

The Female Figure in *The Monk, the Ottoman and the Wife of the Big Money Man* by Venus Khoury-Ghata

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ABSTRACT

“The metamorphosis of the French language” (Tumia, 2014) in the writing of Venus Khoury-Ghata, is part of a process of crossing two languages, French and Arabic. This phenomenon of hybridization at the linguistic level functions to depict an Elsewhere, a kind of metaphor of an imaginary East, in which the destinies of women dominated by the force of submission imposed by a patriarchal type of societal order are played out. Our study aims to highlight the message of revolt expressed by the novelist in order to save those who still live “eyes downcast” to use the words of the researcher Rosalie Ghanem (Ghanem, 2018). In what way does this sense of indignation at the condition of women in the East fits into an imaginary space related to a geographical territory associated with the image of a “small village on the edge of the desert”? In order to answer this question, our research is based on the novel *The Monk, the Ottoman and the wife of the big money man*.

Keywords: connection, image, interculturalism, language.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“I have inserted one language into the other: Arabic and French. Yet at the antipode of each other. I married these two foreign languages. I offered the turns, the nuances, the flavors, the exaltation of the Arabic language to the French language.” (Tumia, 2014). This quotation from the writer Venus Khoury-Ghata draws our attention because it brings into play a writing device of hybrid type at the linguistic level to depict an Elsewhere, a kind of metaphor of an imaginary East, in which the destinies of women are opposed to those of men.

From the novel entitled *The monk, the Ottoman and the wife of the big money man* (Khoury-Ghata, 2003), our research aims to bring to light three female figures: Mary, the fallen princess, Amina, the repudiated woman, and Yakut the young slave. Three women condemned to wander by men. Three women from the East who are united by their language, Arabic.

This study allows us to understand the female figure, Marie, the wife of the big money man, condemned to death by the implacable patriarchal system. It is a question of highlighting the tensions between feminine and masculine within a Muslim society and to give to the language of women, more particularly that which Mary speaks, the power to make the link between East and West, and even more between the Judeo-Christian world and the Arab-Muslim world.

II. DISCUSSION

A. *The Time of the Journey, the Red Thread of the Novel*

In the novel, *The monk, the Ottoman and the wife of the big money man*, the time of the journey is the foundation of the time of the novel. Between the point of departure, a monastery in Savoy, France, and the point of arrival in Istanbul, Turkey, the time of travel is inscribed in two other territories, namely, Spain and Algeria. The traveler, represented by a young French monk, Lucas, who left the monastery of Faucon, was sent on a mission by order of the head of the religious congregation. The latter, in turn, was obliged to satisfy the demands of the Grand Argentier of Saint-Jean d'Acre in Palestine, who had come to this religious place to make his request. He urged the abbot to bring back his wife Marie who fled with her lover Jaafar, the emissary of the Ottoman sultan Selim II. The religious superior knows that once the young woman is captured and brought back to her husband, she will be sentenced to death. Such is the religious law. The decision for the superior of the convent is not easy to take: “The hell described by the Gospels, it is finally the love of a woman” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 11) he says. He ends up entrusting to the young monk, Lucas, the mission to leave, with only a donkey, a purse of money and a map, and pursue the young woman. By receiving from the hands of the abbot “a miniature representing a young woman lying on a red sofa. A

¹ Quoted by Francesca Tumia, page consulted on November 16, 2021 URL: <http://levurelitteraire.com/venus-khoury-ghata: interview with the writer Vénus Khoury-Ghata by Rodica Draghinescu>.

very young woman” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 12), the young man finds himself in possession of a first clue about her physical appearance.

The incipit of the novel puts the accent on a first point which will be recurrent in the following chapters: Christianity, symbolized by the monastery, Lucas left in cassock, and the limits of its power signified by an anodyne scene: where the traveler is awakened by about thirty peasants, armed with pitchforks and sticks, on their way to extinguish fires in nearby barns. The priest was then asked to go and “put out the fire lit by the devil” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 13). He naively asks why the devil and why the barns, to which he is told: “Because of the little Jesus born in a stable” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 14). This is a first indication of the religious divide that characterizes the relationship between the West and the East. In the novel, the Christians are represented by the priest, the convent of the Trinitarians to which he belongs, but also the great Argentier of Saint John of Acre. All the other characters in the novel are Muslims. Gradually the journey acts as a revelation of the “disadvantages” of Christian words: “once living in bliss, the monk was convinced of the superiority of Christianity over other religions.” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 120). The two religions, invoked in the novel, summon just as much discrimination against women:

“The Muslim waiting for his reward in paradise with forty houris to support him tends to despise the woman slumped by motherhood. He treats her like a pet: the whip in one hand, food in the other. Hadn't the sheikh, the cadi and the tailor explained to her the need to beat her, to repudiate her? Thrown into the garbage like her fellow creatures, the ladle, the pot, the calabash when it wears out with time.” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 120)

Is the fate of the Christian more enviable? The one who “must fight against the diktats of a Church that chains couples until their death. “Only death can disunite those united by God,” the pope replied to the great money man” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 120), Mary's husband.

In the novel, there is no hesitation in denouncing the two monotheistic religions as opposed to the freedom of women.

In this context, the monk's journey is part of a quest, both human and spiritual. On the one hand, it is a matter of searching for Mary, the sinner who had the audacity to leave her husband by running away with her lover, a Muslim. But on the other hand, the young monk sees his religious beliefs strongly shaken, because confronted with the religious discourse of the Muslims he meets during his journey and that he ignored until then.

The journey functions as a thread to follow in the structure of the story. We know the point of departure, we do not know the point of arrival. Through it, one discovers an itinerary, one follows the journey according to stages, one shares adventures, one witnesses human encounters; as it goes along, the journey confers a specific novelistic structure based on the sequence of scenes having in common the search for the young woman who has left the husband's home and has thus renounced the law of Christian marriage which obliges spouses to never untie their bonds.

From the first chapters, the monk Lucas does not delay in catching up with the lovers on the run, but without ever being able to approach them in a physical way. Thus, for example, he stops in places that the couple has just left or collects testimonies that inform him more or less precisely about the young woman. In this journey, Lucas pursues Marie, but each time when he seems to be about to approach her, she slips through his fingers. Thus, the quest goes through a long and difficult stage which consists for the young Lucas to gather as many clues as possible around Mary, the face of sin from the Christian point of view.

In terms of the structure of the narrative, Marie, the main character of the novel, appears only through indirect discourse: indeed, in the first part of the novel, she is talked about, only talked about, but she herself never speaks. Thus, there is a succession of “they say”, “they saw her”, “they think they saw her” or more precisely “I saw a woman walking in the rain. Her clothes were those of a foreigner” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 120). Also, we do not see her physically. She appears in the form of an image, the one that the superior of the monastery of Faucon had entrusted to the young monk at the time of his departure. But another image appears through the composite elements of a description reported by the witnesses.

In this time of the journey, the character of Marie is both object and subject of the discourse. She justifies this journey undertaken by the young monk Lucas and places herself in a space of the unspeakable and the invisible. An interesting point to consider is the psychic behavior of the young monk. Let us imagine this young man who has always lived within the walls of the monastery, therefore “outside the world”, who launches himself “into the world” in pursuit of a woman he does not know. During this journey, with all the clues gathered by the monk Lucas, he is gradually bewitched by the image of the young woman. From ghost to fantasy, there is only one step in the young monk's imagination:

“Devoured by a burning passion, Lucas (...) shivers and sweats at the same time. His glance is confused. The poplar tree through the fog is the slender body of Marie, he is going to embrace her, to put his cheek against hers, to make her rock under him, to take root in her, to bury himself

in her, to die the sweetest death.” (Khouri-Ghata, 2003, p. 120).

As we can see, there is a tight articulation between three components of the novelistic narrative: the journey, the character of the monk and that of Marie.

However, throughout the novel, one wonders at what point the meeting between Lucas and Marie will occur. The first meeting takes place in the domain of the Sufi ambassador perched on one of the peaks of the Aurès massif, an unusual and strange place where the ambassador's friends are welcomed to listen to or play music (music is forbidden by radical Muslim practice) and dance. It is there that he discovers Marie, for the first time, in the living room playing the harpsichord. As her back is turned, Marie does not see Lucas and vice versa. Later in the night, the monk and the fugitive finally speak face to face:

“She also says that she comes to deliver herself to him. He no longer needs to chase her. She will not fight, nor will she try to flee. Jafar's departure, her certainty of never seeing him again, takes away all desire to fight.” (Khouri-Ghata, 2003, p. 88)

Attempted surrender? Capitulation? “I left everything on Jafar's orders” (Khouri-Ghata, 2003, p. 89) she says. This is the first time she speaks in the text, which is why Marie's words are translated in a direct style. One wondered until then if she really existed, if she was not a chimera born in Lucas imagination. No, it is her that we hear with her voice, that we see with her body. What is expressed beyond words is the decay of a woman who sins for the love of a man who is not her husband. Not only does she know that her husband paid Lucas to bring her back alive, but she also knows that Jafar, the lover who ran away and abandoned her, has returned to Turkey to marry Princess Malika, in “an arranged, sterile marriage”, says Marie. The conversation is of a neutral tone, between them. Then in the morning, each one will take the road again, the monk trying to put his steps in those of Marie, who left first at dawn.

In a general way, the novel develops relations between various female figures which confer to the text a certain dynamic. They share the common trait of being born Muslim. Only Marie is a convert, a Christian before the flight, who became a Muslim. This point will be further explained below.

B. The Female Figure at the Heart of Tensions with the Male

As we indicated in the introduction, three women's names designate in the narrative three life stories, corresponding to the three main parts of the novel:

- Amina, the repudiated woman or “Woman of pleasure” by night, Amina becomes an expiatory victim by day. A saint who deserves fervor and prayers” (Khouri-Ghata, 2003, p. 56).
- Mary, the wandering princess: Marie first appears in the text when Lucas was about to meet her on top of a hill in the Aurès Mountains in Algeria inhabited by an ambassador and his wife. For the first time, Marie speaks in indirect discourse.

“She feels like nobody's wife, nobody's daughter, nobody's lover. There is no turning back, all doors would close before her. An adulterous woman defiles the ground she tramples.” (Khouri-Ghata, 2003, p. 96)

The one who left her husband, the Grand Argentier of St. John of Acre's, house, “without thinking”, while exhausted to walk alone against the winds and rain, senses that Jaafar, the lover who seduced and then abandoned her, has “sown the seed in her belly” which “rejoices and terrifies her at the same time.” Then, the novelistic discourse continues through the various adventures of the traveler Lucas.

- Yakout, the young slave, presents herself as the narrator of her own story. By adopting first person narration with the use of “I”, she also describes Marie's actions, her words, and her thoughts. In a way, Yakout becomes the double of Marie's character. Yakout in the city of Algiers is known for her talents in dyeing hair and skin with henna and “waxing with sugar women who earn their living lying under men of all origins” (Khouri-Ghata, 2003, p. 125). All the women of Algiers call on Yakout's services, except for the “foreigner”, newly arrived in the white city, whom she sees every morning waiting for a boat that might arrive in the distance. Yakout ends up talking with Marie who recounts her past and explains that she is in the port of Algiers to find Jaafar, her lover who must be in Istanbul, on the other side of the sea.

In a setting made of alleys along the sea, old buildings with interiors rich in carpets and shimmering fabrics, the slave joins in the insane search of Jaafar. As the two of them set off in search of Jaafar, Yakout learns that her mistress is pregnant, that she is carrying the child of the Sultan's son. The lover's quest sinks into unreasonableness, insanity, and madness.

Other women's figures cross the narrative, such as the healer Amina, repudiated after her marriage, or Maryamou the Tuareg “who can neither read nor count”, who share a common destiny of having suffered male domination. Maryamou explains to Lucas that the three children she gave birth to are dead:

Three girls buried at birth by their father. The custom wants it. To perpetuate the species, girls from other tribes are taken and impregnated in the hope that they will give birth to boys (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 103).

They live alone, locked up in hovels away from the villages. The underlying problem that appears behind these faces, damaged by a situation of social relegation, is that of marriage as the only destiny that gives the bride a right to exist. In the course of the adventures that punctuate his journey, Lucas discovers the pains of women's existence. Thus, he who believed, as Christianity taught him, that marriage is a union between a man and a woman that can only be broken by the death of one of the two, learns about the existence of the "harem". A conversation he had with an imam enlightened him on the right of Muslims to have 4 wives. When he asked him if these four women under the same roof could get along, the imam replied: "It is obligatory, otherwise the sheikh will get angry and lock them up in the khiloud (the storeroom) with rats and spiders. I am firm." (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 68)

Strangely enough, the harem is a subject taken up in the first dialogue between the monk and Mary. The monk tells her that he has heard that Jaafar has a harem. She replies:

"His harem is a showcase. The concubines live among themselves. To refuse the daughter of a tribal chief is to offend him. Jaafar needs a loving wife, who welcomes him at night, washes his feet, then lies down under him to take her." (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 89)

This last quote gives food for thought. In the novel, while Mary, both Christian and Muslim, one might say, presents herself as a free and passionate servant of love, all other female figures are literally crushed by the forms of marriage as conceived by Muslim law. This is the moment for us to see how the novelist succeeds in recreating the cultural dimension of the Arab-Muslim world by playing with the terms of the Arabic language.

C. *The Marriage to Mitaa (Enjoyment)*

As already mentioned, the monk's journey between France, Spain, Algeria and Turkey has no other justification than the transgressive behavior of Marie: a Christian woman has dared to defy her husband's authority by agreeing to run away with her lover, a Muslim, in the name of love. In general, the phenomenon of love between a man and a woman is the major obstacle to the proper functioning of the male-female relationship in both Christianity and Islam.

Mary is the symbol of the antagonisms between East and West: indeed,

"Christian converted to Islam by the care of a whimsical sheikh (...) Mary will suffer the disadvantages of both religions. Rejected by the Christians, she will not be recognized by the Muslims, Jaafar having married her by *mitaa*, for a limited time." (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 12)

The word *mitaa* refers to a marriage of short duration and whose purpose is just to obtain sexual satisfaction for a man more than for a woman. The word suddenly introduced in the French speech acts as a revealing clue to the human tragedy embodied by Mary. Split between two religions, she becomes the symbol of the condition of women's lives dominated by the prohibitions in the name of religious law. The word *mitaa* illustrates in a way the domination of the masculine over the feminine. It is this character of the sheik representing Islam who will explain to the young monk that marriage by *mitaa* ultimately legalizes the man's right to pleasure; marriage is neither for the duration nor for procreation. "It is as if [the man] were renting his services for a specific time" (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 71), says the sheikh who assures us that he himself married Mary to Jafaar. The account of this marriage is reported by the Sheikh to the monk in detail:

"Just a week ago, I married a beautiful Christian woman to a Muslim, a very important Turk, a kind of ambassador, more than an ambassador, the trusted man of the Sultan. She wanted to become a Muslim, but nobody forced her. Especially not him, who was thinking about something else. He looked very worried. He must have had big problems because he was leaving for Istanbul after the ceremony." (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 70)

The dialogue between the sheikh and the young monk Lucas highlights the religious and political antagonisms between East and West. There is the language of the monks of the monastery and beyond that of all Christians, with which they seek to dialogue "with the pirates and redeem the captives". But there is also the language of Islam, which the sheik considers to be the only language of opposition to the power of the West:

“Your captives are an invention of the West (...) they have chosen us for reasons that concern them, to live freely without the chains of civilization; they flee religion, confessions, repentance. Many of them convert.” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 70)

Religious laws, Christian or Muslim, deny the freedom of love. They are invoked by men to forbid, sanction, condemn. The religious law, by exercising itself against the love of the woman, legalizes the death of the woman's body.

The tragedy experienced by Marie calls into question her own desire for love. By voluntarily leaving her husband, the great Argentier of Saint Jean d'Acre, a Christian, for the love of the Muslim Jaafar, she acts at the risk of her own existence. Not only will she be condemned to death by her husband upon her return to his home, but she has condemned herself by accepting the celebration of a marriage by *mitaa*. The latter, which inexorably flouts the values of love, religiously legalizes the night of love between the two lovers.

Once the sexual act is consummated, Jaafar has no more obligation towards the one with whom he has just spent the night. The word *mitaa* alone designates the abject side of the male figure in the context of Western ethical thinking that sacralises the dimension of love. In other words, marriage by *mitaa* translates the humiliation of the woman inflicted by the man. Where is the woman and where is the love in this religious world organized by men? That is the nagging question that keeps coming back throughout this tragic and physically exhausting journey, which ends with Mary's death: “Mary who has stopped breathing joins the cohort of women who believe they have the right to love.” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 201)

On the linguistic level, it is necessary to underline a specific organization to the novelist Venus Khoury-Ghata, because the same phenomenon recurs regularly in her work; indeed, the words of the Arabic language are juxtaposed to those of the French language and thus never translated. This creates a sort of wall between two opposing worlds. The fact that no translation of the words is given, reinforces the idea of an obstacle to intercultural understanding. In other words reinforce ideas, such as *madrassa*, which means school, or *haïk*, which means storyteller, and *hakawatt*; we also encounter the word *saïs* to designate the person who takes care of finding a place to park the car, the word *tchay*, *hanum*, *araba*, *the kandils*, *the chaouch*, etc. These elements of language not only translate the identity of the speakers of Arabic, but they build a cultural patchwork of the Arab-Muslim world. For the novelist, it is the words that give the culture its own identity.

D. The Link between the Two Languages: French and Arabic

At the end of this study, it is a question of referring to the ultimate scene of the novel, the birth of the child that Marie had been carrying since the beginning of the journey, the fruit of her love with Jaafar. It is the figure of the young monk who resurfaces, having reached the last stage of his journey. There is no longer any question of looking for Marie, since she is dead, but he has arrived in the village where the servant Yakout has taken refuge after the death of her mistress, who seems to have taken in the orphaned child... “I must take him back”, he thinks. “I must take him back”, thinks the monk. “The child of Mary deserves an intelligent life. I will teach him the Arabic language, French, to count and conjugate verbs, to read and write.” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 206)

The novel ends with this link between the two languages, Arabic and French, the same one that justifies the identity of the novelist Venus Khoury-Ghata, whose personal life also takes place between two worlds, East and West. Not only does the novelist claim the authority of interculturality, but more precisely, she sets up crossbreeding as a possible way of existing. However, as we have been able to understand throughout this contribution, the novel takes place mainly in an Arab-Muslim world. Hence the fact that Arabic is the mother tongue of the various characters, including the heroine of the story.

III. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the novels of Venus Khoury-Ghata have chosen to probe the mysteries of the culture of the Arab world and to cross borders to assert her convictions and claim the freedom of women. Fascinated by the West, synonymous with freedom as much as she is attached to the East, synonymous, more often than not, with war, death, insecurity and suffering, rooted in the Arab world, “(...) submerged by the culture of the Arab world” (Khoury-Ghata, 2003, p. 206) so much so that she confides in an interview “that she [would] not know how to write a novel that takes place in France, where Frenchmen are discussing together.” (Oumhani, n.d.).

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