

The Desert Space: The Feminine Self, the Writer, and the Anti-Place—A Reading of the Narrative Achievement of the Rebellious Novelist Malika Mokadam as an Example

Akila Grourou

University of Eloued

grourou-akila@univ-eloued.dz

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Abstract:

This study aims to explore the desert as an unparalleled realm and an endless narrative space, serving as inspiration for poets, novelists, and Sufis enamored with tales. Grounded in this perspective, writing embodies the infinite, inconceivable, and unfamiliar aspects of the desert—where worlds open up to the wonders of life, death, love, hatred, affinity, opposition, movement, and stillness. Consequently, the Algerian novelist turns to the desert as a mysterious entity, treating it as a symbolic and aesthetic space, connecting it to various human and aesthetic dimensions. The desert has left a strong imprint in the works of the novelist Malika Mokadam, where the desert space manifests as a narrative world open to adventure, experimentation, and rebellion. This narrative structure is entwined with autobiography and narrative disclosure in the journey of the feminine self, recounting the moment of rupture between 'there' and 'here.' The narrative reflects her struggles with feelings of frustration and aversion towards the barren and isolated desert environment, compelling its inhabitants to oppose the place and attempt to escape, aspiring for emancipation and yearning for freedom.

Keywords: the desert space, the feminine self the writer, anti-place

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Introduction:

The desert has been recorded as a space open to vastness, expansiveness, awe, the flourishing of silence, tranquility, aridity, heat, emptiness, and the constant human struggle with all forms of misery, making a powerful presence in narrative texts. The imaginative narrative has embraced the contradictory worlds of the desert space, drawing attention from a group of novelists whose narrative achievement aligns with their creative vision of the desert as a symbolic and artistic focal point in contemporary fiction.

The imaginative narrative has documented its connection to the desert space by imbuing it with the quality of localized humanity, linking it to a set of principles, turning it into a hub for shaping myths and envisioning the extraordinary. It elevates it to the realm of wisdom and

supreme clarity, where radiant enlightenment and the emergence of existential questions, the secrets of the universe, and life unfold. Here, life merges with art and the aesthetics of human creativity are realized.

Access to the desert opens the possibility for narration to live, see, and tell what it has witnessed. The vision here surpasses the sensory perspective of both human and desert, with the desert serving as a catalyst for human adventurous spirit, expanding the horizon of imagination in the mist of metaphysics. Here, the traditional rules of consciousness are disrupted, making the impossible possible, and the questions of existence and destiny persistently linger as one searches for their lost paradise or, more accurately, the truth of oneself and one's place in this world(1).

In accordance with this perspective, the desert becomes an exceptional realm for imagination and an unparalleled space for unending narrative paths. It has inspired poets, novelists, adventurers, explorers, spies, geographically inclined individuals, historians, Sufis, and those obsessed with probing the boundaries of death. They enter it and emerge laden with a wealth of stories.

In this logic, writing about the desert embodies the infinite, where unfamiliar worlds open up to the wonders of life, death, love, hatred, affinity, opposition, stillness, movement, the reasonable, and the unreasonable

The Desert Space and Algerian Narrative Fiction

The Algerian novelist turned to the desert as a secret, treating it as a symbolic and aesthetic space, linking it to various human and aesthetic dimensions. This was achieved by selecting its components to serve as the stage for events, description, and narration, with characters interacting within the coordinates of time, continuity, and place, functioning as 'a network of relationships, narratives, and perspectives that converge to form the space(2).'

This inclination towards the desert reflected aspects of awe, fear, confusion, astonishment, beauty, magic, myth, and marvel. The narrative achievement is seen deriving its presence from the desert space in its entirety. Therefore, the narrator places the narrated, from the very beginning, in the ambiance of the desert with all its manifestations, both positive and negative.

On this basis, Algerian narrative fiction opened up to the desert space with two contrasting visions:

1. **The first vision** sees the desert in narrative imagination as a friendly place, a sanctuary for emotions, thoughts, visions, and dreams. It serves as a safe haven for those fleeing terrorism and persecution by terrorist groups during the dark decade. The desert becomes an academy of mystical sciences and a spiritual treasure for those contemplating the kingdom of the universe, the stages of life, and the depths of the human soul, embodying words and the overflow of meaning, liberation, freedom, and inner peace. It is a source of literary inspiration and artistic creativity, and a tourist destination for those seeking the pleasure of traveling through its

captivating nature, clear air, and picturesque views at sunrise and sunset, while eagerly exploring its customs, traditions, cultural seasons, and religious sites.

2. **The second vision** portrays the desert in narrative imagination as an inhospitable and repulsive place, revealing hidden aggression through its harsh nature, difficult terrain, and hot, arid climate. It becomes a place of detention and torture for members of fundamentalist movements in Algeria, with torture centers and prisons (Rakane, Ain Amguel) during the dark decade.

The desert becomes a restricted space for human freedom, hindering the social thinking of the Saharan people, representing the first obstacle seeking to undermine the concept of self (3).

According to this dichotomy, the desert is no longer just a space for folklore, myths, or an empty attraction void of all aspects of life. Instead, it has become a symbol of civilization, identity, belonging, and a space pulsating with intellectual and literary vigor, filled with symbols that give rise to a unique intellectual vision, imparting narrative texts rich in meanings(4).

In this way, the desert has transformed from a mere narrative space decorating the events of the novel into a visible and latent cultural pattern. We discern this through the various depictions, representations of its dimensions, and the intellectual, spiritual, philosophical, and passionate contents it carries. Thus, it has become a space laden with cultural signs(5).

Hence, the perception of the desert varies from one novelist to another, each according to their viewpoint and degree of connection to it. Some see it realistically, while others see it imaginatively; some see it as open, while others see it as closed; some perceive it as a place of identity, while others view it as an enclosed prison. This reveals that the world of the desert is not merely folklore or superficial aspects but encompasses depth, memory, and heritage(6).

The Desert Space in the Works of Malika Mokadam

The novelist Malika Mokadam is among the few who have written about the desert, showcasing her distinctiveness in the completed novels that constitute, through the desert space, a narrative world open to adventure, experimentation, and rebellion. Malika Mokadam is one of the pioneers who spoke about the Bshar and Al-Qanadsa desert, specifically in shaping a narrative intertwined with autobiography and pure narrative disclosure by the novelist. This is evident in her novels 'Al-Mamnoua' (The Forbidden), 'Al-Mutamarrida' (The Rebel), and 'Rijali' (My Men).

Readers of these novels observe a general trend that distinguishes her writing about the desert through the autobiographical novel. It operates within a specific discourse that grants the narrating self its uniqueness in the narrative path. Her works do not delve into discussions about the desert in its mythical or miraculous manifestations as open worlds to the infinite, the

irrational, and the fantastical. The narrative imagination of the novelist did not aim to meticulously depict the features of the desert space in the process of narrative weaving, balancing between the real and the components of nature. The novelist's imaginative focus did not seek to delineate the details of the desert landscape. Instead, it aimed at blending the natural components of the desert space into the narrative, signaling towards elements such as sand, dunes, palm trees, nomadic Bedouins, sudden floods, salty lakes, mats, and some customs of the region and tribe.

These signals towards the natural components of the desert space give the reader the impression that Malika Mokadam's narrative fiction did not receive adequate attention in terms of describing the external scene and portraying its details. This suggests that the novelist's focus shifted towards matters related to human identity and its social environment within the desert dwelling primarily. Then, it explores the relationship of this identity as it moves within the context of the desert environment, its customs, and the psychological and intellectual complexities it generates for the central character in the narrative work.

The Feminine Self the Writer and Antagonism towards Space in the Novel 'The Rebel'

In the journey of self-exploration, the feminine writer narrates through the autobiographical narrative in the voice of the 'I,' at the moment of shaping the self in the autobiographical text. In her split between there and here, the narrator appears, distributed between two different times and places: the desert of Bshar in Algeria and the city of Montpellier in France. She recounts with a tapestry of memories to the era of her impoverished childhood, amidst a desolate and isolated desert environment. This environment pushes its inhabitants towards frustration and aversion. The narrator expresses this, saying, 'As for us, we cannot escape the hell, which extends from May to October, six months of a purifying torment.' (7)

This is how the desert appears in the eyes of the narrator – mysterious, harsh, and desolate. In it, humans do not feel stability. 'The Sahrawi person, if not the actor in the desert, is the acted upon, imprisoned by it, isolating them from others.' 'Behind the horizon, there is nothing, an unimaginable emptiness.' (8)(9)

Through the narrative disclosure and the elaboration in describing the narrator's self-suffering – living with misery, deprivation, prohibition, stifling of freedoms, self-restraint, and paternal dominance – the reader senses that the novelist's connection to the place is governed by a varied emotional experience fluctuating between the affinity of the external desert space. 'The pleasure of this unique chapter is the astonishing field of stars above us. The star-studded skies in the desert are unique, their sight captivates and governs the heart, restoring the desert to its sovereign power (10).

Here, amidst the internal disdain for the desert place (11), 'the horizon was empty before in a way that invites despair.' 'The sound of the desert (12), sometimes monotonous and sometimes hallucinogenic, much like the desert itself (13).' 'Here, I love the wind, all winds, especially the

night wind of the desert sands.' 'Fortunately, the sandstorm fills my eyes (14).' The desert changes through moments, days, and seasons, so it cannot be objectively dealt with. This deceptive transformation does not reach its depth or essence, as it maintains constant qualities – its aridity, heat, and vast expanse. 'The undulating dunes and the breeze replace the emptiness that I cannot face, my fears are inseparable from them (15)(16).

The narrator's attempt to convey her emotional experience through the manifestations of narrative discourse and autobiographical writing, along with her intimate connection to the self in her psychological and human perspective (17), is characterized by a direct description of the feeling of animosity towards the desert space, which extends to the social environment of the Sahara with all its customs. The narrator's psyche is marked by a sense that the desert is a stifling place, strictly governed by traditions (18).

This led to a rift between the narrator's self and the desert. She directed her hostility towards it, expressing her anger and rebellion against it when she realized it was nothing more than a place stifling individual freedoms and causing suffering. She stated, 'My soul is tormented.' (19) Thus, despair and resentment towards the desert seized the entire feelings and thoughts of the breathless narrator, who sought liberation, individual freedom, and escape from the constraints of family traditions and restrictive Saharan social customs, deciding to completely sever ties with it, even stating, 'I abandoned the desert.' (20)

Deep within the narrator, the idea of getting rid of anything hindering liberation was ingrained, and she saw the desert of Qanadisa as a graveyard for her aspirations, dreams, and self-destruction. Escaping and distancing herself from it was like seeking refuge in life, fearing death unjustly and deprivation. The protagonist narrator stated, 'I cut myself off from it to avoid dying.'(21)

Therefore, this desert presented a negative relationship between the place and the central character in the novel. The relationship between the place and the narrator, as well as the character being narrated about, involves a high level of unfamiliarity and discomfort. It is a relationship rooted in childhood trauma and a sense of loss of personal freedom. The desert and the narrow freedom create serious psychological disturbances in the character, turning her surroundings into an unbearable hell. The writer attempts to reflect what is objective onto what is psychological, a clear reality. The world surrounding the character interacts with and influences the psychological makeup.(22)

Within this feeling, the feminine narrator expresses her resentment and boredom with the Saharan environment, saying, 'I try to reclaim myself, to plant myself like a camel's thorn in the sands... The appearance of the basin deserts, with their supposed rocks worn out by the sun and winds, and the infinite closed on the prison of hard labor.' (23)

And this gave rise to a deep sense of frustration in the psyche of the writer when the emptiness, the lack of freedom, and the tightening siege on individuals in the desert are reflected as constraints and boredom (24). Consequently, the self appears imprisoned, as expressed by the narrator, 'As for me, I opened my eyes, and I was bound like a goat to the pillars of a rusty tank (25).' In this way, the self-lives in the estrangement of things, places, and time, causing the place to lose its intimacy and time to feel distant (26).

The narrator/protagonist recalls some stations of her life within the desert space, in an isolated area in a village of Qanadisa in Bshar. Here, she grapples with the pain resulting from suffering, expressed in forms of frustration, exclusion, neglect, and fear, stating, 'Alone, a terrible deprivation surrounded me, and confusion arose from a feeling of injustice.' On a tempestuous evening, she feels as if she hears the whisper of the sand wind, urging her: 'Break all the ties, all the boundaries that create traps, even the remnants of memorabilia.' (27)(28)(29)

There is no doubt that the harsh climate of the desert space with its challenging climate deepened the suffering of the feminine narrator's self, confusing her emotions and instilling in her a sense of the place's hostility and the difficulty of harmonizing with it to achieve internal stability. She remarks, 'During the day, the light weakens in heat exceeding fifty degrees Celsius under the shadow of the scorching fire, piercing everything. It transforms the basin deserts, fertile lands, and palm groves into places for burning vegetation for cultivation and for tilling. It turns the vast expanses and their skies into a world of prisons.' (30)

This description of the desert worlds reveals the psychological time, the dominant internal time in feminine narrative, where narrative imagination is activated, themes evolve, and narrative texts crystallize, forming a new and flowing narrative discourse (31).

"The desert, with its presence, becomes a closed space full of contradictions. How, then, can the feminine narrator reconcile with a space that only elicits frustration and complaints, while, in return, absorbs the self-off its balance (32).

The Desert Space: The Feminine Self and the Writer

The desert in the narrative achievement of the novel text "(The Rebel)" by Malika Mokadam is an active and formative element, both artistically and intellectually. Through it, the narrating self discovers herself as a woman "thrown into a bare world, and in order to assert her existence, she must challenge it, and she proved herself exceptionally competent (33)." The novelist reveals this means through writing and departure, stating, "The place of writing remains a refuge (34)," and this is when "writing imposed itself on me (35).

The act of writing takes my mind on a journey into the desert of shortcomings, tapping into blocked nostalgia." (35)

The narrator/protagonist has adopted writing as a confrontational tool and a lifeline against everything that obstructs her path, hindering her aspirations and dreams towards achieving her individual and social freedom. This stems from the stifling family environment of the Saharan culture, with its inhibiting customs, seeking to marginalize the feminine element and exert dominance driven by a male-oriented mentality. It extends to the pressures of the harsh Saharan environment, which imposes shades of constraint, oppression, and exclusion on women. Through her narrative texts, the author aims to tame challenging and frightening worlds, considering writing as an escape from realities that the environment does not permit.

The act of writing becomes a means of confronting the oppressive elements and a survival strategy against the struggles faced by the narrator. It is a tool to overcome obstacles and realize her self and freedom, both as an individual and a member of society. This initiative arises from the inhibiting family environment of the Saharan culture, which seeks to suppress ambitions and marginalize the feminine element, perpetuating forms of dominance rooted in a male-oriented mindset. The writer also tackles the harsh pressures of the Saharan environment, where women face various forms of restriction, oppression, and exclusion.

Through her narrative compositions, the author strives to subdue formidable, terrifying worlds that surround the protagonist, using writing as a refuge, a sanctuary, and compensation for what reality denies. It becomes a way for her to reclaim what was taken away in her tense social relationship, influenced by the logic of masculinity. On one hand, writing serves as an escape from the stifling social dynamics built on male dominance (37). On the other hand, it helps the protagonist overcome the inherent fear resulting from the negative interaction between the feminine self and the Saharan environment.

"In the midst of these pressing circumstances affecting the narrator's psyche, the writer, seeking refuge in writing, states, 'The pages are black, angry writing. I would have died if I hadn't turned to writing. Without these sips of words, the violence of the country and the despair caused by separation would have exploded and crushed me.' (38)

The narrator, protagonist, saw writing as a human act in life and liberation, serving as a genuine alternative to avoiding social, environmental, and Saharan death (39). 'I clung to books so as not to die of suffocation. The act of writing emerged as the greatest departure, where I try to push myself to the extreme. Now, I must confront and settle the past to inhabit my sanctuary well.' (40)

This is how writing seized the thoughts of the narrator, and the connection between the feminine narrative self and writing became so tight and robust that it turned into a sanctuary—a refuge from the authority of the Saharan landscape and the dominance of fear stemming from the circumstances surrounding her. These include the social oppression dictated by customs and traditions, along with the familial exclusion in the Algerian Saharan household, racial

discrimination in France, and the pressure from terrorist groups that escalated to the point of death threats: 'Fundamentalists threaten to kill with the sword anyone committing the sin with the pen.'(41)

In response, the narrator, the protagonist, sought solace in a 'intimate place where she felt safe, becoming a sanctuary one turns to in order to rekindle one's spirit.'(42)

The act of writing, portrayed in the narrative fiction, has been personalized as if it were a sentient being advancing swiftly towards the feminine self, enveloping it entirely: 'Now, writing has seized my bed and my nights. The words of rebellion and attachment haunt me.'(43)

Writing has encompassed the narrative self from all sides, transforming into a refuge, a shelter, a tool for struggle and confrontation. Moreover, it has become an effective psychological therapy: 'I treat myself through writing about Algeria.' (44)

The Desert Space: The Feminine Self and Leaving

The narrating self discusses the desert space from the perspective of hostility, aversion, and rejection, employing two means of expression: writing and leaving.

While writing has been an effective tool to counter the feelings of discomfort and boredom from the desert space, as revealed in the previous narrative texts, the reader observes that the desert, for the narrating self, is a space of resentment and despair. It is a place from which the self recoils and suffocates, as it takes on distinctive geographical features characterized by isolation and rejection. Despite its literal vastness, the desert is a space rejected by the narrating self, and it signifies confinement and rejection (45). The writer, therefore, has no desire to settle in the desert. To her, it is a space of perpetual departure and, at times, a space associated with death (46). This sentiment arises after confronting fear and opposition, engaging in a fierce and intricate struggle against male dominance, paternal authority, and societal power.

The narrative persona subjected herself to the narrative discourse, and she subjected this discourse to the self of the writer—the rebellious writer who rebels against all forms of authority and seeks refuge in the space of self. In her perception, she escaped from feeling a sense of belonging to others, forgetting that the self is the medium through which society is reflected within each of us, and through which it exercises control over all our actions (47).

The narrator, or the protagonist, attempted, through the path of retrospective narration, to recall the desert environment and the familial home where she was born and raised. This was driven by her sense of hostility towards the place of her childhood and adolescence, a place that engraved within her the grooves of feelings of injustice, hatred, and neglect. These feelings reflected a departure from the values of affection that homes are supposed to provide to their inhabitants. "Regardless of our memories, the house we were born in is physically engraved inside us (48).

The feminine narrator, through the narrative imagination, delineated the features of the desert landscape with its various dimensions. She captured the engraved image of the desert and the desert home within her, solidifying it through her writing. At that moment, " (49) writing became a dive into the depths of the characters, as they traverse the narrative subjects, encompassing their perceptions, emotions, whims, inclinations, and pains, blending with the place and its details." The novelist described these atmospheres and psychological reactions in the desert home, saying, "Alone, I was surrounded by a tremendous sense of deprivation, and confusion from a feeling born of injustice. However, these impressions are not enough to explain the forms of nightly horror and my need for solitude and insomnia. These things are deeply rooted in something buried and hidden to a great extent. I feel the same anxiety while writing." (50)(51)

This description in the narrative text contributed to providing the essential material for the novelist to shape her narrative world, revealing to the recipient the interplay between places and fictional characters, whether creating closeness and affinity or distance and animosity.

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