Civilization and Otherness: The Case of Driss Chraibi

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ABSTRACT

Driss Chraibi, the late Moroccan novelist, viewed himself as an "anarchist" and undertook mostly thorny issues: immigration, patriarchy, religion and the cultural conflicts between the West and the Arab world in general. From his first novel *The Simple Past* (1954) to his mid-career novels, such as *La Civilization ma mère* (1972) (*Mother comes of Age*) to his last novel *L'homme qui venait du passé* (2004) (*The Man from the Past*), Chraibi retells fixatedly the French colonization experience in the Maghreb. Above all, Chraibi's entire intellectual trajectory and creative output is haunted by the notion of "civilization," which to him, evokes "otherness." In this article, I show how Chraibi was absorbed by the idea of civilization as he challenged its uses, or rather misuses that inflicted permanent scars on the psyche of North Africans from the Maghreb.

Born in 1926[b] in Mazagan, now El-Jadida, Morocco and died in 2007, Driss Chraibi lived on the edges of French and Moroccan cultures. He was one of the precursors of North African literature written in French in the 1950s. He viewed himself as an "anarchist" and undertook mostly thorny issues: immigration, patriarchy, religion and the cultural conflicts between the West[c] and the Arab world in general. From his first novel *Le Passé simple*, (*The Simple Past*) (1954) to his mid-career novels, such as *La Civilization ma mère* (1972) (*Mother comes of Age*) to his last novel *L'homme qui venait du passé* (2004) (*The Man from the Past*), Chraibi retells fixatedly the French colonization experience in the Maghreb. Above all, Chraibi's entire intellectual trajectory and creative output is haunted by the notion of 'civilization[d],' which, to him, evokes 'otherness.'

The notion of civilization as underlying argument consistently revisits Chraibi's work. The author made it his mission to resist the epistemological centrality and permanence of European authority thematically and aesthetically. As a mode of resistance, he deployed the tool of repetition that is not alien to a number of authors and cultural critics. In his seminars, the late Édouard Glissant used to say that "repetition is a virtue" and made use of it in his various work. In this vein, Ahmad Eqbal says:

> "This concept of repeating the same truth or principle over and over again is a fundamental strategy for questioning power, and ultimately for writing dispossessed people as agents in nationalistic politics. Thus, repetition reinforces a counter view to ideology and stereotyping. It is a counter-knowledge whose ultimate aim is to create and guarantee the surge of critical consciousness." (Youssef Yacoubi, 199).

The recurring theme of civilization and colonization in Chraibi's work is stubbornly articulated through the now shunned binary opposition of European colonizers versus colonized Maghrebians. Admittedly, the binary opposition is narrow and restrictive. It disregards other subjectivities and excludes other possible 'Relation' in the Édouard Glissantian sense. Lately, cultural critics are much keener on applying other critical approaches that include: the transnational, the global, and the transvergent among others[e].

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[b] In his work, the author pokes fun at himself about the uncertainty of his date of birth.

[c] I am using the terms West and Western to refer mainly to the Euro-American blocks that identify with the culture of the capitalist system and some have a history of colonialism.

[d] Raymond Williams defines civilization as opposed to "barbarity in 1772….Williams connects civilization with "the general spirit of Enlightenment, with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development. Civilization expressed this sense of historical process, but also celebrated the associated sense of modernity: and achieved condition of refinement and order." (Williams, Keywords, 48-49)

[e] Daniel Martin Varisco notes: "We need to think outside the binary that binds us to us-versus-them-ism" (*Reading Orientalism*, xvi).

Unfortunately, as a community of nations and peoples, we have not been able to transcend the binary frame of 'Us' versus 'Them'[a]. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said indicates that: "No one can escape dealing with, if not the East/West division, then the North/South one, the have/have-not one, the imperialist/anti-imperialist one, the white/colored one. We cannot get around them all by pretending they do not exist; on the contrary, contemporary Orientalism teaches us a great deal about the intellectual dishonesty of dissembling on that score, the result of which is to intensify the divisions and make them both vicious and permanent." (Said, 1978, 327). This trend is at work in North Africa and the Arab world as a whole between those who are advocating for moderate Islamic governments and those who are backing Islamic extremist governments during the ongoing Arab revolutions that have been known us "Arab Spring."

Similarly, because of the indelible scar of colonialism in North Africa, the "Other" in the collective consciousness of North Africans and Arabs remains the West. (Laroui, 1977, 4; Massad, 42). Would we live to see a world outside this dichotomy? In this respect, Édouard Glissant points out that: "Thought of the 'Other' cannot escape its own dualism until the time when differences become acknowledged." (Glissant, 17). In sum, it is the political landscape as it is and not as it ought to be that create realities that in turn exacerbate the wedge between the North and the South, the West and the Maghreb as in Chraibi's context.

In 1952, Chraibi's *The Simple Past* spilled more ink than any other Moroccan novel. It blasted French colonialism and the Moroccan society and shattered the literary and political scene.[b] Even though Chraibi had consistently denied the claim that he based his protagonist on himself, the two share the same first name as well as a similar educational trajectory. Like Driss Ferdi, Driss Chraibi was sent to France to study chemistry, but he abandoned that track and pursued journalism and eventually a literary career. Driss Chraibi was obsessively tormented by the demons of French civilization or "civilizing mission" that rationalized colonization. Through Driss Ferdi, he vents his anger and frustration at the colonial apparatus. He feels crushed by his father and French "civilization" for compelling him to mimic the European dress code: "I was like a little monkey, dressed in a European style, with a lot of words and sentences in my head. It was then that my rebellion started. It was underground for years. I wondered: -- what have we done Moroccans and Arabs for colonialism to have taken place?" (Chraibi, 1954, 61).

Furthermore, the professed civilizing mission did not provide adequate resources for the colonial educational system to 'civilize' the native population in Morocco and the Maghreb as a whole. The colonizer would be too credulous to educate a population that might rise up to challenge his grip on power in the future. Hargreaves expounds:

> "It was easy for the European to assume or hope (without actually ensuring) that what was good for him would also benefit the native. Such an assumption was facilitated not only by the convenience of taking the interests of others to coincide with the attainment of one's own objectives, but also by the conviction that European civilization was so absolutely superior to other life-styles that any modification in the general direction of Western ways would be a blessing for the natives." (Hargreaves, 1981, 15).

However, there was a tiny segment of Moroccan national elite that received a European education. This group had to play on both sides of the colonial fence to educate their children. They served as a bridge between the colonizer/ex-colonizer and the newly independent nation and some of them even played a crucial role in the decolonization movement. Driss Ferdi receives the king's blessing before his trip to Paris to continue his studies and his father maps out his future: "We are sending him to Paris. He will come back … and he will be one of the leaders of the ruling party" (Chraibi, 1954, 270-71). These future leaders benefitted the colonizer and perpetuated new forms of neo-colonialism.

[a] See Hamid Bahri and Francesca Canadé Sautman, "Historical Crossings, Dis-Orienting the Orient, and Amin Maalouf's uses of the Postcolonial 'Medieval'". Nadia Altschul and Kathleen Davis, eds. *Medievalisms in the (Post) Colony*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

[b] *The Simple Past* caused its author much anguish; his compatriots accused him of betrayal for disclosing "secrets" of his own society to a Western readership and in the language of their oppressor. Abdelkébir Khatibi, another Moroccan writer, came to his defense, but the reader can infer from his statement that Chraibi is guilty of something: "It is not because one stays in his country that he avoids betraying it or being used."« Ce n'est pas parce qu'on reste dans son pays que l'on évite de trahir ou d'être utilisé.» *Souffles*, 3, troisième trimestre, 1966, 1.Questions about *The Simple Past* followed Chraibi throughout his life work

This deliberate policy challenges the French ideal of "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity"[a] that formed the foundation of the French Republic. Édouard Glissant considers this formula rooted in the idea of the "Nation" as a conquering agent and as the embodiment of universalism that seeks to dominate and hinder the process of "la Relation." "la Relation" is non-hierarchical and shuns universalism. (Glissant, 33).

In *Vu, lu, entendu, mémoires* (*Seen, Read, Heard, Memoirs*) (1998), Chraibi picks up where he left in *The Simple Past* by reflecting on the French national slogan. When Driss Ferdi is tested at school on "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," he questions the exam itself and its motives. He wonders if the idea of fraternity is aimed at people who look like the French and share their culture or if it focuses only on "Others." Are the North Africans who live in France included in the principle of equality? Or do they only conjure up "sun, couscous, dirty immigrants ... belly dancing, souks, … shanty town, pashas, factories, dates, muezzins, mint tea, fantasias, tents, djellabas, scarves, turbans, snake charmers, public story tellers …" (Chraibi, 1954, 191).

After the failure of genuine integration into the core of French society, Maghrebian immigrants are wary of fully embracing French 'civilization' primarily because the odds of being entirely accepted are slim to none. They are the silent invisible creatures whose presence is only justified by their performing the most abject of jobs that no Frenchman could imagine doing. Contrary to their European counterparts, who preserve their cultural heritage in the Maghreb thanks to their strong economic and political backing and their sense of privilege, these immigrants are vulnerable once in the wolf's mouth, to borrow the expression of Kateb Yacine.[b] (Hargreaves, 2007, xv-xvi)**.** Ironically, these days, there is an influx of French nationals in Morocco who have taken roots in cities, such as Marrakech where some of them have created gated communities.

As for Maghrebians, they journey to the north primarily for economic reasons. They cross the Mediterranean ocean to work and save some money to buy a home or start up a business in their homeland. These vulnerable immigrants are often directed to dwell in uninviting quarters and toil in sordid conditions without the least job security (Hargreaves, 2007, 49). In *The Butts* (1955), Chraibi puts the entire French civilization on trial and lays bare its myths and paradoxes highlighting the divide that exists between the Europeans and the "Others." The North African immigrants in Nanterre, and Genevilliers, France, survive in abject conditions, wretchedness and debauchery. They are ostracized by both the thirty two families who live in the neighborhood, and society that shuns them and contributes nothing to their well-being. Yalaan Waldik, (which means damn your parents), the protagonist from Kabyle, Algeria, scolds French "civilization" for insulating and compartmentalizing people, a theme that Chraibi deals with in his novel *La Foule* (*The Crowd*). Even though Yalaan Waldik fled a desperate situation in his homeland, he maintains his pride; when a worker-priest told him about the immigrants' past: "they were so attractive in their burnouses and riding on their camels," he felt insulted, but ignored the provocation.

Except for Raus, these immigrants are rarely depicted as individuals, but simply as a pack or a crowd along with the fear and imminent danger that those images evoke. The immigrants are homogeneously stigmatized as North Africans. When one of them is suspected of committing a crime, he is reported to the police and referred to as the "North African." The novel is also inundated with images of blood, incarceration,[c] and destruction. In the writing of the 19th century French novelist and statesman, Pierre (pseudonym of Julien Viaud), one finds a similar attitude towards the natives of Morocco where the words "crowd" and "mass" are recurrent. He paints North Africans, particularly Moroccans in his diary as being docile and naïve: "It is a bit somber, this empire of Maghreb, and they even cut some heads from time to time; I am compelled to admit, however I have met only hospitable people, perhaps they are a bit impenetrable, but are smiling and courteous even among people and the crowds." (Loti, 18)

Chraibi's probe of civilization reaches its pinnacle when he adopts its concept in the title of his 1972 novel *La Civilisation, ma mère* (translated as *Mother comes of Age*, 1984). Even though it captures the homage paid to the mother, the title, unfortunately, does not do justice to that nuance in the original where the term

[a] It is France's national slogan which President Barack H. Obama mentioned during his town hall meeting in Strasbourg, France, April 3rd, 2009.
[b] Kateb Yacine refers to the French language as "La gueule du loup" when his father enrolls him in a French school.
[c] In Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma*, it starts and ends with a scene about incarceration of Lakhdar who escapes from his jail cell: "Lakhdar s'est échappé de sa cellule." (*Nedjma*, 11, 255). [Lakhdar has escaped from his cell].
[d] To his defense, Suetoshi Funaoka says that "Loti is neither colonialiste nor imperialiste' At the same time, Funaoka paradoxically adds Loti shared racist sentiments with his contemporaries. 150. Alec Hargreaves bluntly confirms that Loti's "outlook was far more in tune with the colonial spirit than … others have suggested" (Hargreaves, 1981, 2).

'civilization' calls to mind colonization. The mother challenges the French colonial empire and confronts its civilization, which she re-appropriates. She gains knowledge of the political, economic and social realities of the outside world and supplants the father and her two sons. She also becomes a powerful spokesperson of women's rights and the downtrodden in the world and eventually becomes an educator and a leading protester. Similarly, Chraibi the writer takes pride in the fact that the West was unable to mold his thinking to suit its desires. He says that from the beginning, he was bent on disapproving of anything the French taught him. At the same time, he faults the Arabs for not having kept their cultures as the Berbers did. According to him, countering Western civilization should be done carefully by sifting through the past and selecting what worked to build on it and pave the way for a promising future shaped by freedom. Chraibi tried to reconnect with his past and history through his own investigation and not the history that was documented by the colonizer that tried to "civilize" [the indigenous people] according to the French manual of History" (Chraibi, 1998, 10).

Chraibi contests the West's monopoly on civilization and its exclusion as he highlights the contributions of the Arab-Muslim world to human achievements not in the framework of superiority, but rather in the context of cultural exchanges that took place between Westerners and Arab-Muslims. He praises the efforts of those who preserve the identity of Muslim scholars whose names have been westernized or in some cases erased altogether from the annals of innovators and contributors to the world heritage (Chraibi, 1998, 86).[a] In *Le Monde à côté* (2001) *The World Next Door*, Chraibi revives the memory of the Berber leader, Tariq Ibn Zyad[b]. He also named his own son Tarik. As an intellectual, Chraibi is no longer intimidated by Europeans because, as he says: "its writers have conversed with ours for centuries." [c] In fact, he defends European authors as having nothing in common with the colonialists that ruled North Africa from Rabat or Paris. (Chraibi, 1998, 34)

Chraibi takes issue with how civilization dehumanizes. He particularly points out the atrocities that took place during the American war in Iraq and how the human toll and carnage were disguised in "civilized terms." In *The Man from the Past*, the author questions the rationale behind holding captive a billion people because of the actions of one person: Bin Laden who has since been killed by the American forces in Pakistan. [d] Already in (*Succession ouverte* (1962) *Heirs to the Past*, his sequel to his first novel, Chraibi reveals his skepticism on the misuse of 'civilization': "I have seen the West preach humanism and act cruelly." (177).

Nevertheless, Chraibi is wary of any system and he strives to remain independent and not succumb to any ideology even that of the oppressed. He truly exemplified what the late Edward Said notes in *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994): "One of the shabbiest of all intellectual gambits is to pontificate about abuses in someone else's culture and excuse exactly the same practices in one's own." (Youssef Yacoubi, 92). What was the hallmark of Chraibi was his fearless criticism of political leaders in the Maghreb and Muslim world in general. He vehemently blames the autocratic rulers for political stagnation and their societies' malaise that has forced their populations to flee their homeland and allow colonization. Chraibi uses Simone, the protagonist's lover in *The Butt*s, to deliver, one of the most thought-provoking and disturbing lines in the entire novel as she admits that Europeans exploited the native people of North Africa and that their "civilization [caused] despair" yet she mostly denounces North Africans for bringing about a history of colonialism at the hands of the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Visigoths, the Vandals, the Arabs, the Turks and the French. Additionally, the journey toward freedom and genuine democracy for Maghrebians and other Arabs alike is long and arduous. The Arab revolutions that started in Tunisia in 2011 have born some of their limited fruits: ridding the North African region of tyrants in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia thus far. At the same time, it seems that they replaced the ruling tyrants with extremists and zealots.

Paradoxically, readers might be surprised when Chraibi relates the story of when he lands at Mohamed V airport in Casablanca, Morocco, and how he deliberately selects a cab that he describes as "not too civilized" (Chraibi, 1998, 41). Perhaps the author meant someone who has not been westernized in his attire. Yet, no

[a] Chraibi embarks on a mission to interrogate and revive the past memories and wonders why Abdel Karim, the fierce leader from the North who mounted brave military campaigns against the Spaniards, is not included in the dictionary. 86
[b] The name Gibraltar, the mountain between Spain and Morocco, is derived from this soldier's name, meaning the rock/mountain of Tariq.
[c] « Le monde des Européens, ne me faisait plus peur. Ses écrivains conversaient avec les nôtres depuis des siècles. » (V.L.E., 34).
[d] Chraibi is referring to the backlash that ensued after the attacks on the United States (New York City and Washington D.C. metropolitan area) on September 11, 200; Muslims and those who are thought to look like "Muslims," were attacked and it seemed like the entire Islamic faith has been on trial and the Muslim community has faced xenophobia.

matter how trivial this remark might be, it reveals the unwitting complicity of the author. On few occasions, Chraibi was accused of playing into the hands of his Western audience, such as when Tahar Ben Jelloun, another Moroccan author, said that he disliked his novel because he depicted the mother in *Mother Comes of Age* as a smoker just to show to what extent she was free.

In most of his late works, the reflective Chraibi re-examines and expands on the issues that he undertook before as he reaffirms his positions. Chraibi is not afraid to give the West its due. He understands the relative freedom that an author such as himself enjoys in the West. In *The World Next Door* Chraibi wonders if the West should be credited with the freedom that authors like him benefit from to freely publish and be able to contest History. In his interview with Abdeslam Kadiri *Une Vie sans concessions* (*A Life without Concessions*, 18), Chraibi criticizes Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's Prime minister for trying too hard to gain full membership in the European Union. After his intellectual relationship with François Mitterrand, the late French President, who thanked him for writing in French, Chraibi did ask him to become a naturalized French citizen under his watch. An act, which may seem opportunistic, but again Chraibi could have gained naturalization decades before his death, but he had never aspired to that end. In *The World Next Door* (2001) Chraibi accuses some of his compatriots for selling out to the Western readership that was accustomed to reading Orientalized texts and exotic novels or what he called "orientalomania." (Chraibi, 2001, 216).

Chraibi lived his life as a principled intellectual who sacrificed wealth and fame to remain faithful to his ideals. He refused to be corrupted by any institution or government. He confessed that he was afraid of being pigeonholed in a specific category of writers. He declined the much sought-after French literary prizes, such as Renaudot prize for literature and lived a modest life with no excesses.

Even though Chraibi's haunting by civilization did not fade with time, his late work allowed him to look back and reiterate his views. His work shifted from indifference toward Islamic traditions to conciliatory. With *L'homme du livre* (1995), translated as *Muhammad*, Chraibi comes full circle. According to Jacqueline Arnaud, in Chraibi: "takes place the struggle between the values of Islam that he did never, deep down, really deny and the values of the mechanical civilization" (Arnaud, 263). Further, the author's novels are peopled with North African characters, his plots are mostly about Moroccans whether in exile or in their homeland. Chraibi has remained until his death fiercely critical of French legacy of colonialism and its civilization. The author did not pass an opportunity to reaffirm his bond with his motherland and his burial attests to that. Even if he died in France and lived most of his life in exile, he asked to be buried in a common cemetery in Casablanca. It was his ultimate reconciliation with his homeland to "rest his bones" as he had often repeated in his work.

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