

Beyond the Mainstream Narrative: Seeing the Other Side of the Story through the Lens of Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad*

Avijit Das¹ And Dr. Shri Krishan Rai²

¹UGC Junior Research Fellow, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Durgapur, India ORCID: 0000-0002-5625-7492. 20avijitdas@gmail.com

²Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Durgapur, India. srikrishanrai4@gmail.com

Abstract

The present paper offers a critical and comprehensive understanding of how Yasmina Khadra's fiction *The Sirens of Baghdad* (2008) provides a counter-narrative to the institutionalized politics of the Western hegemonic discourse regarding the people living in the conflicting country of Iraq. Set against the backdrop of America's invasion of Iraq in 2003, the novel attempts to unearth the psyche of the young men of decent origins taking up arms against the Western forces. The narrator of the novel represents thousands of young men who are often branded as religious fanatics in the West, but are actually fighting against the injustices, inequalities and humiliations which they have to endure. The writer's professed aim is not to justify radicalism and violence, but to provide a thorough understanding of some of the main drives which led to the occurrence of violence in these war-torn regions. According to Tabish Khair, "Violence, in other words, is not a free choice at the social level...These individuals are usually those who feel that an injustice had been done to them and theirs, those who labour under an overpowering feeling of deprivation." (Khair, 2008 p.10) Rather than portraying religion as the source of hatred, the novel emphasised the social and political issues. One of the main hindrances, the author believes, in the process of establishing peace in these conflicting territories is the Western stereotyping, which the author tries to dismantle in the following novel. The present paper also offers a comparative study with John Updike's fiction *Terrorist* in order to vindicate the countering of the Western narrative in *The Sirens of Baghdad*.

Keywords: Stereotyping, counter-narrative, religious fanatics, violence

Introduction

"Or is it the case that "Islam" cannot be investigated as we would any other culture or religion because, unlike all the others, it stands outside "normal" human experience, a religion that one can talk about as if it, and everything within it, resembles a psychopathological human being?" (Said, 1997 p. xviii)

Yasmina Khadra's popular fiction *The Sirens of Baghdad*, which is actually a part of a trilogy dealing with the issue of radicalism, the other two being *Swallows of Kabul* and *The Attack*, is stirring enough in stimulating the emotions of the readers regarding the pathetic conditions of the people living in the war-torn country of Iraq. Set against the backdrop of the America's invasion of Iraq, the novel charts the anonymous narrator's journey from a person scared of death to someone undertaking the "greatest operation ever carried out on enemy territory, a thousand times more awesome than the attacks of September 11..."(Khadra, 2008 p.11). The novel hints at the destruction of a country that was once the cradle of some of the oldest civilizations of the world. The plot of the novel revealed in flashback takes us to the Iraqi village of Kafr Karam the people of which represents those who have no political ambition and whose main concern is to take care of their basic survival needs and live happily. From the beginning of the narrative, the readers see the narrator as someone sensitive to other people's sadness, someone with no iota of violence and hatred in him. Through the course of the narrative, the readers witness a volcanic eruption of anger and hatred in the personality of the narrator towards the injustices done to him, and he becomes someone ready to sacrifice his life in order to perpetuate the 'greatest' terrorist crime ever committed. After his return to the village, the narrator witnessed some of the worst humanitarian crimes committed against his own people by the Western forces. The amount of hatred that the West has garnered by laying waste in many countries of the world is also very subtly reflected by Mohsin Hamid in his book *The reluctant Fundamentalist*:

So when I tell you I was pleased at the slaughter of thousands of innocents, I do so with a profound sense of perplexity... I was caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to her knees...Do you feel no joy at the video clips- so prevalent these days- of America munitions laying waste the structures of your enemies?(Hamid , 2008 p.73)

The above quoted statements seem to get proper attestation in the *The Sirens of Baghdad*, which portrays the devastation caused by the Western forces in a foreign country. The Western media refrained from portraying these humanitarian crimes committed by the Western forces with the amount of intensity they deserved: "...photos of American soldiers torturing and humiliating Iraqis are one example of private acts made public. While there has been public condemnation of these photos, there have also been attempts to turn them back into private acts...a couple of bad apples."(Steuter and Wills, 2008 p.22). In front of his eyes, the narrator saw the western forces shooting down the village simpleton just because he ran away after getting scared. The boy was held in great affection by the narrator and the villagers. Gradually, the narrator starts to realise how his countryman are deprived of the basic human rights by the outside forces. After the incident with the

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village simpleton, another shock came in the form of a wedding reception being completely annihilated by the U.S. bombing in which many people lost their lives. Finally, the nail in the coffin was the beating and the humiliation of his father by the western forces. To the people of Bedouin community, losing honour is worst than death. Deeply pained and tormented by the humiliation and torture of his family members, the narrator decides to travel to Baghdad in order to take retribution against those who are responsible for his plight. Through his novel, the writer tries to draw attention of the readers to one of the main driving forces that led to the young men of decent origin to undertake heinous act of crime. The mainstream western discourse which portrays the West as the innocent victim of radicalism gets dismantled in the current narrative provided by Yasmina Khadra.

“War on Terror”: A Policy Causing Millions of Innocent Lives in Iraq

Since the novel *The Sirens of Baghdad* is set against the backdrop of the conflicts that are taking place in the war-torn country of Iraq, a brief history of the conflicts in this zone would be helpful in fully comprehending the crises in the novel. Once known as the cradle of some of the oldest civilizations in the world, Iraq has witnessed wars and many humanitarian crimes since the turn of the 20th century. The country can mainly be divided into three parts based on ethnicity and religion- Kurdistan in the extreme north, Shias in the South and Sunnis in the North, and this division is crucial in the creation of many ethnic and religious conflicts in that country. In *The Sirens of Baghdad*, we see the author briefly hinting at this religious divides, and the gulf that exists between these communities: “The black flags on the roofs indicated that this was a Shiite community; the residents wished to distance themselves from the doings of the Sunnis and to line up on the side of those who were burning incense to the new regime.”(Khadra, 2008 p.119). At the end of the Gulf War in 1991, the UN had an agreement with Saddam Husain to destroy all nuclear, chemical and biological weapons stockpile fearing Iraq might be developing nuclear weapons. After the 9/11 incident, George Bush Jr. declared Saddam’s regime as a threat to the world branding it as part of the new axis of evil, which also includes Iran and North Korea. The USA declared a policy of ‘War on Terror’, which gave them the right to attack any nation, state or nation-state entities that is suspected to be harbouring terrorism. In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said emphasised how the USA has taken over the role of the former colonial superpowers in the guise of championing peace in the world:

“Yet the idea of American leadership and exceptionalism is never absent; no matter what the United States does, these authorities often do not want it to be an imperial

power like the others it followed, preferring instead the notion of ‘world responsibility’ as a rationale for what it does.”(Said, 1994 p.366)

The West attacked places like Afghanistan, Yemen, and the country of Iraq was also come under the microscope. But here the reason was weapons of mass destruction. In Nov 2002, the UN resolution charged Iraq of violating sanctions and threatened serious consequences. The mainstream Western media “Rather than serving as hostile medium, challenging government statements about the war, reporters interpreted their commitment to “objectivity” as excluding or limiting critical approaches to evaluating the Iraq war”(Diamaggio, 2009 p.78). In March 2003, the USA led coalition forces attacked Iraq with the stated objective of removing Saddam from power. This was one of the greatest lies of the 21st century because Iraq had no infrastructural facilities to develop weapons of mass destruction. One of the greatest intellectuals of the 21st century Noam Chomsky has talked about the actual intentions of the USA behind its invasion of Iraq:

“In brief, Iraq is to remain a client state, agreeing to allow permanent U.S. military installations (called “enduring” in the preferred Orwellism) , granting the United States the right to conduct combat operations freely, and ensuring U.S. investors priority in accessing its huge oil resources... “(Chomsky, 2011 p.143)

There were anti-war rallies against this move of USA all over the world with only support from UK, Australia and Poland:

“You see? You’re already on the wrong track. The whole world isn’t our enemy. Remember all the people who protested the invasion all over the world, millions of them marching in Madrid, Rome, Paris, Tokyo, South America, Asia. All of them were on our side, and they still are.” (Khadra ,2008 p.182)

In three weeks, Baghdad and all the major cities were captured by the ground forces and Saddam was captured in December 2003 near Tikrit and after the court trial, he was executed in 2006.

The deposition of Saddam Hussein was one of the biggest blunders made by USA as the power vacuum left by the dictator was filled by multiple groups leading to armed struggle against the occupying forces which leads to instability in the country. Jeremy Greenstock, former UK ambassador to the UN and special envoy for Iraq, has talked about the failure of USA policies in the aftermath of war in Iraq:

“The costs of war have to include its aftermath, because acceptance of the need for war is linked to a judgement that war has eventually brought about a better state of affairs. In the case of Iraq in 2003, the post-war costs were never planned for or calculated with the same rigour as the war itself.” (Greenstock ,2017 p.11)

In such situation, elections were held in 2005, and power came in the hands of the long-oppressed Shia majority people, who now started oppressing the Sunnis leading to violent clashes, ethnic violence for years. Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two major players vying for influence in Iraq, were supporting their respective proxy militias. Under such situations, Al-Qaeda became very active in Iraq leading the resistance at many places, and large scale of ethnic violence took place in Iraq from 2004-2007. Different sectarian groups fought against the USA army and the Iraqi security forces and also among each other. These insurgencies brought huge instability in Iraq for many many years. The terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda started bombing major Shia majority cities accusing them of being discriminatory against the Sunnis. During this insurgency period from 2003-2011, millions of people lost their lives. Nouri Al Maliki, prime minister of Iraq from 2006-2014, centralised power and ran government on Shia sectarian lines, which led to the alienation of Sunni population. Although the Sunnis rose up in protests in many provinces, they were brutally repressed, and such conditions paved the way for ISIL's rise in north Western Iraq in 2013-2014. This is the beginning of another civil war in Iraq.

John Updike's *Terrorist*: Compliance to the Western Discourse

“In the post-Cold War world flags count and so do other symbols of cultural identity, including crosses, crescents, and even head coverings, because culture counts, and cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people...For people seeking identity and reinventing ethnicity, enemies are essential, and the potentially most dangerous enmities occur across the fault lines between the world's major civilizations.” (Huntington, 2016 p.20)

In order to better comprehend how Yasmina Khadra's fiction *The Sirens of Baghdad* is posing a counter-narrative to the Western stereotypes regarding this region, the present article will compare the fiction with a novel written by a western writer: John Updike's *Terrorists*, another fiction dealing with the issue of radicalism. *Terrorist*, although tries to penetrate into the psychological workings of a terrorist character, is clearly not free from the influence of the stereotypes regarding the Islamic culture:

“In the aftermath of 9/11, public discussion of the causes of terrorism was largely curtailed...Culturalists, whose analysis tended to prevail, saw terrorists as motivated by a fanaticism that was inherent to Islam and did not require much in the way of further analysis.” (Kundnani, 2014 p.115)

From the beginning of the narrative, an attempt is clearly made especially while portraying the Islamic faith to create an 'us' versus 'them' discourse. Only those aspects of this faith are emphasised which will vindicate Islam to be intolerant and violent towards other faiths:

“Infidels, they think safety lies in accumulation of the things of this world, and in the corrupting diversions of the television set. They are slaves to images, false ones of happiness and affluence...They are paid to instil virtue and democratic values by the state government down in Trenton...but the values they believe in are Godless: biology, chemistry and physics.” (Updike, 2007 p. 4)

While giving lesson to Ahmed, the protagonist of the novel, Shaikh Rashid, the local preacher, quotes those verses from the Holy Quran, which justifies punishment for the disbelievers. These cherry picking quotes from the Islamic scripture suggest that Updike's view on Islam is in compliance with the Western stereotypical notion which sees this faith as a religion of violence and mercilessness: “...the way Allah allows so many grotesquely mistaken and corrupt religions to lure millions down to Hell forever...”(Updike, 2007 p.17). The kind of hostile words that are put into the mouths of the Muslim characters in the fiction clearly reinforce the Western stereotypical narrative regarding Islam and the Arabic culture. Rather than providing a comprehensive understanding of the culture of the Other, which will bridge the gap, we see a reassertion of the fear and hatred for the Other: ‘ “Her religion is the wrong one,” Ahmed informs Tylenol, “and anyway she said she had no use for it but to sing in that foolish choir”(Updike, 2007 p.15). A balanced view that is needed to nurture understanding and empathy is clearly missing in the narrative.

One of the reasons for Ahmed's angst against the society in which he was living was his failure to establish a self-defined identity of his own:

“...if social and political life don't offer you opportunities to form communities and associate yourself with things that are meaningful to you, people look for other ways to do it, and religion's an obvious one.”(Chomsky, 2003 p.50)

Born of an Egyptian father and an Irish American mother, Ahmed was left by his father at a very early age. Ahmed's search for a father and an identity leads him to find a refuge in the religion of Islam and the preacher Shaikh Rashid. When the readers encounter Ahmed for the first time in the novel, they already see that the radical ideas are being injected in his mind by Shaikh Rashid. Ahmed sees the American society as a barren wasteland lacking in divine and spiritual structure. He also sees the loose family structure of the American society as standing in total juxtaposition with the divine dictates:

“The teachers, weak Christians and non-observant Jews, make a show of teaching virtue and religious self-restraint, but their shifty eyes and hollow voices betray their

lack of belief. They are paid to say these things, by the city of New Prospect and the state of New Jersey. They lack true faith; they are not on the Straight Path; they are unclean.” (Updike, 2007 p.3)

This angst towards the lack of family structure in the American society is probably strengthened by the lack of attention that he has received from his mother, Teresa Mulley. He started despising the values and principles of the western society. Teresa in her manners and attitudes stands in total juxtaposition with her son Ahmed, who is so much deeply and blindly engrossed in his faith that he is ready to go any extent to prove his allegiance to it. The desperation with which Ahmed clings to his religion is clear from his conversation with Charlie Chehab, a CIA agent in the guise of a supporter of Islamic fundamentalism. Updike's emphasis on Ahmed's identity as a Muslim appears to be a deliberate effort to ignore the fact that “Muslims, like all other people in the world, have many different pursuits, and not all of their priorities and values need be placed within their singular identity of being Islamic” (Sen, 2007 p. 14).

From the course of the narrative, it is clear that Updike's purported aim is to show how Islam fulfils Ahmed's desire for long-lost masculine figure. The fact that one can be drawn to Islam, the faith practised by 1.5 billion people all over the world, purely on the basis of the principles it preaches is clearly missing from the course of the narrative. All these show that Islam is not a faith for redemption, but a faith for fulfilling an emotional lacuna. By his adherence to the faith of Islam, Ahmad finds a precious identity that he does not want to shun away by integrating into the American society, which he considers to be amoral. At the end when he agrees to participate in the suicide bombing plot, he sees this as an opportunity to come closer to God, the long-desired father figure in his life. Throughout the novel, we see Ahmad as a figure vulnerable of losing his faith. At the end of the novel, he abandons his faith after realising the importance of life over death.

The Sirens of Baghdad: A Reversal of the Western Discourse

“He positioned himself against journalistic discourse by saying that he wrote *The Sirens of Baghdad* to counterbalance the televised images depicting revolutionary Iraqis as barbarians. At the same time, he invited the public to take sides between the ignorant television spectator and the enlightened reader.” (Agerup, 2018 p.182)

In Yasmina Khadra's *The Sirens of Baghdad*, the readers encounter the story of a person completely innocent and non-violent at the beginning of the narrative undertaking the 'greatest' terrorist attack ever committed. Unlike Updike's protagonist Ahmad whom we encounter at the beginning of the novel as a teenage boy already been indoctrinated into the radical ideology and ready to commit any

violent act of terrorism, the readers see Khadra's protagonist as a simple, innocent, non-violent person, not completely committed to his religion and someone whose main concern is to take care of his basic survival needs and live happily. This projection of a simple man's transformation into a terrorist gives the opportunity to explore some of the main drives that led to radicalism more thoroughly.

As the readers enter Yasmina Khadra's narrative, they get a detailed pen-portrayal of the life of the protagonist belonging to the desert Iraqi village of Kafr Karam. He is twenty six years old and belongs to the Bedouin clan. Set against the backdrop of America's invasion of Iraq, the novel shows how war denies the basic human rights to the people. The narrator is forced to leave his university and return to his village because of the war: "The university was abandoned to vandals, and my dreams were destroyed" (Khadra, 2008 p.19). The story begins in flashback with the narrator currently in Beirut ruminating over his his life's journey. His appearance does not give the readers any sign of the aggressiveness in his character. Unlike Updike's Ahmad who is alienated from his family, the protagonist is someone who is very much attached with his family members. As the course of the narrative unfolds, the narrator, even when he is depressed after observing the brutality and injustices committed by the foreign forces, does not take resort to violence immediately, but finally when the honour and pride of his family was injured, he took resort to violence as a form of revenge: "I was condemned to wash away the insult in blood, until the rivers and the oceans turned as red as the cut on Bahia's neck, as my mother's eyes, as the fire in my guts, which was already preparing me for the hell I knew was waiting..."(Khadra, 2008 p.102). The human side of the narrator is clearly shown with the narrator being closely associated not only with his family members, but also with his fellow villagers. Even at the end when the narrator is about to commit the ultimate act, the memory of his village and his cousin Kadem with both of them listening to a song by the Lebanese singer Fainuz weakens his resolve of committing such terrible act: "Kadem! I see myself in his house again, looking at the photograph of his first wife." (Khadra ,2008p.298) So, from the beginning of the narrative, the narrator of *The Sirens of Baghdad* appears to be more life-like character than Updike's Ahmad, who appears to be totally insensitive towards everything around him, and only attached with his religious teacher: "Ahmed knows it is a sin to be vain of his appearance: self-love is a form of competition with God, and competition is what He cannot abide." (Updike 2007 p.18) The narrator, although born in a Muslim family, does not appear to be deeply religious, and so unlike Ahmad, religion is not shown to be one of the driving forces for his hostile nature. It is not religion, but his personal motive for revenge that led him to take resort to such violent act.

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From the beginning of the narrative, Kafr Karam is shown as a poor, but happy village, residing peace-loving people whose main concern in life is to take care of their basic survival needs and live happily. All these projection of the serene village of Kafr Karam actually counters the Western narrative that the Islamic culture is inherently violent, and radicalism is a natural offshoot of the principles that they imbibe in their lives:

\ “Instead of scholarship, we often find only journalists making extravagant statements, which are constantly picked up and further dramatized by the media. Looming over their work is the slippery concept, to which they constantly allude, of “fundamentalism”, a word that has come to be associated almost automatically with Islam...”(Said,1997 p.xvi).

The fact that Arab Muslims are not born with inherent hatred for the west and their culture is clearly portrayed in the narrative. While war ravages havoc in the rest of Iraq, Kafr Karam remains quite peaceful and isolated. But this peace does not last for a long time. The novel clearly portrayed how the foreign occupation of their country deprived them of the basic human rights- health care, education, right to move freely, and most importantly the right to live. But it seems the calmness of the village was the quietness before the storm. It is a premonition of the gradual destruction of the village.

Countering the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ narrative

“In the films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low...Lurking behind all these images is the menace of *Jihad*.” (Said, 2001 p.287).

Unlike the conventional western narrative in which the Self is shown to be the victim of the Other, as the case in Updike's *Terrorist*, Khadra's narrative represents the other side of the story by reversing the conventional roles. The novel advocates against a foreign occupation in Iraq, and how it worsened the situation in an already war torn country. In the course of the narrative, we see the villagers expressing their dissatisfaction and concern about the foreign power residing in their country. Although they consider the reign of Saddam as barbaric and cruel, they suspect the foreign occupation of their country as a mere ploy to acquire their natural resources (oil):

“Why do you think they're here, the Americans? The Falcon went on obstinately. “Is it Christian charity? They're businessmen, we're commodities, and they're ready to trade. Yesterday, it was oil for food. Today, it's Saddam for oil...If the Americans had

an ounce of human kindness; they wouldn't treat their blacks and their Latinos like subhumans" (Khadra, 2008 p.33).

But from their conversation, the author also made it clear that it is the lack of unity among the Iraqi people that led to the flourishing of a tyrant like Saddam, and the invasion of foreign power in their country.

However, Khadra is adept enough in pointing out the difference that exists between Arab and Western culture. Characters like Dr. Jalal and Professor Ghany have spent a better part of their lives in the West, and after experiencing discrimination and injustices in the West became an acute critic of the Western culture, which they see as the representative of a xenophobic society, and of immorality and injustices. In this 'Clash of Civilizations', Dr Jalal now sees violence and extremism as the only means to counter western aggressiveness. But, rather than showing religion as one of the driving forces for radicalism, Khadra emphasises the political and social issues. Dr Jalal categorically confessed how all his contribution remained unacknowledged because of his Arab origin. His disappointment for the west is clearly revealed when he remarks "We have nothing more to hope for from the West. The West loves only itself and thinks only of itself." (Khadra, 2008 p. 9). But, Khadra rejects Dr Jalal's view of violence as the only means of countering the West through the character of Mohammad Seen, who appears to be the mouthpiece of the writer, who tries in vain to persuade Dr Jalal to return to the path of peace and reconciliation.

Misery and Political instability as Motives for Terrorism

"...let us also light a candle or two for the approx. 10,000 or more who starved to death in Afghanistan almost every month, the approx. 5,000 children who died in Iraq every week because of lack of medicines due to an embargo put into place by us...Let us not traffic in the worth of human lives." (Khadra, 2008 p.11).

In Khadra's narrative, in contrast to the Western ones, one of the main driving forces that led to radicalism is shown to be the hopelessness among the youth. Once the cradle of some of the oldest civilizations of the world, the dilapidated, decryped and destroyed country now breathes no hope, nor does the city of Baghdad: "In the past, I'd really loved Baghdad. 'The past? It seemed like a former life.'" (Khadra, 2008 p.132) Witnessing human tragedy in the streets of Baghdad made the protagonist realise the pretence of the western forces, who dethroned the brutal regime of Saddam Husain only to fulfil their own ambition of occupying the oil field of Iraq, and not to bring peace, solidarity and justice to the people of Iraq: "The truth is, they don't have any more scruples than a pack of hyenas let loose in a sheep barn. I've seen them fire on children and old people as though they were cardboard training targets." (Khadra, 2008 p.127)The chaos that emanates after the

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destruction of Saddam's regime becomes almost impossible to regulate. Watching the human tragedy all around, the narrator becomes insensitive to the basic human feelings of sympathy, kindness and empathy towards others. Quite similar to Updike's Ahmed, the narrator became alienated from the immediate society in which he was living, but here this alienation happens not because of his allegiance to the religious fundamentalism, but by watching the human tragedy around. The kind of overwhelming death, decay and destruction that the narrator witnessed throughout the course of his life led him to radicalism.

The transformation of an innocent man scared of killing an insect to a man capable of undertaking the biggest terrorist attack ever committed does not happen at a flash. The mental scars that he received after observing the injustices and the violation of his family's honour by the Western forces made him a stoic person capable of committing any crime to soothe his mind. The narrator had the horrible experience of witnessing the demise of the mentally boy, Sulayman, who was shot down by the western forces just because he got scared and ran. This horrible experience haunts the narrator for the rest of his life:

"I saw puffs of dust, lots of them, bursting from Sulayman's back, marking the impact points. Every bullet that struck the fugitive pierced me through and through. An intense tingling sensation consumed my legs, rose and convulsed my stomach...Sulayman's head exploded like a melon..." (Khadra, 2008 p.57)

This incident appeared as a huge blow not only to the narrator, but to the whole village. While the whole village mourns the death of their 'purest creature', some young men from the village decided to take revenge by joining the rebel groups who were fighting against the Western forces. In spite of his immense angst against the western forces, the narrator refrained himself from taking any violent revenge.

The second incident was the bombing off of a wedding reception by the American missiles. Watching the carnage all around, they realised that violence should be met with violence. They could either silently wait for death or fight against the western forces and die. The narrator realises "how incongruous our existence is, how flimsy our certainties, how precarious our knowledge"(Khadra, 2008 p.97). Most of the young men from the village choose the latter option, but the narrator resolve not to join violence made him stay in his village and suffer silently. Finally, the mutilation of his family's honour shatters all his resolve and made him join the insurgency as a form of revenge upon the western powers:

"I saw only a distraught mother and a painfully thin father in shapeless underwear, his eyes wounded, his arms dangling at his sides, stumbling as the soldiers shoved him

along...And I saw while my family's honour lay stricken on the floor, I saw what it was forbidden to see...A Westerner can't understand, can't suspect the dimensions of the disaster." (Khadra, 2008 p.101, 102)

Revenge as the tool of recovering the Self-esteem

All these experiences full of horror and nightmares create havoc in the character of the narrator, as he fails to realise his previous self:

"I finished getting dressed, and then, without a glance at my sister or my cousin, I grabbed my bag and started down the steep path in the direction of the main trail. Don't turn around, an interior voice admonished me. You're already gone."(Khadra ,2008 p.109)

He now sees revenge as the only means to restore his family's honour and self-esteem. This appears to be a re-incarnation of the narrator, and this re-incarnated self cares nothing but avenge for the injuries he has suffered. Unlike the archetypal terrorists who are shown to be lacking in honour, Khadra's narrator is a man loyally devoted to the principles his clan and its code of behaviour. His intense desire for revenge compounded with the hardships that he has faced on a daily basis in the dismal condition of Baghdad triggers his rage to the pinnacles. It is as if the narrator dies the day the honour of his family was violated, and the only thing that keeps him alive is his desire for revenge that could give his death a sense meaning. Unlike the western narrative where the terrorists characters are shown to be harbouring an inborn hatred for the west and their culture, Khadra's narrator's hatred towards the west is based on the injustices inflicted on his life, it is a deeply personal tragedy compounded with the tragedy done to his fellow countrymen that led him to nurture such intense passion of hatred against the west. Finally, the narrator's decision of aborting the plan which could put the entire planet on the brink of complete annihilation shows the touch of humanity in his character. The human side of his nature refrained him from committing such heinous crime. Finally, at the moment of sacrificing his life, the narrator realised the importance of life over death: life is the greatest gift bestowed to men.

Conclusion

The character of Mohammed Seen, the novelist, seems to be the mouthpiece of the writer, who voices the writer's views regarding the role of the intellectuals in bringing reconciliation, justice and peace in these conflicting regions:

"You were an enlightened man. We're the world's conscience now, you and I and the other intellectual orphans, jeered by our own people and spurned by the hidebound establishment. We're in the minority, of course, but we exist. And we're the only ones

capable of changing things, you and I. The West is out of the race. It's been overtaken by events. The battle, the real battle, is taking place among the Muslim elite, that is, between us two and the radical clerics.”(Khadra, 2008 p.275)

His castigation of Dr. Jalal's argument that “we're in the midst of a clash of civilizations” (Khadra, 2008 p.281), and we must pick a side clearly reveals the broad vision of the author championing the importance of peace over violence:

“Our victory will mean the salvation of the whole world. Our defeat will mean chaos. It allows us to know what's going on, who's right and who's wrong, where some are flawed, why others are blocked. The West is mired in doubt. It's used to imposing its theories as though they were absolute truths, but now they're meeting resistance and coming apart” (Khadra, 2008 p.275).

The author actually believes that the Western stereotyping of these regions is one of the main obstacles in the process of establishing peace in the region as it directly plays into the hands of the radicals who want to create an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narrative. By countering the Western stereotyping in the novel, the author actually reminds everyone the role of the intellectuals in bringing peace, solidarity and justice in the world. The author urges the concerning citizens of the world to question the “pre-existing forms of continuity, all these syntheses that are accepted without questions, and he believes ‘the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed” (Foucault, 2010 p.25). The narrator's refraining from committing ‘the greatest terrorist act’ shows his realization of the value of life over death. Despite setbacks, difficulties, disappointments, one must stick to the very particle of existence that nature has bestowed on us.

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