

**Gender-based Oppression in the Algerian Society During the 1990's as
Viewed by two Algerian Women Writers**

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Abstract:

The Algerian society is mostly based on patriarchal rules. These rules work to the advantage of men while they put women in a position of inferiority. Algerian women have always been subjected to the authority of men and to different forms of oppression. Yet, their situation was worsened by the Islamic radicalization that happened in the early 1990's in the country and which eventually led to a civil war.

The terrible consequences of the gender-based oppression are reflected by two Algerian authors: Maissa Bey in her first novel, published in 1996 and Malika Mokeddem in her third novel, published in 1993. This article aims to probe into the experiences of Algerian women as represented in these two works which are both set during the early days of the Algerian civil war.

Keywords: gender-based oppression, patriarchal society, Algerian literature, Maissa Bey, Malika Mokeddem

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Introduction:

Today, many Algerian people, if asked about the situation of women in the world and in their own country, would say that it has improved significantly in the last decades. Many would even go as far as saying that some women today enjoy more rights and more freedoms than ever before, and even more than some men. Yet, when one wants to look closely at the situation of women today, one learns, for example, that in Algeria, in 2015 a student at university was denied access to one of her exams because she was wearing a skirt that had been considered too short. In the same year, a young woman was not allowed to enter a public health clinic to get treated because she was wearing shorts. In 2018, a young woman was verbally assaulted for jogging in a public space, and then physically attacked for talking back to her assailant. These incidents, isolated as they might seem, are quite significant in the sense that they illustrate the situation of women in Algeria today. They reflect, principally, the attitude of patriarchal society towards women and they show the deeply embedded prejudices that the Algerian society seems to have against women's freedoms. In spite of the fact that no law forbids women from wearing shorts or skirts or even practicing sports in the public space, these simple acts are strongly disapproved of and rejected by society.

Even more significant than the opinions are the acts of people, mostly men, who feel that they are entitled to, supposedly, protect the morality and appropriate behavior in society. The most prominent element invoked in these types of situations is religion. Many Algerians claim that they need to be the protectors of the religious principles of their society; they do not, however, seem to reflect on whether their acts are lawful or not or how they impact other members of society, especially women. They give themselves the right to act as enforcers of social norms that demand that women be kept under the close control of traditions and strict patriarchal rules. This tendency seems to be one, of the many, terrible consequences of what is now called 'the black decade' or the civil war in Algeria. The conflict that opposed different fundamentalist groups to the Algerian government after the legislative elections of 1991 and the denial of the results by the authorities resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties and a deep trauma of killing and violence that Algerians are still struggling with today.

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As is often the case during times of conflict, women seem to have been the category to suffer the most of the atrocities perpetrated against humanity during the 1990's in Algeria. In her article "Women's Struggle against Muslim Fundamentalism in Algeria: Strategies or a Lesson for Survival?" **Louisa Ait-Hamou** Writes:

We need to bear in mind here that violence against women did not start with the terrorism of the early 1990s that followed the cancellation of the elections. Women were targeted by Muslim fundamentalists long before that.

In the early 1980s, when Muslim fundamentalism was already gaining momentum, the first victims of religious and political violence were women. Vociferous Friday sermons at the mosque focused on women and their bodies, describing them as prostitutes if they wore lipstick or 'western clothes'. Young male Muslim fundamentalists attacked female students on university campuses with the tacit approval of the police, who did not intervene to protect women (**Ait-Hamou .L (2004), p.119**).

Therefore, in a patriarchal society already prejudiced against women's independence, religious extremism added a new layer to the oppression of Algerian women. Thus, the most horrendous acts of violence became grounded as punishments for the women who supposedly deserved them. Rape and murder were used as practices to instill fear in women to exhort them to desert the public space and to stay in their houses. Fundamentalists also demanded that women quit their jobs and even wear the veil as a sign of modesty and devotion.

This decade was depicted in literature as Algerian authors saw the necessity to use their writings to denounce what was happening in order to inform about and deconstruct what was taking place in their country. The two authors dealt with here are considered as two of the most prominent female writers of their generation. Maissa Bey and Malika Mokeddem, born respectively in 1950 and 1949, are among the Algerian authors who witnessed the end of the Algerian war for liberation from French colonialism and who saw the situation of women in their society go from bad to worse until it reached its most terrible point during 'the black decade.' The two authors published different novels in which they tackle the situation of women under the rule of patriarchy during the Algerian civil war among which, *Bey's Au commencement était la mer...* (1996) and *Mokeddem's L'interdite* (1993).

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The choice of these two novels is based on the fact that this paper aims to look at the situation of women in patriarchal society; the main point will be to show that women are burdened by gender requirements that patriarchy imposes on their sex and how their situation, which was already precarious, was exacerbated by fundamentalism in Algeria. In both novels, the civil war represents a context and a secondary theme more than a central issue addressed by the two authors. Bey's novel, the title of which can literally be translated as 'at the beginning was the sea,' tells the story of an Algerian young woman, Nadia, and her struggle to enjoy an independent life in a patriarchal society. The eighteen years old girl sees her dreams of freedom and love collapse when she is abandoned by her lover, Karim, who cannot take responsibility for his actions and prefers to surrender to the demands of his family and society. Mokeddem's work tells the story of Sultana, 'the forbidden woman' of the novel's title, as she comes back to Algeria after several years of exile to attend the funeral of her friend, and former lover, Yacine. The novel also narrates the experience of Vincent, a French man who comes to Algeria in an attempt to connect with the identity of the Algerian woman whose kidney was transplanted to him.

In her book *Gender Divisions and Social Change*, Nickie Charles writes:

Patriarchy has been defined from within feminism as...the power of the father: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, language, customs, etiquette, education and division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female everywhere is subsumed under the male (Charles. N (1993), p.22).

The Algerian society is one that is based on the principles described by Charles. The positions of privilege and power are granted to men along with the right to exercise that power over women. Women are, on their part, relegated to a secondary position from which they are required to merely serve men and to strictly follow the rules of patriarchy. Both Bey and Mokeddem give a clear representation of the functioning of the Algerian society and of the difficulties that women experience under its rule. The two writers render the struggles that Algerian women who aspire to obtain a life as independent individuals have to go through in order to achieve their goal.

The two female authors set their novels in the early 1990's; a period in Algeria which was mainly characterized by the atrocities of the civil war. In both works, it

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is clearly demonstrated that religious extremism reinforces the already unfair rules of patriarchy. The inferior position of women is made worse by the preaching of preachers who exhort men to exercise a violent authority over women who, in the name of keeping the balance and protecting the integrity of society, are subjected to verbal, physical, and even sexual abuse. For Zahia Smail Salhi, "...such forms of violence are often falsely backed up with a religious tenet that gives them legitimacy and makes them difficult to shift or remove." (Smail Salhi. Z (2013), p.3). This situation is experienced by women in *Au commencement était la mer...* and *L'interdite* as Bey and Mokeddem show how fundamentalists succeeded in making of women the main targets of their war against 'immorality.' As Karima Bennoune writes in her article "S.O.S. Algeria: Women's Human Rights Under Siege," "Women of all socio-economic backgrounds began to experience tremendous difficulty walking in their neighborhoods, going to work and dressing as they chose." (Bennoune. K (1995), p.194). This added to the already heavy restrictions that women had to live under in Algeria.

The main objective of what follows is to analyze the two selected novels with the purpose of probing into the sufferings endured by women living under the rule of patriarchy in Algeria and how, during the 1990's, Islamic fundamentalism made the situation even worse for them by making them a target. Through the analysis of the experiences of different female and male characters in the novels, the goal is to understand and deconstruct the oppression of society and the reaction of individuals in the face of this oppression.

I. Gender-based violence:

It is true that violence in society can take different forms, have different causes, and target different categories of people. Yet, violence against women remains one of the most ubiquitous forms of violence found in society. Zahia Smail Salhi explains that "Although there is no universally accepted definition of violence against women [her] study is based on the gender-based roots of violence as it is inflicted on women and girls specifically because of their gender, and targets their self-worth and their right to life with dignity and security." (Smail Salhi. Z (2013), p.2). This type of violence is the direct result of the social pressure of patriarchy that aims at keeping women and girls under its control. The perpetuation of the status quo relies directly on preventing women from questioning the system and attempting to change it.

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Therefore, the first thing that seems to be required from women is obedience. From early childhood, they are asked to follow the rules even when these neither suit them nor work to their advantage. They are taught, coerced, and even threatened to blindly obey the orders and requirements of patriarchy as they are formulated by different institutions or individuals.

Maissa Bey explores this aspect of the Algerian society in her novel. Through her main character, Nadia, the author voices the questionings of thousands of Algerian women that are echoed in the voice of the young girl. At eighteen and with a sharp mind that pushes her to think about her situation in society, Nadia does not understand the rules imposed on her or their pertinence.

Au nom de quelles lois absurdes, incompréhensibles, doit-elle toujours renoncer à dire, à faire ? Avoir toujours à l'esprit ce qui se fait, ce qui ne se fait pas. Obéir à ceux qui veulent régir sa vie : son frère, sa mère et tous les autres. Vivre sous les regards qui jugent, qui jaugent, qui agressent, qui condamnent. (Bey. M (1996), pp.13-14).

Nadia voices the absurdity and the injustice of the restrictions that are imposed on women in Algeria in the 1990's; she does not understand why she has to live her own life as others want her to. Her position as a girl, in the family, even puts her under the obligation to obey a brother, Djamel, who is one year younger than she is. The restrictions of her ability to think, act or express herself freely are the consequences of being born a woman. Nadia is deeply aware of the injustice of her situation and, more importantly, she is reluctant to submit to the judgments and aggressions of her society.

The social pressures and exclusions that women are subjected to is also a form of gender-based violence, or at least discrimination, which can be seen in Malika Mokeddem's novel. The world described in the work is one in which men occupy the different social spaces while women are confined to the spaces of their homes. In chapter 2, Vincent calls it «...la quasi totale absence des femmes dans les rues... » (Mokeddem. M (1993), p.31) as he, the European man who travels to Algeria in an attempt to connect with the Algerian woman whose kidney was transplanted to him, is surprised, almost disturbed by the absence of women in the public spaces that he visits. His vision, which is that of a foreigner, might be labeled negative because he does not belong to the society. Yet, it seems to be a valid one precisely because it is neutral. In fact, Sultana expresses a similar feeling right after she comes back to

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Algeria. When she is on her way from the airport to Ain Nekhla, she observes the streets from the taxi and she describes what she sees: « Je regarde la rue effarée. Elle grouille encore plus que dans mes pires cauchemars. Elle inflige, sans vergogne, son masculin pluriel et son apartheid féminin. » (Mokeddem. M (1993), p.15). The female character, in spite of being familiar of this vision of the Algerian patriarchal society, still deplores the absence of women from the daily life and its everyday activities. By using a word as strong as apartheid, Mokeddem seems to reinforce the strong sense of injustice that she feels when she sees what is perpetrated against Algerian women.

The discrimination and violence against girls and women in Algeria is so present and so widely accepted that it is rarely questioned in society. Most men simply uphold a system which is made to serve their interests and most women see it as immutable and impossible to challenge. Even when everyone can see the injustice of the status quo, no one is willing or able to take action against it. Sultana and Salah Akli, Yacine's doctor friend who comes to attend his funeral, discuss the situation of the Algerian society and he declares: « Nous sommes les rois, quand il s'agit d'autodestruction et de régression, » to which she adds, « Et de détestation des femmes ! » Salah agrees: « Oui, avant tout, pour nous empoisonner à la source. Nous n'avons cessé de tuer l'Algérie à petit feu, femme par femme. » (Mokeddem. M (1993), p.51). This lucid analysis on the part of both characters shows the complexity of the situation as it is deconstructed by Mokeddem.

The dynamic of this society in which power is put exclusively in the hands of men who, very often, use it unfairly and even violently is a misbalanced one as women are completely excluded from the life of society and they are assigned very restrictive roles that force them to the margins and keep them under control. This situation was made even worse by the religious radicalization that gave birth to Islamic fundamentalism in the 1990's. The indoctrination of thousands of young Algerians, especially young men, was the result of a meticulous work carried out by various preachers as part of the political project of the Front Islamique de Salut (FIS). One of the main targets of the changes that were supposed to improve the Algerian society was, once again, the women. Maissa Bey shows this through the character of Djamel, a young man of seventeen and Nadia's brother, who is in the process of being radicalized. Bey writes:

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Enfermé dans la chambre qu'il ne veut plus partager avec son frère, Djamel écoute des cassettes.

Etranges paroles sans musique.

Paroles de haine et de violence. Martelées plus tôt que dites par des prédicateurs aux accents passionnés et incendiaires.

En écoutant une cassette subtilisée un jour, Nadia a entendu des imprécations, des diatribes contre LA femme. Contre sa perversion originelle. En termes crus, choquants, si suggestifs parfois qu'elle en rougissait, alors même qu'elle était seule. Propos publics, ponctués par les acclamations enflammées d'un auditoire envouté. (Bey. M (1996), p.58).

The deeply misogynist, and supposedly religious, speeches directed against women serve to reinforce and even strengthen the already restrictive and violent patriarchal attitudes that Nadia and many other women were confronted to in the Algerian society described by Maissa Bey.

In order to concretely see the damages done to the lives of women and to better understand the burdens that they have to carry in society, it seems important to focus on both aspects of their lives: the domestics and the public. The aim is to show the extent to which gender-based discriminations affect the lives of women in the different domains.

II. Women in the domestic sphere:

The burden of being a woman in a society based on gender inequalities is one that women have to bear from the moment of their birth. In patriarchal societies, the birth of a male child is very often celebrated as a blessing to the family while the birth of a girl is frowned upon and viewed as something that has to be accepted, since it could not be avoided rather than an event to rejoice over. Very often, girls grow up in households in which they are required to prove their value by being obedient and docile; they also have to participate to house chores from a very young age. The girl is also put in a secondary position vis-à-vis her brothers, and other male members of the extended family, when she is put under their authority, which she has to accept and respect even when they are younger than her. Men are free to use different types of violence (verbal or physical) to ensure the obedience of the woman in the domestic sphere.

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The situation deteriorated, even further, in Algeria during the 1990's when religion was used as an alibi to justify and reinforce the strict gender roles of patriarchy. Consequently, the subordination of women became a practice required both by society and religion. It was preached that men had the right, and sometimes even the duty, to restrict the freedom of women and keep their behavior under strict control. The evolution of the mores of society was more than ever related to what women should and should not do.

In Au commencement était la mer..., Maïssa Bey deals with the radicalization of the Algerian society and she shows the direct consequences on the lives of women in the domestic sphere through the life of her main character Nadia and her family. The young girl, whose father died when she was eight, lives with her mother, her two younger brothers, and her little sister. Her freedom, which is clearly limited by the rules of patriarchy, is further restricted by the radicalization of her brother Djamel. He represents, in the life of Nadia, a source of oppression. At the beginning of the novel, the readers meet Nadia very early one morning as she is taking a walk on the beach next to the house where she is spending the summer with her family. When she comes back, she finds her brother waiting at the door to interrogate her in an accusing tone. He demands to know where she had been and at that moment, she is scared of him as if she had done something wrong. « Elle tremble, surprise en flagrant délit de liberté. » (Bey. M (1996), p.13). Djamel does not say anything to his sister; he simply acts as someone who has the right to question her and even to decide for her. « Il l'écarte d'un geste brusque, pousse la porte, tourne la clé qu'il enlève. » (Bey. M (1996), p.13). Thus, Nadia becomes a prisoner.

Nadia does not react because she knows that she cannot win. She has internalized the functioning of her society from a very young age and she is aware of the fact that a direct challenging of authority would result in more oppression and even violence. When she is forbidden to go out, she does not protest in spite of the feeling of injustice. « Nadia promène sa rage impuissante et fébrile à travers l'espace restreint, insupportable, de sa chambre, du patio, de toute la maison. » (Bey. M (1996), p.63).

In *L'interdite*, Malika Mokeddem also exposes the many restrictions imposed on Algerian women and girls within the domestic sphere through the family of Dalila. The little girl, who is presented in the novel as Yacines little friend, desperately strives for freedom and she attempts to face the limitations imposed on her by the patriarchal authority which represented in her case by her numerous

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brothers. She wants to get education and follow the example of her older sister, Samia, who left the country in order to study in France. Yet, despite her success, Samia was rejected by her father and brothers who saw her refusal to get married and her decision to pursue her studies as an affront. So, Dalila tries to be discreet in order not to be taken out of school; even when she goes out on her own, she makes sure to go back home before she is missed by her family. She does not even accept the portrait that Yacine makes of her. She knows, from her sister's experience, that challenging the status quo would result in direct reprisal. She explains her fears to Vincent during their first conversation by saying: « Chez moi, ils crieront, ils me taperont. Ils me laisseront plus sortir. Ils me couperont de l'école. » (Mokeddem. M (1993), p.34). Thus, for the little girl, the space of the home is not one where she feels safe and protected; she views it as a place to be feared and if possible, escaped. Similarly to Nadia's brother Djamel, Dalila's seven brothers, four out of which she describes as bearded Islamists, take their authority over their sister for granted. She describes their attitude to Vincent as she says:

Ils me disputent et ils disputent ma mère. Ils me disent toujours : « Tu sors pas ! Travaille avec ta mère ! Apporte-moi à boire ! Donne-moi mes chaussures ! Repasse mon pantalon ! Baisse les yeux quand je te parle ! » et encore et encore et tu multiplies par sept. Ils crient et me donnent des ordres. Parfois, ils me frappent. (Mokeddem. M (1993), p.36).

The position of the girl in her family is a secondary one. She does not have the same rights as her brothers, and more importantly she is required to submit to their patriarchal authority. Dalila is denied her individuality and her free will because she is a girl. She is also required to perform specific gender roles defined by her society. She finds herself obliged to serve her brothers with no possibility to challenge the power that they have over her because she knows that there would be consequences.

Another character image through which the oppression of patriarchy can be observed is that of the mother. In both novels, the character of the mother is associated to the different restrictions that are imposed on women in society and more specifically in the domestic space. These women also illustrate a form of socialization. As they are almost completely deprived of their free will by patriarchy, most of them internalize its rules which they see as immutable and inescapable. They even perpetuate some of the demands of society when they raise their daughters to conform to the requirements of patriarchy. These mothers also demonstrate their submission when they relinquish their authority in the family to their sons. The

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structure of the family becomes misbalanced because the mothers no longer hold the place of parent; they submit to the authority of their husbands and to that of their sons who represent patriarchal power.

This situation is addressed by Malika Mokeddem through the character of Dalila's mother. This female character represents the women who are subjected to the stronghold of society. In the hierarchy of the family, she is under the authority of her husband, which is a requirement in patriarchal society; she is also submitted to the dominance of her sons. It can be deduced from the story told by that her mother did not have a say in the decision taken by her husband and her sons to banish her daughter Samia. The young woman who had refused to get married, as her brothers wanted her to, in order to pursue her studies abroad was considered as a disgrace to the family. Her mother was probably not able to stand up for her daughter and defend her freedom to study instead of accepting a husband found by her brothers. This situation is described by Dalila in a conversation with Vincent : « Des fois, ma mère, elle pleure et elle cache ses larmes. Si mon père voit ses larmes, il crie et il dit qu'il veut plus qu'on lui parle de Samia, jamais ; que si elle vient, il la tue. » ((Mokeddem. M (1993), p.37). The position of the mother is so precarious that she cannot even freely cry the absence of her own daughter.

This terrible experience shapes her behavior and her attitude toward her second daughter, Dalila. She appears to have lost hope and no longer believes that her life or the lives of women in general can be improved can be improved in the Algerian society of the 1990's. As Dalila tells Vincent:

Elle dit que l'Indépendance elle est injuste. Des fois elle est si triste, alors elle dit qu'Allah, lui aussi, il est injuste. Quand elle dit ça devant eux, mes frères islamistes crient et la disputent. Ils disent qu'elle ira en enfer. Et elle dit [que] l'enfer c'est tous les jours, c'est maintenant. (Mokeddem. M (1993), pp.38-39).

Dalila's mother has enough lucidity to analyze her situation under the rule of patriarchy and she knows that she has no escape. She bitterly points out the injustice of living in a free country that fought a liberation war to obtain its independence from French colonialism and to still be oppressed in one's own society. She also rejects the hypocrisy of a religion which is maintained by men who simply use it to reinforce the social order. Yet, despite her sense of hopelessness, she wants a better future for her daughter. She encourages her to go to school and to learn as much as

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she can with her teacher, Ouarda, who acts as a mentor for the little girl. Yet, she fears that a direct confrontation with the figures of authority would lead to reprisal for Dalila, so the mother encourages her to follow the rule as when she tells her: « Obéis à tes frères, sinon tu es pas ma fille! » (Mokeddem. M (1993), p.36). The mother knows that due to her secondary position in the family, she cannot protect her daughter from the control of her sons, so she tries to help her escape through education.

Similarly, in Maissa Bey's novel, Nadia's mother is a woman whose life is limited to the space of the house and whose voice is rarely heard within this space. She is a widowed mother of four who leaves her husband's family's house after his death, with the help of her brother, to move to an apartment in Algiers. After the death of her husband, she has been treated as a maid by his relatives as she had no longer any status within the family when she became a widow. She explains this to her children when she says: « Sans un homme, une femme n'est plus rien » (Bey. M. (1996), p.40). In the Algerian society, the wife is often viewed as the possession of the husband and his family. Her position is not that of an independent individual as she cannot make her own decisions or act as she wants; her life and her behavior are determined by her husband and her in-laws. This position of inferiority reduces the woman's existence to performing domestic tasks and taking care of the family.

Bey describes Nadia's mother through the vision her daughter has of her. When she thinks of her, Nadia focuses mainly on the nurturing aspect of her mother. For Nadia, she cannot be dissociated from the cleaning, the cooking, and the baking that she does for the family every day. For the young woman, « C'est cela sa mère. Elle est tout entière dans ces gestes ancestraux qu'elle n'a même pas besoin d'apprendre. » (Bey. M. (1996), p.52). The mother is defined by her ability to perform certain tasks that are demanded by society from women. She exists within the space of her kitchen and she provides her children with what she believes they need, but the problem is that she does not exist outside this role. For Nadia, « C'est cela sa mère. Rien que cela. » (Bey. M. (1996), p.53). She does not perform the role of a real parent in her children's life. She is unable to prevent the radicalization of Djamel as she cannot speak to her son who retreats more and more into silence and extremism. She is also incapable of seeing the problems that Nadia suffers from when she gets pregnant and is abandoned by her boyfriend, Karim. She does not even notice when

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her daughter has an abortion. Nadia's mother is imprisoned within the role allocated to her by society to the point of becoming blind to her children's pain.

One of the most restraining burdens that women have to carry in society is their confinement to the domestic sphere. In this space, they are deprived of their voice and of their individuality. Their position as the subordinates of men denies them the possibility to express their opinions, needs, and desires. By definition, the traditional role of the woman is to become a wife and mother; she is to nurture her children and to obey and please her husband in order to be approved of by society. In this position, women are also denied access to any form of intellectual or public activity. Girls are not encouraged to pursue higher education, but rather groomed to become good housewives. Women who manage to get educated are not encouraged to go to work because they are not supposed to neglect their domestic duties. This is why, for a long time, the public space in Algeria was almost exclusively occupied by men. Many of whom were not ready to share what they considered as their legitimate prerogative with women.

III. Women in the public sphere:

In the introduction of her 2013 book *Gender and Violence in Islamic Societies*, Zahia Smail Salhi states that “In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) unequal power relations between men and women still prevail and are sustained by patriarchy and the rise of Islamism in the last few decades.” (Smail Salhi .Z(2013), pp.1-2). This is the case for Algeria where men take the center stage of both domestic and public life on which they exercise their power and control while women are confined to the margins and asked to conform to society's demands. Yet, in the recent history of the country, there has been a time during which women had hope that their society was going to evolve and allow them to become the partners of men in the construction of the different aspects of life in Algeria. In fact, during the war for liberation (1954-1962) Algerian women fought alongside men to free the country from French colonialism. They actively participated in the war effort and supported their fellow men, sometimes at the price of their own lives. But the independence of the country did not bring women the freedom that they had earned. After the end of the war, they were asked to go back to their houses and be content with performing the roles of wives and mothers because their services were no longer needed in the public sphere. This represented a deep disappointment for women who perceived the attitude of the new government as a form of betrayal of all the principles they had so strongly

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fought for. In fact, it is difficult to understand that a country that had struggled with oppression for so long would continue to perpetrate oppression against half its members on the basis of gender.

One of the most significant limitations that women suffered from in the public sphere is the restriction of education. One form of limitation is the one exercised by the families; many of them considered education for girls as useless. They would privilege the education of the boys who were expected to go as far as possible in their studies and obtain the best possible position with their degrees. Girls, on the other hand, were encouraged to learn to become the best potential wives. Even when they were sent to school, girls would only be allowed to go for a few years, and they would be taken out by their families as soon as they were ready to be married off. Besides, there was the potential danger that sending their daughters to school could represent for their proper upbringing. Families were often suspicious of schools that, in their opinions, could teach girls to be disobedient and demand more freedom than society was willing to give them. There was also the risk that the girls would want to pursue higher education and go on the work market after graduation.

The issue of education for girls is dealt with by both Bey and Mokeddem as it is a crucial one in understanding the situation and position of women in the Algerian public sphere. In *L'interdite*, the topic of education is a problematic one for different female characters. First, there is Samia who had to defy her family in order to go to university and finish her studies abroad. She challenged their authority, by consequence she was seen as a terrible woman. As her little sister Dalila explains that when they speak about Samia, her brothers insult her because of her decision to study abroad. For the little girl, her sister only wants to be free. Despite the fact that education for girls is a right that is granted by the law in Algeria, and the fact that successive Algerian governments since the independence have promoted the importance of education of all children for the building of a strong nation, some patriarchal families, especially ones composed mostly of uneducated men like Samia and Dalila's brothers, still do not tolerate daughters like Samia because they represent a threat to the established order; they want access to the public sphere through education and work and they are ready to subvert the authority of their families. Thus, the situation of Dalila is quite uncertain. Although she goes to school, she knows that she cannot take her education for granted; she needs to be careful not to show any signs of disobedience in order not to have to suffer the consequences of

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the disapproval of her brothers. Sometimes they do even remind her of her situation. She explains that they when they want to threaten her, they say: « Toi, tu iras jamais à [l'université]! On ne te laissera pas faire comme Samia. » (Mokeddem .M (1993), p.37). Therefore, Dalila keeps a low profile and works as hard as she can while trying not to antagonize her brothers. As the story of Sultana unfolds, it becomes clear that the main character of the novel was also confronted to many difficulties in order to get educated. In the small village in which she was born, education for girls was unheard of. When she started school she was the only girl there and her faly was strongly disapproved of for not following the norms of the community.

In *Au commencement était la mer...* Bey also deals with the difficulties that girls have to face in order to get educated. At the start of the novel, her main character Nadia has just graduated from high school by getting her Baccaalaureate and she is about to start university. « Pendant des années, Nadia a rêvé de ce jour, de ses premiers pas [à] l'université. » (Bey. M (1996), p.71). In fact, Nadia knows that in her society education for a girl cannot be taken for granted; she is also aware of the fact that it represents a possibility to escape the fate pre-established for her gender by patriarchy which is that of being confined to a household. Nadia seems to have always understood that the only way for her to follow her own path in life would be through higher education. When she needs to register at one of the faculties of the University of Algiers, she does not really give much thought to which one she wants to go to. « Etudier d'abord. N'importe quoi. L'essentiel étant d'accéder à l'université. Envers et contre tous. Elle s'est tellement battue pour en arriver là, qu'elle n'a plus envie de rien en cet instant » (M. Bey (1996), p.72). When she finally starts her classes, studying for her is equivalent with fighting; for her future, for her individuality, and even for her own life. Yet, her fight is not that of one girl; it is the fight of all Algerian women who wish to acquire a certain degree of freedom in a patriarchal society that wants them to submit at all costs. One girl who shares the same fight with Nadia is her friend, Farida, whose intelligence, strong will, and assertive personality bring her disapproval from society. « Effrontée disaient certains professeurs au lycée, parce qu'elle avait l'insolence de poser des questions, d'exiger des réponses. Vive, tout simplement, avec des écorchures parfois dans la voix, dans le regard, traces de ses incessants combats...contre une famille qui n'a de cesse de la soumettre. » (Bey. M (1996), p.73).

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The qualities of Farida are perceived as flaws by her family because they do not meet the behavior expected from a young girl.

In addition to their families and society, these two young women, and so many others just like them, had to fight against the other oppressive force operating in the country during the 1990's: fundamentalism. Karima Bennoun writes: "When the FIS was a legal party, the number of attacks on women skyrocketed, on both the individual and mass levels. For example, women's college dormitories were repeatedly besieged by FIS militants who threatened women residents, prohibiting them from entering or leaving." (Bennoune. K (1995, pp.194-195). This clearly shows that there was a will to keep women away from education in an attempt to prevent them from acquiring the knowledge and opportunities that would allow them to escape, partly or completely, the stronghold that patriarchy exercises over them.

Another way to ascertain its restrictive power over women in the public spaces, patriarchy encourages men to use intimidation as means to limit women's freedom and to reprimand them when they do not strictly conform to the norms of society. Many women are raised to believe that the public sphere is reserved for men and they are signified that they are committing a transgression when they try to join it. The transgressions are generally met with different forms of pressure and several types of gender-based violence.

The first form of pressure that women suffer from and complain about in the public sphere, are the looks of intimidation that they receive from men. These looks of scrutiny and disapprobation are often perceived by women as a threat that makes them afraid of going out, especially on their own. This situation is addressed by Maissa Bey through the character of Nadia. The young woman is weighed down by the pressure that she constantly feels when she is outside. « Toujours présents, les regards, le poids des regards. Obsession. » (M. Bey, 1996, p.21). Nadia has to always be aware of the men around her and of her own behavior; she can never feel safe or free. The same complaint is made by Malika Mokeddem's character, Dalila. The little girl explains to Vincent the difficulty of being a woman who wants to freely go about her life; she gives him the example of her sister, Samia, who felt assaulted by the looks of men and perceived them as direct aggressions against her. Dalila explains: « [Samia] dit, ici les gens regardent pas. Ils zyeuvent. Ils ont leurs yeux collés sur ta peau, collés sur toi jusqu'au sang, comme des sangsues, comme des sauterelles, partout sur toi, même sous tes habits...ça te fait [trébucher] les pieds

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pour te faire tomber. » (M. Mokeddem, 1993, p.99). The anxiety and the feeling of unease that the young woman describes illustrate the deep and devastating impact that this form of intimidation has on women.

Another form of pressure that women are subjected to in public spaces is verbal abuse. In fact, it is very common that women are called different sorts of pejorative names when they are on the streets or in other public places. This is often justified by the fact that the woman's behavior is viewed as inappropriate, but in reality the insults are gratuitous and aim to degrade women and intimidate them. *In L'interdite*, as soon as she comes back to Algeria, Sultana is reminded of what the women have to endure on the streets when she is insulted, for no reason, by a young boy. For Sultana, insult represents all the pain and the shame that women are made to feel in society. It is a symbol of what she had desperately been attempting to escape when she left the country. Despite the fact that these behaviors stand on no judicial ground since insulting women in the public space is against the law in Algeria, still many men, who are mostly, uneducated and quite extreme in their actions, still feel that their attitudes are justified.

When women do not conform in spite of the intimidations and the insults, the verbal abuse turns into acts of physical violence. Zahia Smail Salhi defines violence against women as she writes: "It is the form of violence used to establish and enforce gender inequalities and keep gender orders in place." (Z. Smail Salhi, 2013, p.13). This type of violence very often occurs in the domestic sphere and within families, but it also takes place in the public sphere. As men believe that they should to protect the status quo, they feel that are entitled to coerce women and oppress them into following the restrictive rules of patriarchy by perpetrating violent acts against them. One example that can be found in Mokeddem's novel is the violence that Sultana is subjected to at the hands of certain members of the community of the village of Ain Nekhla. She is disapproved of for being 'the forbidden woman' of the novel's title because she does not strictly conform to the patriarchal rules of her society. Bakkar, the mayor of the village who represents the FIS political party, supported by many of his acolytes, goes as far as slashing the tires of Sultana's car in an attempt to force her out of Ain Nekhla. (M. Mokeddem, 1993, p.122). As this attempt fails, they set fire to the house in which Sultana had been staying. (M. Mokeddem, 1993, p.180). These extreme acts of violence appear as desperate endeavors to preserve the social order.

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With the fundamentalist movement of the 1990's in Algeria, came one more form of oppression that was used against women: the attempt to oblige women to wear the veil. According to Karima Bennoune, “The campaign to force women to veil has been relentless.” (Bennoune. K (1995), p.187). This can be seen in Maissa Bey's novel when Djamel tries to force his sister Nadia to start wearing the headscarf. Many women comply with this demand because they are scared to the consequences of a refusal, but Nadia does not. « Elle marche devant eux, la tête nue. Cela seul est un défi aux lois qu'ils veulent désormais faire régner dans la cité. Son frère et les autres...Presque toutes les filles ici ont fini par céder. Elles portent le voile. » (Bey. M (1996), p.135). Yet, Nadia soon comes to understand that her challenging attitude was not going to remain unpunished. In fact, when she gets home, she discovers that her brother has destroyed all her books and notebooks, her photos, and even her dolls (Bey. M (1996), p.136). He destroys everything that she values in reprisal for her defiance.

For many other women the threat was even more serious and they run the risk of losing their lives if they did not surrender to the authority that was being forced upon them. For Karima Bennoune, “...fundamentalist ideology and activity unquestionably pose a unique and overwhelming threat to the lives of Algerian women.” (Bennoune .K (1995), p.185). In fact, many women were killed during the Algerian civil war in the name of purifying society from the evil that was supposedly threatening it. As Maissa Bey puts it in her novel:

Des lois sont édictées chaque jour au nom d'un ordre nouveau, rédempteur, par des prosélytes d'un autre âge, chaque jour plus nombreux, chaque jour plus féroces.

Chaque jour, une fatwa, signée d'un obscur émir, proclamé par ses pairs « décideur des croyants. »

Délits maintenant punis de mort. Sans jugement. Sans appel. (Bey.M (1996), p.90).

Women were, therefore, condemned to death for transgressing the established order. Yet, the simple fact of being a woman seems to already be a transgression in a patriarchal society in which the already established gender inequalities were reinforced and strengthened by religious extremism. Algerian women were condemned to either conform to patriarchy's demands or suffer the different consequences that they might be subjected to. Simply wanting to have access to

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public spaces without limiting conditions or restrictions is not considered as a right by society but rather as a challenge.

Conclusion:

Despite the fact that Algeria has made tremendous efforts after its independence in 1962 in order to establish laws that protect Algerian women's rights in society, and also in order promote strategies that would grant women a better socio-economic status, some restrictive patriarchal rules were still upheld by families and communities in the Algerian society. As mentioned above in the article, these were reinforced by the Fundamentalism of the 1990's. Yet, it needs to be mentioned that since the end of the 'black decade' in Algeria, the situation of women has significantly improved as they are today an integral part in all the important fields in their country and they play crucial roles in its development.

It seems that a good illustration of the ordeal that women went through in the Algerian patriarchal society of the 1990's as depicted by Bey and Mokeddem is the fresco painted by Yacine in *L'interdite* and which he entitles 'L'Algérienne.' Sultana describes it as «...une mer de flammes. Une mer agitée. Là où les flammes déferlent, il s'en échappe un peu de fumée. Le ciel est bouché. Une femme, de dos, marche sur les flammes, indemne. Elle laisse derrière elle un sillage blanc et plat comme une route tracée dans la houle du feu. » (Mokeddem. M (1993), p.48). This represents what most Algerian women have to endure in their everyday life. They have to constantly struggle in order to be treated as individuals who can take part in the social and public life of their country.

One example is that of Algerian women writers like Bey and Mokeddem who are actively participating to the process by "...asserting their freedom to define their Algerian-ness, denouncing taboos, claiming in a different way their right to take part in their country's history and construction, to contribute to its evolution." (B. Stora, 1999, p.88). Both women writers attempt to offer women an alternative path to follow; one that would allow them to live as independent agents rather than be subjected to patriarchal authority. The two of them deconstruct the terrible situations that women experience and create positive images of female characters who relentlessly fight the injustices of the established order.

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More importantly, the two Algerian writers open spaces against the restrictions. In her novel, Bey offers the sea that for Nadia represents the freedom that she so longs to enjoy. The immensity of the sea contrasts with the suffocating spaces that women are confined to. Mokeddem, on her part, uses the desert. The infinity of its space offers Dalila a refuge from the limitations of her home; it represents the escape and the freedom that she craves.

Algerian female writers have contributed to the improvement of the situation of women in the last few decades, but a lot remains to be done. Women in Algeria today are still often confronted to restrictive patriarchal norms that they desperately try to liberate themselves from. Most of them still have to carry their gender as a burden.

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