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For a New Ethics of Reading: Analyzing Tea in the Harem’s Reception

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The March for Equality and Against Racism (La Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racisme) left Marseilles on October 15, 1983, responding to the increase in racist sentiments in France and protesting the police violence routinely faced by youth of North African heritage in the banlieues. Two months later, what began as a small group of participants, mostly descendants of North African immigrants from Minguettes, turned into one of the most politically significant moments in French history, as more than 100,000 participants, including government ministers, labor leaders, and members of religious organizations, arrived in Paris for a final demonstration (“La marche pour l’égalité et contre le racisme”). The March of the Beurs (La Marche des Beurs), as the movement came to be called, brought attention to issues of housing discrimination, police brutality, immigration, and citizenship, but it also left an indelible mark on the subsequent journalistic and scholarly treatment of “beur² writing.” As previous scholars have pointed out, Mehdi Charef’s Tea in the Harem (Le Thé au harem d’archi ahmed), published in 1983, and its film adaptation in 1985 were sociopolitically overdetermined by the events of the March. As the beur political movement came to occupy an increasingly central position in the political consciousness of mainstream French society, beur writing became a stand-in or pretext for political discourse. Beur authors, who were often asked to comment on issues of “identity politics, immigration, and discrimination in...
French society” during their television and radio appearances, were reduced to the function of a native informant, tasked with the responsibility of making their minority culture intelligible to a majority audience (Kleppinger 25). Additionally, their works were subjected to what I call an anthropological approach to literature, a reading practice which, by studying, evaluating, and interpreting fiction in respect of its presumed portrayal of a historical reality, instrumentalizes and subordinates the text to the reality which it is said to represent. This essay examines the extratextual materials that reified the novel/film *Tea in the Harem* (and its author/director Mehdi Charef) as an archive of knowledge about the *beur* community. While acknowledging the extent to which the novel/film lends itself to an anthropological reading, the paper explores dimensions of Charef’s work that have been deemphasized in favor of narrowly racialized readings.

In elucidating what I have called the anthropological approach to literature, I draw on the works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Nayoung Aimee Kwon. In her seminal “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” Spivak famously dismisses “an information-retrieval approach to ‘Third World’ literature,” a reading practice which reduces the literary text to an archive of knowledge to be gained about the Third World (243). Such cases of information retrieval are legitimized by the same sociopolitical forces which have engendered what Kwon calls the “postcolonial regime of colonial realism,” a “dominant postcolonial rereading of the colonial past” which values colonial-period texts only insofar as they represent an “authentic” colonial reality (182). Both hermeneutics posit an unproblematic, referential relation between the literary work and its material context and in so doing renders the text predictable. In the same conceptual vein, the anthropological approach to literature, which is more interested in viewing the text as a cultural repository than in the text’s generative capacity to do what cannot be done in the material world, reduces the text to the function of a native informant, “the person who translates her culture for the researcher, the outsider” as both the source and the object of knowledge (Khan 2022). The term as I deploy it signifies both a reading strategy and a value system motivating our activities as readers. As an interpretive framework, it relies on an unreflective assumption that literature passively reflects a historical reality; as an evaluative framework, it influences which texts we choose to read and the standards by which we appraise them. As this essay will demonstrate, the novel/film *Tea in the Harem* was overwhelmingly subjected to an anthropological reading, made to explain a particular narrative of contemporary history, often to the neglect of its formal features.

In *Branding the ‘Beur’ Author: Minority Writing and the Media in France*, Kathryn Kleppinger investigates the process by which authors of the *beur* population became native informants for a mainstream French audience. In her monograph, she examines the role of audiovisual media as a
significant extratextual force in the social construction of *beur* writing, which became coded as autobiographical and politically engaged. She astutely points out that the phenomenon resulted from a convergence of interests.

“Journalists seeking to promote the contemporary relevance of the guests on their [television and radio] programmes” treated authors of North African heritage as spokespersons for the *beur* community, desiring their commentary on contemporary social issues (Kleppinger 119). In turn, the authors, by “[accepting] this framing and [expanding] upon it,” actively participated in the social construction of their literary works as archives of knowledge about the *beur* community at large (119). “By establishing themselves as privileged interlocutors regarding such themes, these authors [solidified] the idea that such topics [constituted] the primary interest and goal of their work,” Kleppinger submits, later citing Mehdi Charef as a typical author in this category (25, 39). Her research casts light on the complex, dynamic process by which *beur*-authored texts ended up in the service of readers who wished to be introduced to relevant social issues in an easily digestible narrative format.

To this discussion of extratextual forces I add my analysis of print media, namely film reviews of *Tea in the Harem*, which unfailingly underscored the autobiographical overtones of Charef’s work. “[The film is] set in lower-class suburban Paris, partly in the Gennevilliers housing project where the young writer-director, Mehdi Charef, spent his teen-age years—living the same experiences that his teen-age protagonist Majdid (Kader Boukhane) does in the movie,” reads a July 18, 1986 *Los Angeles Times* review (Wilmington, “Movie Reviews: ‘Tea’: Outsiders in Mean Streets of Paris”). The passage, a particularly egregious example of the anthropological approach to literature, collapses all boundaries between the film’s protagonist and its director, grossly overgeneralizing their experiences as being one and the same. Moreover, that the review is American suggests that the reception of *beur* cultural production, though in many ways entangled with French republicanism, is part of a more general phenomenon in which literatures of “the other” are viewed as resulting from a particular cultural identity rather than from a singular, innovative, and idiosyncratic artistic mind. In so doing, the dominant culture withholds from “the other” the possibility of universal expression, which it silently reserves for itself. By gesturing to Charef’s personal background, the critic applies a specific reading practice to the film, decoding it as an “authentic” representation of life in the French housing projects.

This conflation of the cultural product with the cultural producer is unsurprising given that Charef himself frequently emphasized his personal experiences as the son of Algerian-born parents raised in a housing project in his television and radio appearances. Such slippages nevertheless give away a value system which all too easily demands of socially marginalized authors an “authentic” representation of their reality. For instance, a *New York Times* review, published on
June 6, 1986, is particularly revealing for what it praises—and laments—about the film and is worth quoting at length:

Mr. Charef’s knowledge of what existence is like in a French housing project... comes through [in the film.] He is at his best in carrying us into those busy apartments, where every day brings a domestic skirmish or worse. These are people on the outskirts of French society, some of them on the outskirts of existence. It’s a combat zone between the have-little and the have-less, between those with jobs who are trying to hang on and keep their children from going bad and those with nothing left to lose.

A strong subject - but as though mistrustful of what he has to tell us about their struggles, Mr. Charef resorts to plot devices that seem to have been lifted from paperback novels. An unemployed young mother, one leg over the terrace railing, is stopped from suicide by the sight of her son, held up in the nick of time by the quick-thinking Madjid. Pat’s sweet sister is driven to street walking - and who should approach for purposes of proposition but her devoted admirer, young Madjid? Madjid’s mother, a pious Moslem, seems to have imported her lines from the Yiddish stage. (Goodman, “Screen: ‘Tea in Harem’”)

In this review, the critic assumes the film’s representation of life in the French housing projects to be faithful, envisioning a referential relation between *Tea in the Harem* and Charef’s lived experience. As the critic would have us believe, the film, thanks to Charef’s “knowledge of what existence is like in a French housing project,” reflects or refers back to a social reality in which “every day brings a domestic skirmish or worse.” Moreover, Goodman conceptualizes said representation as fundamentally passive and straightforward, as evinced in the following statement: “He is at his best in carrying us into those busy apartments.” According to the critic, Charef, in rendering the French housing projects into fiction, leaves them wholly untouched in the process. They are not reworked, contested, or reconfigured by the literature—rather, they are simply reproduced for the voyeuristic gaze of the film’s audience, who are provided with an insider’s perspective on a population “on the outskirts of French society.” However unwittingly, the critic forecloses the generative capacities of the film: authorial imagination is here limited to mere mimesis.

Moreover, the review unveils an anthropological evaluative framework in that the critic praises Charef for his knowledge of a fraught social reality and leaves unmentioned the role of artistic imagination in the rendering of that reality into fiction. “He is at his best in carrying us into those busy apartments,” Goodman appraises, but how Charef accomplishes this—his use of surface form to draw viewers into the experience of meaning—is seemingly of no concern. In fact, while the review commends the “strong subject” of the film, it finds fault with its “plot devices that seem to have been lifted from paperback novels,” citing among other examples the suicidal scene in which Josette nearly jumps from her balcony but is stopped by the sight of her son Stéphane. Unbeknownst to the critic, the scenes he disapproves most are those in which Charef’s authorial imagination happens to be most exercised: although the real-life inspiration for the Josette figure did commit suicide, Charef changed the outcome in his novel/film. “Je n’ai pas voulu faire un drame social et misérabiliste,” he explains in a later interview (qtd. in Hargreaves 139). The critic’s suspicion that the plot device...
results from the director’s “[mistrust] at what he has to tell us about their struggles” betrays the criterion by which we assess minority cultural production: as a vehicle for conveying a given social reality.

Likewise, the aforementioned L.A. Times review also promotes a value system which prizes works by marginalized authors primarily for their treatment of sociopolitically sensitive subjects and relegates the aesthetic experience of those works to a secondary concern. Titled “Movie Reviews: ‘Tea’: Outsiders in Mean Streets of Paris,” it too melds the artist with the art object in gesturing to Charef’s outsider status:

Charef is an outsider in more ways than one: Algerian, ex-factory worker, son of an unskilled laborer. One of the strengths of this unusually fine, perceptive, evocative first film is the way he adjusts the audience, almost at once, to an outsider’s viewpoint. As in “Los Olvidados” or “Pixote,” we simply plunge in with the characters, live their world for a few hours and gradually understand what drives them to a life that seems initially amoral, empty and ruthless. (Wilmington)

The critic locates the film’s strength in its ability to “[adjust] the audience, almost at once, to an outsider’s viewpoint,” rendering transparent the formerly inscrutable lower class of France’s banlieues. In this way, the review makes legible the majority culture’s desire to gain access to the other, its “demand for intercultural information,” which constitutes part of the web of sociopolitical forces in which Tea in the Harem was and is suspended (Miller 2-3) Wishing to “understand what drives them [the minority] to a life that seems initially amoral, empty and ruthless,” the critic praises the film for humanizing the inhabitants of the French housing projects; yet this humanizing representation is only necessitated by—and derives its value from—the very dehumanization of the housing projects by the mainstream media in the first place. The minority artist is thus made to rehabilitate, educate, and civilize the majority mind and is rewarded for it.

In examining the extratextual materials that contributed to an anthropological reading of Tea in the Harem, I wish to avoid a rigid dichotomy in which either the text or the extratext is solely responsible for shaping the reception of the novel/film. If Tea in the Harem was easily co-opted by a journalistic and scholarly discourse which projected a political dimension onto the novel/film, such reading practices were assuredly sanctioned by textual as well as extratextual forces. In the film’s opening shot, for instance, the camera follows Josette and Stéphane as they walk, hand in hand, to Malika’s apartment, where Stéphane is to be dropped off. The audience’s initial entry into the world of the film is thus a quite literal one. In fairness to the New York Times review, Charef does indeed “[carry] us into those busy apartments” as the...
audience, adopting the point of view of the camera, is led inside the bustling interior of Malika’s residence (Goodman).

Nevertheless, *Tea in the Harem* exceeds the interpretive categories that have been placed upon it in at least one meaningful sense, accommodating critical lenses alternative to the racialized one which is so often deployed in analyses of the novel/film. As Kathryn Kleppinger aptly observes, the back cover of the 1988 edition of *Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* foregrounds Madjid’s identity crisis as the son of North African immigrants as a central theme of the novel: “Une cité H.L.M. Sur les murs: graffitis, slogans, appels de détresse, dessins obscènes. Madjid vit là. Il est fils d’immigrés, paumé entre deux cultures, deux langues, deux couleurs de peau, et s’invente ses propres racines, ses attaches,” it summarizes (qtd. in Kleppinger 36). Amazon, advertising Ed Emery’s English translation of *Le Thé au harem*, also spotlights Madjid’s racial background in its economic description of the novel, which reads, “the lives of second-generation Algerians in a Paris housing project, the basis of the award-winning film” (“Tea in the Harem”). Such racialized synopses evoke the *beur* political movement and bespeak the social relevance of the marketed text. But if the way editors, printers, and publishers presented Charef’s work was informed by a political consciousness increasingly preoccupied with France’s immigrant community, academics were hardly exempt. An article published in *The French Review* depicts “*Le Thé au harem d’Archimède…* [as] a novel about the misunderstanding and fear caused by institutionalized racism and poverty” and as “an incisive critique of the French attitude towards immigrants and the poverty that results” (Xavier 331). These paratextual and extratextual materials reified an interpretation of *Tea in the Harem* as an assertion of a particular cultural identity, namely, that of second-generation Maghrebis in France.

However, some scholars have begun contesting this interpretive framework, pointing to the ways in which *Tea in the Harem* exceeds or escapes a narrowly racialized reading. The film, for instance, makes use of a “doubling-up of central protagonists with different ethnic origins,” who nevertheless share the same working-class background, to emphasize themes of solidarity between alienated youths (Tarr 329). The multiethnic gang, whose members reside in the same housing project, moreover integrates individual ethnic identities into a unified whole, defined by their shared rebellion against the older generation (329; Xavier 333). It is in this way that the film resists a rigid adherence to a racialized framework and instead invites a commentary along the lines of youth and age, friendship and alienation. In light of these alternative reading strategies, Malika, whose strained relationship with her son is typically regarded as emblematic of his dissociation from his mother country, takes on new significance. Madjid’s acts of disobedience can be productively read alongside those of the other gang members toward their parents and other adults as a manifestation of intergenerational conflict, the tensions arising from which animate the film.
This rereading of the Malika figure brings to light what is elided by the anthropological approach to literature, which seeks to access the other through the semantic content of a literary text and, in so doing, consigns minority writing to the role of native informing. Although the disconnect between mother and son can undoubtedly be read as an allegory of the immigrant experience—“paumé entre deux cultures, deux langues, deux couleurs de peau”—its generative potentialities would be regrettably limited by a routine (and unreflective) usage of this critical lens (qtd. in Kleppinger 36). The native informant model, which provided Mehdi Charef and other beur authors with a platform for addressing relevant social issues, may have exhausted its political usefulness. In charting the way for a new ethics of reading, one must reexamine the demand all too easily placed on minority writing to faithfully—and affectingly—depict their tribulations to a majority audience so that it may be edified. Rather than fixating on the production of authentic knowledge of otherness, one would do well to attend more closely to the formal, non-mimetic, creative, and universalizing features of minority writing. Only by rejecting such reductionist models will we be able to disclose the aesthetic creativity and perpetual newness of these literary and filmic texts.

ENDNOTES

1 Suburbs
2 The descendents of North African immigrants (also called Maghrebins)
3 A universalist belief that all citizens are equal before the law. The term, however, often conceals fundamental tensions in French society, which is becoming increasingly ethnically diverse.
4 “I didn’t want to write a sordid melodrama” (Kleppinger 62).
5 “Caught between two cultures, two languages, two skin colours” (Kleppinger 36).

REFERENCES


