

The Star, the Cross, and the Crescent: Religions and Conflicts in Francophone Literature from the Arab World

BY CARINE BOURGET

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In *Against the Postcolonial: Francophone Writers at the Ends of French Empire*, Richard Serrano challenges the francophone studies model, arguing that it “promotes a tiny sliver of literary and cultural production as representative” (6). Carine Bourget’s intent in her text *The Star, the Cross, and the Crescent: Religions and Conflicts in Francophone Literature from the Arab World*, as she states, is to build on Serrano’s critique by examining texts written by francophone writers of the Middle East and North Africa. It is her belief that many francophone writers of the Arab world who were trained in the French secular tradition do not fully understand the Islamic revival taking place in the Muslim world and therefore do not adequately interpret it for their Western audience. Her critical lens is particularly pertinent today in a world in which Islamic fundamentalism has become increasingly violent and acute political/religious problems in the region, such as the Palestine-Israeli conflict, have not been resolved.

Given the fact that throughout the Arab world secular elites often rule over devout, disenfranchised populations, Bourget aptly asks, how have writers from the Arab world represented various conflicts that have been framed in terms of religion (Islam and Christianity), civilization (Islam/Christendom), and imperialism (East/West)? Have the writers brought understanding and nuanced analyses to entangled issues or have they contributed to the simplistic, stereotyped representations of Arabs and their societies that are so prevalent in the West today? Her response is a provocative and interesting study organized thematically around a series of conflicts: the Arab-Israeli conflict (chapters 1 and 2), the Lebanese and Algerian civil wars (chapters 3 and 4), the heated debates surrounding the Muslim headscarf in France (chapter 5), and literary representations of 9/11 in francophone novels from the Arab world (chapter 6).

Bouget’s analysis includes works of fiction, film, comic books, autobiographical narratives, and essays by writers and filmmakers of diverse national backgrounds: Syria (Myriam Antaki), Lebanon (Evelyne Accad, Andrée Chedid, Amin Maalouf), Algeria (Salim Bachi, Slimane Benaïssa, Rachid Boudjedra, Rachid Mimouni), Morocco (Tahar Ben Jelloun, Edmond Amran El Maleh), Tunisia (Abdelwahab Meddeb, Albert Memmi), and France/Algeria (Karin Albou, Yamina Benguigui, Farid Boudjellal, Leïla Sebbar, Hélène Cixous). These writers reflect differing religious backgrounds: Christian (Accad, Antaki, Chedid, Maalouf), Jewish (Albou, Cixous, El Maleh, Memmi), Muslim (Bachi, Benaïssa, Benguigui, Ben Jelloun, Boudjedra, Boudjellal, Meddeb, Mimouni), and secular (Sebbar).

Noting that francophone writers of the Arab world often find themselves in the awkward position of intermediary between their culture and their French readership, she considers this situation exacerbated by the fact that many reside in the West, primarily in France, where they are also published. A selection of writers

living at home and abroad allows her to explore the premise that writers in exile and expatriates risk losing touch with their country of origin and, by writing for a foreign audience, may consciously—or unconsciously—adapt their creative work to that public's expectations. Following this train of thought, she addresses the "politics of translation" (161), arguing that political factors (particularly the events of 9/11), rather than literary merit, often determine the translation, packaging, and reception of the texts. In the critic's view, although turmoil in the Middle East and the events of 9/11 have increased Westerners' interest in the literature of the region, far too many works translated from French to English contribute to perpetuating stereotypical views of Islam and the Arab world rather than destroying them. In this vein, she finds that lesser-known writers frequently give more nuanced representations than established authors. For example, Antaki goes further than Maalouf in challenging Middle Eastern stereotypes; El Maleh is more critical of Israeli policies than Memmi.

Similarly, in her analysis of the Muslim headscarf affair in France, Bourget considers well-known authors Ben Jelloun, Maalouf, Meddeb, and Memmi to be "hard-line secularists" (133) who do not present a balanced view of the issues surrounding the headscarf affair, particularly the intertwined political and religious implications for Muslims in France. As she investigates current controversies surrounding Islam, Bourget calls for objective critical writing that will lead Western readers to understand the dynamics of the Islamic revival in the Arab world rather than summarily condemn the religious movement as intolerant and fanatical.

Nonetheless, readers familiar with events surrounding Algeria's civil war will discover serious omissions in her analysis (chapter 4). On the one hand, she rightly faults Algerian writers Boudjedra and Mimouni for publishing impassioned essays rather than objective analyses with regard to the FIS, the Islamic party whose impending victory in the legislative elections of 1991 was blocked when the Algerian military, in a coup d'état, cancelled the second round of elections, dissolved the FIS, and arrested its leaders. The military's actions sparked the civil war between the Algerian military and Islamists that continued throughout the 1990s, taking a heavy toll on the civilian population. On the other hand, she neglects to discuss the Islamist attacks against francophone Algerian intellectuals, including the assassination of novelist Tahar Djaout in 1993, and the exile of many intellectuals during this period. Islamist violence was also directed against Algerian women who refused to comply with Islamic dress code, i.e., don the veil. It is important to examine the literary production of Algerian women writers who, during *la décennie noire*, the dark decade of the 1990s, defended cultural pluralism and women's rights. These writers (Assia Djebar, Malika Mokeddem, Maïssa Bey, Leïla Marouane, Hafsa Zinaï Koudil, and others) were overtly critical of both the Algerian government and the Islamists for their poor treatment of women. Yet, rather than examine any one of their texts, the critic dismisses them all with a parenthetical remark, "(it would take a book to do them justice)" (90). She then devotes thirteen pages of the chapter to Sebbar's edited anthology, *Une enfance algérienne* [*An Algerian Childhood*], a collection of short autobiographical narratives by writers from diverse backgrounds who had grown up in colonial Algeria. Here, Bourget foregrounds the injustices of the colonial situation, thereby providing insights into later events indirectly, whereas any one of numerous texts of the Algerian women writers who dealt with the conflict directly would have been a far better choice in my view.

In conclusion, Bourget's text, admittedly provocative, is an important addition to francophone literary studies in its range of writers and its willingness to take on complex issues. It sensitizes readers to the importance of engaging in critical analyses that clarify rather than obfuscate thorny political and religious issues, for we readers sorely need texts that grant insight into the various political, cultural, and religious conflicts that plague the Middle East and North Africa today.

WORKS CITED

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African Pasts, Presents, and Futures: Generational Shifts in African Women's Literature, Film, and Internet Discourse

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In this study, Khannous demonstrates how women from Africa have expressed their activism and political commitment in various writings, including digital media, and in films from 1968 to 2011. The vast geographical area and the different levels of activism displayed by women must have made the selection of works challenging. Khannous analyzes works in French, Arabic, and English from seven countries—Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa; acknowledging that she gives "more space to North Africa because of the diversity of its narratives." More precisely, four works represent Morocco; whereas the rest represent each one of the other countries. The short chapter on cyberspace activism is devoted to Moroccan and Tunisian women. The absence of the Swahili and central regions does not go unnoticed, however.

Part 1 highlights the "political interventions" of Assia Djebar in her film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, of Ama Ata Aidoo in her novel *Our Sister Killjoy*, and of Bessie Head in her novel *A Question of Power*. Khannous demonstrates how these three women of the same generation have challenged gender bias and colonial injustice and have underscored post-independence disillusion. Part 2 examines more recent works and focuses on human rights abuses and repressive regimes in Malika Oufkir's memoir *Stolen Lives*, Yvonne Vera's novel *The Stone Virgins*, and Tess Onwueme's play *No Vacancy*. Selecting *Stolen Lives* based

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