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Rituals of Algerian Novel Writing in Exile: Yasmina Khadra's In the Name of God as a Case Study — Between the Tide of Origin and the Ebb of Residence —

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Abstract

Identity has become a central concept in contemporary scholarship because of the major role it plays in defining societies and cultures. Without a clear sense of identity, society risks becoming a silent signifier without meaning. Algerian literature in general, and the novel in particular, is among the forms that seek to illuminate and preserve national identity. Yasmina Khadra's *In the Name of God* offers a significant example. The novel represents Algeria through events rooted in its social and political environment. Although Khadra resides in France and writes in French, his fiction remains closely connected to Algeria, his country of origin. This study examines a set of tensions that structure this writing: origin and residence, Algeria and France, self and other, and Arabic and French. Together, these oppositions contribute to the formation of an Algerian cultural consciousness. The study asks how the duality of origin and residence appears in *In the Name of God* and how identity is represented in the novel. It first considers features of Khadra's writing in exile. It then analyzes identity through three narrative components: space, time, and character. The study concludes by assessing the extent to which the novelist succeeds in representing the identity of his country of origin through the language of his country of residence.

Keywords: Identity; Algerian Novel; Exile Literature; Yasmina Khadra; *In the Name of God*.

Introduction

The concept of identity continues to gain prominence in contemporary studies and research. This interest reflects the growing role that identity plays in shaping different aspects of life. It is also one of the major intellectual, philosophical, and existential questions addressed by modern scholarship. The crises and ideological conflicts of the present have made the concept increasingly broad and difficult to define. No individual can fully detach from identity because it represents the spirit of a nation and a sign of its existence. A nation derives many of its basic components from it. As one definition states, the identity of the individual appears in "belief, gender, land, language, culture, civilization, history, collective spirit, the authentic essence of the national entity, and shared interests" (1). Identity therefore cannot be reduced to language, ethnicity, or geographical space. It has both material and symbolic dimensions.

Identity forms part of the basis on which a community is built. It also informs the discourses through which that community expresses itself. The novel is especially important in this respect because identity often becomes part of its narrative material and structural foundation. Identity therefore remains an open question in fiction. It appears through recurrent oppositions such as origin/branch, self/other, self/otherness, stability/change, homeland/non-homeland, and Arabic/French. These tensions frequently provide the novel with part of its meaning and movement.

The Algerian novel written in exile has generated sustained debate within literary studies. This is partly due to the creative richness associated with Francophone Algerian literature. The tradition passed through several stages before its major figures became internationally known. These include Assia Djebar, Mouloud Mammeri, Mouloud Feraoun, Mohammed Dib, and Yasmina Khadra. Khadra has contributed a large body of work to Algerian literature written abroad. *In the Name of God* is the primary text examined in this study.

The present article investigates the identity of Algerian literature in exile through the dialectic of origin and residence. It searches for traces of the self and the homeland within the signs and structures of the novel. It addresses three main questions: How is the duality of origin and residence represented in *In the Name of God*? What are the principal manifestations of identity in the novel? To what extent does Yasmina Khadra represent the suffering of Algerian citizens during the events associated with the 1990s? The discussion is organized around two main areas: the relationship between identity and literature in exile, and the manifestations of identity in the novel through space, time, and character.

The Dialectic of Identity and Literature in Exile Identity

Identity is one of the most widely discussed concepts in contemporary research. It has attracted considerable attention because it intersects with many areas of individual and collective life. Definitions differ according to scholarly method, discipline, and ideological frame. As one source observes, “every attempt to provide a clear and final definition of identity that satisfies psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists will remain futile” (2). The concept therefore continues to invite inquiry and interpretation.

Despite these differences, many definitions converge on the idea that identity is “the self within a socio-cultural situation, as well as an extension through time that brings together the experiences lived by the individual across the course of psychological, mental, and emotional development when those experiences become mechanisms and dynamics of the self” (3). Identity can therefore be understood as the image of the individual within a given culture and as the accumulation of knowledge and experience acquired over time. Together, these elements form a distinctive mode of existence.

Literature in Exile

Literature in exile is one of the literary experiences that seeks to communicate a human world that extends beyond a single national setting. The writer may transmit the culture of the country of origin through the language of the country of residence. In doing so, local experience can enter a wider cultural space. A Francophone novelist such as Yasmina Khadra aims to “criticize human folly and the culture of violence, and to speak about the beauty and charm of his motherland, Algeria, but also about the madness that spreads everywhere through fear and the sale of conscience under the pretext of religion, leaving behind pools of blood” (4). The writer thus transfers human experience and aspects of everyday life from a national context into a broader literary sphere.

The relationship between Algerian literature in exile and identity is a contentious question that calls for close analysis. Two broad positions can be distinguished. The first holds that literature written abroad can express the identity of the country of origin. The second considers this claim problematic and argues that only the language of origin can fully convey the deeper experience of the people. Each position has its own arguments. This disagreement has contributed to the conceptual openness that surrounds identity.

Algerian literature in exile, like Algerian literature more generally, carries the concerns of the homeland. It reflects anxieties shared by writers living in Algeria and communicates the concerns of Algerian society. It also assumes a role in defending national experience. This became particularly visible after the colonial period, when French was used as a medium through which revolutionary and anti-colonial messages could be conveyed. As one study notes, “Algerian novelists found themselves confronting the language of the stronger side at that time. French became their means of addressing that side under the conditions imposed by colonialism on Arabic as the mother tongue” (5). Several factors helped consolidate this linguistic situation.

First, some writers defended the use of French because scientific and cultural openness should not be restricted to a single language, regardless of its origin (6). Cultural exchange requires engagement with several languages. Communicating local experience and opening dialogue with others therefore involves knowledge of their languages.

Second, French colonialism left a cultural and linguistic project that encouraged the consolidation of French in Algeria. One cited view argues that French should become the language of the elite and the language used in international forums, while bilingualism should be promoted in the Maghreb (7). From the perspective adopted in the source, this policy represented a form of linguistic domination directed against Arabic. The argument rests on the assumption that weakening Arabic also weakens an important component of national identity.

Third, another explanation links the use of French to an attempt to escape a difficult Arab and Algerian reality. The source describes this as an “escape from a dark, backward, and dominant reality that led people to lose confidence in themselves, their nation, their history, their civilization, their culture, their language, and everything connected with our collapsing world, through flight from the language of origin and attachment to the language of the other” (8). In this view, speakers turn toward other languages in search of possibilities that they feel are unavailable through Arabic. Such practices can be observed in contemporary media, economics, politics, and literature. The novel in exile is particularly significant because it often adopts French as its primary linguistic system. *In the Name of God* provides an example through which the presence of the Algerian self can be examined beneath the surface of French expression (9).

Manifestations of Identity in the Novel

Khadra’s text seeks to express the Algerian self through the language of the other. French becomes a bridge for communicating Algerian aspirations, concerns, and collective anxieties. Through French, the writer attempts to express the inner life of an Arabic-speaking people. He thus joins those authors who live within “a clear cultural duality: the culture of the country in which they were born and to which they belong, and the culture of the country whose language they find

themselves speaking or which they choose as a place of exile” (10). The resulting text contains an encounter, and at times a struggle, between languages and cultures: the culture of the self and that of the other.

This tension raises a basic question. If the language of a community is considered the vessel of its culture, how should Francophone Algerian literature be understood? Can French contain and communicate the experience of Algerian society? These questions have generated extensive debate. They remain difficult because both language and identity are fluid concepts.

In the Name of God is a novel that both attracts and unsettles the reader. Its narrative develops around a tragic reality experienced by Algerian society. Khadra draws on elements of that reality and transforms them into fiction. The Arabic edition used in this study runs to 264 pages. The novel addresses the violence of Algeria’s Black Decade. It also evokes the political climate that emerged from the October 1988 unrest and the subsequent rise of Islamist movements. The text raises questions related to the homeland, authority, religion, and violence.

The story centers on several men in the Algerian village of Ghachimat, including Allal Sidhom, a police officer, Kada Hilal, a teacher, and Jafer Wahab. Their relationships are shaped in part by their desire to marry Sarah, the daughter of the mayor. In the article’s interpretation, the male characters come to represent different political tendencies, while Sarah symbolically evokes Algeria itself. The narrative later gives greater prominence to Sheikh Abbas after his return from prison. A radical religious network begins to take shape. After failing to marry Sarah, Kada leaves to join the jihad in Afghanistan. He later returns to the village and assumes a position of leadership. Violence escalates and massacres follow. Teachers, children, and other villagers are killed by terrorist groups. Allal and his wife are also targeted in revenge. The novel closes with police and security raids and large-scale search operations in the area.

The Structure and Significance of the Title

The title is the first threshold through which the reader enters the unknown world of a text. It functions as a key for interpreting meaning. It is also “one of the most distinctive features of the book as a whole, since the book, as a commodity, is identified by a linguistic sign created to designate it” (11). The writer invests the title with semantic and aesthetic energy. It can therefore become a discourse in its own right, closely connected with the body of the text. The title precedes the text and continues to shape interpretation after the reading is complete.

The original French title, *Les Agneaux du Seigneur*, translated into English as *In the Name of God*, is closely connected with religious heritage and with the story of sacrifice. In the reading proposed by this article, the “lambs” refer to victims of terrorism during Algeria’s years of violence. The term carries strong religious associations. The novel enters into intertextual dialogue with the Qur’anic story of Abraham and his son. One character asks: “Do you know why God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son?” (12). The article then recalls Qur’an 37:102: “My son, I saw in a dream that I should sacrifice you. Tell me what you think.” The son answers that his father should do what he has been commanded and that, God willing, he will remain patient (13). The interaction between the novel and the Qur’anic narrative demonstrates the writer’s awareness of the cultural and religious memory of his country of origin. It also frames the novel’s violence through a symbolic language familiar to Algerian readers.

Space

Contemporary criticism gives considerable importance to space because it is one of the main foundations of narrative fiction. Space is not simply a container in which events occur. It performs functions within the narrative and interacts with time, character, description, and other elements of storytelling. It can also give fiction a strong sense of realism because it connects the literary text with a recognizable social world.

In *In the Name of God*, descriptions of villages, houses, streets, and interiors allow the reader to enter the material environment of the story. The house and its organization, for example, can suggest the culture, social position, and habits of its inhabitants. Space therefore exceeds its traditional geographical function and acquires cultural, existential, and ideological meaning. This is particularly clear when the locations and events in the novel are inspired by recognizable aspects of Algerian reality.

The Village of Ghachimat

Ghachimat is the central setting of the novel. At first, it appears as a peaceful Algerian village and as the world to which the characters belong. One statement in the text captures this attachment: “This village is the only country we possess, and our only homeland is our family” (14). Khadra depicts the rhythms of rural life in detail and records the ordinary routines of the inhabitants. The village initially functions as a space of familiarity and belonging.

Its meaning changes as the crisis intensifies. Ghachimat becomes a site of massacres in which farmers, teachers, shepherds, night guards, and children are killed with extreme brutality (15). The physical place remains the same, but its symbolic meaning changes. Space acquires its semiotic value from the events that occur within it and from the behavior of the characters who occupy it.

The novelist contrasts everyday life before the crisis with the violence that follows. Through this movement, the village becomes a condensed image of the wider Algerian experience during the Black Decade. Ghachimat is therefore not only a fictional location. Within the article’s reading, it also functions as a representative space through which the national crisis is narrated.

The House

The house is another major space in the narrative. Khadra often relies on description to present its architecture, internal arrangement, location, and relation to its inhabitants. These details give the house cultural and social meaning. For this reason, critics have emphasized the importance of examining all parts of the house and the meanings associated with them if it is to be studied in its full complexity (16).

Khadra gives this space particular attention. Allal Sidhoum's house is described as standing at the edge of the village, partly hidden among prickly pears. It is a modest dwelling with damaged walls, a heavy metal door, and a neglected courtyard lit by a weak public lamp. Inside, a simple bedside table carries a framed photograph of Allal in his security-service uniform (17). The public writer's house is described differently. It lies behind a row of carob trees, neither fully attached to the village buildings nor entirely isolated in the fields. Its position suggests a deliberate middle ground (18). The interior is orderly, clean, and ventilated. A curtain divides the space between the kitchen and the room, while shelves of books occupy much of one wall. Old black-and-white photographs hang on pale walls (19).

Such detailed descriptions reveal the close relationship between characters and domestic space. The house helps shape the reader's understanding of its inhabitants. Traditional forms of housing, including modest rural structures, also reflect the difficult social conditions experienced by many Algerian families during the 1990s, especially in villages and rural areas. The house therefore becomes more than a geographical location. It carries an ideological and cultural dimension. As one critical formulation suggests, "if you describe the house, you describe the person. Houses express their owners, and they affect the people who are required to live in them" (20). The house thus has a double function. It shelters and conceals its inhabitants, but it also reveals aspects of their social position, culture, and worldview.

The Mosque

The mosque initially carries a clear religious meaning. It signals that the village is Muslim and provides a place for worship, prayer, and religious teaching. The narrative, however, changes this function. The mosque also becomes a place where people are exploited and extremist ideas are promoted in the name of religion.

The novel refers to other places drawn from the Algerian environment, including Algiers, Sidi Bel Abbès, Oran, Sétif, and Biskra. These recognizable locations strengthen the realism of the narrative and make the fictional world appear close to historical documentation. They encourage the reader to perceive the novel as a literary reconstruction of real events.

Space therefore does not merely contain events. It contributes to their development, reveals dimensions of character, and helps interpret the narrative. Some critics consequently argue that "space is the identity of the literary work; if spatiality is lost, the work loses its particularity and therefore its authenticity" (21). Space is thus central both to the construction of the text and to the reader's interpretation of it.

Time

Time is inseparable from existence, life, the present, and the past. It is a structural foundation of narrative fiction. A novel cannot be imagined without temporal organization because storytelling depends on the ordering and reordering of events. Novelists often reconstruct earlier historical moments and reshape them through narrative. The novel has therefore been described as "the only form capable of capturing time and representing it in its various mythological, historical, and philosophical manifestations" (22).

A close reading of *In the Name of God* reveals recognizable historical events and temporal references. Khadra does not present them as a simple chronicle. He reshapes them through literary form and uses temporal shifts to interrupt linearity, sustain suspense, and challenge the reader's expectations.

Narrative time is commonly divided into two categories. The first includes external times outside the text, such as the time of writing, the time of reading, and the relation between the book and the historical period about which it is written. The second includes internal times within the text, such as the historical period of the story, the duration of events, and the succession of chapters (23).

External Time

External time refers to the circumstances surrounding the literary work and can be considered through several dimensions.

The writer's time. The original French novel, *Les Agneaux du Seigneur*, was published in 1998. The Arabic translation cited in this study appeared in 2009. The novel draws on Algerian reality and forms part of the French-language literature concerned with the national crisis, sometimes described as "emergency literature."

The reader's time. A reader in the past is not the same as a reader in 2016, the temporal point from which the article was written. Each reader approaches events through a particular historical and ideological background. An Algerian reader may enter the text with memories, assumptions, and cultural references shaped by national belonging. Because society changes, the reader's interpretation also changes with time and context.

Historical time. This refers to the broader historical framework that inspires the narrative. Khadra draws on the crisis experienced by Algeria. The relation between fiction and reality allows historical events to become material for literary construction.

The present study focuses mainly on external time because it more directly reflects the conditions through which national identity is represented. Internal narrative time is more closely connected with fictional arrangement, including the disruption of chronology and the reordering of the story.

Character

Character is one of the central structures of narrative fiction. Characters carry social, intellectual, political, and religious affiliations. As one critic states, “the persons in a story are the center of human meanings and the axis of general ideas and opinions ... and their source is reality” (24). Because of this role, the novelist’s choice of characters is closely related to the story and to the functions those characters are expected to perform.

In *In the Name of God*, characters are not presented only as individual names. Within the article’s interpretation, they also represent political and ideological tendencies. Kada and Abbas, for example, are associated with the Islamist current. Sheikh Abbas is described as a young man who, from the age of seventeen, delivered sermons in major mosques, possessed extensive religious knowledge, developed powerful oratory, and denounced corruption and representatives of authority (25). The discussion of these characters therefore becomes a discussion of a political tendency that sought power in Algeria during the period represented in the novel.

Allal, the police officer, represents another side of the conflict. The article reads his position in relation to the other characters as part of a broader struggle over power and authority. The selection of fictional characters is thus connected with “the dominance of the historical and social tendency on the one hand, and the dominance of political ideology on the other” (26). Khadra takes the Algerian uprising of October 1988 and its consequences as part of the historical background of the novel. Through Ghachimat, he depicts conflict, radicalization, and the bloody violence that later marked the national crisis.

The Significance of Character Names

The choice of names is an important element in fictional characterization. A name is not necessarily assigned at random. It may be selected according to the function performed by a character within the narrative. In *In the Name of God*, names such as Allal, Kada, and Abbas are distinctly Arabic and local. This is consistent with the national character of the events and with the Algerian setting of the novel.

The names also interact with cultural connotations. Abbas, for example, is commonly associated in Arabic naming traditions with meanings of strength and courage. The article links these meanings with the novel’s description of Sheikh Abbas at the age of twenty-five. His repeated periods in prison have marked his face with a form of spiritual authority, while the narrative presents him as an imposing figure whom the prisons of the regime have failed to tame (27). The article therefore sees a correspondence between the semantic associations of the name and the character’s fictional construction.

A similar point is made about Kada, whose name is connected in the article with the Arabic root meaning to lead or command. In one passage, Kada Hilal is angry and paces roughly across the floor of the hut that serves as his headquarters on the summit of Jabal al-Khawf, the “Mountain of Fear” (28). The name can therefore help the reader interpret the character’s position within the narrative. More generally, names may “explain the nature of the fictional character, clarify his position on the social ladder, indicate his relation to the fictional event in which he appears, and reveal his ideological inclination and direction” (29).

Modern criticism has often described fictional characters as textual or “paper” beings. Such a view is useful in emphasizing the constructed nature of narrative. Yet the article argues that this position should not obscure the social and reformatory function of realist literature. *In the Name of God* draws heavily on a historical reality experienced by Algeria during the 1990s. Its characters can therefore be read both as artistic constructions and as elements in a fictional representation of a collective crisis.

Conclusion

This study has examined *In the Name of God* through three major narrative signs: space, time, and character. These elements help communicate the message and purpose that the article identifies in Khadra’s novel. The rural Algerian setting carries clear cultural meanings. The narrative also reflects the violence and fear associated with Algeria’s Black Decade in the 1990s. Characters are assigned distinct social and ideological roles, and several of them are interpreted as representing competing political tendencies.

Through this framework, the novel approaches the Algerian crisis and attempts to depict a society living under fear and violence. Khadra transforms this reality into literary writing that moves beyond a purely local frame. His work has reached an international readership and, as the source article notes, has been translated into more than thirty languages. The analysis therefore presents French as a medium through which the novelist communicates the experience and identity of his country of origin to a wider readership.

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