

INTRODUCTION

James D. Le Sueur

It is not an exaggeration to say that *Madah-Sartre* is one of the most imaginative and provocative plays of our era. In it exiled Algerian playwright Alek Baylee Toumi crosses several unspoken boundaries and, in so doing, places his art and himself at the center of one of today's most important and violent disputes. That dispute, as Salman Rushdie has often stated, centers on the right, if not necessity, of intellectuals to criticize radical Islam. Alek Baylee Toumi is well-schooled in the facts of life of the post-Rushdie fatwa era—when criticism of militant Islam has become a complicated and altogether deadly business, when even the translators of literary works have been murdered by religious extremists, and publishers, editors, and booksellers have been threatened and harassed. Nevertheless Toumi chose to engage in this debate through this play, knowing full well the stakes of the literary game.¹ As a result of his courage and commitment to art and critique, he can now stand defiantly before us—in his own flawless translation—as one of the most creative and courageous playwrights of our generation.

Like many other writers fully aware of the danger of reprisals by religious extremists, Toumi published *Madah-Sartre* under his nom de plume, Alek Baylee (which translates as “the Kabyle”). The first of several plays, it was conceived in large measure as a recalibration of Jean-Paul Sartre's most famous play, *No Exit* (*Huis Clos*). It was in *No Exit* that Sartre distilled the powerful paranoid intoxicant of his existentialist credo from the pure fear of be-

ing trapped in hell with Others, whose mutual disdain seemed to spill from one condemned soul to the next. What better literary device could there be for Alek Baylee Toumi than to draw from this fear of the Other and then graft it onto the bitter realities of a nation turned to fratricidal chaos?

Madah-Sartre, Algeria's own *No Exit*, was written in 1995, while Toumi was in exile in the United States (where he still resides). The fact that he chose to situate the re-incarnated ghosts of Sartre and his lifelong companion, Simone de Beauvoir, in Algeria during that year is no coincidence. As leading European intellectuals, both Sartre and de Beauvoir had played instrumental roles during the decolonization of French Algeria (1954–62) and thereby served as perfect mirrors from which to reflect the hopes and illusions of the past. By mobilizing their ghosts, giving them voice, and having them kidnapped on their way to the funeral of the slain Francophone Algerian writer, Tahar Djaout,² Toumi could mine their reputations and bring them down to earth during a major humanitarian crisis. By doing this he could venture into territory that is forbidden to the historian. He could ask what if . . . ? What if Sartre and de Beauvoir could see what had become of their once-cherished Algerian cause? What if they could confront the radical Islamists who now terrorize innocents in the name of God? What if they could bear witness to the new hell of postcolonial Otherness?

The year 1995 was a particularly good time to ask those very questions. It was a bloody year in Algeria, preceded by several years of intense escalating violence, and it was thus a good moment to assess the phantoms of the past and the grim realities of the present. Algeria's violent decade of the 1990s, sometimes referred to as a "Civil War,"

or “The Second Algerian War,” spilled over its borders with the involvement in a hitherto internal conflict by a group of Afghan-trained Algerian jihadists known as the GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé). This internationalization began with the failed December 24, 1994, highjacking of the Algiers-Paris Air France flight 8969—which the GIA planned to blow up over the Eiffel Tower on Christmas Eve—and then continued with a series of bombings in 1995 in Paris (nine years before the deadly Madrid attacks were carried out by al-Qaeda affiliates in Europe in March 2004, and a full ten years before other jihadist suicide bombers struck in July 2005 in London).

The first of a string of Algerian GIA bombs in Paris killed eight people and wounded eighty-seven on July 25, 1995, at the busy Saint Michel subway stop on the Left Bank. Other foiled and unsuccessful bombing plots continued to terrorize Paris over the course of the next several months. Demonstrating both a clear will and desire to strike directly at France for its not-so-tacit support for the military regime in Algeria, Algerian jihadists were already several years into a devastating terror campaign at home that resulted in the murder of dozens of prominent Algerian intellectuals, activists, artists, and tens of thousands of Algerian civilians. One of the prime but elusive targets in this violent campaign had been Khalida Messaoudi, perhaps Algeria’s most prominent feminist politician and today’s minister of culture.

We now know that the jihadist movement in Algeria was a large and central part of a global, well-organized, and extended campaign to combat opponents of political Islam, first at home within the Islamic world, then abroad throughout the West. Yet as efficient as groups such as the GIA were in killing opponents or in forcing

them into disorienting exile, they could not stop the political aesthetics of literary critique. In fact, the more innocents the militants killed, and the more the Algerian government began to censor criticism of its own highly questionable violent excesses, always couched in the language of repressing terror, the more the literature of protest flourished. Hence, rather than suppressing these new post-Cold War dissidents of the Muslim world,³ as Rushdie called them, the fraternal enemies of the Islamists and the military government fostered an entirely new literature, art, music, and even cinema, and unwittingly inspired in each a sense of utter urgency that refused despair and an unyielding determination to overcome the logic of violence.

Alek Baylee Toumi's play is perhaps the best example of the literature to emerge from this new generation of Algerian writers who choose to write their way through terror. The literary generation emerging from the civil conflict of the 1990s includes Anouar Benmalek, Maïssa Bey, Slimane Benaïssa, Aziz Chouaki, Tahar Djaout, Yasmina Khadra, and Malika Mokeddem and has benefited from the sustained critiques of more established writers such as Assia Djebar and Rachid Boudjedra. This said, Toumi also issues an important caveat that is important for all readers to understand from the beginning. As he writes in his "warning," he wants to ensure the proper distinction between the terms *Islamist* and *Muslim*. Islamists are, in his view, dangerous religious fundamentalists who often resort to terrorism against innocent Muslims and non-Muslims alike, in order to achieve their earthly paradise. His work is thus written in defense of civilian Muslims and Others, but is strongly "anti-Islamist" and "antiterrorist."

Violence in Algeria and indeed artistic reactions to it, however, did not surface *ex nihilo*. In fact, Algeria's steady descent into terror during the 1990s was preceded by two turbulent millennia, marked by successive waves of foreign occupation, culminating in the modern period with the French capture of Algiers in 1830 and the establishment of Algeria as the jewel of France's colonial empire. By 1954 the French military and political authorities could no longer contain Algerian nationalism. In July 1962 Algeria achieved independence, after an eight-year war that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and marked one of the most violent episodes in the history of twentieth-century decolonization.⁴

Alek Baylee Toumi was born during the French–Algerian War in a village in Kabylia and was still a young child when his nation finally won its independence. In 1965 Colonel Houari Boumediene overthrew President Ahmed Ben Bella, establishing a military dictatorship with the only legally recognized party the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), thus ending Algerian hopes for an open democratic society for three decades. In that same year Alek Toumi entered a French-speaking Jesuit school in Algiers. Hence, just as his homeland was beginning its controversial Arabization program, which linked linguistic reforms to nationalist identity politics, Toumi's intellectual formation was firmly situated in the French Cartesian rationalist tradition. He received his baccalaureate, traveled to France, and then in 1984 continued his university studies at the University of Wisconsin.

Meanwhile in Algeria during the 1980s, after a decade of firm control over the Islamist movement, the government of President Chadli Bendjedid (1979–92), who assumed power after the death of Colonel Boumediene,

began to yield to pressure from religious conservatives. Perhaps the most important concession came with the passage of the Family Code in 1984, which greatly limited women's civil rights and put them in a legally subservient position in relation to men.⁵

While the Algerian government confronted growing opposition from women's rights movements, it also began to encounter extreme socioeconomic distress, fueled by a population explosion, massive state corruption, and grossly inefficient utilization of the country's vast natural resources. Social unrest increased, and in October 1988 major youth riots forced the government to declare a state of siege. This decision proved fatal to the FLN, which lost virtually all credibility as news of the killing of hundreds of Algerians by state forces proved true. In reaction to growing public opposition, President Chadli heeded calls for political liberalization. Algeria's resulting new constitution in 1989 allowed for the creation of Algeria's first multiparty system.

Among the many parties that vied for power in this democratic process was the newly formed Front Islamique du Salut (FIS). Clearly the FLN never felt that the FIS represented a serious threat to their power, but the FIS won stunning victories, first in the municipal elections of June 1990 and then in the first round of the national elections held in December 1991. Already in the summer of 1991, the FIS had called for the creation of an Islamic Republic and for instituting shari'a (Islamic law), and it also threatened armed revolt against the state. This threat of militant action led to the arrest of top FIS leaders and hundreds of others. Among the newly formed parties that hoped to block the FIS's ascent to power through the ballot box was the Rassemblement pour la Culture et la

Démocratie (RCD), led by Saïd Saadi and Khalida Messaoudi, who were both strong secularist candidates.

Unable to check the FIS's swift rise to power, the military intervened in mid-January 1992, canceled the second round of the elections, dissolved the National Assembly, and voided the December election results. The Algerian government quickly installed a powerful military junta government known as the High State Committee, headed by Mohamed Boudiaf, a former war hero who returned after years of exile only to be assassinated about six months later in June 1992, during a live television appearance.

After the military intervention and Boudiaf's assassination, the situation quickly deteriorated into a violent conflict between the military and the Islamists. The FIS formed an armed insurgent movement known as the *Armée Islamique du Salut* (Islamic Salvation Army), or AIS, and suddenly other militant groups formed and proclaimed a jihad against the state, its supporters, and cultural opponents. The AIS and other groups immediately began to use fatwas to legitimize killing their opponents, and prime targets of these fatwas during 1993 were journalists, writers, activists, foreigners, French speakers, and academics.

By 1993 even more radical Islamist groups emerged, the most prominent of them being the terror conglomerate known as the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA). Many of the GIA were veterans of the Afghan jihadist campaign against the Soviets, and they came to Algeria in the hopes of making it a central part of the global effort to overthrow corrupt (in their view) secularist governments. During the battle for Algeria the GIA developed a reputation for killing intellectuals who refused to fall into line with its extremist views. One of the most outspoken crit-

ics of the Islamist movement to be murdered was the Algerian writer Tahar Djaout.

Djaout's murder in mid-1993 seemed to change the entire tenor of the Algerian civil war and brought international attention to the plight of Algerian intellectuals and to the relevance of their situation for intellectuals across the globe. Djaout's assassination also set in motion the GIA's decision to step up its campaign to eliminate other opponents, and it began a long and bloody campaign to execute any writer or intellectual (along with other categories of targets) who dared criticize Islamist ideologies. Alek Baylee Toumi, like many others, including Salman Rushdie, Julija Sukys, and Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka,⁶ was deeply affected by the murder of Djaout and understood long before al-Qaeda became a household name that the world had changed. Toumi also knew that the international media largely misunderstood the conflict.

The media's misunderstanding of Algeria was in part due to the tendency of international human rights groups and even Western governments to side with the Islamists. Many Islamists were granted political asylum in the United States and in Western Europe. One of the most prominent FIS leaders in exile, Anwar Haddam, had managed to escape to the United States, from where he continued his advocacy of an Algerian Islamic state. From 1996 to 2000, he was held without charges by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, after being sentenced to death in absentia in Algeria for allegedly ordering acts of violence to be carried out there.⁷ Anwar Haddam is important here because his persona was partially fictionalized in the character of Madah (a composite name short for Mad-d-Allah, to symbolize Islamic fundamentalists) in the play.⁸

In addition to these current events and the realities

of Islamist rage that loomed large in 1995, the legacy of decolonization continued to haunt French and Algerian psyches. During Algeria's struggles to achieve national liberation, one of the prevailing ideologies was that the FLN represented the true sovereignty of the Algerian people. With that ideology came claims of authenticity and also the insistence that violence (even against their countrymen and rival nationalist movements) would liberate Algerians from their French overlords. These methods meant that the FLN tolerated no middle ground, no collaboration, and no challenges to their claims to represent Algeria's cultural authenticity and political legitimacy. And importantly, while the FLN recognized the place of Islam as the religion of the people, it also remained secularist and socialist in orientation.

Many French intellectuals supported the FLN's logic of violence during decolonization, and Sartre and de Beauvoir remained foremost proponents of the FLN. They tended to see in the FLN (and other national liberation groups around the world) the hopes for a worldwide proletarian, socialist revolution. Moreover, Sartre and de Beauvoir's positions on Algeria drew international attention and were a constant source of embarrassment for the French government. Understanding this, Sartre and de Beauvoir used their symbolic capital as world-famous intellectuals to argue that European, and especially French, colonialism was incorrigibly corrupt and doomed to disappear. Prior to its extinction, though, colonialism would make desperate use of the most savage repression, including torture, to maintain its hold on its overseas possessions.⁹ Hence Sartre and de Beauvoir argued that violence against the colonial system was justified and necessary for the global liberation of humankind.

By setting both Sartre's and de Beauvoir's ghosts on the historical stage of Algeria during the 1990s, Toumi evokes not only the powerful symbolism of two of the most important advocates for "Third World" national liberation, but also brings their spirits onto a violent historical stage permeated with the phantoms of the past. Toumi suggests rather provocatively that by condoning such unmitigated violence in the name of revolutionary abstractions, they helped to sow the seeds of this terrible present, where their fellow intellectuals are ruthlessly slaughtered in this harvest of hate.

The reincarnated Sartre and de Beauvoir, who themselves had made it known that the notion of a spiritual afterlife was one of humanity's grand illusions, are now in the mood for some self-criticism and seem to enjoy giving life on the stage a second chance. Their ghosts are summoned by Toumi, with a kind of magical realism, so that the viewer (or reader) senses that their appearance on stage is logical and natural. They are present in order to account for their own past advocacy of violence and at the same time to defend rationalism and democratic justice. True to the spirit of their philosophical positions, both ghosts defend the writer's right of political critique and the role of the intellectual. But they are called back down to earth for other purposes as well: Simone de Beauvoir to defend women's rights and Sartre to destroy radical Islamists' claims that they rightfully occupy the space of cultural legitimacy vacated by failed secular nationalists.

As a Francophone writer, Toumi stands his ground and allows the deteriorating situation in Algeria to speak for itself. And despite the playfulness of his literary devices here, there is a powerful message. According to Toumi, the radical Islamists attempted to use the rhetorical trap-

pings of authenticity advanced during the nationalist period, an ideology that made sense given the brutality of French colonialism and its totalizing effect on identity. He shows that these Islamists have also sought to replace the secularist ideology with a species of religious fascism that would permanently destroy civil society. In one of the many terms coined by Toumi, the “fascislamists” are the thugs clad in religious rhetoric who stop at nothing in their effort to wrest the Algerian state from the military. At the same time, Toumi had no illusions about the Algerian state when he wrote the play in 1995 and demonstrated an equally well-grounded disdain for the military regime that was then ruling the country in the name of preserving order. From his point of view, the Islamists and *Le Pouvoir*—the military-backed state—each used the violence of the other side to justify a ruthless quest to dominate an ever-cowering Algerian population—common Muslim citizens such as the taximan, who in the play largely personifies the average pious man desperately trying to survive in this unrelenting war zone of impiety.

Given the brutality of the war between Islamists and the state in Algeria during the 1990s, it might just take the ghost of Sartre and de Beauvoir to make sense of the situation. What is certainly clear in this play is that the power of critique that Sartre and de Beauvoir once possessed has in fact been transmitted to future generations of writers, and that these writers understand exactly what is at stake in the contemporary period. The Islamists were also no doubt equally aware of the stakes, which is why they began to target the very intellectuals, such as Tahar Djaout, who best communicated the democratic, secularist, and genderless values that Sartre and de Beauvoir once embraced. Moreover, knowing full well the reality of

violence against innocent civilians, Toumi does not recoil from having his characters put this reality starkly.

Toumi's play thus refuses to yield to the radical Islamists in Algeria. Confronted with the wholesale murder of Algerian intellectuals and the Islamists' desire to purge the country of all those corrupted by the West, Toumi was one of the first Algerian writers to put this battle in such provocative terms. As he sees it, human dignity hangs in the balance. Literature itself has a specific role to play, that of "engagement," as Sartre himself put it. This wonderful *pièce de théâtre*, written from the perspective of an exiled intellectual, brings home the reality that has become all too familiar to readers in the post-September 11 world. *Madah-Sartre* gives us reason to believe not only in the art of resistance but also in the resistance of literary critique.

NOTES

I would like to thank David L. Schalk, Ladette Randolph, Loukia K. Sarroub, and Alek Baylee Toumi for their welcomed comments on this text.

1. For more on the effect of fatwas, see Daniel Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West*, 2nd ed., with a postscript by Koenraad Elst (New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers, 2004); Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
2. Tahar Djaout (1954–93) was assassinated in Algiers in May 1993 by the GIA. He co-founded the journal *Ruptures* and wrote many important books, including his posthumous novel *The Last Summer of Reason* (St. Paul: Ruminator Books, 2001) and *The Watchers* (St. Paul: Ruminator Books, 2002).

3. Salman Rushdie, "The Struggle for the Soul of Islam," *New York Times*, July 11, 1993.
4. For more on the decolonization of Algeria see, James D. Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria*, forward by Pierre Bourdieu, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Matthew Connolly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and David L. Schalk, *War and the Ivory Tower: Algeria and Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).
5. For more on feminist opposition to the Family Code see Khalida Messaoudi, *Unbowed: An Algerian Woman Confronts Islamic Fundamentalism*, interviews with Elisabeth Schemla (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). Also see James D. Le Sueur's *Uncivil War* and "Ghost Walking in Algiers: Why Alek Baylee Toumi Resurrected Jean-Paul Sartre and de Beauvoir," *French Culture and Society* 10, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 507–17.
6. Wole Soyinka wrote the forward to the English translation of Tahar Djaout's acclaimed novel *The Last Summer of Reason* (New York: Ruminator Books, 2001). See also Julija Sukys, *Silence Is Death: The Life and Work of Tahar Djaout* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).
7. INS officials attempted to have Anwar Haddam deported back to Algeria, but this action was blocked. Failing to make a case against him, he was released in the United States in December 2000.
8. Le Sueur, *Uncivil War*, 312.
9. For more about French torture, see Henri Alleg's *The Question*, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, forward by Ellen Ray, and introduction by James D. Le Sueur (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006). See also James D. Le Sueur, "Torture and the Decolonization of French Algeria: Nationalism, 'Race,' and Violence in Colonial Incarceration," in *Captive and Free: Colonial and Post-Colonial Incarceration*, ed. Graeme Harper (London: Continuum, 2002).

WARNING

In French the word *islamiste* refers to radical Islamic fundamentalists, to Islamic terrorists and their organizations. *Musulman* is a term used to designate mainstream Muslims, ranging from liberal, secular, or nonpracticing Muslims to moderate or conservative ones who go to the mosque but are not fundamentalists. In the case of the civil war in Algeria, the overwhelming majority of the assassinated people—journalists, intellectuals, school teachers, raped women—are Muslims. It means that:

**The victims are Muslims, while the killers,
the assassins, the terrorists are Islamists**

This is a major difference between the two.

The problem is that in English the word *Islamic* is used interchangeably to refer either to a Muslim or to an Islamist. It is very important not to confuse the two and to learn to distinguish between victims and executioners. *Madah-Sartre* is not anti-Muslim; to the contrary, it defends Muslim victims and all Others who are victims of terrorism. That is why *Madah-Sartre* is, without a shadow of a doubt, antifundamentalist, antiterrorist, and anti-Islamist.

CHARACTERS

MADAH

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

MULLAHS and PSY-MULLAH

CHIEF CHADOR and

CHADORETTES

COPS

TAXIMAN (Hamid Lounar)

CHAUFFEUR ('Mmi Ali)

DOCTOR

SURGEON (Dr. Freeman)

ARTIST

DOORMAN

TERRORIST

NURSES

PRESENTER

GUARD

RADIO ANNOUNCER

RADIO REPORTERS (Veronique
Lamesche and Liz Miller)

PRELUDE

Somewhere in the seventh heaven. Center stage.

SIMONE: Are you ready? Do you have all that you need?

SARTRE: One moment. My pipe, my glasses, something to write with.

SIMONE: Paulo, are you sure you want to do this?

SARTRE: He was a friend . . . Let's go, Castor. Don't forget your coat. Everything is arranged. We're traveling incognito. They think we're dead. We take a cloud to Paris, then Orly-Algiers, and then we go to Kabylie¹ by taxi. Burial is tomorrow.

1. Kabylie is the largest of the Berber regions in northern Algeria. Berbers call themselves Imazighen, or "Free men," and they are descended from the original population of North Africa, comparable to Native American Indians.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

Algiers, on the east road. A taximan is driving with a woman in the back seat, dressed up in European style. He is stopped by many cops, some hooded.

COP: (in civilian clothes) Get out of the car. Your papers.

The TAXIMAN gives the cop his driver's license, insurance, and title.

COP: Where do you come from?

TAXIMAN: (in a French accent) From Algiers, Mr. Policeman. I went to buy medicine. My mother is ill.

COP: Who is this woman?

TAXIMAN: A customer. I'm driving her home.

COP: Where are you going?

TAXIMAN: I am going back home.

COP: What do you think of the military power?

TAXIMAN: But, Mr. Policeman, I . . . think nothing. I am not in politics. I work . . . I have nine children to feed. I am fifty . . . I have done nothing.

COP: For the military FLN or for the fundamentalist FIS?¹

1. FLN (pronounced "efelen") is the Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front), a military-backed single party that ruled Algeria. FIS is the Front Islamique du Salut (Islamic Salvation Front). Pronounced "feece," it has the same sound as the French word *fil*s, meaning son.

TAXIMAN: But . . . I am for nothing . . . I am a family man. I have nine kids waiting to eat.

COP: You are . . . against religion. You are against God.

TAXIMAN: No, I am not against. I am against no one.

COP: Then you must be working with the police. You're a rat, an informant. Talk.

TAXIMAN: (*begging*) What do you want me to say?

COP: Who are you for? Choose, or we'll burn your cab.

TAXIMAN: (*crying, begging*) I am old, I pray, I go to the mosque . . . I am not against religion.

COP: But . . . whom are you for? Choose a side.

TAXIMAN: I am for no one. I am against no one. Don't kill me. I have nine children.

COP: You are for the terrorists. You're against us. Talk.

TAXIMAN: What do you want me to say? I am for nobody.

COP: Who are you? Who do you work for?

TAXIMAN: For no one. I work to eat and feed my children. I work for myself. I am the only employee and the boss. I don't do politics.

COP: You're clever . . . You refuse to talk. (*He slashes the taximan's left cheek with a blade.*) This is a warning. Now scam.

SCENE 2

Later, at a second roadblock. POLICEMEN stop the TAXIMAN. Two are standing on the road and several are armed, wearing hoods, watching. They look like the first cops.