

Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack*: A Feminist Reading

الهجوم لى ياسمينه خضرة: قراءة نسوية

L'attaque de Yasmina Khadra : Une lecture féministe

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Introduction

This article offers a feminist reading of Yasmina Khadra's *L'attentat* (2005, trans. *The Attack*, 2006). Khadra is one of the most influential Algerian authors, the pseudonym of Mohammed Moulessehoul, who created the pen name using his wife's two forenames. Bearing a woman's name, he was considered as a woman writer at the beginning of his literary career. After the publication of his autobiographical novel *L'Écrivain 'The Writer'* (2001), he unveiled his identity in an interview with *Le Monde des livres* in 2001. Yet, he continues to write under his pseudonym even after his true name is revealed. He justifies this deliberate choice by his aim to support women. In this sense, Khadra claims :

“I am proud to write under a woman's penname. It increases my self-esteem and places me on the same level as all of the women whom I love and admire : my wife, my mother, my daughters, my sisters, Hassiba Boulmerka...” (Khadra & Merahi, 2007, p. 19-20).

In spite of this supportive tone towards women, we suggest that *The Attack* projects a stereotypical depiction of one of his female characters, namely Sihem, the female terrorist in *The Attack*. Indeed, Khadra's novel presents Sihem as a vulnerable, manipulated, and an emotional woman. Her portrayal raises a lot of questions on Khadra's claimed feminist sympathies. Leaning on the Feminist criticism, we will attempt to demonstrate that Khadra presents Sihem with a controversial image. Indeed, Feminist criticism considers that literature most often frames stereotypes about women ; it investigates how literary works integrate patriarchal positions or subvert them. In this sense, Copeland (2000) defines feminist criticism as a

“heterogeneous grouping of scholars, writers, linguistics, philosophers, scientists, anthropologists, psychologists, educators, and peoples from all professions and walks of life who believe that women and men are equal. As a social movement, feminist

criticism highlights the various ways women, in particular, have been oppressed, suppressed, and repressed. It asks new questions of old texts. It develops and uncovers a female tradition in writing. It analyzes women writers and their works from female perspectives” (p. 184-186).

Feminist literary criticism takes its theoretical principles from feminist philosophy ; its foundational authors are numerous, from important works of female authors such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Cixous and many other feminist critics, and to current gender studies undertaken by ‘third wave’ authors. Various strands of feminism co-exist : liberal feminism, French feminism, postcolonial feminism, global feminism, and transnational feminism. In spite of the various patterns of the feminist criticism, most critics agree on some shared concerns. In this regard, Ann. B Dobie (2002) explains that these feminist critics

“analyze the male/female power structure that makes women the other (the inferior), and they reject it. They work to abolish limiting stereotypes of women. They seek to expose patriarchal premises and the prejudice they create.” (p.104) Kolodny (2001)

Also claims that feminist literary critics are united by their strong attachment to investigate “the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance : the consequences of that encoding for women - as characters, as readers, and as writers.” (p.13). These critics aim to study women stereotypical representation, and to fight it in order to highlight women’s creativity, achievements, and positive roles. This is precisely what the following work aims to accomplish, to study the representation of Sihem as a female terrorist in Khadra’s *The Attack*.

The novel portrays the aftermath of a suicide attack. It represents the ineffectiveness of violence through portraying the atrocities committed by Palestinians and Israelis in this wartime land. The novel recounts a suicide bombing in a Tel Aviv restaurant ; it is narrated by the bomber’s husband Amin Jaffari. The latter is an eminent surgeon, one of thousands Arabs who are enjoying Israeli citizenship. Nonetheless, they are not fully welcomed by Jewish society. Khadra’s protagonist sees his life radically transformed after the suicide bombing committed by his wife that ravaged the life of seventeen Israeli civilian victims. In spite of his wife’s extremist choice, Amin remains loyal to his humanist commitment as a surgeon ; his unique and ultimate choice is to save lives, not to destroy others. Therefore, the novel portrays the journey of discovery of Dr Amin Jaafari who embarks on an investigation process

throughout the novel to understand the reasons hidden behind his wife's suicide bombing.

As indicated above, what this study seeks to demonstrate is that Khadra presents the female protagonist, Sihem, with several stereotypical traits. Hence, she reacts impulsively as an emotional woman and commits her radical act ignoring the recommendations of her fundamentalist unit. Moreover, she is a character in absentia, speaking only through her husband's words throughout the novel. Amin incarnates a discourse of life and tolerance, whereas Sihem embodies a discourse of death and hatred. Finally, Amin views Sihem as a subordinate wife who is a captive of a male-centered discourse.

1. The Representation of the Female Terrorist in Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack*

In *The Attack*, Sihem is portrayed as the terrorist figure in Khadra's narrative ; she kills herself in a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv. She is represented as a suicide bomber who killed civilian victims, "among them eleven schoolchildren who were celebrating the birthday of one of their classmates in the fast-food restaurant where the bomb went off." (Khadra, 2006 :17-18) Therefore, Sihem's terrorist act in a Tel Aviv restaurant provokes a "veritable carnage." (Khadra, 2006 :13). In order to demonstrate the violent shock of the attack committed by Sihem, we refer to Amin's description of his wife's dead body :

This is horror in its most absolute ugliness...Only Sihem's head, strangely spared by the devastation that ravaged the rest of her body, emerges from the mass, the eyes closed, the mouth open a little, the features calm, as though liberated by her suffering... (Khadra, 2006 : 29).

In this perspective, Gardner (2011) claims that Sihem's violence is complex according to three important factors : she is a Palestinian who lives in Israel, she is a "non-practicing Muslim" (Gardner, 2011 : 5), and she enjoys a comfortable economic situation. In an attempt to explain his wife's extremist engagement, Amin claims, "Sihem must have carrying that hatred inside her forever, long before she met me." (Khadra, 2006 : 228). Amin's portrait of his wife undergoes many changes and becomes contradictory throughout the novel. Indeed, Sihem and Amin led a happy life in Israel due to their comfortable economic status. Yet, Sihem's radical act denotes that appearances can be illusory, and Amin discovers a completely different side to his wife's character.

1.1 Sihem's Silence

One strong example that demonstrates Khadra's stereotypical representation of Sihem is the fact that he silences Amin's wife in the text. Throughout the novel, Amin tells the story in his own voice. Sihem does not appear in the novel except through Amin and the other characters' memories and descriptions of her. Thus, she is a terrorist figure in absentia ; she is a silent character in the novel. The reader only knows of Sihem reactions, attitudes, and feelings thanks to a male voice. In a word, Amin is her spokesperson. Hence, Khadra chooses to 'silence' Sihem. In this regard, Laurence (1994) suggests that women silence, from the patriarchal perspective, stands for "an absence and powerlessness" (p.157) of women because of the restricted space devoted to women in the public sphere. Apart from her last letter sent to Amin, she remains silent throughout the novel. In her letter, she writes the following poignant words to Amin :

"What use is happiness when it's not shared, Amin, my love ?
My joys faded away every time yours didn't follow. You wanted
children. I wanted to deserve them. No child is completely safe
if it has no country. Don't hate me. Sihem" (Khadra, 2006 : 69).

So, the readers of the novel cannot discover more on the 'silent' protagonist without the 'narrative mediation' provided by Amin, he shapes his description on what he 'thinks' Sihem 'might be'. Therefore, Amin, as a lover husband, speaks about Sihem with his personal feelings and emotions. This is especially true at the beginning of Khadra's novel, but his love and consideration will take place later on in the novel to sentiments of frustration, treason, and disappointment.

1.2 Sihem's Impulsive Reaction

Sihem impulsive's reaction against Israel is another example of a stereotypical depiction of women in Khadra's narrative. Sihem is described as an emotional woman who cannot control her emotions and grief. Adel informs Amin that Sihem was one of the most important members of the group, she was determined to fulfill her radical act in spite of Sheikh Marwan's and Adel's dissuading attempts. Hence, Sihem's act was committed on impulse without listening to the multiple advices of her immediate environment. Khadra presents Sihem as an 'emotional' and 'instinctive' woman who acts without thinking about the consequences of her decision. Instead of privileging a deep thinking about her future act, she prefers to follow blindly her anti-Israeli sentiment. Therefore, humiliation, misery, and hatred urge Sihem to act and react against Israel's violence. When Sihem learns to hate, she activates her

radical vision and engages herself in a crusade against Israel's oppression. More significantly, the idea that women are more emotional than men is considered as one of the dominant stereotypes activated against women according to many feminist critics. In this regard, Shields (2002) considers this view as the "master stereotype" (p.11) (emphasis ours) for the reason that "it serves as an overarching organizing principle for other related beliefs." (p.3). In this perspective, Victoria L.Brescoll (2016) explains that : "women may be labeled as more emotional than men in large part because they are seen as less able to control the outward display of their emotions compared to men." (p.417). In other terms, Sihem as a woman lacks emotional control, whereas Sheikh Marwan and Adel, as two male characters ; succeed to control their emotions and anger throughout their radical engagement.

The next stereotypical feature about Sihem is her embodiment of the idea of death. What is contented here is that Sihem as a woman incarnates a discourse of death, whereas Amin as a man embodies a discourse of life. This binary opposition reflects Khadra's negative representation of Sihem. As a surgeon, Amin chooses life and rejects any form of violence. During his long journey, Amine is portrayed as being a 'secular man' and a non-violent figure (McManus, 2013 : 92) who expresses "equal delight" when he contemplates Jerusalem's monuments to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Khadra, 2006 : 142). Most importantly, he stands out from the Israeli-Palestinian struggle and he is against any form of violence. He rejects "policies requiring armed struggle and sermons based on hatred" (Khadra, 2006 : 142). His quest for the truth reveals him to be a profoundly humanist man who diffuses a message of peace and tolerance. However, Sihem chooses death and violence in order to avenge 'her' people. Amin explains that Sihem chooses death over life and dreams : "when dreams are turned away, death becomes the ultimate salvation. Sihem understood this."(Khadra, 2006 : 220).

1.3. Manipulation

Apart from considering women prone to violence, Khadra's novel develops another stereotype about women, who are, in his view, easily manipulated. In the novel, Sihem is easily influenced by the fundamentalist organization because she is a woman ; she is presented as a vulnerable character. After discovering Bethlehem's background, Amin is still convinced that Sihem "was brainwashed rather than willing to take part in the plot. Amin prefers to view Sihem as a victim instead of a representative of a cruel Other." (Mohamad, 2015 : 289). In this sense, Amin tells Kim that "they killed my wife." (Khadra, 2006 : 143-44).

Therefore, Sihem receives a psychological training by the Palestinian group to be a martyr and to abandon her 'first' life. In other words, Amin believes that Sihem was not the same woman anymore. At the beginning of his investigation, he accuses religious fundamentalism, and does not put the blame on his wife. According to Amin, Sihem was trapped in a spiral of violence, he considers his wife as being not responsible for her decisions. This is the reason why, he wants to look for "who indoctrinated [his] wife who strapped explosives on her and sent her to her target." (Khadra, 2006 : 102). At the end, Amin's nephew, Adel, informs his uncle that "the cell put her to the test, and she convinced them." (Khadra, 2006 : 225). After a process of radicalization, Sihem is integrated as a new member of the terrorist organization.

2. Women and Sacrifice

The other predominant stereotype circulating about women in Khadra's novel is the view that Sihem incarnates the idea of female sacrifice in *The Attack*. In fact, Sihem sacrifices her family and her life for the Palestinian cause by choosing to commit a massacre. Her sacrifice is considered as a typical woman act. This idea echoes Renee Lee Gardner's (2011) argument that "the act of sacrifice is offered up as a thing "women" do." (p.6). Sihem's radical choice reflects a 'feminized' readiness for sacrifice. For instance, Amin is told, "Sihem was a woman, not just your woman. She died for others." (Khadra, 2006, p. 226). Khadra's deliberate choice of a female suicide bomber may be explained by the tendency to consider women more inclined to acts of sacrifice in comparison to men. In doing so, Sihem "understands her own, gendered role to be one of surrender, and she adheres to that role above the "desire of freedom" she is expected—according to the tenets of Western feminism—to value most." (Gardner, 2011 : 6) (emphasis ours). In other terms, these gendered notions of sacrifice are easily identified with a female character, who sacrifices her existence to the fight of her nation. In this perspective, the following excerpt from Virginia Woolf's essay 'The Angel in the House' reminds us Sihem's sacrifice :

"She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult art of family's life. She sacrificed herself easily daily. If there was chicken she took the leg : if there was a draught she sat in it- in short she was constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. " (Cawston and Archer, 2018 : 460).

In the same manner, Sihem sacrifices her life for the Palestinian people. Therefore, for feminist critics this "self-sacrificial ideal is both a symptom of

and a contributing factor to the continued domination of women.” (Cawston and Archer, 2018 : 460).

Conclusion

What emerges from the analysis of Khadra’s supposedly stereotypical representation of Sihem is that she is the captive of a male-centered discourse. Amin views Sihem as an unsuccessful wife who betrays her marital engagement. In fact, Amin’s ultimate objective, as a husband, is not to help the police investigation progress, or to go to Bethlehem to help dismantle the terrorist organization, but his unique aim is to discover why Sihem hides her radical engagement to him. Therefore, he reacts as an affected husband who is betrayed by his wife. He considers Sihem’s attack as a personal case, not a political affair. His Israeli friend Kim reminds Amin “the case is not personal.” (Khadra, 2006 : 103). However, Amin is convinced that it is an ‘ordinary’ husband/wife relationship interrupted by his wife’s autonomous desire to live the family for a personal engagement. He confesses that he is “more furious about not having seen anything coming than I am about all the rest.” (Khadra, 2006 : 156). In doing so, Sihem is disloyal to the institution of marriage. Amin as a husband is the ‘tutor’ of Sihem, he has some duties toward his wife. “My duty was to protect her. I was her husband.” (Khadra, 2006, p. 105). Amin is strongly disappointed by his wife choice ; he is “like a man who works and slaves to make life as pleasant as possible for the woman he loves, while she’s cheating on him the whole time.” (Khadra, 2006 : 122). As the story progresses, his vocabulary becomes more virulent toward his wife. Amin expresses his disillusion and sorrow in the following passage : “Sihem seems like the worst slut in the world. I have to know which of us sinned against the other.” (Khadra, 2006 : 144).

For Amin, Sihem fails to be a good wife. Amin’s frustration of a neglected wife changed his opinion about Sihem, he regrets the manner that he idealized her. According to Amin, she did not deserve idealization and consideration. He admits that Sihem “was my canvas, my chief dedication. I saw only the joy she gave me and never suspected any of her sorrows, any of her weaknesses...I would have idealized her less and isolated her less...” (Khadra, 2006 : 184). In one of Amin’s conversations with the commander of Sihem’s fundamentalist group, the commander clarifies to his interlocutor that Sihem has her own reasons why she did not want to confide in him. Then, Amin answers furiously :

She had obligations toward me. A wife can’t deceive her husband like that. Not this husband , in any case. I never wronged her in any way. And it was my life she blew into smithereens, too, not just hers. My life and the lives of

seventeenth people she'd never met. And you ask me why I want to know? Well, I want to know everything. I want to know the whole truth. (Khadra, 2006 : 159).

Thus, Amin's pride as a husband has been wounded ; he confronts Sihem's marital failure with his masculinity in order to maintain his honor intact. In this regard, Lina Mohamed (2015) claims "Amin's quest for the truth about Sihem is an attempt to re-establish his masculinity – he desires to avenge the slight to his honour."(p.293). To say it more explicitly, Amin endorses a male-centered discourse by emphasizing that wives are accountable to their husbands. In doing so, he manifests his male dominance over his wife.

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Abstract

This article offers a feminist reading of one contemporary Algerian novel, namely, Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack* (2005). What the following study seeks to demonstrate is that Khadra's stereotypical portrayal of the female protagonist, Sihem, is built on a set of clichés. One pertinent example that illustrates this prejudicial depiction is that she reacts impulsively as an emotional woman and commits her radical act ignoring the recommendations of her fundamentalist unit. In addition to this emotional dimension, the juxtaposition of two discourses is also given much prominence in the text. In other terms, Sihem's husband, Amin, incarnates a discourse of life and tolerance, whereas she embodies a discourse of death and hatred. Most importantly, she is a character in *absentia*, speaking only through Amin's words throughout the novel.

Keywords

Yasmina Khadra's *The Attack* ; feminist criticism ; terrorism ; the "female terrorist".

Résumé

Cet article présente une lecture féministe du roman *L'attentat* de Yasmina Khadra. Ce que l'étude suivante cherche à démontrer, c'est que la représentation stéréotypée du personnage féminin, Sihem, est élaborée autour d'un ensemble de clichés. Un exemple pertinent qui illustre cette représentation préjudiciable concerne la réaction impulsive et émotive de Sihem en commettant son acte meurtrier sans obtempérer aux multiples recommandations de son unité terroriste. En plus de cette dimension émotionnelle, la juxtaposition de deux discours est également mise en valeur dans le texte où Amin incarne un discours de tolérance, alors que sa femme, Sihem, véhicule un discours de haine. En dernier lieu, Sihem est réduite au silence par l'auteur en étant un personnage *in absentia*, ne parlant que par l'intermédiaire de son mari tout au long du roman.

Mots-clés

Yasmina Khadra's *L'attentat*, critique féministe, terrorisme, femme terroriste.

مستخلص

يتناول هذا المقال التمثيل الأنثى الإرهابية في رواية ياسمين خضرا "الاعتداء". ما تسعى الدراسة التالية لإثباته هو أن تصوير خضرا النمطي للبطل الأنثى، سهام، مبني على مجموعة من الأفكار النمطية. أحد الأمثلة ذات الصلة التي توضح هذا الوصف الضار هو أن سهام تتفاعل بشكل متهور بصفتها امرأة عاطفية وترتكب فعلها الراديكالي متجاهلة توصيات وحدتها الأصولية. بالإضافة إلى هذا البعد العاطفي،

فإن تجاوز خطابين لهما أهمية كبيرة في النص. بعبارة أخرى، يجسد زوج سهام، أمين، خطاب الحياة والتسامح، في حين أنها تجسد خطاب الموت والكراهية. الأهم من ذلك، سهام تمثل شخصية صامتة تتحدث فقط من خلال كلمات أمين طوال الرواية.

كلمات مفتاحية

النقد النسوي، التمثيل الأنثى الإرهابية، الأفكار النمطية. ياسمينة خضرا "الاعتداء"