

Khatibi: A Sociologist in Literature

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Je ne suis pas un homme de ‘concept ... on a raison de me faire préciser les choses.’

ABDELKEBIR AL KHATIBI

All fantasies to which any writer will succumb, believing himself to be the holder of an infinite power over words; these can lead one to stray into a measure of ‘anesthetic’ aestheticism of words and things. He [Abdelkébir Khatibi] did not, however, for all that, entirely forgo what Aesthetics, as it was invested in all his work, brought to his writing, in both subtlety and density.¹

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Abstract

This study explores the ways sociological and philosophical insights into Morocco and French speaking societies haunt and hijack the literary agenda of Abdelkebir Al Khatibi. The distinction between sociology, philosophy, and literature masks another agenda: the incompatible ways in which the three genres of writings can be bridged in composite societies like that of Morocco. Khatibi wants to bridge the unbridgeable in a society in which he is heavily invested, and yet sees the possibility of realizing his dream of being a writer as limited. The study will draw on Khatibi's writings *La Mémoire tatouée*, *La Blessure du nom propre*, *Amour bilingue*, *Un été à Stockholm*, *Chemins de Traverse: Essais de sociologie* and *Triptyque de Rabat*.

A Rich Corpus for Sociological Inquiry

Since independence, only three Moroccan sociologists have risen to international prominence: Paul Pascon, Fatema Mernissi, and Abdelkébir Khatibi. However, Khatibi's sociological work continues to be unknown in the field of social sciences outside

the French speaking world. It is his oeuvre in its literary, philosophical, and stylistic dimensions that has made him famous in comparative literature, cultural studies, and humanities circles on American campuses and beyond.

Khatibi, culturally and intellectually, inhabits two worlds, Europe and the Maghreb, leading him to coin his “double critique” in order to liberate himself, the people of the Maghreb, and the Francophone countries from self-imposed, symbolic, and rigid boundaries. This process of liberation occurs through processes of socialization and acculturation. He aspires to liberate all parties from the heavy weight of ideologies linked to the formation of identities in the Maghreb since the Islamic “conquest.”

His liberating approach can be seen in the same vein as the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Mohamed Arkoun. He sheds light on the elements of the plural identities composing the Maghreb and shows how ideology after independence depends on the formation of the nation state and other concepts related to it. The different layers of identity in the Maghreb include Arabic, Islamic, Berber, African, French, and Spanish. These elements constitute the unique stew of Maghrebi plural identities. He also examines the different influences coming from the Middle East, such as pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism as well as sub-Saharan African and European thought, through colonialism and postcolonial ideologies.

The work of Khatibi, his writings and interviews, is a corpus for sociological inquiry and investigation. For this study, this will be limited to the following titles: *La Mémoire tatouée*, *La Blessure du nom propre*, *Amour bilingue*, *Un été à Stockholm*, *Chemins de Traverse: Essais de sociologie*, and *Triptyque de Rabat*.² In his writing and research two themes stand out: evolution and change. His work on signs and symbols, tribal structures, the Moroccan bureaucracy, and artistic fields all focus on points of transfiguration. He also explains how Arab societies have difficulty in making a virtue of change.

Khatibi's Self-Definition: Maghreb, Europe or Both

In his own words, Khatibi reports that he was born at the intersection of three violent events: the feast of sacrifice which corresponds to ten Dhû-Hijja 1938, the beginning of the Second World War, and the experience of living in a society that was theological, feudal, and colonized by the French and Spanish. For Khatibi, these three events symbolize the dimensions of sacrifice, war, and colonization. Khatibi

conceptualizes sacrifice and domination as two words that go hand in hand. His aversion to all forms of domination may come from that moment of extreme human vulnerability.

He went to Paris to study sociology at the Sorbonne with Raymond Aron and George Gurvitch in 1958. Although he hated sociology at the Sorbonne, he learned how to trade through dwellings and adventures in Paris, the cosmopolitan dimension of the city, its intellectual debates, its art, its architecture, and its margins. When he first arrived in Paris, he had already experienced it through literature, especially Baudelaire. This literature gave him the key to understanding the semiology of the city. He describes his experience as that of a professional stranger who had to mediate different cultures.

He was impressed by the work of Roger Bastide, who gave him the conceptual tools to construct an ethno-sociology of the body and its representations. The impact of Roger Bastide is felt throughout Khatibi's work. Khatibi's interest in urban spaces and architecture comes from his encounters with Henri Lefebvre. Just like the Sudanese writer Al-Tayyib Salih, Khatibi became mesmerized by the North. He loved Germany, Belgium, Scandinavia, and all the northern European countries. This fascination had more to do with northern cultures than languages.

In 1964 he returned to Morocco, where he created a new school of post-colonial sociology that transcended the orientalist scholarship of many Moroccan educational institutions. Since 1974, Roger Bastide has inspired much of Khatibi's work. Psychoanalysis prompted him to work on the anthropology of the body, which he called "*La Blessure du nom Propre*."³ These influences make of Khatibi a unique stylist of language, who uses sociology, psychology, and semiology as resources for his literary writings. Finally, he created a new genre of literature informed by sociological inquiry, which is a type of literary method for writing sociology.

Beyond these steps forward, Khatibi has a unique engagement with the societies of the Maghreb, and in particular Morocco. No other writer or sociologist understands the Moroccan psyche in all its different forms, expressions, names, signs, art, politics, and family relations as well as Khatibi. He is not only an avid reader of European literature but also a connoisseur and a lover of northern European cultures. His love for the Moroccan culture gives him a unique vantage point as a storyteller in literature with a vast knowledge of society that goes well beyond statistical evidence. This allows him to understand the logic behind certain behaviors and structures of Maghrebi societies.

In one interview Khatibi is asked, "Tell us about your Europe?". He answers with a series of questions, becoming the interviewer through a game of words. He explains

how he met Europe as an heir and as a living organism. He also says, “Sometimes I use ‘I’ as a mask. This mask is sometimes ‘I’ or sometimes ‘I am thinking.’ If I tell you that I am at the same time Moroccan, sometimes of the Maghreb, an Arab, a European, a Muslim, a Mediterranean; if I say all this, then give you a definition of myself, is my being reducible to these attributes?” He concludes that the identity of somebody is not a closed entity “[b]ut the identity of the trace of time.” It is an identity in perpetual becoming. As a researcher, Khatibi continues to deconstruct and break down binary oppositions. He denounces all kinds of humiliations and confusions to identity.⁴

Khatibi is particularly attentive to the lines that demarcate various influences on individuals and groups in Maghreb and Arab societies. This is evident in the attention he pays to the Moroccan handicraft of Safi pottery, tattoos on the faces of Berber women in the Atlas, and the symbols in henna on the hands of Moroccan brides. As an intellectual, writer and researcher, his work is as delicate as the linings of pottery from Safi.

He speaks about the complexity and subtlety of the interwoven cultures – Jewish, Islamic, and Berber – that give Morocco a special texture not only in its people but also in its landscapes, from the southern landscape of Marrakesh to the landscape surrounding the Rif region of northern Morocco. He defines the Moroccan cultural identity as a mystical community between the ones who are dead and the ones who are alive. In that sense, the Moroccan individual is very particular.⁵

Irreconcilable Divisions in the Maghreb

Khatibi exposes the dilemmas of emerging nations, like Morocco, where traditionalists and modernists who live in two opposing camps can find a *modus operandi* of sharing the same space of signs and symbols. He recognizes the weaknesses of post-colonial societies as a location of suffering. However, if understood, this suffering can lead to a positive turning point in the history of the Maghreb. Before 9/11, he urged Arab societies to take Islamism seriously, explaining that Islamism should be dealt with in a way that allows its members to find points of transformation that can lead to its reform and its emancipation.

He believes that Arab societies are divided into “irreconcilable” blocks. These blocks are defined by societies that accept modernity and those that refuse western hegemony and want to go back to Islam as a source of norms and values. He feels that such societies are handicapped by five factors: weakness of civil society, the tendency

of hypnotic political power, the flagrant lack of *savoir-faire* technique, the weight of theocracy that makes it difficult to distinguish state and religion, and the weakness of the self-image that the Arab world presents. The tendency to be either pro-western or anti-western fits in with this typology.

Islamists believe that the solution lies in the past. That is why Khatibi argues the Muslim world needs a new tradition to get out of an untenable position between tradition and modernity.⁶ He strongly believes that modernism and Islamism nurture one another in unhealthy reciprocity. He writes that the opposition is in every one of us, as an internal bleeding, in our apathy, in our complaisance, from our past. Islamism is a crying symptom. Our dream is to stop time, to immobilize it ... We [Muslims, Arabs and Maghrebi] suffer from our backwardness: we complain continually, but we need to work from this suffering itself.

Khatibi urges the Maghreb societies to take Islamism seriously, because it perpetuates “a profound tendency in Arab societies and their fascination with the past ... We should repeat that these societies are societies of commandment and directed servitude, voluntary or not.”⁷ Hence the solution is to work productively from the reality that the status quo represents.

Writing in French as Trace of Difference

When Khatibi was asked why he writes in French, his answer was that the same question was also asked of Samuel Beckett, and his response was because he liked it. He was then asked why he combined literature and sociology, to which he responded, “I am a stylist, above all, a stylist of ideas.”

When Khatibi writes a text, he goes for a walk in time and space; he reads faces, and he crosses topographies. Reality for him is like carpentry. He takes only one thread, and he leaves it in his imagination taking the force of the moment. He describes this process as one in which “the one who writes wants to live at the same time in the past, the present and the future.”⁸ He compares writing to music, since all that is necessary is finding the right tone. He speaks of passion and love of two languages being possible without mixing them together or diminishing the value of either one. This does not break their boundaries but instead creates a harmonious parallel between words that translates emotions, perceptions, and ideas in two languages at the same time.⁹

Khatibi respects the laws that make up the structure of language. Especially in the Maghreb, he believes that many of the writers who live, speak, and write

in Arabic or Berber also write in French. These individuals therefore live in two or three languages. For him, Kateb Yacine and Mohamed Dib represent this high poetic tradition.

He does not believe that Maghrebi writers' writing in French is simply a linguistic phenomenon, but instead a cultural and social one as well. It is this structural bilingualism that he calls diglossia between orality and writing. He believes that writers do not write the way they talk; in that sense there is a dissymmetry, a difference of tone, style, and rhythm.¹⁰

This is illustrated in a couple of different contexts. *Triptyque de Rabat* is a novel that takes the reader on a journey to discover the enigma of the city of Rabat seeped in corruption, murder and secret labyrinths. The voice narrating the story is that of a refined sociologist. Khatibi deciphers the signs and the symbols as keys to the transformations of a city with its multiple identities. In *Un été à Stockholm*, he contrasts the city of Stockholm with the city of Rabat. It is a story of fascination with a northern city. In that sense he is not like Albert Camus, who visited Amsterdam and hated its low sky.

Khatibi wants to study the dynamic nature of Moroccan culture through both its visible and masked oral and written dimensions. This study includes levels of difference, plurality and hierarchy. Khatibi believes that three large blocks of global culture in civilization are developing: the European block, the American block, and the Asian block. This reality makes him fearful of the forces of marginalization that globalization brings. He is therefore concerned about cultural marginalization.¹¹

He spends more time in his academic life studying sociology than any other academic discipline. This is all the more notable, given the full mutation that has been occurring throughout Moroccan society. This is perhaps because of his interest in evolution and social change in Morocco. Themes of youth, evolution and mutations of social groups, relation of hierarchy, division of labor, distribution of wealth, and social crisis are at the heart of his work.

Since his father was a theologian, the religious question and the sacred were present early in his life. This is why he considers Islamism to be a form of ideology. He makes a link between ideology and the stressed populations that messianic religious movements create. He believes that Arab and Muslim societies are in a kind of distress because of rapid social changes that they cannot decode. It is therefore difficult to find a solution to the economic, social, and political distress of the people. The result seems to be a populism attached to religion, which has an impact on societies it affects, as do other ideological orientations such as communism.

Morocco's Unique Traits

Khatibi stresses the very peculiar character of Moroccan society. It has a very old monarchy, but there is a sense that there is a new crisis of legitimacy of the king. It also has an old civilization, which is Berber, African, Andalusian, Arab, Islamic, and European. In this sense, the country is very ethnically and religiously diverse in comparison to many of its regional peers. This ethnic and religious diversity gives rise to a host of issues that simply would not exist elsewhere.

This is illustrated by the story of a Berber woman who discussed the tattoo tradition in Morocco with Khatibi. The woman said that television had erased the tattoo tradition, which had been practiced for centuries in the country to embellish the faces and hands of women. The promotion of make-up for women on television meant that Berber women were simply no longer interested in tattoos.¹² For Khatibi, this is how new modes of being and thought are created and erase traces of cultural practices.

The Maghreb has existed as a distinct entity since the Second Century of the Hijrah of the Prophet.¹³ Khatibi explains that the independence of Morocco has strengthened the monarchy. The nationalist elite has been marginalized, and a rigid mode of stratification has been created, putting an end to the aspirations of many Moroccans.¹⁴ The state's function in turn has been to master a heterogenic society, which aggravates splits between rich and poor as well as rural and urban societies.

Khatibi refutes the idea of social mobility when it comes to power. He believes that the state developed different techniques of manipulation that he considers experimental. Such a system functions in a way that allows the state to look at a stock of elites and choose the ones it desires in every situation not because of their intellectual and individual qualities but in order to measure the level of resistance of every group with the purpose of destroying the network. In that sense, elites are privileged on account of rapid mobility. Politically, these elites, who once may have desired to change the world and make a difference, now consider it to be a great risk to make a plea for universal access to education. They may instead feel overwhelmed by the new educated classes that are now jobless.¹⁵

Although Khatibi died before the Arab Spring, he left an incredible theoretical toolbox that was perfected during the 50 years that followed the independence of Morocco. This toolbox will help literary critics as well as social scientists decipher the enigmas of symbols and metaphors which encompass Moroccan culture from a historical perspective. Indeed, Khatibi's work is a valuable lens for any literary or

sociological endeavor into the world of signs of Morocco. Assia Belhabib's book shows clearly the complexity and ingenuity of Khatibi's work.¹⁶

Notes

- 1 Mohammed Boudoudou, On the heritage of multifarious sociological thought: (Tattooed) memories of a meeting with Abdelkébir Khatibi: The professor-researcher-writer (forthcoming).
- 2 Abdelkebir Khatibi, *La Mémoire tatouée* (Paris: Denoël, 1971); Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Amour bilingue* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1983); Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Un été à Stockholm* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990); Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Triptyque de Rabat* (N. Blandin, 1993); Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Chemins de Traverse: essais de sociologie*. (Rabat: 2002).
- 3 Abdelkebir Khatibi, *La Blessure du nom propre* (Paris: Denoël, 1974), 7.
- 4 Ibid., 448.
- 5 Ibid., 458.
- 6 Ibid., 449.
- 7 Ibid., 450.
- 8 Ibid., 452.
- 9 Ibid., 452.
- 10 Ibid., 453.
- 11 Ibid., 457.
- 12 Ibid., 468.
- 13 Ibid., 295.
- 14 Ibid., 185.
- 15 Ibid., 188–189.
- 16 Assia Belhabib, *La Langue de l'hôte: Lecture de Abdelkébir Khatibi* (Casablanca: Editions Okad, 2009).