

Waltzes in Exile: Exilic spaces and female presence in Kenizé Mourad's *De la part de la princess morte*¹

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Abstract

Regards from the Dead Princess (1989), Kenizé Mourad's much acclaimed début novel, tells the story of Selma, an Ottoman princess whose life traverses capitals, cultures and continents – Istanbul, Beirut, Badalpour, and Paris during the interbellum years. Selma bears witness to key turning points in a troubled period, namely the fall of empires, rise of nationalism, and world wars. Her life story provides insight to cataclysmic events, and its retelling in an errant narrative which weaves in female experiences that have been silenced. There is a link between the shifts in places and those her inner self undergoes. Moreover, the presence of dance as a means of self-expression makes an apt point in discussing the development of Selma's identity. This paper traces the ways in which the novel represents exilic spaces and their female experiencing through focus on displacement and practices of dance. By juxtaposing the themes of exile, movement and dance this paper highlights the complexity of the narrative and the circuitous forms of displacement.

Keywords: Exile, movement, performativity, dance, literary space.

Sürgünde Vals: Kenizé Mourad'ın *Saraydan Sürgüne* adlı romanında sürgün ve kadın

Öz

Kenizé Mourad'ın *Saraydan Sürgüne* (1987) adlı romanı Selma adındaki Osmanlı prensesinin iki dünya savaşı arasında kıtalar, kültürler ve başkentleri kat eden (İstanbul, Beyrut, Badalpour ve Paris) hikayesini konu alır. Selma imparatorlukların çöküşü, milliyetçiliğin yükselişi ve dünya savaşları ile örülmüş sorunlu bir dönemin kilit tarihine tanıklık etmektedir. Selma'nın bu göçebe öyküsü yaşanan felakatlere ışık tutmanın yanı sıra susturulmuş ve bastırılmış farklı kadın deneyimlerine de göndermede bulunmaktadır. Romanda Selma'nın yaşadığı mekânsal değişimler ile içsel benliğinin yaşadığı başkalaşım arasında bir bağlantı bulunmaktadır. Ayrıca, kendini ifade etme aracı olarak dans kavramının varlığı, Selma'nın kimliğinin gelişimini tartışmak için uygun bir noktaya getirmektedir. Bu makale, romanda bir mekân olarak sürgün kavramının ve kadın varlığının ne şekilde temsil edildiğini ve metnin gidiş ve dönüşler arasındaki gezici niteliğinin bu kavramları nasıl

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dönüştürdüğünü incelemektedir. Bu bağlamda, sürgün, hareket ve dans temalarını yan yana getirerek, anlatının karmaşıklığını farklı bir mercekle analiz etmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sürgün, hareket, performatiflik, dans, yazınsal mekân.

Introduction

De la part de la princesse morte (1987),⁴ Kenizé Mourad's much acclaimed debut novel, tells the story of Selma, an Ottoman princess born in the twilight of the empire and whose life traverses capitals, cultures and continents – Istanbul, Beirut, Badalpour, and Paris during the interbellum years. Selma bears witness to key turning points in the turbulent history of a turbulent region at first hand – the fall of empires, rise of nationalism, two world wars, occupied cities, anti-colonialist movements, and the suffragette. Her family and affiliations in her life story provide insight to cataclysmic events that reshaped the Middle East, and impacted Europe. Selma's life story is one of movement, perpetual exile with incidents of profound loss and drastic change. Their retelling gives space to personal stories that have been suppressed or silenced during the period.

La princesse is much more than a historical novel, as we find out in the end that it also relates to the writer's own life. Daughter of an Ottoman princess and an Indian rajah, Kenizé Mourad was born in Paris during World War II. She was raised by Catholic nuns but grew interested in her Muslim heritage as a teenager. At age of twenty-one she visited India and met her father for the first time. Upon returning to France, she studied psychology and sociology at the Sorbonne. From 1972 to 1982, she worked for the Paris-based newsmagazine, *Le Nouvel Observateur* as a Middle East and South Asia correspondent. Her first novel *La princesse*, based on the life of her mother, Princess Selma, was published in 1987, and became an international bestseller. Published by Robert Laffont, one of France's most prestigious publishing houses, the novel won the award *Anaïs Ségalas de l'Académie française* and the award *Grand Prix des Lectrices Elle*.

La princesse weaves in varieties of movement in multiple settings that make the text difficult to capture and reflect upon. The text provides a glimpse of Ottoman female presence in the interwar period and its retelling in twentieth century French literature. The autobiographical quality of the novel, and the layers of displacement that mark the lives of the writer and her mother make the novel an unusual instance of memory writing in exile, where memory is, in Azade Seyhan's words, "an intersection between personal recollection and historical account, and though self-consciously fragmentary, intimates the virtual existence of a longer collective narrative of a nation, ethnic group, or class" (2001: 17). Selma's peculiar position as an exiled princess also warrants analysis of her intimate relationship with the cities she inhabits. She moves from one city to another, and not always because she is forced, as is the case in exile, but because she wants to. In this sense, her wanderings make her not only an exile, but also a nomad, in the sense of a person without the idea of a fixed home or center (Peters, 1999: 19-21).

La princesse is a novel of border crossings and various forms of mobility, which are beyond conventional literary traditions, resonating with what Azade Seyhan contends as "diasporic narratives" in her work on narratives outside national boundaries (2001: 13). Mourad's writing provides an unusual space where female experience is given precedence: it is an errant narrative⁵, divided into four sections each entitled

⁴ Henceforth referred to as *La princesse*.

⁵ The adjective "errant" is a deliberate choice in order to delineate the nature of the act of "wandering". In Latin "to wander" means "erraverunt". To err means to make a mistake. Wandering is a concept peculiar to Medieval Arthurian romances

with the four different locations that Selma spent time in Turkey, Lebanon, India, and France— four locations that shaped the course of her life, and her identity as a princess and as a woman. This paper addresses questions of exile and female presence by zooming in on movement. This article is structured as follows: first displacement will be situated historically and thematically through the different locations by way of various examples regarding relationship between space and exile. Next, the role of dance in these locations will be analyzed in order to unite these two perspectives and point at the performative quality of the narration as a means of self-expression, discovery, and identity.

Dance and performativity add to the complexity of Mourad's novel. There seems to be a deliberate attempt in subverting the power mechanisms through changing of locales as well as exilic positions and the appearance of dance in each of these settings. Performativity and bodily practices are linked through dance, which may provide an example of the idea of the stylization of the body and the body's repetitive acts. Tied to other collective social actions dance implies play. Judith Butler's theory of performativity addresses this issue when she claims, "identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (1990: 25). Subjects continually perform identities that are prescribed by hegemonic discourses. Butler recognizes identity as a process of identification, something that is done over and over again instead of something that is an inherent characteristic of the individual. It is possible to see these hegemonic discourses as a "script" which is always already determined within this regulatory "frame" from which to make a constrained choice of gender style. The body, then, is a significant aspect that Butler builds "not as a surface... but as a series of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained... (through) the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990: 33).

La Princesse is an apt text to compare forms and concepts of mobility and to discuss their differences. Selma's movement starts with banishment from homeland, yet the punishment is at home, as her childhood is spent in home imprisonment. In her wanderings across cultures, countries, and continents, we see her allegiance to and nostalgia for the lost home, especially to the title of princess. Yet her nostalgia dissipates in the course of her wanderings: the unusual itinerary allows her to create herself anew. Taking its cue from the emphasis on movement, this paper zooms in on diverse forms of mobility, in particular exile and dance to explore how they contribute to the development of identity.

Turkey

The narrative starts with the death of Abdulhamid II, the great sultan who issued the first Constitution of the Empire in 1876, suspended it in 1878, and ruled the empire with absolute power for the following forty years. In the narrative, we meet Abdulhamid as a despot who imprisoned the young princess's mother, Hatidje Sultana, along with the other children of Mourad V, the shortest reigning monarch of the empire, who was forced to abdicate after three months and then kept in custody with the rest of the family in Cheragan Palace, which became their gilded prison. Their house imprisonment ended with the death of the Sultan. This is a bittersweet moment for Selma's mother, Hatidje Sultan, especially: sweet because the uncle who caused grief to her family is dead, but bitter because what is to come is not necessarily better, and the country is on the brink of total collapse. Abdulhamid II was toppled by a

in which the hero commits a lot of errors before he finally succeeds in his goal. Wandering can be perceived as a movement in Mourad's text: the narrative tries and tries out distinctive perceptions of identity formation.

rebellion by the democrats led by the Committee of Union and Progress, yet the very same committee led the country to war on Germany's side and total annihilation.

Selma and her family's stay in Istanbul end soon after the advent of the Republic, as part of the Republican law forcing royals to exile. Feeling of perpetual exile and longing for home will henceforth mark the characters. Selma's homelessness starts at home and is not simply related to her royal blood. The period marks the Kemalist reforms that sought to modernize the country, and in terms of the former capital, the emigration of Ottoman royals, the abolishing of the caliphate. This change in the cultural makeup of its inhabitants, aimed at severing the remaining ties with Islamic heritage and the Ottoman Past, in order to facilitate processes of Westernization, turned Istanbul into a desolate city of alienation, where no one feels completely at home. As Selma leaves Istanbul, she not only feels she is putting her hometown behind, but also her childhood memories, her very first life and happiness there. However, her position in the family, her imprisonment in the Tchéragan Palace –when it is recognized as false home– have significant implications in defining the origins of Selma's exile. These experiences help her form her exilic identity that does not simply refer to actual experiences of being dislocated from home but becomes a way of thinking *without* home.

The narrative gives a panorama of strong women in different settings, who surround Selma. Her mother Hatidje Sultan for example, prefers to direct men, from behind the curtains, as has been the tradition in her country for centuries. She contends, "Concealed behind the moucharabié, our great cadins have followed the deliberations of the Divan for centuries, and the direction of the empire's policy was often affected by the advice they gave the sovereign. In the East, any intelligent woman knows how to influence her husband's decisions, but she is wise enough not to flaunt the fact. (Mourad 1989: 131) ⁶. Being raised as a princess, Selma looks up to other powerful women outside the royal circles as well. Selma yields a sort of devotion in particular to Halide Edip, writer, public speaker and activist, and to Latifé Hanım, Mustafa Kemal's wife. In her first experience outside the confines of the palace she encounters the great Halide Edip, "famous writer and ardent champion of women's rights" (Mourad 1989: 91) ⁷. Selma watches clandestinely "women now had the right, and even the duty, to assist in shaping their country's destiny" (Mourad 1989: 131) her galvanizing speech in a public rally against the occupation of Izmir /Smyrna and feels reborn. Latifé Hanım becomes Selma's next heroine as she takes an active part in the politics following the liberation of the country, and proclaims that "women now had the right, and even the duty, to assist in shaping their country's destiny" (Mourad 1989: 131) ⁸. Here we are also informed that as a very young princess, Selma is already familiar with French women, the idea of revolution and history, through her governess, Mademoiselle Rose.

Lebanon

Selma and her mother's next refuge is Lebanon, which was put under the Allied forces under French military occupation followed by the abolishment of Lebanon's semiautonomous status by the Ottoman forces. Selma lands in Beirut at a very special historical juncture: Lebanon experiences the most

⁶ Pendant des siècles nos grandes cadines, dissimulées derrière les moucharabiehs, ont suivi les délibérations du divan, et par leurs conseils au souverain ont souvent infléchi la politique de l'empire... En Orient, tout femme intelligente sait influencer les décisions de son mari, mais elle a la sagesse de ne pas s'en glorifier" (Mourad 1987: 152).

⁷ "La grande Halide Edip, écrivain célèbre et ardente avocate des droit de la femme" (Mourad 1987: 71).

⁸ "Les femmes ont désormais le droit, et même le devoir de participer aux destinées de leur pays" (Mourad 1987: 152).

tumultuous events in history of the country in which opposing religious beliefs strived for political power. Her exile coincides with the aura of the Mandate Period⁹.

She and her mother rent a small flat in which they start to live together with their remaining personnel. Her privileged aristocratic position is to be no more, though her identity/title as “princess” accompanies her at *les Soeurs de Besançon*, the educational institution that claims to be “open to children of all religions” (Mourad 1989: 152)¹⁰. The institution is among the many “homes” that Selma will inhabit: it becomes a site where identity politics are at play. The second section of the novel opens with the scene in which Selma is being harshly beaten by one of the nuns of this school. When questioned about the reason why she called the nun a “liar”, Selma answers in fury: “Reverend Mother,” she said in a muffled voice, “what would you do if someone forced you to repeat, out loud, in front of the class, that your grandfather was insane, your great uncle a bloodthirsty monster, your other great-uncle feeble-minded and the last of your dynasty a coward?” (Mourad 1989 : 152)¹¹. As an adolescent, she is forced to unlearn her own identity and distance herself from her own history. This is also the point where her knowledge of French culture moves into something else as she is estranged and enforced to re-conceptualize her past in order to create herself. This feeling resonates in her first days at the Beirut harbour where she first starts to socialize with people as she watched the steamship called *Pierre Loti* arriving and leaving:

In the early days Selma had gone down to the harbour and mingled with the jostling, bustling crowd, shutting her eyes in an attempt to rediscover the sounds and scents of her native land. When she was completely steeped in them, but only then she allowed herself to look. They seemed familiar, all those faces. She scrutinized them avidly one by one, as if a glance could summon up visions of the city she loved, or a smile convey the splendour of those sunsets over the Golden Horn. With difficulty she would refrain from asking some stranger: Are the people happy in Istanbul? – or from begging a morsel of sesame-seed bread from the brimming basket on some woman’s arm, drinking in the warmth of an accent, the scent of a faded rose. (Mourad 1989: 183).¹²

Selma’s remark stresses the importance of observation, to help ascribe meaning to the object, and to highlight the peculiarity of her exile. Here a parenthesis on her particular perception is necessary. Selma’s experience of Lebanon is conditioned by her memories of Istanbul. In this regard, even her daily experiences in the port area turns into a nostalgic search for the traces of her home city. Selma’s walk can be considered as gestures, in the sense that Michel De Certeau defines the term in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, as action that creates a narrative process of everyday life revealing the urban experience. The relation between the human being and its surrounding milieu (social and spatial) engenders a strategy of sensorial perception where the movement of the body, in all the surrounding urban environments, improves the experience by immersing in the street and generates a kind of sensitive panorama of the urban experience in everyday life (quoted in, la Rocca, 2017: 24). Selma’s longing for

⁹ At the point when the Mandate started, Lebanon was experiencing the strict clashes of the 1860s and from World War I. The French started to build up a legislative structure that included new regulatory and legal frameworks and a new civil code. A negative impact of the Mandate was the priority given to French as a language of instruction, a move that favoured Christians to the detriment of Muslims.

¹⁰ “Ouvert aux enfants de toutes les religions” (Mourad 1987 : 172).

¹¹ “Révérende mère, que feriez-vous si on vous forçait à réciter –sa voix s’étouffe –que votre grand-père était fou... votre grand-oncle un monstre sanguinaire... votre grand-oncle un faible d’esprit, et le dernier un lâche ?” (Mourad 1987 : 173).

¹² Les premiers temps, Selma descendait jusqu’au port, et là, mêlée à la foule, elle se laissait bousculer et bercer, les yeux fermés, essayant de retrouver les bruits et les odeurs de son pays. Et puis, lorsqu’elle s’en était imprégnée tout entière, alors, mais alors seulement, elle s’autorisait à regarder. Tous ces visages, il lui semblait les reconnaître ; avec ferveur elle les scrutait, un à un, tentant de capter dans les regards des images qui lui parleraient de sa ville, de retrouver dans un sourire la splendeur nostalgique des couchers de soleil sur la Corne d’Or. Elle se retenait à grand-peine de demander : « Est-on heureux à Istamboul ? », ou de quémander un morceau de ce pain de sésame dépassant d’un panier, la chaleur d’un accent, une rose fanée (Mourad 1987 : 203).

and experience of Istanbul is of the mind: wherever she goes, memories will always accompany her, shape her enjoyment and understanding of the environment.

Ottoman past informs Selma's experience of Lebanon in myriad ways. Even though the renewed opinion on the Ottoman empire reveals (French) hostility towards the imperial past, Selma attracts the attention of Lebanese "crème de la crème" society. She befriends Amal, the daughter of a very wealthy Druze family, and has a brief and tempestuous relationship with the heir of a Druze leader, Wahid. She becomes to be perceived as an Ottoman princess in high society. She represents the heyday of the past. The glory of the Ottoman Empire might have dwindled; however, the remains still outshine the once Ottoman lands/cities. Thus, in the eyes of Lebanese society, Selma embodies a blend of the old and the new.

When asked by Amal in Beirut whether she likes dancing, Selma tries to hide the fact that she has never danced before with a man (Mourad 1989: 243). Later on, when she asks her mother's permission to go to a ball, the only dance her mother finds appropriate and allows Selma to practise is waltz: it implies choreography and entails certain rules, all else are swayings of savages (Mourad 1989: 274). For Selma's friends, on the other hand, waltz can be dizzying, carrying the dancer away to another world (Mourad 1989: 274). The liberatory and sensual potential of movement is underlined in dancing scenes. As it has been mentioned before Selma's each dance attempt in various settings refer to the possibility of an endless multiplicity of identities.

She dances for the first time in Beirut. Selma dreams of dancing with Wahid, but he is busy talking with his friends. A good-looking French officer, Georges Buis, proposes, and with him she lets herself enjoy the rhythms of the music, even though she knows the dance will create a fuss and will make Wahid jealous. Wahid's remark is scornful; he says, It amazes me that any Muslim girl, let alone an Ottoman princess, should dance with a French officer. How broad-minded, how noble of you to forgive and forget!" (Mourad 1989: 230)¹³. Wahid's jealousy is evident, and it is transposed to politics as it is followed by a long rant against the French mandate. More importantly, it is Selma's choice of dancing with a stranger that makes the scene an apt instance for "becoming": agency is required for each subject to sustain identity through constant repetition (Butler, 1990: 145). It might well be argued that it is indeed the juxtaposition of the binary sentiments, desire and fear, which reveals the transformative quality of dancing.

India

After Selma's broken love affair with Wahid in Beirut, Hatidje Sultan works to make certain arrangements for her daughter to find a suitable husband. As she writes to a distant relative residing in India, she asks Selma whether she would be interested in such a match. To her great surprise, Selma accepts the offer right away. It is decided that she is to travel to India and marry the Rajah of Badalpour. The section that starts with her departure and ends with her arrival in Lucknow is particularly striking. As the train departs from the station, she assumes a sense of purpose and security because she has a destination, which she hopes to call "home". Just like the errant narrative, her act of erring calls for a question on the relationship between identity, belonging and home. According to Sarah Ahmed, this journey between "homes" "provides the subject with the contours of a space of belonging, but a space

¹³ "C'est étonnant de voir une jeune fille musulmane, et plus encore une princesse ottomane, danser avec un officier français. J'aime cette largeur d'esprit, cette noblesse danse l'oubli » (Mourad 1987: 255).

which expresses the very logic of interval, the passing through of the subject between apparently fixed moments of departure and arrival” (1999: 330).

In India, Selma gets caught in the throes of ethnic, religious, and political upheaval. India's modernisation project entailed the effort to break away from British colonial structures and to secure a distinctive Indian modernity (Roy, 2010: 152). Here we see a similar effort in breaking away with the past in that Turkey's modernisation aimed at a complete rupture with its Ottoman and imperial past in both political and cultural terms (Keyman, 2007: 220). Selma's sympathy and adoration for Mustafa Kemal yields to resentment, as it was Mustafa Kemal who ended the caliphate rule and banished the members of the Ottoman dynasty. Here in India, once again she experiences a nationalist movement against the West, which is not unlike the one she already experienced in 1920s in Istanbul. Due to the partition of India under hundred-and fifty-years colonial rule and the existence of the deeply rooted caste system, this period marks an important decade for Indian politics/society. In India, her identity as a princess still dominates yet with a twist: whereas in Beirut she is part of the ruling class, in India she represents the Muslim resistance against the West. However, she is well aware that the two variations of modernisation efforts in India and Turkey form a contrast: although she is a Muslim, the Hindu traditions and the sect differences make it very hard for her to adapt. Her first encounter with Amir comes as a shock to her: at the train station, she is greeted by Rashid Khan and not her future husband. She is not allowed to see him before the day of the wedding. When they finally lift their veils and gaze at one another with surprise, the first words of Amir are: “You should respect the traditions” (Mourad 1989: 332)¹⁴.

Selma remains an outsider to Shiite culture although she is a Muslim. She gets teased by the women of the palace as ignorant of its customs. Yet she turns this ignorance into a tool for control just as Eve Sedgwick has pointed out: “ignorance can be a source of power as well as knowledge and has suggested that ‘ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons’” (1999: 4). When Amir invites her for a special prayer for Mustafa Kemal's death, she accuses Amir of not sympathizing with her and outmaneuvers him saying, “No, of course I do not intend to pray for Kemal! [...] While you go and pray, I shall invite a few friends to toast the happy event in champagne.” (Mourad 1989: 455)¹⁵. She is deeply resentful of the exile of her family.

Selma's transgressive / rebellious act relates again to a dance – her acceptance of an invitation to dance, this time at a ball hosted by the British governor in Badalpour. Selma goes to the ball with Amir, which is exceptional – a daring act. And in the ball, forsaken by her husband, the rhythms of the waltz transport her to a world of reverie. To her surprise, a young British officer, Roy Lindon offers to dance. Selma knows the dance will be scandalous, but accepts nonetheless, remembering her dance in Lebanon, and deciding that a dramatic move is not to displease herself, but to shake off the conventionality of her existence which she has started to get used to (Mourad 1989: 464). Selma's inner voice is its attestation: “And more than the desire for a waltz, it is the fear of being engulfed, that survival instinct, which suddenly makes her stand up and say: Let us dance!” (Mourad 1989: 419)¹⁶. Selma cannot resist the opportunity to perform her identity, which remains short of creating a political scandal. Amir, finding it out, proposes a duel. The British governor intervenes and saves his officer and the raja from a bloody

¹⁴ “Vous devez respecter les traditions!” (Mourad 1987: 312).

¹⁵ “Bien sûr que non, je n'irai pas prier pour Kemal! [...] Pendant que vous irez prier, je vais inviter mes amis à sabler le champagne pour fêter l'heureux évènement !” (Mourad 1987 : 491, 492)

¹⁶ “Et plus que le désir d'une valse, c'est la peur de se laisser engloutir, l'instinct de survie, qui soudain la fait se dresser et dire: “Allons danser!” (Mourad 1987: 456)

confrontation, yet this requires manoeuvring to find another target for raja's anger. In the end Selma is blamed for accepting the dance and is sentenced to home imprisonment.

Selma's transgression, her punishment, and eventual journey to Paris may be understood better through her presence in public space, notably through the concept of *flânerie*. As an activity, *flânerie* is discussed by feminist critics in order to highlight women's exclusion from public spaces or their objectification by the *flâneurial* gaze. According to Elfriede Dreyer and Estelle McDowall, within the constraints of patriarchal legacies, women have been seen to represent disorder, chaos and sexuality, and men rationality and control; therefore men are viewed as not compatible with the male conception of an ordered, utopian metropolis ("Imagining the *flâneur* as a woman" 33). Spaces also become gendered; public spaces are associated with men and private spaces with women. Women's position on the streets has therefore always been marginal, and their experiences are limited and regulated. This idea is illustrated in Selma's acceptance of an invitation to dance.

France

The tensions between the old and the new, emancipation and conservatism, the authority of the state and the resistance towards subordination mark Selma's life. They will all be resolved, albeit tragically, in Paris on the brink of war characterized by violence and instability. Suffocated by the exigencies of the life in Lucknow, Selma makes sure to move away from the state and from India. Using her pregnancy as an excuse, she moves to Paris, to the capital of a culture she was trained in as a child in Istanbul and later in Beirut. In Paris, Marie-Laure, Selma's one-time rival in high school in Beirut, becomes a best friend, as Selma is a prized companion to have around and to introduce to society life. Selma's exotic outlook is a great asset, and a key to Parisian society. Standing out also means that Selma's dreams of being like everybody are shattered, and she has to perform her difference – that of the Oriental princess. With the Parisian society, we see Selma exhausting her financial resources: due to war she loses her contact with her husband. Even though her financial power dwindles her awareness of her femininity and womanhood intensifies.

Her ultimate self-discovery and actualisation, however, come through love – in the form of erotic and motherly love.¹⁷ She meets Harvey Kerman, the American doctor she falls in love with in a ball in Paris. This time, they don't dance the waltz, but a more intimate and free form during which she feels absorbed by this unknown man (Mourad, 1987: 530). Harvey helps her get in touch with the woman underneath the titles of princess and rana. Harvey beckons her to move out of her dream world and embrace womanhood: when he says, "Stop dreaming, Selma. You are a woman; don't you know what that means? It is the noblest title of all." (Mourad 1989: 504)¹⁸. Selma's love affair is indeed a means of getting to know and take pleasure in the body and in female experience. Harvey's caresses are more than pleasing; they shape how Selma relates to herself, her body, and to her unborn child. Selma decides that Harvey and not Amir is the actual father of her child.

The ultimate moment of being, to borrow Virginia Woolf's phrase, is her dance with her daughter, after which she collapses due to malnutrition. Through this dance we see her reach a new sense of being. Selma talks to her baby Kenizé as she cuddles her and dances and says, "Oh my treasure, my treasure!" With the child in her arms she started dancing to the lilt of a Strauss waltz coming from the radio. "You

¹⁷ On early Middle eastern feminism and the *bildungsroman* qualities of the narrative see (Armianu 205).

¹⁸ "Sortez de votre rêve Selma, vous êtes une femme, avez-vous conscience de ce que cela signifie? C'est le plus beau titre de noblesse" (Mourad 1987 : 540).

will see how sweet life can be. Now I know the secret, we shall never be unhappy again, I promise.” (Mourad 1989: 554) ¹⁹. The final dance is the peak point where we witness the ephemeral, elusive and evasive quality of identity. This is in fact the final step of becoming which shows both her acknowledgment of the new self and her effort to transmit this revelation to her daughter. The waltz with her daughter also becomes a tool in self-creation. She acquires agency through exposing the constructedness of discourse and power. As she dances away, she subverts the very codes the social order imposes. In doing so she produces new ways of being in society.

Conclusion

In *La princesse*, the lines between fact and fiction are blurred, public history and private story converged, accent is on female experience behind power struggles and grandiose events. The errant narrative and the dancing body work in a similar way. Dancing scenes throughout the text point to the performative nature of dancing: to perform is to “get with the programme,” to be in the event, to readjust and recalibrate. Caught between male dominated social hierarchies and forced exile, Selma’s dances testify to the negotiation between social structures and personal agency. Through constant repetition of her identity in variegated contexts, Selma sustains her identity as a woman. The liberating or subversive potential of dance provides the subtext of her becoming: her effort in being the good wife, the virtuous princess, the good mother correspond to these contexts in which subjects are compelled to participate in reproducing official discourses of identity.

In the ending, the tragic story of a princess whose life is interrupted changes its tone in the epilogue: we are told that the novel in fact retells Kenizé’s own story. The narrative is her daughter’s journey of self-discovery, too, if only through her mother. The epilogue, in other words, re-presents the narrative; it invites the reader to reconsider and to re-turn to the text. The inclusion of multiple histories, heritages, and traditions does not simply provide a panorama of the political and familial turmoils that Selma experienced – it is foremost an act of their recovery – retelling of lost histories. *La princesse* showcases the emancipatory potential of writing, as a tool for creating alternative worlds and, as Françoise Lionnet argues, for “appropriating the past so as to transform our understanding of ourselves” (1991: 5). Ultimately, the narrative transfigures loss into a story, movements into dance, and a tragic life of a princess into the story of a strong woman who forged her identity, waltzing in exile.

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¹⁹ “Oh, mon trésor, mon trésor! Selma s’est mise à tourner en tenant l’enfant dans ses bras au rythme d’une valse de Strauss qu’égrène le poste de radio. Vous verrez comme la vie est belle ! Maintenant je connais le secret, et je vous le promets, jamais plus nous ne serons malheureuses” (Mourad 1987 : 597).

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