

ARTICLE

## **Allegorizing Algerian History & French Colonization in Mokeddem's *L'Interdite***

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### SUMMARY

This article argues that Malika Mokeddem's 1993 novel *L'Interdite* can be read as an allegory representing the history of French colonial rule in Algeria, and the postcolonial relationship between the two countries that has followed. Specifically, it argues that the parents of chief female protagonist Sultana Medjahed represent French rule in Algeria during the colonial era, while Sultana and the male protagonist Vincent Chauvet represent the two nations in the postcolonial era.

**KEYWORDS:** *L'Interdite*, Malika Mokeddem, French colonialism, France, Algeria, postcolonialism, allegory, symbolism, patriarchy, sexism, fanaticism

In her 1993 novel, *L'Interdite*, Malika Mokeddem presents postcolonial Algeria as a nation crippled by misogyny, patriarchy, and Islamic fundamentalism. Each of these elements are apparent in the journey of the female protagonist, Sultana Medjahed. Born in Algeria, Sultana left—or perhaps, better put, fled—to France to complete her education and become a medical doctor. When we meet Sultana, however, she has just made the trip back across the Mediterranean to return to the village of her childhood, Aïn Nekla, for the first time since her youth. She does so to attend the funeral of her recently deceased lover from her medical school days, a fellow Algerian who took a position in her hometown, Dr. Yacine Meziane. Sultana then decides to stay and serve as the village's doctor in his stead, but she does so at great personal cost. The village's mayor and his male followers harass and threaten Sultana, whose feminism they see as a threat to their religion and male dominated society.

Voicing the French side of the allegory, Vincent Chauvet might best be described as Mokeddem's chief male protagonist. After all, she does alternate between Sultana and Vincent as the narrator from chapter to chapter, even if the overall story drawn from the two narratives is decidedly Sultana's (who narrates five chapters as opposed to Vincent's four). Vincent is a French math professor who has recently received a life-saving kidney transplant from a deceased woman of Algerian descent, and now feels a need to understand the cultural background of his savior (Mokeddem 30). In essence, the transplant has complicated his identity. Though in an altogether different way from Sultana, he too is now a product of the ever-intertwined postcolonial world that exists between his native France and Algeria. Vincent meets Sultana while visiting Algeria in an effort to make sense of his new identity. He becomes, progressively, her friend, lover, and crucially, ally in her on-going struggle against the oppressive mayor. In doing so, Mokeddem attaches Vincent to her book's examination of sexism and fanaticism in Algeria, all the while refraining to cast him as the story's hero. The novel ends with the village women of Aïn Nekla

taking inspiration from Sultana and uniting to fight against their oppressive mayor (Mokeddem 160–66). Indeed, this conclusion is a final reminder that, while Vincent is the male protagonist and a narrator, *L'Interdite* remains at its core Sultana's story.

Given this plotline, it is not hard to see why such a great deal of scholarship has examined the sexism, feminism, and patriarchy embedded in the narrative of *L'Interdite*.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, several others have read the novel in terms of exile, a particularly fertile field of analysis thanks to the novel's semi-autobiographical nature; like her protagonist Sultana, Mokeddem was born in Algeria, moved to France, studied medicine, and became a doctor.<sup>2</sup> It is hardly a leap to suggest that Sultana reflects the author's personal experiences with sexism and Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria, as well as living a life of self-imposed exile while feeling torn apart by a postcolonial identity. However, to this body of excellent work by literary scholars, I wish to add my interpretation as a historian of French colonialism: for me, Mokeddem's novel reads as an allegorization of the French colonial presence in Algeria.

This type of allegorical reading, it should be stated, is not entirely without precedent. Sandrine Teixidor has previously argued that the theme of "chaos" in Anour Benmalek's *The Lovers of Algeria* and Mokeddem's *L'Interdite* "can be perceived as an allegory for Algeria's political past and socio-cultural identity" (564). All the same, Teixidor's allegorical reading maintains its focus on that specific realm of female cultural identity, examining how these two authors "allow their characters to deconstruct the traditional space of French and Algerian social and cultural standards in order to map their own interval and escape the limits that the world tried to impose upon them" (564). In other words, the larger-scale historical elements as related in *L'Interdite* and as proposed by this current analysis remain largely unexamined.

Indeed, that is precisely where this essay will pick up, as over the following pages, I will develop that allegory for *L'Interdite* in which Sultana's parents embody the era of French colonialism; Sultana herself represents post-independence, postcolonial Algeria; and Vincent symbolizes postcolonial France. To that end, I will first provide the reader with a brief historical overview of French colonialism in Algeria. With that grounding, I will proceed to draw the parallels I see between this history and our four characters, starting with the parents, then moving to Sultana, and finally, Vincent.

### **A Brief Colonial History of in "French-Algeria" (1830–1962)**

While France's imperial conquest of Algeria started in 1830, its pretense to attack came three years prior, in 1827, when the largely autonomous Ottoman vassal, Hussein Dey of Algiers, allowed his frustration with French consul Pierre Deval get the better of him. The two were in the midst of yet another fruitless meeting regarding a massive, three-decade old debt that France owed to Algerian merchants (and thus, indirectly, to Hussein), when the usually cool-headed Dey became so frustrated that he struck Deval with his whip-like fly swatter. This "Fly Whisk Incident," as it came to be known, was minor enough that it should have been nothing more than a footnote in history. However, in its wake, diplomatic relations and trade between the two nations had sufficiently soured that, by 1830, as the crown was slipping from the head of fiercely conservative Bourbon king of France Charles X, the king's minister Jules de Polignac, a fanatical *ultra* loyalist, claimed the Dey had irreparably sullied France's honor and sent a conquering force to seek restitution. Hoping likewise that a military victory might appease those in Restoration

France who remained incensed by the King's suppression of the free press and (already limited) voting rights, Polignac's wager did not have the desired impact on either front (Stora 3–4). Charles's short-lived reign was swept away by the July Revolution of 1830 and the reparations he sought for the diplomatic slight developed into the full-scale conquest of Algiers.

Over the ensuing four decades, France would conquer the rest of Algeria as well. As such, Algeria became part of France's growing, world-wide empire, which the French justified as their *mission civilisatrice*, or "civilizing mission," to bring "civilization" and modernity to those they conquered (Forgarty 10–11). Of course, the conquest itself was often far from "civilized." For one notable example among many, French military commander Thomas Robert Bugeaud became infamous for his tactic of chasing resisters into a cave, then lighting fires at its entrance, thus forcing its occupants to choose death by asphyxiation or flame. Between 1830 and 1870, 1861 was the sole year in which Algeria did not experience any conquest-related violence at the hands of imperial France (Ruedy 55).

The year 1870 brought a significant political shift as France's new Third Republic fully annexed Algeria into France. This meant Algeria was more than a colony; it was "French-Algeria." In the eyes of the French government, it became France itself. The hundreds of thousands of European settlers, or *colons*, living there would now enjoy French citizenship and civil government. This would also apply to Algeria's indigenous Jews thanks to the Crémieux Decree that made them French citizens.<sup>3</sup> Blanket citizenship did not, however, apply to French-Algeria's predominant inhabitants: Muslims. These millions of remaining Arabs and ethnic Berbers (known as *Indigènes*), remained constrained by the Senatus-Consulte of 14 July 1865, meaning they could only receive French citizenship by applying for it on a case-by-case basis (Weil 209). Few did.

This two-tiered system became further engrained under the Third Republic as 1881 saw the creation of a set of oppressive laws that only applied to the *Indigènes* called the "Code de l'Indigénat." Meanwhile, despite their inferior status under such arbitrary laws, Muslim Algerians nonetheless served in the French military during World War I and worked in France's factories across the Mediterranean to keep the war-time economy thriving (Stora 64). France promised reforms for the *indigènes'* sacrifice; still, the reward proved lackluster: the 1919 Jonnart Law gave the vote to only 43% of Algerian Muslim men, and relegated their vote to a separate college from that of Algeria's fully recognized citizens (Fogarty 258). This ensured that French-Algeria's *colons* of European descent, which numbered approximately one million during the Interwar Period, did not lose control to the region's far more numerous 5 million *Indigènes* (Ruedy 69). Algeria's Muslim men fought, bled, and died for France only a generation later during World War II, but once again, their sacrifice was not rewarded with equal civil rights (as depicted in Rachid Bouchareb's 2006 blockbuster film *Indigènes*, distributed in North America as *Days of Glory*). This injustice proved a breaking point for many *Indigènes*.

The Algerian War followed; from 1954 to 1962, Algerian nationalists and the French military clashed over whether Algeria would become independent or remain under French rule (a conflict depicted in yet another important film, Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 *The Battle of Algiers*). The FLN (*Front de libération nationale*) nationalists won, and as Algeria entered its postcolonial existence as a sovereign nation, those who fought for or otherwise supported French-Algeria sought to flee to France. This included one million of European descent (known as *Pieds-Noirs*),

140,000 Algerian Jews, and roughly 100,000 amnestied Muslim Algerians, known as *Harkis*, who had fought for the French army and were now considered traitors in Algeria (Stein 11).

The war had put an end to French-Algeria, but the two nations could hardly walk away from one another. After 132 years of French colonial rule, migration in both directions, and—wanted or not—cultural exchange, the two nations were too intertwined to allow for an easy reset. Countless people in both countries had ancestral, linguistic, or other cultural ties that made their identity neither purely French or Algerian (whatever “purely” might mean anyway). This continues to be the case today. France and Algeria are sovereign countries, but for better or worse, theirs is a postcolonial relationship, and those who most deeply personify it can feel that they do not fully belong to either nation or culture. This complicated if not tortured history and sense of identity are symbolically represented in Mokeddem’s characters in *L’Interdite*.

### **Sultana’s Parents and/as French-Algeria**

Existing as mere background characters in *L’Interdite*, Sultana’s parents provide, all the same, a crucial subtext for understanding Sultana and her presentation (in the subsequent section) as postcolonial Algeria. In fact, we never meet them and we only learn of their story at the end of the novel; however, this deferred discovery allows us to retrospectively witness the ways it, as an allegorization of pre-1962 Algeria, impacts Sultana. Indeed, this backstory offers key insights into the mayor’s crusade against our Sultana, which might better be described as a vendetta of unrequited love (or at least, desire).

Prior to marrying her father, we learn that Sultana’s mother had already been promised to Bakkar, the future mayor. Then her father—a “foreigner” (*étranger*) from the Chaâmba tribe—“came and took the most beautiful woman from here” (Mokeddem 173). In Bakkar’s eyes (and perhaps understandably so), the Chaâmbi had stolen his bride. Decades later and now the village’s mayor, Bakkar still burns with jealousy and rage at having lost *la plus belle femme d’ici* (from “here,” emphasis added). Nevertheless, we soon learn that Bakkar’s wrath would be kindled as the star-crossed couple does not live happily ever after. Rather, Sultana recalls that when she was five years old, her father jealously hectoring her mother when she came home one day by questioning where she had been. “Where were you?” he demanded five times in a row. Overcome by these feelings of distrust and fear that she had been unfaithful, he “jumped on her. They fought. Fists, slaps, screams of rage . . . suddenly my mother fell, and she didn’t move.” Sultana remembers the horror in her father’s face—“his eyes said to me ‘I didn’t want this!’” (Mokeddem 152–53). There was no changing what had happened, though: Sultana’s father had killed her mother.

The tragic story of Sultana’s parents runs a few parallels to the colonial history of Algeria, but let’s begin with the relationship between Sultana’s mother and the future mayor, Bakkar. She was promised to him, but given the outcome, it seems their connection was not particularly strong. This is similar to Algeria’s pre-1830 relationship with the Ottoman Empire. The Dey of Algiers was a vassal of the “Sick Man of Europe,” as the Ottoman Empire was known in the nineteenth century, but it was hardly strong enough to make demands of or even protect the North African territory (as the French conquest demonstrated). Just as the Ottomans lost Algeria, Bakkar could never change the fact he had “lost” Sultana’s mother. Further, the mayor’s thinking of Sultana as “his” also reflects the way in which an empire, like the Ottomans or the French, would think of a territory such as Algeria. Taken together then, the mayor, as conquered suitor, reflects the

conquered Ottomans; Sultana's father, as the winning "foreign" suitor, represents colonial France; and Sultana's mother represents colonized Algeria.

Now, there are critiques worth considering about this interpretation on first glance. Unlike Algeria, Sultana's mother was not "conquered." She chose her handsome Chaâmbi husband. Women from the village also reassure Sultana that her father deeply loved her mother. "Yes, yes, the big Chaâmbi loved her, as a man lost can love a 'girl,'" one of them tells her (Mokeddem 173). If Sultana's mother is taken for a representation of colonial Algeria, "love" does not fit the sentiment of revolting, revolutionary, France-rejecting *Indigènes*. These readings, however, require treating both the relationship between Sultana's parents and the history of French colonialism with far too much simplicity. All the same, from Bakkar's perspective, feelings of lost possibilities and might-have-beens haunt the mayor decades later, just as Algeria is haunted by similar feelings.

We in the twenty-first century cannot allow our general disapproval of colonialism and its abuses of human rights, civil rights, and self-determination to allow us to overlook those Algerians who accepted, or rather, chose France. Indeed, painting any people in any era as politically united is simply inaccurate history, and the French had their supporters in Algeria. Many of the 100,000 or so early-twentieth-century Gallicized indigenous Algerians known as "*Évolués*" (quite literally, "advanced," or "evolved"), saw the best path forward as fighting for full integration with full civil rights. These assimilationist *Évolués* were known as "Young Algerians," and as World War I began, they pledged their support to France with the hopes (if not the understanding) that their dream for equality would become a reality. To quote an article published in their newspaper, *L'Islam*, shortly after the outbreak of the war:

In facing the terrible dangers which threaten France, our dear adoptive motherland, cradle of all liberties, our loyalist Muslim duty, profoundly attached to the republican institutions is clearly outlined: all of us, every single man, we must face the Teuton enemy and help with all the force of our soul the tricolor to triumph over the brutal German soldier. (Jackson 255)

Of course, France did not reward *Indigènes* with equality after the war. The Jonnart Law (described earlier) fell far short of that. Recognizing that France was squandering an opportunity with the Young Algerian segment of *Évolués*, Governor-General of Algeria Maurice Viollette wrote in 1926 to the French Minister of the Interior that:

(S)ix out of ten of these [*Évolués*] are ready to adopt the French fatherland without second thoughts, but if the French fatherland rejects them, raises itself so high that they cannot reach it, they will make their own fatherland, and we will have willed it. (Schaffer 146)

Viollette's word proved prophetic. France continued its oppressive policies in French-Algeria, and the Young Algerian movement died as *Évolués* largely abandoned assimilation in favor of nationalism by the mid-twentieth century. What is of interest to this study, however, is noting this segment of Algerian leaders that for decades found itself "choosing" and speaking affectionately of its "dear adoptive motherland."

Some might reject the idea of the Young Algerians speaking for Algeria. They were an elite minority making decisions within the context of a well-established colonial state. To this point, I would suggest that this is not the only way to interpret the text, and furthermore, that the question of which group speaks for a nation is a challenge any personification of a nation will face. After all, we could hardly dismiss the Young Algerians or their many realist predecessors who made difficult decisions to acquiesce while dealing with the French any more than we can dismiss the nationalists. The point then remains: a sizable group of Algerian leaders chose France. They did so within a difficult context, but not a context altogether different from that of Sultana's mother.

I would also argue against taking the mother's choices as being significantly freer than those of the *Indigènes* when the novel itself is a scathing rebuke of sexism, patriarchy, and limited choices for women in Algeria. Nor should the love many readers might see in the parents' relationship be taken for granted. The women assuring Sultana of her father's love are speaking as outside observers of a relationship from decades earlier and are, necessarily, unreliable witnesses. As a historical source, such removed testimony would always be considered suspect. The only observation we have of their relationship from inside the family is that of a young Sultana witnessing her father berating her mother with expectations that she must answer to him before accidentally killing her with a violent outburst when she pushes back. His expectations and violence bear eerie parallels with French expectations and the "Code de l'Indigénat."

Even Sultana's mother's accidental death alludes to a historical moment: the Algerian War and the end of French-Algeria. French officers and *Pieds-Noirs* inhabitants certainly did not mean to "kill" French-Algeria, but like Sultana's father, too few French beyond Viollette grasped how their behavior (or policies) were slowly destroying what good will was there. As with this abusive husband, it did not dawn on the French government or interested French citizens that they were killing what they professed to love until it was too late.

### **Sultana as Postcolonial Algeria**

If Sultana's parents represent Algeria and France's colonial past, then the next generation—Sultana and Vincent—represent, respectively, the two nations' postcolonial present. They do not exist in an unequal (colonial) union like the previous generation. While Sultana and Vincent do make love at one point in the narrative, they are not in a relationship; to put that into the language of nations, both remain sovereign and independent (Mokeddem 117). Nonetheless, both have been permanently, irreversibly altered by the other's world. Sultana has taken on French speech, culture, and thought, while Vincent's life depends on the kidney transplant he received from an Algerian woman. This section will elaborate on Sultana's situations and illustrate how they in turn parallel postcolonial Algeria and France.

Despite independence, modern, postcolonial Algeria has remained heavily impacted by French culture. Algerians consume French television, radio, and speak in their own unique mixture of French and Arabic. As described by Philip Naylor, this is Algeria's "French mirror" (256). Curiously, we read in *L'Interdite* that participating in this effortless *mélange* of the two worlds is a crucial component of being a "real Algerian" (Mokedden 141). No one's life in *L'Interdite* better captures and reflects this paradoxical mix that is postcolonial Algeria than that of Sultana.

Her mixed identity established almost immediately in *L'Interdite*, the Algerian roots of Sultana are evident from the outset of the novel. As she arrives in the village of Aïn Nekla, Sultana tells us that she's a native-born Algerian and that this is her home town; in fact, she was born in the *ksar* (a fortification that likely is the oldest part of the village) (Mokeddem 11). This is a powerful assertion of belonging. It gives Sultana credibility to speak about the village, so that we know she knows what she is talking about when describing its horrendous misogyny. We witness this immediately too. In two early episodes upon her arrival, a young boy calls Sultana a "whore," and her taxi driver becomes obsessed at knowing whose daughter she is (Mokeddem 16–17).

However, these opening pages establish Sultana's "French side," as well. This is her first time back to Algeria in 15 years (Mokeddem 19). Sultana has been in France, where she went to school and became a medical doctor and her adopted French mannerisms jump out in these early pages, too. Even as she assures us that she knows the village—particularly, its sexism—Sultana registers surprise at the boy's rude comment. Indeed, after a decade and a half in France, Algerian-born Sultana now "epitomizes Western femininity," as Teixidor puts it (566). Sultana is both Algerian and French, and as such, she is lost between the two worlds.

Yet, that very mixture and lack of belonging is what makes her a representation of Mokeddem's postcolonial Algeria, and this is made apparent through discussions with a young Algerian girl named Dalila. In the second chapter, Dalila meets Vincent and they begin talking about her passion for learning, as well as the challenges she faces in pursuing an education because of her father and brothers' disapproval (Mokeddem 33). As this conversation plays out, Vincent gently corrects Dalila's French. When she says "*maîtresse au collègue*" (literally, an elementary teacher at a junior high—an oxymoron) Vincent explains that the word she was looking for is "*professeur*" (middle school teacher). When Dalila tells him that her brothers say she'll never attend a "*versité*," Vincent seeks clarification: "*université?*" (university), which she confirms. He does the same when she uses the wrong verb, saying "*renversés*" (knocked over or down), when she should have said "*renvoyés*" (returned or went back) (Mokeddem 37–38). While this conversation would appear to serve as a simple introduction to the character Dalila, it is more than that as their discussion prepares the demonstration of Sultana's mixed identity, in which a stifling sexism meets head on with a nationalistic and linguistic chauvinism.

Indeed, later in the narrative, in chapter five, Dalila and Sultana meet. They converse, and like Vincent, the now-Gallicized female protagonist also corrects the young girl. When Dalila mixes her languages by casually inserting an Arabic word into her otherwise French sentence—"*h'chouma*," Arabic for "shame," rather than using the French word "*honte*"—Sultana replies: "*contre la honte*" (against shame). But unlike her exchange with Vincent, during which she accepted his corrections without any consternation, Dalila is slightly vexed at the reprimand of her ethnic, sexual, and linguistic equal. She lets Sultana know that not only is this mannerism foreign, her desire for pure, non-mixed language further establishes her as an outsider: "You do as the *roumi* [Frenchmen], you correct words in Algerian. Yacine didn't do that. He was used to it. We, the true Algerians, we always mix words" (Mokeddem 93). The idea of being a "true Algerian" is important to Dalila, for whom Sultana is now necessarily "mixed" (as someone who has spent significant time in France and absorbed its culture). For Dalila, a "true Algerian" somewhat paradoxically is someone who *does* mix languages without qualm: "(W)e [true Algerians] mix French with Algerian words. [Whereas,] (y)ou are a truly mixed [*mélangée*] since you don't mix

your words. When you study over there [in France], you always become a true mixed” (Mokeddem 93).

Dalila is right that Sultana is a mixture of France and Algeria. “Sultana symbolizes a dual culture, a dual national memory and a double identity” (Teixidor 565). As with Dalila’s linguistic “proof,” it might seem paradoxical to say that she is a mixture and a representation of Algeria, yet, in the context of postcolonialism, it makes all the sense in the world. As a mixed figure, Sultana is no longer completely Algerian. At the same time, what postcolonial nation is not a mixture of its former self and the colonizing power? As their conversation continues, Mokeddem emphasizes the lack of “purity” in national identity by having Dalila express doubts that she is a “true” Algerian because she may have ancestors from other countries. Sultana replies: “I think there is nothing true but mixtures. All the rest is hypocrisy and ignorance” (Mokeddem 94). Indeed, this is particularly true of postcolonial nations as they continue on in a mixed form, and Mokeddem’s choice to send Sultana to France made the female protagonist the paradoxical embodiment of postcolonial, French-influenced Algeria.

### **Vincent as Postcolonial France**

For his part, Vincent is both a complement and binary opposite of Sultana. Like her, he is connected to both France and Algeria, but not because he has been immersed in and absorbed Algerian culture. His connection is more physical if not visceral, as it relates to the kidney transplant he received from a recently deceased 27-year-old Algerian woman (Mokeddem 30). Prior to this, he confesses to having been “toward this other [Algerian] culture, superbly ignorant” (Mokeddem 30). However, following the transplant, Vincent travels to Algeria intent upon gaining a knowledge of the country and its culture as he feels that, with this Algerian organ in his body and saving his life, his identity has forever changed. It is no longer his alone. He shares it and his existence with this stranger whose death has restored his own life: “We are a man and a woman, a French and an Algerian, one survival, and one Siamese [conjoined] death” (Mokeddem 31). This dynamic is significantly different from Sultana’s, at the level of metonymy (Algeria is now contiguous within Vincent) and metaphor (Sultana has figuratively rendered herself other), and quite befitting of a symbol for postcolonial France.

In the final decades of its colonial empire, France relied heavily upon Algerian *Indigènes* in the metropole. This was new. Previous to World War I, French laws were designed to keep *Indigènes* from crossing the Mediterranean. This was almost entirely the case until, as discussed above, the demands of war convinced the French government it needed colonial bodies to keep France alive. This sent Algerian men to France by the hundreds of thousands: 206,000 served in the French army; another 119,000 labored in factories, on farms, or in other capacities across the metropole. These figures put “more than a third of the male population [of Algeria] between the ages of twenty and forty in France during the war” (Ruedy 111). The French government tried to return the colonial relationship to the antebellum status quo afterwards by sending *Indigènes* back to their respective homelands, but these efforts failed. The French economy had become too reliant on Algerian (and other colonial) men. Some even found love: for instance, a war veteran of the *Deuxième Régiment de Tirailleur Algériens* Youcef Boukrich married his bride in a small town on France’s southern coast called La Ciotat in 1922.<sup>4</sup> In short, there was no going back. A part of Algeria had been implanted in France, and it was there to stay.



Vincent's kidney transplant is an excellent trope for this history and the postcolonial present. Just as the kidney transplant required opening up Vincent's body and implanting it within him, so the French state found itself needing to open itself in order to implant Algerians within French society. The organ too is symbolic. The kidney's role in filtering blood, removing waste, and moving hormones through the body's circulatory system is an appropriate representation of Algerian men coming to France to keep its factories, mines, and farms moving their products within the circulation of the French wartime economy. The fact that the kidney accomplishes this movement through the body's blood flow further symbolizes of the Algerian blood split across the war's front lines.

Nor were these roles isolated to the years of World War I. At the advent of World War II, Algerian men again took up arms to fight for France. Meanwhile, Algerian men continued to work these physically demanding yet crucial jobs that keep France's economy "circulating" well into the postcolonial period. They and their descendants became an integral part of postcolonial French society just as the kidney became an integral part of Vincent. To quote Teixidor on this point: "[Vincent's] body represents the space of colonial collision. His body and the organ became as interweaved as France and Algeria civilizations were interconnected" (568).

Finally, Mokeddem's depiction of Sultana and Vincent's relationship is representative of the culturally-entangled-yet-sovereign nations of France and Algeria in the postcolonial era. This is best illustrated when Sultana and Vincent make love. As Teixidor points out, there is significant symbolism in how their intimacy brings together their mutually-yet-differently mixed French and Algerian identities: "Sutana embodies the foreign component [kidney] that exists inside Vincent's body" while "Vincent represents the foreign component that physically penetrates Sultana's body, literally from medical and sexual perspectives" (568). Perhaps no moment in the book better illustrates their difference and sameness at once.

However, this moment of consummation and culmination also highlights the explicit lack of union between our protagonists. Vincent informs the reader that "at the peak moment of climax, Sultana sighed and said: 'Yacine'" (Mokeddem 117). Sultana's audible sexual longing for her dead lover in this intimate moment tells us that this is not the lopsided male-female power dynamic Mokeddem has otherwise shown us throughout the story. Following this Freudian slip in the throes of passion, Sultana has a real choice, and indeed, later mulls whether or not she is truly interested in Vincent. This represents true independence and sovereignty that Algeria has only enjoyed in the postcolonial era. Algeria and France have a relationship today, but Algeria now chooses what that looks like on its side. This is what we see in Sultana and Vincent: a relationship that is no closer than the less interested party (in this case, Sultana) wants.

## Conclusion

Above all, as convincingly argued by others, *L'Interdite* offer us Mokeddem's view on modern Algeria's religiously-fueled, patriarchal society. It further explores the sense of exile and loneliness that those with identities caught between postcolonial France and Algeria can often feel. However, beyond the breakdown and blending of cultural and social norms, Mokeddem has also written characters that can be read as an allegory for the long, complex colonial history and aftermath between France and Algeria. In this essay, I have taken this idea and applied it to three groups of characters. First, Sultana's parents, who I have argued represent Algeria and France

during French colonial rule. The constrictions, limited choices, and even violence and death that Mokeddem describes in Algeria's fundamentalist-driven patriarchy prove a meaningful comparison to the lopsided relationship between a colonial power and colonized nation. The specifics of their history, from the 1830 conquest, to the Young Algerian movement, and on, make these general parallels all the more meaningful. Next, Sultana (and her foil Dalila) paralleled alongside Vincent also brings out specifics of France and Algeria's history in a meaningful way. The heavy influence of French culture in postcolonial Algeria, and the notable Algerian descent French population in France today are reflected well in Sultana's "mixed" identity, and Vincent's transplanted kidney.

Personifying entire nations is, of course, a formidable challenge. No single writer or procrustean bed can perfectly account for the diverse events and interpretations of events that create a nation and a people. Still, what Mokeddem does here, not unlike the prerogative of the historian, is to take the artifacts, the realia, the complex history and attached emotions, to represent (in the mimetic sense of re-present) the 132-year colonial history and the postcolonial present shared between France and Algeria.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of scholarship treating feminism and sexism in the novel, see the cited essays by Elduayen, Ibrahim-Ouali, Meding, Miraglia, and Orlando; for postcolonialism, see Rice and Ndiaye.

<sup>2</sup> For analysis on the idea of exile, confer the texts in above by Aas-Rouxparis, Hamil, Miller, and Valani.

<sup>3</sup> Indigenous Jews did not always enjoy the same treatment of Europeans in French-Algeria, but the scope of that history is well beyond the confines of this paper. For more information on this, see Stein, *Saharan Jews and the Fate of French Algeria* (reference in biblio).

<sup>4</sup> La Ciotat (Bouches-du-Rhône). *Officier de l'état civil, 1793–1927*. Reel #1618768.