

## The Memory of the Body *Dhākirat Al Jasad*

Ahlam Mustaghanmi  
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Reviewed by Saleh Ibrahim

We can enter the world of *Dhākirat Al-Jasad* through the passage of the homeland, the passage of suffering and pain. It is a novel that begins with the homeland and ends with it. At first, Si el-Taher died, and Khaled was injured in the war against the French occupation and his hand was amputated. Then, the story begins, a story of love, exile and bitter endurance. Hassan, Khaled's brother, is killed by mistake in Algeria. That's the end of the story.

Khaled carries his wounds to France where he lives a painful love story with an Algerian writer and a transient love affair with a French woman. Khaled's Palestinian poet friend dies in Lebanon, and he goes back, almost devastated to his homeland.

The homeland is, sometimes, simplified into a city, Costantine, which represents every Arab city (p. 154). Thus, to belong to this city is to belong to the Arab world: "You cannot belong to this city without feeling its Arab identity." (p. 318). The author shows that in Algeria "Some pray .. while some get drunk ... and the rest rob the country" (p. 345) For this reason, Khaled cries out: "You pimps .. robbers .. murderers .. you will not rob our blood also .. Fill your pockets with whatever you like .. your accounts with any currency ... We will always have our blood and memory. With these, we will hold you responsible ... We will pursue you .. And we will build this country ..." (p. 395).

Women like "Ahlam" or "Hayat" represent "a whole country" (p. 381), and Khaled represents a whole generation, the generation of rebellion. While Khaled's love for Ahlam is an expression of the generation's love for their country, Ahlam's marriage to Si el-Taher is a representation of the occupation of the virgin land by the robbers and pimps who symbolize corrupt authority.

Within the same context, the novel deals with the relationship between Algeria and France. For Khaled, Catherine who represents France, is a woman with whom he had a transient affair (p. 165). She is the woman who was always on the verge of becoming his beloved but never was (p.76). Their meeting represents the meeting between Algeria and France. They have "met for more than a century, without really knowing each other ... without precisely loving each other, .. a mysterious attraction brought them together" (p. 403).

Here, the novel returns to reality. Khaled asserts that the roles are reversed - France has rejected us. To get a "visa just

for a few days' visit has become impossible" (p.318). After an evening party in France, "from which our native country was absent" they spoke in French about Algerian funded projects that were going to be implemented by foreign groups, Khaled wondered: "Have we truly gained our independence?" (p. 234)

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We can also approach this novel from the psychological perspective, manifested in Khaled's and Hayat's internal psyche. Having lost her father when she was a child, Hayat tries to compensate through writing. She tries to resurrect her father through her love for Khaled; however she fails both ways. She asserts: "I would have preferred to have had a normal childhood and a normal life, to have a father and family like other people, instead of a pile of books and journals." (p. 105). She eventually marries a man her father's age, but continues to love Khaled, her father's real and best friend.

Khaled who fought against the French occupation and lost his left arm in the battlefield, leaves Algeria after Independence and goes to France. There he meets Hayat, daughter of his commander who died during the war. His love for Hayat can be seen as a substitute for his love for Algeria, their native land.

We learn from the novel that Khaled lost his mother when he was a teenager and that he suffers from the Oedipus complex, as he very often confuses the mother with the lover. He tells the woman he loves: "When did my madness about you start? When you became my daughter? or the moment I imagined that you were my mother?!" (p.140) When he compares between his real mother and other women he had known, he says: "I compensated for my mother with a thousand other women .. but I did not grow up. I compensated for her breasts with a thousand more beautiful breasts but I did not quench my thirst .. I compensated for her love with more than one love story but was not satiated ... " (p.329)

In addition to this, and as a result of an inferiority complex that he suffers from owing to the amputation of his arm, Khaled resorts to painting as a form of sublimation, or to use a more technical word from psychology, he substitutes. He says: "I, who used to draw with one hand to recover the other hand, would have preferred to remain a normal man with two arms and to perform ordinary daily tasks, rather than be transformed into a genius that carries sketches and paintings under his arm." (p.106)

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I asked Ahlam Mustaghanmi: "How could you write a novel of more than 400 pages and maintain this emotional abundance and poetic language?" After a few moments of silence, her answer was: "Writing stimulates me. Sometimes I cry. I cry, and tears truly fall ..."

*Dhākirat Al Jasad* - fertile imagination, gushing poetry, a wound and a tear. Since we cannot summarize it, you must read it.

Translated from Arabic  
by Ghena Ismail