
H-France Review Vol. 22 (September 2022), No. 156

Tristan Leperlier, *Algérie: les écrivains dans la décennie noire*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 2018. 344 pp. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 9-78-2271120755.

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The “décennie noire,” as it has become known in Algeria, was a period of political unrest and violence that erupted during the years following the popular uprising of October 1988 and the subsequent liberalisation of electoral politics in Algeria under then-president Chadli Benjedid. After the unexpected success of the Islamist party, the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS), in the first round of elections in December 1991, the Algerian army cancelled the second round of voting due to take place in January 1992 and the president was forced to resign. A transitional body led by senior generals in the Algerian army attempted to fill the power vacuum at the top of the Algerian State, appointing one of the founding members of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), Mohamed Boudiaf, as Algeria’s president. Just six months later, Boudiaf was assassinated by one of his bodyguards during a speech he was giving in the Algerian city of Annaba. Ordinary Algerians had invested great hope in Boudiaf’s ability to resolve the political crisis that had paralysed the Algerian State, but that hope was quickly extinguished when he was killed. Boudiaf’s murder was a turning point. After 1992, the violence began to escalate, with estimates of people killed throughout the decade reaching 200,000.[1] Many victims of the violence were ordinary Algerians, but Algerian journalists, intellectuals, and writers were also specifically targeted by the armed groups that were involved in many of the killings after 1992. One of the first to be assassinated was Tahar Djaout, a talented young writer and journalist who would, in Leperlier’s words, become both “martyr” and “symbol” of the decade of violence to follow (p. 13).

This conflict that engulfed Algeria during the 1990s has been told and retold through the varied lenses of journalism, literature, the visual arts, memoir, the political and social sciences, literary and cultural criticism, and history. And such a diverse tapestry of telling the war demonstrates a repeated desire to come to understand a period of violence that was and remains extremely opaque. In his recent book, *A History of Algeria*, James McDougall names the conflict as one where any attempt to tell it would result in falling into one the many existing “competing narratives” of the war.[2] And, as Walid Benkhaled and Natalya Vince contend in the afterword to another important recent study of contemporary Algerian culture and politics, edited by Patrick Crowley, such competing narratives have often been characterised in the academic literature as a series of “mutually exclusive” versions of Algerian identity, understood as a set of binary oppositions between, on a broad level, the “system” and the “people,” and, more specifically, the distinct categories of Arabic speakers vs. French speakers; Berbers vs. Arabs; Islamism vs. secularism; and conservatism vs. progressivism.[3] While much of this oppositional discourse remains

dominant among many artists, writers, journalists, and in some of the academic literature, recent years have seen several scholars challenge these simplistic accounts and analyse the ideological bases of these assumptions about the construction of Algerian identity as it has emerged in the wake of the 1990s conflict.

Tristan Leperlier's book, *Algérie: les écrivains dans la décennie noire*, focuses specifically on the role played by writers and literature during this contested period of political crisis and subsequent violence of the 1990s in Algeria. It offers a detailed and forensic account of the ways various competing narratives and categorisations of writing and of writers came to construct particular visions and ideas of the crisis years both within and outside Algeria. In so doing, Leperlier clearly demonstrates how the perceived identity conflicts of the present are rooted in a complex recent past that has too often been told through the lens of literary and cultural studies and whose sociological undercurrents have been neglected. One of the core objectives of the book is to address this lacuna by deploying the sociological lens of the "champ littéraire" (pioneered by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu) to better understand how a proliferation of texts that were published during the 1990s responded to the several moments of crisis during these years. In parallel, the book sets out to show how, by combining approaches from literary criticism and the social sciences, we can come to a fuller understanding of the role of the writer in terms of both text and society--what Leperlier calls "l'écrivain dans sa totalité" (p. 28).

The four main chapters move from a focus on the political crisis of October 1988 (what some see as the starting point of the war) to an examination of the various ways the conflict placed writers into different positions in the *champ littéraire* --what Leperlier calls a "bipolarisation" of writers (p. 34). In the second half of the book, Leperlier examines the influence of a more globalised literary field among those writers who moved to France and the role played in the crisis years of a so-called "testimonial" literature, which emerged principally among French publishers during the 1990s. The chapters offer detailed and comprehensive accounts of this difficult period of Algerian history, as well as the complex relations between literature, culture, and politics during this time. In the summaries I offer below, I try to capture the main thrust of Leperlier's argument and how this is illustrated by some of the many examples he gives throughout the book.

Chapter one explores how the *champ littéraire* was constituted during the early years of the crisis by the figure of the intellectual who moved from relative silence to a place of increasing opposition when it came to the one-party Algerian State and their electoral opponents in the FIS. Leperlier outlines how it was principally journalists who led the opposition to the political regime in the wake of the protests of October 1988, with many established writers remaining silent or vocally supporting the one-party FLN State (p. 45). What Leperlier calls the "repolitisation" of writers (p. 70) began to take place during the period after October 1988 and coincided with the emergence of a small group of private-sector publishers operating outside the State-controlled publishing market, even if much of the political debate writers engaged in was published in Algerian newspapers. In this sense, literature was politicised as the result of the positions taken up by writers in the public domain, with the majority ending up aligning themselves with the State as the prospect of Islamists gaining power in early 1992 became a reality. However, Leperlier reveals a common misconception here: as reductive binary oppositions began to enter public discourse, commentators (particularly those in France) failed to see the complexities of the situation for Algerian writers on the ground. While writers supported the interruption of the elections by the army in 1992, this did not mean they supported the State politically. Indeed,

many writers maintained their opposition to the one-party State while at the same time opposing the electoral alternative offered by the FIS.

This focus on how writers were represented, and the way these representations impacted how the events of the 1990s ended up being understood, emerges clearly throughout the first chapter and the book as a whole. Chapter two continues the theme by examining the foundational oppositions that came to characterise the conflict, and how these oppositions were linked to various different groups of writers working throughout the crisis years. The main focus of the chapter is around how the Algerian conflict came to be known and understood by critics as a “*guerre des langues*,” opposing French and Arabic speakers in such a way that the former became the so-called language of the “progressives” and the latter that of the “oppressors” as embodied by the Islamist party of the FIS (pp. 105, 143). As the former colonial language, French had been a highly contested ground for many years—occupying debates around which language writers published in, even if they had been educated under French colonial rule. Meanwhile, the Arabic language was becoming increasingly linked with those writers such as Tahar Ouettar who were more sympathetic to the Islamist movement and openly hostile to the use of French in Algeria. Challenging critics who have used such linguistic oppositions to explain the political divisions of the 1990s, Leperlier demonstrates how such opposition emerged principally as a result of the positions of a minority of well-known writers in the literary field at the time of the political crisis of 1991/92. As an early sympathiser with the Islamist movement and an Arabophone writer, Ouettar was placed in firm opposition to writers such as Rachid Boudjedra who were, at the time, writing in French and attacking the Islamist movement. The point Leperlier makes is that it was the literary trajectory of these writers and their position within what had become a highly politicised literary field that determined their polarised identities and a perceived division based on language, which was then extrapolated to all writers. This resulted in a self-fulfilling prophecy when it came to outside perceptions of the Algerian conflict whereby warring factions within the literary field came to be understood (wrongly) as representative of a war against culture generally.

Chapter three shifts the perspective to those writers who left Algeria during the crisis years of the early 1990s and who published their work in the former colonial metropole of France. According to Leperlier, 40 percent of Algerian writers lived outside Algeria during the 1990s, with a third of Algerian writers residing in France. While writers such as Assia Djébar had resisted becoming seen as a spokesperson for the subaltern, the 1990s presented a challenge to journalists and social and political scientists who were not able to travel to Algeria, nor understand the complexities of the conflict from the outside. In this context, Algerian writers and the literature they produced in exile was understood through a testimonial lens. Such writers (in particular women writers) became spokespeople for Algerians experiencing the conflict first hand. While cognisant of the impact of a particular form of testimonial writing on a reductive understanding of the crisis abroad, Leperlier seeks to break down testimonial writing into three core categories of “attestation,” “evocation,” and “interrogation” which reveal a diversity of testimonial forms existing during the period (p. 197). As with his earlier unpicking of the language question, Leperlier reveals how writers, and in particular their literary interventions, both reinforce and challenge received ideas around the conflict. Moreover, Leperlier demonstrates how market factors play a significant role in which writers get recognised and how decisions by more prominent publishers were informed by the kind of aesthetic writers deployed in their work. In the case of the 1990s, there was a clear oversimplification not just of the range of writers producing literature, but of the scale of aesthetic experimentation they employed. In

other words, the violence of the 1990s obscured what Algerian literature was and its capacity to mediate in a more nuanced way such things as history, conflict, and culture.

In chapter four, Leperlier continues his analysis of writing published in France by exploring the tension between the independence of writers and the constraints of the marketplace. The emphasis here is on the role of French publishing, and the so-called “horizon d’attente” of French readers, determining the kinds of literary writing produced by Algerian writers (p. 243). While the context of the collapse of Algerian publishing during the 1990s in Algeria meant a move away from the national, French and international publishers would nevertheless seek to capitalise on a certain “etiquette” of the national as Algerian literature became re-exoticized for its focus on the civil war of the 1990s (p. 244). Leperlier provides clear examples of what Graham Huggan called the “postcolonial exotic” in action as publishers negotiated with Algerian women writers in particular in order to engineer more saleable images of Algeria, for instance privileging the idea of the “heroic woman” overcoming the odds of a regressive Islamist violence (p. 275).^[4] Other examples include publishers refusing manuscripts for being “trop poétique” and for failing to show “la réalité sanglante” of the 1990s (p. 278). An apparent exception to this dominant trend in publishing was the literary journal *Algérie Littérature/Action*, which for a period published whole novels within its issues. However, Leperlier’s close readings of the editorials nevertheless reveal a certain ideological stance associated with the anti-Islamist left, as well as a tendency to see literature as a way of understanding the crisis in Algeria (p. 282). This goes to explain to some extent the association between the journal and so-called “testimonial literature” of the 1990s, however, as Leperlier rightly states, this journal in many ways succeeded in providing writers the independence they were unable to access through other French publishers. In the final parts of chapter four, Leperlier explains the steady reestablishment of the independent publishing sector in Algeria (and the foundation of new avant-garde publishers such as El-Ikhtilef and Barzakh) as part of a wider geopolitical realignment at the end of the 1990s. With the election of president Abdelaziz Bouteflika and new foreign policy agenda directed towards France, cultural initiatives such as the Année de l’Algérie en France became central to the rebuilding of a French language publishing infrastructure in Algeria that, while funded in part with French money, was no longer constrained by the demands of the French literary marketplace (p. 305).

Running throughout this book is an underlying stress on the inseparability of France and Algeria, embodied in the at times fraught cultural and political relationship they maintain. In straddling sociology and literary criticism, Leperlier is able to get beyond those “mutually exclusive” identity types cautioned against by Benkhaled and Vince. By digging into the complexities of the social and political dynamics of the period, and how these elements came to constitute literary production during the 1990s, Leperlier takes a materialist approach that allows him to clearly situate the literary text in the context of its publication, circulation, and reception. At the same time, the book demonstrates how the political and ideological stances of writers generate a series of self-fulfilling perceptions of crisis that are ultimately rooted in the positions writers occupy within the literary field.

One of the potential drawbacks of this approach is that the role played by the form and style of literary texts is often only briefly touched upon. There is, for instance, little attention paid to how writers self-reflexively interrogate accounts of how their work sits within the literary field—what the literary critic Lia Brozgal has claimed is “a mainstay of the North African novel for as long as it has existed in French.”^[5] In addition, some scholars have criticised the use of Bourdieu’s framework of the *champ littéraire* because of its tendency to predetermine a sociological

framework that fails to account for the fact that texts “are endlessly *re-produced*, endlessly remade with different political consequences and effects.”[6]

However, as Benkhaled and Vince make clear in their work, more literary scholarship is not necessarily what is needed here. If Leperlier’s study lacks in its focus on form and style, this is because the book is explicitly about not reproducing the literary approaches that have interpreted this period of history in sometimes reductive ways. The comprehensive range of sources gathered for the overall study (more than 2,000 literary works by more than 1,000 authors and more than 50 personal interviews conducted with Algerian writers) clearly demonstrates the sociological roots of this study, and this level of sociological detail adds to the book’s capacity to reveal how overly simplistic identity-based categories produce a skewed vision of social and political reality. Leperlier’s examination of the roots of the oppositional representations of war in wider “culturalist” narratives that were widespread during this time has broad implications for the ways academic critics, and particularly social and political scientists, have hastily classified post-Cold War conflicts along the lines of a so-called “clash of civilizations” (p. 328). Moreover, Leperlier is surely right to caution against the tendency of literary scholars to give an overly celebratory account of writers at a time of conflict.

Leperlier’s book is necessary reading for researchers from across the disciplines working on the “*décennie noire*” or seeking to understand the social and political stakes of contemporary postcolonial writing in Algeria. It is a resource one can dip into, with its clearly demarcated subsections offering easy access to the different parts of the four main chapters and the detailed and nuanced accounts they provide of this contested period.

NOTES

[1] Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* (London/New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. xiv.

[2] James McDougall, *A History of Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 292.

[3] Walid Benkhaled and Natalya Vince, “Performing Algerianness: The National and Transnational Construction of Algeria’s ‘Culture Wars,’” in *Algeria: Nation, Culture and Transnationalism 1988–2015* edited by Patrick Crowley (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), pp. 243–69 (p. 243).

[4] Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[5] Lia Brozgal, “The Critical Pulse of the *Contre-enquête*: Kamel Daoud on the Maghrebi Novel in French,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 20, 1 (2016): 37–46 (p. 44).

[6] John Frow, “On mid-level concepts,” *New Literary History* 41, 2 (2010): 237–252 (p. 224).

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ISSN 1553-9172