

# “The Architects of Salvation”: Discourses of Extremism and Cultural Hegemony in Yasmina Khadra’s *Wolf Dreams*

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**Abstract**—This article aims to analyze the construction of the extremist discourse in Yasmina Khadra’s *Wolf Dreams* (2025) placing the text in the context of Algeria’s “Black Decade” as well as the postcolonial legitimacy crisis. Through the close reading of two fundamental scenes, the mufti’s sermon, and the parable of the mantis, Khadra shows the evolution of Islamist discourse from spiritual consolation to the ideological domination of political Islam’s discourse. The study examines how political Islam captures and colonizes moral uncertainty and weaponizes despair. Using the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony, the article shows how *Wolf Dreams* reframes Algeria’s civil war as an allegory of stagnant revolutionary continuity. The novel’s representation of indoctrination as a theatrical and linguistic process shows how political praxis is replaced by rhetoric of purity, creating a self-consuming cycle of violence. In the fusion of testimonial realism and allegory, Khadra not only chronicles national trauma but also interrogates the cultural logic that sustains extremism’s appeal.

**Index Terms**—*Wolf Dreams*, Islamist discourse, Gramsci, Algeria, hegemony

## I. INTRODUCTION

Yasmina Khadra dramatizes the violence, apocalyptic fanaticism, and ideological distortions that devastated Algeria’s moral and political landscape during the “Black Decade” of the 1990s. While fictional, these narratives are clearly grounded in the shattered rhythms of lived experiences that reflect social disintegration, intellectual paralysis, and moral despair defining that period. Khadra does not merely bear witness; his narratives serve as laboratories of ideological inquiry, staging Algeria’s battlefield of ideas in aesthetic form. Through this lens, his novel may be comprehended as moral fictions: explorations of how extremist factions manipulated Islamic precepts for political ends, and how intellectuals, poets, and ordinary citizens sought to articulate counter-gestures of resistance. In *Wolf Dreams* (2025), Yasmina Khadra offers more than a literary chronicle of Algeria’s “Black Decade”. He presents a surgical investigation into how ideological violence is manufactured through language. It is a dissection of how language is used to manufacture the violent ideologies of extremists. While the novel follows the journey of Nafa Walid, a young man who evolves from being marginalized to a militant, it relates a distinctive connection between radicalization and violence on one hand and the way extreme ideologies are constructed through language on the other. That is, how salvation can become enslavement, beliefs can become rituals, and suffering can become rhetoric. This paper provides evidence that Khadra’s novel transforms extremism from a politically based phenomenon into a piece of linguistic and performative machinery, an ideology that colonizes consciousness, rewrites kinship, and weaponizes moral despair.

Hence, Khadra employs a rich tapestry of social, historical, cultural, and political markers to cultivate a vivid sense of realism. The opening sections, “Great Algiers” and “The Casbah,” do more than introduce the setting; they delineate the novel’s spatial and socially stratified architecture. The Casbah, depicted as a labyrinthine, overcrowded quarter, becomes a theatre of societal abjection and is identified as the cradle of jihadist mobilization. In deliberate contrast, the narrative situates the affluent and morally compromised Raja family in the exaggerated “Beverly Hills” of Algiers (Khadra, 2025, p. 24), thereby highlighting the city’s stark social inequalities. Khadra extends this topography with precise geographic markers: Bab El Oued, a bustling waterfront district; the Maquis, peripheral highlands that witnessed some of the civil conflict’s most grisly massacres; Chrea, a mountainous region southwest of the capital, notable for its strategic elevation; and, extending further afield, Peshawar, near the Khyber Pass, where certain Islamist figures undergo military training. These detailed cartographies do more than differentiate spaces; they anchor the narrative in a shared empirical landscape, enhancing both its historical verisimilitude and socio-political intelligibility.

According to Antonio Gramsci, hegemony refers to a mode of political domination that relies on the consent of those who are subject to it. Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony is fundamentally critical whenever domination is under the

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lens. Yet hegemony does not presuppose domination as a necessity inherent in the “nature” of any social order, rather it aims to analyze the political processes of the construction (or failure) of consent. Gramsci's concept of hegemony has a strategic meaning: political struggle is not aimed simply at seizing state power, but at organizing and dominating ideologically, pedagogically, and culturally; and an analytical meaning: political action and institutions are characterized by both coercion and consensus building. Gramsci thus speaks of a “dual perspective” in political action and in the life of the state: force and consent. The concept of the hegemonic apparatus refers to the institution that is forged and mobilized to organize and guarantee this political and cultural domination, while civil society and political society refer respectively to the social sphere in which the struggle for hegemony is engaged and the sphere of coercion. (ÓRálaigh, 2024; Pries, 2025). Taking up the topological metaphor of structure and superstructure with which much of Marxism has attempted to conceive of economic determination, Gramsci conceives of civil society and political society as “two great superstructural ‘floors’,” the first being “the set of organizations commonly referred to as ‘private,’” the second constituting the sphere “of ‘direct domination’ or command expressed in the state and in the ‘legal’ government.” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 314). The state thus represents a synthesis of the two; it is “in its fullest sense: dictatorship and hegemony” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 126).

Gramsci attaches particular importance to the question of hegemony in crisis situations, when the existing order and its modes of consent and loyalty are no longer “obvious.” Gramsci thus proposes the concept of “organic crisis” to describe a situation in which the very foundations of structures of domination are at stake (Kiely, 2025; Pries, 2025). According to Gramsci, there can be two solutions to this crisis: “organic” (profound social transformation) or “charismatic” (domination by a leader). In Khadra's novel, however, this figure appears in a distorted and unsettling form. The Islamist sheikh functions as a counterfeit organic intellectual, channeling communal grievances into authoritarian and violent ideologies. In so doing, he inverts Gramsci's model; moral leadership is transformed into an apparatus of coercion, and violence is redefined as a sacred duty. This corruption of intellectual authority dramatizes the ease with which cultural leadership can be weaponized in times of crisis (ÓRálaigh, 2024; Kiely, 2025). In sharp contrast, Khadra's depictions of poets, journalists, and intellectuals reflect their marginalization and impotence in Algeria during the 1990s. Rather than articulating counter-hegemonic visions, they are silenced, exiled, or withdrawn into self-preservation. This absence underscores not only the personal risks faced by intellectuals during the “Black Decade,” many of whom were targeted and assassinated, but also the structural incapacity of Algeria's cultural sphere to produce leaders capable of mobilizing alternative forms of consciousness. The vacuum of intellectual authority thus becomes, in Khadra's narrative, one of the most devastating symptoms of the national crisis. In Khadra's fiction both the authoritarian state and the Islamist opposition function as heirs to colonial modalities, privileging coercion over consensus and silencing critical thought. The failure of intellectual mediation thus reflects the unfinished project of decolonization. The intellectual figure is either absent, complicit, or silenced, dramatizing a national crisis in which cultural leadership is stifled by fear and violence. Khadra therefore does more than describe the silence of intellectuals; he dramatizes the collapse of cultural frameworks that might otherwise have anchored collective resistance.

Yasmina Khadra explicitly acknowledges that his novels mirror contemporary social and political realities. He asserts that while his work may employ fictional devices, it is fundamentally a reflection or, as he puts it, a “plagiarism” of Algerian reality (Drouin, 1999; Mertz-Baumgartner, 2003, pp. 93–108). His narratives, he claims, aim to faithfully report the nation's tragedies, often unbearable, with the intent to illuminate, warn, and provoke reflection among readers who might otherwise remain indifferent (Mertz-Baumgartner, 2003, p. 96). Brisley (2012) examines the theme of futile archetypes and melancholic violence in the novel, and how it mirrors the cultural trauma of the Algerian War. Brisley writes that “by figuring the recent panic in Algeria as the incestuous legacy of the FLN's failed ideals, Khadra's novel establishes a melancholic genealogy of violence that begins with the independence movement and continues into the 1990s” (pp. 88–89). Watson (2019) writes that *Wolf Dreams* suggests then that the post/colonial body politic has mutated into a new body, one who is also decaying, dying, one whose disease is likely beyond cure (p. 77). She adds that “Khadra's aggressively lurid prose on massacres and infanticide, of saturation of blood and torn flesh, accentuates the exacerbated, autodestructive legacy of post/anti/colonial violence in Algeria” (p. 100). Khadra's novel contains a surplus of carnage in the form of graphic, explicit, gory, obscene, and vulgar depictions of mutilations and mutations on the human body. Khadra's depictions of extreme violence show that contemporary forms of Algerian violence are paradoxically both auto-destructive and autoreproductive (Watson, 2019, p. 58). Senoussi and Mortad (2019) note that Khadra's *Wolf Dreams* “calls to the symbolic as well as the performative character of terrorist acts. In this transdisciplinary endeavor, the Algerian author applies historical imagination and narrative practice to the phenomenon of terrorism” (p. 511).

Although existing scholarship has examined violence, trauma, and postcolonial decay in Khadra's fiction, relatively little attention has been paid to the linguistic production of extremism as a structured process. Researchers such as Lucy Brisley and Julianna Blair Watson emphasize genealogies of violence and corporeal excess, while Senoussi and Mortad highlight the symbolic and performative dimensions of terrorism. However, the specific role of language as a mechanism that manufactures ideological consent and violent subjectivity remains under-theorized. This article addresses that gap by examining how Khadra constructs extremism as a discursive apparatus rather than merely a historical or political condition. Violence and terror are central to Khadra's strategy of realism. The author employs graphic, visceral language to position the reader at the center of the horrors he depicts. Terms such as “massacre,”

“decapitated,” “blood-soaked,” and “mutilated” do not merely narrate events; they evoke the psychological and emotional experience of terror. In scenes such as the Maquis in the chapter “The Abyss,” where Nafa witnesses atrocities committed by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the narrative achieves cinematic intensity that immerses the reader in Algeria’s “Black Decade.” Detailed descriptions of killings, such as Salah of Indochina’s execution, emphasize both method and effect, aligning with didactic realist strategies designed to educate readers about the extremity of terror. Through these narrative choices, Khadra transforms the reader into a virtual participant, fostering an emotional memory of events that are both historically situated and psychologically resonant.

In the collapse of Algerian political legitimacy, the novel dramatizes what Gramsci described as the “crisis of authority” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 210). The ruptured state, the disillusioned citizenry, and the charismatic preacher form a triangular formation of violence: the preacher occupies the space vacated by the state, offering moral leadership as ideology. This vacuum of leadership is poignantly revealed in the novel’s reflection on intellectual failure: the poet Sid Ali tells Yahia how the mantis story began an inversion of revolution into predation (Khadra, 2025, p. 203). The transform-mechanism in the story mirrors the structural logic of the insurgent movement in the novel: hope transforms into hunger, and comrades into targets. By elaborating these theoretical underpinnings, this essay prepares the ground for a detailed analysis of how Khadra constructs extremism as a grammar and theater of power rather than simply a historical event. Through these lenses, *Wolf Dreams* becomes a testimony of Algeria’s terror and an indictment of the language that sustains it.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach that integrates close reading with extremist discourse analysis to examine *Wolf Dreams*. The analysis is theoretically grounded in Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony as developed in *Selections From The Prison Notebooks*, which conceptualizes language as both a material and symbolic instruments of ideological authority. The study addresses many research questions such as: how does the novel represent the interplay of consent and coercion in the formation of extremists’ subjectivities? How does Yasmina Khadra’s prose reproduce and destabilize the linguistic strategies of ideological totalization? The analysis focuses on two key passages: the mufti’s sermon and the parable of the praying mantis. Each passage is examined across three analytical dimensions: first, lexical syntactic patterning (including repetition, binary logic, and metaphor). Second, narrative voice and vocalization with particular attention to how the narrator positions the reader in relation to ideological discourse and historical resonance situating the text within the Algerian crisis of the 1990s and broader patterns of radicalization. Primary analysis of the novel is supplemented by secondary scholarship on Algerian literature and Islamist discourse in order to situate the arguments within its historical and theoretical context. The study maintains analytical distance by treating religious and ideological language as historically situated discursive formations rather than theological claims. Accordingly, the focus is not on religion itself but on its mobilization as a mechanism of power and its conversion into systemic violence.

## III. DISCUSSION

### A. Writing the Ruins of Postcolonial Legitimacy

Khadra’s *Wolf Dreams* occupies a distinctive place in the literary cartography of Algeria’s “Black Decade” (1991–2002). Where many contemporaneous works adopt testimonial or journalistic registers (Ford, 2021; Landers, 2013; Le Sueur, 2010; Martin & Phillips, 2007), Khadra’s narrative fuses realism with allegorical intensity, turning political terror into a theater of moral contagion. His protagonist, Nafa Walid, an unemployed, alienated youth, becomes both product and victim of a language that promises salvation but manufactures obedience. The novel thus stages what Antonio Gramsci called a “war of position,” fought not through arms alone but through the occupation of consciousness and culture. As Gramsci writes, “The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as domination and as intellectual and moral leadership” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 57). Khadra’s depiction of extremist indoctrination embodies this duality: coercion and consent intertwine until submission masquerades as faith.

In Khadra’s Casbah, the discursive field of religion becomes a site of political capture. The passage describing the proliferation of “young imams... sniffing out resentment, invading people’s consciousness and forging minds to suit their purpose” (Khadra, 2025, p. 117) epitomizes the Gramscian logic of hegemony at its most insidious. These “architects of Salvation” exercise leadership by absorbing popular discontent into a moral vocabulary that neutralizes critique. Their power lies not in the mosque’s pulpit but in the transformation of grief into grievance, of despair into doctrine. Khadra’s syntax: short clauses, iterative verbs, and spatial saturation “bars, schools and health clinics, and even on staircases” (p. 117) mimics the claustrophobia of ideological saturation. As the narrator confesses, “No more privacy, no running away” (p. 117): hegemony has completed its work when the private sphere itself becomes uninhabitable.

This saturation of discourse corresponds to what Achille Mbembe<sup>1</sup> terms the “aesthetics of domination,” wherein violence is “not merely an act but a form of visibility that structures the political imagination” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 26). In *Wolf Dreams*, visibility is both literal and metaphorical: the constant surveillance of the neighborhood mirrors the internal colonization of thought. The Islamist movement’s moral absolutism functions as a new colonizing discourse, one that replaces the French civilizing mission with a theocratic narrative of purification. Khadra’s irony lies in this substitution: the postcolonial subject, liberated from external rule, becomes enslaved by domestic dogma. The “lost souls” once exploited by colonial paternalism are now “roped into the movement” by indigenous preachers. Extremism thus emerges not as rupture but as continuity what Fanon (1963) calls the “pitfall of national consciousness” (p. 119), wherein decolonization produces mimicry rather than emancipation.

By dramatizing the Islamist’s rhetorical strategies, Khadra also stages the failure of the intellectual class to offer an alternative hegemony. The city’s “confusion” and “weakness” are not mere psychological states but symptoms of an absent moral leadership. In Gramsci’s terms, Algeria lacks an “organic intellectual” capable of translating popular suffering into emancipatory politics. The result is what Khadra (2025) calls “a vocation for being a guru” (p. 117): the proliferation of pseudo-intellectual authority figures who fill the vacuum left by a discredited state. As recent scholarship on Algerian cultural politics has observed, the 1990s witnessed the collapse of both secular and socialist ideologies, leaving religion as “the only discourse with residual moral legitimacy” (Benrabah, 2013). Khadra’s novel captures precisely this historical vacuum, the moment when discourse itself becomes the battlefield.

Khadra’s novel reveals the semiotics of extremism through its obsession with purity, conviction, and surveillance. The repetition of “impossible” “Impossible to grin and bear it. No more privacy, no running away” (p. 117) encodes both social pressure and metaphysical closure. The community’s moral space contracts until every gesture becomes legible to an ideological gaze. Foucault (2012) argues, “where there is power, there is resistance, but resistance is never external in relation to power” (p. 95). In the Casbah, even resistance is pre-scripted: the moment one “whimpers,” sympathy turns into recruitment. Compassion is weaponized and intimately politicized. This fusion of the spiritual and the coercive, of faith and surveillance, makes extremism not an aberration but a product of social disintegration (Gatt, 2025).

Khadra’s narrative also prefigures what Roy (2020) calls the “Islamization of radicalism” rather than the “radicalization of Islam.” The militants’ zeal is born not from theology but from humiliation; Islam becomes a vessel for rage. Hence the description of recruits as “lost souls,” (p. 117) “wretched,” and “frustrated” (p. 119), a lexicon that mirrors Fanon’s analysis of the lumpenproletariat’s susceptibility to violent mysticism. In this sense, *Wolf Dreams* transcends local reportage: it anatomizes the universal grammar of fanaticism, in which discursive purity masks existential despair. By exposing the mechanics of indoctrination, Khadra’s narrative itself performs an act of counter-hegemony. His narrator’s oscillation between complicity and critique dramatizes what Said (1994) calls “the intellectual’s exile,” a consciousness both implicated in and estranged from its milieu. Writing becomes the only space of resistance left when “life was becoming intolerable” (p. 117). The novel’s hybrid style, half testimony, half parable, undermines the extremists’ monologic rhetoric by reintroducing ambiguity and introspection.

In postcolonial Algeria, where both the state and the mosque claim a monopoly over truth, Khadra’s prose reclaims the right to complexity. The very act of describing the process of indoctrination, of rendering its language visible, constitutes a reclaiming of the symbolic order. Gramsci (1971) asserts that “every revolution has been preceded by an intense labor of criticism” (p. 336). *Wolf Dreams* performs that labor not through slogans but through storytelling. Khadra thus depicts extremism not as an eruption from outside the national body but as its pathological continuation. The rhetoric that once animated anti-colonial militancy has been re-channelled into a metaphysical absolutism, a perverse afterlife of revolutionary purity. Recent analyses of Algerian cultural memory (Benslama, 2009) have underscored this continuity, arguing that the Islamist imaginary inherits both the moral fervor and the authoritarian impulse of nationalist discourse. Khadra’s narrative renders this inheritance visible in linguistic form: the sermon’s cadences echo the declamatory tone of independence-era oratory, now stripped of its emancipatory referent.

#### *B. The Law of Silence: Fragmentation, Art, and Ideological Disillusionment*

Khadra stages the disintegration of postcolonial Algeria through the shattered consciousness of its artists, poets, and dreamers. The selected passages: spanning the reflections of Sid Ali, Hamid, and Dahmane, as well as the narrator’s descent into fear and religious conversion, capture the ideological fracture of a society where culture has lost its voice and the individual no longer finds a place to exist. The novel opens onto a geography of alienation that mirrors the postcolonial void what Fanon (1963) describes as a landscape haunted by silence, where the colonial wound mutates into moral decay and paralysis. When Sid Ali, “the bard of the Casbah,” tells the narrator that “Algeria was the biggest archipelago in the world, made up of twenty-eight million or so islands” (Khadra, 2025, p. 34), the metaphor condenses a collective existential condition. What should be a unified post-independence nation is instead fragmented into isolated selves, separated by “oceans of misunderstanding” (p. 34). The image of the “archipelago” articulates both spatial and affective dislocation; it recalls Said’s notion of the dispersed geography of postcolonial identity, where the promise of

<sup>1</sup> A Cameroonian philosopher, historian, and political theorist whose work critically examines colonialism, postcolonial power, and contemporary forms of sovereignty. He is best known for developing the concept of necropolitics, which analyzes how modern political regimes exercise control over life and death, particularly within contexts shaped by colonial and racial domination. (see: <https://wiser.wits.ac.za/people/achille-mbembe>)

liberation collapses into alienation. Algeria here becomes not a nation but a dismembered body; a geography without solidarity, where misunderstanding replaces dialogue and disillusion replaces emancipation.

Khadra's use of Sid Ali as a "bard of the Casbah" also situates the poet as both witness and casualty of a postcolonial malaise. In his poetic solitude, Sid Ali represents the figure of the intellectual trapped between the ruins of ideology and the silence of a defeated public sphere. His remark, cited above, anticipates the recurrent theme of silence as both repression and survival, culminating in Dahmane's bitter pronouncement that "there is only one absolute law, and that is the law of silence" (Khadra, 2025, p. 80). The silence governing Algeria is thus not only political but also ontological; it defines the impossibility of speech in a society where words have lost their transformative power. This "law of silence" functions as a carceral logic, a disciplinary system in which visibility, discourse, and power intersect to regulate bodies and suppress dissent. In Khadra's Algiers, the Casbah becomes both a material and symbolic prison: a spatial manifestation where state power homogenizes urban life by erasing difference and spontaneity. The artist, in such a space, becomes a criminal by definition, a dissident whose only weapon is speech, and whose silence is his only refuge.

In the early dialogues between Hamid, the disillusioned musician, and his interlocutors crystallize this tension between art and social decay. Hamid laments, "I say our society is incompatible with art [...] People look at you with indifference. You're there to entertain, that's all" (Khadra, 2025, p. 58). His despairing confession positions art as both a symptom and a critique of postcolonial stagnation. The indifference he encounters mirrors the collapse of symbolic capital described by Bourdieu (1993): when the social field fails to recognize artistic labor, creativity becomes devalued, reduced to spectacle or noise. Hamid's outburst, his fantasy of smashing his mandolin "on someone's head," reveals the violence of alienation when cultural production loses its social legitimacy. The artist's rage stems not only from exclusion but also from the loss of reciprocity; the community no longer mirrors his expression. In this sense, Khadra dramatizes what Bhabha (1994) identifies as the disjunction of enunciation in the postcolonial nation, the fracture between the idealized image of national unity and the lived fragmentation of its subjects.

Hamid's monologue also illuminates a deeper paradox in postcolonial Algeria: art, once the vehicle of revolutionary consciousness, has been relegated to the margins of survival. His yearning for "something big, not necessarily an ambitious enterprise; just a serious, collective project" (p. 59) evokes the lost utopia of the liberation struggle (Khadra, 2025, p. 59). Yet that desire for collective meaning mutates into an openness to fanaticism. "Give me the Islamic Salvation Front," he declares, "At least the Islamists have a chance of shaking us up" (p. 58). His radicalization is not ideological but an existential act of desperation to escape the vacuum of insignificance. With chilling lucidity, Khadra traces the same sociological process that Frantz Fanon theorizes when colonial oppression is replaced by national corruption, the alienated subject seeks redemption through absolutism (Fanon, 1963). The appeal of the FIS for Hamid and others lies not in theology but in its promise of recognition. "At least at the mosque, I get the feeling they're talking to me, that they're concerned about my future, that I exist" (Khadra, 2025, p. 59). The Islamist project fills the void left by the failed postcolonial state; it offers what the secular republic denied community, visibility, and dignity.

Khadra's treatment of the artist's disillusionment thus functions as a sociopolitical diagnosis of the late Algerian condition. Hamid's longing for "usefulness," his need to "serve without crawling," reflects the contradiction between revolutionary ideals and bureaucratic inertia (Khadra, 2025, p. 59). The FLN, once the emblem of national pride, has become, in his words, "a hoodlum culture, antagonistic to art, learning and human genius." The artist's speech turns prophetic when he denounces "indifference" as "the worst enemy of talent" (p. 59). His protest against stagnation is not only aesthetic but ethical, for indifference perpetuates the very "law of silence" that Dahmane later articulates. Khadra thereby constructs a continuum linking cultural repression, political corruption, and existential despair. The erosion of art mirrors the erosion of hope; the silencing of poets prefigures the silencing of the nation.

The narrator's later encounter with Dahmane crystallizes this moral suffocation through the motif of fear. After the traumatic incident in the forest of Bainem, Nafa retreats into isolation, haunted by nightmares of guilt and persecution. His father's moralizing and society's suspicion turn his private trauma into collective paranoia. Dahmane's cold pragmatism, "The law is for the small fry in our country. The big fish are above the law" (Khadra, 2025, p. 80) expresses the cynicism of a society governed by impunity. His grim maxim, "There is only one absolute law, and that is the law of silence" (p. 80), exposes the hollow core of Algeria's postcolonial sovereignty. Law has become a mask for domination; justice has been replaced by fear. The moral vacuum that Fanon warned would follow independence finds its fictional embodiment here: a society where speech itself is dangerous, where to speak is to die. Foucault's notion of the microphysics of power helps clarify this atmosphere of diffuse control: the state does not need visible repression when fear internalizes obedience. The narrator's psychological collapse, his insomnia, hallucinations, and eventual flight to the mosque, reveals the intimate workings of power on the subject's psyche.

The mosque sequence that follows (pp. 81–85) marks a turning point in Nafa's journey, but Khadra's narrative irony prevents any simple redemption. The call of the muezzin<sup>2</sup>, initially heard as divine consolation, becomes the conduit for ideological capture. "I was filled with a sensation of deliverance," Nafa recalls, "I was convinced that it was a sign from Heaven. God was talking to me through the muezzin" (Khadra, 2025, p. 81). His conversion is less a spiritual awakening than a refuge from unbearable guilt and social abandonment. The mosque functions as a representational space, a lived, symbolic environment offering coherence amid chaos. Yet it also embodies the seduction of totality. Imam Younes, with his "radiant smile" and "ineffable goodness," gently translates Nafa's trauma into the language of

<sup>2</sup> Stands for the Arabic term "Muezzin".

faith and moral order (p. 82). His rhetoric transforms personal despair into collective mission: “You have been among the fat cats... Now you know where you belong” (p. 84). Thus, the discourse of religion heals the scar of alienation by substituting doubt with obedience. In Bhabha’s (1994) view, such moments reveal how national and religious discourses interpellated the subject through empathy and belonging, turning anxiety into faith. What begins as solace ends as subjection.

This dialectic between disillusionment and submission lies at the heart of *Wolf Dreams*. The novel does not demonize faith but exposes its instrumentalization in a space where secular ideals have failed. Imam Younes’s final words: “I offer you the sky as your screen, and God as audience. Now show me your talent” (Khadra, 2025, p. 85) reinscribe the aesthetic impulse within a theological frame. The artist, once seeking beauty and expression, is now conscripted into divine performance. His art becomes jihad. Khadra’s tragic irony is that creation survives only by being reabsorbed into dogma; imagination is redeemed by annihilating itself. This transformation of artistic longing into religious zeal encapsulates the perverse dialectic of Algeria’s “black decade,” when the collapse of cultural institutions produced a vacuum filled by ideological absolutism. The shift from poetry to preaching, from mandolin to minbar, marks not conversion but colonization of the soul.

Spatially, Khadra maps this transformation through the topography of Algiers. The Casbah, the forest of Bainem, and the mosque form a triangle of descent: from the chaotic exterior of crime and corruption to the interior sanctuary of faith, yet all are equally governed by violence and control. The Casbah becomes a palimpsest of broken dreams and failed revolutions. The description of the city “like a mangle,” its “garrets like bundles of washing,” evokes both domestic intimacy and suffocation (Khadra, 2025, p. 85). The vertical movement “from the heights of Notre-Dame to the depths of the Casbah” (p. 85) mirrors Nafa’s psychological fall. Even his final gesture of flinging Sonia’s gold chain into the sea, an act of “renunciation,” cannot cleanse him of despair. “A dream is seductive, persuasive and a companion,” he concludes, “but, in most cases, it is no friend” (p. 86). This recognition seals the novel’s diagnosis: in a world where dreams no longer sustain reality, faith becomes both opium and weapon.

*Wolf Dreams* thus stages the death of the intellectual as the symptom of a broader societal implosion. Khadra’s Algeria is one where artists, poets, and thinkers, those who should have been “the soul of the nation,” are silenced, exiled, or co-opted (p. 57). The “oceans of misunderstanding” (p. 34) that divide Sid Ali’s islands are the oceans between reason and fanaticism, between creation and destruction. In this fractured archipelago, speech becomes a crime and silence the only law. In the end, Nafa’s tragedy is not simply his fall into radicalism but his failure to sustain the fragile space of art between power and belief. The “dream” that turns into a nightmare is not only Algeria’s but humanity’s, the dream of freedom corrupted by fear, and of beauty corrupted by silence.

### C. The Language of Absolutism and the Totalizing Discourse of Extremism

*Wolf Dreams* dramatizes the seductions and contradictions of Islamist militancy through a poetics of speech, particularly, through the performative rhetoric of religious indoctrination. One of the novel’s most striking scenes features the Katiba mufti’s addresses to new recruits, a sermon that transforms language into a weapon of purification and belonging. Beginning with the stark pronouncement that “there are only two ways, not twenty: the way of the Lord, and the way of the Devil,” (Khadra, 2025, p. 219) the mufti inaugurates a binary order that abolishes moral ambiguity and replaces dialectic with dogma. This linguistic polarization captures the novel’s central insight: extremism thrives not merely through violence, but through discourse, through the production of an ideological grammar that forecloses the possibility of choice (Pruitt, 2022).

The mufti’s sermon operates as a form of counter-hegemonic articulation that paradoxically reproduces domination. The Islamist insurgency in *Wolf Dreams* seeks to overthrow the Algerian state, yet its rhetorical practice replicates the same hegemonic logic of totalization: it defines a universal “truth” and demands consent through coercion. However, this consent is achieved through an emotional manipulation that thrives on precarity and despair, echoing what recent scholarship has identified as the affective economy of jihadist rhetoric (Hegghammer, 2022). The mufti’s sermon thus exemplifies what Bayat (2021, p. 44) terms “post-Islamist re-hegemony”: a political discourse that re-sacralizes everyday grievances by framing them within a cosmic narrative of salvation and betrayal. The language of the sermon alternates between scriptural paraphrase and militarized command, collapsing the moral and the martial into a single performative register. The imperative syntax: “Follow him with your eyes shut... Forget them, cast them out...” (Khadra, 2025, p. 220) dramatizes the pedagogical violence inherent in the rhetoric of purity. The mufti’s voice transforms listening into obedience, and faith into surveillance. His theology of “nakedness,” in which believers strip away all illusion, paradoxically enforces a form of self-erasure: “We have renounced all that is sham and illusory and chosen the path of nakedness, where all is visible” (pp. 219-220). What masquerades as spiritual transparency becomes total exposure to authority, a condition of docile visibility reminiscent of Foucault’s disciplinary gaze.

When the mufti declares that “you can’t have one foot in the east, and one in the west. It isn’t possible,” (p. 219) Khadra dramatizes how ideology performs linguistic enclosure, the narrowing of moral and intellectual space until the subject’s only available position is submission. The sermon’s rhythm, its didactic repetition “You can’t go round in circles, You can’t have one foot in the east,” and its invocation of divine geometry “paths so straight that you have just enough room to put one foot in front of the other” (p. 219) all work to turn spatial metaphors into ethical imperatives. The “straight path” of God becomes not only a religious symbol but also an instrument of disciplinary order, an aesthetic of rectitude that mirrors both state authoritarianism and jihadist puritanism. The mufti’s sermon is precisely

that “labor of persuasion”: it reshapes despair into militant purpose, converts poverty into spiritual privilege, and constructs a community through the grammar of exclusion. As modern scholars of radical rhetoric note, “jihadist speech acts” operate through binary epistemologies that produce conviction by annihilating alternatives (Dabashi, 2021; Kundnani, 2014; Wiktorowicz, 2005). Such discourses thrive on eliminating ambivalence, translating complex socio-political frustrations into a grammar of cosmic warfare. In Khadra’s depiction, the mufti’s voice is both hypnotic and disciplinary, a blend of religious charisma and bureaucratic command. In this sense, the mufti embodies what Gramsci (1971, p. 333) calls a “Caesarist” figure: a charismatic intermediary who emerges in moments of ideological exhaustion to provide the illusion of unity.

The sermon’s theology of “nakedness,” “we have renounced all that is sham and illusory and chosen the path of nakedness, where all is visible” (p. 219) extends beyond metaphor. It articulates an aesthetic of purity that collapses into violence. The stripping away of illusion becomes a symbolic act of annihilation, anticipating the physical purges GIA will commit. By demanding that the recruits “weed out” those who “fester in the shadow of demons,” he fuses agricultural imagery with theological censure, transforming extermination into a moral duty. The mufti’s insistence that “The GIA is our only family. The emir is father to all of us” (p. 220) exposes how extremism replaces organic kinship with ideological filiation. The biological family, the microcosm of affective bonds, is displaced by the totalitarian “family” of the movement. In this substitution, Khadra renders visible the process that Althusser called interpellation: the moment when ideology “recruits” individuals as subjects through address (Althusser, 1971, p. 174). The mufti’s voice, calling his listeners “brothers” and “sons,” performs this interpellation linguistically; the recruits respond by nodding “in silent agreement,” thus confirming their new subject positions. As the sermon continues, the demand intensifies: “If your natural father is not on your side, he ceases to be your father forthwith... Forget them, cast them out, they are nothing but diseased branches” (p. 220). The metaphor of the pruned genealogical tree materializes the violence of ideological purification, a familial euthanasia that mirrors the purges within the jihadist factions themselves.

Khadra constructs the sermon as a performance of orality, rhythm, and theatricality. The mufti’s gestures, smoothing his “henna-red beard,” tapping his “hefty volume of hadiths,” speaking in a “deep, singsong voice,” situate him within an affective economy of authority. His charisma stems from embodied rhetoric, what Judith Butler might term the “performative iteration” of belief (Butler, 1997). Each repetition of divine binaries “God/Devil,” “light/shadow,” “faith/blindness” consolidates the speaker’s position as the conduit of absolute truth. Yet Khadra undercuts this charisma through irony. The narrator’s description of the recruits’ response: “The new recruits nodded in silent agreement” (p. 219), evokes a mechanical uniformity, suggesting not conviction but programmed obedience. Later, when the mufti instructs them to “banish all thoughts from your minds, all hesitation from your hearts, and be content to be the arms that deliver the blows,” the language shifts from persuasion to command. The result is no longer Gramscian hegemony, rule through consent, but the post-hegemonic phase of domination, where language no longer persuades but orders, where the subject’s will dissolves into function. Lazreg (2008) and Rahal (2022), have argued that the Algerian civil war produced a crisis of speech: both the state and the insurgency claimed a monopoly over truth, leaving no space for dialogic resistance. The mufti’s discourse embodies this crisis. His sermon’s cadence imitates Qur’anic rhythm, yet its effect is secularly strategic to silence rather than enlighten. Khadra’s choice of the word lesson to close the scene “The lesson was over” confirms the didactic structure of terror: indoctrination masquerades as pedagogy.

The exchange between the mufti and the questioning youth crystallizes how extremist discourse weaponizes dehumanization. When the boy asks, “What should my attitude be towards relatives who fight for the Islamic Salvation Army?” the mufti’s immediate reply: “The Islamic Salvation Army is a vipers’ nest and ‘Bughat-rebels... They are worse than the *taghut*<sup>3</sup>, their allies” (Khadra, 2025, p. 221) demonstrates the rhetorical substitution of political opponents with moral contagion. The metaphor of disease and vermin “vipers,” “diseased branches” echoes colonial tropes once used by the French to describe Algerian insurgents. In this sense, Khadra stages a mimetic reversal: the postcolonial Islamist now reproduces the very colonial discourses of dehumanization that were once inflicted upon him. Martinez (2004) shows how this period witnessed the proliferation of armed groups whose ideological differences were less theological than strategic. The mufti’s rhetoric of purification and exclusion thus signifies what Bhabha calls the “ambivalence of mimicry,” the insurgent reproduces the master’s language even as he claims to destroy it. Khadra’s prose amplifies this irony: the mufti’s syntax, with its formal balance and rhetorical symmetry, recalls colonial bureaucratic discourse as much as religious sermonizing.

In the final moments of the sermon, Khadra’s imagery fuses the theological with the technological: “The military instructor, who had been sitting open-mouthed... swung his bludgeon and barked at the stragglers, demanding they close ranks. The ground trembled as his cubs marched to the beat of rousing songs” (Khadra, 2025, p. 223). The transformation from spiritual assembly to military drill literalizes the process by which language becomes machinery. The recruits, described as “cubs,” are reduced to zoological automatons, their chanting substitutes for thought. The fusion of sermon and drill underscores the totalitarian nature of this ideological formation. As Žižek (2008) observes, “the highest form of belief is not to think but to act as if one believes” (p. 33). The recruits’ synchronized movement, “marching to the beat,” becomes the ultimate performance of belief: conviction turned into reflex. Khadra’s irony lies in

<sup>3</sup> One who exceeds his legitimate limits. In Koranic terminology it refers to the creature who exceeds the limits of his creatureliness and abrogates to himself godhead and lordship. The ultimate stage is that man not only rebels against God but also imposes his rebellious will on others. All those who reached this stage are targets (Khadra, 2025, p. 268).

the juxtaposition of “rousing songs” with “death and destruction,” highlighting the aesthetic pleasure embedded in violence. This is the rhetoric of rapture the exhilaration of submission to collective will. This fusion of sermon and drill underscores the totalitarian nature of ideological discipline (ÓRálaigh, 2024).

#### *D. The Parable of the Praying Mantis*

If the mufti’s sermon exposes the linguistic mechanics of extremist hegemony, the parable of the praying mantis told by Yahia (Khadra, 2025, p. 214) dramatizes its tragic psychology. In this deceptively simple story, of a rebellious leaf transformed into a mantis that devours “everything in her path, including those who love her” (p. 215), Khadra condenses the novel’s entire allegory of ideological self-destruction. The metamorphosis from leaf to insect allegorizes the insurgent’s journey from idealism to predation, from resistance to tyranny. Through this parable, Khadra situates the Islamist insurgency of 1990s Algeria within a broader postcolonial dialectic: the revolutionary will to autonomy becomes the seed of its annihilation.

The tale begins with a moment of rebellion: “a rebellious, arrogant leaf who couldn’t stomach the idea of being dropped from the branch simply because it was fall” (p. 214). The leaf’s refusal to “fall” resonates with the historical disillusionment of post-independence Algeria. The nationalist generation, having fought colonial domination, now confronts moral decay and authoritarian rule, the “fall” of revolutionary ideals. This moment represents a crisis of organic intellectuals. Nature’s intervention, transforming the leaf into a mantis “impressed with her grit and determination,” mirrors the ideological regeneration promised by Islamist movements in the 1990s. They claimed to restore purity and autonomy, offering redemption from corruption. Yet, as Khadra shows, this divine “miracle” quickly turns monstrous. The mantis’s evolution from leaf to predator marks what Frantz Fanon called the pathology of postcolonial revolution: the moment when liberation “turns inward and devours itself” (Fanon, 1963, p. 148). The insect’s hunger for sovereignty transforms into an appetite for domination. The mantis’s self-conversion into a “cruel, haughty predator” who tramples her own branch reflects what Bhabha describes as the “mimicry of mastery” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). Having imitated the colonial will-to-power, the drive to control, categorize, and consume, the once-subaltern subject becomes indistinguishable from her oppressor. Khadra’s parable thus stages a tragic repetition: the logic of colonial domination reemerges within the insurgent’s own consciousness.

Yahia’s retelling of Sid Ali’s parable also bears a self-reflexive dimension. Sid Ali is identified as a poet “Sid Ali the poet caught a praying mantis in a field and told me the story” (Khadra, 2025, p. 214). By embedding this narrative within the discourse of a poet, Khadra foregrounds the intellectual’s complicity and impotence. Artists and thinkers oscillate between lamentation and moral paralysis; they can diagnose the sickness but cannot cure it. The poet’s tale of metamorphosis becomes a displaced confession: the intellectual class, once the conscience of national liberation, has itself become the mantis, consumed by cynicism or co-opted by violence. Gramsci’s notion of the organic intellectual here collapses into irony. The poet’s voice, filtered through Yahia’s melancholy narration, lacks revolutionary efficacy. The moral insight comes too late: the mantis’s cannibalism is already complete. As such, the parable functions as “contrapuntal allegory” (Said, 1993), an aesthetic form that registers dissonance rather than synthesis. Khadra’s language, oscillating between fable and lament, stages the impossibility of ideological innocence in the aftermath of both colonialism and civil war.

The closing lines: “She began to scoff at her branch, to trample on it... devour everything in her path, including those who love her” (p. 215) constitute one of Khadra’s most chilling metaphors for ideological autophagy. The branch, emblem of origin and belonging, stands for the community from which the revolutionary emerged. To “trample” it is to sever all bonds of solidarity; to “devour” it is to replace the political with the biological, transforming the collective body into food. The mantis thus becomes the allegorical ancestor of the jihadist mufti: both sanctify the destruction of kinship in the name of purity. As contemporary political theorists have noted, extremist movements often follow an autophagic logic, consuming their constituencies under the pretext of defending them (Roy, 2017; Kepel, 2017). Khadra’s insect metaphor anticipates this dynamic decades before it became a staple of counterterrorism discourse. The mantis’s violence is not imposed from outside but emerges from the very structure of her will to survive. In this sense, the parable anticipates the later fragmentation of the jihadist factions described on page 185: “conflicts broke out all over the place, cracking the framework of the Jihad... with new currents emerging in their bloody aftermath” (Khadra, 2025, p. 198). The mantis is the embryonic image of that chaos, each sect devouring its neighbor in an endless cycle of purification.

By expressing ideological violence in natural imagery, Khadra achieves a paradoxical depoliticization that intensifies critique. The parable’s ecological setting: “a beautiful spring day [...] flowers everywhere” (p. 214) contrasts starkly with the horror of metamorphosis. This ironic juxtaposition mirrors the novel’s broader aesthetic of beauty and decay, where the natural world serves as a silent witness to human self-destruction. The divine “miracle” that transforms the leaf into an insect is narrated without theological commentary, inviting an interpretation rooted in irony rather than faith. Nature’s act is less a reward than a cruel experiment: “to see how she would fare.” The anthropomorphic arrogance of the leaf, her claim to “rely only on herself, like a big girl,” is exposed as the origin of her downfall. Khadra’s irony aligns with Albert Camus’s existential moralism: rebellion detached from solidarity becomes absurd and destructive. The mantis’s final cannibalism is the price of radical autonomy.



## IV. CONCLUSION

In juxtaposing the mantis parable with the mufti's sermon, Khadra constructs a dialectic between mythic explanation and ideological indoctrination. Both operate through narrative closure: the fable teaches that rebellion leads to self-destruction; the sermon insists that doubt leads to damnation. However, where the mufti's discourse eliminates irony, the parable restores it. The poet's tale, retold by Yahia with "pensiveness" and a sigh, reintroduces reflexivity, the possibility of thinking about violence without reproducing its logic. This act of storytelling, however modest, represents a fragile counter-hegemonic gesture in Gramsci's sense. It resists the monologue of the mufti by offering parable instead of command and metaphor instead of law. The fable's indirection permits mourning, ambiguity, and moral fatigue, all antithetical to the absolutism of jihadist rhetoric. As Yahia suggests, recognition of the mantis's fate may not save the world, but it preserves the capacity for self-reflection that ideology destroys. Together, the mufti's sermon and the mantis parable form the two poles of *Wolf Dreams*' critique of extremist discourse. The sermon enacts ideology's grammar of certainty; the parable dramatizes its myth of purity turned inward. In Gramscian terms, the first represents coercive consent, the second tragic consciousness. Khadra's novel thus situates the Algerian civil war within a universal allegory of revolution: every absolutism begins as a leaf, vital, green, defiant, and ends as a mantis feeding on its own kind.

Thus, Yasmina Khadra's *Wolf Dreams* functions as a multidimensional study of the Algerian Civil War, extending beyond historical reportage into a literary-philosophical interrogation of extremism, ideology, and violence. The novel synthesizes narrative techniques, symbolic registers, and socio-political commentary to explore how extremist movements, particularly the GIA, consolidate power and manipulate moral perception. Through an interweaving of literary, semiotic, and philosophical registers, Khadra dramatizes both the internalization of extremist ideology and its material consequences on society, exposing the mechanisms of control, coercion, and legitimacy that underlie militant Islamist discourse.

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