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# Islam, History, and the Modern Nation: Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary Francophone Moroccan Literature

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Scott Homler

There remain a number of critical problems associated with the discussions of identity which characterize much of the debate in post-colonial literary theory. The components under discussion have been culture and ethnicity, politics and nationalism, differentiation and assimilation, forces of resistance and hegemony. A particularly grave obstacle has been the inability of post-colonial scholarship to resolve the problem of the particular and the universal in such a way as to update the exploration of difference as a proactive and non-coercive force of resistance against post-independence structures of repression. The preservation of exclusionary barriers based on ethnic or cultural particularities does not offer an effective check on the abuses of post-independence systems of power which are left in the wake of foreign domination. In the Arab world, Islam has both galvanized forces for the liberation of millions from colonial rule, but it has also sanctified numerous subsequent forms of repression, against political dissenters and women, in particular. Therefore, it is crucial that critical scholarship respond to the essential contingency, variation and change within the terms of cultural or ethnic difference.

The Maghreb offers a challenging example of the need for critical awareness of the particular social and cultural transformations in post-independence countries. In order to frame the discussion of post-colonialism in the context of the Maghreb, I will briefly discuss the positions of Frantz Fanon and Abdelkebir Khatibi, two thinkers whose work has been particularly influential. Frantz Fanon described the case of Algerian resistance to French imperial domination. To fabricate an Algerian identity undergoing material and social changes in order to fulfill itself by transcending its historically determined abjection certainly reveals much about the discourses of Marxism, psychoanalysis and racialism. One wonders however whether Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* helps at all to understand what has troubled Algeria since the liberationist doc-

trines appropriated by the FLN have been brought under wide critique.

Fanon described the psychological outlook of the colonized person in sharply oppositional terms. To overcome the subalternity imposed by colonialism, the colonized self is compelled first to objectify his experience in terms of a new identity: "La mise en question du monde colonial par le colonisé n'est pas une confrontation rationnelle des points de vue. Elle n'est pas un discours sur l'universel, mais l'affirmation échevelée d'une originalité posée comme absolue. Le monde colonial est un monde manichéiste" (Fanon 29). It is evident that the moment of interrogation is also the moment of uncompromising self-declaration for the colonized subject. Fanon stresses the originality of that declaration in quasi-curative terms. Fanon's new discourse of liberation constructs a subject which is the unified culmination of Marxist, psychoanalytic and post-colonial thinking of identity.

*Les damnés de la terre* describes the psychological and social effects of the Algerian struggle for independence against the French. Algerian identity could not help but assert itself and, given the protracted struggle against colonial rule, the assertion of absolute difference should hardly be surprising. However, the absolutism required during the struggle for independence must be superceded by a realizable democratic dialogue. Traces of such a dialogue do project themselves from writing about the independence era, in Yamina Mécharka's *La grotte éclatée* and Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma*, for example. Nor could Fanon have seen how less than thirty years later, the Islamic fundamentalists and the army would be engaged in a bloody conflict that would kill and maim tens of thousands of people. But it is indeed the same absolutism of the independence politics which helped solidify the FLN's control over governing power in Algeria and, further west, the Moroccan monarchy's absolute political and spiritual reign.

With the current state of social disintegration in Algeria and social stagnation in neighboring Morocco, we are compelled to question whether Abdelkébir Khatibi's "tierce voie" for decolonizing the intellectual and philosophical bases for criticism has contributed in any real sense to surpassing the political and cultural utopianism of Maghrebian specificity, such as has been embodied, for example, in the Sultan of Morocco's sublime return from exile to rule a grateful people. Like Fanon, Khatibi proposes

that local identity is capable of transcendence, but this time in its ultimate openness. He writes in *Maghreb pluriel* that "...nous pouvons, Tiers Monde, poursuivre une tierce voie: ni la raison ni la déraison telles que les a pensées l'Occident dans son tout, mais une subversion en quelque sorte double, qui, se donnant le pouvoir de parole et d'action, se met en oeuvre dans une différence intraitable" (Khatibi 50-1). "Reason" and "Unreason" in Occidental thought appear here to be doubly attributed, first, respectively to the West and the East within the Western imaginary, and second, as oppositional terms in an absolute logic preconfigured to the advantage of the Western ideology of conquest. The melding together of "word" and "deed" for the purposes of displacing Occidental thought is supposed to supplant the preponderance of reason and to secure the privileged premise of multiple meanings in reason's stead. The ultimate gesture becomes an affirmation of plurality. Diversity can not then be used as a sign pointing ultimately to the supremacy of the One.

Khatibi is very aware that to presuppose multiplicity as an absolute category is to compromise in two ways and in two cultures. His first concession is to absolutism, even in its guise of perpetually decentering multiplicity. A second compromise involves the logocentric unity which Muslims cling to in the Koran. This necessitates both an anthropological exploration in Islam's texts and practices for the signs of diversity and a new association of "word" and "deed." The exploration becomes the reconstruction of authentic difference, this time orbiting and reflecting an internally divided and subdivided existence. In Morocco, Sufism, saintly adoration, derviches and superstitious fear of genies (*djnoun*) are all frequently referred to as "not real Islam." But they would represent in Khatibi's thinking, the "real difference" of Maghrebian life and culture between the absolutist cultures of Muslim and Judeo-Christian civilizations.

This is also a region in which particularities are reduced to folklore for foreign and increasingly, domestic consumption, or worse, stamped out by repressive ideologies such as Islamic fundamentalism. The political and social relevance of difference is indeed in serious jeopardy. The reduction of local difference to folklore should not be blamed on Khatibi or on post-modernism.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the dominant narratives of Islam and national develop-

ment marginalize unorthodox practices and views. None of this is unique to the Maghreb.

There is a link between the "differentialism" (declaring difference in order to distinguish in absolute terms) of nationalist discourses of post-colonialism and the politics of repression in the name of national unity. This conclusion has been reached by Benedict Anderson, Geoffrey Bennington, Aijaz Ahmad and by Aziz Al-Azmeh. Yet the very terms of difference which themselves tend toward universality are also subject to social and historical variables, and those terms of difference are simultaneously used to achieve different goals by different groups. For example, Aziz Al-Azmeh writes: "Islam appears as an eminently protean category. It appears indifferently, among other things, to name a history, indicate a religion, ghettoize a community, describe a "culture", explain a disagreeable exoticism and fully specify a political programme" (Al-Azmeh 24). Who is naming whom or what "Islamic" is certainly as important as whether the nuances are indeed just. Al-Azmeh also suggests that collapsing diverse human experience into an ideologically motivated term like Islam facilitates the hegemonic reappropriation of historically-situated diverse and local forms of religious and communal identification.<sup>2</sup> There is an evident parallel in the Maghreb between religion and nation in terms of their deployment in order to appropriate and repress differences, in both opinion and practice. Abdellah Laroui posed essentially the same question in *La crise des intellectuels arabes*, "...qui ne voit que la fossilisation de la langue [koranique] et l'élection de la culture traditionnelle [monarchique] comme signe distinctif de la nationalité sont le moyen le plus décisif de maintenir vivante la pensée médiévale..." (Laroui 193). Distinctive signs of cultural identity become tools of oppression within the context of national unification.

While these national characteristics are archaic, room must be made to see the Moroccan nation as a dynamic and open framework for economic and cultural development. As open signifiers in a very new context, projected like Orthodox Islam onto Morocco's diverse people, nationality and national belonging are equally subject to intense scrutiny. Writers like Abdelhak Serhane and Mohamed Khair-Eddine are among those in the Arab world who explore the plurality of Moroccan experience within the coercive and institutionalized power structures of Islam and the modern



Islamic nation. Whereas Khatibi writes an apology for local forms of Islam, Serhane and Khaïr-Eddine identify those too as coercive and repressive aspects of a traditional culture at severe odds with its contemporary social context.<sup>3</sup>

Mohamed Khaïr-Eddine's novel *Agadir* is perhaps the most subversive francophone novel yet written in Morocco. In its direct and overt attack on the pillars of Moroccan national identity, Khaïr-Eddine places into question both the ways in which Maghrebian nationality and selfhood are transmitted and preserved and the actual sustainability of a collective identity fabricated through the genealogy and archaeology of ultimately refutable knowledge. The interrogation of cultural and national identity is simultaneously personal and subjective, and the prognosis for a concrete definition of an authentic self is far from conclusive:

A vrai dire je ne connais pas l'Histoire. Ni la mienne ni celle de mon pays. Peut-être ai-je une histoire. Je ne sais pas. Il est possible que j'en aie une, à moi. Cette ville aussi doit en avoir une. A peu près comme la mienne. Pas tout à fait. Non pas comme la mienne. Alors je vous dis que l'histoire n'existe pas. (Khaïr-Eddine 86)

What history has come to represent, the narrator muses, is a basic chronology of arbitrary construction which seems to bear little resemblance to the conscious existence of a narrator charged with the reconstruction of social order. In the wake of a major earthquake, the city of Agadir is reduced to rubble and is in this sense the scene for great social and cultural renewal. The text points out, however, that while the city may be rebuilt, there is no way of retrieving social and historical continuity. Memory itself is a false and deceiving construction. Khaïr-Eddine's text effectively destabilizes the metaphysical pretensions of the monarchy, of Islam and of traditional culture. Among survivors of the catastrophe, the novel's narrator wistfully acknowledges a stubborn unwillingness to relinquish the trappings of their former lives. The human subject is loathe to abandon its cultural baggage, even if culture is ultimately a construction without absolute value.

The narrator's description of the plans for the reconstruction of Agadir reflect a central national and military authority's concerted efforts to efface traces of past human culture. The archaic, disorganized city of the past will be replaced by a city of geometric

design, "UNE VILLE EN CINQ BRANCHES AYANT UN CENTRE VIDE CIRCULAIRE" (123). The sterile geometry of the new Agadir reminds one, of course, of abstract Islamic design, but also of the wide boulevards leading to the Arch de Triomphe in Paris. But beyond the city's smooth surfaces, the society's future is to be documented in a single book, "où iraient se ranger d'elles-mêmes les idées de chaque citoyen" (125). This represents the single narrative of humanity reduced to its biological existence, in which "ideas" are natural and are naturally organizable. We come to the precipice of both word and deed, culture and nature, for this is a society in which renewal relies on the elimination of the mythic elements of identity, not to restore the subject to its whole existential self. The narrator realizes the impossibility of such a task. He states: "Ce qui compte: aboutir à des conclusions qui se tiennent. Peu importe leur véracité" (49). Rather than attempt to confirm an identity which inevitably alienates reality that it can not accommodate, the provisional solution is to attempt to meet minor local demands of people as they struggle for mere survival.

Abdelhak Serhane's *Le soleil des obscurs* offers another perspective on the same distressing trend toward dehumanization and urbanization in Moroccan society. The novel examines the fragility of the individual psyche under increasingly difficult social circumstances. These include the rapid and uncharted transformation of traditional rural tribal society into homogeneous Islamic Moroccan identity, the pressure of out-migration and widespread bureaucratic and personal corruption. The narrative focuses on the marriage of Soltane and Mina. Their union is planned during a period of serious decline in the social and economic fabric of their village. The optimism and jubilation with which their elders plan and execute the marriage ceremony are dashed by Soltane's sexual disfunction and Mina's exaggerated shame. The fortunes of Soltane and Mina are hyperdetermined by their social surroundings, even as the text suggests interference by the evil spirit of possession, Aicha Qandisha. There is little Soltane and Mina can do to empower themselves, other than Soltane's arguably successful plan to disassociate himself from the pressures of village life through out-migration.

*Le soleil des obscurs* also calls into question the ability of Islam to fulfill its role as the institution guaranteeing justice and fraternity. The text recognizes that the association of Moroccan Islam

with the monarchy tends to extend subjugation to the regime even into the mosque itself, thereby defaming the very integrity of Islam. An extraordinary turn of events occurs in which a bird in the mosque actually pecks his way into the brain of the preaching *imam*. Out of the *imam's* head comes the "fibre de mensonge." The rest of the sermon is a lucid detour through what must be the very thoughts of the author:

Réveillez-vous et secouez les cadavres de vos vieux! Débarassez-vous de cette lassitude inventée pour vous paralyser dans la stagnation. L'Etat réclame de vous des sacrifices sans cesse. Il veut un doigt. Et quand vous vous apprêtez à lui en sacrifier deux, il réclame le bras entier. Alors commence le massacre des populations sans défense! (Serhane 45)

Serhane suggests that resistance to state repression can emerge from within the religious congregation, even while the King is the de facto "commander of the faithful." The mosque has indeed been the seat of anti-government activity in neighboring Algeria. Such resistance can not take hold in *Le soleil des obscurs*. For as the renegade *imam* is declared *officially* insane, the mosque will continue to prop up the officialdom of a dehumanizing regime. In the Arab world, Islam's integrity as a distinct component of identity has been seriously challenged, particularly given the number of military conflicts which have erupted. It can hardly be a liberating force for a future generation of Moroccans, as it may have been at the time of independence, unless the terms of modernity are modified to reflect Morocco's concrete social and political circumstances.

The *imam* in Serhane's text has identified the state as the singular obstacle to the people's self-determination, and he preaches the people's power to overcome any force of oppression. This kind of liberationist ideology reminds one of the independence rhetoric of the 1950s, but it comes well after a reconfiguration of the terms of Maghrebian culture. State bureaucracy, greed and archaic social practices which limit individual self-expression are the inimical forces. Both Khaïr-Eddine and Serhane force us to reconsider the assumptions of post-colonial thinking if we are to grasp the importance of their social critique in its contemporary context. Absolute difference and absolutist plurality have failed to hold particular, local forms of repression accountable, nor have they



enabled individuals to rise above the institutions which organize the experience of identity. Post-colonial studies will continually need to be brought into alignment with the diverse and evolving conditions under which its privileged concepts such as identity and difference are employed.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Winifred Woodhull, Khatibi's third compromise takes place on the very level of local politics. Woodhull argues that by reducing cultural debate on difference to a radical difference on the level of the sign, post-structuralism stymies concrete efforts at the self-determination of particular oppressed groups. See *Transfiguration of the Maghreb*.

<sup>2</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains how Islam represents, on the one hand, revealed truth, in itself timeless and unattached to any historical event, as well as a system of beliefs which encompasses all aspects of the historically situated physical and spiritual life of the believer. *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*. (Chicago: Kazi Publications, Inc., 1994). It is of course the question of historically and socially determined aspects of culture which are most perturbing to Islam.

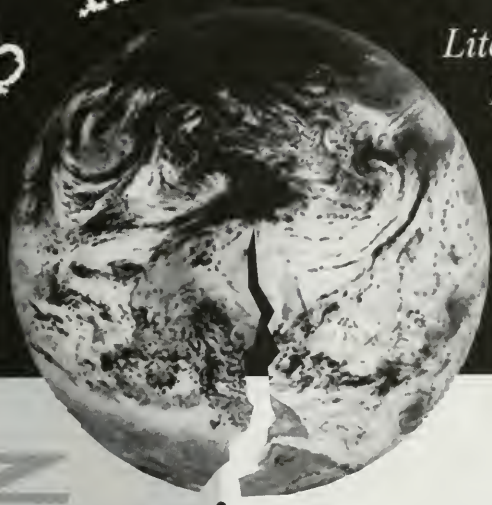
<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the issue of assimilation of cultural transformation in Islamic countries, see Tibi's *Islam and the Cultural Accomodation of Social Change* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

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