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Khaled Khalifa's *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* and the Anatomy of Pre-Revolutionary Syria

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Abstract

This article examines Khaled Khalifa's No Knives in the Kitchens of This City as an anatomy of Syria's pre-civil-war decay. The novel functions as an affective archive that renders revolt retrospectively intelligible through fear, shame, and stagnation. Within a suffocating Aleppo, Khalifa materializes authoritarian endurance as sensory experience, airlessness, rot, and silence, turning atmosphere into political grammar. Triangulating affect theory, spatial poetics, and ecological critique, the study introduces moral topography to show how emotion, environment, and governance converge to sustain obedience. It demonstrates that Khalifa's fiction transforms everyday life under the Asad regime into moral testimony, where beauty and decay coexist as final gestures of survival.

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1. *Introduction*

Khaled Khalifa's *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* (2013) is not a chronicle of the Syrian civil war but an autopsy of peace. Through its portrayal of an Aleppine family suffocating under silence, decay, and fear, the novel transforms the lived experience of authoritarianism into an anatomy of slow disintegration. Long before 2011, Khalifa had already rendered the emotional and moral climate that made revolt inevitable. "Cities like ours do not collapse in a day," the narrator warns; "they rust from the inside" (Khalifa 15). The atmosphere of rot is both metaphor and diagnosis, a representation of Syria's pre-war stability as a form of gradual dying.

Building upon this psychological and symbolic groundwork, modern aesthetic criticism increasingly locates dystopian imagination within the broader grammar of psychic disintegration. It has been argued that artistic modernism enacts the "aestheticization of psychic decay," revealing how

loss and alienation evolve into visual languages for collective crisis (Serir and Bouhassoun 39–40). In *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, Khaled Khalifa translates this modernist insight into prose: Pigment becomes syntax, and the still life of Aleppo's kitchens turns into a Syrian expressionism where political paralysis is rendered through sensory exhaustion. Each image of rot and silence operates as a moral canvas on which decay itself testifies to endurance. This scene shows that decay is not only represented but also theorized as a moral condition. Through this poetics of deterioration, Khalifa transforms disintegration into a record of survival, the textual equivalent of a bruised painting where pain becomes the medium of remembrance.

Extending this aesthetic inquiry into the political realm, the Baʿathist regime's endurance depended not on legitimacy but on affective control. Asad's Syria became a "Kingdom of Silence," where "the presence of power was felt through the internalization of caution" (Hopkins 41). Fear was no longer a reaction but an instinct. Khalifa captures this emotional colonization when the narrator admits, "Everyone was afraid, even those who had nothing to hide" (Khalifa 43). Judith Naeff defines this pervasive fear as "the humiliation of submission to Asad's rule," a humiliation that binds citizens "in a shared moral complicity" (Naeff 130–31).

Consequently, *No Knives* becomes a study in emotional governance: fear, shame, and silence functioning as the invisible architecture of power. In Aleppo's decaying houses and airless kitchens, Khalifa gives political repression a sensory form. "The smell never left the house," the narrator notes, "it clung to the walls like our shame" (Khalifa 29). The stench, recurrent throughout the novel, translates moral corruption into bodily sensation, producing what this study calls an architecture of decay: an environment where the air itself bears witness to the rot of conscience.

Ultimately, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* constitutes an anatomy of pre-revolutionary Syria: a narrative that transforms political history into affective and spatial form. Triangulating affect theory, spatial poetics, and ecological critique, it examines how Khalifa renders late-Baʿathist life, its authoritarian fear, social shame, and moral exhaustion, into an atmosphere of endurance. The novel stands as a work of spatial testimony, translating the textures of domestic and urban decay into an ethical record. In this sense, it maps the precise moment when peace began to smell like decay, turning the Syrian city into both an archive and an allegory of authoritarian ecology (Naeff 130–46).

2. *The Long Shadow of Authoritarianism*

Khaled Khalifa's *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* is, above all, a cartography of fear. Long before the Syrian uprisings of 2011, it anatomized a social order founded upon silence, surveillance, and the corrosion of civic life. The novel's Aleppo is not a battlefield but a laboratory of obedience, an environment where political domination becomes emotional climate. Through the chronicle of an ordinary family's decline, Khalifa renders authoritarianism as a system of affective governance, a regime that colonizes time, space, and even the body's sensory experience.

In this framework of emotional domination, Khalifa's depiction of Asad's Syria parallels what Karima Abdedaim identifies in dystopian literature as "the division of worlds," the stratification of society into isolated realms that reproduce inequality and control (694). In Baʿathist Syria, these

divisions are not futuristic but painfully real: between party loyalists and the voiceless, between male authority and female endurance, and between public loyalty and private despair. Surveillance replaces ideology, and moral paralysis substitutes for political consensus. The ruling class maintains power, as Abdedaim explains of dystopian regimes, "through surveillance, propaganda, and strict regulation… to maintain power dynamics and prevent uprising" (697). Khalifa renders this system in sensuous detail: the smell of decay in the kitchen, the still air of Aleppo, and the whispered conversations at family tables. These are the mechanisms of psychological control transposed into material form.

Moreover, the novel's atmosphere of stasis transforms Syria into what Nassima Amirouche and Selma Bekkai describe, in a postcolonial context, as an "internally colonized" space, one where authority redraws borders not across land but across consciousness (213). Syrians under Baʿathism inhabit a condition of internal exile: displaced within their own homes, estranged from speech, memory, and mobility. The regime constructs what Gloria Anzaldúa, via Amirouche and Bekkai, terms "an unnatural boundary," a borderland between obedience and dissent that fractures identity and belonging (215). Khalifa's characters dwell precisely in this liminal zone; they are both victims and custodians of repression, performing complicity as survival.

As the narrative unfolds, fear, however, does more than paralyze; it structures social relations. Khalifa's Aleppo is governed by the ritual of forgetting. "We learned to forget what we saw," the narrator says, "forgetting became a virtue" (Khalifa 43). Memory, once a moral faculty, turns into a liability. Sumaya Malas calls this "the routinization of fear," a psychological transformation that renders oppression self-sustaining (46). Through habitual silence, citizens internalize censorship until surveillance becomes redundant. Thus, the Baʿathist project evolves from coercion into self-discipline, producing a literature of waiting in which citizens inhabit a suspended temporality, living as if they were already commemorations of their own vanished lives.

Extending this logic further, in Khalifa's universe, authoritarianism is not only political but ecological. The city's suffocating air, stagnant rivers, and crumbling buildings form an "authoritarian ecology," an environment metabolized by fear. The decay of nature mirrors the decay of moral life, a relationship that recalls Amirouche and Bekkai's notion of "ecological continuity," wherein human and environmental survival are intertwined (220). Yet, in Khalifa's vision, that continuity is inverted: Aleppo's ecology is one of persistence without regeneration, a landscape that survives only to remember its own decomposition. The smell of rot, recurring throughout the novel, is the olfactory equivalent of collective guilt, a sensory archive of the state's moral pollution.

Finally, the novel's portrayal of Sawsan complicates the emotional politics of fear by embedding it within patriarchal authority. Her trajectory, through sexuality, ambition, and eventual remorse, reflects the workings of hegemonic masculinity in post-authoritarian Arab societies, a moral order that regulates female autonomy as a form of political deviance. Sawsan's oscillation between defiance and guilt exemplifies how gender becomes the laboratory of obedience. The body, especially the female body, internalizes state logic, learning to equate modesty with loyalty and desire with treason. Through this gendered dimension, Khalifa transforms shame from a private emotion into a systemic instrument, revealing that the family, like the regime, survives through the regulation of affection.

3. *The Family as Political Microcosm*

In *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, Khaled Khalifa turns the Syrian family into a miniature of the state. Every gesture, silence, and bodily symptom within the household reproduces the logic of domination that defines Baʿathist rule. By translating political coercion into domestic affect, Khalifa reveals that tyranny survives not only through armies and decrees but also through emotion, ritual, and intimacy. The family becomes what Michel Foucault once called "the cell of power," a space where obedience is learned through love and fear, and where the boundary between private affection and public loyalty disappears (Malas 8–11).

Within this domestic framework of control, Khalifa's domestic sphere "replicates the social and moral corrosion of the wider city: each family member embodies a survival strategy under authoritarianism, delirium, guilt, repentance, or apathy" (Malas 9–10). The father's physical absence and abandonment of his family for a new life abroad leave a void that the mother fills with authoritarian nostalgia and obsessive propriety. Her fixation on preserving class respectability and moral order reproduces, within the home, the same hierarchies and silences enforced by the Baʿathist regime (Naeff 133; Hopkins 176). Through this feminized echo of control, Khalifa shows that tyranny endures not only through the machinery of the state but also through the emotional economies of fear and shame that govern family life. Domestic affection thus becomes inseparable from political obedience, a training ground where citizens learn to police themselves long before the state intervenes.

As this internalization deepens, the mother emerges as the primary agent through whom authoritarian affect becomes habit. Her insistence on refinement becomes both preservation and captivity, an effort to sustain dignity by internalizing the logic of power. Through her, ideology is lived rather than proclaimed, shifting the narrative from the structural to the emotional. Khalifa renders domestic authority through a rhetoric of ritualized submission: "She taught them to bow their heads when speaking, to lower their eyes before their uncle, to wipe the table as if erasing their own traces" (Khalifa 47). Submission becomes a performative habit, rehearsed through posture and gesture. The verbs, bow, lower, erase, compress bodily motion into a grammar of obedience, revealing how political hierarchy is naturalized through gendered decorum within the home and how aesthetic propriety becomes a strategy of survival (Wedeen 17).

Subsequently, Khalifa's domestic allegory unfolds through three women whose bodies and silences trace the genealogy of Syria's moral corrosion. The grandmother, Bahiya al-Katibi, once spirited and vital, grows estranged and resentful, her bitterness curdling into detachment. Neglecting her home and family, she becomes "cold in bed as if punishing [her husband]," seeking refuge instead in cinema and nostalgia. Her emotional withdrawal inaugurates the lineage of paralysis that shadows her descendants, embodying the first stage of moral alienation under patriarchal complacency. Her daughter, once a "respectable schoolteacher," deteriorates not into paralysis but into dementia and psychic exhaustion. She drifts between lucidity and delirium, her muteness a symptom of internalized fear rather than physical debility. Her silence "rules the house," not as strength but as the echo of domination learned through endurance; she personifies the regime's triumph when obedience becomes instinct. Jean's mother, Madame Mary Abdel-Nour, represents the terminal phase of this decline, a

paralyzed and blind figure, confined to her bed "waiting to die," her immobility translating spiritual submission into the language of the body. Through these successive portraits, Khalifa composes a generational anatomy of decay, where alienation evolves into amnesia, and amnesia into absolute stasis. The family becomes the nation in miniature: each generation more immobilized than the last, each silence heavier than the air of Aleppo itself.

Amid this lineage of paralysis, Nizar, the narrator's maternal uncle, represents an alternative ethics. An aesthete and homosexual living in quiet defiance through which he exists in a borderland condition, a "vague and undetermined space created by unnatural boundaries," where identity is shaped through displacement, endurance, and negotiation between belonging and exclusion (Amirouche and Bekkai 215). Within this liminal zone, Nizar's solitude, aesthetic sensibility, and refusal of hypocrisy mark him as a moral survivor of dictatorship. His marginality, far from weakness, becomes a form of ethical resilience, an artistic survival that implements the transformation of suffering into expression (Attar and Serir 115). Through portraying Nizar, Khalifa renders queerness not as deviation but as endurance: his quiet artistry, like Khalifa's own narrative voice, transforms trauma into creative resistance, refusing the totalization of fear.

In contrast to Nizar's endurance, Rachid, the narrator's brother, extends Khalifa's anatomy of obedience and despair through failed resistance. Trained as a violinist under their uncle Nizar's guidance, he embodies the tension between artistic sensitivity and moral suffocation. His music, played in Aleppo's night cafés, becomes both refuge and indictment, a fragile speech within a voiceless city. During the Iraq War, his drift to Baghdad and fleeting ties to extremist groups mark a desperate search for meaning. Yet his return to Aleppo and suicide reveal that no gesture escapes repression; the same air that silences his violin silences him. His oscillation between creation and destruction signals the paralysis of a generation trapped between obedience and revolt. In death, Rachid performs his last act of endurance, self-annihilation as the ultimate metaphor of resistance.

Similarly, Jean embodies the exhaustion of authoritarian life through a descent from intellect to paralysis and reason to ritual. Once a rational lecturer, now in Aleppo, he witnesses colleagues dismissed for "insufficient devotion," a purge that corrodes his faith in ethics and truth. There he meets Sawsan, whose rebellious vitality disrupts his solitude, and their affair ends with a pregnancy he refuses to acknowledge, an emblem of his paralysis between desire and obedience. After Sawsan's flight to France, Jean remains bound to his paralyzed mother, his care for her becoming a metaphor for inherited submission. Yet within this suffocation, Khalifa hints at resilience, as storytelling reclaims motion and voice from paralysis. Through Jean's cyclical path, from exile to return, passion to denial, Khalifa stages the collapse of moral agency: intellect curdles into habit, love into obedience, leaving him both caretaker and captive in a world where reason has learned to bow.

In a broader sense, cultural resilience illuminates Khalifa's paradox of survival within decay. Displaced peoples preserve continuity through "intergenerational transmission of memory and adaptive endurance" (Amirouche and Bekkai 220), and Khalifa's fragmented family enacts this endurance. The mother's silence, Sawsan's shame, and Nizar's solitude become dialects of survival within moral ruin, ensuring that memory outlives domination. This fragile persistence unfolds within

what Khalifa portrays as a necropolitical genealogy, a lineage sustained through decay (Mbembe 39–40). The Syrian home mirrors the regime's illusion of stability, intact on the surface yet rotting within. By exposing that decay, Khalifa transforms intimacy into critique: the family's dysfunction reveals that authoritarianism begins not with the ruler but with the emotions, love, shame, and fear, that sustain him. Obedience thus extends beyond the household, inscribed in Aleppo's very walls, where space itself bears the discipline of power.

4. ***Spatial and Symbolic Decay:*** *Aleppo as Dead Ecology*

If the Syrian family in *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* mirrors the state's structure of control, the city of Aleppo represents its decaying body. Khaled Khalifa transforms urban space into an anatomy of moral and political ruin. This symbolic anatomy is grounded in a tangible urban condition. During the late Baʿathist decades, Aleppo's built environment suffered chronic infrastructural decay, uneven municipal investment, and widespread air pollution resulting from unregulated industry and fuel scarcity. Informal settlements expanded while historic quarters deteriorated under policies of neglect and centralized planning that prioritized spectacle over habitability.

These environmental pressures form the material substrate of Khalifa's imagery: the rot, dust, and stagnant air that pervade the novel mirror the lived suffocation of a city literally decomposing under bureaucratic paralysis. The novel's Aleppo is not simply the backdrop of authoritarian life; it is the physical expression of it, a corpse that continues to breathe. "Aleppo was rotting slowly, like a corpse that refused to die," the narrator declares (Khalifa 54), condensing in one image the continuity between civic, bodily, and ethical disintegration. The city's stagnant air renders visible the invisible violence of decades of fear. This sensory saturation of space finds one of its sharpest renderings in Khalifa's description of the city's blended odors: "The stench of the slaughterhouse mixed with the minister's perfume, until the city itself smelled of obedience" (Khalifa 112). This detail crystallizes Khalifa's method: political domination enters perception through the senses. The oxymoronic pairing of *stench* and *perfume* fuses luxury with rot, turning the sensory environment into what this article terms "authoritarian ecology," a landscape where domination is inhaled rather than decreed.

Extending this poetics of endurance to the urban scale, this immobilized urban ecology literalizes Achille Mbembe's necropolitical vision, "life continuing in the proximity of death" (52). The citizens of Aleppo inhabit a space where vitality itself has become a form of endurance. Streets, houses, and bodies persist not despite death but alongside it. In such an environment, existence shades into decomposition; survival is indistinguishable from rot. Naeff calls this process "the unstoppable spread of corruption, rot, and decline" that provokes a "corporeal repulsion resembling shame" (131, 143). Khalifa amplifies that shame through sensory saturation, the stench that "clung to the walls like our shame" (Khalifa 29). In this way, the smell becomes moral texture: a reminder that corruption is not abstract but breathable.

Parallel to this sensory dimension, Khalifa's use of domestic imagery extends this spatial critique. The recurring kitchen, claustrophobic, airless, and tainted, functions as the intimate equivalent of the decaying city. Its suffocating smell fuses the bodily and political, turning cooking into an allegory of

slow corruption. Judith Naeff interprets the odor as the embodiment of "moral complicity" (131); Hopkins reads the same motif as a translation of fear into the senses (41). The kitchen's walls, perpetually sticky with smoke and shame, perform the same function as Aleppo's ruined facades: they preserve the trace of every silence.

From this domestic parallel emerges a broader architectural reading. Drawing on the notion of dystopic architecture as "a semiotic mode of the discourse of power" (Touhami and Hakkoum 1266), Aleppo's spatial arrangements become extensions of the regime's logic: the home mirrors the prison, and the kitchen the bureaucracy. Likewise, dystopia often grows from "the utopian promise betrayed" (Kohil and Bouregbi 72), a world where the ideal of communal peace mutates into moral ruin. Khalifa's portrayal of prewar Syria as a peace rotting from within translates this inversion into lived topography: the city rusts before it burns.

At this juncture, Khalifa's spatial imagination resonates with the notion of an *aesthetic of heritage*, a mnemonic geography that resists erasure through architecture and naming (Zargoug and Ghithri 436). In this conception, toponymy functions as moral memory, preserving communal identity within the geography of faith. This understanding of space as remembrance parallels Khalifa's reverence for Midan Akbas and Aleppo, cities whose names and textures carry the residue of endurance. In a profound inversion, just as the zawiya once embodied continuity amid historical collapse, Khalifa's decaying Aleppo becomes its inverted reflection, a sanctuary of memory transformed into an archive of loss. The house, like the zawiya, thus serves as a site of moral documentation where identity persists through the preservation of spiritual and spatial traces.

Finally, this intertextual echo expands Khalifa's ecological allegory. Heritage here emerges not as a static inheritance but as a living aesthetic sustained by geography and memory (Zargoug and Ghithri 445). In this light, Aleppo's ruins do not signify mere destruction but testify to moral endurance. They reveal how memory itself becomes an ecological force, the means by which a culture metabolizes loss and transforms decay into continuity.

Methodologically, the transfer of *ecological continuity* from Amirouche and Bekkai's analysis of Silko's colonial landscapes to Khalifa's authoritarian Aleppo rests on a structural, not thematic, analogy. In both contexts, continuity emerges as an ethical strategy of survival under systemic duress: Silko's displaced communities preserve identity through relation to land, while Khalifa's citizens maintain moral coherence through the endurance of space and memory. The mechanism, persistence amid degradation, remains comparable even as the causal orders differ: settler-colonial erasure versus internal authoritarian corrosion. Reading across these domains illuminates how ecology, as a form of continuity, can mediate both colonial displacement and domestic tyranny without collapsing their historical specificities.

By fusing spatial ruin with moral persistence, Khalifa turns remembrance into a form of resistance, a quiet insistence that even what decomposes continues to bear witness. The decaying kitchen, stagnant air, and lingering smell all inscribe Syria's collective soul, recalling the zawiya's sacred vocation to remember in silence. Khalifa's architecture of decay, therefore, aligns with the concept of

memory-places, sites that embody both corruption and continuity, transforming ruin into an act of remembrance and endowing material decay with the dignity of witness.

5. *Affective Politics, Shame, Silence, and Complicity*

At the affective core of Khalifa's narrative, emotion is not a passive reflection but a contested field shaped by ideological control and systemic forgetting (Missoum 197). This affective framework clarifies how fear and silence function as instruments of governance. Here, "emotional governance" denotes the state's management of feeling as a political resource, the calibration of fear, shame, and attachment to secure compliance rather than conviction (Ahmed 9–13; Wedeen 504). Within this conceptual frame, Khalifa's Aleppine households dramatize an affective authoritarianism in which shame and paralysis constitute the architecture of obedience (Missoum 198–199).

In this regard, the analysis of *Writing Shame in Asad's Syria* identifies two inseparable shames within Khalifa's text: the shame of transgression and the shame of humiliation (Naeff 131–37). The first governs gender and sexuality; it marks the body as a site of moral suspicion and social control. The second arises from submission itself, "the humiliation of obedience to power when one can no longer stand upright" (Naeff 133). Together they form "a spectrum of shame," encompassing both the desire to resist and the fear of exposure (Naeff 134). More significantly, this spectrum is not merely psychological but political: it regulates conduct by fusing emotion with ideology. Through this duality, Khalifa exposes how power reproduces itself not by external coercion but through internalized affect. Shame becomes the moral texture of citizenship, the condition through which individuals remain governable. In this sense, the novel exemplifies what is described as "the glue of ideology," an affective adhesion that binds subjects to the very norms that debase them (Ahmed 27). Thus, the citizens of Khalifa's Aleppo remain tethered to the authoritarian order not despite shame but because of it; belonging is made possible only through obedience.

Within this emotional framework, the domestic scene exposes this structure most vividly. "The fathers told us to stay silent, the sons learned silence, and the daughters inherited silence like a dowry." Here, silence operates as affective inheritance, an intergenerational technology of control. This mechanism exemplifies what has been termed "the routinization of fear," in which emotion hardens into habit and domination becomes intimacy (Malas 46). Through such habituation, Khalifa's Syrians "forget what they saw," converting endurance into moral anesthesia that ensures each generation re-enacts the same posture of submission.

Furthermore, the political scope of shame extends beyond gender. In Khalifa's Syria, humiliation substitutes for citizenship. "Even those who had nothing to hide were afraid." Shame, as affect, adheres to both bodies and environments, enacting what has been described as stickiness, an attachment through which emotion "sticks" to subjects and spaces, making subjection feel like belonging (Naeff 131). The narrative focalization turns shame into a tactile presence: "Her face burned, but no one had touched her; the shame stayed on her skin like smoke that refused to leave" (Khalifa 183). In effect, the novel turns emotion into substance, making governance legible through the body. Through the simile of smoke, Khalifa materializes affect as residue, what Ahmed calls the stickiness of emotion

that clings to bodies and histories alike. In this configuration, fear of isolation transforms compliance into comfort; humiliation becomes the very condition of community. The paralysis that results evokes futurophobia, the fear of imagining futures under permanent regimes of stagnation. Khalifa's citizens cling to their humiliation because it is the only stable form of coherence available within a world where political continuity erases the possibility of change.

Against this pervasive moral anesthesia, Jean's forced parade scene introduces another register of affect: disgust. "Sweat poured from him; he could not look at the flag without nausea." Naeff calls this response "the moral appeal of disgust" (145), an instinctive revulsion that reasserts humanity against anesthetized conformity. In a system built on affective discipline, to feel disgust is to resist. Correspondingly, emotion in Khalifa is not merely thematic but structural. The narrative itself moves through waves of affect: fear thickens into guilt, guilt into disgust, and disgust into muted tenderness. Trauma fiction, it has been observed, converts pain into aesthetic rhythm, where "art and suffering coexist as instruments of survival" (Attar and Serir 115). Through this rhythmic circulation of feeling, Khalifa transforms affect into historiography: emotion becomes archive.

In continuation of this argument, the notion of "dictatorship's intimacy" (Avlar 127) complements this reading: Fear becomes a habit because it is shared. In Khalifa's Syria, emotion circulates like polluted air, vital yet suffocating. Dictatorship's intimacy names the paradox of power that governs through private feeling as much as public decree. It is the intimacy of fear, shame, and dependence, where the regime infiltrates domestic space and emotional life until subjugation feels familiar. Power, in this configuration, does not simply impose itself; it cohabits with its subjects, shaping their gestures, speech, and silences. The family dinner, the neighbor's glance, and the unspoken word each become an extension of the state's surveillance. Thus, this emotional domestication transforms obedience into affection and caution into care, producing citizens who reproduce domination through their attachments. In this sense, dictatorship intimacy explains how Khalifa's characters remain bound to the structures that oppress them: love, loyalty, and fear are indistinguishable. Shame, then, is not the negation of selfhood but its distorted survival, a mode of being that endures by accommodating power rather than confronting it.

By translating this emotional economy into narrative form, Khalifa achieves what has been termed an affective historiography: literature as the record of feelings that precede revolt (Ahmad 204). This mode of writing treats emotion as both symptom and archive, capturing the atmosphere of humiliation, paralysis, and deferred rage that made rebellion inevitable. As Aftab Ahmad argues, Arab literature has long functioned as "the will of life," a creative force that preserves dignity under oppression and transforms collective frustration into moral energy. Accordingly, Khalifa's novel participates in that tradition by documenting not events but sensibilities, how Syrians were trained to feel obedience as safety, humiliation as civic duty, and silence as a mode of speech. Such representation carries ethical weight: it renders emotion a form of testimony.

Ultimately, Khalifa's Syria is an affective state, a regime sustained by emotional circulation rather than ideological conviction. Fear, guilt, and shame function as social technologies that maintain obedience while simulating cohesion. Yet despite this suffocation, traces of liberation persist. Jean's

nausea, Sawsan's defiance, and Nizar's dignity all testify to what Attar and Serir call "art's capacity to redeem feeling without erasing pain" (121). In them, disgust becomes ethics and shame becomes knowledge. Hence, Khalifa's achievement lies in exposing emotion as history: the daily rehearsal of humiliation that prepared the ground for revolt. Shame is both symptom and resistance, the wound that proves the nation still has nerves.

6. *Narrative Form as Historical Testimony:* *Archaeology of Trauma*

At the narrative and ethical level, "Our history is a long chain of defeats," the narrator reflects, "each one resembling the last" (Khalifa 14). The sentence announces both the novel's worldview and its form. *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* is built on repetition, dislocation, and ellipsis, the grammar of trauma. Its chronology circles rather than progresses; its voices multiply rather than resolve. The fragmentation of structure becomes an ethical stance: only broken form can speak a broken history. Khalifa's narrative thus operates as an archaeology of trauma, unearthing buried layers of violence that resurface through recurrence and silence.

The novel's "disorienting sequence of events converts narrative disorder into political meaning" (Courtney 144). Khalifa's refusal of linear time performs what Courtney terms an aesthetic of the uncanny, a temporal dislocation that exposes how trauma, when unassimilated, returns to disturb the present. His circular narration mirrors what Courtney observes across Syrian and Iraqi war fiction: a refusal to grant history closure, as violence continually re-emerges in "uncanny anticipation of future war" (Courtney 15). The result is not chaos but moral design, in which repetition and delay become the only forms of truth-telling possible under repression. In this framework, the familiar domestic world, the kitchen, the courtyard, the sickroom, turns spectral, "haunted by the repetition of unassimilated violence" (Courtney 74). Khalifa's Aleppo thus becomes both archive and apparition, a city that documents its own decomposition through echoes, returns, and silences. Fragmentation, far from signaling despair, constitutes an ethics of witnessing: broken form alone can register the disintegration of experience when language itself has been corrupted by power. Thus, structure itself becomes argument.

If Khalifa's disjointed temporality transforms history into haunting, his narrative also transforms pain into survival. Storytelling becomes the psyche's means of endurance, a symbolic reconstruction of chaos into meaning. Within Khalifa's aesthetic framework, this principle is realized through discontinuity and silence. Each rupture of chronology embodies the mind's effort to translate what remains unspeakable into rhythm and image. Silence, accordingly, is not void but metamorphosis: a gestural language through which pain negotiates visibility. In *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City*, the withheld word preserves the trace of suffering without reenacting its violence. Through this formal strategy, the novel's broken temporality mirrors trauma's nonlinear return, converting repression into form and memory into testimony.

Having transformed trauma into an aesthetic of survival, Khalifa extends this logic into the politics of belonging. Writing from what has been termed an **internal exile**, a condition in which the artist remains physically within the homeland yet morally estranged from its ideology, he occupies a liminal

space between loyalty and dissent, between complicity and rebellion. The novel's multigenerational narration enacts this in-betweenness, refusing fixed vantage points and dramatizing what has been described as a process of un-labelling, the dissolution of binaries such as victim and perpetrator. Narrative instability becomes a moral practice of humility, a recognition that in a society governed by fear, innocence itself is a compromised ideal. The closing confession, "We all shared the blame," extends this ethics of ambiguity from content to structure, implicating even the storyteller within the moral disorder he recounts (Columbu 98–99).

Extending the moral ambiguity of exile, Khalifa transforms artistic creation into an act of endurance. Art becomes the grammar through which trauma learns to speak again. It has been argued that "art is a means of salvation in times of crisis and devastation, bringing comfort and hope to all the people" (Attar and Serir 115). Khalifa's aesthetic fragmentation thus performs ethical reconstruction: the shattered narrative repairs through rhythm, silence, and return. Writing becomes therapy for a nation that has lost its language, converting paralysis into motion and chaos into pattern. The novel's cyclical structure embodies this therapeutic loop of memory, where recurrence becomes the pulse of endurance. Each pause and recursive image enacts the struggle to reassemble meaning after disintegration.

Within this same framework of renewal, the persistence of form expresses what has elsewhere been described as cultural resilience, the capacity of identity to survive through adaptive narration and creative continuity (Bekkai and Amirouche 213–14). Khalifa's prose, oscillating between tenderness and disgust, remembrance and erasure, constructs a new syntax of endurance. Through its aesthetic of fracture, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* transforms pain into moral cognition, demonstrating that when language falters, art becomes its ethical substitute, an archive through which the silenced past continues to breathe.

7. ***Art, Exile, and Cultural Resilience****: Writing to Breathe*

At the culmination of Khalifa's moral and aesthetic vision, "To write about our city is to betray it," the narrator admits, "yet to stay silent is to kill it again." Expression thus becomes a form of loyalty. Writing is breathing under constraint. This process constitutes "coded testimony," the embedding of dissent within ambiguity (Hopkins 68). In this sense, Khalifa's metaphors of stench and stagnation function as such codes: where slogans would be censored, smells and ruins speak. Through sensory metaphor, he transforms decay into discourse, translating oppression into the language of atmosphere. This stylistic maneuver turns aesthetic density into moral testimony.

This aesthetic paradox extends to Nizar and Rachid's resort to music, which becomes a fragile but profound act of resistance. Their violins and compositions are not mere escapes from despair but acoustic assertions of life in a necropolitical landscape. In their art, emotion is reclaimed from domination when it generates moral awareness; to create under suffocation is to affirm being.

Within Khalifa's domestic microcosm, art functions as a fragile yet profound mode of survival. Nizar and Rachid's violin performances and compositions transmute despair into rhythm, echoing the ethical principle that creation is itself defiance. Their music recalls the moral aesthetics of Belkacem

Khaldi's "creation beneath prohibition," where constraint engenders spiritual expression. Through such aesthetic gestures, Khalifa asserts that under tyranny, beauty becomes the last remaining form of truth. Sound replaces speech; melody restores vitality where language fails. The act of playing, like the act of writing, reclaims the right to feel, transforming decay into harmony and suffocation into moral air. In such moments, art does not flee reality but redeems it through form, revealing how the sensory language of resistance transcends silence itself.

Nizar's artistry, cultivated in silence, transforms the kitchen's rot into rhythm, converting decay into melody. Rachid's music, equally, becomes an echo of persistence, a sonic refusal of paralysis. In both cases, beauty is not consolation but defiance: a disciplined assertion that, even under tyranny, harmony and conscience may still coexist.

Khalifa's art of survival is simultaneously an art of exile. Although he remains physically in Syria, his writing speaks from a space of moral estrangement, a position between belonging and rebellion. This internal exile, already evoked in his fragmented narrative stance, reveals how art transforms alienation into ethical vision. Like the silent endurance of his characters, his authorship performs what has been described as "ecological continuity," the persistence of life and meaning within deterioration (Bekkai and Amirouche 213–14). His creative position embodies that continuity on a spiritual level: remaining amid the ruins to record them. To write from within suffocation, then, is not betrayal but fidelity to memory, a form of breathing that keeps the moral pulse alive. Through this vision, exile becomes not departure but witness, a mode of staying that preserves conscience when speech is endangered.

No Knives in the Kitchens of This City transforms art from a gesture of survival into a repository of moral memory. Within this framework, decay itself becomes both medium and archive. The city's rot, the mother's stillness, and the kitchen's stench register survival as a form of spiritual discipline, reflecting the principle of "aesthetic resistance," the capacity to transcend oppression through form (Khaldi 105). Creation under constraint is thus not merely possible but ethically imperative, a moral practice that affirms life through articulation.

Finally, Khalifa's broken syntax and sensory density perform a dual function: they encode political memory and redeem emotion from banality. His writing embodies what has been defined as "art as memorial," a gesture not of redemption but of elevation (Attar and Serir 122). Through this metamorphosis of decay into moral texture, Khalifa joins a broader ethical lineage in Arab art, where creation becomes testimony and beauty survives as conscience beneath prohibition. His Aleppo, like the violated homeland it reflects, endures not through triumph but through persistence—the disciplined act of breathing within silence.

8. *CONCLUSION*

In summation, Khaled Khalifa's *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* transforms Syria's pre-civil-war decades into an anatomy of moral suffocation. Its airless kitchens, stagnant streets, and wounded families form a political ecology in which fear is oxygen and silence the price of survival. Rather than depicting the revolution itself, Khalifa exposes the corrosion that made revolt inevitable.

Through this lens, his Aleppo decays from within, revealing that authoritarianism survives by domesticating emotion, by turning love into obedience, shame into loyalty, and survival into complicity.

Nevertheless, what appears as decomposition in Khalifa's Aleppo also constitutes continuity. Drawing on the notion of "ecological continuity," decay itself becomes a medium of endurance (Amirouche and Bekkai 213–22). The city survives by recording its corruption; its persistence amid rot is a paradoxical testimony to life. In this sense, Khalifa thereby redefines resilience not as recovery but as remembrance, the capacity to continue breathing within ruin. This moral ecology transforms survival from mere endurance into ethical witness: to decay is still to remember.

Consequently, across these pages, the novel becomes both record and resistance. It bears witness to the emotional infrastructures of despotism and to the small dignities that persist beneath them. Each character embodies a mode of endurance: Sawsan's doomed transgression, Nizar's aesthetic solitude, the mother's dignified dementia. Their failures become archives of moral truth. Through this aesthetic of decomposition, Khalifa's prose, dense with sensory decay, renders fear audible and shame visible, proving that art can tell what history conceals.

Ultimately, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* is not a prophecy of revolution but a testament to decay, a reminder that tyranny begins in the intimacy of fear and that redemption, if it exists, resides in remembering before the fire. The city's rot, like its people's silence, is not merely symptom but scripture: the text of a nation learning, belatedly, to breathe.

Therefore, Khalifa's achievement lies in transforming affect into historiography. By aestheticizing suffocation, he converts private emotion into collective archive, demonstrating how fear, shame, and memory become the very grammar of Syrian history. His novel fulfills what this study has defined as affective ecology: the conversion of sensory experience into moral knowledge. Within this interpretive framework, decay functions as narrative ethics, compelling readers to inhabit the claustrophobic stillness of a society trained to forget. Through this aesthetic of endurance, Khalifa restores to literature its ancient civic function, the preservation of conscience when speech itself has collapsed.

In a broader critical perspective, Khalifa's novel extends the boundaries of Syrian literature into the moral and philosophical domain of global trauma aesthetics. His portrayal of pre-revolutionary Aleppo resonates with literary traditions that transform oppression into art, echoing, for instance, the post-totalitarian allegories of Eastern Europe or the testimonial narratives of Latin America. Through this comparative horizon, *No Knives in the Kitchens of This City* emerges not only as a national allegory but as a universal meditation on moral endurance under domination. Its fusion of affect, memory, and decay situates Khalifa among writers who convert silence into narrative energy and despair into ethical imagination. Thus, his work endures as both local witness and global testimony, affirming that art remains humanity's last form of breathing when history itself constricts the air.

9. *Bibliography List*

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