

Introduction

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A little bit of background

Literature of the Maghreb

It is, perhaps, unusual to find a discussion of a multilingual body of literature that does not divide the literature linguistically: Francophone, Arabic and Tamazight (Berber) in the case of the Maghreb. Yet this is precisely the approach we have chosen to take in organizing this list, and to us it seems a very logical choice-perhaps the only one that really makes sense.

Too much discussion of Maghrebi literature uses the discourse of binary oppositions: Islamic/Christian, colonial/native and the one most relevant here, French/Arabic. But the linguistic scene in the Maghreb is much more complex than this simple dichotomy would suggest. To begin with, it leaves out Tamazight, the language that predates both French and Arabic and which is still in usage. It also leaves out Spanish, which is still widely used in the North of Morocco, for example. It also doesn't account for dialects: Dialectal Arabic v. Standard and the dialects of Tamazight.

Moreover, the classification of writers linguistically is nearly impossible. There are a handful of writers who are equally comfortable writing in different languages and who have done so. Take Rachid Boudjedra, for example. It would be difficult to say with certainty whether he originally wrote his novels in French or Arabic, since he is often his own translator. Abdelfattha Kilito, Hedi Beraoui and Ali Siddiqi Azeyku are three other figures who have published in more than one language.

Others prominent writers who are comfortable writing in only one language--many of those who were educated in French schools during the colonial period, for example--nonetheless have expressed the sense that they are translating their mother tongue--that is to say quite literally the language in which their mother communicates with them--into another language, most often French. Abdelkebir Khatibi and Assia Djebar are two who have expressed this sentiment.

Then there are writers who, by virtue of their education, are only comfortable writing in French, but who resent having to write in the language of the colonizer. These writers made a conscious effort to infuse their language with Arabic or Tamazight (Berber) words and figures of speech. Abdelwahab Meddeb expressed this with the metaphor of the old medina: (insert quotation).

At least one writer, Mohamed Khair-eddine, has expressed the sentiment that he is as comfortable writing in Arabic for French, but since his mother language, Tamazight, is forbidden to him, he chooses to write in French so as to avoid the danger of being assimilated. A North African that writes in Arabic is effectively Arabized, but a North African writing in French remains and outsider. Writing in French, then is a method of guarding ones individuality. And we could go on.

A Maghrebi writer is obliged to confront the question of language very early, and often their literary production serves as a the field on whcih the confrontation takes place. Tamazight is the indigenous language, but Arabic arrived more than a millenium ago and is deeply rooted, both in its dialectal and more standard written form. French, too, has become extremely important since the colonial era began in Algeria in 1830.

All of these languages and their dialects inform one another, jostling competing, permeating one another. Hence we do not divide them according to the language they write.

Of course the legacy of colonization and the horrors of the anti-colonial struggle are another theme, particularly in Algeria where the struggle was especially long, bitter and bloody. This was a theme in the writing of some of the earliest novels and poems by Mohamed Dib, Tahar Ouettar and Driss Chaibi and it remains a topic of interest even today in the fiction of contemporary writers. Often, however, newer writers are reassessing the normative history of the anti-colonial struggle as it has been taught to them in schools. Assia Debar and Leila Abouzeid, for example, seeks to highlight in fiction the role played by women in the war whereas others such as Tahar Djaout sought to interrogate narrative that center the role of the elite who would rule Algeria in the post-colonial era.

A substantial body of literature addresses the ills of the post colonial nations of the Maghreb, attacking the authoritarian leaders of their states, either directly or allegorically. Writers such as Abdelhak Serhane and Leila Sebbar use their fiction to denounce and demonstrate the effects of of patriarchal family structures. The role of religion in society and the dangers of radical Islamists have been explored by nearly every writer who continued writing during the terrible civil conflict that began in 1993 in Algeria, and the build up to it: Rachid Mimmouni, Abdelkader Djemai, Leila Marouane, Tahar Djaout, Malika Mokaddem and Aissa Khelladi to name just a few. There are many other themes that could be listed here.

It should be noted, however, that the topics explored by North African writers are by no means unique to them. Maghrebi writers have explored nearly ever topic that has interested modern writers of any culture, and they have done so with all the styles of writing available to the 20th century writer, including a few that are unique to the Maghreb that are reflective of the region's cultural traditions. The narration may be linear or non-linear, omniscient or first-person, literal or allegorical... The style may be prosaic or lyrical, reflective of oral tradition or highly erudite and literary, etc.

Unfortunately, North African literature remains virtually unknown to most of the English-speaking public. Surprisingly little of it has been translated into English, even though it is, in our opinion, among the most interesting bodies of literature in the contemporary world. Where translations exist that we are aware of, we have signaled that, but it is also our hope that this site will help stimulate an interest in the literature and hence in its translation into English.