



SOUF FLES - NIFAS

A CRITICAL
ANTHOLOGY FROM
THE MOROCCAN
JOURNAL OF CULTURE
AND POLITICS

EDITED BY
OLIVIA C. HARRISON
AND
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GENERATION DRIVE

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Translated by from the Arabic by Maya Boutaghou and Hoda El Shakry

Each generation has its truth, . . . a *Zeitgeist* that tempts the artist above anyone else. It emerges from the changes that occur from time to time, forces that break monotony and renew values and concepts.

For every generation to question its truth is naturally a serious matter. Indeed, the greatest misfortune is for people to live with their comprehension paralyzed and their emotions dulled, having lost the courage that guides them to question and innovate, and the drive to extricate themselves from resignation and imitation.

There is no single voice that represents an entire generation; rather, there is a diversity of voices. Their melodies distinguish themselves to the extent of conflicting and clashing with one another. In fact innovative changes will only be accepted by the segment of the population that benefits from them. The dominant classes in particular would like to maintain the status quo for fear of losing their privileged position. This is a natural state of affairs because it characterizes the essence of historical dialecticism. The value of a generation is determined by its ability to understand and express its individual “truth” or historical trajectory as well as its ability to mobilize social powers to respond objectively to unfolding changes.

With respect to artists, there is another dimension that complicates the choice and the expression of their social views, or their stance on social and humanitarian developments. By this I mean documented art history with respect to the development of art forms, innovative compositions, and the aesthetics of a given era. It is true that art history derives its framework and features from History. In the end, however, art history demands diversity and individuality and calls upon artists not to ignore History but rather to take it into consideration when they create or innovate.

Now where do young Maghrebis writing in Arabic stand in the midst of these reflections? Many factors have created the air our young writers breathe. I do not pretend to probe them in depth but rather to point out the most prominent points. I think that the influence of the intellectual movement of the Arab East on our national movement can in no way be denied. One of the consequences of this interaction is that before

independence Maghrebi writers knew the poems of Mahmoud Sami al-Baroudi, Ahmed Shawqi, and Hafez Ibrahim by heart. They were urged to weave according to these patterns in order to reinforce political, social, and religious concerns that shaped the national movement of that time. The same holds true for our plays and short stories (under the influence of Youssef Wahbi, Mahmud Taymur, Jurji Zaydan . . .).

Now is not the time to debate and reevaluate this phenomenon. I am however interested in investigating whether this literary influence of the Arab East continues to exert itself on our young writers.

I have absolutely no doubt that it does and it is an influence that sometimes borders on imitation. However, contemporary Maghrebi literature no longer derives its forms solely from the East; it is also in the process of building ties with the West. It has diversified its cultural influences and intellectual palate. This is how we have on the one hand the imprint of Naguib Mahfouz, Youssef Idriss, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Salah Abdel Sabour, Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati, Mustafa Mahmud, etc., . . . and on the other, echoes of the philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Karl Marx, Maxim Gorki, Eugène Ionesco . . .

Is this to be expected? Possibly.

What is not normal, however, is for this situation to persist endlessly: the East imitates the West, while we imitate the East. Meanwhile, the West “discovers” our folklore and spirituality, while we are attracted to their reflection but leave behind the originals [*asala*]. And what is the result? A “hybrid” literature [*adab khalit*] that has lost its national grounding and historical authenticity.

In reality it can be said that the political and social philosophies of the past ten years or so emerged from the necessary task of searching for national origins. After political independence, it was natural for this new generation to sense the vast vacuum surrounding them, as well as the deep sediment resulting from the meeting of two cultures, and the confrontation of two epistemologies and ethics. It is impossible to return to precolonial times; yet it is futile and unproductive to continue acquiring the customs and traditions of the West just as we accumulate machines and technological tools. Where then is this “safe road” that can guide us without leading us astray?

Without a doubt the first step is to change and establish material foundations as a necessary precondition for all attempts to eliminate under-

development. What we fear, however, and what frightens many people is that these changes will be limited to the infrastructure without affecting the surface, allowing intermingling, confusion, accumulation, and “modernization” to continue without comprehension or assimilation.

Insofar as literature is a form of expression that transcends collective and individual realities, it must act to eliminate, through its own means and norms, signs of underdevelopment and stagnation. We must also open the door to popular forces in order to expose them, through literature, to the experience of the contemporary world.

In the Maghreb we too have witnessed heated controversies with respect to defining the role of literature in an underdeveloped society, the terms for actualizing cultural authenticity as well as the justifications for and dimensions of political commitment among artists (particularly between 1962 and 1965). We are faced with the task of examining the value of our literary production. Is the reason for its stagnation the absence of publication venues? Or are the reasons deeper than this? Do they reside rather in the content and forms made available to artists in this transitional period, ridden with both anxiety and productivity?

The goal is not innovation for the sake of newness, or to reach an avant-garde aesthetics by the easiest means (such as adapting foreign and Western artistic forms). The problem at hand is to see literature, and the arts in general, become one of the tools that will form the society that we aspire to become. Societal innovation is fundamentally a response to biological, psychological, and human needs. The dream of creation has been behind every leap forward and innovation. Every time a generation fulfills its dreams and potential, the air is full of youthful energy, overflowing with dreams and secrets capable of transforming the unreal into reality.

It appears that the end of the period of “fermentation” and its effects on Arabic literature have given rise to ideal conditions for a re-examination of the forms and content of our creative gifts. It is natural not to want to build in a void. Indeed, all experiences are foremost our heritage, worthy of study and attention. We must strive both to acquire mastery of Western concepts and conserve the foundations of our past and of our elites. The obstacles before us do not limit the realm of possibilities in this domain. But often obstacles emerge from within our-

selves, and we must make choices with an equal measure of courage, perseverance, and defiance.

What is the value of the Arabic writings published in the journal *Souffles*?

It is difficult for me to judge them, because their authors are in a critical period of their development and formation. In addition, artistic achievement differs from one writer to another. These then are indicators showing the path rather than signposts determining their direction. What attracts our attention in the writings of these young Maghrebi writers is that, despite their diverse voices and forms, they agree on one point: things are not for the best. This is an advantage in my opinion because our new literature is borne out of embracing the problems of the people. It is as if these young voices reply with the tongue of Ahmad Mejjati:

“When will generation drive drum to its own beat?”