

Abdelkebir Khatibi: From Regional Postcolonialism to Global Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract: Abdelkebir Khatibi's work demonstrates how North African Francophone literature challenges and subverts conventional literary and cultural classifications. Being the product of different cultures, traditions, genres, conventions and influences, Khatibi's intellectual project, inspired mostly by the philosophy of difference, offers a promise to deconstruct and ultimately transcend oppositional constructions of identity and culture. In a time characterized by a global empowerment of religious and nationalist discourses on 'sameness' and 'difference', when literary critics and students start to doubt the applicability of theory to cultural and literary studies, this article proposes to revisit three key ideas that have largely defined Khatibi's influential project, namely "double critique," "bi-langue," and "orphan thought" with special focus on *Maghreb pluriel* (1983) and *Un Été à Stockholm* (1990). My approach will be to highlight Khatibi's intellectual cosmopolitanism as a strategic transcendence of the theoretical limitation of contemporary Arab and postcolonial debates on the West and its others, the centre and its margins.

Keywords: Abdelkebir Khatibi – bi-langue – double critique – orphan thought – cosmopolitanism – North Africa – identity



Within contemporary cultural politics, transnational literary *nomadism* or cosmopolitanism has swept through much of postmodern and world literature rhetoric and thinking. For a reason. On the one hand, it proposes a viable theoretical apparatus by means of which postcolonial writers and critics theorize the collapse of the "two-dimensional Euclidian space with its centres and peripheries and sharp boundaries" and the emergence of a "multi-dimensional global space with unbounded, often discontinuous and interpenetrating sub-spaces" (Kearney 549). On the other hand, literary *nomadism* represents a philosophy that defies not only the restrictive practices of literary genres and cultural boundaries, but also the ideological subtexts of religious and nationalist narratives on identity and territorial belonging. Colonialism and its various corollaries, urbanization, transnational migration, and globalization of culture and capital have radically changed how individuals, if not whole societies look at their past and present and how they envision their future contribution to/in the world. As Vinay Dharwadker puts it, "the accelerated globalization

of capital and material production and consumption after the fall of the Berlin Wall” and the fast transformation of “the economic and political relations among old and new nations” represent major events that have altered the image of the world in the last quarter of the twentieth century (1). As a consequence, different postcolonial scholars and critics have recommended diverse responses to the complex question of sameness and difference; that is, how to safeguard the purity of one’s identity and culture while appropriating elements of the dominant culture. Because of cultural power imbalances, a group of postcolonial African intellectuals—spearheaded by the Kenyan writer and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o—have even called for a categorical return to pre-colonial languages and cultures in the hope of empowering the past and its forgotten idioms and traditions. Others, like most North African Francophone writers, have sought instead to transcend this same-other dichotomy through an implicit recognition and acceptance of the inexorable reality of linguistic and cultural ‘contamination.’

In what follows I will discuss Abdelkebir Khatibi’s intervention in this complex discussion of cultural identity within the context of North African and Arab discourses on tradition and modernity. More specifically, I will address three key ideas which have defined Khatibi’s intellectual project: 1.) the theory of ‘double critique’ that he outlines in his seminal work, *Maghreb pluriel* (1983), 2.) the concept of *bi-langue* (*Amour bilingue* 1983), and 3.) the theme of ‘orphan thought’ as presented in his novel, *Un Été à Stockholm* (1990). Two considerations have informed my decision to revisit these three ideas. First, given the alarming expansion in recent years of religious and nationalistic extremisms in the Arab world and around the world, it seems all too opportune to re-examine Khatibi’s intellectual project, namely nomadic thought, as a counter-narrative to dogmatic discourses on religious and national identity. Second, Khatibi is probably the only North African Francophone writer who lived, worked and died in his home country, Morocco, but whose ideas echo those of international nomads or cosmopolitan writers like Salman Rushdie, Edouard Glissant, Edward Said, J. M. Coetzee, or Kazuo Ishiguro whose works often figure in conferences or university syllabi on literary exile and cosmopolitanism. As he himself puts it, “Since the end of my studies in Paris (in 1964), I’ve lived and worked in Morocco. I haven’t experienced exile directly although I talk about it metaphorically”¹ (Lamrhili 129).

Khatibi’s ‘double critique’

In order to understand better the extent of Khatibi’s intervention in the sameness-difference debate, it is imperative to discuss it, although summarily, against the background of contemporary Arab controversy over the questions of identity, authenticity, and the West. Ever since Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798 and the encounter with a powerful West in the nineteenth century, the question of ‘authenticity’

¹ This and all further translations from Khatibi’s texts are mine.

has turned into a problematical issue for Arab societies and intellectuals.² Though dissimilar in their ideological motivations and approaches, Arab intellectuals remain deeply concerned with one question: how to remain faithful to inherited values and beliefs while embracing some of the political, cultural, and economic principles of the modern West. For example, Muhammed ‘Abduh, the father of what is commonly called the Arab *Renaissance* of the early twentieth century, believes that transcending the tradition-modernity dichotomy can be achieved provided modernity’s values and principles remain compatible with the fundamental doctrines of Islam. He argues that Islam could be the basis for a modern society, since “the changes which were taking place were not only permitted by Islam, but were indeed its necessary implications if it was rightly understood” (qtd. in Hourani 139). On the other hand, Taha Husayn, who remains the most radical of all his contemporaries, does not hesitate to exhort Egypt—and for this matter, the Arab world—to emulate the European model of governance in order for it to have true political, economic, and democratic institutions. In his rather controversial work, *Mustaqbal al-thaqafa fi misr* [The Future of Culture in Egypt] (1938), he suggests that Arabs “must follow the path of the Europeans so as to be their equals and partners in civilization, in its good and evil, its sweetness and bitterness, what can be loved or hated, what can be praised or blamed” (qtd. in Hourani 330). In his seminal book, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, Hisham Sharabi summarizes Arab discourse on the opposition *asalah/badathab*—tradition/modernity—as one that has simply grafted an inverted version of modernity onto a modified picture of patriarchy (4).

In his ground-breaking work on contemporary Arab ideology, *L’Idéologie arabe contemporaine* (1967), the Moroccan historian and novelist Abdulah Laroui summarizes the thorny East/ West dispute in a rather derisive tone: “For three quarters of a century the Arabs have been asking one and the same question: Who is I and who is the Other?” (15). According to Laroui, in such a polarized self-definition, it is always the West which prompts the question, delimits the frame of investigation, and it is within its global imperialist paradigm that contemporary Arab ideology tries to formulate the answer. Since it is the West that imposes its modular patterns of the universal, the I/Other opposition has brought about in the Arab world a historical consciousness that is at best ‘a-historical,’ to use Mohamed al-Jabri’s word. The salient feature of this a-historical consciousness is the call for a categorical return to the origin or *asl* in Arabic which has been fermented by different ideologies such as *salafism*, traditionalism, Islamic revivalism, and fundamentalism. The common denominator of these and similar ideologies is the revival of the authentic and pure past. It follows that the conception of cultural authenticity posits the early period of Islam as an immutable and stable point in time. The present-day proliferation of such Islamic extremist groups as al-Qaeda, ISIS and their followers attests to the danger of such ideologies and narratives that call for the destruction of the

² For a detailed discussion of how Arab intellectuals have reacted to the thorny East/West opposition, see Hourani; Laroui, *Crisis*; and Djait.

present, the modern, and the reinstatement of a glorious and prophetic Caliphate. Laroui's provocative conclusion that Arabs do not possess a rational understanding of history remains apropos even today. Instead of embracing modernity and its philosophical and aesthetic ethos, Arabs continue to look at the world around them through the lens of a sclerotic past and a regressive theology.

In *Maghreb pluriel* (1983), Abdelkebir Khatibi concurs with Laroui on the existence of a "conflicting interference between two epistemes, of which one (the Western one) covers the other, restructuring it from within while detaching it from its historical continuity" (17). Yet his critique of the Western episteme, especially the Orientalist-colonialist discourse, moves away from Abdullah Laroui or Frantz Fanon before him. In fact, Khatibi dismisses Laroui's historicism for its naïve interrogation of Arab identity and for writing a history of the Maghreb without historical discontinuities or disruptions. According to Khatibi, Laroui's theory remains, despite its rigorous treatment of Arab ideology, short-sighted by its dependency on a stable I/Other dialectics, whose lineage goes back to Frantz Fanon, whom Laroui happens to critique in his book *The Crisis of Arab Intellectuals* (125-6). Khatibi distances himself from both Laroui and Fanon because of their inability to construct a theory of the postcolonial (North African) subject outside of the Hegelian master/slave dynamics; that is, because of their failure to free their approach to the I/Other duality from the dialectic moment of the Hegelian Manicheism. This is to suggest that their postcolonial intervention in colonial discourse analysis, like that of their Anglophone counterparts,³ remains crippled by the same Manichean structure it seeks to deconstruct. In both Francophone and Anglophone offshoots of colonial discourse theory, the West continues to enjoy its powerful and stable centrality.

Khatibi opens *Maghreb pluriel* with a reference to Frantz Fanon: "Some time before his death, Frantz Fanon launched this plea: "Comrades, the European game is definitely over, we've got to find something else" (11). He then capitalizes on this *something else* in Fanon's appeal and gives it a name, 'une pensée-autre'—a thinking otherwise—whose theoretical apparatus will be 'double critique.' 'Double critique,' inspired by Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism, involves a philosophy of skepticism and thus can be described as a double hermeneutics of suspicion. First, it calls for a demystification of Western and Arab-Islamic metaphysical logocentrism. Second, it deconstructs the structural interrelation of the Western *episteme* in its different imperialist and ethnocentric discourses and practices. While developing his theory, Khatibi admits his indebtedness to Derrida, particularly his critique of Western metaphysics, as well as to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Blanchot, to cite but these three. Like Derrida, Khatibi also interrogates the notion of alterity and refuses to be trapped in any form of "metaphysical essentialism" (Derrida 151). Hence his insistence on resisting all forms of oppositional thinking in

³ As Henry Louis Gates puts it, "the course we've been plotting leads us, then, to what is, in part, Spivak's critique of Parry's critique of JanMohamed's critique of Bhabha's critique of Said's critique of colonial discourse" (465).

favour of a *'pensée-autre'* which targets the deconstruction of the Cartesian self, as well as the interrogation of the metaphysical and political foundations upon which the Same is constructed. What poststructuralism and deconstruction offer Khatibi is “a textual economy/strategy for overturning and displacing the dichotomous relation Occident/Orient” (Wolf 65). For him, the West—or Europe to be precise—remains a historical reality which is neither a disaster nor a benediction, but rather the condition *sine qua non* of a historical and intellectual responsibility that still needs to be assumed positively, beyond feelings of resentment or miserable conscience.

Compared to other postcolonial theories, Khatibi's ‘double critique’ promises a possibility to redeem literary and cultural studies from oppositional thought by shifting focus from the centre to the margin; that is, from the postcolonial critic's fixation on the Other, the West, the colonizer to an inward consideration of the ideological and cultural self-colonization of the Same. As he puts it in *Maghreb pluriel*, “a thought that is not a *minority, marginal, fragmentary, and incomplete* is always a thought of ethnocide” (*Maghreb* 18; italics in original). A minority thought for Khatibi is that force that lies on—or is pushed to—the margin of all authoritative systems of thought and social/political structures. It is thus incumbent upon the intellectuals and writers belonging to the margin to work through their state of marginality in order to de-centre the historical centre and to expose it to what it deliberately tends to repress. The 1977 special issue of the French journal *Les temps modernes*, with its very suggestive title, “Du Maghreb,” co-edited by Abdelkebir Khatibi himself, the Tunisian novelist and essayist Abdelwahab Meddeb, and the Algerian economist Nourredine Abdi demonstrates how thinking differently about the centre-margin would influence the destiny and destination of the region and of its politics. In his lead contribution to the issue, Khatibi argues that the people of the Maghreb, like all Arabs, harbour a troubled definition of themselves, torn between an impossible conformity to an idealised Islamic past and a dreadful emulation of an advanced modern West. Thus, the Maghreb as a region remains “an unthought space,” alienated by two contradictory desires and crushed by two hegemonic metaphysics (Khatibi, “Du Maghreb” 19). The postcolonial Maghreb that figures in Khatibi's intellectual project is “a name for the ‘unthought’ margin, a space of generative pluralism, and an opportunity for a radical subversion of the limits placed by centralising force and metaphysics of the nation-state” (Jebari 58). ‘Double critique’ provides thus the post-colonial subject with the necessary theoretical tools to subvert the present condition of its post-coloniality—or else, its marginality. Because of its global scope, double critique, as Mary A. Wolf has observed, develops “out of the now exhausted category of centre-periphery” (61) and transcends regional and national frontiers. Already in *La Mémoire tatouée* (1971), Khatibi outlines the basic principles and motivations of his theory:

And if the triumphant West was singing its Nietzschean loss, what about myself and my own culture? I could recognize in this culture the bricolage of knowledge, repression, disorientation; I could feel its crack in the intimacy of

my being. And because I was attached to this seductiveness, I let myself drift in the weft of desire. To love the Other is to speak of the lost site of memory, and my insurrection, which was, in an earlier time, nothing but an imposed history, now perpetuates itself in an acceptable resemblance, for the West is part of me, a part that I can also deny insofar as I fight against all the 'occidents' and the orientals that oppress or disenchant me. (106)

In order to shift one's obsession with the West's Nietzschean loss to one's own, one needs—especially after the consolidation of neo-colonialism and the rise of religious fundamentalism—a rigorous theoretical apparatus that is capable of dismantling the primacy of both western and Islamic metaphysical constructions of identity. While double critique invites suspicion of Arab-Islamic metaphysics, especially the metaphysics of the unitary self and the pure *as'* or origin, it also targets such modular concepts as Western identity and history, especially when these are used to legitimate the repression of those who fall outside of the West's system of signification and codification (see Khatibi's discussion of Jacques Berque's Orientalism in the third chapter of *Maghreb pluriel*). If contemporary Arab-Islamic cultural dogmatism teaches the Unique, the Invisible, the One, the Father, and God, double critique proposes to destabilize all of these absolute concepts by detaching discourse from the nostalgia of an absolute origin and an absolute totality, or what both Khatibi and Derrida call the metaphysics of the One. As Bensmaïa sums it up, double critique "has given itself an exorbitant objective: to open up our thinking to the point of thinking difference as the surpassing of both Western and Arab metaphysics" (107). It is through the theoretical apparatus of double critique that Khatibi's postcolonial subject can finally liberate himself/herself and his/her text and perspective from the oppressive authority of the *same* without however subordinating them to the cultural supremacy of the *other*. Adapting Diana Brydon's words, double critique presents the postcolonial writer and critic with the possibility to "simultaneously assert local independence and global interdependencies" and "define differences that do not depend on myths of cultural purity or authenticity but thrive on an interaction that 'contaminates' without homogenizing" (141). Contrary to Frantz Fanon's call for a counter-violence or Ngũgĩ's call for a systematic 'decolonization of the mind,' Khatibi welcomes the Other within his text in order to, as Roland Barthes admits, puncture his cultural hegemony. Khatibi's textual celebration of a hybrid subjectivity becomes permissible only through the avant-garde concept of *bi-langue* which calls for the subversion of all forms of linguistic and cultural moorings.

The concept of bi-langue

In *Maghreb pluriel*, Khatibi points out that bilingualism, and even plurilingualism, is not a recent linguistic phenomenon in North Africa and that the coexistence of languages has always been a feature of the region's linguistic landscape. Such a reading of

the linguistic map of North Africa demystifies the nationalist and religious narratives that define incorrectly the Maghrebi identity in terms of two absolutes: Arabic and Islam. The definition of identity in terms of language (Arabic) and religion (Islam) suffers from two major inconsistencies. On the one hand, authenticity becomes problematic, not because it establishes a difference between two modes of existence, Western and Arab-Islamic, but because it fixes identity within a construct that does not reflect accurately the heterogeneous linguistic and cultural reality of Maghrebi identity. On the other hand, insistence on the French-Arabic polarization dehistoricizes the question of Maghrebi identity and by the same token excludes other marginalized forms of identity constructions. In *Maghreb pluriel*, Khatibi ironically observes that

[We] the people of the Maghreb, we have spent fourteen centuries to learn the Arabic language (roughly), more than a century to learn the French language (more or less); and since time immemorial, we have been unable to write Berber. (179)

While Classical Arabic is the language of the *Quran* and the carrier of a rich literary heritage, regional Arabic and Berber dialects embody the collective memory and oral traditions of the illiterate population. And while Classical Arabic is learnt, like any other foreign language, only in a formal context, Arabic and Berber dialects are acquired through osmosis and social interaction. The colonial encounter with the French language and French culture (1830-1962) has added yet another layer to an already heterogeneous Maghrebi identity. Only through a rational engagement with this linguistic and cultural diversity—French, Arabic, and Berber—can one rise above the limitations of oppositional constructions of the world and enjoy the pleasure and hospitality of intellectual nomadism. Khatibi proposes what he calls *bi-langue* as a strategy to represent the cultural and linguistic intricacies of the North African linguistic and cultural space. *Bi-langue* implies a double consciousness of the self and of the world. It can be defined as a third language which is neither the mother tongue nor the adopted language, but “an intermediary space, at once empty and neutral but, paradoxically, inventive and fertile” (El Nossery 392). Such being the case, one may argue that any North African text written in French (or in any other western language for that matter) is a sort of palimpsest that carries within its layers traces of other silenced or marginalized languages, be it Berber, dialectal Arabic or written Arabic. As Khatibi puts it in *Maghreb pluriel*, “Maghrebian literature written in French is a narrative of translation. I am not saying that it is only translation; what I am saying is that it is a narrative which speaks in tongues” (186).

For most North African writers, the act of writing in a foreign language involves a troubled consciousness of the impossibility of *writing* their native language in or through the adopted language. As Erickson puts it, the challenge for a post-colonial writer who tries to communicate his or her identity in a foreign language “lies in the uncommonly arduous process of liberation through the restructuring or destructuring of the ideological

constructs underlying it” (104). Contrary to those who call for a categorical return to regional and national languages, Khatibi recommends instead to neutralize the ideological life-force of the foreign (French) language by exposing it to its own exteriority, to its ‘absolute outsidersness’ and to fill in the “silent void of non-communication between the West and the non-West with voices from the outside proclaiming their presence as other” (Erickson 104). Long before Homi Bhabha’s celebrated ideas of ‘hybridity’ and ‘third-space,’ Khatibi has described in his famous essay, “Un Etranger professionnel,” how the act of writing in a foreign language inscribes his text in what he calls “a third intermediate space, a neutral and vacant place” (125). In this essay, Khatibi compares his writing act to that of other bilingual writers like Samuel Beckett or Ahmadou Korouma who, like him, have created the ‘magnificent space where they could write their “troisième langue” (third language).

Within this ‘interval,’ this ‘in-between’ sameness and otherness, the adopted language becomes the designated vehicle that transports the sensibilities of the mother tongue to a new level of untranslatability. As he puts it in *Maghreb pluriel*, “the foreign language, when it is internalized as actual writing, as word in action, transforms the first language, structure, and deport it to the untranslatable” (186). Walter Benjamin writes in a different context, “bilingual writers or ‘creative translators’ need to twist their own language in the same way they distort the foreign language that is and is not their own” (71). The Khatibian text’s ‘untranslatability,’ accordingly, corresponds to an inability to find in his adopted language (French), his lost mother language (Barbé 12). Yet Khatibi insists that the mother tongue is never absent or muted in the act of writing in French. On the contrary, it is the mother tongue which maintains the memory of the narrative and reminds the reader of its cultural authority: “The mother tongue, precisely because it is not written and not elevated to the level of a text, maintains the memory of a narrative” (*Maghreb* 191-92). Despite its being eclipsed by a foreign idiom, the mother tongue preserves its ‘maternal’ presence in the background of the written text as a testimony to its (the text’s) linguistic duality; that is, to its linguistic madness. What this original language represents is a feeling of and, of course, the pre-symbolic idiom associated with such a state of oneness” (Siassi 51). This Lacanian obsession with an absent (but present) language is emblematic of the writer’s absurd quest of a pre-bilingual identity. In the impossibility of recovering a lost monolingualism, the writer can only aspire to its problematization through a strategic celebration of its opposite, bilingualism. Hedi Bouraoui argues that the Maghrebian text is doomed to be a game on and of language, at best, as Khatibi suggests in his seminal work *Maghreb Pluriel*, the playing out of a simulacrum, that is a “splitting, a rupture of the monolanguage and its deportation, its movement of transference from one language to another (in every sense of ‘to transfer’)” (193). The words of the mother tongue are no longer relegated to an index or a glossary, as was the case with the first generation of Francophone writers of the 1950s such as Ahmed Sefrioui or Mouloud Feraoun, but incorporated organically and graphically in the French text itself (Abdel-Jaouad 68).

The co-existence of the two languages within the same textual space raises fundamental questions about the status of what one calls a mother language and a second (or third) language. As James McGuire argues in his discussion of Khatibi's *Amour bilingue*, both Arabic and French are "betrayed during the act of writing [...] for only in the paradoxical freedom of linguistic exile can the true bilingual actually write" (108). In fact, Khatibi introduces the idea of *bi-langue* in order to transcend the internal schism within the postcolonial bilingual writer who is historically and ontologically torn between the mother language and the language of the former colonizer. Instead of rejecting the other language as a reminder of an ontological wound or as a source of cultural and psychological alienation, Khatibi welcomes it within the realm of a linguistic hospitality that celebrates a simultaneous love in/for two languages. Contrary to Jacques Derrida who could not "bear or admire anything other than pure French" (46), Khatibi never recoils from loudly serenading his love in/of two languages. And it is this love—sometimes a painful love relationship—that many North African characters share with all transnational immigrants and exiles. In *Downcast Eyes*, for example, Tahar Ben Jelloun's young shepherdess, after a painful struggle with her fractured identity and the madness of her French and Berber words, gradually understands that she actually inhabits "a third place, which is neither [her] native soil nor [her] adopted country" (249). The estrangement of the signifier and the signified—the French idiom and the reality it is supposed to express—enables the writer, even as it produces alienation, "to express another potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility." This potential community, Deleuze and Guattari assert, is realizable in the literature they designate as 'minor' in opposition to mainstream literature (265). The characteristic of this new literature is its power to disturb established conceptions of value, genre, and canon. Deleuze and Guattari insist on its nomadic nature, which allows it to resist temporal and spatial containment and categorization. The consciousness (and even celebration) of a fragmented self comes as a reaction to theological and dogmatic discourses on identity—a theocracy which insists on a categorical submission to the law of the One of the Quranic text. In literature, the subversive feature of Khatibi's idea of *bi-langue* has certainly invigorated contemporary Maghrebian writers of French (and even of Arabic) expression. Not only does it favour extra-national identifications and solidarities, it also does liberate them from the supremacy of national homeland and its primordial origins.

Nomadism and cosmopolitanism in *Un Été à Stockholm* (1990)

Despite the fact that Khatibi never truly lived in exile he nonetheless shares with other postcolonial (African) writers the experience of being a wanderer through/in time

and space.⁴ In *Le Livre du sang* (1979), for example, he asks a very problematic question: “I left my home country. But what is a home country? A home country? That of one’s heart and one’s thought” (162). Implicit in this postcolonial conception of homeland is the inferred emotional detachment from the spatial determinism of identity. In other words, the idea of self-identification in Khatibi’s view can no longer be formed and homogenized within specific cultural and national confines of a fixed homeland, a confined geography, but rather through an ongoing process of deconstruction and reconstruction of its incongruent fragments. Such a postmodern conception of identity and homeland challenges the dominant nationalist and religious discourses on identity in the Maghreb and the Arab world that insist on the two absolutes of Arabic and Islam as the only defining factors of postcolonial identity. Moreover, the global access to the digital world makes of the idea of belonging to One country or to One language more and more problematical (Leonard 35). In fact, most of Francophone characters reject the predicament of being chained within definite regional, national or linguistic boundaries. Their ‘*raison d’être*’ lies instead in the constant discovery and re-discovery of new shreds of identity, new appropriations of history and geography, and whose voices and perspectives are inherently decentred.

In the image of the central protagonist of Khatibi’s *Un Été à Stockholm*, Francophone writers embrace the postmodern, the nomadic, and the cosmopolitan as a way to counter reactionary religious and nationalist discourses on identity and origin. For example, Khatibi refers to his characters as ‘professional travellers’ whose destiny is premised upon the permanent crossing and re-crossing of linguistic and cultural territories, of appropriating and disappropriating languages, and whose homeland is the text itself. Thus, the central character in *Un Été à Stockholm*, Gerard Namir, confesses that he is alternately himself, the other, and then himself again: “I am successively myself, the other, and again myself” (49). The constant shift between the self and its multiple other (s), bordering at times on linguistic madness, enforces on the bilingual subject a new philosophical understanding of his/her cultural identity and of its relationship with the other. Talking about self-identification during the colonial period, Fanon argues in *Black Skin White Masks* (1967) that the colonized subject cannot make a meaning for himself; it is the colonizer’s language that usually defines him (134). While this process may be true for a colonized subject whose identity is not constructed through a written language, the North African context establishes a different construction of identity and selfhood. Since the colonial period, there have existed two distinct codified systems of signification—French and Arabic—that have jointly overdetermined the Maghrebi subject, and out of which s/he has to extract a meaning that s/he would recognize as hers or his. Maghrebi writers in French are thus, from the beginning, caught within the interstices of divergent histories, languages, cultures, and value systems that intersect in them, and which they

⁴ Philippe Barbé shows how both Derrida and Khatibi are condemned to err in a linguistic space which both writers describe as “un désert de la langue” (13).

seek to appropriate or misappropriate through the act of writing. One of the constellations of signification pre-existing every Maghrebi writer is that of the proper name. Mohamed Boughali explains in this respect how “the imposition of the first name, in the lands of Islam, is the first ritual celebration which marks the triple affiliation of the child with a family, and with a socio-cultural and religious identity” (33). Even though the religion of Islam does not object to choosing non-Arabic names, one of the divine duties of Muslim parents towards their children remains the choice of names that reinforce their religious affiliation and identity. It is reported in a *Hadith* that the prophet Mohammed said: “You will be called on the Day of Resurrection by your names and the names and the names of your parents, so have good names” (in *Abi Dawud’s Sunan abi Dawud*, Book43, Hadith 176). Thus, Muslim names are intended to establish the fact that a person belongs to a pre-existent community and to celebrate the supremacy and unity of the divine. In *Par-dessus l’épaule*, Khatibi summarizes the issue in the following terms:

What I wish to underline is that the identity of a people is a battle over the Name, the Place (whether in terms of territory or border) and Unity (...) But the identical is divided, split, forever at war against the illusion of its totality and unity. (128-9)

The most obvious deconstruction of the illusion of identity’s ‘totality and unity’ is certainly the name Khatibi chooses for his narrator, Gérard Namir, in *Un Été à Stockholm* (1990). As a composite name, Gérard Namir partakes in two different systems of signification. While the name ‘Gérard’ has an obvious French (Western) resonance, ‘Namir’, on the other hand, is the Arabic word for a ‘lion’. Khatibi’s deliberate choice of such a compound name is meant in the first place to disrupt the common temptation to fix a narrator’s identity within one or the other cultural identity. Gerard Namir remains thus a name/signifier that has no definite referent—or rather it has more than one referent.

Because of his career as a professional traveller/interpreter, Gérard Namir’s identity becomes the product of transnational spaces and languages. Identity in this respect is not something already constructed or fixed in time, unchanging, or, to use Amin Maalouf’s word, vertical. Rather it is something dynamic, always in the making, territorial and horizontal. Wherever Gérard Namir travels, he feels at home, especially in such hyperspaces as international airports, airplanes, hotels, and conference rooms. Shared among these spaces is the fact that conventional identity markers such as language, culture and history are irrelevant, if not non-consequential. The opening chapter of the novel titled, symbolically enough, ‘Galaxie,’ takes off at JFK airport. Once comfortably settled inside the plane, Gérard Namir plunges into a sort of reverie; “I had the impression, not that of flying with the spirit of the plane, but of being transported to the heart of a lit memory, a memory in the making in the astral space” (9). Gérard Namir describes the plane in terms of a ‘spectacle,’ a ‘prehistoric cave,’ and a ‘flying museum’ and the

passengers as talking portraits; “Seen from the inside, the plane comes alive like a living museum” (11).

The idea of coming to life, or to be born, in mid-air is a very postmodern idea that undercuts the traditional assumption that identity is bound to a specific territory. Nowhere is this idea of rebirth in mid-air more forcefully visible than in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Rushdie describes the plane as a “flying womb” and as “a metal phallus,” and its passengers as “spermatozoa waiting to be spilt” (41). Gillian Gane argues in her discussion of the novel that “it is by plane that migrants cross the borders of worlds and are in the process reborn” (Gane 22). The experience inside the plane suspends, at least during the time of the flight, the cultural and social markers of the passengers’ former selves and imposes on them an uncanny experience of being identity-less, or about to be born into new selves. The narrator in *Un Été à Stockholm* conceives of his mid-air suspension in terms of a separation not only from his hometown and home country but also from the weight of the past:

I conceive of my birth in the world in a speed that separates me more and more from my past by veiling it, detaching me from my hometown and its gregarious roots, almost motionless alongside an ocean beach. (10)

The plane offers a transcendental experience; it resembles a mystical journey that detaches the self from all forms of worldly attachment. Gérard Namir’s moment of reverie inside the plane is reminiscent of similar experiences of liminality. In *L’Homme rompu* (1994) by Tahar Ben Jelloun, Mourad, the main character, dreams of escaping the world of corruption through an imaginary flight to the world of childhood. He states: “I am above it. My feet no longer touch the ground and my head is already in the clouds (...). I feel safe and have no need to return to earth” (133). Both experiences, despite their contextual difference, make reference to a limbo state which, notwithstanding—or maybe thanks to—its indeterminacy, allows these characters an infinite freedom to move above the restrictive cultural and national determinants of identity. Gérard Namir’s subsequent love relationship with Lena, the flight attendant who has seduced him, turns into a new discovery of his own identity and of the city of Stockholm. During their first date in downtown Stockholm, Gérard Namir becomes conscious of his being a foreigner, not only in the eyes of Lena but also to himself.

More than simply a fleeting sexual partner, Lena, an emblem of orphanhood herself, has converted Gérard Namir’s perception of his business trip into an ontological journey of initiation into himself and into the ancient mythologies of Stockholm. As Jean-Frederic Hennuy puts it, the strolls in Stockholm and the love relationship with Lena constitute an experience of the Other which makes Gérard Namir live moments of truth, moments of (his) identity transformation” (359). When geography becomes a mental topography, the mind acquires a neutral relationship with space and time. Gerard Namir confesses, “(In Stockholm) I also learned how to explore the secret of frontiers, of

passageways, of exits and impasses: initiating secret of the traveller” (62). Not only are people’s cultural specificities suspended in the traveller’s mind, so also are the political frontiers of cities and countries. Learning how to decode the language of frontiers involves an ontological experience of self-discovery that teaches the traveller how to abandon the mental frontiers of his own identity as well. The mind being thus traversed with different consciences of foreign spaces and temporalities gives rise to a new spatial consciousness in which all locales, cultures, and languages become transferable, or at once internal and external. In this new geometry of the mind, consciousness of deterritorialized identities reflects a fractured correlation with both the past and the present. Gerard Namir admits, “This secret heightens our memory and our patience to live. Sometimes I tell myself: we are all strangers until the end of the world” (62).

It is true that most of Khatibi’s stories provide the context for an ontological deliverance from the deadly narcissism of identity. In fact, the cornerstone of his intellectual project implies the liberation of the postcolonial self from the narratives of confined identities and languages. His notion of “orphan thought” serves as a vital precept upon which his intellectual project rests, namely the subversive critique of the metaphysics of origins. Instead of a fixed origin, he proposes nomadism which provides the intellectual background from which one can disrupt the ideologies that inform both Western and non-Western hegemonic discourses on identity and difference. As stated in the introduction of this article, in the globalized world’s interchange between the universal and the local, the centre and the margin, with its disturbing imbalances, *nomadic thought* or cosmopolitanism may allow for the construction of a global community which may offer, in Schoene’s opinion, the power to “pre-empt war and terrorism”(10). In fact, Khatibi’s orphan thought demystifies such inflexible notions as the centred self, homeland, and exile. As he states in *Taoist Warrior*, “everyone cherishes identity/Everyone looks for origins/And I teach orphan knowledge” (2). Already in his autobiography, *La Mémoire tatouée* (1971) Khatibi considers himself ‘orphan’ of God, of a “dead father, and of two mothers” (12). Orphanhood implies for him more than just a lost father or mother, but a strategic disruption of all forms of affiliation to any authority or origin(s). Despite the fact that one’s origin, culture, language and ethnicity may shape one’s identity, the nomad’s sense of selfhood grows out of his/her transnational experiences of the world. Khatibi’s postcolonial ‘nomad passenger’ involves the idea of excess, rather than lack of belonging to different cultures and histories.

In his discussion of Khatibi’s poetics of orphanhood, Matt Reeck shows how the poetics of the orphan, because of its ideal of freedom, counters “the misleading metaphysics that generates the idea of the importance of rooting for the sense of self” and which “fosters sedentariness, recursive and other parochializing and ethnogenic localization processes” (130). Like all transnational migrants and intellectuals, Gérard Namir continues to be haunted by his past despite his transnational nomadism. As rightly stated by Edward Said, “Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one’s native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but

that loss is inherent in the very existence of both” (191). The difficulty to bracket out the past, to develop a new consciousness of the self as determined by space and not by time captures the postcolonial’s painful transition from colonialism to postcolonialism, from the authority of the grand narrative of history to more localized social experiences of space. Belonging to a transnational community of professional travellers and interpreters, Gérard Namir can hope to break free of the hegemony of nationalist and religious orthodoxy. He thus adopts the persona of the anonymous traveller, “I, Gérard Namir, (am) an anonymous traveller” (102). It is this condition of anonymity; that is, the absence of a clear and fixed identity marker, that allows him to cross and re-cross frontiers—whether political, linguistic or cultural—with a certain ease.

In her discussion of Rushdie’s intellectual migrancy in *The Satanic Verses*, Gillian Gane argues that “Postcolonial writers are often seen as divided into two groups: deracinated cosmopolitans aligned with discourses of the *post* and the *trans*, and nativists engaged in the project of retrieving precolonial histories and fostering indigenous identities” (28). In this divide, Khatibi’s intellectual development, like that of Rushdie or Said, would seem to be unambiguously on the side of the cosmopolitan and the global. He certainly belongs to what Timothy Brennan calls “Third-world Cosmopolitans” (vii) who advocate linguistic and cultural hybridity, pluralism of views and migrancy, while rejecting all forms of monolithic discourses on identity and the mythification of authenticity. Of all of Khatibi’s fictional works, *Un Été à Stockholm* remains a problematic work: its textual celebration of cosmopolitanism and exilic freedom is undercut by the nostalgic tone of its final chapter. The desire to travel away from one’s city of origin is compounded with the impossibility of forgetting it either: “To suspend my past; this is impossible. Unreal” (115). In fact, Gérard Namir’s fear remains the temptation to succumb to the nostalgic appeal of the city of origin: “Ah, to die without succumbing to this distance” (10). In order to suppress the memories of the city of origin, Khatibi deliberately expands the geographical map of his identity: “To travel and to change countries and languages excites my thought and my surplus of pleasure” (27). Adapting Deleuze and Guattari’s words in their discussion of ‘Memories of Plan (e) maker,’ one can argue that Khatibi’s choice of the vocation of a ‘professional traveller’ suggests that changing cities (New York, Paris, Stockholm, Berlin) offers a euphoric experience whereby “one continually passes from one to the other, by unnoticeable degree and without being aware of it, or one becomes aware of it only afterwards” (Deleuze 269).

Conclusion

Considering the present-day cultural and political reality of the Arab world, it is too early to claim that Arab societies, in the image of their writers, live their present as a historical phase in the long march towards a post-postcoloniality of their own making. Colonial legacies continue to hamper the realization of economic and cultural autonomy. Moreover, home-grown forms of oppression makes it even harder to admit that the

majority of people have really shaken off the burden of ‘colonial’ domination. Unable to arrive at a stable cultural symbiosis—that is, a hybrid thought and culture—between the forces of tradition and the appeals of modernity, past and present, the ‘same’ and the ‘other,’ North African societies are trapped within a historical hiatus, in which all temporal—and even ontological—categories have no real historical significance. Attempts at reconciling North African societies to their political and historical realities have been “something closer to mechanical and tactical assertions aimed at dismissing issues than integrative analyses intended to promote genuine cultural or national synthesis” (Barakat 43). As a consequence, North Africans continue to look at the world around them from within a profound rift—rather than a completed hybridity—between the traditionalist absolute and the modernist rationale. For in addition to their exile from Western culture, they are also exiled from their past and tradition because of the “exaggerated medievalization obtained through magical identification with the great period of classical Arabian culture” (Laroui, *The Intellectual Arab Crisis* 156). The recent upsurge of religious extremism throughout the Arab world attests to the reality that the ‘ghosts of the past’ may still appear as attractive as the ‘angels of progress.’

Given the fact that Khatibi has not lived in exile proper, it seems all too obvious that his vision deviates from postcolonialism and its political engagement in order to embrace cosmopolitanism which, in Schoene’s opinion signals “a departure from traditional internationalist perspectives while stressing the significance of local culture for the development of any meaningful and viable world-communal future”(1). Khatibi’s intellectual project, steeped in French poststructuralism and deconstructionism, targets, among other things, the authority of dogmatic discourses on identity and culture. His “orphan thought” or otherwise cosmopolitanism helps to shatter the illusion of the supremacy of origin and challenge the myth of a pure identity. On the other hand, it proposes to create new solidarities between different peoples and cultures on the basis of tolerance and respect for other languages and other cultures, two ideals which represent today an artistic deliverance from all styles of ideological and religious extremism.

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