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Chapter 5

The Re-Racination of Driss Chraïbi: A Hajj in Search of a New Mecca

JOHN C. HAWLEY

Reading the Qur'an has never made me smile. THE SIMPLE PAST

In his Introduction to Faces of Islam, Kenneth Harrow refers to Clifford Geertz’s elaboration of three forms of Islam that he observed in Morocco. The first was based upon a cultic veneration of dead saints and those in a patrilineal descent (the “siyyid complex”); the second was centered around individual holy men, marabouts, and their set of practices (the “zawiya complex”); and the third was focused on the “royal assumption of sacred power assured through descent in the Prophet’s line” (Harrow 1991, 6). This last form Geertz called the “maxzen complex” (Geertz 1968, 49–53). While it can be reasonably argued that Driss Chraïbi’s many novels focus almost obsessively on characters whose identity as Muslims is foregrounded, the sociological, or even theological, distinctions that Geertz observes are not central to the novelist’s concerns. On the other hand, Harrow goes on to observe that

as concerns Islam in Africa, and its subsequent literary expression, what occurred was a series of adaptations in which Islam came to occupy increasingly important spaces in the lives of various people—psychological spaces, governing first the territory of the mind, at times motivated by economic or other self-interested concerns, and then larger, external spaces of an increasingly political and social nature (Harrow 1991, 7–8).

This chapter will argue that Driss Chraïbi, while no clear exponent of Islamic doctrine, follows Harrow’s pattern to a tee. His whole adult life continues to be a journey of self-discovery that centers around his place in the religion of his birth.
Le Passé Simple [The Simple Past, 1954], Driss Chraïbi’s first novel, is still considered “the most controversial work of the ‘Generation of ‘52’” (Marx-Scouras 1992, 131)—a novel of hatred, anger, and violent departure from all that the young author had associated with his Islamic heritage. It was banned in Morocco until 1977, and is typical of the writing of a turbulent period in which the country struggled for independence and self-sufficiency. As Joan Monego notes, for the most adventurous writers “the first half of this decade was a time of gestation during which the hero was seen struggling for a personal form of liberation. Rejection of one’s own heritage, flight, and assimilation with the Other would be a route elected by many. At this stage the hero had merely begun his anxious quest” (Monego 1984, 22). Certainly, Chraïbi’s overstated and adolescent novel was only the beginning of his own journey. He quickly rejected it himself when he saw that it could be used by the French and others to denigrate Morocco’s potential for self-rule, though he later regretted having done so. In any case, the novel set an insolent tone that alerted readers to a new breed of writers who readily criticized what they considered to be the injustices and incongruities perpetrated in their societies in the name of Islam. Its impact was strong enough to secure Chraïbi’s place as a (if not the) “founding father” (Bensmaïn 1986, 15) of Maghrébian fiction.

The dominant figure in Le Passé Simple is the protagonist’s father, called throughout “the Lord.” Chraïbi casts him as a hypocrite and a tyrant. The character of almost equal importance in the book is the protagonist’s mother, who is kept tucked away in the back of the house, suffering silently under her husband’s infidelity, condescension, and cruelty. If the father is the target of his son’s impotent hatred, the mother receives her son’s withering insults for remaining so passive. I would like to argue that the parents represent, for Chraïbi, two aspects of Islam with which he continues to struggle. Significantly, whereas the father has, for the most part, dropped out of the later books, the mother has assumed a lasting and recurring metaphorical role as the heart of the Prophet’s message—a message Chraïbi has come to embrace almost with a sense of inevitability (since this, and not the French Christianity that surrounds him in Paris, is his heritage) and, finally, of gratitude.

Chraïbi’s novels are autobiographical to a degree some would consider remarkable for a Muslim.1 Yet he is intent on creating a literature of self-affirmation and testimony. This is typical of the aspirations of other writers of his generation. Chraïbi is remarkable, though, in his insistence from the very beginning that women’s self-affirmation is as crucial as that of men. His frequent return to the character of “mother,” who had apparently committed suicide in the first novel, suggests that he could not, or would not,
rid himself of whatever she represented. He resuscitates her in *Succession ouverte* [Heirs to the Past, 1962], though she is not a much happier person there. In fact, with her husband now dead, she faces a crisis of meaning in her own life. She has lived for him and for her children. Chraïbi's focus is still basically upon himself, however, and upon his struggle with both his real and imagined "father." But in the next book, *La Civilisation, ma mère!* . . . [Mother Comes of Age, 1972], he has become almost lighthearted, playing with the notion of the mother recreating herself as a feminist activist.2

Chraïbi typifies Maghrebian writing of the decade between 1964 and 1975, which focused on the problems educated North Africans faced as a result of their multicultural education. Jean Déjeux calls the writing produced during this period a "littérature de contestation et de dévoilement" [literature of struggle and disclosure]. Joan Monego describes the time as "a period of anguish, at the heart of which lay the burning issue of whether to advance along Eastern or Western lines, to follow one's heritage, imbued as it was with Islamic tradition, or to opt for a pagan, capitalist-oriented technological society" (1984, 24).

These psychological and social concerns are certainly important even in Chraïbi's earliest novels; they continue, in fact, to the present day. There now seems to be a much greater sense of resolution, however, than one would ever have imagined possible from the violent writer of the 1950s. Happily, much of that resolution seems based upon Chraïbi's revisionist memories of his mother, who has taken on a symbolism that evades the legalism of Islam (represented by the father) by returning to the source—at least to Muhammed himself, if not obviously to Allah. For Chraïbi, as we shall see, this also means a personal return to his pre-Arabic roots in the Berber people of Morocco.

Chraïbi was born in El Jadida, Morocco, in 1926. His years as a very young boy in a koranic school were, apparently, horrible for him. The corporeal punishment, the rote memorization, and his accusations of sexual expectations by the overseers seem to have left a permanent scar on his psyche. Brutal domination, coupled with what he perceived to be hypocrisy among the staff, form the basis for all the problems with Islam as he sees it practiced in the Arabic world, including ritualism, bigotry, and formalism (see Urbani 1986, 30). These are also the characteristics he discerns in the protagonist's father in *Le Passé simple*.

When he was ten, however, Chraïbi became a student in a French school, and later was one of only two Moroccans enrolled among 1500 students in the lycée in Casablanca. He had been chosen to become one of the "évolués," the evolved ones—that is, Muslims who had been educated
in French schools in Algeria or Morocco, and gallicized. In these schools Arab (let alone Berber) culture was denigrated. The hero of Chraibi’s books is told by his family that he is being sent into the camp of the enemy to learn the tricks that he will later be able to turn against them. And “Driss Ferdi” does not come out unscathed. He finds his own culture barbarous, his own religion contradictory.

In 1945 Chraibi moved to France for further study. He graduated with a diploma in chemical engineering, and then began studying neuropsychiatry. The level of anxiety that this crosscultural experience brought about showed itself on the eve of his completion of his doctorate, when he dropped out of school specifically for religious reasons, upset by the total secularization that his Western education seemed to demand. The implied attack on his faith, coupled with the obvious Parisian prejudice against the “Norañ” (the North Africans), led to a skeptical view of the West. He enthusiastically expressed his enlightenment in his second novel, Les Boucs (1955), translated as “The Butts,” that is, “the scapegoats.” “Le bouc” is a term of derision that the French apply to North Africans working in France. The title, and the very angry book, suggest that the author had begun to move beyond total self-absorption, seeing himself as a spokesman for a whole class of individuals. He writes that the novel is for those persons “in all times and all places . . . and not just North Africans in France—whose fate it was to be sacrificial victims, whether the Negro in America, the Jew in the Middle East, the Moslem in India, the slaves of ancient Rome or Greece, assimilated into a civilization, as though to prove that no creation of man has ever been for everyone or ever been perfect” (p. 5).

While focused principally upon the West, the anger Les Boucs directs against authority figures naturally prompts Chraibi to refer to the first such figure in his own life. In fact, Isaac Yetiv characterizes Chraibi’s obsession with this symbol as setting a standard whereby much other Maghrebian literature can be judged, since, in so much of it, “the Father continues to be their scapegoat and Islam the source of evil” (Yetiv 1977, 860). Like other critics, he notes that the protagonist in Les Boucs is named Yalann Waldick, which means “may your father be cursed.”

Against their native society they make use of a different weapon: the profanation of the sacred. They debase and defile the most sacred shrines of Islam and the long venerated pillars of society. Sexuality bordering on pornography, for centuries a taboo in Islamic circles, becomes in their hands an instrument of desacralization and is always accompanied by violence. In revolt against the father and his tyrannical authority, the young writer feels himself castrated, mutilated, and he asserts his virility through eroticism. Chraibi was the first to combine violence with sexuality as a way to achieve catharsis (1977, 863).
Of course, there is a certain irony in describing Chraïbi as the founding “father” of such literature.

Despite the ongoing anger against all authority figures, the movement in this novel—first the attack on the West, and then the identification with underdogs throughout the world—suggests the route whereby Driss Chraïbi could gradually reintegrate much of what he had emotionally dismissed in his rejection of a degraded Islam. This course of recovery seems his conscious intent in writing his next two novels, L’Ane [“The Jackass,” 1956] and Succession ouverte (1962). In the Preface to L’Ane he recalls his first novel, Le Passé Simple, and offers the following explanation:

The hero’s name is Driss Ferdi. He is perhaps me. In any case his despair is mine. Despair of faith. This Islam in which he believed, which spoke of equality of reigns, of the gift of God in each individual of creation, of tolerance, of liberty, of love, he saw it, ardent adolescent formed in French schools, reduced to Pharisaism, a social system and propaganda arm. Everything considered, he embarked for France: he needed to believe, to love, to respect someone or something (p. 13); translation by Joan Monego.

But the respect he hoped to gain, the object in which he hoped to place his faith, was not to be found in France. Having purged his disappointment by writing Les Boucs, he begins a recovery in L’Ane. Joan Monego notes the abrupt change:

Indeed, L’Ane retains the full flavor of Chraïbi’s North African Muslim heritage. . . . Revolt gives way to bitterness, disappointment, and distress as Chraïbi realizes that nationalist liberation does not automatically make better human beings of its citizens, nor does it morally and spiritually transform a country. L’Ane, an extended metaphor in five parts, is a plea for men to interrupt the thoughtless, mechanically performed daily chores that have lulled their brains and to reflect carefully on the meaning of existence, both on the individual and the collective level (1984, 115).

His call to greater awareness is aimed at no particular class, but it is clear that he has lost none of his earlier disdain for the powerful in society. As with many African novelists, L’Ane suggests that Driss Chraïbi quickly learned that after the first blush of victory that comes with independence, neocolonialism can simply change the cast but retain the same dehumanizing script.

In Succession ouverte the protagonist returns to Morocco from France to attend his father’s funeral. This occasion gives the novelist a chance to observe, in his brothers, different sorts of Moroccans, each fairly ordinary and prepared to follow in his father’s footsteps. Chraïbi uses their varying perspectives to show different aspects of that father, and he allows himself
to admire characteristics that his hatred had blinded him to in the first novel. But he does not withdraw his implied criticism of Islam's apparent failure to open his brothers' eyes to certain inequities in society, like the treatment of the poor and of his mother. The greatest indication that he is prepared to come to terms with his paternal heritage comes in the closing paragraph of the book. Apparently disinherited, he prepares to leave Morocco once again and return to France. At the airport, about to board the plane, a customs official hands him an envelope that the protagonist's father had entrusted to him. From the note inside, Driss reads the following: "Well, Driss. Dig a well, and go down to look for water. The light is not on the surface, but deep down. Wherever you may be, even in the desert, you will always find water. You have only to dig, Driss, dig deep" (p. 107).°

The reader may have a difficult time imagining that this philosophical "gift" comes from the same man who brought about the death of one of Driss's brothers in the first novel, and who refused to mourn the consequent suicide of his own wife. Perhaps the wayward son was pleading, with this book of reconciliation, for some way to identify with a world that was now forever beyond him. But his reviewers had long ago made it difficult for Chraïbi to "place" himself, in any case. As Danielle Marx-Scouras observes, in Succession ouverte, "he now realizes that he is also a foreigner in Morocco. Caught between two closed doors, forever destined to remain in the gap between civilizations, Driss can only cry out for mutual understanding among peoples" (1992, 138). Thus, he must return to France and continue to dig, but to do so now without the distorting emotionalism that led to the total rejection of Islam in his earliest writing.

Before we see where that search has taken him in his recent novels, it is important that we note where that anger placed him among faithful Muslims, and the extent of the resulting alienation. The most thorough analysis of Chraïbi's relationship to Islam has been that of Houaria Kadra-Hadjadj. Referring to three articles Chraïbi wrote for Demain in 1956 and 1957 that deal with contemporary Islam, Kadra-Hadjadj describes his version of Islam as "very personal" and "very largely borrowed from pantheism" (1986, 218). In short, "Dris Chraïbi, like the majority of Maghrebians formed in the French school, does not possess a sufficient knowledge of Arabo-Islamic culture nor, perhaps, of the Arabic language, either" (pp. 218–19). This leads him to misread Islam, and to misdirect his attacks. Kadra-Hadjadj wishes to illustrate these points by following the lead of M. Aouissi Mechri, a professor of Islamic law. These critics discern three degrees of unorthodoxy is Chraïbi's representation of Islam: least offensive are some passages that are inexact expressions of the Qur'an; other passages seem to be naive and childish recollections of the Islam Chraïbi experienced
through youthful eyes, and never grew to understand more comprehen-
sively as an adult; and most offensive are those passages that have absolutely
no parallel in the Law. Using these rubrics, the critics dissect Chraïbi's
references to Islam, his experiences in koranic school, his understanding of
the pillars of Islam, Ramadan, the imperative to give alms, and the pilgrim-
age to Mecca; they note the derision of saints in his novels, the disparage-
ment of Abd el Haï Kettani and of prayer, the destruction of the message
of the Qur'an by the those entrusted with its safekeeping, and, yet, his
apparent belief in the invincibility of the “Islam of one’s heart.” In short,
Kadra-Hadjadj concludes that “the vision of Islam that reveals itself in the
work of Driss Chraïbi is tainted with negativity” (p. 252), because he can-
not help associating the religion with the familial power that dominated
his youth. This is all the more regrettable, in Kadra-Hadjadj’s view, since
Chraïbi offers very valuable criticisms of the religious educational system,
the maladaptation of the fast to the modern world, the cult of the saints,
and other items. In this critic’s view, it is the obligation of faithful Muslims
to return to their sources, and to show the world that the Qur’an actually
(teaches tolerance, fraternity, and progress, and is not a system of totalitarian
politics (p. 253). These views indicate an appreciation among some believ-
ing Muslims for Chraïbi’s reformist tendencies, but they also display an
understandable concern for orthodoxy—a “setting the record straight.” This
leaves little leeway for the novelist’s gradual and pain-filled accommoda-
tion with his own somewhat “protestant” version of Islam, one that, as we
shall see, could be characterized as a scripturally centered latitudinarianism
with a humanistic, and even “incarnational,” emphasis.

The means whereby Chraïbi has returned to Islam suggests the move-
ment in contemporary Christianity known as “liberation theology,” since
his is also a religion that arises from the lives of practicing Muslims rather
than from clearly defined (and imposed) doctrines. Not only does the nov-
elist seek to foreground the aspects of his religion that he sees embodied in
his mother, he also seeks to identify Muhammed with the enslaved poor
who can hear his message with a purity that leads to spiritual freedom.
Thus, in his later books Chraïbi attempts to revive his Berber history and
find in it those aspects of Islam that have not been adulterated by the
Arabic drive to conquer.

With the semi-comic La Civilisation, ma mère! . . . (1972), in an effort
to strike a less vitriolic tone, he finds the perfect solution: he transforms his
meek mother into a crusader for human rights:

Nothing, you hear, nothing can compare to the terrible nakedness of a
man who has nothing left but his soul stripped bare and who wants his
dignity here and now and not tomorrow or later on with promises from
some religion. Do you know what I've done with religion? I've buried it with the other debris of the past under an orange tree. At least the tree will give some fruit some day that can be eaten with pleasure (p. 119).\(^5\)

Danielle Marx-Scouras correctly notes the unusual combination of qualities that Chraibi projects onto the evolving mother figure: "Chraibi's mother metaphor is situated at the confines of meaning. In her quest for emancipation and identity, which coincides with the Maghrebian's, she carefully blends the ingredients of old and new, past and future, tradition and modernity, progress and backwards, evolution and vestige, in order to prepare an original 'pièce de résistance'" (Marx-Scouras 1986, 6). In contrast to an old and powerful order that coalesced behind mercantile interests, the mother is an "inerradicable archaism" (Marx-Scouras 1986, 6). Marx-Scouras contends that Chraibi typifies two generations of Maghrebian francophone writers who have described their move to France as an abduction from their mothers. Chraibi, though, does not blame the French as much as "Islamic fathers who acquiesced to colonialism and then colonized women, children, and the underprivileged classes in their own society. The 'Seigneur' [Chraibi's father] and French colonial rule are thus, in Chraibi's mind, different aspects of the same phenomenon" (1992, 135).

But Chraibi takes a very interesting additional step, and recognizes the mother as the foundation for spiritual and well as political liberation. Chraibi's journey necessitates both resistance to (and partial incorporation of) the cultures of France and of Arabo-Islamic Morocco, and personal sophistication that resists secularization. In silhouetting the archaism of his mother as inerradicable he suggests that this is the real strength that can arise from Islam\(^6\) in the lives of the oppressed—and possibly only in such lives. For it is not only to his mother that he looks for a non-manipulative sense of Allah's presence, but also to the Berbers. Thus, he manages to make oppression (experienced by himself as a child, by his mother as a wife, and by Berbers as the conquered) the necessary door to enlightenment.

Joan Monego observes that "the Maghreb's brand of Islam was a blend of the intellectualism and orthodoxy of the ulama and of the superstitious emotionalism of the masses, and so it would remain into the twentieth century" (1984, 5). But Jamil Abun-Nasr is more specific. In his view "the Islamization of the Berbers went further than their Arabization, and in many ways the latter process was the product of the former" (1971, 6). Thus, it is little wonder that the "Islam" to which theBerber Driss Chraïbi finds himself returning in his later works is found somewhat suspect by critics like Houaria Kadra-Hadjadji: it does, in fact, seem to blend a semipantheistic preArabic Berber spirituality with more traditional Islamic theology. Such a blend seems to have a history in
Morocco, where “orthodox Islam and Berber folk religion with its very active marabouts coexisted. The marabouts stressed community solidarity and mutual self-assistance, thus lending psychological support to the masses in a way that the official institutions—mosques and courts—could not” (Monego 1984, 10).

The “archaism” that Chraïbi endorses, therefore, does not imply a return to Islamic fundamentalism, especially in terms of social laws, but rather a return to the simplicity at the heart of Muhammed’s message. Marx-Scouras is again helpful in pointing out that Chraïbi,

by writing about the origins of Islam in the Maghreb, ... provides a genealogical perspective that restores the complexity of struggles and competing interests to the image of a reality from which oversimplified myths of origin spring. This is the reality that nationalists and fundamentalists often seek to deny, as if the Maghreb were not a site where Africa, Europe, and the Middle East intersect—a potential stage for the interplay of cultural diversity, ethnic pluralism, and multilingualism. Such a cultural perspective, espoused by such writers as Chraïbi, Khatibi, Abdelwahab Meddeb, Nabile Farès, and Tahar Ben Jelloun, denies fundamentalism its basis (Marx–Scouras 1992, 141).

But if Islamic fundamentalism is rejected, a kind of spiritual “foundationalism” is certainly Chraïbi’s goal. His recent writings express a religious sense that is not systematic, and far from dogmatic, but based in compassion, fraternity, and, significantly, a rootedness in the earth as the lasting source of all life. In Une Enquête au pays (Flutes of Death, 1981) he looks to his fellow Berbers as a long-suffering people, simple and wise and enduring beyond their various conquerors. A chief of police from the city, and his assistant, Inspector Ali, are seeking terrorists among various Berber encampments. The chief is an arrogant racist, in comparison with whom Ali appears reasonable. Their encounter with the Berber worldview offers Chraïbi an opportunity to “convert” the inspector to an enlightened understanding of Allah’s demands, at least to some extent. The Berbers themselves seem to think so, and consequently spare Ali’s life when they execute the chief. But, at heart, they recognize the two as strangers who are “as aggressive and unhappy as the conquerors of any race or religion who had ever unfurled their banner in the pages of history” (Flutes, 42).

The man the authorities are seeking is Raho, who recognizes that his time is passing and that his people will be forced to move yet further into the wilderness. Yet, in the meantime, he resists and prays. He is a Muslim and gives the “five times daily tribute to Islam,” though his real strength is from the old ways:
One after the other, he placed his hands on the ground, the fingers spread. Well before civilization or Islam, beyond the events of History, there was the worship of the earth. From generation to generation, and from one flight to the next before the conquerors of every race, that old religion had perdured right up to him, by the oral route. Raho had done his duty, he had offered sincere hommage to the impersonal god of the monotheists. And now . . . with his hands, and through his pain, he was about to pierce the earth, to gulp down in himself the elemental and prodigious force of the earth. It was really simple: all he had to do was to spread himself out like the roots of a tree. The sap was there, coursing life, right down there (Flutes, 26).

Then, he listens for “the voice of the nourishing mother.” It was she who endured, and gave birth to human history and all fleeting systems of meaning: “This Islam, this religion which somehow touched him, Raho, wasn’t it born way back in time, way back in the arid desert, between the sand and the sun—nothing else? Like Islam, and his own destiny, one was born from the belly of one’s mother, naked, and one returned equally so into the entrails of the nourishing mother earth. Your skin and flesh were witness to this truth!” (p. 41). 9

His appears to be, in fact, the pantheism that Kadra-Hadjadji finds in Chraibi, circumventing the pretensions of systematic religions: “All religions, whether from the Orient or the Occident, or elsewhere, had only inflicted thought upon him. . . . Raho himself had no notion, no consciousness of what his life had meant” (pp. 41–42). 10 This is about as minimal as a religion can get, and the Islam that Raho’s associates practice is more or less that: a practice, a series of rituals that are now part of their tradition. It would be more accurate to speak of this belief system as syncretic rather than as strictly pantheistic, since the monotheism of Islam is arguably dominant, though Allah has been reconceived as feminine.

In any case, the Berbers represented here have learned to be cynical of other alternatives. Hajja, one of the women leaders of the tribe, recalls of the conquerors that “they reinforced themselves with what they called the law, from books which they forced us to read: the book of Hebrews, those of the Christians, the Qur’an of the Islamic ones . . . huge numbers of others which they pretended were holy and sacred” (p. 138). 11 They used these to divide brothers from brothers, terrestrial life into good and evil, the sky a paradise, and the nourishing earth a hell. “And, when they perceived that their books were worn out like old figs and that they couldn’t get anything from them or next to nothing, then they invented another strategem: progress, civilization” (p. 138). 12

The effect this has on Inspector Ali is interesting. He is belittled by his superior, and therefore implicitly identifies with the Berbers he has
come to investigate. He shares their cynicism, and recognizes that “else-
where, in other offices, there were the same types, all chiefs: religious
types promoted to magistrates, just because they knew by heart, or al-
most, two or three chapters of the Qur’an. . . . A plethora of chiefs
formed one big giant iron tree, rigid in both directions: horizontal and
vertical” (p. 86). Yet he himself has no substance, no guiding principles.
At one point he relies on the flip of a coin to determine whether he
will continue the investigation, or instead align himself with the Berbers.
Ironically, the coin gets lost somewhere in the air. At novel’s end, once
the chief has been killed and Ali has made his report, he returns to the
village as the chief’s replacement, now intent on exterminating this
troublesome enigma. But the villagers are gone, and little is left: “A
void. Not a soul” (p. 146)—which is surely as much a description of
Ali as it is of the deserted village. He fails Chraïbi’s ultimate test, which
is the attempt to live compassionately with one’s inner complexities,
resistant to the will to power.

Ten years later Chraïbi gives this character his own book,
L’Inspecteur Ali (1991), or, more clearly, he returns to a semi-autobiogra-
phical work about a writer named Brahim who has become world-
famous under that pseudonym (Inspector Ali) as a braggart and provo-
cateur, expert in resolving questions having to do with Islam. Brahim is
trying unsuccessfully to write a second Passé simple (he is starting his
fourth draft), but must spend most of his time entertaining his Scottish
in-laws who are visiting Morocco for the first time.

The book has some zany twists, and is obviously ripe with oc-
casions for crosscultural ironies. But the real importance of the book, com-
ing late in Chraïbi’s career, is the resolution it attempts in the area of
his accommodation to Islam. In one passage of the novel that he is
writing, Brahim has Muhammed wondering whether, if he were to re-
turn to earth, he would undertake the same mission (L’inspecteur Ali,
181). In another passage, he has Muhammed seated in the office of a
publisher, being told that a book he has offered them for review, called
The Qur’an, is certainly poetic, and offers a lot of moral precepts, but it
couldn’t be sold in its present form. After all, this is the twentieth cen-
tury. Would the author mind very much if they were to submit it to a
thorough reworking by the editors? (p. 222). Brahim knows that the
effect such writing will have on his Western readers, very lighthearted
and mildly cynical toward Islam, will bring him even more fame.

In Brahim’s personal life, however, the reader sees that things are
far from lighthearted, and by novel’s end Brahim implicitly confronts
major questions of belief and self-definition. Is he, too, something of a
buffoon for the West, like his comic hero? Brahim has become, he says, "the king of the kiosk" (p. 231) and for twenty five years in Europe and America his fans have made him rich; his celebrity has made him a name to be sought for various international causes. Between himself and the common people there have been passionate words, but he has calmly protested: No, not "the Prophet"—do not speak of the one you have constructed over these many centuries. "Speak to me of the man who was there before his revelation, flesh and blood like you—illiterate, like you. . . . I want neither myth nor legend. Only the reality, concrete. Some insult me—I was blaspheming, I was a provocateur, an unbeliever, this country's only skeptic in the name of reason—still, one could not return such a being to our level. So how important is their misery!" (p. 232).

Yearning for an impossible encounter with the historical Muhammed, Brahim is suddenly surprised by the miracle of birth, an ordinary event that takes on mystical and hopeful meaning in the book. He ends in a maternity ward, all his worldly cynicism stripped away as he experiences "the joy of creation," which transcends all borders. It is, he says, the first time he has assisted at a birth: it is a boy, with fists clenched and ready to struggle in the world. And then he sees the face of the mother—"And finally I recognized her. She has come to visit me, and calls me by name, and asks for money to go to Mecca and pray for me. There suddenly rises before my memory all my past history, sharp, clear, blinding with tiny details—this past which I have buried so deeply within me" (p. 233). It takes very little imagination to imagine Driss Chraibi himself in such a maternity ward, seeing in the struggling child all struggling humanity, seeing in the face of the exulant—and faith-filled—mother, his own loved mother.

Lionel Dubois points out that Driss Chraibi has always been a great traveler, and he is perhaps right in concluding that "the voyage does not end with the life of the voyager" (1986, 19). Certainly, Chraibi's journey has never paused long along the way. Bernard Urbani observes that Chraibi is fully comfortable in neither France nor Morocco, but he prefers "a royal exile" because "in spite of the injustices and hypocrisy, he remains in the West because it is a world that corresponds to his way of thinking. It allows him to put into practice the message of the Lord [his father]: the maturation of his soul in the reinterpretation of the past" (1986, 34; my translation). That recuperation continues. But in the view of Hugh Harter, one of Chraibi's English translators, "both Une Enquête au Pays (Flutes of Death, 1985) and La Mère du Printemps (Mother Spring, 1989) indicate that the Driss Ferdi of Passé Simple has
come full cycle and made his peace with himself and both worlds he has straddled so long” (1986, 38).

The route he has taken to achieve this tenuous resolution is suggested by Danielle Marx-Scouras, who notes in 1986 that “in his last two novels, La Mère du Printemps . . . and Naissance à l’Aube (Birth at Dawn, 1986), Chraïbi reinterprets history from the point of view of those whom Memory (as repression moreso than remembrance) has forgotten, and History (as the story of conquerors) has obliterated.” He writes now, she notes, “for all the refugees of the world” (1986, 7). Chraïbi says that the most urgent problem that he feels it necessary to treat in his novels now is “the people—the rising generation,” and for that reason wishes they were written in Arabic (1986, Interview 24).

Nonetheless, he finds himself perfectly at home in France, where he works, knowing now that he always carries a certain Moroccan appreciation in him, as does anyone who spends some time there:

The role of the mother is central. One must never forget a very well-known saying, the word of the Prophet, the word of the Qur’ān, which has applied to Morocco and to Morocco alone: “Paradise is there at the feet of one’s mother.” And this, for Morocco, has been true. And moreover: “Respect for uterine bonds increases one’s life.” And that is something I have rediscovered with a most famous saying of the Prophet. Yes, I am, and we are all—and not only the Maghrebian writers in French, but also the dockworker in Casablanca, the mountain people of Atlas, the poor of Casablanca, the immigrant in Aubervill—we are all Muslims (1986, Interview 26).

Which of his readers in 1954 could have predicted the destination of his journey, the “Mecca” his life had found in 1983:

Well, we, we in the Muslim world, have something phenomenal, I tell you, which is our source, which has not changed at all: it is the Qur’ān. I’d like to speak about it at greater length.

One is greatly surprised that the appearance of Islam causes dread. Yet, it grows—it gains more and more. In France alone there are already, officially, 37,000 converts to Islam. It’s gaining in North Africa, in Asia, in India, where the colonial powers have failed. Because of its view on women, inheritance, of rights, it is a factor for progress. It is not I who says so, it is journalists opposed to Islam who are obliged to give these reports. This is not at all the foundation. Judaism has evolved over the centuries; Christianity even more so. Marxism has evolved. There is something that has never evolved: Qur’ānic law, Islam. It remains as it was; that is, for us in the Arabo-Islamic world, it is newly-born, it is the source. And for me, it is a force: it is my strength (1986, Interview 23–24).

Perhaps Driss Chraïbi can now smile when he reads this book.
Notes

1. Algerian novelist Mohammed Dib notes that “les Algériens élevés dans un milieu musulman considèrent l’introspection comme un peu malsaine. D’un homme plongé dans des reflexions qui paraissent profanes, le proverbe dit: ‘C’est quelqu’un qui mène pâtre les vaches d’Iblis’. . . . La psychanalyse est impensable en Algérie pour l’instant.” Interview with Claudine Acé, 10. [“Algerians raised in a Muslim milieu consider introspection a little unhealthy. Of a man plunged in reflections which seem profane the proverb says, ‘It is someone who leads the cows of Iblis to pasture.’ . . . Psychoanalysis is unthinkable in Algeria for the moment (translation Joan Monegro)].

2. See Isaac Yetiv, “The Evolution,” for a discussion of Chraibi’s development of this character.

3. In a 1976 appendix to the novel Chraïbi writes: “The question has been asked me, and I have asked it of myself, if I am capable now twenty years later of writing such a book, one equally atrocious. It is hard for me to answer, except with another question: does racism still exist in France twenty years later? Are the immigrants who continue to come to work in this ‘so highly civilized’ country still penned up on the edges of society and humankind? Is it still true, as my master Albert Camus stated, that the bacillus of the plague never dies and never disappears?” (The Butts, 124).


5. “Rien, vous entendez, rien ne peut tenir devant cette nudité atroce d’hommes démunis et à l’âme nue et qui veulent leur dignité maintenant et nondemain ou plus tard, comme la leur promet la religion—et savez-vous ce que j’en ai fait, de la religion? Je l’ai enterrée au moins donnera un jour des fruits, de vrais fruits que l’on mangera à belles dents.”

6. Chraïbi’s obvious valorization of the mother is not shared by other contemporaries. Jean Déjeux notes, for example, that “the use of French allows writers to transgress boundaries they might encounter in Arabic. For example, Ben Jelloun admitted that he could not have written L’Enfant de sable in Arabic because the material in the novel is on the order of a heresy against the Koran, religion, and his parents. Only by taking refuge to another language—a form of ‘otherness’—could he overcome the constraints of the parental superego, especially its feminine (maternal) component” (Déjeux 1992, 10).

7. Chraïbi, in fact, falls in line with Jean Déjeux’s observation that “in addition to the expatriate Maghrebian community, numerous internal exiles feel ill at ease in their own countries, especially after the rise of fundamentalism throughout North Africa” (Déjeux 1992, 9).

8. “L’une après l’autre, il posa ses mains sur le sol, à plat, doigts écartés. Bien avant la civilisation ou l’Islam, derrière les événements de l’Histoire, il y avait eu le culte de la terre. De génération en génération et de fuite devant les conquérants de toute race, il s’était perpétué jusqu’à lui, par voie orale. Raho avait fait son devoir, il avait rendu sincèrement hommage au dieu impersonnel des monothéistes. Et maintenant, par les mains et par son siège il était en train de percevoir la terre, d’avaler en lui la force élémentaire et prodigieuse de la
C'était très simple: il lui suffisait de s'ouvrir, comme les racines d'un arbre. La sève était là, la vie, tout au fond."

9. "Cet Islam qui était parvenu jusqu'à lui, Raho, n'était-il pas né là-bas dans le temps, tout là-bas un désert aride, entre le sable et le soleil—et rien d'autre? Comme l'Islam et sa destinée, on sortait nu du ventre de sa mère et on retournait aussi nu dans les entrailles de la mère nourricière, la terre. La peau en était témoin!"

10. "Toute religion, venue d'Orient ou d'Occident ou d'ailleurs, ne lui avait apporté rien d'autre que la pensée. . . . Raho n'en savait rien, n'en avait nulle connaissance."

11. "Ils ont apporté avec eux ce qu'ils appelaient la loi, des livres qu'ils nous ont obligés à lire: le livre des Youdis, celui des Nazaréens, le Coran des islamiques . . . quantité d'autres qu'ils ont prétendus saints et sacrés."

12. "Et, quand ils se sont aperçus que leurs livres étaient usés comme des figues sèches et qu'ils ne pouvaient plus rien en tirer ou presque rien, alors ils ont inventé un autre sortilège: le progrès, la civilisation."


15. "Parlez-moi de l'homme qu'il avait été avant la Révélation, fait de chair et de sang comme vous, illettré comme vous . . . Je ne veux ni mythe ni légende. Uniquement la réalité, concrète. On m'injuria, je blasphémais, j'étais un provocateur, un mécréant, le seul sceptique de ce pays au nom de la raison, on ne pouvait pas ramener un être aussi exceptionnel à notre niveau. Et peu importait leur misère!"

16. "Je la reconnus enfin. Elle était venue me rendre visite, m'avait appelé par mon nom, m'avait demandé de l'argent pour aller prier sur moi à La Mecque. Remonta soudain dans ma mémoire tout mon vieux passé, net, clair, aveuglant dans les moindres détails—ce passé que j'avais enfoui si profondément en moi.