance in patriarchal and postcolonial situations. Both books focus on female main characters who fight against stringent societal norms, which makes them ideal for sociocritical analysis.

3 Previous Research and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Postcolonial Feminist Theory

Spivak (1988) asserts that “the subaltern cannot speak” without narrative spaces that facilitate the reclaiming of identity. Mokeddem and Ben Jelloun create environments that confront both patriarchal suppression and colonial obliteration concurrently. Agar-Mendousse (2006) asserts that this dual battle is fundamental to Maghrebian women’s literature: it is “a decolonising effort aimed at reclaiming identity compromised by dominant ideologies.”

3.2 Patriarchy and Gender Dynamics

The complexity of patriarchy and how it affects women's identities and social roles are examined in both Forbidden Woman and The Sand Child. The Last Patriarch by Najat El Hachmi emphasises how gender roles are constructed in different societies and portrays patriarchy as a byproduct of cross-cultural practices rather than an inherent feature of Islam This representational distinctiveness is readily encapsulated in Moroccan feminist literary narratives. This essay will focus on two significant literary representations of women's lives both inside and beyond Morocco. In The Last Patriarch, budding diasporic writer Najat El Hachmi depicts patriarchy as a cross-cultural phenomenon rather than an inherent characteristic of Islam. In "Dreams of Trespass," prominent Muslim feminist Fatima Mernissi portrays gendered separation as a socially manufactured phenomenon. In both works, the patriarch's fate is linked to the transgression of the conceptual and physical confines of the 'harem' (Elboubekri, 2015).

Similarly, gendered separatism is portrayed in Fatima Mernissi's Dreams of Trespass as a socially constructed phenomenon, with a focus on how breaking free from the 'harem' space is crucial to the destruction of patriarchal structures Gasgar, A. Fatima Mernissi, a sociologist, feminist, and university professor at Mohamed 5 University in Rabat, Morocco, was a pioneer in the field of gender and empowerment. Born in a harem in Fez, she was one of the first Moroccan girls to access school, breaking the gender barrier and challenging the status quo that women should stay within the domestic sphere. Her memoir, Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood, was published in 1994 and represents the liberation of women from the oppression of segregation, seclusion, and patriarchy. (Laghssais, 2017) focused on theories of Gender and Empowerment, focusing on Gender and Patriarchy, and gender empowerment as a form of equality between the sexes. The second part of the research analyses the memoir, focusing on gender and patriarchy within the harem and the manifestation of empowerment through storytelling, theatre, and music.

Spivak's idea of the "subaltern" asks whether women who are already on the outside can really talk in cultures that don't let them be themselves (Spivak, 2023). Mohanty criticises how Western feminist writing makes all Third World women seem the same (Mohanty, 2014), while Ahmed talks about how Islamic and colonial patriarchies are connected (Ahmed, 2021). These accounts imply that patriarchal structures are not only oppressive but also intricately linked to individual agency and cultural identity.

3.3 Intersectionality and Identity

Intersectionality is essential for comprehending the characters' challenges in both books. The intricacies of gender identity, ethnicity, class, and nationality provide diverse experiences for the female characters. The feminist critiques in the works examine the contemporary woman's pursuit of sexual autonomy and gender equality, illustrating the intersection of these ideals with wider social challenges (Bhuiyan, 2018). Moreover, the class talks about cultural workers and critical theory underscore the significance of comprehending the intersections of many identities and their impact on an individual's place within the socio-political context.

The narratives in *Forbidden Woman* and *The Sand Child* commonly mix personal and political issues. The personal is political is a phrase that comes up a lot throughout the characters' travels because their personal experiences are connected to bigger social and political issues. The personal parts of these books provide the writers a way to show their own point of view and fight against colonial and sexist views of women. The fact that the personal and the political are connected here supports the idea that personal stories may be strong ways to fight against structural oppression (Talbayev, 2012)

4 Analysis

4.1 Narrative Voices

Malika Mokeddem's book "The Forbidden Woman" provides a deep look at the patriarchal institutions that are deeply rooted in Algerian culture, focussing on the main character, Sultana. The story shows how males use religion teachings to make women submit and limit their rights, which is a bigger problem in society: patriarchal tyranny. (Mehta, 2020). Sultana's personal journey stands for the search for freedom and the rejection of the rules that society puts on women. It also shows how women in her community come together to support her struggle against oppression (Hua, 2022).

The idea of the "*Forbidden Woman*" comes up a lot in literature. She is generally shown as a strong and attractive figure who goes against social standards and challenges the status quo. Sultana in "The Forbidden Woman" is an example of this archetype because her fight against patriarchal forces shows how gender and power interact in a postcolonial setting. The book criticises how women's identities are produced in patriarchal societies, showing that the state of women is not a natural part of society but a socially manufactured thing that can be changed and contested. (Evans, 2000).

Sultana's experiences show how gendered separatist affects women in general, as women are generally seen as the main targets of unfair social standards. Mokeddem's depiction of Sultana's hardships shows how patriarchal language works in many ways. It is not only a reflection of the power of individual males, but also a tool for social systems to keep women under control..

The work makes the point that women need to stick together to fight against patriarchal tyranny and redefine their identities in the face of systematic enslavement via Sultana's narrative.(Mehta, 2020). Also, the text uses a complicated narrative structure that switches from Sultana's point of view and that of other characters. This helps the reader understand her challenges better and shows how different they are from those of other people in her society. This method makes readers think about the larger cultural ramifications of the characters' behaviour and the social restrictions they encounter.

Malika Mokeddem's works demonstrate several ways of getting readers involved via the use of chapter titles and switching points of view. The chapters are named after the main characters, Sultana and Vincent, which not only changes the focus of the story but also suggests a change in point of view. This change encourages the reader to explore the subtleties of each character's point of view, which is a good example of "la restriction de champ," in which each character tells their tale based on their own knowledge and experiences (Evans, 2000).

The second novel *"The Sand Child"* begins with a narrator detailing an enigmatic individual whose facial characteristics have been marred by the passage of time, and who has willingly isolated "himself" from his family. The individual, Ahmed/Zahra, is first referred to as "he." The speaker discusses Ahmed's torment from the intrusions—the visual, auditory, and olfactory stimuli—of the external environment and then describes his preparations for his imminent demise. The narrator references the framework of a narrative as recounted in Ahmed's personal and cryptic notebook (*Sand Child, p. 3*).

A blank space after five pages signifies the end of the introduction or frame story and indicates the commencement of the main narrative. The narrative starts with the inquiry: *"And who was he?"* The following paragraphs provide a narrator who allegedly has Ahmed's journal, the key to his identity. The storyteller asserts, *"The secret resided within those pages, intricately crafted from syllables and imagery,"* as he starts Ahmed's narrative (Sand Child, p. 5).

The narrative starts before to Ahmed's birth, when his father perceives a curse burdening him due to the fact that all his progeny is female. His embarrassment about having solely female offspring intensifies with each subsequent birth, provoking mockery from his younger brothers who, due to his absence of a male heir, are positioned to receive two-thirds of his fortune. Consumed by the desire for a male heir, the father seeks counsel from physicians, charlatans, practitioners, and sorcerers. He subjects his wife to a harrowing regimen of incantations and remedies until she is utterly exhausted. Notwithstanding all these efforts, each new birth results in another girl, accompanied by sadness. The father ultimately resolves to challenge destiny by ensuring that the subsequent kid is male. With his wife's collusion, he orchestrates for an elderly midwife to assert that the infant is male, irrespective of its actual gender. Upon the delivery of his ninth offspring, the midwife proclaims the arrival of a male kid. The father, while seeing that it is a female, proceeds with his intentions and exults at the prospect of finally having a male child.

The individual, called Ahmed, is attired and reared as a male. She is cherished and ceremoniously transitioned through many stages of male growth, including circumcision in infancy, which the father orchestrates in collusion with a barber, using blood drawn from his own lacerated finger. Raised under her father's mandates, Ahmed becomes wholly immersed

in the illusion of her existence: her chest is tightly bound to inhibit breast development, she pilfers towels from her mother's and sisters' closet during menstruation, and she endeavours to mimic men in both speech and demeanour. Essentially, she transforms into a male.

Ahmed, a prospective brother, establishes dominance over his sisters and, to his parents' dismay, insists on entering into marriage. Following his father's death, he becomes control of the household and marries his cousin Fatima, who is a disabled epileptic. He thereafter cohabits with her in isolation from their respective families. Fatima embraces a life devoid of sexuality, perceiving and ultimately discovering Ahmed's secret. Ahmed develops a profound aversion to Fatima's presence; concurrently, she succumbs to a loss of desire to live, ultimately resulting in her death by self-neglect. Following her demise, Ahmed retreats into solitude.

At a certain point in the narrative, a conflict arises between the narrators. The current storyteller is said to fabricate narratives, seeming to read from Ahmed's notebook while really reciting from "a cheap edition of the Koran" (Sand Child, p. 49). The first storyteller, distinct from the narrator of the framing narrative, is then succeeded by a second storyteller who claims that he is Fatima's brother. This narrator presents the subsequent chapter of the tale, which increasingly seems more fragile. It is evident that Ahmed ultimately chooses to abandon his life of deceit to uncover the lady inside him and the essence of his identity. According to one version, he/she roams and ultimately becomes part of a circus. Upon the departure of a male dancer impersonating a woman, the circus director, Abbas, suggests that Ahmed take his position. Ahmed first comes on stage attired as a guy, only to depart and reemerge as the femme fatale, Lalla Zahra. Zahra emerges as the main attraction of the circus.

At this point, having surpassed three-fifths of the narrative, the most recent narrator vanishes, and the tale is continued by three elderly individuals—Salem, Amar, and Fatuma—who were part of the audience and now recount their own interpretations of Ahmed's/Zahra's story. Each individual's account of Zahra's last days significantly differs from the others.

Salem recounts the brutalisation of Zahra by Abbas, the proprietor of the circus. One night, aware of his impending assault, she inflicts a wound upon him, and as he succumbs to blood loss, he throttles her. In Amar's narrative, Zahra flees from the circus and traverses the nation; ultimately, all evidence of her presence vanishes. Amar reads from texts he ascribes to her, in which she articulates her want to go from home. However, Amar contradicts his previous statement by asserting that he thinks Ahmed/Zahra *"never left his room high up on the terrace of the big house," where he/she had a "gentle death"* (*Sand Child, pp. 123-24*). Salem contends that the figure of Ahmed/Zahra embodies an act of violence, asserting that only a significant act of violence—a bloody suicide—can suitably conclude this narrative (Sand Child, p. 124). Fatuma recounts her travels throughout several nations but confesses to have fabricated these experiences *"in a tall, narrow, circular room …overlooking the terrace"* (Sand Child, pp. 127-28). She recounts a journey to Mecca undertaken in male disguise. She recounts her experience of learning to exist inside a dream, *"to make of [her] life an entirely invented story," while living in "the illusion of another [male] body"* (Sand Child, p. 132). Although Fatuma does not explicitly reference Zahra in her narrative, she implicitly suggests that she embodies Zahra, recounting her own experiences and existing now as elderly Fatuma.

To these many tales, the Blind Troubadour adds his own story of Ahmed/Zahra's death. He describes how a lady, most likely an Arab, paid him a visit at the Buenos Aires library where he works. She handed him a rare Egyptian coin known as a battene and stated that she sought him out since he was the only one who could understand her. She had been journeying, she said, as a fugitive sought *"for murder, usurpation of identity, abuse of confidence, and theft of inheritance"* (Sand Child, p. 141). While the Blind Troubadour narrates the story of the mystery lady visitor to listeners in Marrakech's big plaza, we learn a little about him. We discover that he was not blind at first, but then he lost his sight and chose to journey in quest of the mysterious lady whose identity he has grown fascinated with, the woman whom he labels "a princess who has escaped from a fairy tale" (Sand Child, p. 145).

The last chapter narrates the departure of the Blind Troubadour after the return of the first storyteller to the plaza, where he articulates the novel's closing words. He has the journal purportedly belonging to Ahmed/Zahra and elucidates that, after his departure, Ahmed/Zahra manifested to him during a night of insomnia, reproaching him for exposing her secret. On another occasion, he slept off and subsequently roused in a graveyard. The characters he believed he had "created" manifested and summoned him. “Ahmed’s father locked me up in an old building and forced me to go back to the square and tell the story in a different way” (Sand Child, p. 162). Fatima, the incapacitated spouse of Ahmed/Zahra, also made an appearance and said, “I am the woman you chose to be your hero’s victim” (Sand Child, p. 162). She presented him some dates from the palm tree. Upon consumption, a brilliant light emerged and the characters disappeared (B. Jelloun, n.d.).

The narrative of "L'Enfant de Sable" uses traditional Arabic and oral storytelling methods, with a character reciting the story of Ahmed being a big part of it. This strange storyteller frequently has to deal with people in the marketplace who don't believe him, which is similar to how the author feels about Arabic cultural traditions and how important storytelling is as a cultural medium. The storyteller's strange qualities not only add to the tale, but they also help to explore issues of deception and surrealism, especially when the narrator's reliability is called into doubt. The story's abstract images and words mirror how the viewer sees the story's essential nature (Freakery, 2004).

4.1.1 An Overview of Themes

"The Sand Child" (originally "L'Enfant de sable"), written by Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun and released in 1985, looks with the complicated issues of gender identification and the social and cultural limits that are put on women in a patriarchal society. The story is about Mohammed Ahmed, a girl who was raised as a guy because her family needed a male heir. This idea not only criticises conventional Islamic and Moroccan values, but it also looks at the bigger effects of postcolonial identity and gender roles in Moroccan society (Vurdering, n.d.).

- **Gender and Identity**

The main character's journey shows how hard it is for women to find their own identity in a society that values male lineage. Hajji Ahmed Suleyman, Mohammed Ahmed's father, forces this gender fraud on his daughter to protect her inheritance rights. This shows how far patriarchal civilisations would go to follow conventional rules. The usage of bodily changes,

such circumcision and breast binding, shows how society expects people to act. This shows how strict the rules are about gender roles in Morocco (B. Jelloun, n.d.).

- **Critique of Patriarchy**

Ben Jelloun's writing criticises the patriarchal discourse that controls not just family ties but also the rules of society. The father's manipulations and the mother's willingness to raise Mohammed Ahmed as a male show how patriarchal attitudes have been ingrained in the household. This setting makes a bigger argument about how women, represented by the mother and the midwife, frequently help keep themselves down by supporting the systems that restrict their freedom (B. Jelloun, n.d.).

- **Magical Realism and Symbolism**

The novel employs magical realism to mix the harsh reality of gender discrimination with more ethereal and mystical themes. This mix lets Ben Jelloun show deeper emotional realities about what the characters go through. For example, the story's supernatural elements highlight the gap between what society expects and who you are, showing how hard it is for people to find their own way in a world with stringent cultural rules (T. Ben Jelloun, n.d.-a).

4.2 The Sociocritical Approach

The sociocritical approach used to look examine Malika Mokeddem's Forbidden Woman and The Sand Child focusses on how personal stories and larger social and political situations affect each other in Maghrebi women's literature. This kind of thinking recognises that personal experiences frequently reflect the problems of the whole group, especially in postcolonial nations where gender, class, and cultural identity are very important. Jameson says that stories from the Third World always have political elements, turning personal stories into metaphors for public cultural and social conflicts (Talbayev, 2012).

4.2.1 Personal and Political Intersections

The phrase "the personal is political" is still useful for interpreting women's autobiographies in the Maghreb, where private experiences frequently mirror larger community issues. Leigh Gilmore says that women writing about themselves helps to show how complicated women's subjectivity is while also dealing with social and political problems (T. Ben Jelloun, n.d.-b). In Mokeddem's stories, protagonists like Sadiya deal with the complicated relationships between their own identities and the demands of society. They show the conflicts between personal wants and public duties after independence. This dichotomy shows how important it is to look at these tales through a critical perspective, as they reveal how personal experiences mirror bigger fights against gender inequality and the effects of colonialism (T. Ben Jelloun, n.d.-b).

4.2.2 Colonial Legacies and Gender Oppression

Although Algeria and Morocco earned independence from colonial powers, the postcolonial period did not abolish patriarchal systems; contrary, colonial disruption frequently strengthened them. Agar-Mendousse (2006) says that women were "freed from colonial rule only to be recaptured by national identity projects that idealised traditional gender roles." In The Forbidden Woman, the village's reaction to Sultana's return reflects this entrapment:

"*I have forgotten nothing… When the inquisition is elevated to civility, questions are summons and silence becomes an admission of infamy.*" (Mokeddem, 1993, p. 84) This comment shows how seeing women becomes natural and even praised as a societal standard.

4.2.3 Gender Identity and Suppression

Ben Jelloun's The Sand Child starts with an act of patriarchal brutality masquerading as necessity—the father's choice to raise Zahra as Ahmed to ensure property rights. This action obliterates Zahra's identity as a girl, compelling her to inhabit a falsehood: "They referred to me as Ahmed, yet I felt Ahmed was consuming me from within." Ben Jelloun, 1985, p. 78. The novel's narrative is intentionally fractured, including many narrators narrating Zahra's experience, reflecting her disordered identity. Orlando (1995) contends that "Ben Jelloun's multifaceted narrative illustrates the intricacy of gender as a construct dictated by social systems rather than an inherent truth." Zahra's final liberation from her father's will represents a reclamation of autonomy, although incomplete.

Although both novels critique analogous systems of oppression, their narrative techniques diverge. Mokeddem's realism and dual narration provide a nuanced portrayal of Algerian society in the early 1990s, illustrating the conflict between modernity and tradition. In contrast, Ben Jelloun utilises Moroccan oral storytelling traditions and metafictional techniques, framing Zahra's narrative as an element of a collective history of marginalised women.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, looking at The Forbidden Woman and The Sand Child shows that both books are strong criticisms of patriarchal norms that are firmly rooted in North African communities and made worse by the effects of colonialism. These works show how difficult it is to build gender, negotiate identity, and be a woman under institutional oppression via their main characters, Sultana and Ahmed/Zahra. Mokeddem's story is on the conflict between fundamentalist beliefs and women's freedom, showing that cooperation and strength may lead to freedom. Ben Jelloun also uses several narratives and magical realism to show how fragile socially imposed identities are and how hard it is to live up to gendered standards. Both novels show that women's voices, which have been pushed to the outside of mainstream discourse for a long time, are coming through in literature as acts of resistance and redefinition. In the end, this research shows that Maghrebi women's writing is not just a criticism of culture, but also a force for change that questions strict rules and imagines free futures. This sociocritical point of view shows how important it is to keep talking about intersectional feminist issues in order to comprehend how women's lives are changing in patriarchal and postcolonial settings.

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