BOOK REVIEW


"Ifrikya ma pensée" (Ifriqiya — My Thought), this title bears a deceptive resemblance to “Hiroshima mon amour” (Hiroshima - My Love), name of a well known novel and film. The most ancient evidence for the name Africa (in Arabic Ḩifqiyah) we find with the Romans who used it for what is nowadays Tunisia. It is from there that this little book of French verses comes, written by a promising Muslim poet: Ridha Zili. The work is significant not only for its genuine reflection of the spirit of the young, bilingual Tunisia, but also for the study of René R. Khawam which precedes it in form of an introduction entitled The State of the French written Maghribi Literature (“Situation de la littérature maghrébine d’expression française). By Maghribi is of course meant North-Africa West of Libya. René Khawam is the author of several books on Arab culture and literature on account of which he is regarded as an outstanding specialist in this field. His study serves both as an introduction to the poetic work of Ridha Zili and to the panorama of Maghribi literateurs who write in French. He eulogizes the Arabic language by ascribing Zili’s originality to his fidelity to the Arab tradition of art. He dilates on the attachment to all that is human and universal as a characteristic of Arab artistic creation and views Zili’s verses against the background of Arab poetry and Muslim culture so profusely that one is almost made to forget that this is after all a collection of French verses. His introduction begins with the declaration of faith that “today Arabic literature is experiencing a new upsurge throughout North-Africa and every man of letters ought to rejoice over it.” Behind all these compliments, however, one is prone to detect a subtle pleading for the continued use of French by Arab writers at a time when their own language is re-emerging. To justify this coexistence Khawam seeks the support of the Prophet who is reported to have said: “Seek knowledge even if this takes you as far as to (sic) India.” This latest version of the famous Ḥadīth ʿishab al-ʿilm wa law kāna bi-ṣin marsh the reputation of the author as a specialist of Arab culture. Moreover, his reference to the “beautiful golden age of the ‘Abbasis” when literary creation was not confined to Arabic alone but was equally carried out in Persian, reveals a state of mind alarmed by the strides Arabic is making on its march to replace French, especially in the neighbouring Algeria. He is expected to be well acquainted with the shuʿāʿīya movement and all its implications but, nevertheless, he projects the Caliph al-Maʿmūn as the example of “a comprehensive hospitality to the writer in Arab lands, a respectable tradition which could offer a positive solution to the problem.”

The Maghribi writers’ amazing ability for poetic expression in French, and their “instinctive tenderness” in handling this language are traced back to “a very simple reason”. This reason, however, smacks a bit of distortion for Khawam holds that during the European Middle Ages French has been open to influences of Arabic more than any other language. French has received so many ferments from Arabic and it “allowed those ferments to act with utmost liberty so as to work for its own cultural maturity.” He refers in particular to the court poetry of the troubadours. Here the initiated reader
fails to see the extent to which French has been more influenced by the Arabs than Spanish, Italian, English or even German.

The eulogy of President Bourguiba seems somewhat superfluous, although one may concede that it remains within the context of introducing cultural trends in modern Tunisia. Tunisia’s self-definition is given, by courtesy of the Arabic magazine Al-Fikr, as an open country that “welcomes and absorbs all foreign cultural values, especially those of the Mediterranean world.” This Khawam calls “a natural reaction in a milieu true to Arab and Muslim traditions.” Next to Bourguiba he dedicates three pages of praise to the Jew Albert Memmi, as another important French author from Tunisia. The third on the list is Ridha Zili.

Zili was born in Monastir in 1942. He is photographer by profession and is attached to the Secretariat of Cultural Affairs, Government of Tunisia. The photographer’s love for the image may be rightly said to be the conspicuous element or rather the new dimension in his verses. With the clarity of the poet’s vision and this new dimension, the image acquires mobility, abandons its static condition and becomes all dynamism, a whirling ball in the sky of imagination. This new character imposed on the object of poetic vision opens up new vistas to Arab literature. It is a corollary of the photographer and cameraman’s technique. The image is treated in such a manner that it expresses new meanings and integrates into a moving world. In his capacity as someone who puts something into motion the poet’s function is doubled and his magic power is multiplied ad infinitum, especially in the perspective of Arab poetry where the image possesses such great importance and preponderance, more often than not even to the exclusion of the idea. Undoubtedly the initiative of Ridha Zili is bound to provoke a remarkable re-orientation in Maghribi poetry, be it of Arabic or French language. Besides this, his poetry betrays some other qualities: force and, simultaneously, a delicate and subtle tenderness, amplitude of vision and propriety, the abandon to an image which pursues a trajectory that almost causes giddiness, but at the same time an instinctive control which keeps the poet within the boundaries of humanity.

The thought of this spokesman of a Muslim community is pregnant with the fulfilling prospects of a talent that exercises self-restraint and calmly weighs the risks to be taken and the limits that should not be crossed. Whether his poems contain any message to the toiling masses, a message that transcends the borders of his native Ifriqiya, is, however, as questionable as official Tunisia’s claim to social-democracy. René Khawam makes this even more evident, for his bombastic interpretation rather fumbles when he speaks of “the young image of that Tunisia with the astounding destiny which refuses to participate in incoherent adventures but offers to Africa as a whole the fertile promises of its experience which is new and, at the same time, as old as this world.” This sounds almost like the praises of Mexico’s stability so often heard from American authors who feel so gratified that the Mexicans have never thought of exporting their revolution to other countries of Latin America as they are content with having set up a model that could be emulated by anyone who wishes to do so. When Khawam talks about the Tunisian experience as if it were a social revolution he forgets that this is merely the claim of an oligarchy the liquidation of which is the prerequisite of any effective transformation of traditional society.

By belittling such statements we certainly do not wish to say that Zili’s verses are devoid of meaningfulness. The armed struggle for liberation in Tunisia was carried out
mainly by the, then ill-famed, fellaghas. This word stands originally for peasant, but it acquired the meaning of guerilla fighter in French. It is heartening to note that their heroic struggle was not made to fall into oblivion by the bourgeoisie that came to power with independence. For Zili the fellaghas are at least souvenirs:

The peasant suffers to die
to conquer hunger
he searches a jellaba
for his body
searches sandals
for his feet
Nothing exists for him
neither on the earth
nor on the moon
he sleeps at the feet of a sand-dune
under the sun
in the rain
the sky is his cover
the earth is his bed
miserable peasant ...
our Lords
our masters
who laugh at your sobs
He who laughs last shall laugh best......
Peasants martyrs yesterday
Heroes of the after-life
from Adam right till eternity
your names are in our hearts
engraved
Dead yesterday alive today
they are in our arms which embrace them
to our hearts which beat
in the shadows that follow us
in the clarity that illumines us
They are
wherever we love.

Ridha Zili wrote also a poem *L'Homme Resiste* with the significant date Bizerte, 1961. (Bizerta, a French naval base even after independence, was the scene of bloody clashes between the colonialist troops and Muslim freedom marchers who suffered a heavy death toll.) In 1971 the context might have changed but the spirit of sacrifice demanded of the freedom fighters of Tunisia is a constant factor:

Man resists
There is no liberty
without a pool of stagnant blood
Nothing can stifle a people
when it reflects the coming morn ......
It marches in the bleak streets
it marches towards its cherished goal
tongue bloodless
throat dry
Man resists

Thus it is certainly doubtful whether Zili's subdued violence-distilled, analysed, and purified as it seems — can be held against the violent outcry of the Algerian poets, as Khawam does. Especially in the poem *Vieux Volcan* the "literary volcanism" so typical of Algerians like Al-Muhib 'Amrūsh (Al-Mouhibb Amrouche) is manifest in every verse. This poem is dedicated to the martyr Farhat Hached, a Tunisian trade union leader who was assassinated by the terrorist organisation of the European settlers shortly before independence. Another similarity between Zili and the Algerian writers is the *sun esthetics*, a term used first in regard to the works of Algeria-born Albert Camus. Here sun does not stand for the Mediterranean's notorious *farniente* ("doing nothing", leisureliness), it is neither hedonism nor a glaring blending of colours, but rigour, courage, virility, and the casting away of one's outerwear.

Ridha Zili's "Ifrikya ma pensée", although not of the calibre of the "Misères et Lumières" (*Miseries and Lights*) by the Moroccan philosopher M. 'Aziz Laḥbābi (translated into ten languages), is certainly a book of verses that commands attention and deserves translation. Experimental attempts of the Muslim world towards closer unity are bound to fail as long as the various nations remain virtually ignorant of each others' cultures and actual sentiments. Therefore, students of French in Pakistan ought to take equal interest in the Maghribi poets as they take in Charles Baudelaire and Victor Hugo.

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