

## Women Crossing Borders of Experience and Genre

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**Abstract:** *This paper argues through a reading of *The Rebel* (2003) by the Algerian francophone novelist Malika Mokeddem that the 'third world' feminist text has undergone a process of self-liberation through continual transgressions of genre and experience. The feminist text has crossed the borders of isolated scholarship and experience only to cloud the orthodox literary lens through which it was read and interpreted. However, rather than merely crossing the border from one space to another, this paper argues through the concepts of experience and gender, that the border is a special transgressive space that guarantees the displacement of the stereotypical woman's experience and visions, and it is a border that paradoxically frees the text from the traditional feminist taxonomy of second wave feminism by embracing contradiction, dislocation and change.*

In her semi-autobiography *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* Fatima Mernissi (1995:9), the Moroccan feminist sociologist says: "my father has taught me that there are borders everywhere because borders maintain the balance of the world. Ever since God created the universe there was a border that divides the East from the West. There is a border also that separates Muslims from Christians (the colonizers), and similarly there is a border that separates women from men. In this way, no *fitna* can happen." Then she adds: "however, women were preoccupied with the idea of crossing borders" and their first attempt in *Dreams of Trespass* was to harass Ahmed the gatekeeper.

Feminism is similarly concerned with borders and borderlands in terms of positionality and situatedness. Recent feminist scholarship focuses on the geopolitics of identity within disparate communal spaces of being and becoming (Friedman 1998; Kaplan 1996; Grewal & Kaplan 1994; & Spivak 1993). Not unlike Mernissi's women, Third World feminists (as much as this term makes me cringe) are concerned with crossing the borders of not only Euro-American scholarship but of the homogenous, rigid, and essentialist identity enforced on them by an intricate web of communal interests and the omniscient Western eye (Mohanty 1988).

In the last decade of the twentieth century, feminist scholarship has shifted its academic attention to women's literature. However, as with 'World Literature' courses, the departments of Women's Studies would just lump anything related to women under one rubric:

economics, ecology, history, anthropology, literature, science, and dance. The result is that these studies are far less prestigious than more 'serious' studies in 'real' departments such as 'Middle East Studies'.

Yet, the feminist literary text is always isolated from the canon of literary criticism, looked down upon, discriminated against and understudied (Spivak 1993). This acute division between the feminist text and the production of literary criticism has yielded a number of feeble writings that resemble 'letters to the editor' in a woman's magazine, exacerbated by a certain 'gender blindness' of canonization.

In this paper, I argue that the 'third world' feminist text has undergone a process of self-liberation through continual transgressions of genre and experience. The feminist text has crossed the borders of isolated scholarship and experience only to cloud the orthodox literary lens through which it was read and interpreted. But, if the text has crossed some borders, what lies on the other side? If it were only a one-way trip then the text would have re-settled somewhere else. In other words, if it were just a matter of changing sides then the word "border" would have become another harmless catchword in literary and cultural criticism. Whereas if the text travels incessantly back and forth, to use Homi Bhabha's terms (1994:3), then it can never fit into a specific taxonomy and will stop being labeled in the old derogatory style.

Here it might be useful to quote Susan Friedman's (1998:135) distinction between two terms; she states that a *boundary* is "a fixed line separating one side from another, often symbolically marking different sovereignties and loyalties" whereas the *borderland* is an "indeterminate, potentially shifting and broad terrain across and through which intercultural traffic and transaction circulate." There are "borders between individuals, genders, groups, and nations erect[ing] categorical and material walls between identities . . . But borders also specify the liminal space in between, the interstitial site of interaction, interconnection, and exchange" (*ibid.*:3).

It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the possible definitions of the term 'border',<sup>1</sup> since they cover almost every area that requires transgression/crossing: genre, gender, household, values, cultures, land occupation, and certainly, traveling. Since crossing any border is generally regarded as an act of transgression, borders are either to stay intact or to function strictly. This 'either/or' formula echoes the position of both modernism and avant-gardism on borders, as John Welchman (1996:160), in his highly enlightening article "The Philosophical Brothel" explains:

For modernism the border is always a limit that sub-tends and controls practice. For the avant-garde, on the other hand, it is a special transgressive space whose traversal (and conflictual) re-articulation guarantees the continuity and seriality of avant-gardist rupture. The discourses of both modernism and the avant-garde are secured by the

imagination of border, but they are locked in a double spiral which folds together modernist intensity and avant-garde extension.

In my opinion, the feminist text, whether it is literary, cinematic, or photographic, deconstructs the modernist definition of the border where patronization is obvious. In the texts I will shortly examine, the border is a special transgressive space that guarantees the displacement of the stereotypical woman's experience and visions, and it is a border that paradoxically frees the text from the traditional feminist taxonomy of second wave feminism. And finally, it is a border that embraces contradiction, dislocation and change.

Where do the two terms in the title, 'experience' and 'genre', fit into this framework? Experience is a recurrent word in feminist discourse and many other discourses, ranging from philosophy and history, to common daily speech. My concern is with the connotations of the word as developed in feminist poetics. In this context I am using Teresa de Lauretis' (1984:159) definition of experience as a process by which subjectivity is constructed. This explains why I will be using the word 'process' and 'crossing' interchangeably. The process of crossing leads to the emergence of a new identity in the borderland as a discursive event. And, therefore, in order to historicize experience it should not be separated from language, and the productive quality of discourse should be emphasized (Scott 1992:22-40). At this point, transgressing the strict division of genres seems like a corollary. In *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home* which belongs to the American series of *Gender and Genre in Literature*, Barbara Bowen (Wiley & Barnes 1996:ix) argues in the 'Foreword' that:

[T]he notion of genre itself is changing shape under pressure from feminist and other interventions in humanist discourse. New categories of writing- letters, journals, popular fiction, travel narratives, advertising, science—are demanding attention as literary genres, while the traditional genres are being reanimated by efforts to disrupt their alignments with patriarchy, compulsory heterosexuality, and white supremacy.

The first work I will examine in this paper, is that of the Algerian francophone Malika Mokeddem *The Rebel* (2003), (*Les Trans Insoumis*, as the French title goes). The protagonist is an Algerian woman who came of age during Algeria's independence. The trauma she suffered in the post-independence period drove her to France, where she completed her education and then not only started her own clinic, but also a series of writings against fundamentalism. In writing she found her final abode.

The main question in analyzing this narrative becomes ‘what constitutes a valid historical narrative?’ The text is labeled as a ‘novel’, whereas the back cover admits that it is a mixture of autobiography and fiction. In the praxis of the text itself, Mokeddem explicitly uses the subjective autobiographical ‘I’. Then, she reinforces that stance by sprinkling inter-references to her previous novels. *The Rebel* demolishes the separation between the narrator’s private history and the history of colonization and resistance. She transgresses the grand narrative of independence and ‘civilized France’ to graft her own story as an Algerian woman ‘in between’ – in the borderland. The text, therefore, sits on the borderline between history and fiction, while detailing the process through which the narrator is engendered as a female subject through historicizing the personal, which turns out to be the political and the epistemological.

Similar to the narrator who is always at crossroads, the structure of the text is constructed like an everlasting crossroads. The chapters are entitled ‘here’ and ‘there’ successively. The ‘here’ refers to France while the ‘there’ refers to Algeria. Though the site of the narrative voice is France, the structure does not imply any sort of flashback, the two places overlap in the consciousness of the narrator; they are equal as though in a dialogical relation. In a literal sense the crossing is never finalized, it is perpetually taking place, that is, it is not a trip from/to. Arrival is always deferred. And the narrator’s discursive and physical transgressions turn the text into a ‘borderama,’ where neither Algeria nor France are fixed points of departure or arrival. When Mokeddem (2003:75) says: “I have no country. I feel like having no nationality”, she does not convey a ‘Woolfian’ tone (as Virginia Woolf in fact says: “in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world”) nor any lack of awareness of history. “I have no country” is the narrator’s discursive resistance against the violence she experienced in the aftermath of independence, when she was almost killed because she went around unveiled. Subsequently, the First Gulf War inspired in her the same feeling, and she says: “this time I have no nationality in my adopted country, France. Having obtained the French passport nauseated me. France, which is part of the international network of terrorism, pushes me to erase myself from whatever is French, except the language” (*ibid.*:77). Discursively, Mokeddem has dislocated the centrality of France. In the process of constructing her subjectivity she used herself as a shuttle between the center and the margin, a strategy suggested by Spivak (1990:381); hence, the formation of a new belonging where “othering” is totally ruptured.

Writing for Mokeddem becomes the new home which is always in a state of becoming. Straightforwardly she says: “Any place away

from books is like a door slammed in the face of what cannot be named” (Mokeddem 2003:75).

France comes up again in Hoda Barakat’s *The Stranger’s Letters* (2004) which is not an epistolary text. The chapters are addressed to nobody and they do not expect any reply. They are all snapshots from her life in Paris as a voluntary immigrant. Not without reservation, the text could be taken as a memoir divided into two parts: ‘We Who Live There’ (reference to living in Paris) and ‘The Other Countries’ (reference to Paris as well). Unlike Mokeddem, Barakat refers to Paris as ‘there’ not ‘here’.

Then the text delves into a process of superimposing images of life in Paris and Beirut. Barakat does not limit the text to documenting experience; otherwise she would not have been able to explore the system that has formulated the experience itself as Joan Scott (1992:25) explains. She engages in a constant transcultural travel and a local habitus simultaneously. Paradoxically, she returns to her local habitus only to feel like a stranger. She is not part of the ‘here’ and she is not fulfilled ‘there’. The problem of identification and alignment becomes the main theme of the text; she is living in the borderland, neither here nor there. The discursive poetics of home shed light on the history of subjectivity; the link of the subject to the place:

These are transit houses where you cannot live or stay. You just get on them from one destination to another; from time to time . . . They are much more similar to the trains than to the stations. Our houses here are much more transit-like than the ones we established in Beirut during the war (Barakat 2004:81). [My translation].

Barakat’s text aims at negotiating the line that allows her to be entirely committed to Beirut without taking it as an abode. She is a foreigner on foreign soil and a stranger at home. The text, therefore, functions as a crossroads that exercises an “infinite shifting of the signifier” (Minh-ha 1996:7), identity as a fixed construct is deferred and hence, multi-layered and fluid. It undergoes a constant process of formation as the subject engages in a process of re-visioning.

Displacement – voluntary as it may seem here – is what motivated the writer to go back to her roots, to question and historicize her past there and her present here, and to finally construct a transgressive narrative that is far from being a nostalgic scream. The text looks like a narrative of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, it works as a route that takes the subjectivity back to the roots, only to result in a re-routing. The vacillating movement reinforces the political agency of the subject and poses dislocation as a significant trope.

It is important to elaborate here on the working and re-working of subjectivity. When the two locations (Paris and Beirut) are visible in the text, they do not function as a means to install subjectivity or to

acquire identity. Their presence tends to disturb Barakat's sense of a fixed identity as an imagined unitary subject. The presence of both locations in the narrator's consciousness strengthens her awareness of borderlands where identity is always in the making: "we jump into our country and work hard to get rid of any feature that might remind the others of our immigration" (Barakat 2004:53); yet she then negates what has been said: "the more we visit our country, the more we tend to immigrate" (*ibid.*:59). The way she declares her position de-naturalizes any critique of biculturalism. In the gaps, between the 'here' and 'there' she weaves a new identity, basically on the discursive level.

Using photography as a critical medium of visual language, Rula Halawani (2005), the Palestinian photographer, examines the concept of borders in a series of photos taken at the Qalandia checkpoint.<sup>2</sup> She captures the experience of the checkpoint which has become a hallmark of the current Israeli occupation. There are no faces in her collection of photos; rather the viewer is invited to read several close-ups of encounters between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians waiting to cross the border.

As the border represents contact, it also stands for separation and aggression; and, as it lets one in, it also shuts one out. bell hooks (1992:3) has provided one of the approaches to read this duality:

It is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what type of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation.

Halwani's photos depend on the assumed knowledge that the viewer has gained from a certain political occupational context, the knowledge that crossing an Israeli checkpoint is an ordeal. That is to say, those close-ups document the experience of crossing in a specific location which implies history and geography. Yet, they do not stop at the mere task of documentation. Rather, they examine the workings of the system that produced such experiences. The nuances of the encounter between two anonymous parties are spotted, and we see different gestures of waiting and the postures of the human bodies as they are positioned in an unequal power relation. We also sense the individuals' different moods of tiredness and anxiety.

The recurrence of a large slab of worn stone which marks the site of exchange, accentuates the difficulty of crossing. It is a contact zone and a separating barrier at the same time. It signifies proximity and distance that lead to misrecognition and miscommunication combined with humiliation. Discursively, the close-ups translate into 'you may' or

'you may not' cross. In this amalgam of possibilities the stone becomes a fixed element that bars crossing and turns the contact zone into a violent policing zone. The stone is a fixed boundary not a borderland.

Halawani (2005) looks through the lens of the camera with irony, even titling her collection *Intimacy*, which stands for the personal that ultimately becomes the political in this specific location and experience. It is this grid of intersecting positions and references to reality where the border becomes a horrific barrier that could determine, in the words of Chandra Mohanty (1991:7), "our potential political alliances."

The autobiographical essay, or rather testimony, of Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Beyond Silence" (1996:50) deals with home as a complex and multi-layered concept and thus I take it not only as a text to be read but also as a way of rounding off my theoretical approach. Majaj is an Arab-American, a term that designates an identity no less complex than the concept of 'home'. In my opinion, it is an oversimplification to call Arab-Americans bicultural or bilingual, as all the pairings fall short of analyzing the politics of location of such an individual.

Majaj (1996:50) describes her crisis eloquently, "often I feel like a well-educated foreigner who is not quite fluent in her adopted language and culture-whether that culture is Arab or American." Not belonging to any of the assumed 'homes' is then what problematizes Majaj's position. In every phase of her life 'home' meant something different. It was always somewhere else, always deferred. Therefore, trying to name herself, literally and metaphorically, Majaj delves into a never-ending process of negotiation with voices that force women to be silent on one hand, and with the historical circumstances that necessitate exchanging one home for another. Naming herself literally in Jordan exposed her to mockery due to her weak Arabic, and naming herself a Palestinian in America was met with hostility: "Each part of my identity-Palestinian, American, woman-requires acknowledgement, affirmation; makes it possible and necessary to speak. Yet each one of these identities has silenced me at various junctures of my life" (ibid.:50). For a long time, silence, the gaps, and the in-betweens were 'home' for Majaj until writing came and with it came her articulation of selfhood to fill the silence. Writing functions as a link between the local and the global, the private and the public, the personal and political. Writing as a 'home' taught her how to name herself with full consciousness "I am half American, half Palestinian", that is, she counter politicizes the derogatory connotation of each half which reflects an oppositional stand in the way Minh-ha (1996:7) has explained.

I believe that the autobiographical essay of Lisa Suhair Majaj shifts theory from the abstract to the concrete. Similar to the approach

of the feminist Teresa de Lauretis, Majaj does not pose gender as a biological category of analysis. Rather, she explores the notion of experience as practice through which gender could be conceived of as a lived process of worldly interactions. Caren Kaplan (1996:178), the postmodern theorist, comments on the de Lauretis alternative: "the subject that emerges in this work has agency and a capacity for analytical reflection, with a consciousness that is in the process of formation- never totally fixed and always in relation to history."

When Majaj summarizes her theoretical position by posing the crucial question "where am I writing from?" she solves the everlasting dilemma of deconstructing stereotypes by recourse to experience; "beyond the stereotypes which cling with a terrible tenacity lies the fluid, subtle complexity of lived experience. Only when we begin to speak of our realities will our own voices finally welcome us home" (Majaj 1996:50). Since reality is always changing in accordance with the politics of history and historicity, there will never be a final destination that is called 'home'. Home is a process that finds shape in transgressing the boundaries of assigned solidarity, the limitations of comprehension, and the desire for linearity.

The texts I have dealt with so far do not adopt gender as their main category of analysis and it is not the sole approach for declaring positions via boundaries. Though the texts successively confirm and negate in an avant-gardist manner, that oppositional poststructuralist agency occurs through highlighting the 'temporality of struggle' which Mohanty (1987:41) believes to be the basis of a feminist vision. The temporality of struggle, in the broad sense of the word, maps and transforms the political location of the Euro-American unitary subjectivity.

It is location (history and geography) as a category that determines how both experience and difference work politically. The analysis of location is what formulates the temporality of struggle and enables subjectivity to be an ongoing process crossing from one place to another. Mokkedem assumed gender as a starting point of departure. Yet, along the way her position shifted several times allowing her identity to combine different factors related to her own personal history and communal history. Gender, in her case, turned out to be a nebulous lens and a limited means of grasping experience. As for Barakat, gender was never assumed to be a category for analyzing the experience. It is her position as a voluntary immigrant who tries to cross the borders of a stereotypical experience that characterizes her vision. Majaj solves her dilemma by rebelling against all strict borders of language; thus, she is capable of grasping the complicated relation of language, experience and location. All three women's positions are as similar in relating to "the temporality of struggle," as they are different. Halawani, on the



other side, is located at the heart of struggle. Through her photos, she crossed the borders of an under siege experience by showing the difficulty of crossing physical borders.

To conclude, the four positions constantly shift according to the process of crossing or the impediments to crossing. That is to say, they all relate to the geopolitics of their location or where they came from, a fact that is reflected on the crossing of the borders of genre. Since these geopolitics function as markers of positionality and situatedness the texts move freely between the personal and the political till the borders between both are totally blurred. Therefore, all the texts turn outward to embrace contradiction, dis/location and change. The texts, in terms of experience and genre, are not far from what Gloria Anzaldua (1987:195) expressed:

To survive the borderlands  
You must live sin fronteras  
Be a crossroads.

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<sup>1</sup> The theoretical discussion of borders owes its debt to Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* that was published in 1987. It is due to the influence of this book that the idea of the border became prominent in the field of cultural studies, in spite of the fact that Anzaldúa was concerned with the American-Mexican border, where "living on borders and in margins" had become an abode.

<sup>2</sup> The photos are scanned from the *Prince Claus Fund Journal*, special issue on asylum and migration, December 2004.