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Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra (*The Other Woman*), by Karima Ahdad. 1st ed. Al-Mutawassit Publications, 2024. 472 pp., ISBN: 979-12-5591-048-0.

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Book Review

Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra (*The Other Woman*), by Karima Ahdad. 1st ed. Al-Mutawassit Publications, 2024. 472 pp., ISBN: 979-12-5591-048-0.

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The literary space in Morocco has witnessed the emergence of various female voices who expose the struggles of women within patriarchal societies and challenge the dominant stereotypes about Moroccan women. These voices include distinguished authors such as Malika Moustadraf, Najat El Hachmi, Leila Slimani, and Mhani Alaoui. Another voice that recently rose to prominence is author Karima Ahdad from the Al Hoceima region in northern Morocco. Ahdad holds a Master's Degree in Political Communication. She began her career as a journalist before paving her way into the realm of literature with a short story collection and three novels. Writing in Arabic, Ahdad has distinguished herself within the Maghrebi literary landscape, receiving both critical recognition and formal awards for her nuanced explorations of social and cultural themes. Her first literary work, a short story collection titled *Nazīf Ākhir al-Ḥulm* (*Bleeding at the End of the Dream*), won the Union of Moroccan Writers Award for Young Authors in 2014. Her first novel, *Banāt al-Ṣabbār* (*Cactus Girls*, 2018), was awarded the Mohamed Zafzaf Prize for the Arabic Novel in 2020 and was selected for the LEILA Catalogue, a project that promotes Arabic literature in Europe. Ahdad's subsequent works include two other novels, *Ḥulm Turkī* (A *Turkish Dream*, 2021) and *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra*[1] (*The Other Woman*, 2024), and a short story, "A Slender Thorn Digs into My Foot," which won the first prize in the 2024 ArabLit & Komet Kashakeel Flash Fiction Competition.

Unlike her first polyphonic novel, *Cactus Girls*, which explores the suffering of women in a patriarchal society through multiple voices, and her second novel, *A Turkish Dream*, which traces a young couple's failing relationship as they grapple with alienation and migration in Istanbul, *The Other Woman* is a deeply psychological novel, one that surveys the hidden facets of patriarchal structures from an internal perspective. The novel revolves around the life of a first-person narrator, Sheherazade Al-Rawi. In a stark departure from her legendary namesake, who wove tales to save her life from an external tyrant, Ahdad's Sheherazade is instead trapped in a self-inflicted cycle of narrative obsession. In the novel, the "other woman" is not just a romantic rival—as the title might suggest at first glance—but a manifestation of the protagonist's own insecurities and internal turmoil. The novel reflects a bold, fluid, and uncomfortable journey that asks: when we stare too long at "the other woman," are we looking for a rival, or desperately trying to find the missing pieces of ourselves?

Set against the bustling backdrop of modern-day Casablanca, the narrative follows Sheherazade, a literary editor at Al-Ibda' Publishing House who aspires to be a writer. She leads a conventional life, sharing a home in the Al Hay Al Kabir neighborhood with her mother and sister Nouha. Sheherazade's world is upended, however, when she is tasked with editing Saad Jabrane's translation of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Sheherazade and Saad's professional email exchanges soon develop into an intimate relationship. However, as Sheherazade meticulously polishes the memories and lost time within Proust's prose, she becomes dangerously consumed by a "search" of her own. Her obsessive inquiry into the ghost

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of Saad's former girlfriend, Najwa, mirrors the very excavation of the past she is editing, eventually plunging her into a profound and unbearable existential crisis where her self-confidence completely dissolves.

As the novel progresses, Sheherazade finds herself trapped in an invisible bubble from which she will never be able to escape. Her obsession with her husband's ex-lover grows increasingly intense. Ahdad's literary creativity unfolds in an unprecedented and compelling storyline. From constantly checking Najwa's social media accounts to creating fake online personas to stalk her, Sheherazade's life soon becomes a relentless pursuit of Najwa's existence. She patiently waits for Najwa's Instagram and Facebook posts, zooming in on each picture, learning about the background details, analyzing clothing choices, and meticulously scrutinizing her facial expressions. However, Sheherazade does not limit herself to passive, distant observation; she also creates elaborate fake accounts to interact with Najwa online, gradually learning everything about her routine, preferences, past, and worldview. More troubling still, this obsession extends beyond online voyeurism. Sheherazade decides to abandon her own marriage, leave her marital home, and move to Najwa's neighborhood. She confesses, "if I wanted to be close to Najwa and see her in her complete image, I must live a life that resembles hers—live in the alley where she lives, frequent the cafés she frequents, go to the shops she goes to, buy from the grocer she buys from, and see every day the things she sees" (297-98). Now that they are neighbors, Sheherazade cannot help but sit by her window for hours, watching every move of Najwa's daily life. But will Sheherazade ever cross the line from silent observation to direct confrontation?

In *The Other Woman*, Karima Ahdad moves beyond conventional plotlines on relationships and jealousy. Through Sheherazade's entrenched sense of inadequacy, she highlights profound psychological and social ramifications: a lifetime of internalized patriarchal norms, unresolved childhood trauma, and a toxic maternal relationship. Sheherazade's past is nothing but a never-ending struggle to fit into a society that deems women worthless and constrains their abilities to shape their own destinies. Her relationship with her mother is central to understanding her fractured sense of self. Through this, Ahdad carefully explores the mother-daughter bond, a bond that, rather than nurturing Sheherazade's confidence, becomes a site of wound and withdrawal: "My mother loved us greatly, but she hated us at the same time. In fact, she hated us more than she loved us… For over twenty years, my mother carried within her a deep desire to kill us, and at the same time, a great fear that any harm would befall us" (37), said Sheherazade reflecting on her relationship with her mother; a relation characterized by a toxic ambivalence that leaves Sheherazade without a secure foundation of identity.

Ahdad's novel makes a significant intervention into the discourse on what feminist psychologists term the "maternal wound"—the silent, unspoken pain that travels between generations of women living under oppressive conditions. The mother is herself a victim of patriarchal structures; she married very young and spent her life catering to her husband and children's needs. Adrienne Rich offers valuable insights into this matter in her seminal book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Rich distinguishes between motherhood as a lived experience and as an institution shaped by patriarchal control. Under patriarchy, mothers are often unable to nurture their daughters' autonomy because they themselves are denied selfhood. The mother becomes both victim and perpetrator, passing down silence, denial, and low expectations. Sheherazade's mother reflects a motherhood shaped by the patriarchal institution. Her figure in the novel epitomizes the condition of many Moroccan mothers who are trapped, powerless, and voiceless. Yet Ahdad does not present this wound as an inevitable fate. Rather, through Sheherazade's narrative, she demonstrates how the maternal wound becomes a psychic inheritance that the protagonist actively, if destructively,

reenacts through her digital stalking. The novel thus expands the concept beyond the mother-daughter dyad to encompass all the women the protagonist encounters.

From an internal perspective, Sheherazade embodies an accumulation of trauma that manifests as relentless self-criticism and a deep negation of her sense of self. Her fractured identity can be understood through the work of sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow. In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Chodorow argues that mothers perceive their daughters as their "doubles." She coined the term "narcissistic object attachment," which implies that the mother sees the daughter simply as an extension of her own life, and not as an autonomous being. Thus, daughters often struggle to individuate fully, which eventually results in permeable ego boundaries. Sheherazade exemplifies this failed individuation: she confesses that she "had always wanted to run away from [her] mother, yet [she] searched for her in every person" (438). This inability to separate from the maternal figure shapes how Sheherazade relates to every woman she encounters. Her excessive obsession with her husband's ex-lover, Najwa, can be explained through this lens. The "other woman" becomes a mirror reflecting the inadequacy and insecurity her mother instilled in her. Najwa embodies everything that Sheherazade is not. The obsession, then, is less about Najwa herself than about Sheherazade's unhealed maternal wounds. Though she manages to escape her mother's house, she remains forever captive of her mother's gaze. She reflects, "I remembered my mother. She was like a *jinn* that appears and disappears constantly in my head, frightening me, burdening me with unbearable anxiety" (34). Even in her absence, the mother persists as a haunting presence.

Besides Sheherazade's internal turmoil and traumatic experiences, *The Other Woman* touches upon a number of other themes and important intersecting topics that reflect the complexity of modern Moroccan life. It specifically offers a unique perspective on patriarchy in Morocco. Ahdad unfolds the female struggle with domestic violence, gender hierarchy, divorce, and societal expectations. She lays bare the workings of cultural and structural violence that deeply define women's lives in patriarchal societies. Not only this, but she also offers a profound critique of women who internalize patriarchal values and raise their daughters in the dark. Through Sheherazade's voice, who sharply criticizes her sister, Jamila, for conforming and reinforcing patriarchal values, Ahdad implicates women in the reproduction of patriarchal structures**.** On the other hand, through narrative, the writer recuperates other female characters who demonstrate resilience and resistance in the face of oppression. Through the sub-narrative of one of Sheherazade's family's relatives, Ghizlane, who boldly asks for a divorce after enduring years of exploitation from her husband, and Sheherazade's father's cousin, Zahra, who "never desired to be with a man, nor to carry a heap of flesh and bones and tissue in her belly" (446), Ahdad praises women's resilience and challenges the dominant stereotypes on women's subordination.

As a richly layered novel, *The Other Woman* also offers a compelling literary enactment of digital voyeurism. Sheherazade's rather compulsive online stalking of Najwa symbolizes what Mark Andrejevic terms "lateral surveillance," where ordinary people monitor one another through digital platforms. Sheherazade embodies the full spectrum of what a digital voyeur might do; she meticulously checks every post and story of Najwa, and she stalks her friends and followers. Not only this, but she also creates fake accounts to surveil and interact with her, blurring the boundary between passive watching and intervening. In *The Culture of Surveillance* (2018), David Lyon considers this a defining feature of contemporary surveillance culture. Najwa is thus closely examined through the gaze of her voyeur, Sheherazade. Here, Ahdad offers a crucial revision to Laura Mulvey's paradigm of the male gaze. The gaze in *The Other Woman* is female, but it is no less objectifying or destructive. By grafting Mulvey's visual pleasure onto Chodorow's failed individuation, Ahdad reveals that the patriarchal gaze, once

internalized, can be reproduced and weaponized by women against themselves and each other. Sheherazade's surveillance of Najwa is not an assertion of power but a confession of its absence—a female gaze fixated upon its own perceived lack.

For all its psychological depth, the novel occasionally risks collapsing into the very obsession it depicts. Some readers may find Sheherazade's relentless introspection, while technically brilliant, to verge on the claustrophobic, leaving little room for narrative relief or counterpoints. Moreover, Najwa herself remains frustratingly opaque, a blank screen onto which Sheherazade projects her fears. While this is undoubtedly the point (Najwa is a mirror, not a character), it also raises questions about whether the novel inadvertently reproduces the objectification it seeks to critique. Does giving Najwa no voice of her own risk silencing the "other woman" a second time? This ambiguity, however, may be Ahdad's most daring move: forcing the reader to confront their own complicity in Sheherazade's voyeurism. The novel thus resists easy resolution, inviting readers to sit uncomfortably with the very questions it poses.

Ahdad's stylistic and structural choices are deeply intertwined with the novel's thematic preoccupations. First and foremost, the choice of the first-person narration is significant: Sheherazade is not simply a character but the teller of her own story, which gives the reader first-hand insight into her psychological experience. The naming of the protagonist itself constitutes a layered intertextual gesture. Though Ahdad's Sheherazade departs from her legendary namesake, their paths cross in many ways. Both the classical Sheherazade and Ahdad's Sheherazade use stories to save themselves. Where *The Arabian Nights*'s Sheherazade spins stories to postpone her death, *The Other Woman*'s Sheherazade brings herself into being a writer, a dream she has held since her childhood. The intertextuality deepens further through a metafictional turn: the novel's narrator and protagonist, Sheherazade, eventually publishes her first novel, also titled *The Other Woman,* whose content deeply resonates with the world she inhabits, one of "Mothers who hate their children. Women who hate their bodies. Dreams that never come true. Hope that torments us and leaves us hanging like worn-out, fragile laundry lines. Spite. Houses that reek of death. Miserable families" (433). The novel within a novel thus collapses the boundary between character and author, fiction and lived experience.

Furthermore, the prose style in Ahdad's *The Other Woman* is marked by a constant shifting between the present and the past. The narrative drifts from Sheherazade's current struggles into her childhood memories, family, and formative experiences. This temporal restlessness across the novel's fifty-six chapters is not arbitrary. It very much reflects how Sheherazade's memory circles. In some chapters, the narrator's internal monologue dominates; in others, she engages in dialogue with other characters. At the same time, in the novel, Ahdad demonstrates a striking ability to sink deeply into the lives of secondary characters. She offers descriptions of their lives, appearances, and thoughts vivid enough that the reader can create visual images of each character. Yet, the first-person narration poses an inevitable question about narrative reliability. Sheherazade's account of other characters shifts across the novel, sometimes signaling serious contradictions. Her emotional state controls her recollection of others, thus undermining the reliability of her narration. This unreliability further reflects the novel's commitment to psychological realism.

Karima Ahdad's *The Other Woman* is more than a psychological portrait of jealousy. It is a trenchant excavation of how patriarchy reproduces itself through the most intimate bonds—mother and daughter, wife and rival, a woman and her own reflection. By situating the maternal wound at the heart of digital-age surveillance, Ahdad bridges feminist psychoanalysis and media studies, offering a model for reading contemporary Arab women's literature as both aesthetic achievement and cultural diagnosis. As Arab women's writing continues to gain global recognition, Ahdad's work demands a criticism attuned to the psychic costs of liberation and

the ghosts that persist even after the cage door has opened. *The Other Woman* ultimately suggests that for women raised under patriarchy, the most formidable tyrant may not be the external sultan but the internalized *jinn*, namely the mother's voice that lingers, the rival's image that enthralls, and the self that remains perpetually other. Through her work and her engagement with various themes and different narrative techniques, Karima Ahdad emerges as a powerful literary voice. Her reflections on issues that affect women's lives and her commitment to giving agency to her female characters grant her a central position among contemporary writers of Arab-language fiction. Despite writing from a conservative cultural context, her novels are bold and daring, venturing into the territories of sexuality, obsession, and digital transgression. Thus, Ahdad is, without question, a writer whose evolving body of work demands continued critical exploration.

Notes

1. *Al-Mar'atu Al-Ukhra* (*The Other Woman*) is originally written in Arabic and has not yet been translated into English; all translations of titles and quoted material in this review are the author's own.