

Terrorism and Literature: The Case of Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad*

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the relationship between terrorism and literature. Yasmina Khadra, Algerian novelist, tries to identify the origins of terrorism in an identity crisis in the Arab world with an imbrication of political and economic failure. The encounter with the different Other in an international environment, a fast moving technological world, from a national to a gender identity issues, the malaise bred by an archaic mentality and lack of development opportunities remain the challenges that drown deep the Arab society in terrorism. Yasmina Khadra appropriates then rejects, denies, and acknowledges these problems as his and displays the consequences. From a lost narrator to lack of communication, to hatred, to anger, to folly and a sense of the absurd, or perhaps adherence to fundamentalist theses as in the case of Dr. Jalal in Yasmina's novel *The Sirens of Baghdad* (2008), this is the lot of a sane intellectual. The author connects the abject with desire, the hideous with the beautiful, the present with the past and the real with the mythical, but above all the betrayal of the west and its values. The Orient remains eternally Salambo, and humiliation is a factor to the rise of fundamentalism. The Kafkaen Western communication with the Orient reinforces the chthonic body relation to terrorism while the West seems to manipulate the deep-sea monsters. In *The Sirens of Baghdad*, with a setting in Beirut, Baghdad and Kafr Karam, space remain related to body and terrorism. Mapping the origins of terrorism, body and soul are other plausible source for evil when Yaseen the fundamentalist 'struck his chest with the flat of his hand. 'We are the wrath of God.' Terrorism is not only the hell fruit of both the absence of communication and democracy in the Arab world but the natural consequence of a despising West as well.

Key Words: Yasmina Khadra, terrorism, body, phallus, the West, the Orient, space, monster.

The novel *The Sirens of Baghdad* (2008) is a spiritual quest, a quest for meaning and a quest for identity in an absurd post-colonial context. It is the story of an unnamed twenty-one years old shy boy, student at the university in Baghdad, compelled to return to his village, Kafr Karam, after the US invasion of Iraq. Despite the war, he leads a peaceful life until the GIs kill a mentally retarded kid of his village, blow up a wedding, ill-treat and humiliate his father. He sees his penis, 'the abominable thing,'¹ and constructs a whole avenge hatred against the West to

wash the dishonour. The young man joins a terrorist group in Baghdad. After being injected a vaccine in Professor Ghany's clinic in Beirut, the unnamed man's mission is to fly to London and contaminate people in subways, train stations, stadiums, supermarkets, to propagate a large-scale epidemic terrorist attack.

The narrative construction of the novel goes through a three stages initiation development and looks like a descent to hell. The departing point is the cemetery. Baghdad does not emerge from the sands as the city of the Arabian Nights but rather like a monstrous city. It is no more the city of houris and charms he used to identify with in his 'former life.'² The narrator smells 'Baghdad's diabolic odour.'³ Beirut is 'an indeterminate city', out of time, 'closer to its fantasies than to its history.'⁴ In all cases, space is the symbolic representation of the self.

At the airport, a love scene and a kissing couple dissuade him from carrying out his evil project. The call of love is stronger than the call of hatred. The novel ends on a possible tone that terrorists would kill him, but he has no grudges against anyone 'I say to Shakir, "Let them be quick. I don't hold it against them. In fact, I don't hold anything against anybody anymore."⁵

1. Space, the Phallus and the Monster

All the way through the novel, the protagonist remains without a proper name. He sounds innocent and virgin. The identity issue gravitates around a feminine delicate, narcissistic and emotional character, rotates around a loss of values, a metamorphosis into a human-phallus thing as a narcissistic metaphor that truly reminds us of Kafka's narcissistic 'submissive human-insect, Gregor Samsa,'⁶ and the birth of a terrorist. There seems to be a gender issue too right from the beginning with a suspicious comradeship with his cousin Kadem who lost two wives.

While waiting for Kadem around the cemetery, a monstrous rebirth occurs. Space and memory are tied up from a gruesome space to his father's penis. Narration is confusing. The reader feels that the 'abominable thing' is not only the phallus, but the cemetery as well, 'I wandered around the cemetery... Everywhere I looked, I saw *the abominable thing*.'⁷ However, 'the abominable thing' is also the monstrous begotten 'terrorist' from his earlier life 'The whole place stank in the morning heat. A decomposing corpse, no doubt.'⁸

The central abject element that cast the unnamed man in the pit of 'terrorism' remains his father's penis, the abominable thing. 'I saw what it was forbidden to see: that flaccid, hideous, degrading thing, that forbidden, unspoken-of, sacrilegious object, my father's penis. That sight was the edge of the abyss, and beyond it, there was nothing but the infinite void, an interminable fall, nothingness.'⁹

As much as the body is the expression of humiliation, abject and monstrosity, it is also the expression of impotence and desire. 'I found myself hating my arms, which seemed grotesque, translucent, ugly, the symbols of my impotence; hating

my eyes, which refused to turn away and pleaded for blindness.¹⁰ In addition, the young man has never kissed a girl on the mouth. ‘What’s that like, kissing someone on the mouth? I’ve never kissed a girl on the mouth. Then the war came and gave my daydreams the coup de grâce.’¹¹ The libidinal drives transform him like a bomb too when mixed with humiliation and wrath. However, humiliation and hatred breed both the loss of love and loss of identity. ‘How could I love anything after what I’d seen in Kafr Karam? If so, who was I? I wasn’t really interested in knowing that.’¹²

2. Nationalism and the Quest for Identity

The metamorphosis of Baghdad is jointly described with his. ‘Baghdad was decomposing,’¹³ while ‘his tangled hair hung down over his brow like the nest of snakes on Medusa’s head.’¹⁴ People look like ‘hairy creatures...except perhaps for their human form.’¹⁵ However, metamorphosis and alienation are to their terminal stage when he realizes that ‘One morning, I looked in a shop window and didn’t recognize myself. My hair was bushy...my eyes white-hot and hideous.’¹⁶ Alienation starts with the abominable thing to reach the narrator’s inability to recognize his country. ‘What country is this?’ I heard myself pant.’¹⁷ From national identity to a monstrous rebirth, the narrator feels the formation of another self. ‘I was born again as someone else, someone hard, cold, implacable.’¹⁸ The interaction between space, body and ‘terrorism’ becomes apparent when he feels ready for his ‘terrorist’ act. It is weird how humiliation can alter a peaceful individual in a clap of hands. ‘I was stunned by how easy it was to pass from one world to another and practically regretted having spent so much time being fearful of what I’d find.’¹⁹ From a national identity, the narrator comes to realize through his characters that the West is ‘a siren song for people shipwrecked on their identity quest,’²⁰ and from the abominable thing, the phallus, to the ‘thing’ he has become, humiliation takes sinuous paths to lead him to a sense of loss. However, this humiliation is political too. Trapping Saddam and the image of the leader with a hirsute beard, through worldwide media nets, was shocking but wisely manipulated by Yaseen the fundamentalist. ‘By humiliating him like that, they were holding up every Arab in the world to public opprobrium.’²¹

The definition of terrorism remains controversial. It is a strategy of political and criminal violence which advocates use to instill terror and fear for some political gain. It can take different shapes from political assassinations to mass murder. Yasmina describes the western aggression of Iraq as an act of ‘terrorism’. The narrator faithfully displays the horrors in a realistic image of US bombing civilians. The horrors of the war are a direct reason for the emergence of ‘counter terrorism’. ‘The horrors of yesterday are what’s pushing me on. But the war’s not limited to that.’²²

Bernard Lewis thinks that the decline of the Arab world is self-inflicted through its culture and religion. Yasmina refutes the thesis through Kadem’s words ‘If the

West could only understand our music...if it could hear our soul...if it could commune with our world.²³ Jalal also convincingly argues 'What can they comprehend of our world, which has produced the most fabulous pages in the history of human civilization?'²⁴

The problems of the Arab world are neither cultural nor religious. Yasmina tracks the reasons that cast a delicate individual into 'terrorism'. They all start with psychological development into adulthood and the relation between spirit and body. Local tyrannies and absence of communication are other reasons too in addition to the economic and development failures as well as the betrayal of the West.

The novel is an initiation into the world of violence. The unnamed man grows up under his bossy masculine elder sister. He has not developed a legitimate 'violent' character. Violence is synonymous to manly behaviour he regrets. 'At school, my classmates considered me a weakling. They could provoke me all they wanted; I never returned their blows.'²⁵ He even comes to feel responsible for what happened to the Haitems during the US bombing of the wedding because of his 'weakling' behaviour.

Whenever I watched a schoolyard brawl, I hunched my shoulders around my ears and got ready for the sky to fall in on me. May be that's what happened at the Haitems' place: The sky fell in on me. I told myself I'd never be free of the curse that had destroyed the wedding party and turned joyous ululations in to appalling cries of agony.²⁶

Mapping the origins of 'terrorism', body and soul imbalance is another plausible source for evil. People cleanse their bodies without understanding; they pray mechanically. According to some voices, Arabs are the sole responsible for their decline 'Don't try to make others wear the hat we've fashioned for ourselves with our own hands. If the Americans are here, it's our fault. By losing our faith, we've also lost our bearings and our sense of honour.'²⁷ Body and soul relation is also responsible for evil when Yaseen 'struck his chest with the flat of his hand. 'We are the wrath of God.'²⁸ Evil equates with the city 'where the devil was at work, nimbly perverting souls.'²⁹ Nationalism regresses to a rejection of the city as a space of 'vice or thievery.'³⁰ This relation between body and space is dialectical. The city corrupts the young man, but he comes to 'Baghdad in my turn to spread my venom there.'³¹

Dictatorial regimes breed culture as a natural consequence of a history of oppression. Power remains in one hand, and tyrants do not share it. Opponents either are in jail or silenced if not in graves. Lack of democracy erects only one idea and does not tolerate other voices. One tyrant topples another. 'Sometimes,

when one tyrant had been cast out by another, the new tyrant's henchmen had descended on us like hunting dogs.'³²

The ramifications of political oppression instil venom in patriarchy and rigid traditions within both the family and society. Dialectical relations shape the monolithic mind. The young man experiences this lack of communication with his father or in the Safir café.

The real issues of the Arab world are also economic and political after 19th century colonialism. The West does not change its attitude despite the fast changing worldwide relations. It imposes only one binary relation. 'Its imperialistic nostalgia prevents it from admitting that the world has changed. You can't even reason with it.'³³

Economic development needs stability and education. The US invasion of Iraq has stopped the rhythm of development and the peaceful course of history in Iraq. The unnamed man's course of life is affected as well. In Kafr Karam, unemployment urges young men to take money even from their female siblings. 'They all dreamed of finding a job that would allow them to hold their heads high. But times were hard; wars and the embargo had brought the country to its knees.'³⁴

Before the invasion of Iraq, Dr. W. Kreisel of the World Health Organization claims that health care services in Iraq were well developed. However, banal diseases like pneumonia and meningitis kill as in the case of Kadem's first then second wife. 'At the time, the UN "oil for food" program was foundering...there was a shortage of basic medications, even on the black market.'³⁵ The frontiers between fiction and reality seem to disappear.³⁶

3. Fundamentalists' Rhetoric

Fundamentalists know how to breed their image. From Sayed's 'frank talk'³⁷ to Dr. Jalal's academic theses and rhetoric abilities 'to express our anguish,'³⁸ they all converge towards heating masses' emotional and nationalistic fibres. 'Tomorrow, *our children will be its slaves!*' he cried, stressing the final clause.'³⁹

Tears and humiliation lead to the rising of tyrants. The wounds beget anger and hatred as intense as folly and a sense of the absurd. The absurd starts with metamorphosis and comes to its paroxysm with insanity. The unnamed man develops an unimaginable hate towards the West along with the intention to commit a large-scale terrorist act. His world is flooded with signs, but nothing makes sense. Dr. Jalal and virologist Ghany are the epitome of insanity his world has come to: Two frustrated intellectuals following uneducated men in a subterranean terrorist enterprise.

Mass media should be a means for both entertainment and the diffusion of democratic values. It is an important tool to introduce the diversity of voices. However, it is a poisonous gift by a fundamentalist to the Safir café, where young people gather. In an illiterate environment, the shock is mostly prejudicial to peaceful Kafr Karam. While authority is absent there, fundamentalists try to sit

their own through the contagion principle. As a double-edged tool, television introduces chaos as well. The intense emotional content through TV coverage of death and war in Iraq is to pull both the religious and nationalist strings.

Brainwashing goes through technology while tyrants dismiss their authority space. Of course, the fundamentalist discourse stresses that alienation and present ills find their roots in interminable historical crusades, political oppression, corruption, social dislocations, and ‘that the remedy is a return to the original, authentic way of Islam.’⁴⁰ Technology works like the *rattenfanger* legend as most young people disappear and no one knows their whereabouts only years later when people in Kafr Karam learn they joined the terrorist groups.

Modernity, as understood in the West, is not only technology. It is founded on secularism, freedom, tolerance and emancipation, democratic values, human rights, equality and justice. Nevertheless, the modern West neither impresses nor fascinates. It is an ‘acidic lie’ and ‘an insidious perversity.’⁴¹ The image is not new. It is already shaped in Kafr Karam by Sayed when he draws an immoral picture of the West through the GI’s. ‘Violence and hatred sum up their history; Machiavellianism shapes and justifies their initiatives and their ambitions.’⁴²

4. Counter Representations: Imagology between Arabs and the West

Yasmina is aware that the encounter with the Other in a fast moving technological world is rough for a mythical mentality that still lives in middle ages heydays Baghdad. The whole novel brings forth a nostalgic memory.

We taught the world hygiene and cooking and mathematics and medicine. And what do these degenerates of modernity remember of all that? A camel caravan crossing the dunes at sunset?’ Some fat guy in a white robe and a keffiyeh flashing his millions in a gambling casino on the Côte d’Azur? Clichés, caricatures.’⁴³

The West, the ‘crude hoax,’⁴⁴ sounds hypocrite to Jalal, who used to defend its ideals, democratic values and all concepts of modernity that he calls ‘bright shining words’⁴⁵. The image of the Arabs does not change: from Bedouins to kickers in soccer balls or wailers into microphones to terrorists. The West uses the intellectuals then withdraws and leaves them to their own lot facing the religious clergy. Jalal is one of these intellectuals who feels betrayed. He was considered a mere ‘Western lackey.’⁴⁶ From a death target of the jihadists to their own theorist, the move is incredibly smooth. He even ‘lend[s] his oratorical talent and his formidable intelligence to jihadist directives.’⁴⁷ Jalal’s rhetoric has nothing to do with religion, but it is an incendiary vehement discourse against the West and its ‘imperialist hegemony.’⁴⁸

The arrogance of the West prevents it from even listening to what the East has to say. Communication starts with comprehending the discourse of the Other. The West's misunderstanding of the East goes worse when used in a fundamentalist rhetoric.

They're particularly ignorant of our heritage and our long memories...All they see in our country is an immense pool of petroleum...[T]he only virtue they recognize is profit. Predators, that's what they are.⁴⁹

The image of the West is also that of a seductive deceptive female that Muslims need to avoid. For Jalal 'All its seductiveness is false, like a cheap, fancy dress. Underneath, it's not such a turn-on.... The West isn't a suitable match for us.'⁵⁰

These misunderstandings will certainly lead to a clash of civilization that fundamentalists wish. Ironically the author describes it a funny way. 'Our streets are going to witness the greatest duel of all time: Sindbad against the Terminator.'⁵¹ However, the clash is also described in a very serious manner. From humiliation to hatred, to anger, national feelings and contexts are interwoven and find their climax in the fundamentalist rhetoric 'Peaceful coexistence is no longer possible...We're going to make them suffer for all the evil they've done to us.'⁵²

Samuel P. Huntington's clash of civilization sits comfortably in the midst of the US invasion of Iraq, the other Islamic countries, and in the recent events known as the 'Arab Spring'. The questions that arise after Huntington's prophecies are: what kind of relationship between the West and the East? Will it be the wealthy male domination of Salambo as imagined by Gustave Flaubert? The East sounds like a female, weak and sensitive. The clash is indeed reduced to wealth and poverty according to Jalal. 'The West isn't modern; it's rich. And the 'barbarians' aren't barbarians; they're poor people who don't have the wherewithal to modernize.'⁵³

The West has developed predatory instincts for survival. According to Edward Said, it is the result of a certain culture⁵⁴, and fundamentalists in our novel use it. 'They arrive here from an unjust, cruel universe with no humanity and no morals, where the powerful feed on the flesh of the downtrodden.'⁵⁵ Violence stems from the 'will to erase' the Other and his culture. There is no religious war or clash, but a political and power claim, and an identity claim. The author does not endorse the fundamentalist's theories. He does not share Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis's opinions about the clash. His unnamed protagonist does not fly to London but awakes just minutes before the flight. At the end of the novel, the call of love is stronger than the call of death as he remembers the young couple kissing at the airport 'They deserved to live for a thousand years. I have no right to challenge their kisses, scuttle their dreams, dash their hopes.'⁵⁶

Notes

- ¹ Yasmina Khadra. *The Sirens of Baghdad*. Trans. John Cullen (New York : Anchor books, 2008), 64
- ² *Ibid.*, 78
- ³ *Ibid.*, 116
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 05
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 180
- ⁶ J. Brooks Bouson. *The Empathic Reader : A Study of the Narcissistic Character and the Drama of the Self*. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 51
- ⁷ Yasmina Khadra. *The Sirens of Baghdad*, 64
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 64
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 60
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 177
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 79
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 88
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 115
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 115
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 52
- ²² *Ibid.*, 10
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 45
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 103
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 58
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 15
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 79
- ³² *Ibid.*, 33
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 163
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15
- ³⁵ Richard Hil and Michael Otterman. *Erasing Iraq, The Human Costs of Carnage*. (London: PlutoPress, 2010), 15

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- ³⁶ Bertrand Westphal. *Geocriticism, Real and Fictional Spaces*. Trans. Robert T. Tally Jr. (New York : Palgrave Macmillan , 2011), 195
- ³⁷ Yasmina Khadra. *The Sirens of Baghdad*, 43
- ³⁸ Ibid., 146
- ³⁹ Ibid., 146
- ⁴⁰ Bernard Lewis. *The End of Modern History in the Middle East*. (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 2011), 10
- ⁴¹ Yasmina Khadra. *The Sirens of Baghdad*, 11
- ⁴² Ibid., 103
- ⁴³ Ibid., 75
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 164
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 159
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 146
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 08
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 146
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 103
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 164
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 103
- ⁵² Ibid., 11
- ⁵³ Ibid., 162
- ⁵⁴ Edward Said. *Orientalism*. (London: Penguin Books, 1978, 2003), 07
- ⁵⁵ Yasmina Khadra. *The Sirens of Baghdad*, 103
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 180

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