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Islam and Postcolonial Narrative

John Erickson examines four major authors from the “Third World” – Assia Djebar, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Salman Rushdie – all of whom have engaged in a critique of the relationship between Islam and the West. Erickson analyses the narrative strategies they deploy to explore the encounter between Western and Islamic values and reveals their use of the cultural resources of Islam, as well as their intertextual exchanges with other “Third World” writers. Erickson argues against any homogenizing mode of writing labeled “postcolonial” and any view of Islamic and Western discourses as monolithic or totalizing. He reveals the way these writers valorize expansiveness, polyvalence, and indeterminacy as part of an attempt to represent the views of individuals and groups that live on the cultural and political margins of society.

JOHN ERICKSON is Professor of French and Francophone Studies at the University of Kentucky. He is founder and editor of *L'Esprit Créateur*. He has co-edited three volumes of critical essays and published two books: *Nommo: African fiction in French*, and *Dada: Performance, poetry, and art*. He has published numerous essays on comparative literature, modern European literature, and “Third World” writing.

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To SUZANNE

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Preface

This book looks at oppositional narratives of four contemporary Muslim authors writing in languages of European provenance. In the study of these narratives I endeavor to bring out their specificity and divergences that inveigh against our seeing the authors as each setting out to do the same thing in the same way. I am interested rather in the commonality of their aims, which emerges in their categorical rejection of the hegemonic and totalizing forces of institutionalized thinking that impinge on human individuals and minorities who deviate from the well worn paths of conformity.

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In terms of narrative, I am particularly interested in the ways these authors have each set about to fashion a specific, localized idiom, while under the ideological shadow of the dominant discursive structures of their respective societies. Though invariably their writing is marked by a dissenting, contestatory mode, it is marked as strongly by the rich profusion of beliefs and practices of the Islamic and Greco-Roman–Christian traditions and the diverse secular ideas and customs upon which they have drawn. I find it as important to see how they have used these riches as to look at how they have expressed their divergences.

Of the authors I study, three write in French and come from the North African littoral: Abdelkebir Khatibi and Tahar Ben Jelloun from Morocco and Assia Djebar from Algeria. The fourth author, Salman Rushdie, comes from the Indian continent and writes in English. I shall on occasion speak of the writings of these authors as postcolonial, but the individualized character of their writings prevails against any misguided attempt to enclose them within an undifferentiated grouping or system of reference.

Postcolonial is a useful term to apply to writing only insofar as it refers

to writers emerging from varied cultures and circumstances, who have experienced analogous structures of domination imposed in the past by colonizing powers and shaped in the present by those same or other external powers, or by indigenous (neo-colonist) powers. The writers I call postcolonial seek, each in her or his own way, a space of writing that sets itself apart from those structures of power.

Many onlookers have regarded such writers as writing on the periphery, but their voices are more and more being heard. We can ascertain the efficacy of what they say as much by the often brutal attempts to suppress them, whether in Algeria or East Timor, as by the growing awareness of readers that they speak to some of the most important issues of our time – having to do, above all, with the relation between human individuals and minority groups and the societies that govern them.

I write out of the conviction that these voices, coming from elsewhere than that place where most of my readers and I are situated, say profoundly important things to us if we are willing to listen. Much of the most significant writing of our time comes from beyond the often arbitrary discursive boundaries set by the dominant political–social powers in Europe, on the North American continent, or in other regions of the world. What Roland Barthes has said of the Moroccan Abdelkebir Khatibi – that identity in his writing is of such a pure metal that it comes to be read as difference – applies to all of the writers I choose to look at. Their difference, or differences, for they address us through distinctly different timbres, have much to say to us about our own differences. For we are all located elsewhere with relation to others.

Critically, my own approach leans heavily on authors and commentators conversant from birth with the Islamic faith and the forms it has variously taken in far-flung areas of the world, as well as on other authors and commentators from so-called Third World regions who have undergone first-hand experience of colonialism or of the hegemonic structures it has left in place in numerous countries that have gained nominal independence. Many of my sources are thus “foreign” to the European or North American readers but “indigenous” to the subject at hand, that is, to the condition of postcoloniality wherever it might be found. All translations are mine when no source is given. In several instances I have modified the translation to convey nuances I felt had to be brought out.

I wish to give special thanks to Ross Chambers and Laurence Porter for their exceedingly helpful suggestions in regard to early versions of the present work; to Jean-François Lyotard for his encouraging reading of my

manuscript as well as his enriching and ever-expanding thought that has over the years inspired me to conceptualize the world differently; and to Assia Djebar and Abdelkebir Khatibi for sharing ideas with me that have left their important mark on the formulation of my work. Several other persons, who have read parts of this study or my essays, have also left their imprint in some shape or form on my thinking. In some instances, these persons have contributed unknowingly to what has gone into the present book. Among them, I wish to mention in particular R. Lane Kauffmann, Hussam Al-Khateeb, Edouard Glissant, Françoise Douay-Soublin, Lilyan Kesteloot, and Evelyne Accad. I hasten to add, however, that their ideas have sometimes grown unrecognizable owing to my idiosyncratic adaptation of them. Additionally, my close collaboration as general editor with guest editors of special issues of *L'Esprit Créateur* devoted to postcolonial topics has opened up to me many valued avenues of discursive exchange. Among those guest editors are Eric Sellin, Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, and Ali Behdad. Particular thanks go to anonymous readers whose wonderfully perceptive and constructive readings of an earlier version of this book have helped me to straighten out many inconsistencies, focus my subject much more effectively, and deal more discerningly with its many complexities.

Last of all, I want to express heartfelt apologies to my Abyssinian Trotsky, who often, after keeping patient vigil over his empty bowl while I tussled with ideas, felt called upon to sprawl over the manuscript pages on my desk. He slowed me down on occasion but gave measure to overly concentrated thought by restoring me to the needs of my less prosaic if no more real surroundings.

My work was supported in part by research grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and Louisiana State University. I was also able to pursue essential research and engage in a valuable exchange of ideas as NEH Visiting Scholar in Residence at the University of Minnesota, Morris; as Visiting Favrot Chair at Rice University and participant in the wonderfully stimulating Rice Circle; and as resident lecturer in the Centre des Etudes Francophones at the Université de Paris IV–Sorbonne during the spring of 1993.

Some chapters of this book have drawn on material, revised and expanded, from certain of my essays published in literary reviews and as chapters in edited collections. I wish to thank the following publishers for permission to use this material:

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- “*Metoiikoi* and Magical Realism in the Maghrebian Narratives of Tahar Ben Jelloun and Abdelkebir Khatibi,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Copyright © 1995, Duke University Press.
- “Women’s Space and Enabling Dialogue in Assia Djébar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia*,” in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*. Eds. Mary Jean Green, et al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Copyright © 1996 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota.

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- (August–September, 1975); and “Fugitive, et ne le sachant pas,” in *L’Esprit Créateur* (Summer 1993).
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- Readers International for Abdellatif Laâbi, *Rue de retour*. Trans. Jacqueline Kaye (1989).
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