



Of Dreams and Assassins (CARAF Books: Caribbean and African Literature translated from the French)

Malika Mokeddem

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Of Dreams and Assassins is the urgent and rhythmic fourth novel of Malika Mokeddem, her second to appear in English. Born in Algeria to a Bedouin family that had only recently become sedentary, Mokeddem was raised on the stories of her grandmother, who encouraged her education at a time when girls did not go to school. Though raised in a tolerant version of Islam, Mokeddem nevertheless felt the weight of custom and tradition. Of Dreams and Assassins, though not strictly autobiographical, evokes through the beauty and vastness and oppressive heat of the desert Mokeddem's early yearning for freedom. Through its heroine, Kenza, and her simultaneous rebellion and immersion in the literary classics at a boarding school, the novel dramatizes the possibilities for women to express their identities.

Kenza is an exile, first in her own society and later in France. Born during a visit to Montpellier in the year of Algerian independence, she returns with her mother to Oran to find her father has taken another wife. Her mother leaves alone, never to return. Kenza's subsequent search for herself through the mother she doesn't know, told in a frank first-person narrative, mirrors the struggle of Algerian women to make a place in a society that has stripped them of their rights in spite of their crucial participation in the war for independence. Kenza's suffocating childhood in the house of her boisterous, leering father is broken only by summers in the desert, where the dates "become golden brown and gleam like little clusters of suns that mock the children." Eventually, Kenza, like Mokeddem herself, leaves her home to go to school in Montpellier, because she can no longer tolerate life in Algeria.

Of Dreams and Assassins is a protest, against the subjugation of women in Algeria and the violence of the last ten years, perpetrated by fundamentalist Muslim guerrillas. In exile, Kenza puts her hope in métissage, the blending of cultures embodied by the character of Slim, her friend and confidant, who lives happily with his mixed-race origins. Kenza's story dramatizes Mokeddem's belief that the future of Algeria lies in its women and in education; only through liberation and education can the pain of Kenza's exile be redeemed.

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