

## A solitary swallow

**As an officer in the Algerian army he was forced to use his wife's name as a *nome de plume* when writing novels. The question of who Yasmina Khadra is leads to many interesting answers.**

Yasmina Khadra has just recently completed his trilogy of novels from Kabul, Palestine and Baghdad. As the first of them, *The Swallows of Kabul*, is translated into Norwegian, we have the opportunity to meet him in the Library Bar at Oslo's Hotel Bristol. We ask him to reveal key elements to his intriguing background.

"I was born in a village in the Sahara. My mother was a nomad, my dad a nurse, later an officer. I was enrolled as a cadet in a military school in 1964, when I was nine years old. During my time in the army I wrote eight books. I started using my pseudonym when I ran into problems with censorship. I left the army in 2000, and the following year I moved to Aix-en-Provence. Only then did I disclose my true identity."

"I had started out writing poetry in Arabic, but now I stick to novels, and always in French. My most important literary influences are Albert Camus and John Steinbeck. A lot of people mention Camus in connection with the literary universe I have created in *The Swallows of Kabul*. This book is a Greek tragedy, told as an Arabic folk tale."

### **Non-lives in Kabul**

This literary universe consists – among others – of two married couples. Mohsen and Zunaira are young and educated, but Zunaira loses all respect for her husband after he admits to having participated in the stoning of a woman, and more so later when he lets himself be humiliated by members of the Taliban. Atiq, on the other hand, is a watchman in a prison (which symptomatically used to be a hospital), while his wife is sick and tied to their home. One day Atiq gets a fleeting glimpse of a woman without her veil in a prison cell, and falls blindly in love. This is not far from being the only ray of light in the book.

"I got the idea for the title of the book while studying the women dressed in chadors when they are walking. But otherwise the atmosphere is rather claustrophobic, and that is intentional. One can be imprisoned in a cell, but also in a home, or behind a chador. And you must bear in mind that when a woman is wearing something like this, it is hard for her to be recognized, even by her own husband. Some of the characters in the book have random but fateful meetings with each other without knowing who the others involved really are. I have used the French term *devivre*, that people are "un-living" or "not-living", about their conditions in Kabul."

Yasmina Khadra repeatedly underlines that he has first and foremost been looking to create a literary universe, rather than a political novel or a testimony. He says that *The Swallows of Kabul* is a tale of people whose lives are dominated by politics, but the ambition of the novel in itself is existentialist. Regarding his research for the book, he somewhat surprisingly admits to never having been to Kabul.

### **An ecumenical outlook**

"The important thing is to know the people, and I have plenty of experience with this kind from my time in the Sahara. The Islamic terror in Algeria is full of Taliban doctrines. There is

something called the Peshawar school, and many an Algerian man has visited Peshawar in Northern Pakistan to let himself be introduced to the ideology behind this terror.”

Khadra is himself a deeply religious Muslim who prays five times a day, but he is quite free-spoken, and has little respect for religious leaders. When I show him an interview he has done with the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, where he seems to promote an ecumenical view of life, he nods his head contentedly at his own quotation.

“I am a Muslim, that is true, but nothing is written in stone. The Koran exists outside of time, but the laws are made by man, so they are not always up-to-date. But my Muslim faith is no hindrance for modernity.”

### **Power and myths**

What Yasmina Khadra had claimed in *Haaretz* was that different believers have placed the various prophets before the one deity that the monotheistic religions have in common. This creates distance: ordinary people forget that they are only human, and in this way remove themselves from God.

“All religions want to unite people, while the men of religion, in fact all men, are more interested in power and politics. The Arab monarchies, for instance Saudi Arabia, used to encourage the Taliban, but now I think they regret this. But too late; they have revealed, once and for all, that they are more interested in ideology than the well-being of their people.”

“Unfortunately this is true of the West as well. They have created a myth about Afghanistan that they can sell at home; if you want to kill your dog, you say it has rabies. I am also involved in myth-making, but I merely describe the Taliban, I do not take their lives.”

“Sometimes I use the term “theopathy”, trying to denote a form of paranoia that comes into being when you take an individual away from its living environment and turn it into a purely contemplative creature. If you pray all the time, you end up being ashamed of your human essence. A deeply religious person will thus convince himself that he has a Messianic message, and the world will appear to be unclean.”

### ***Arabia Felix***

Khadra has also written about the conflict in Palestine. The hardships of the Palestinian people are continuously in the news, but what are their Muslim brothers and sisters doing to help them?

He shakes his head: “The governments of the Muslim countries have not done anything for the Palestinians, but look, they don’t even take care of their own citizens! We have the money to build a “Happy Arabia”, but we never get around it. We are governed by idiots, and that is a fateful irony. As a people, we are known throughout the World for our hospitality, and our contribution to history has been great. It is our own leaders, along with the West, that make us appear as barbarians.”

*What about the Taliban? Is it true that they are now increasingly using class rhetoric?*

“No, the Taliban are nihilists. They claim that every single remnant of colonialism must be eradicated, and thus they turn themselves into vandals.”

## **Our last chance**

*What about the educated middle class, like Mohsen and Zunaira in your book? Isn't the key to success now in the hands of the cultured class?*

“In reality, this is now our only chance, because both politics and religion have failed. Even if the crisis we're facing was originally a political one, culture is now our only chance. But at the same time, some honesty is required from the West, so that they stop manipulating others and themselves. The financial world probably doesn't believe in peace at all, and for many it is not even a goal. The areas worst hit by the crisis are suffering from artificial or technical unemployment that comes as a consequence of power cuts, war and so on. This condition is not necessary, surely they can admit that?”

“I am closer to Mother Theresa than the Pope, and closer to Médecins Sans Frontières than the French Left. In a French context, I have closer connections with NGOs than any political party. Basically, I don't think that war can ever contribute to a solution, but I am not a military adviser, so I cannot express any opinion about which coalitions should be formed at this point.”

Yasmina Khadra nods his head enthusiastically when I ask him if he has seen Gillo Pontecorvo's docudrama *The Battle of Algiers* from 1966. This classic is an effective demonstration of the growing brutality among the French troops and the Algerian resistance alike in the conflict that haunted his country during his youth. At one point in the film one of the villains, a cynical, but competent leader of the military unit in question, is facing a united and critical press corps. He doesn't buckle, but declares that it is not him, but *them* – from the far left to the far right – that have sent troops to Algeria.

Both *The Battle of Algiers* and Yasmina Khadra's own body of work serve as reminders that culture is often more important than we imagine.