

Ayo Onatade

Crime fiction and Algeria are not generally synonymous and while Albert Camus maybe at the present time be one of the few Algerian writers to gain recognition, Algeria does have at least another writer whose works are certainly worth reading for a number of reasons.

Yasmina Khadra may be a female name, but it is also the pseudonym of Mohammed Moulesshoui a former high-ranking counter-terrorism officer who survived the vicious Algerian Civil War of the 1950s. He took the nom de plume in an effort to avoid Algerian censors who (when he wrote his police procedurals) were demanding that prior to publications that the manuscripts be presented to the Algerian military authorities. Khadra had already had six books published before the authorities decreed that his work had to be sent to the military censors. The name Yasmina Khadra is in fact that of his wife who persuaded him to use it. It was with the publication of his memoir *L'Écrivain (The Writer)*, that Khadra revealed his identity.

There have been a number of complaints that Khadra cannot and should not be seen as a dissident despite the politics evident in his books. Why? Could it be because he was brought up by the army from a young age? Alternatively, could it be that his novels just happen to deal in grisly detail the savage civil war that has pitted Islamic fundamentalists against the Algerian backed government? In *L'Imposture des Mots (The Deception of Words)*, a non-fiction book Khadra explains how he became a writer. Khadra has had a long-standing interest in politics, which is of course heavily reflected in his novels. So far, Khadra has written 18 books with a number of them having been translated into English.

The first of Khadra's books to be published in English was *Les Agneaux Du Seigneur* under the title *In the Name of God*. Originally published in French in 1998 and in English in March 2001 the novel illustrates the way in which evil can become part of everyday life. Khadra paints an intimate picture of village life with a savage twist. Written before the Taliban decided to dispose of all religious icons it is as if Khadra was being prophetic as in the novel *In the Name of God* the radical Islamists devastate an ancient temple regardless of the attempts of Dactylo (the town letter writer) to deter them from this brutal behaviour. The politicians in the novel are not only venal but also obtuse while the Islamists make revenge seem to be an everyday episode. In the novel, it is not uncommon for the betrayal of all and sundry to take place on a recurring basis. For one to get so used to the terror that takes place that any fear that one might have is replaced by complacency as a result of the lack of compassion and indifference results in it becoming the norm. It is not long before people begin to see the attacks as having flair; the murders that take place are a gripping recklessness. What emerges from *In the Name of God* is a sleepy village that finds itself under siege from radical fundamentalist Islamists. When Kada Hilal returns after being on a jihad in Afghanistan, he launches a reign of terror not only against women not wearing a veil but also "European" Algerians and those whom he considered to be traitors. His brutal and vindictive action concludes in not only the kidnapping of a senior village Imam but also his beheading. Religion is used as an excuse to prolong the bloodshed.

*In the Name of God* is not the only book by Khadra to look at the rise of radical Islam in Algeria. The second book to do so was *Wolf Dreams (or The Dreams of Wolves)* as it is also known. Originally published in 1999 in French as *A quoi rêvent les loups* and in 2003 by Toby Press *Wolf Dreams* tells the tale of a disillusioned handsome young man once found in the company of poets and having dreams of both fame and fortune in the movie business turning into a brutal killer. The young man in question Nafa Walid hopes to become a successful actor but starts to lose his hold on his dream and fate as he finds himself drawn irrevocably into the Algerian Islamic fundamentalist movement. Walid's life begins to unravel when he becomes chauffeur to a very rich family and despite his attempts not to do so he soon finds himself embroiled in an extremely nasty murder. His efforts to use his payoff to his own advantage in the film world disintegrate.

*Wolf Dreams* shows how discontent and disenchantment not only encourages fundamentalism. Added to the chaos of a civil war it is not surprising a supposedly normal well adjusted middle-class young man can become a

programmed killer; someone who is quiet content to inflict pain and terror on others with very little thought of the effect and his own immortality. At the end of this book, the reader is left wondering rather sadly, how this once innocent young man finds himself knee-deep in such brutality. While the reader may ponder this, Khadra on the other hand has not really bothered to delve into too much detail preferring to concentrate on Walid's moral psychology as it interacts with his involvement with Islamic terrorism. These novels that have chronicled the rise of radical Islamic fundamentalism in Algiers are thought provoking, gritty and immersed in local familiarity.

The first in a trilogy of Khadra's books to examine the brutality of Afghanistan under the reign of the Taliban is *The Swallows of Kabul* or *Les hirondelles de Kaboul* as it is known in French. Set outside Algiers the reader is brought into the lives of two very different couples who live near one another. On the one hand, we have Moshen and Zunaira Ramat. Moshen from a wealthy family of shopkeepers destroyed by the Taliban and Zunaira a talented former teacher who (to her chagrin) is no longer allowed to leave her home without being covered with a burqa and without an escort. Moshen once had dreams of being a diplomat while his wife a Magistrate. On the other, there is Atiq Shaukat a loutish Taliban prison keeper who has religiously adopted the ideology of the Taliban but struggles to remain within his faith along with his wife Musarrat who saved his life but is now dying. Both couples find themselves smothered by Muslim fundamentalism. Moshen who has become so dulled by the daily incidents of brutality one day finds himself wandering dissolutely amongst the devastated streets of Kabul and participating in the stoning of a prostitute. His confession to his wife strains and subsequently leads to the breakdown of their already tense and fragile marriage. Atiq who is also losing his grasp on reality speculates as to whether his continuous contact with the condemned is also making him consider the worthiness of his own life. As he begins to lose his sanity he meets and falls in love with Zunaira after she is arrested and charged with the murder of her husband after a tragic but physical argument. *The Swallows of Kabul* is a harrowing novel that tugs at the readers thoughts constantly. It depicts in detail the results of individual choices along with the irrationality of daily life under the Taliban. Khadra has managed to give readers a tangible look at what life was really like under the reign of the Taliban. For some *The Swallows of Kabul* may be too harsh in its portrayal but this has not stopped its chilling impact. The characters are powerfully drawn along with their environment. This is not an easy book to read but it certainly is a compelling one.

*The Swallows of Kabul* was short-listed for the 2006 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. It was also chosen as the best book of the year in 2005 by the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Christian Science Monitor* it was also one of the American Library Awards notable books in 2005.

*The Attack* or *L'attentat* is the second book in the trilogy and once again is set outside Algiers. *The Attack* is very prophetic and examines the peculiar world of the suicide bomber. The main protagonist in this novel is Dr Amin Jaafe, an Arab Israeli surgeon who is dedicated to his work in a Tel Aviv hospital. His integration has brought him respect and admiration from his colleagues and within his community. Narrated by Dr Jaafe, this is a heart-rending tale of someone who gave up all his views political and religious in order to remain above the fray. That being said, the book is set in Israel and of course this makes life very difficult indeed.

However, all this changes when while working in the emergency room his wife's body is found amongst the dead with massive injuries similar to those of a fundamentalist suicide bomber. It soon becomes clear that his beloved wife was in fact the suicide bomber. For Dr Jaafe the revelation makes a travesty of the relationship he once thought he had with his wife. As he tries to look for answers as to why his beloved wife would care so much about a cause that he was unaware she felt so strongly about, he finds himself being warned off his search by both the militants and the police. The consequence of his interference results in him being viciously beaten up by the Israeli FBI, his Israeli neighbours, and Palestinian Islamists.

From the begin of the novel with its realistic account of the bombing right up to the end *The Attack* not only depicts the authenticity of terrorism and its untold religious cost to everyone but also draws the reader into demanding to know why such a beautiful, modern and intelligent woman would desire to becoming a suicide bomber. Essentially, it is a further account of cruelty and intolerance of lives that have been blighted by fundamentalism.

*The Attack* had a number of criticisms levelled at it on its publication. Many commentators especially in the US saw it as an apology for terrorism. Nevertheless, I believe that Khadra's intention is to show not only the destruction meted out by suicide bombers and the fact that they should be considered rational people but the

plight of the countless citizens of Israel of Arab descent. *The Attack* is due to be filmed by Random House Films and Focus Features.

The final book in the trilogy is *The Sirens of Baghdad* and is the portrait of a young Bedouin who grows up to resent the occupation of Iraq by the Americans. To say that the novel will in no doubt cause controversy is an understatement. With much of the media's coverage of the war called into question, *The Sirens of Baghdad* will be one of the most anticipated books awaiting release.

*Morituri* was the first of Khadra's *Roman Policiers* or *Roman noir* novels to be published originally in 1997. The English version of *Morituri* was published by Toby Press in 2003 and was the first to introduce the formidable detective-cum-writer Commissioner Brahim Llob and his devoted sidekick Lieutenant Lino. Tasked with tracking down the missing daughter of a top power broker in Algiers, the investigation in fact gives the reader an insight into the deep despair and brutality freely visible in Algiers. Khadra has given Llob not only an extremely strong voice but also the opportunity to illustrate his disappointment in how a once extremely strong and vibrant country has turned on itself and become a victim and the subject of constant in-fighting. *Morituri* is a very post-modern and interesting book; it is in turns very noir; despondent, depressing, intense and vivid but also splendidly written. The chapters in two parts are in fact entwined together. While Llob is investigating the crime that has taken place, the reader is also able to catch a picture of contemporary Algiers, with drugs and Islamic fundamentalists both playing their part. The setting of this novel pits two contrasting scenes that of destitution, fear, and scepticism prevalent in the country juxtaposed against that of both the fraudulent and opulent society that can still be found in Algiers and emphasising the fact that things are not what they seem and cannot be accepted at face value in such a divergent country. *Morituri* was made into a film in 2004 directed by Okacha Touita.

The second book in the series to feature Commissioner Llob is *Double Blanc* was also written in 1997 and was called *Double Blank* when translated. Former powerful diplomat Ben Ouda is found viciously assassinated in his home. Ouda a foremost academic had recently published a book that heavily censured the ruling power of Algiers. His brutal slaying was quickly followed by that of a university Professor Abad Nasser. Llob's investigation ascertains that both Ouda and Nasser were killed by the same people. Allegedly a group of Islamic fundamentalists, but is this actually the case? As his search continues members of the supposed hit squad find themselves being brutally murdered. With Llob and his squad upsetting, all those they encounter as they track the assortment of dead bodies through the different layers of Algiers society they soon find themselves wondering what was in the secretive document that Ouda was trying to make public and what damaging political ramifications did it contain. *Double Blanc* is a serious book, which is tempered by the witticisms present. It is also perplexing with the chapter endings often quite shocking along with long leaps of time, which leaves out details that one would normally find in a much more conventional police procedural.

The third book *L'Automne Aux Chimeres* or *Autumn of the Phantoms* (written in 1998) featuring Commissioner Llob once again intensely portrays contemporary Algiers' violent realities. On his return to his hometown, to bury a friend Llob manages to live through an attack by a GIA (Armed Islamic Group) commando and returns to Algiers. Summoned by his boss the Chief of Police in Algiers, Llob finds himself threatened with death and out of a job for writing *Morituri* under the pseudonym Yasmina Khadra. The books detailed Algeria's civil war and mammoth dishonesty inversely. The establishment believed that when written *Morituri* was full of lies and was dishonourable. The menace hanging over Llob deepens. He survives bombings, terrorist attacks and numerous threats from his superiors who would not be in the least disappointed if he were killed. With his apartment ransacked, he considers whether he should give in gracefully to what his superiors want or stand by his principles. Like the earlier books in the series, *Autumn of the Phantoms* is filled with constant eruptions of violence that was evident in Algiers during the 1990s. It also gives a bleak view of Algerian society where power and cruelty is synonymous. *Autumn of the Phantoms* was short-listed for the CWA 2006 Duncan Lawrie International Award

The Llob books are a delight for crime enthusiasts especially those who like noir, post-modern contemporary reads. It is clear that Khadra has been influenced by a number of other writers such as Simenon, Chandler, and James M Cain. The writing is spare, caustic, and periodically brazenly violent to the extent that the reader can be forgiven for thinking that they have stepped onto the pages of an American noir novel. Moreover, what of his main protagonist and narrator Llob? Well Commissioner Llob is what a reader of *Roman Policiers* can expect to

be. He is principled (shades of Marlowe), astute, pessimistic, and droll. He shares many a characteristic of a more famous Oxford police detective including his tendency to ponder over issues, his intellectual snobbery, and cynicism. It is clear that Llob is at ease in both worlds i.e. that of a police officer and a writer of detective fiction. He is able to follow the trail of the crime from the fashionably rich to the desperately poor à la Holmes directing a harsh bleak perspective over both positions. Furthermore, he is wary of power but again like Marlowe will challenge it when necessary. While clearly there have been comparisons to Chandler, Hammett also cannot be ignored. This is evident in the final pages of *Double Blank* where there are allusions to *The Maltese Falcon* evident. Clearly post-modern in its intent (the narrative structure of a *Policier* is morbidly suited to these books).

Even with his crime novels, Khadra has been unable to free himself from some of the rather hostile comments. It is may be because the books once again do not show Algeria in a good light but rather in a harsh and bleak manner.

It has not been plain sailing for Khadra especially since the revelation that he was not in fact a female author. Many have felt a sense of betrayal and in fact deem Khadra a supporter of the Algerian army and the atrocities that they participated in instead of the dissident that is portrayed in his novels. Despite this, none of the messages submerged in any of Khadra's books are easy to disregard.

Notwithstanding the deep sense of betrayal that has been felt and the comments that have arisen what can be said about Khadra is that he has not shied away from writing about subjects that have given rise to fear, antagonism and for some a sense of shame. His writing has been compared (and quite rightly so to) another Algerian Albert Camus. There is intensity about his writing that cannot be ignored by readers and critics alike despite the fact that you may not like or enjoy the subject matter. As multi-layered as his books are, it is clear that Khadra's army career has had a deep effect on his writing.

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