Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature

Edited by Miriam Fernández-Santiago
and Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández

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Chapter 8

The Logics of Vulnerability

Challenging the Ungrievable *Différance* of the Other in Tabish Khair's *Just Another Jihadi Jane* (2016)

Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández

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8 The Logics of Vulnerability

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Introduction

In a foreword to a collection of essays about literature and terrorism, Tabish Khair (2019) resorts to the Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han's (2017) *The Scent of Time* to express his views about the role of literature in relation to any form of ideological or militant extremisms. Han, Khair (2019) states, ascribes human ontology to the capacity of "contemplation or deep attention" (xii). Khair correlates this human ability of paying attention to the act of reading literature as the means to unsettle, counteract, or oppose radicalism. For the Indian writer, this "deeply complex kind of contemplation [is] demanded by a work of literature," which in turn is "the antidote to fundamentalisms" (xii). Khair warns that "[t]he antidote is not another moral, but a process of reading" (xii) and thus proposes such methodological instrument consisting of the complex linguistic, epistemological, and affective procedures inherent in the reading act in order to resist or disrupt the global trends of fundamentalisms sweeping myriad emerging discourses after 9/11. Likewise, Claire Chambers (2019) concludes her chapter on Khair's (2016) *Just Another Jihadi Jane* and Kamila Shamsie's (2017) *Home Fire* along the same lines. Despite her word of caution about the role of fiction, "[w]e need to be careful about wishful thinking around literature's prospect of saving the world," Chambers (2019) adduces that "literary fiction is contributing to global debate differently from social science-based interventions. Novels add to that body of work, holding the potential to transform our understanding of radicalization [...]" (201). Chambers claims that "[f]iction delves beneath words to shadow forth why individuals have spoken them, and what symbolic bearing they have on our age" (201). Like Khair's, Chamber's invitation lies at the heart of the literary endeavor to dismantle these fictive narratives with the intention to apprehend its workings and to test its complex meaning production on different realms ranging from the purely linguistic to cultural analysis.

With these suggestions at hand, this chapter is premised on the idea that Khair promotes the agency of readers empowered for social change

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by his encouragement to adopt an attitude of openness toward difference, toward the Derridean *différance* (1968) in its double sense of difference and deferral, required when reading this novel due to the proleptic nature of this fictional testimony. Khair's novel explores the global phenomenon of female suicide bombers in the wake of the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the international rearrangement of geopolitical power after 9/11, together with the proliferation of hegemonic political discourses through mass media. The Indian writer looks into such violent phenomenon through the story of Jamilla and Ameena, two British teenage girls of South Asian Muslim descent who decide to join Islamic State (IS) in their search for their religious ideal of Islamic truth and their impending need for belonging and recognition.

Khair's (2016) *Just Another Jihadi Jane* will be analyzed to explore the nature of vulnerability on several levels. Following Jean-Michel Ganteau's (2015) analysis of vulnerability, this chapter examines the multidimensional complexity of vulnerability in the novel exposed in two separate features: the story thematization and the narrative genre of fictional testimony, which is "one of the stamping grounds of the poetics of vulnerability" (Ganteau 2015, 23). The story emplotment vertebrates along two different axes. First, the socioeconomic and cultural context that articulates vulnerability as precarity (Butler 2004, 2009) and the conditions of the precariat (Standing 2011) in the novel. This context lays bare the limitations and likely exposure to double disempowerment and intersectional marginalization (Crenshaw 1989, 191) that the two Yorkshire-born teenagers perceive. The second axis focuses on their female vulnerability to the patriarchal superiority and oppression imposed through the normalized use of violence, consisting of the psychological and physical subjugation depicted in the novel after they move to Syria. The second feature investigates the materiality of the narrative medium itself as vulnerable, unstable, and precarious; yet, a creative vehicle for the challenging of stereotypes publicly generated at both ideological ends. Namely, radical Islam fundamentalism mass media propaganda and Western mass media and political discourses about the other—no longer a dark cannibal in the Congo, to mention Joseph Conrad's (1999) key postcolonial text *Heart of Darkness*, but a dark veiled woman attired with an explosive belt.

This chapter ultimately claims that Khair's story and narrative materiality bring about a nuanced particularization—if not radical questioning—of the social imaginary built by mass media discourses about the stereotyped jihadi Jane in these two British Muslim young girls. This depiction shatters to pieces the sociopolitical ungrievability (Butler 2004) they are thrown into by the ontological features imposed on them as lives wasted (Bauman 2004) and as Others, publicly represented as effaced, unintelligible, monstruous, and pathologized beings in hegemonic discourses. In her comment of Khair's novel, Elisabetta Marino (2019) acknowledges readers' need of constant epistemological and emotional shift toward the haunting figure of the jihadi Jane that exacts from them a Derridean (1968) exploration of the *différance* in time and space: "Jamilla's and Ameena's is a story of prejudice, discrimination, and yearning to belong that constantly shifts its focus, only to come to the conclusion that thirst for power and contempt for whoever is different have multiple identities and faiths: the One and the *Other* are interchangeable, depending on the point of observation" (17). The dynamic positioning of one and the other, on the one hand, and of the point of observation, on the other, that Khair's novel demands is in line with his belief that "[e]xtremism gives easy answers; literature makes us ask difficult questions. We need literature today, more than ever before. [...] We need it because it connects us to the Other without reducing his/her difference" (Khair 2019, xiii). Apart from disclosing the problematized and fissured nature of human epistemological supremacy and infallibility, Khair also excels in *Just Another Jihadi Jane* at signposting the fractures or gaps intrinsic to the vulnerable materiality of the narrative genre itself: the diegetic structure of Jamilla's trauma as fictional testimony. These two areas help reveal the vulnerable, precarious nature of human perception and knowledge as they entail a clarion call to suspending one's own strong-held beliefs in order to advocate for an ethics of recognition of the other.

Vulnerability in the Binary Emplotment of *Just Another Jihadi Jane*

Khair's (2016) inaugural citation of Toni Harrison's (1985) poem *V* in *Just Another Jihadi Jane* conjures up sundry ideological elements which comprise the binaries conforming race, class, religion, gender, and the ideological geopolitical configuration into West and East that the novel is weaved into. Moreover, the novel's middle chapters—chapter four ("The Flight") and five ("A New Life")—diegetically hinge its ten chapters on some of the binaries articulated by the many *versuses* that Harrison lists in his poem. Thus, the first half of the novel narrates the experience of Jamilla and Ameena in their Yorkshire's whereabouts, and the second half exposes their life in Syria once they join the jihad.

Jamilla starts her narration by returning to her memories of how the two girls met, when around the age of 12 or 13 Ameena and her mother moved in the building where Jamilla's family lived. Jamilla recalls the socioeconomic precarious features of their building in this Yorkshire undetermined area:

> you know the streets where buildings grow straight from the footpath, one after another, their façades bland, with blank windows staring like the eyes of a zombie? You press a buzzer to be allowed in. If the buzzer is working. There are newspapers and wrappers strewn

> in the foyer and under the staircase. Sometimes the buildings have a lift. Our building had one. It smelled of sweat and deodorant. MAX CAPACITY THREE, a notice said.
>
> (Khair 2016, 2–3)

This portrayal readily points out to the adscription of Jamilla and Ameena to the precariat (Standing 2011), whose families live and work in "insecure jobs and conditions of life" (Standing 2012, 589). But it also indicates their intersectional (Crenshaw 1989, 1991) embodiment as migrants, women, and youth—three of the seven categories listed by Standing (2012, 595–598) which comprise this new emerging class—who experience the neglect of governmental institutions and of other members in the precariat who blame them for their already-deteriorated socioeconomic status. Although the urban landscape described looks disadvantaged, Jamilla reports the progressive homogenization of the population in the area that took place during her childhood, shaped around the brown-and-white divide of the ironically called *working* class. The neighbors no longer belong to this shrinking socioeconomic category, but to the precariat as a "class-in-the-making" (Standing 2012, 588) that comprises the remnants of the neoliberal system:

> You think that sounds bad? It was much worse when I was a child. The lift would smell of vomit and beer then. And there were used condoms and syringes lying about. Then, of course, more of us moved in, and more of them moved out. Some were glad to leave; some gave us the finger. But they left, slowly, one by one, the so-called white working class. Or the white drinking class. The so-called brown working class moved in. It was not the brown drinking class though; it was mostly the Muslim working class. The smell of vomit and beer disappeared. The syringes and condoms disappeared. The graffiti got multilingual. All the rest stayed as it was.
>
> (Khair 2016, 3)

Jamilla also recounts the discriminatory episodes his father underwent: "when Abba had a swastika spray-painted on his cab one night, its windows smashed, and they had trouble getting insurance to cover the expenses, so much so that she had to sell some of her jewelry to raise the money" (21).

This depiction of social unrest hamper possibilities of mutual recognition based on their vulnerability, which conforms to what Standing (2012) labels as the "Politics of Inferno" (598–600).

Jamilla narrates hers and Ameena's clearly distinguished cultural backgrounds. Jamilla's parents came to the UK from Pakistan, after her grandfather had fled from India after the Partition (1947). Her older brother Mohammad and herself were born in the UK, where her father progressively turned to a rather orthodox vision of his Islamic faith caused by his progressive resentment toward the Western way of life. In turn, Ameena's parents, who came from India following her father's career prospects, divorced when she was seven or eight after her father's affair with "one of them" (Khair 2016, 5–6), as the girls call this type of women, meaning blonde, white women. Ameena's strained relationship with her parents articulates around her living together with her working, non-practicing Muslim mother with leftist views, to whom Ameena blames for not having been able to keep her husband and often confronts openly, and the very occasional and short visits from her father, who has moved up the career rank in succeeding job positions as he has also changed from one white partner to another, and who makes up for this continued absence from Ameena's life with very expensive gifts. Furthermore, the religious and economic features of each family, inversely proportional to each other, stand at the backdrop of their mutual distrust, which provides a key example of the impossibility to recognize the other in the novel.

Critics have already addressed the reasons why Jamilla and Ameena decide to join ISIS. Herrero (2018) provides two main motives: "the novel points to Ameena's lack of affection and self-respect and Jamilla's lack of future prospects as the main reasons for their respective 'Islamization' processes" (7). Chambers (2019) enlarges this list: (1) her friendship with Ameena; (2) her need to fill a vacuum when failing to get an education scholarship; (3) being perceived as a monster in Britain; and (4) Islamophobia industry and racism (179–180). In general terms, the failing ethics of care (Gilligan 1982) that the girls undergo on several areas strongly influences their decision to join IS. There are three remarkable instances about such inadequate support in the case of Jamilla. First, when Jamilla's parents are called by the school because of Jamilla's Muslim orthodox views about a poem. Mohammad visits the school in an even more unyielding attitude: "Not having read the poem, and having no time for poetry—after all, as I was also brought up believing, why read a poem when the Qur'an contains *divine* poetry?" (Khair 2016, 18; emphasis in the original). This utter dismissal for Jamilla's education by her family would have at a later point a key impact in her decision to leave for Syria when she finds herself without any higher education opportunities and anxiously faced with an impending arranged marriage. Second, when Jamilla tries to interest Mohammad and his wife in the Internet publications of Hejjiye, a female recruiter for IS already living in Islamic sacred lands: they simply "did not seem to have time for all this" (56). Jamilla's allure to Hejjiye's Internet life would have been detected by her family and worked out adaptatively to avoid her fleeing to Syria. Finally, upon the girls' arrival to IS, to the question Jamilla "had been burning to ask her [Hejjiye] from the moment I had arrived" (92), about where her cat Batala was, Hejjiye blatantly replies: "Batala disappeared last summer. […] Lots of pets have been killed or maimed. […] And then, to be honest, who has time for pets now?" (92). These three responses, insisting in the lack of time, reveal that her requests for attention (Tronto 2009) remain unattended by Jamilla's family members and by the Internet recruiter Hejjiye, each of them with their own personal and/or political agenda. It suggests the failure to bridge the gaps between the worlds of the teenager and her closer environment, and attest to the growing isolation of Jamilla.

As for Ameena, her psychological portrait revolves around her need for attention of a male figure, making up for her father's long absences, illustrated in three different occasions in the novel. Firstly, in her school days, Jamilla informs us, Ameena seeks the attention of any boy (Khair 2016, 10), which is best exemplified in the episode with her classmate Alex, with whom she has a short relationship until he humiliates her in front of her school peers. Alex's dismissal triggers Ameena's initial interest in Islam, who progressively joins Jamilla in her everyday religious practice. Secondly, when she starts spending time at Jamilla's house, she begins harboring romantic hopes toward Mohammad, with whom she finds intellectual and religious affinity. But this is truncated by Mohammad's announcement of his engagement to his best friend's sister. This pushes Ameena to the idea of actively defending her sieged Islam. Finally, Ameena is lured by Hejjiye into joining the jihad by marrying a jihadi fighter, which somehow comprises her two drives. In sum, these open refusals to pay attention to the demands exerted by Jamilla and Ameena prove the lack of social commitment and responsibility toward each of them at different narrative moments in the story, as it reinforces their mutual connection and support.

Jamilla and Ameena epitomize very specific cases of two theoretical visions of precarity. The ideological distinction between dispossession and precarity (Butler 2004) in an a priori privileged, first-world Yorkshire city in the UK exposes neoliberal traits of the new precariat (Standing 2011) initially. However, these are then transformed into another version of neocolonial logics of precarity, far more violent, in line with, among others, the critiques of Sunera Thobani (2007) and Ida Danewid (2017). Therefore, Butler explores precarity as "a politically induced condition" (2009, 25) and explains that such population "suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" and how they "are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection" (2009, 32). Thobani remarks that precarity has only been closely examined after the US has experienced the conditions that other countries have been suffering for long, in many cases at the hands of US interventionist politics. Similarly, Danewid criticizes European narratives which ignore how their colonial recent past brings about mass migration.

In this sense, Jamilla and Ameena provide a hybrid literary encounter between both theoretical approaches in two complementary senses. First, these characters are Westerners born around 9/11 with a UK passport who comply with Standing's (2011) precariat. Second, they also embody non-normative Western population, comprised by those (ex-)colonized others whose suffering has been silenced and/or ignored by the West because their historical, cultural, and religious traditions do not comply with the ideals associated to the West. For example, ideals built around ethnicity—read brown versus white—or religion—read a socially preferred secularism or mild public manifestation of religious beliefs. Such historical reference becomes evident in Jamilla's complaint on being called names, when she is exoticized in class by her history teacher: "I suppose Jamie here, Jamie would be our idea of Cleopatra, wouldn't she, if she did not mostly hide herself from view" (Khair 2016, 7). Jamilla "hated being called Jamie—my name is Jamilla—but evidently Europeans cannot stop themselves from giving new names to people and places. I guess it must be hard to stop after all those centuries of renaming stuff in the colonies" (7–8). Furthermore, Jamilla constructs her classmate Alex's romantic approach to her in terms of a binary when she marks the clear distinction between *them* and *us*: "Arabs, Pakis, Iranians, whatever he [Alex] thought I was" (8). However, the same accusation to Alex for not being able to distinguish different cultural groups also works in the opposite direction because Jamilla recognizes how her family, Ameena, and herself remained blind to the differences of the Others, "[w]e did not distinguish between Jews and Israelis and Zionists; we had never met any, and for us the terms were interchangeable" (35–36), and mimicked the same logics of failing social divide when addressing the white blonde female other as "one of them" (5–6).

Daniele Valentini (2019) unpacks the successful dynamics of social media propaganda that ISIS has been carrying out and comments on how it is depicted in Khair's novel. Some of these discourses were based on "a coherent narrative for aspiring jihadi mothers" which included messages like "1) partaking in the state-building project as good wives and mothers; 2) belonging and sisterhood; 3) covering institutional roles as teachers; 4) possibility to freely live one's religion" (29). However, the lives and discourses displayed on Jamilla's and Ameena's electronic screens soon prove a farce to them upon their arrival to Hejjiye's orphanage. Jamilla's prolepsis of her own experience in the orphanage and of Ameena as a wife to Hassan—a sadistic jihadist deputy commander—dismantles fundamentalist ideological discourses to disclose the dynamics of disempowerment, oppression, and violence enforced through such discourses, which underlie several forms of hegemony, including patriarchal superiority.

As they settle in Hejjiye's orphanage, Jamilla "was made conscious of how different this life that I had chosen was from the life I had led in England. I had assumed that a shared faith would be enough to bridge the gap, and now, for the first time, I felt unsure" (92). Jamilla needs to constantly negotiate her parents' beliefs, strongly passed on to her, with the realities in the orphanage: panopticon-like techniques of control, polygamy, collective weddings of girls to jihadist fighters, women war prisoners, detention and torture of Halide, a Turkish girl who questions Hejjiye's norms, electricity and water cuts and food supply discontinuation, or indoctrination for suicide bombing, apart from the growing fear of an impending armed attack.

Jamilla's initial positive impressions about the way of life provided by IS soon give way to her realization of the violence inherent in it. They were not able to leave the orphanage alone, but soon they would only leave with a male, until they were simply forbidden to leave; progressively, it became dangerous to read even certain orthodox scholars who had been blacklisted (145), until a book burning is organized in the orphanage as an act of IS propaganda; celebrations were forbidden as well; smiling was considered an impious behavior; pictures were removed from the walls; or cell phones were not allowed. In addition, being stranded in the orphanage—described as "an Islamic marriage bureau for the *jihadis*" (98; emphasis in the original)—allows Jamilla to discover that Hejjiye is a comfortable user of the polygamy system—and of the jihad discourse in general—because the three wives to her husband "were each the perfect combination of sister and slave to her" (94). In this context, the psychological pressure in the orphanage makes girls grow distant from each other, for fear of being reported to Hejjiye, who devises a system of oppressing the most vulnerable: "Many of us had come to live with this inhibition from knowing the other too well" (125) because "this was a set-up in which the structure of authority encouraged you to run down the weak and the vulnerable and to cater for the powerful" (129). The situation grows even more difficult toward the end of the novel, which makes Jamilla build "a wall of caution, if not suspicion, between me and everyone else" (175). Jamilla compares her situation in the orphanage with her experience in Britain: "I could still retreat into this small space of belief in myself, and ignore them. In some ways, it was no different from how I had grown up and lived in England" (185). The insistence on that personal space within herself is emphasized against the two opposing spaces outside—one represented by the West and the other by fundamentalism—which fail to provide a context for an ethics of care.

Similarly, Ameena's experience after she is married off to Hassan and leaves the orphanage grants her with the painful learning that her husband is not interested in understanding Islam precepts. Instead, he uses them conveniently for his own violent impulses and his aspirations to move up military ranks. Feeling isolated, she progressively becomes attached to Sabah, a Yazidi boy aged around ten, kept in the house by Hassan as a slave and frequently subjected to his outbursts of arbitrary violence. Ameena's learning process is much more violent and harsh than

Jamilla's, for her well-being is strongly dependent on Hassan's sadistic and patriarchal power. On learning that some of his men have been killed in skirmish, Hassan decides to behead the child himself and film it as a retaliation. Ameena unsuccessfully tries to convince him, who strongly hits her before leaving with his men in a hurry. Ameena hides Sabah for weeks in a dry well until he is discovered when the village is finally bombed. After slashing Ameena, Hassan beheads the boy. Such experience leads Ameena to her secret determination to use a suicide belt against her husband to avenge Sabah and to free Jamilla from IS. Thus, Ameena's death is her last act of care of and recognition to her friend Jamilla.

Material Vulnerability of the Novel

Khair's novel provides an oral version of the found manuscript, a literary device that he superbly used in his subsequent novel *Night of Happiness* (2018), in which the narrative trigger is finding a manuscript in a cabinet drawer at a five-star hotel. In *Just Another Jihadi Jane*, Jamilla tells her story to testify to the grievability of her friend's death to endow it with social and political meaning, resulting in Jamilla's survival and her purposeful new life in Bali. Khair's narrative structure is underpinned by a meeting held at a restaurant there between a male writer and Jamilla, who recounts her traumatized experience as a female jihadist tainted by her survivor's guilt. One plane of vulnerability in the narrative is based on the story's instability from its outset, since readers may either realize that they are attending their meeting and/or that they are reading the writer's literary version of it: "Like it or not, make what you can of what I say—for you are a writer, and I shall leave this story in your safekeeping" (1). Hence, Jamilla endows the unnamed writer with the task of guarding, reconstructing, and communicating her fragmentary and precarious rendition into a written version which can stand on its own with some literary value.

Jamilla explains that the reason why she has invited him in particular to listen to her story is because of his own views about the human impossibility to "know the mind of God" (Khair 2016, 44): "Divinity is divinity only to the extent that it exceeds the bounds of human understanding, you said. That was one of the statements that made me think of accosting you here" (44). In fact, aware as she is that one "cannot really discuss moderate faith with someone who has an immoderate version of it" (40), this male writer bears witness to Jamilla's posthumous act of care, whose memories of Ameena enable the public grievance for her lost friend in the literary space opened up by the novel.

The narration, which moves between Jamilla's proleptic deployment of layered past—in the UK first and in Syria later—in contrast to her present, is disrupted on several dimensions throughout the novel. One first instance occurs when Jamilla opens a space for reflection about what is happening in the restaurant. She discloses the writer's attitude to readers and unsettles the narrative complexity of the story by further complicating it. On explaining that men usually take interest in her and how this makes her feel uncomfortable, she turns toward the writer: "Even you observed me on the sly. No, don't get flustered. [...] I did not point this out to accuse you; I just wanted you to know that I know. I know that men notice me" (6–7). So, this passage also draws readers' attention to certain power dynamics that Jamilla still has to cope with.

Another dimension that grants this fictional testimony with a vulnerable status, in Ganteau's (2015) line, is that hers is the chronicle of a traumatized narrator. Therefore, her post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms seep through her story, revealing the narrative's material stability and a fractured, incomplete story interspersed with memory gaps, involuntary over-repetitions, or intended detail omissions. As Shoshana Felman (1995) put it, (fictional) testimony throws into question accuracy, which is in doubt (17). Two key examples of Jamilla's repetition compulsion happen when she describes how Halide's torture repeatedly haunts her: "the next two weeks run like a horror film in my head. I see the main scenes recurring again and again, and sometimes I still wake up, sweating, desperate and unable to do anything to help Halide" (Khair 2016, 129); or when, in the last pages of the novel, Jamilla describes her suffering on recalling Ameena's last cry:

> Ameena's last word had been that cry, almost inhuman; that name, the long, never-ending *Sabaaaah*, which I still hear on some nights, and which makes me thrash about in bed, pinioned and helpless, wanting to run and help her, unable, unable, unable forever, unable even to return to her that last, loving caress when she had patted my hair in place, unable for all eternity, unless, of course, I hope you understand, there is a merciful God, a loving Allah.
>
> (218; emphasis in the original)

Her condition structures her narrative form into a "vulnerable text" (Ganteau 2015) that aesthetically embodies the mental instability of Jamilla and communicates it to readers through the material consolidation of the text itself. Moreover, the narrative structure draws attention to itself by making readers wonder how much weight the writer's material creation and Jamilla's experience finally conform the novel. Thus, it places readers in a position that invites them to reconcile themselves with such uncertainty and to embody their own version of epistemic impossibility about the novel.

In addition, vulnerability is woven into the text by Jamilla's memory gaps that render her story precarious. The narration enacts the apparent aporia that her intentions to provide a truthful account of her experience cannot respond to the actual happening of events, but only to her perception of them. In this sense, Jamilla wonders: "[a]m I mixing up this occasion with another one?" (36). She is often dubious about when something happened: "[a]t fifteen (or was the sixteen then?), Ameena was no longer a virgin" (11); or "[t]he news was put on. It was about Syria or Iraq. Or maybe it was Palestine, some outbreak in Gaza. Or perhaps even Afghanistan. Strange, isn't it—I do not recall clearly any longer. But you can imagine what it must have been" (59). Thus, a contradictory relationship between Jamilla's obsessed concealment and disclosure of details alternates in the story, such as her repeated description of Ameena's eyes. Jamilla's emphatic description of Ameena's face and eyes at different points in the story suggests three porous cross-influencing levels of analysis. Firstly, such rendition is philosophically underpinned by Emmanuel Levinas' (1969) conceptualization of the radical responsibility in the individual exerted by the face of the other. Ironically, readers relate to the face of a spectral other, since Ameena is dead at the time of Jamilla's testimony. Moreover, such ethical demand reaches its apex precisely due to her personal sacrifice for Jamilla's life. Readers' encounter with Ameena's face becomes a condition of possibility that disrupts their narcissistic entertainment with their own totality—in Levinasian terms—which holds stereotyped images of the quite often effaced female suicide bomber as constructed by proliferating neoliberal mass media machinery. Secondly, in a post-9/11 context such image stands in stark contrast to the photographs of both 9/11 terrorists and Afghan girls repeatedly circulated by international mass media during the US armed intervention in Afghanistan. In this line, following Butler's (2004) examination, those faces were reified to convey respective messages of absolute evil that needed to be destroyed and of feminist liberation that morally justified the invasion of the country (141–142). Finally, Jamilla's insistence on relating Ameena's evolving ontology through describing her face and eyes intends to honor her existence by the creation of a precariously rendered literary space, that of the fictional testimony. The reading act both tests readers' ability to perceive—and makes possible their encounter with—Ameena's face, predicated on her *différance*, i.e., not only her difference as an other but also the belated, instable, and tentative status of her ontology. Jamilla thus affirms in her first description of Ameena that she "had lovely eyes, liquid and soft, much darker than mine, with the shadow of some unnamed hurt lurking in them. Like a lake at dusk" (6). Upon referring to "Ameena's liquid eyes" (32), Jamilla is in fact describing the face of would-be jihadi Jane, although at this point of the story the narrator is simply building a portrait of a girl who was struggling to make sense of her world at the age of 15 or 16. In chapter nine, Ameena's face is revisited: "I have remarked on her eyes, haven't I? How she had these limpid eyes, with depths in them, as if they were dark pools of light in which lurked the deeper shadow of a hurt. I have said how the light had hardened into anger over the years?" (180) This commentary soon turns into a proleptic portrayal in contrast with this newer physical description of Ameena that foreshadows her death: “But now when I looked at her, I felt that the light had been switched off, the pools had dried. There was just a brittle layer of silt left in them” (180).

Jamilla’s trauma also evinces her obsession with hiding details, which can potentially compromise the narrative, when at times Jamilla volitionally omits or alters details that risk identifying its true protagonists. Names used in the story, including those of Ameena and Jamilla, are false; the orphanage, located in the Syria-Iraq border, is conveniently called “The Town,” among other details that conform a fractured narration that readers need to negotiate on their own. In line with trauma theory, her testimony also works toward her own healing process and allows readers to learn of her own mechanisms to deal with her pain, which mobilize her attention to detail to calm down:

> I was swept up in a storm, and it has only started fading away here, in beautiful Bali. […] the thunder may still crash and I can cower in the depths of my soul, waiting for lightening to strike and obliterate everything […]. I need to look out on such occasions and focus on the world outside me. Small, external details help calm the storm.
>
> (33)

Jamilla’s emphasis on details also undermines the fabrication of grand narratives in mass media discourses by working against stereotyping and in favor of the particularization in her story amid the complex global dynamics of vulnerability. Along the same lines, her mental turmoil shapes through her impossibility to discern true and false news from the mass media arena in which this ideological war is also contended: with “hundreds of such news items jumbled up in my head, [...] I [Jamilla] cannot really make up my mind about some of them” (101). Readers can empathize with her own confusion and challenge their own uncritical alignment with Western or Eastern discourses upon reading a novel, whose very ethics and aesthetics resonates with their shared vulnerability.

Conclusion

In making sure that readers experience the multiple gaps existing in this multidimensional novel, they need to reconcile with the epistemological limits pressing against the narrative content and form, and to adopt a permanent state of ontological and epistemological uncertainty. The novel demands from readers the task to continue their exploration of received discourses even though epistemic impossibility lingers on the horizon. This prevents readers from assuming an attitude of self-sufficiency and superiority, satisfied with their univocal worldview, based on one singular reading. Thus, readers can continue their enquiry—which may or, more likely, may not be fruitful—while they also look for *différant* perspectives, which may appear straightaway, emerge in the future, or not surface at all.

Khair problematizes the content and form of the novel, rendering it vulnerable, by confronting readers time and again with the impossibility to understand completely, since Jamilla's experience is subject to multiple contingencies, such as the listening abilities of her interlocutor, Jamilla's own limits imposed by her condition, or the aesthetics and ethical agenda of the writer, among others. Khair frequently places his texts in a vulnerable situation—not only material but also ideological—because he aspires to show that the reading act does not end in the epistemological apprehension of reality in our negotiation with it, but that it is the attitude itself to reading—a text or reality—that integrates the work of the *dasein* in their being-in-the-world in Heideggerian terms. The readings that follow one another, that overlap, each time throwing concomitant, contrary, conflicting, communitarian readings, are interwoven in human perception itself and overwritten in not only a mental and emotional but also a social and political palimpsest. It is in this diversity that readers negotiate their approach to Khair's novel and where they experience their own (Levinasian) finitude and totality as insufficient or inadequate against the humility demanded by the infinitude that exists beyond themselves, in the spaces of otherness that all too quickly in history tend to be first fetishized and then ignored or, worse, erased.

Even more than the fabric of Jamilla's testimony itself, Khair makes the narrative seams of his novel explicit by focusing on the periphery that these two female others and the fractured materiality of their story represent, rather than on a central, hegemonic limpid narrative without fissures. The logics of vulnerability in Khair's *Just Another Jihadi Jane* turn out to be complex processes which operate multidirectionally, entangling readers in this ontological exploration, as powerful as highly exposed to contingency and risk, by creating a time-space continuum, the very reading act which hosts both personal working through and collective advocacy for care, empathy, and social connection toward the paradoxical *différance* of the other.

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