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Saïd Khatibi, *Nihayat al-Sahra'*, *The End of the Sahara*. Beirut & London: 2022 (English Edition, 2026). 336 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1916725225.

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Bodies Are Never Naked:
Violence, Resistance, and Memory in The End of the Sahara

In his award-winning novel *The End of the Sahara* (original Arabic edition), Algerian author Saïd Khatibi presents a genre-defying narrative that blends detective fiction with political allegory and cultural critique. Set in 1988 Algeria, just before the civil conflict known as the "Black Decade," the novel offers a layered exploration of violence, economic and political contexts, and the contested terrain of postcolonial gender and cultural identity.

Comprising three sections—"A Silver Earring," "Specters," and the titular "The End of the Sahara"—the novel unfolds through the interwoven narratives of seven characters, all connected to the Desert Hotel, where the murdered singer Zakia, known as Zaza, once performed. Her body is discovered in a remote area called Al-Marj in the fall of 1988. While the novel initially follows the investigation into her death, a second narrative runs beneath this procedural frame: Ibrahim Darris's search for the unmarked grave of his father, a veteran of the Algerian War of Independence. Together, these intertwined quests position the body as a central site where private grief, public history, and socio-economic forces converge.

The Body as Text

In *The End of the Sahara*, bodies are not passive symbols but active sites of struggle, imbued with meaning. Through vivid descriptions of skin, hair, and physicality, Khatibi creates a literary palimpsest that reveals the socio-political forces shaping each body. This is evident in Hassina's memory of Bachir's admiration for Zakia's "slender body" and Ibrahim's wish that

Noura had "blue eyes and a slimmer figure" (p. 79), exposing the ideological weight of bodily aesthetics. Khatibi unveils this economy of visibility without overt moralizing, illustrating how women often internalize, navigate, and at times strategically deploy these aesthetic scripts. In one particularly resonant passage, Edahabia references Dalida's peroxide-blond transformation as a symbolic act of reinvention (p. 125). This act of bodily modification engages in the commodification of the female body while reclaiming it as a tool for social and economic mobility, representing a form of individual agency that operates outside the confines of religious and patriarchal discourses demanding modesty and submission from women. Simultaneously, it draws the reader's attention to how media constructs and dictates gendered ideals of beauty, shaping perceptions of the desirable body for both women and men.

What sets *The End of the Sahara* apart is its sustained focus on the male body as both an object of the gaze and a site of vulnerability. Male characters receive sensual descriptions typically reserved for women, with attention to hair, skin, and physique serving as markers of social capital and internal struggle. Ibrahim's reflection—"The only flaw I see in myself is my sunken eyes... A man's beauty lies in his strength" (p. 58)—reveals his internalization of hegemonic masculinity, as theorized by Connell. Khatibi deepens this critique through Fouzi, an effeminate man marginalized even by his own family. Fouzi's suffering exemplifies Connell's concept of "subordinate masculinity," where deviations from dominant norms are punished through ridicule and violence. Rather than exoticizing Fouzi's sexuality, Khatibi portrays his assault as a stark illustration of how society polices gender nonconformity. This aligns with Emma Sinclair-Webb's assertion that "the subordination of women by men should not let us forget the subordination of men by other men" (p. 8), highlighting how patriarchal systems enforce rigid hierarchies not only between genders but also within them.

The Ritual of State Violence

The narrative offers a scathing critique of the postcolonial Algerian state and its systemic use of gendered violence to suppress female autonomy. Women who challenge patriarchal norms face both symbolic erasure and physical brutality. Marzaga Soualem, a divorced women's rights advocate, is found dead—her fall "from the balcony of her hotel room" (p. 140) officially labeled a suicide. Her death signifies more than bodily elimination; it marks her forced removal from social legitimacy. The feminist lawyer Hassina represents both the violent repression of feminist activism and the co-optation of resistance. Introduced during a 1984 protest against the Family Code—which enshrined male guardianship and revoked women's custody rights—she is beaten by police and later absorbed into

the corrupt system. Inspector Hamid recalls, “I pretended to listen to her to defuse her anger,” then sneers, “Any true believer who sees you must renew their ablutions” (p. 84). This grotesque fusion of religious piety and misogynistic ridicule exposes how patriarchal power seamlessly traverses both state and domestic spheres.

In *The End of the Sahara*, state violence is not confined to women’s bodies; it is insidiously enacted upon men as well. Through the trajectories of Mimoun, Ibrahim, and Bachir, Khatibi exposes how carceral institutions extend their disciplinary reach to male bodies, rendering them instruments of submission. Mimoun, once a defiant revolutionary, is defeated not by ideology but by the calculated cruelty of the prison regime: starvation, enforced filth, and the spectacle of death. His eventual embrace of capitalist exploitation signals a tragic complicity—a surrender to the very structures he once resisted. After his release, Ibrahim reflects: “I imagined my father’s dismay in his grave as I walked out of the prison, which looked just like the gate of the high school” (p. 283). This architectural symmetry brutally underscores how authoritarian control naturalizes itself within everyday institutions, blurring the line between education and incarceration. Echoing Foucault, Khatibi shows that power does not merely repress; it conditions, replicates, and banalizes itself through spatial and institutional continuity.

Beyond the "Black Decade"

Khatibi probes the deeper structural roots of Algeria’s crisis: neoliberal betrayal, systemic corruption, and ideological exhaustion. His narrative centers the body as an archive of national trauma—etched with abandonment, repression, and loss. Visual imagery dominates: the word "face" appears over 100 times, alongside recurring references to eyes, fingers, lips, and noses. Yet interior monologue is notably sparse, highlighting how both the state and the public reduce individuals to surfaces, reinforcing a colonial gaze that prioritizes appearance over inner life. The novel opens with: "They called me Ibrahim, or Brihum, or Biriyeh—the name doesn’t matter here" (p. 11), and closes with Kamal merely changing a photo on an ID card. Identity becomes fluid and disposable—easily rewritten by different authoritarian powers.

Overall, *The End of the Sahara* challenges fixed ideas of gender, identity, and resistance by centering the body as site, symbol, and battleground. Khatibi’s characters—whether femme performers, disillusioned revolutionaries, or youths torn by unfulfilled desires and contradictory values—voice a vital truth that the narrative relentlessly emphasizes: bodies do more than endure history; they inscribe it,

remember it, and at times resist it. As Connell reminds us, “bodies are never naked; they are always clothed with meaning” (2005, p. 82). In Khatibi’s Algeria, the body transcends mere flesh—it becomes visible memory, intimate history, and embodied resistance.

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