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## **The representation of the body in literature, the case of Rachid KHALES's "Absolut hob"**

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### **Abstract:**

The body is often considered a hidden intimacy. It is taboo, especially in the rather conservative Arab-Muslim culture. This article explores the bodily dimension by taking a brief journey through ancient Arabic poetry and the fictional experience of a poet who becomes a novelist.

The body is both a powerful and often overlooked element, depending on the observer's perception. In fact, we seek to highlight how literature has approached it. In this sense, the choice of "Absolut hob" is not accidental, as it is a novel that celebrates the body in many ways. Our work will be guided by the following question: How is the female body represented in the Moroccan novel, using "Absolut hob" as an example?

**Keywords:** Body - literature - woman - representation - image

### **Introduction:**

The body is one of the most important parts of the human being because it conveys an image of the person to the point of constituting a means of communication. It communicates grace, self-confidence, shyness and other aspects related to the state of mind and posture that a person seeks to assert or that is imposed on them. The physical dimension deserves our attention because it is full of meanings that we cannot ignore in our analyses in various fields of knowledge. History tells us

that the body has always been decisive in the human imagination:

*"The birth of Eve from Adam's rib, Esau's hairiness, Ulysses' scar, Venus' gait all testify that, from the beginning, the body has been at the heart of literary representation. Giving birth and being born, being hairy, bearing the mark of a wound, walking—all these activities or states seem to be a matter of nature, not culture. And yet, a woman's gait reveals her as a goddess in the eyes of Aeneas, referring to a vision of man and the gods, and the story of Eve's creation establishes the division and hierarchy of the sexes in Judeo-Christian anthropology. In an article in which he introduced the term 'habitus' into the field of sociology, Marcel Mauss emphasized how much 'body techniques' were a matter of culture... Roulin, Jean-Marie.*

The question of the body is therefore fundamental to human thought and clearly reveals that human beings are above all bodies that mark, among other things, an opposition between the two sexes and the fact that women come from men even though they are different from them. The body is both a natural and cultural element in the sense that it is already there and at the same time it is an object that supports gestures and actions that can convey a given message.

We can say that in the beginning was the body, and then came reflection, which brought about an awareness of the difference between the human body and other species, such as animals.

This crucial place of the body prompts us to examine this theme in literature, particularly in French-language Moroccan writings. We have chosen a contemporary writer, Rachid KHALES, and his novel entitled "*Absolut hob*". We will let the following question guide our reflection:

### **How is the female body represented in Moroccan novels, using *Absolut hob* as an example?**

We will address this theme of the body through the following axes:

- I. The body in Arab-Muslim culture
- II. The specificity of Rachid KHALES' writing
- III. The body in the novel *Absolut hob*

#### **I- The body in Arab-Muslim culture:**

It should be noted that the decision to focus on the body in Arab-Muslim culture is far from gratuitous, because, whether we like it or not, the novel under study is set in a context where Arab-Muslim culture has a say.

*The body plays an essential role in the religious norms and practices of the Muslim East. In the theological and mystical elaborations of Eastern Christianity and Islam, the body is constructed in constant balance with the soul, generally identified with the spirit. This duality often gives way to a triangular construction with the carnal soul, that of the passions that must be tamed. As a general rule, it is the body that must be tamed and controlled; it is the focus of ascetic practices, the locus of devotional gestures and the tangible manifestation of the charisma of prophets and saints. The body is also an instrument of salvation: the carnal and the physical are legitimized by the creation of Adam as God's vicar on earth, and above all by the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who laid down the rules to be followed by a body seeking to escape its passions in order to fulfil its deepest calling. Holiness in Islam is first and foremost imitation of the Prophet. Around the body, the notions of pure and impure, lawful and unlawful, are opposed according to precisely defined but sometimes contradictory and fluctuating standards.*

#### **Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen and Bernard Heyberger**

We understand immediately that the body occupies a central place in religious discourse, which tends towards the spiritual, which is in a way a transcendence of the physical that is embodied in the human body. The latter is presented as inferior to the soul, which is identified with the spirit. And since the body can lead a person to baseness, it is up to the soul-spirit duo to control it, even tame it, to avoid excesses

that could tarnish the Muslim identity, which advocates a certain purity that distances itself as much as possible from bodily impurity. This is a real ongoing struggle between the body and the soul, the ultimate goal of which is to purify the body, as it is an instrument of salvation insofar as prayers pass through this same body, which, it seems to us, constitutes a real danger in religious confession.

We can say that the Muslim religion does not celebrate the body, as it exercises control over it, which brings us back to Arab culture, which is strongly influenced by poetic writing. We will focus on the Jahiliyyah period, as this is the phase that laid the foundations for the Arab imagination in various aspects of life. Poetry was a space for communication through which various themes related to the details of everyday life were addressed.

To begin with, we will address dimensions related to the body, such as bodily awareness, the ageing body, and the body between the past and the present.

#### **1-1 Awareness through the body:**

*"Awareness through the body in its relationship with time is synonymous with awareness through death as an inevitable end. Time crushes the body" Lkhdar BARAKA*

Did I not tell you that time is a wolf... that devours men?

وَقَدْ مَلَكَ السَّهْوَةَ وَالْجَبَالَ... أَزَالَ مِنَ الْمَصْنَعِ ذَا رِيَاشِ

وساق إلى مشارقتها الرعالا... همام طحطح الأفاق وحيأ

These verses by Imrou AL KAYS convey the power of time, comparing it to a monster that crushes everything in its path: men, mountains... the body cannot resist the grip of time, whose power exceeds all other forces. The physical body is presented as vulnerable to time, and all men are equal in this vulnerability, without exception. This Jahili poet highlights the awareness that everyone is proud of their strength or courage. Indeed, the history of the Arab world is full of psychological profiles overwhelmed by pride in courage and physical strength, such as Ali benou Abitaleb, among others.

#### **1-2 The image of the old body:**

*"The image of old age and grey hair are signs left by time on the body, which increase the intensity of the feeling of silent annihilation that operates in secret. This same image highlights the metamorphosis of the body, which has become different and strange..." Lkhdar BARAKA*

Let us examine these verses by Assar bnou Saad:

نَوَدَّ الزَّمَانُ أَتَى بِلَوْنٍ مُنْكَرٍ... قَالَتْ عُمَيْرَةٌ مَا لِرَأْسِكَ بَعْدَمَا  
أَعْمِرَ إِنَّ أَبَاكَ شَيَّبَ رَأْسَهُ... كَرُّ اللَّيَالِي وَإِخْتِلَافُ الْأَعْصُرِ

These verses clearly reveal that grey hair is detestable, as shown at the end of the first verse. The explanation for this repulsive color is given in the last word of the second verse: it is the same monster called time.

It seems that this evocation of the body in Arabic poetry of this period shows the central place that this element occupies in the culture of this phase. It is synonymous with strength and even masculine virility, but also with feminine beauty and grace. Old age is, in reality, a weakness that reduces a person's value, and people prefer the vigor of youth.

## II-The specificity of Rachid KHALESS' writing:

In this part of our article, it is essential to question the obvious by discussing Khalessian aesthetics, which are characterized by novelty and difference. *Absolut hob* is the third novel by Rachid KHALESS, who is primarily a poet.

From the very first sentence, the novelist invites us to reconcile with ourselves by admitting a very human reality: that every reader must possess a "woman's body". Otherwise, "let them throw this book away and wash their hands of it." This interpellation of the reader (or receiver) is rarely used by novelists. In KHALESS's work, this technique aims above all to involve the reader, who ceases to be passive and thus enters into the narrative act and finds themselves closer to the novel.

This same text vacillates between novel and poetry. The sentences take on the appearance of verses brimming with passion and moving towards a detailed description of things, feelings and human disappointments. "But there it is, that feeling of living life to the fullest that I am used to experiencing in her presence. It flows through my fingers as I record this account of events." *Absolut hob*, page 15.

This is, among other things, an example of how the poetic marries the prosaic to better paint the grand canvas of feelings that is *Absolut Hob*. It is a work in which not a single paragraph ends with a full stop, making it a long poem of love and passionate suffering. Paragraphs without full stops, meaning a continuity of ideas and feelings from the beginning of the novel to its conclusion.

It is clear that this use of poetic touches served the basic theme of the novel, which is love. Prose alone would be incapable of describing and helping to imagine the scenes of love. Poetry

is, above all, a place of love that gives life and meaning to feelings.

In reality, this poetic touch resembles brushstrokes that embellish the narrator's sensations through paragraphs/stanzas. Moreover, events in the classic and full sense of the term are rare. They give way to the celebration and quest for love.

Another characteristic of Khalessian aesthetics is the use of short sentences, avoiding any lexical overload. By lexical overload, we mean the excessive use of sophisticated words that serve no purpose other than to demonstrate a certain mastery of language, which risks becoming an end in itself, which is far from being the goal of writing for some writers.

Khaless's words are well chosen and concentrate or summarize the intended meaning without excess. They convey a range of feelings such as love, doubt, frustration, etc.

The novelist's aesthetic should be seen as stylistically different in that he writes a rather successful marriage between poetry and prose, giving rise to a new genre that we might call the poetic novel.

## III-The body in *Absolut Hob's* novel:

In this novel, the body overwhelms us from the very first page. The illustration by Bouchta El Hayani shows us three bodies standing in profile, naked bodies, two of which are encircled by a kind of rope. One of these two bodies is male and the other is female.

This essentially physical configuration plunges the reader into a logic of hypotheses related to the body, the intimate physical relationship between men and women, and the perception of the person's body.

### 3-1 Summary of the novel:

This 173-page novel tells the heart-wrenching love story between a painter who is enjoying the pleasures of success and a sexy young woman. From beginning to end, the reader is immersed in a heart-wrenching and ecstatic atmosphere that plunges them into the intense passion between the two protagonists. However, an enigmatic corpse stands between these two lovers. Ijja is dead, but her daughter refuses to pay her funeral respects until she solves the mystery of the tattoos on her body. Her husband, who is madly in love with her, follows her on this laborious quest for meaning that takes him to south-eastern Morocco.

This narrative poem ends with an open ending, concluding that meaning is so close that we do not notice it.

The story is told in a fluid style full of poetic images that best convey feelings, sensations and disappointments.

### 3-2 The body as a vehicle for sexuality:

Alongside love, sexuality is an essential theme. In fact, there is no shortage of sexual scenes, to the point that the novelist reserves strategic places for them, such as the excerpt:

"She let her dress fall. I discovered her sculptural body, completely naked. I grabbed her buttocks and kneaded them with a trembling hand. With the other, I sought the sap released by her intimacy

She offered me her back. No sooner had I penetrated her than shivers ran through my lower abdomen. My orgasm was imminent. Lilas noticed. She quickly grabbed my hands and brought them to her neck

"Press as hard as you can," page 170.

This is, among other things, an excerpt that evokes sexuality in its passionate dimension, which stands out from gratuitous pornography insofar as the sexual scenes put an end to romantic disappointment or consolidate the love between the two protagonists.

We can argue that the sexuality presented by KHALESS is poeticized, which distances it from any bestial or instinctive baseness. Rather, it is sanctified through the poetry of words. This theme is revisited with a view to making it an almost spiritual eulogy. It is indeed a physical expression of love. Physical sexuality is therefore perceived differently in the sense that it is a celebration of strong love, a celebration of love that constitutes an essential support that materializes the feeling of love elevated to the level of spirituality.

### 3-3 The body as a bearer of messages:

The novel in question contains a clear novelty in the sense that the body is presented as a book conveying messages that can be read and analyzed, a book that is none other than the corpse of Ijja, the narrator's mother-in-law. The tattoos inscribed on the body of this dead woman are synonymous with an enigma to be clarified in order to grasp the meaning of the message.

Khaless tells us in his novel:

"This representation of the seven stars on Ijja's flesh was her graphic acknowledgement of the Lord.

If the sky suspended by the hand of the Almighty welcomed this sublime work, how could one not consent to the body, perishable matter, being elevated to such fulfilment? Is God not moved by this mark of gratitude? A humble woman, my mother-in-law gave praise where praise was due, to Him, the Merciful, the Generous, the Source of her joy and the instigator of her happiness."

Absolut hob page 165

It took until the end of the novel to find the solution to the mystery that had puzzled Lilas and her husband so much. The reader understands that the drawings on Ijja's body are not intended for ordinary mortals but rather for the Creator. They are messages sent to God, messages that express gratitude to the divine entity. Gratitude for all the good that God has done for Ijja. She has made her joyful and satisfied. This novel clearly reveals to us that the body is not simply a collection of limbs, but can very well become a medium for transmitting messages to God, the Almighty. It is therefore a medium with spiritual qualities. This brings us back to the idea that even though it is material, the physical element has been able to rise to the spiritual sphere, which is superior to all physical baseness.

### Conclusion:

Even though the Muslim faith perceives the body as base, this journey with it has allowed us to conclude that it is not simply a machine that carries out the orders of the brain. In reality, this same body can have meanings but also convey a message. Meanings and messages that we can summarize in these lines:

- The body is vulnerable to the passage of time, which leaves its mark on it (grey hair, wrinkles, etc.);
- Signs of ageing on the body, such as grey hair and changes in physical appearance, show that it is approaching the end/death;

- The novel that was the subject of a partial analysis reveals that this same bodily entity can convey messages with spiritual resonance.
- Whether stagnant or in motion, the body will never cease to speak to us, conveying ideas that will prompt us to meditate on things.

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