THE BIPOLARITY OF RACHID BOUDJEDRA

In the annals of modern Algerian literature, the novelist, poet and critic, Rachid Boudjedra (b. 1941), is an exception. Nearly twenty years after his forceful impact on the French literary scene with his first novel, *La Répudiation* (1969), Boudjedra has emerged as a major literary figure whose writings straddle two cultures, French and Arabic. Boudjedra, however, is not the only Algerian writer to use two languages. There are other bilingual writers, notably Kateb Yacine (b. 1929) and Assia Djebar (b. 1936) (French and Arabic), or Taos Amrouche (1913-1976) and Mouloud Mammeri (b. 1917) (French and Berber). These writers, unlike Boudjedra, use the spoken idiom, be it Algerian Arabic or Berber. Kateb, for example, has written plays in colloquial Arabic, and Djebar film scripts, also in colloquial Arabic. All Boudjedra’s Arabic works are written in the literary idiom. Moreover, his six Francophone novels, published by Denoël in Paris, have been translated into Arabic, and his Arabic novels, which to date have all appeared in Algeria, have been published in a French translation by Denoël. Thus, all Boudjedra’s fictional works are available in both languages, a major achievement for any writer, and a proof of the importance of Boudjedra as an author of both French and Arabic fiction. No other Algerian writer has been able to occupy such a prominent position in two different camps as successfully as he has. The French press has come to claim him as a writer of French fiction, while in the Arabic press he is considered to be an Arab author, on a par with the two leading Algerian Arabophone novelists, Abdelhamid Ben Hadouga and Tahar Wattar.

Boudjedra’s earliest published work is a collection of poetry, entitled *Pour ne plus rêver*, which appeared in Algeria in 1965. Some of the poems in the collection had already been published in various literary journals. In this collection the author openly criticises the social structure and religious bigotry of his own milieu. This theme was to recur in nearly all his subsequent works, and to be met with a mixed reception, ranging

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1. Boudjedra uses colloquial Arabic when he translates from other languages. The plays of Lorca, for example, have been translated by him into Algerian Arabic.
2. Denoël commissioned A. Moussali together with Boudjedra himself to translate the Arabic works into French.
5. The Arabic title of this collection appears in the catalogue of the Entreprise National du Livre (ENAL) as *من احلى اخلاق نواخذ الميت*.
from the positively hostile to the adulatory. Few 20th century writers have elicited such extreme responses as Boudjedra has. But his growing circle of devoted admirers has, over the years, more than compensated for the criticism and hostility meted out by his detractors. Although Boudjedra’s criticism of Algerian society in the poems is not as blatantly expressed as in the novels, one can detect the beginnings of his rebellion against the long-established hypocrisy, superstition and general narrow-mindedness of Algerian, or any other society that is closed in on itself, and unable to see beyond the confines of its own beliefs. Boudjedra strongly condemns the veneration and esteem accorded to the father figure in a despotically patriarchal society. In a poem dating from 1963, and entitled “Litanies”, Boudjedra writes:

_Pourquoi est-ce que je rêve que j’ai tué mon père?_

“Why do I dream that I have killed my father?”

In another poem entitled “Mise au point” he writes:

_Et je hurle_
_Et je bave_
_Et je blasphème_
_Et je frappe sur la table_
_Car les sarcasmes continuent_

“And I scream
And I whine
And I blaspheme
And I bang on the table
Because the sarcasms continue”

When the heavily censured version of _Pour ne plus rêver_ appeared, it was received with comparative indifference by the readership it was intended for. All the outbursts of rage and indignation that seem to follow the publication of a provocative Boudjedra work were reserved for his novels, and especially the first three.

_À la Répudiation_, Boudjedra’s first novel, was published in 1969 and sent shock waves through conservative circles in both the Maghreb and France. According to Jean Déjeux, some members of the French public felt Boudjedra was playing into their hands. They thought that here at last was someone exposing from within all the malaise affecting Algerian society. This was too bitter a pill for Maghrebi circles to swallow. They already had the exposés of the Moroccan writer Driss Chraïbi (b. 1926)

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6 Both “Litanies” and “Mise au point” are reproduced, with commentary, by Jean Déjeux in his book _Littérature maghrébine de langue française_, Éditions Naaman, Sherbrooke, Canada 1973.