

AMIN MAALOUF

(1949-)



Amin Maalouf is a Lebanese living in France since the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War. His literary work ranges from fiction and essays to opera librettos and he has been, since 2011, a member of the French Academy.

He is a living example of a *borderline* person, as he considers himself to be, for being crossed by several fracture lines (ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural), the author knows he is in a privileged position to act as a courier and to help launching bridges of dialogue and understanding between cultures, seeing in literature, especially in fiction, a territory of choice due to the symbolic mediation it enables. His work proposes, in the image of other modern Arab writers, a rereading of History that ponders the East-West tensions and allows for to new interpretations, stemming from what in the officially enshrined History might be a doubt or an equivocation, thus enabling a new kind of perspective and a new form of knowledge.

In the *maaloufian* work, Literature and History combine in the configuration of historical frames of coexistence where, through a positive mythification of History strategies of identitarian reconfiguration, the reader accedes to platforms of reflection on the world and the relations of strength that determine its movement. The chosen contexts follow a logic of decentralisation and imbalance in societies in turmoil and in the process of rethinking themselves in which, naturally, the differences and the confrontation of ideas stand out more vividly and where, balancing between cultures and different world perspectives, the individual is led to rethink himself in an individual and collective fermenting exercise. This

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different angle of perspectivation was first used in *Les croisades vues par les arabes* (1983) [*The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*] and started a cycle of reconsidering the relations between Europe and the Arab world.

Frequently bipolarised, which is understandable in a life journey framed between an Arab social environment and a school education with a European matrix, the approach taken by Amin Maalouf provides, however, enough substance for reflection on the frictions that have been opposing West to East and that have been at the root of several extremisms and identitarian fervours that plague contemporaneity.

Critical of the Arab world with respect to its persisting blindness to the world's evolution and to the crystallisation of denial, Maalouf does not, however, exempt Europe from guilt in the Middle East's obscurantist drift. In fact, the author points at the haphazard borders' delimitation, executed by European nations in the aftermath of armed conflicts and the European greed (and North American, too) fed by oil, determining power politics games that better-favoured Western interests, even if at the expense of the collapse of consistent efforts to democratise Arab societies and of their cultural and civilizational development (2009: 27).

Albeit clearly a Europeanist, his belief in human and democratic values that erected the old continent to be the world's civilizational beacon, the writer does not spare the Western powers of the accusation of having poisoned the West-East relations, hindering the human ability to manage diversity and to open up to a collective future underpinned by common values (*idem*: 52). The fighting and reformist spirit of grandfather Botros in *Origines* (2004), [Origins] of Benjamin Lesage, in *Samarcande* (1988) [*Samarkand*] and of Tanios, in *Le Rocher de Tanios* (1993) [*The Rock of Tanios*], defending a modern and lay education system, the rejection of centuries-old, obscurantist, development crippling traditions, are efforts that are blocked, not only by the Arab world's atavistic blindness, but also by the Western powers' political and economic interests, unable to understand the hypocrisy of repressing the values they boast of, when the possibility of them dominating the world is at stake. The Arabs' failure in their effort to modernise, namely in the implementation of the Constitution in old

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Persia (*Samarcande*), in achieving an ethnic, religious, peaceful and reconciliatory coexistence and sharing (*Les Echelles du Levant* – 1996) [*Ports of Call*] and in the cultural and ecumenical dialogue (*Léon l'Africain* – 1986 [*Leo the African*]; *Le Périple de Baldassare* – 2000 [*Balthasar's Odissey*]) is frequently attributed to the hypocrisy of the European institutions that, acting on the double impulse of civilizing and dominating the world, do not understand that ethnic or religious communitarianism cannot constitute a legitimate basis of political representation, because it runs counter the spirit of democracy and citizenship (2009: 58).

The writer accuses Europe of, in the last decades, having lost compass and, following the fascination with the fall of the Berlin Wall, of having closed over itself, narcissistically, in self-contemplation, ingenuously thinking that, with the Soviet collapse, democracy would spread out all over the world (*idem*: 18). Such an illusion, in the author's perspective, would have done away with the democratic debate, henceforth taken as being redundant, which would have determined a drift from the ideological issues to the identitarian ones, something which Maalouf is especially sensitive to and has comprehensively explained in his first essay, *Les Identités Meurtrières* (1998) [*In the Name of Identity*].

In spite of his painful and critical vision (2009: 62, 64) and of clearly displaying some reserve to his optimism, Maalouf believes in Europe's capability to regenerate itself, since he considers that it knows how to gauge the risks and that it possesses the needed ethics and institutions to successfully accomplish its aggregating project. Above all, the writer defends that the equanimity amongst peoples and cultures, transcending their cultural diversity, is the right course on the way towards an *ethical motherland* (*idem*: 310) that supplants all essentialist impulses. His faith is particularly rooted in Man's potentialities and in his adventurous and restless vocation. For that reason, too, the praise of the journey and the crossing rises as a fundamental topic of his fiction, in such a way that all of his characters undertake long journeys, aware that confinement to a single place becomes smothering and that the road brings knowledge and inner wealth. The sentence "Ma patrie est caravane" [my motherland is a caravan], in *Léon l'Africain* (1986: s/p), is emblematic of the *maaloufian* understanding that men are defined by an itinerary and it is rooted in the conviction that

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deterritorialization shakes cultural foundations, shifts the perspective and opens up intercultural bridges.

It is in the restlessness he ascribes to the European man that Maalouf anchors the hope that nations will be able to transcend the moral collapse civilization has plunged into (2009:32) and that they will reinvent themselves, not at the cost of a selfish and denying moral relativism, but through an always refreshing wager on culture, literature and teaching, that the author elected, early on, as the access doors to solid and reconciliatory intercultural bonds.

Brief Anthology

«La Perse est malade [...]. Il y a plusieurs médecins à son chevet, modernes, traditionnels, chacun propose ses remèdes, l'avenir est à celui qui obtiendra la guérison. Si cette révolution triomphe, les *mollahs* devront se transformer en démocrates ; si elle échoue, les démocrates devront se transformer en *mollahs*.»

in *Samarcande* (1988: 227)

«Contrairement à l'idée reçue, la faute séculaire des puissances européennes n'est pas d'avoir voulu imposer leurs valeurs au reste du monde, mais très exactement l'inverse : d'avoir constamment renoncé à respecter leurs propres valeurs dans leurs rapports avec les peuples dominés. Tant qu'on n'aura pas levé cette équivoque, on courra le risque de retomber dans les mêmes travers.

La première de ses valeurs, c'est l'universalité, à savoir que l'humanité est une. Diverse, mais une. De ce fait, c'est une faute impardonnable de transiger sur les principes fondamentaux sous l'éternel prétexte que les autres ne seraient pas prêts à les adopter. Il n'y a pas des droits de l'homme pour l'Europe, et d'autres droits de l'homme pour l'Afrique, l'Asie, ou pour le monde musulman.»

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in *Le dérèglement du monde* (2009: 62-63)

«[...] Je voudrais que l'Europe donne l'exemple de la coexistence, aussi bien entre ses peuples fondateurs qu'à l'égard des immigrés qu'elle accueille; je voudrais qu'elle se préoccupe bien plus de sa dimension culturelle, qu'elle organise bien mieux sa diversité linguistique; je voudrais qu'elle résiste à la tentation d'être un 'club' des nations chrétiennes, blanches et riches, et qu'elle ose se concevoir comme un modèle pour l'ensemble des hommes ; et je voudrais aussi qu'elle ose bâtir, sur le plan institutionnel, une seule entité démocratique, un équivalent européen des États-Unis d'Amérique, avec des États dotés d'une plus grande spécificité culturelles et qui se préoccuperaient de la défendre et de la promouvoir, mais avec des dirigeants fédéraux élus le même jour sur l'ensemble du continent, et dont l'autorité soit reconnue par tous; oui, je m'inquiète des frilosités que je perçois, et de certaines myopies morales.

Mais ces réserves que je formule ne diminuent en rien ma foi en la valeur exemplaire du «laboratoire» que représente la construction européenne à l'étape cruciale où se trouve l'humanité.»

in *Le dérèglement du monde* (2009: 310-311)

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