THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Alongside Sexuality

MATTHEW BRAUER

From his first writings to his last, Abdelkébir Khatibi credits his practice as a researcher-writer combining ethnography and literature to Victor Segalen (1878–1919), the French naval doctor, writer, and theorist of cultural diversity (Forsdick 181–95). Khatibi adopts Segalen's figure of the *exote*—an individual with a special sensitivity to cultural difference (Segalen 21)—to envision another's view of the world without believing oneself to have become like that other person (Khatibi, *Le scribe* 42). Different from Segalen, however, Khatibi postulates that cultural difference cannot be considered apart from sexual difference. In *Figures de l'étranger dans la littérature française* (*Figures of the Foreigner in French Literature* [1987]), Khatibi argues that Segalen's *exote* falters in encounters with "[l]'Étrangère," the female other, who is "occultée, statufiée" ("obscured, petrified"; 51) in abstract, unhuman representations.[1] In Segalen, the *exote*'s quest for diversity collapses into a reification of male subjectivity and an objectification of female difference.

Khatibi's reframing of Segalen is reprised in his literary writing, where it is often female characters that stage encounters with difference, typically as part of a male-female couple, like the beguiling Nafissa, who launches Idriss on a mysterious investigation in *Triptyque de Rabat* (*Rabat Tryptic* [1993]), or the lovers who inspire the master artisan Raïssi in *Pèlerinage d'un artiste amoureux* (*Pilgrimage of an Artist in Love* [2003]). Moreover, Khatibi's couples are often of mixed Maghrebi and European origins, like Gérard Namir and his Swedish lover, Lena, in *Un été à Stockholm* (*A Summer in Stockholm* [1990]) and the Moroccan man and European woman in *Amour bilingue* (*Love in Two Languages* [1983]).

And yet, very little has been said about sexuality and sexual difference in Khatibi's writings, literary, critical, or otherwise. Khatibi ironizes his Arab compatriots' prudish reticence to discuss sexuality with

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a rejoinder derived from the Hadith tradition: "Il n'y a pas de pudeur en matière de religion" ("There is no shyness in religion"; *Maghreb pluriel* 149; *Plural Maghreb* 95). Critical interpreters of Khatibi have largely not broached questions of sex, either. The essay "La sexualité selon le Coran" ("Sexuality according to the Quran") from Khatibi's influential *Maghreb pluriel* (*Plural Maghreb* [1983]) remains overlooked.

I hypothesize here that Khatibi treats all difference as originally sexual. I propose this hypothesis regarding sexual difference in Khatibi as both a corrective and a provocation. The established reception of Khatibi as a postcolonial supplement to the work of celebrated colleagues like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida displays at times its own prudishness, hesitating at the texture of Khatibi's thought born of the promiscuous mingling of European and Maghrebi cultural, literary, conceptual, and stylistic elements—all essential elements of Khatibi's description and decolonial deconstruction (Rice 117) of the metaphysics of light that he argues is common to Mediterranean civilizations and monotheisms (Khatibi, *La langue* 88–89).

Testing this hypothesis about the primary nature of sexual difference in Khatibi's writing requires attention to neglected constituents of Khatibian discourse, as well as a reconsideration of how sexuality inflects the cultural and linguistic manifestations of difference that have predominated in readings of Khatibi. I first present Khatibi's account in *Maghreb pluriel* of the Qur'anic discourse on sexuality, identifying three constituents of a Khatibian analysis of sexuality: sexual difference and ontology, sexual dissymmetry and social inequality, and the discursive reproduction of sexuality. Then, I show how these elements inform Khatibi's narrative of multilingualism in *Amour bilingue*.

Defining Khatibi's Discursive Field of Sexuality

The essay "La sexualité selon le Coran" in *Maghreb pluriel* is one of the only writings where Khatibi discusses sexuality through a critical and theoretical lens, rather than a literary one. By pairing a focused reading of the Qur'an with a broad range of interlocutors and by shifting rhetorically between multiple perspectives, Khatibi unfolds for his reader the complex discursive domain in which he will work on and with a concept of sexuality.

"La sexualité selon le Coran" opens with a response to previous studies of sexuality in Islam that fail, in Khatibi's estimation, to account for a necessary translation of both "sexualité en islam *et* l'islam selon la sexualité" ("sexuality in Islam *and* Islam according to sexuality"; *Maghreb pluriel* 151; *Plural Maghreb* 96). These studies, Khatibi observes, import the paradigmatic analysis of "sexuality" as a discourse of truth from the first volume of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (149–50; 95–96). Because these elements lack direct correspondents in the Arabic language, Khatibi argues that "sexuality" must transform in translation relative to the target language and the bodies that speak it. He shows that, unlike Foucauldian sexuality, the Qur'an's "discours primordial sur la sexualité en islam" ("primordial discourse on sexuality in Islam") is legal in nature, regulating sexual functions in social relations. What sexuality is remains in flux (150; 96).

Even as Khatibi narrows his scope to Qur'anic discourse, his analysis places this discourse in a zone of translation. On a rhetorical level, Khatibi's essay frequently shifts between others' positions and its own, as well as between argumentation and metacommentary. Khatibi uses this narrative strategy of commentary to remark directly on the Qur'anic text without deferring to authoritative critical intermediaries. At the same time, the outside influences he brackets in his reading—not only Islamic theology and jurisprudence and European philosophy, but also Christian doctrine and notions from Western art—return repeatedly throughout, signaling the impossibility of commentary without conceptual translation or interference. These are the characteristic dynamics of Khatibian double critique, making "La sexualité selon le Coran" an essential complement to the same volume's essay "Double critique" and its study of colonial sociology.

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Sexual Difference as a Translation of Metaphysics

Khatibi's central claim in "La sexualité selon le Coran" is that legal discourse on the regulation of sexual activity—"sexuality in Islam"—is a means of translating the metaphysical order of the universe articulated in the Qur'an into a human social order on Earth: "Islam according to sexuality." Consequently, speaking of sexuality is like speaking of Islam: speaking of sexuality translates divine creation into human procreation, while speaking of Islam translates the unicity and otherness of God into human language.

As Khatibi reads the Qur'an's view of sexuality, God creates all things directly, while remaining absolutely self-indissociable and other to the created world. In human procreation, fertilization is treated as a divine act of creation, not just a biological event. The child is therefore not subordinate to the father as his offspring, but is rather his equal before God as created beings. In this sense, Khatibi says, fathers beget sons without fathering, reproducing the absolute unicity of divine creation by sublimating the sexual difference inherent to human reproduction. Replicating cosmogeny in human conception reduces women to what Khatibi calls a "chiasme" ("chiasmus"; *Maghreb pluriel* 172; *Plural Maghreb* 113), a purely formal operator for reproducing cosmology in the social realm. Legal discourse on sexuality in the Qur'an seeks to safeguard this circularity between the metaphysical and the social through a strict logic regulating the licit and illicit exchange of women, as in marriage. Licit sexuality maintains this circularity; illicit sexuality disrupts it.

It is therefore illicit, Khatibi notes, for Yusuf (the Biblical Joseph), sold into slavery to a master who considers adopting him, to have sex with his master's wife, Zulaykha, who seduces Yusuf. Khatibi's commentary on this scene highlights the tensions within a theological discourse that sublimates divinely created sexual difference out of the social order so as to treat human procreation as homologous to divine creation. Yusuf, as the object of seduction, becomes like a woman because being female is "son sexe caché" ("his hidden sex"; 167; 108), in the sense that God created man and woman in one body and then separated woman out of man. Yusuf is restrained from temptation by a divine reminder of his prophetic status "pour que l'inversion entre l'homme et la femme soit la parade d'une séduction impossible" ("so that the inversion of man and woman becomes the parade of an impossible seduction"; 167; 108), an illustration of the metaphysical principle behind the law. For the same reason, Zulaykha falls into madness because, in Khatibi's interpretation of Qur'anic dictates, "elle n'obéit pas à ce sacrifice" ("she does not obey this sacrifice") between adultery and seduction, between the affirmation of law and the "perversion" that occasions its application, since "que la sexualité soit permise ou suspendue, interdite ou tolérée, il faut qu'elle soit mise à nu dans une scène de séduction. Pour que la loi frappe, suspende le désir, il faut les ruses de la séduction, il faut une perversion" ("whether sexuality is permitted or suspended, prohibited or tolerated, it has to be laid bare in a scene of sexuality. For the law to hit and suspend desire, you need the ruses of seduction, you need a perversion"; 166–68; 108–09). The representation of Zulaykha's desire, reduced to an object of the law, as a "perversion," enables Khatibi the commentator to transform Qur'anic discourse on sexuality into a critique of patriarchal narratives that sacrifice women so that the social order may replicate the metaphysical circularity of creation.

Sexual Dissymmetry and Social Inequality

The cocreation of male and female in one being, their division, and their potential inversion in the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha—not impossible, but banished by divine intervention—are the basis for Khatibi's assertion of "le sexuel" ("the sexual") as an indissoluble dissymmetry in *Par-dessus l'épaule* (*Over the Shoulder* [1988]). In that work, Khatibi distinguishes sexual dissymmetry from "dissymétrie inégalitaire" ("inegalitarian dissymmetry"; 44), or an inequitable distribution of social functions according to gender found, for instance, in designating politics and economics as male domains. Such unjust arrangements remain in need of critique for Khatibi. However, he insists that resolving gendered

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social inequities does not produce "égalité" ("equality") in the realm of the sexual, as it does for politics and economics, because the sexual cannot be "égal à lui-même" ("equal to itself") or "partag[é] équitablement" ("equitably distributed"; *Par-dessus l'épaule* 44). "The sexual" resists language and, moreover, the law, as a stubborn "reste" ("remainder"): sexuality is, for Khatibi, the difference inherent in human existence, even before being expressed by the separation of the first woman out of the first man, whose body already contained sexual difference (45).

Discursive Reification of Sexuality

In "La sexualité selon le Coran," Khatibi describes a discursive universe in which the sexual is both inherently dissymmetrical and inherent to what is human. This position enables a critique of patriarchy based on the way original sexual difference is reproduced discursively as a "perversion." Because the "perversion" in the system is necessary to its functioning, Khatibi treats it as a usable analytic unit of its discourse. I show three manifestations of these concerns in Khatibi's literary writing, focusing on *Amour bilingue*.

Sexuality in *Amour bilingue*

Amour bilingue weaves the story of a relationship between a Moroccan man and a foreign, probably French, woman into the man's narration of his experience of the *bi-langue* ("bi-language"). The novel is, as critics have demonstrated, a complex depiction of postcolonial bilingualism (Bensmaïa 79–80; Erickson 103) and of Mediterranean plurilingualism (Tamalet Talbayev 102–04), a Mallarméan poetic exploration of language (Khatibi, *La langue* 37; Quinney 144), and an inquiry into Walter Benjamin's *reine sprache* ("pure language") relative to Arabic's status as the language of divine revelation (Beebee 69–70, 76; McGuire 111–14). More than an exposition of bilingualism, however, *Amour bilingue* is an account of the narrator's attempts to "exorcise" the self, its obsessions, and those of society in the self (46, 57). Reading *Amour bilingue* alongside "La sexualité selon le Coran" reveals the novel's diegetic and textual instances of bilingualism to be inherently sexual. Language itself may be "ni masculine ni feminine, ni maternelle ni paternelle" ("neither masculine nor feminine, neither maternal nor paternal"), as Khatibi insists, but the linguistic situations in *Amour bilingue*—the relations between the narrator and his lover or his mother, or within the narration and the text themselves—are conditioned by sexual dissymmetry and its discursive reproduction (*Maghreb pluriel* 152; *Plural Maghreb* 97).

To Speak of the Bi-Language Is to Speak of Sexuality

In *Amour bilingue*, Khatibi develops a way of writing in between the narrator's "langue étrangère" ("foreign language"), French, and his "langue maternelle" ("mother tongue"), Arabic, in which he had "grandi . . . comme un enfant adoptif" ("grow[n] up as an adopted child"; *Amour* 10–11; *Love* 4–5, trans. modified). This oxymoronic expression refers to the status of Arabic as the language of divine revelation, which is inscribed in immutable form in the Qur'an and is relearned by rote, unlike the colloquial varieties of Arabic that are transmitted from parents to children as a mother tongue. Thus, when the narrator qualifies Arabic as maternal, he doubles the adoptive Qur'anic language with the colloquial mother tongue, transforming the maternal from an exchangeable position of woman-as-chiasmus into an active transmitter and translator. Unlike the "enfant islamique" ("Islamic child") whom Khatibi analyzes in "La sexualité selon le Coran" and who is symbolically orphaned of the father because of their equal submission to God in the continuity of creation and procreation (161–63; 104–06), the "enfant bilingue" ("bilingual child") imagined in *Amour bilingue* is orphaned of language because he knows that the "enchevêtrement de noms et d'identités s'enroulant sur eux-mêmes" ("overlapping of names and identities piled on top of one another") are not identical, breaking the "cercle nostalgique de l'unique" ("nostalgic circle of the unique") language (77; 67). The bi-language, engendered alongside the ontology of sexual difference articulated in the Qur'an, channels Khatibi's

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"poetics of the orphan" (Reeck 129) to fracture Arabic's impossible translation of divine unity into human existence—not to mention the domineering cultural authority of the French language and European novel tradition in which *Amour bilingue* is ostensibly written.

Androgyny and Sexual Dissymmetry

Just as Khatibi uses the bi-language to create a multipolar space around the split between classical and colloquial Arabic, as well French and other languages (Rice 118–19), he introduces androgyny as a mobile third pole of sexual dissymmetry. Androgyny, the narrator's obsession in *Amour bilingue*, shares male and female predicates and expresses itself by switching positions or occupying both at once, evoking the cocreation of male and female in one body, reflecting the stifled inversion of sexual difference in the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha, and reformulating the theological principle of reproduction without sexual difference as an ambivalent patriarchal fantasy, or phantasm, to be exorcised from the self.

The opening of *Amour bilingue* interweaves language and body in a way that uses the bi-language to reflect androgyny. The narrator is in a medial state of consciousness and corporeality. Half awake and half asleep, lying still while sensations shoot through his body, the narrator thinks of the sun, then the moon. In this thought, the grammatical gender of the French masculine noun *soleil* ("sun") and feminine *lune* ("moon") are reversed by the Arabic feminine شمس (*shams* ["sun"]) and masculine قمر (*qamar* ["moon"]). Moreover, Arabic may refer to sun and moon together as القمران (*al-qamarān* ["the two satellites"]), a single, grammatically dual masculine term that is divisible by grammatical gender into masculine moon and feminine sun. By reversing and then recombining grammatical gender, the bi-language undoes the "fiction théo-grammaticale" ("theo-grammatical fiction"; *Maghreb pluriel* 152; *Plural Maghreb* 97) that the masculine is the original grammatical gender and the feminine a branch of it, analogous to woman's creation within man and subsequent separation from him according to the Qur'an.

Like sexuality translated into Arabic, grammatical androgyny transforms relative to the body that speaks it. The thought of grammatical androgyny depends diegetically on the narrator's semi-conscious, semi-out-of-body state. In return, the doubled grammatical expressivity of the bi-language allows the narrator to understand "sa lancinance de l'androgynie, aimant, désaimant sous le coup des mêmes charmes" ("his obsession with androgyny, attracted and repulsed by the same set of charms"; 10; 4). The narrator's experience of androgyny will invert sexual difference in a constant, undecidable oscillation, as *Amour bilingue* slips seamlessly from the recombination of language to the recombination of sexuality. An exemplary passage describes the male protagonist's experience "se traduisant, traduisant tout" ("translating himself, translating everything"), during which "il aima une femme, changea de sexe" ("he loved a woman, changed sex"; *Amour* 55; *Love* 47). The bi-language voices the sexual experience of androgyny: "Il fut violé alors par sa langue étrangère. Jeté à terre, il souffrait atrocement. Mais—sensation bizarre—il était derrière son violeur, non pas à son tour le pénétrant, mais il était pénétré par la jouissance de la langue—son homosexualité fichée dans les dictionnaires du monde entier" ("He was then violated by his foreign tongue. Thrown to the ground, he suffered hideously. But—bizarre sensation—he was behind his violator, not taking his turn as penetrator but rather penetrated by the tongue's orgasm—his homosexuality filed in the dictionaries of the whole world"; 55; 47; trans. modified). In this simultaneous experience of androgyny and bi-language, the sexual encounter takes on a textual form that speaks to the unnamed remainder of sexual difference through its paradoxical formulations.

Taken literally, the male narrator's changing sex would suggest that he becomes a woman. Yet the image is based on male penetration, even as it destabilizes the gendered positions presumptive to that image. Rather than male or female, I argue, the narrator moves into a form of androgyny that is both and neither, expressing itself in the bi-language. It is the narrator's experience of androgynous homosexuality "fichée" ("filed") in all the world's dictionaries that evokes the

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bi-language's ability to draw on a multiplicity of languages and to fracture the self-identity of those languages as expressed by the monument to monolingualism that is the dictionary.

Reifying Sexual Difference at the Bounds of the Human

In the discursive universe that Khatibi evokes, where human existence is first defined by sexual difference, the boundaries of the human often come into question, as my final example from *Amour bilingue* shows. After the relationship ends in the novel's final pages, the narrator does what many others have done in his situation: he adopts a dog. Since "chaque langue d'amour s'inspire du règne animal" ("every language of love takes inspiration from the animal kingdom"; Khatibi, *Par-dessus l'épaule* 31), the dog becomes part of the text's discourse on sexuality and humanity. *Amour bilingue* plays on classical Arabic scholarship's distinction of human and nonhuman animals on the basis of reason (Tlili x). As rational animals, humans are capable of belief and unbelief in religion, which is the basis of Qur'anic discourse on sexuality: licit sexuality expresses religious belief in its translation of the metaphysical order into the social.

In *Amour bilingue*, the narrator introduces his dog to the music of whirling dervishes, with the accompanying dance and mystical states. Both human and dog are entranced: "Il avait le regard en extase, je dois l'avouer. Je l'appelais Paradis" ("The dog looked ecstatic, I must say. I called him Paradise"; *Amour* 130; *Love* 117). In Arabic, جنّة (*janna* ["paradise," or "heaven"]) is a homonym of the garden where God created Adam and then woman, recalling the translation of Qur'anic metaphysics into the worldly social order by sacrificing women, as analyzed in "La sexualité selon le Coran." Here, this sacrifice is narrated in the mystical annihilation of woman's presence in the attempt to attain unity with the divine (*Maghreb pluriel* 154; *Plural Maghreb* 98). The dog, lacking reason, should not be able to occupy the place of the mystic. Madness follows from "perversion" in this scene, reprising Khatibi's reading of the story of Yusuf and Zulaykha.

As with Yusuf and Zulaykha's inversion of sexual indifference, the narrator's madness in *Amour bilingue* relates to a confusion of metaphysical categories. The narrator, by training his dog in art and spirituality rather than behavior and obedience, blurs the boundary between rational and nonrational beings. Observing the narrator's mystical dance, the dog occupies an intermediate position between the narrator and God, witnessing the mystical annihilation of the self in love of the One. This act, which evocatively suggests a nonanthropocentric vision of creation, is diegetically taken as evidence of the narrator's unreason. He goes to see a psychiatrist, but quickly senses the doctor is more interested in keeping a person like him ("de son espèce" [130], meaning "species" as well as "sort, kind") as a perpetual patient, if not dependent companion. The narrator tries to leave, but the doctor blocks the door and pulls out a gun. The narrator only escapes by killing the doctor, bludgeoning him with an umbrella.

The psychiatrist's attempt to appropriate the narrator's existence to his own ends replicates the sacrifice of women as the chiasmus of human reproduction that makes procreation a palimpsest of divine creation. This fatal scene plays out with a dose of dark humor, an obsessive aspect of the fantasy Khatibi sees within Islamic metaphysics: males producing more males without fathering. The scene of the dog and the doctor may be read as another exorcism of the social order inscribed in the self: perhaps, *Amour bilingue* subtly suggests, it is not the doctor who dies but the narrator's self, who had internalized the disciplinary order that psychiatry represents.

Reading *Amour bilingue* alongside "La sexualité selon le Coran" brings out sexuality as a foundational concern, both at the personal level of the subject's work on the self—extended in Khatibi's many writings on "aimance," which I have not addressed here—and at the societal level. I began with the hypothesis that difference is originally sexual difference in Khatibi's writing, based on his assertion in *Maghreb pluriel* that sexuality is the

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crux of a "circularité structurelle entre le plan métaphysique et le plan sociétal" ("structural circularity between the metaphysical plane and the societal plane"; *Maghreb pluriel* 174–75; *Plural Maghreb* 114–15) in Mediterranean monotheistic theologies and societies. From this perspective, the three scenes I have analyzed from *Amour bilingue*—of ontological orphanhood, grammatical and sexual androgyny, and human-animal difference—fulfill the same critical function as the scenes of sexuality that Khatibi commentates in "La sexualité selon le Coran." In the latter text, Khatibi asserts that the Qur'an's legal discourse on sexuality decides the licit or illicit status of specific examples of human sexuality, rather than general cases. Scenes of what the law dubs "perversion" are therefore necessary to the law's discourse. I argue that Khatibi's method of double critique operates in the same representational mode: it stages scenes based on what the discourse of the law would label a "perversion," playing out the potential of what would otherwise be stifled by legal disapprobation. Khatibi thus conjures an Arabic, non-European version of sexuality by moving alongside an ensemble of heterogeneous perspectives and voices, from which a singular thought of sexuality is not easily distilled.

Khatibi contrasts sexual difference as an indissoluble residue against the discursive reproduction of sexuality in a transactional social order. The bi-language, as the narrative inscription of a human sexual relationship, deploys the unresolved remainder of sexual difference to fragment the discourses that reproduce sexuality hegemonically. This fragmentation is just as often violent and obsessive as it is liberatory. In this vein, a structural, narrative dissymmetry emerges in *Amour bilingue*: the narrator's lover does not speak Arabic. A kernel of exclusion persists in the bi-language that the narrator creates with (and without) her.

Khatibi's oblique approach inscribes sexuality as a central concern of decolonial thought, while circumventing a disingenuous Western obsession with the condition of Muslim women. Aiming for a broader critique of Mediterranean solar metaphysics, Khatibi foregrounds what he calls the "marge des marges: le féminin" ("margin of margins: the feminine") as an "excentricité dissymétrique . . . à même d'ébranler la métaphysique d'un monde maintenu encore par l'ordre de la théologie et d'une tyrannie insistante" ("dissymmetrical eccentricity . . . capable of shaking the metaphysics of a world still sustained by the order of theology and of a strong tyranny"; *Maghreb pluriel* 13–14; *Plural Maghreb* 3). Khatibi uses "the feminine" to designate not only women's material situation in the world but also something in all human existence, an original difference that defines the human. The structural role of the feminine does suggest that Khatibi's treatment of sexuality remains "irremediably straight" (elhariry 14). A Khatibi for the future, however—the Khatibi who liked to state, "Je suis né demain" ("I was born tomorrow"; El Khatibi 5)—deserves to be followed further alongside sexuality, without which his contributions to a decolonized Maghreb, Mediterranean, and world will not be fully grasped.

Note

1. All unattributed translations are mine.

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