



## Policy Paper

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# Literature against corruption and fanaticism: the writing of Boualem Sansal

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*"Boualem Sansal belongs to a generation of Algerian writers who, three decades after Algerian Independence, denounce the drift of the sociopolitical and economic system in their country that "leaves less and less room for illusions" (Bonn, et al.: 1997 : 206). Gradually, for certain authors, who are steadily growing in number, "referential writing is supplanting formalism" as Jean-Marc Moura noted (2007: 155). The bloody current topicality of the '90s thus inspired Algerian authors like Rachid Mimouni and Rachid Boudjedra to courageously bear witness in a literature firmly rooted in reality. By the last decade of the 20th century, the country had ceased being a model of third-world socialism, nationalism had eroded and the absence of hope compelled increasingly more members of the younger generation to go into self-imposed exile.*

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Boualem Sansal arrived late on the literary scene. He was born in 1949 and initially practiced engineering as a profession, devoting his pen to scientific writing at that time. Later, his station was elevated to that of a high-ranking civil servant but this was before his stand against the Arabization of education and the Islamization of society resulted in reprisals that forced him to resign from his position. Thereafter, his friend and compatriot, the novelist Rachid Mimouni, persisted in encouraging Sansal to try his hand at fiction up until his death in 1995. Thus Boualem Sansal found the literary vein in which he would pursue with flare his work as a critical observer of contemporary life in Algeria. Today Boualem Sansal is considered one of Algeria's most renowned French-language authors, revered as much for his literary talent as his courageous stance on the political situation in Algeria in the postcolonial era. His entire novelistic production is based on a questioning, ever more harrowing, about the Algeria of today and even more so, its future. By denouncing the opportunism and corruption of those in government, the inefficiency of the administration, the rising intolerance and fanaticism, Boualem Sansal acts as spokesman on behalf of his fellow countrymen who can no longer abide their destitution and isolation as victims of the insatiable appetite for power characterizing the political community. The very title of his first novel *Barbarian Oath* (1999, First Novel Award and Tropics Award) heralds an acid vision of the Algerian regime. Published one year later, the book *Kid who was crazy for an empty tree* (Michel Dard Prize) offers a caustic reflection on the political upheaval that followed the war of independence of the 1960s, which ultimately benefitted only the privileged classes. This novel attracted international attention concerning facts that were little-known, or simply ignored, before then. In another book bearing the title *Tell me paradise* (2004), Boualem Sansal revives the centuries-old frame narrative form, which G. Boccaccio introduced in *The Decameron*, to ruthlessly expose his country in crisis after the revolution was rerouted by a band of "patriots".

Another facet of contemporary Algerian society concerns the drama of young migrants with "clipped wings" who dream only of fleeing their country where they have no future. These youths are in fact the subject of the novel *Harraga* (2005). Once they have burned their papers and thus destroyed the documents, the evidence of their identity, this anonymous mass of illegal aliens goes from one danger to the next, to eventually gain passageway across the Mediterranean in order to reach the West, the land of illusions.

The novel *Harraga* is inspired by the migration of individuals, as well as entire communities, from one country to another, one continent to another. Furthermore, an episode representative of the diegesis focalizes, as we shall soon see, on the treacherous migration route taken by so many Africans to reach Europe via Algeria and Morocco. Their existential condition is one of exile – that casts all the disinherited into a new time and space, one beyond fixed origins and individual past, but is instead a space and time that is pure potential, where we witness a perpetuation of the provisional. In this novel Boualem Sansal chooses to tell a story that is “authentic from start to finish, everything true – characters, names, dates, places” (7) through the relationship of two women, Lamia and Chérifa, two generations that cross paths “in the tumult of passing days”. The novelist decided to situate his protagonists in Lamia’s home within walls steeped in history. She is a character endowed with a past that bears the marks, both happy and bitter, of her country’s history. *Harraga* is a novel conceived in four seasons. Thus it is divided into four chapters – each one is preceded by a poem and ends with an epilogue. Under the sign of “harragas”, these “trailblazers” prefer the insecurity of escape and exile to suffering in their homeland “from where we depart more often than we arrive” (109). This book is written in a soberly elegant language that speaks poignantly of a population suffering from profound discontentment, drifting from a world borne along by violent extremes.

Shortly after this novel, Boualem Sansal published a brief and harsh pamphlet called *General Delivery: Algeria* (Gallimard Publications, 2006) with the subtitle “letter of anger and hope to my compatriots”, which was in fact a premonitory title as the book remained outside the borders and outside the reach of the readers it was intended for in the first place. This work by Sansal was aimed exclusively at Algerians. The writer knows that the Revolution that would overthrow the dictatorship in Algeria could never have happened without the participation of the inhabitants of the capital. The book also constitutes a blistering attack on the Algerian government as well as a subversive call to a people’s uprising: “It’s up to us to give our country a legitimate place. You know how to do it, we talk about it all the time amongst ourselves: demolish everything then rebuild from zero”. (74-75)

Released in 2008, the novel *The German’s Village* is in fact a cry of warning against religious fanaticism. With the subtitle (“The Schiller Brothers’ journal”) the writer proposes, right from the paratext, authentic fiction as a novelistic form, situating himself in the intermediary zone between testimony

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(even fictional) and the real to intensify the impact on the receptor. This novel is arguably the most accomplished and profound literary work the author has produced to date. The strength of the book in question is born of the parallel the author establishes between Nazism and Islamism. Once more, the novelist shakes up and upsets his readers by clearheadedly recalling how history's genocides are profoundly interconnected.

Two brothers, Malrich and Rachel Schiller, go about investigating their family's past and through their search, Sansal exposes a poverty-stricken and corrupt Algeria under the rule of terror: "The country is sealed shut like a safe and the motive for this is invariably the same: the more poor, racist and angry people there are, the easier it is to govern the populace (197). The author calls for his fellow countrymen to react and to revolt: "Silence merely perpetuates the crime, relativizes it, closes the door on logic and truth, and instead pulls wide open the door to forgetfulness, only to begin all over again (98)".

With the work entitled "Brief homage to memory. Four thousand and one years of nostalgia", published in 2007, the writer bids us to accompany him on a journey through time and space, that of his people. From the very first chapter, the author establishes the mode of travel. Nostalgia, defined as "homesickness", "a deposit of incredible abundance", will serve as guide. By way of the speleological metaphor the author explores in his writing, we embark on a voyage of genuine introspection, a descent into the depths of History: "Nostalgia is like speleology, a hazardous approach – we enter the self, advancing step by step into the recesses of the soul, personal memory and history, always in the hope of reaching the bottom so that we might then find our way back" (29). In this way, subjectivity is affirmed as the ultimate value, at once the mode and the object of the journey: "So let us now set ourselves in motion, let us give way to our emotions and take off in search of ourselves and what was once our motherland" (45). If nostalgia is a journey deep into the self in order to discover and better know oneself, then it is also collective in scope: "At their side, I was initiated into nostalgia and discovered how much it helps pass the time, relieves us of our sorrows and helps us share our dream to build a common future". This utterance takes on a particular resonance in view of the current situation in Algeria to which Boualem Sansal bears witness unflinchingly.

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