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Revised title:

“Houellebecq’s Compelling Repulsiveness: Post-secularism, Aesthetics, and Whiteness in Soumission”

Revised abstract:

In this article, I read Michel Houellebecq’s Soumission (2015) as a post-secular novel that comments—even if extremely polemically—on the fraught relationship between aesthetics, and notably literary aesthetics, on the one hand, and secularism (and its intendant other, religiosity), on the other. I argue that Houellebecq purposefully nurtures an ambivalence as regards the narrative intention of his novel: that is, does Soumission parody stereotypes about male misogynist chauvinism, both supposedly ‘French’ and supposedly ‘Muslim’? Or does it praise Islam and mock French republican values, or vice versa? Ultimately, I claim that Soumission forces its readers to engage in the oversimplified yet vexed terrain, which pits the largely undifferentiated demographic category of Arab/Muslim/Islamic against a French republican exigency to secularity, or laïcité. Ultimately, Soumission demands that its readers decide for themselves how the novel functions ethically, and as such obliges them to prendre parti, to reveal themselves and their sentiments and positionalities as regards the fraught and injurious debates around Islam (but also Jewishness and Asianness), colonial histories, and Frenchness. In engaging an intimate and sustained intertextuality with the work of late nineteenth century writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, but also to lesser but significant extent with Albert Camus, Houellebecq provides hints into what his intentionality in Soumission might be: notably, to suggest that aesthetic theory, misogyny, a colonial history, racism, and French secularism (laïcité) are complexly imbricated one in the other. Although most critics thus far have read Soumission’s futuristic imaginary of France as led by a “première tentative d’islam politique” under the leadership of “le Parti des musulmans de France” (Houellebecq 2015, 51) as undesirable, my reading of Soumission argues that Soumission’s offensive feat is to sketch the inexplicitly torturous relationship between and among aesthetic theory, race, religion, philosophy, especially as debated upon by ‘French’ and more generally ‘European’ intellectuals. Finally, as I shall suggest in the conclusion, the novel invites readers familiar with Houellebecq’s popularity and success on the French literary scene, perhaps despite themselves, to judge whether or not Houellebecq has undergone a veritable change-of-heart as regards his heavily mediatized purported Islamophobia.

Submission as a Formal Feat

Soumission, a novel by Michel Houellebecq, enacts its title upon its reader, forcing us as readers to quite literally ‘submit’ to the logic of “submission.” For the first-person narrator François, such submission seems inextricably linked to both the sexual submission of one human to another, as well as the existential submission to of the human to the existential (Houellebecq, 260; 276). Soumission deliberates on the various spaces in which a human submits to another: religious spaces, whether benevolently or diabolically connoted, or as “apolitical miracles of grace” that on
the surface seem indifferent to religious sentiment (Gagnier, 421) and whose expression in Franco-Germanic thought has often been associated with the aesthetic (Houellebecq, 260). Although both cultural and gender studies scholar Mohammed Amadeus Mack and political analyst John Rosenthal read Houellebecq’s title as “symboliz[ing] both Muslims’ attitudes in regard to their religion as well as the capitulation of Westerners faced with its force”,² I suggest that Houellebecq’s reference to submission is one that is much more focused on the white, male French bourgeois subject. In fact, in gesturing heavily to the late nineteenth century French-Dutch writer Joris-Karl Huysmans’ and notably his two most well-known fictional protagonists—Jean Floressas des Esseintes, a dandy, esthete, and libertin, from À Rebours (1884); or, Durtal, who populates several of Huysmans’ later ‘Catholic’ novels—Houellebecq’s novel Soumission quite deliberately states its intention to deliberate on an “esthétique spiritualiste” (Smeets, 73), interrogating its relationship to religiosity and/or spirituality.

Yet, Soumission almost immediately undercuts what seems to be such a seemingly highbrow literary project: without shame, Soumission proposes that French republicanism and political Islam share a common space: that of misogyny. In a sense, the novel’s premise is nothing more degrading than to suggest misogyny as a lieu commun, which promises to solve the seemingly irresolvable Huntingtonian “clash of civilizations” between a Christian ‘West’ and its present-day secular sensibilities, on the one hand, and the Islamic ‘Orient’ on the other.⁴ As literary scholar David Spieser-Landes argues, Houellebecq’s gesture is “clairement ironique” (Spieser-Landes, 52). That is, Houellebecq delivers his readers all of the prosaicness implied in the phrase lieu commun, which refers to a total absence of originality, a platitude (“lieu commun”). The question however is to what end? Does Houellebecq deliver a cold plate of reality in his readers’ faces: namely that misogyny really is the only means to bring peoples together? Or does he instead probe us with the banality of an age-old trope so as to challenge us to find something less patronizing as a means to resolve the “clash” between supposedly Christianly and Islamically informed societies? Or, in putting forth the banality of the most stereotypically misogynist behavior does he ask us to meditate on the utter absurdity of holding on to the notion of Frenchness, one that despite its twentieth-century renown feminist literary history, continues to be predicated on a persistent male chauvinism? In short, Houellebecq’s novel operates the reductive stereotypes that assert that Islam oppresses women, while all the while laying bare the misogyny of French republicanist behavior, at least amongst its intellectual elites.

Part of this article’s work then is to understand what at once attracts readers to Soumission, but also makes them extremely uncomfortable in admitting an attraction to the novel.⁵ On the surface, what seems to most trouble Soumission’s commentators is the idea that political Islam shall indeed replace, overtake, or merge with the values of French republicanism.⁶ Most commentators thus far have read Soumission as a sort of dystopic, or at least realpolitik endgame for both French republicanism and any sort of feminist sensibility, regardless of whether or not the ‘readers’ in question see themselves—or are seen—as monolithic dichotomous identities: for example, French republican, secular, on the one hand; and Muslim, on the other, leaving little room for non-Muslim individuals who practice Judaism or Christianity, French-Arabs who trace Asian⁷ or Jewish origins, or Arabs of Muslim background who are non-practicing.⁸ Scholars such as Regenia Gagnier and David Spieser-Landes argue that Soumission must be considered to reflect a certain “contemporariness,”⁹ which itself can only be understood by comparing Houellebecq to
a ‘long’ twenty-first century history of religion and secularism in France. To Gagnier’s and Spesier-Landes’ analyses, I contribute a reading that focuses on how Houellebecq quite self-referential narrative teases in the vexed question of colonialism as related to the racialized and ultimately debilitating relationship between religion and sexuality.¹⁰

To be clear, I do not seek to justify or provide approval for Houellebecq’s polemical and often injurious behavior as a public persona, but rather to show that his novel Soumission is so well read because it provocatively and incisively asks its readers to do the hard work in thinking through what Mack has argued is the inextricable relationship in France between and among gender, race, religion, secularism, gender, sexuality, and nation. As much as Houellebecq’s Soumission might seem an odd intellectual bed fellow for Mack’s research on early twenty-first century France in Sexagon: Muslims, France, and the Sexualization of National Culture (2017), in fact, the novel illustrates Mack’s scholarly deliberations on whiteness as related to the ideas associated with Islam and Arabness. I argue that even if offensive, or perhaps because of its offensiveness, Houellebecq’s Soumission may be read as an exercise in (autofictional) self-reflexive Critical Whiteness Studies. In particular, Soumission offers its readers a rather honest (if incomplete and bitingly sardonic) interrogation of how French intellectuals—those who see themselves as possessing “la vie d’un Occidental moyen” (Houellebecq, 207)—have come to imbue the word aesthetic with a meaning, which is at once highly gendered and racialized. In other words, Houellebecq’s novel popularizes quite shunned scholarly work about how Frenchness—and more generally Europeanness—are predicated on a myth of Europeanness,¹¹ which itself relies on a particularly condescending relationship to both Arabness and Jewishness.¹² As I shall suggest further on, the novel’s intimate engagement with Huysmans’ fin de siècle œuvre reveals the inextricable interdependence between and among “(sexual) modernity” (Mack, 258), French secularism (or laïcité), and also the often eschewed triangular relationship formed by ethnicity, race, and religion. Regardless of his intention, Houellebecq takes on the question of ethnicity and race, and notably whiteness, as topics which for so long have figured as quintessentially taboo among post-racial or “race neutral” French intellectuals.¹³

Conversions? Huysmans and Houellebecq
If this article argues that Soumission puts forth the notion of the aesthetic as built on the precarious foundations of a misogynist pretense to whiteness, then it behooves us to understand how the novel deploys its quite hefty intertextuality to the life and work of Joris-Karl Huysmans, whom the novel’s narrator François describes as “comme un ami” (Houellebecq, 12). A first point of commonality between the two writers is that both Huysmans’s and Houellebecq’s fiction is to some extent auto-fictional. As Edith Hartnett points out in her discussion of Huysmans’ À Rebours, to “call this a novel would be to torture the word.” She argues that instead it is “a sort of manifesto, without a program but implying certain necessary political and social choices, as does French Decadent aesthetics generally.”¹⁴ That is, by inserting rather self-referential experiences into their fiction, it may be argued that both Huysmans and Houellebecq engage in the rather messy work that is the self-reflexive exercise of more general social commentary. Both Huysmans and Houellebecq feature protagonists who might be described at some level as auto-fictional, whereby certain aspects of the author’s real-life persona become a quite important part of their fictional writing: for example, Huysmans’ conversion to Catholicism in 1892 becomes a major
topic of his Catholic trilogy (1891-98), or his last novel _L'Oblat_ (1903); or Houellebecq’s purported anti-Islamic sentiment, for which he went to court (and was acquitted) in 2002, is presumably a context for _Soumission’s_ praise of Islam.\(^{15}\) It is in this vein of conflating in part the author with his male protagonists that we are meant to understand Huysmans’ conversion to Catholicism, as well as Houellebecq’s possible (and questionable) conversion from Islamophobe to Islamophile, and even “islamogauchiste” (Houellebecq, 273).

Yet, it is also of value to examine what conversion meant for Huysmans’ more general aesthetic intellectual project. That is, Huysmans’ conversion from dandyist sensualist to ascetic Catholic may only superficially be understood as a complete about-face in his moral behavior. In 1892, after having written the dandyist novel _À Rebours_ (1884), Huysmans converted to Catholicism, at which point he dedicated himself to the arduous task of adapting his writing practice to his new religious fervor. He became for all intents and purposes, to draw on the title of one of his later novels an “oblate,” a word which designates a layperson or clergy, who lives in society, but is not a “professed” monk or nun and who has “individually affiliated themselves with a monastic community.”\(^{16}\) Huysmans scholar Marc Smeets explains that after Huysmans’ conversion, one of Huysmans’ preoccupations was to adapt his writing practice to serve an “esthétique spiritualiste.”\(^{17}\) Smeets explains that Huysmans sought to “à tout prix conserver son outil” (Smeets, 78) while all the while using his talent as a writer to repudiate “la vaine existence’ que mènent les hommes de lettres, tel est, selon Huysmans, le destin d’un auteur converti, d’un auteur religieux” (Smeets, 75). Moreover, as nineteenth-century scholars Christian Berg and Maarten van Buuren have argued, despite his conversion from libertinage to Catholicism, Huysmans’ quest never diverged: that is, throughout his writing, both fictional and non-fictional, sought to tease out and nurture the mystical.\(^{18}\) Huysmans’ most libertine phases understood the esthetic as a sensual quest to actualize “les consolantes maximes de Schopenhauer”\(^{19}\): namely the idea that only the aesthetic experience offers temporary relief from the pain of existence. In fact, Huysmans’ turning away from naturalism as a legitimate novelistic project towards “surnaturalism” (Van Buuren, 117) and “decadence” (Van Buuren, 116) constituted a deliberate effort to merge the aesthetic with the spiritually mystical (Berg, 39), even in what we may consider to be its most unlikely of spaces: the “riddecks” [brothels] of Antwerp or the “maisons closes” of mid-nineteenth century Paris (Berg, 31-33). The question then beckons: to what extent was Huysmans’ conversion an actual change-of-heart, or rather an alternative means to pursue relief from the suffering of “bourgeois” existence through the mystical, when his belief in the non-religiously aesthetic had failed (Huysmans, _À Rebours_, 316-17)?

Decadence here is to be understood as a multilayered process in which the description of the physical, social, and a more abstract notion of reality offers a means to transcend the pain of human existence. Marten van Buuren’s study of Huysmans’ essays on art and art criticism reveals that although Huysmans at first admired the French naturalist novelistic enterprise (i.e. Zola), in the end Huysmans rejected it as insufficient. Van Buuren writes:

> Il découvre petit à petit cette nouvelle voie au moment où il se tourne vers certains artistes dont l’œuvre contient selon lui les germes d’un art post-impressionniste. Cette voie, il l’indique pour le moment par le nom de « surnaturalisme » (terme qu’il n’utilise d’ailleurs que comme adjectif : « surnaturel » ou « super-naturel ») et il entend par là une esthétique
And for her part, Gagnier argues that both Huysmans’ and Houellebecq’s writing exhibits an openness to experience. That is, it is not so much that we must understand Huysmans and Houellebecq as unabashed miserabilist, disenchanted hedonists, but rather that they (and their protagonists) are open to seeking transcendence across various experiences: “religious conversion, introspection, apolitical miracles of grace—the so-called Decadence—that seemed best exemplified by Huysmans” (Gagnier, 421).

In fact, it is in his state of oblate that Huysmans writes some of his most refined art criticism. In his consideration of Dutch sculptor Claus Sluter’s Mourners of Dijon Huysman’s protagonist Durtal lingers on Moses, because unlike the other figures such as David or Zacharias, he does not see an attempt to replicate under the guise of Biblical mourners the capitalist desires of the mercantilist society which commissioned the work (i.e. “Ce David avait la placide figure d’un Hollandais blond en tirant sur le roux, d’un bon bourgeois un peu soufflé.”) Rather, Durtal reads (and receives) relief in the extremity of Moses, this “figure d’orage qu’on sentait sur le point d’éclater,” a sculpture whose “allure presque surhumaine” reflects back onto those who look upon him the guilt that they should feel for their wrongs. That is, Sluter’s Moses does not possess a “sentiment plus religieux” than the others (Huysmans, L’Oblat, 244); instead, “il semblait écouter les excuses embarrassées des tribus coupables, prêt moins à pardonner qu’à chattier” (Huysmans, L’Oblat, 239). The work then of a Huysmanien-Houellebecquan work of art is to make its spectators aware of their behavior, force them to become aware of their parti pris. Perhaps the forcefulness of such an “allure presque surhumaine” delivers onlookers from their angst, for a moment; or, perhaps there is something mystical to the œuvre. But mostly, the artistic or literary œuvre, in its extremity, forces the receivers of the objet d’art to witness a “super-natural” version of their reality, and as such forces them to take account of their behavior. At the end of L’Oblat, despite Durtal’s plea to God, his skepticism as regards “la schlague divine” persists (Huysmans, L’Oblat, 323). Similarly, at the end of Soumission, despite François’ aspirations otherwise, his hopes that his conversion resolve any sort of angst remain at best tenuous, for the entire last chapter consists of an internal monologue in the conditional tense, in which he finally concludes, “Je n’aurais rien à regretter” (Houellebecq, 300).

What is clear, as per Gagnier’s comparison of Houellebecq to Huysmans, is that both writers must be understood as actively reacting to and commenting on “the commercialization of modern society” and its effect on the human subject (Gagnier, 421). Despite the fact that Huysmans wrote at the turn of the twentieth century and Houellebecq writes at the turn of the twenty-first century, both offer “polarized reactions to modernization,” whereby polarized is to be understood as extreme behavior that seeks to balance out a certain repulsion for such modernization (Gagnier, 421). That is, although, and rightly so, literary journalist Adam Leith Gollner has noted that the hero in both Houellebecq’ Soumission and Huysmans’ À Rebours are both misanthropic esthetes, what creates the intimacy between not so much the two fictional protagonists, but rather their authors, is that both refuse to give up on finding a means to better navigating their existential angst. Both are also quite decadent, that is quite thorough, in exploring the various ways in which not just the human subject, but the male subject processes his being-the-world (Spieser-Landes, 48-49). What Houellebecq’s novel does a century after
Huysmans’ work is to put the masculine, white European subject into active dialogue with questions of gender, race, and religion. His protagonist is unequivocally self-referential: his name after all is the quintessential French name, “François.” If Huysmans’ des Esseintes and Durtal wrestled with the possibilities and differences among Catholicism, Protestantism, and dandyism, Houellebecq’s François adds to the mix Islam and French post-1968 secularism.

**The muteness of “l’Arabe,” or Meursault rises again**

An important variable in considering whether or not Houellebecq’s novel is meant to parody misogynist understandings of libertine secularism and fundamentalist Islam is to examine the dynamic of a diegetic element that is grossly lacking in *Soumission*: namely, the voice of men (and women) understood as not-français de souche. More frankly put, although Mohammed Ben Abbes and his Fraternité musulmane political party have democratically been elected to power in a France of 2022, who really maintains the reins in this not-so-distant future? François’s narrative unequivocally privileges white men: whether they are the authors he reads in his work as a university professor, his colleagues at the university, or those friends he visits on his peregrinations throughout France the summer leading up to his conversion to Islam, not once does François reference a non-French author. In fact, in preparation for his conversion, he reads no primary sources, but relies on a cliff notes explanation of Islam, “Dix questions sur l’islam” (Houellebecq, 268). One might think that by 2022, a professor so obsessed with reading the canon should turn his attention at least to a writer such as Frantz Fanon whose studies of Algerian society have become unavoidable resources for thinking about France and Islam, and more generally postcolonial and decolonial discourse. The closest François gets to serious scholarship on Islam is his reference to metaphysicist René Guénon, who converted to Islam while in Egypt (Houellebecq, 275). Moreover, in his multiple meals shared, not one is with a colleague with a non-French name. And, as regards women, while his narrative does offer a certain measure of access to how and why Alice, Myriam, or Marie-Françoise make their decisions, his description of Nadia is limited to describing his vulgar sexual interaction with her (Houellebecq, 185-88). The complete absence of any non-white author in the narrative’s repertoire is gobsmackingly striking. Yet again, as readers we are forced to reflect on the authorial intentions of *Soumission*. To be colloquial about it, is Houellebecq ‘for real’ in imposing such an utter absence of postcolonial and Critical Islamic Studies on us, or does he self-reflexively parody himself and poke sardonic fun at his readers?

More specifically, to pay attention to how the narrative sequences allusions to canonical French white male writers suggests that what is being imposed on the reader is not an Islamic France, but a France that resembles more a French colony of the late nineteenth century (say pre-independence Algeria) and/or a more present-day département or territoire d’outre mer (DOM-TOM), a reality to which Houellebecq is not a stranger, for he was born on Réunion island in the Indian Ocean, and his father was born in Algeria. Almost no ‘Arab,’ ‘Beur,’ or ‘Muslim’ protagonists appear in the novel. The non-français de souche to whom François pays the most attention is the new French leader Mohammed Ben Abbes. Most of our information about Ben Abbes comes to the reader from what François’ colleagues say about him. Not once in the story is Ben Abbès diegetically present. As such, Ben Abbès figures quite literally as an “éminence grise, de leader politique dans un mouvement plus ou moins clandestin” (Houellebecq, 89). For his
part, Robert Rediger, the new Rector of the now Islamicized Sorbonne University compares Ben Abbes to Richelieu. Rediger tells François:

Ben Abbes s’apprête, comme Richelieu, à rendre d’immenses services à la langue française. Avec l’adhésion des pays arabes, l’équilibre linguistique européen va se déplacer en faveur de la France. Tôt ou tard, vous verrez, il y aura un projet de directive imposant le français, à parité avec l’anglais [...] (Houellebecq, 291)

That is, Ben Abbes fits the type of the perfect colonial subject, one who follows the orders of the colonial power perfectly. In a political vacuum in which all of the français de souche politicians such François Bayrou are in the words of Alain, another of François’ colleagues, “parfaitement stupide” (152), the role played by Ben Abbes is to execute the will of the master while not compromising the master’s power. In other words, when Alain says, “il est vraiment fort, ce Ben Abbes...” (151), there is little respect or deference on Alain’s part to Ben Abbes, but rather a somewhat dissimulated, but mostly quite obvious condescending opportunism.

As such, Houellebecq’s novel is not at all about the Islamicization of France, but rather about a renewed form of French chauvinism. The novel’s clever but rather mundane intertextualities self-consciously retrace the contours of a stereotypically French predilection to cultivate all that is pleasurable—the culinary, the sexual, the aesthetic. For example, that the name of the newly converted Rector of the Sorbonne is named Rediger (which in French means ‘to draft’) provides a first clue, indicating that it is not Ben Abbes who pulls the strings, but rather those persons who occupy key positions in major institutions such as the Sorbonne. Further hints that indicate Ben Abbes’ lack of political power introduce themselves into the narrative, helping the reader to understand why perhaps François, who was initially so opposed to converting to Islam, change his tune. For example, during their conversations about François’ conversion to Islam and Ben Abbes’ francophilie, Rediger and François savor a bottle of Meursault, whereby François describes Meursault wine as “une synthèse, il est comme beaucoup de vins à lui tout seul, vous ne trouvez pas” (Houellebecq, 248). The name Meursault of course is now most recognized as referring to Albert Camus’ unapologetic first-person narrator in L’Étranger (1942), a novel in which a lower middle-class, French colonial male protagonist living in Algeria kills an “Arab,” who is never given a proper name and whose personal story the narrator refuses to either be interested in and/or share with his reader.24 As readers of Soumission, we are invited to keep L’Étranger’s Meursault present as we seek to better cognize François. Most obviously, Meursault like François is a disinterested, unaffected, salacious, and lonely protagonist. Yet, if Meursault exemplifies the literary entrée-en-scène of the uninspired middle-class atheist par excellence, François epitomizes his decay. It is not without consequence that we learn that Rediger now lives with his new polygamist family in the former house of renown writer of erotic literature, Dominique Aury [Anne Desclos], the author of Histoire d’Ô (Houellebecq, 260).

What I am arguing here, is that in harnessing the full ironic weight of writers such as Camus, and notably their disenchanted white male protagonists, Houellebecq’s male characters—notably, François and Rediger, do not turn to Islam, but rather they only recommit themselves to a better, less painful form of libertinage, one which in appearance poses as religious, but in fact corresponds fully to the secularist intellectual pursuits of quintessentially ‘French’ authors such as Camus, Huysmans, Leiris, and Sartre, to name a few.25 While Houellebecq’s novel may be read as a quest for spiritualism, and as such corresponds to what
Spieser-Landes argues is a post-secularist, religious crisis in France, *Soumission* may also be understood as a superbly defiant French chauvinism that might admit the presence of Islam in France, but continues to deny it any sort of veritable legitimacy, manipulating it to its own ends. That is, in *Soumission*, Islam comes to represent the perfect religion through which to further at once both the colonial and libertine cause. Alain, François, and Rediger have ultimately found a way to resolve the loneliness that for centuries has beset such libertinage: fundamentalist Islam—as understood by what Mack designates as a subjectivity of white “secular male impotence” (Mack, 249)—becomes a way to sanction such behavior while all the while providing the comfort of home and family, as well as the supposed mystical aesthetic sensuality of the Coran. In short, no conversion has been made, only Alain, François, and Rediger have adapted a quintessentially French libertinage to Islam.

To read how powerless Ben Abbes really is in the storyline only adds insult to injury. When as readers we fully take in the fact that Ben Abbes is the Francophile par excellence, when we grasp what it means to compare Ben Abbes to Richelieu, that is someone who perfectly executes royal dictates, but shall never himself occupy the place of royalty, we begin to understand that *Soumission*—at least from the point-of-view of a French chauvinist, or non-apologists (using the language surrounding of debates on the Holocaust, slavery, and/or postcolonial discourse in France)—imagines quite the opposite of a “doomsday scenario” for white French men (Mack, 249). That is, *Soumission* harnesses the nostalgia associated with French colonial rule quite literally to the Hexagon, using Ben Abbes and non-français de souche intellectuals to serve français-de-souche interests: no new (understood as non-white, non-male, and/or progressive) professors are brought in to teach courses on ‘non-French’ topics, nor are such new voices brought in to bring alternative perspectives to reading the French literary canon. All that is asked is that the white, French male professors (who are atheists and/or of Christian background) convert to Islam. In this sense, the “doomsday” scenario as regards the novel’s diegetic space applies only to the women in the novel, especially the women with French names, for the narrator assumes that the women with Arab names (Aïcha, Nadia) are completely satiated in their roles as polygamous wives, “child brides,” “homemakers” (Mack, 249), or prostitutes (Houellebecq, 185).

Yet again, as readers we find ourselves confronted with a conundrum as regards Houellebecq’s *Soumission*. Is Houellebecq’s novel making a desperate plea, does it sound a clarion call to the readers of the novel who are sensitive to gender inequality to better articulate a discourse that does not condescend to Muslim women? Is Houellebecq’s gesture to propose that there is no difference between Arab, French, and Muslim women and that we must abandon our age-old prejudices that the West (in the novel’s terms “l’Occident”) is a fabrication of the false project of “Europe” as an idea? Is Houellebecq asking his readers to become aware of the fact that “Europe” is but a racialized ideology predicated on a desire that geography be “bounded” around whiteness, whereby modernity has remapped the Mediterranean so as to attempt to expunge any trace of Islam from the Iberian Peninsula and France? That is, when *Soumission*’s narrator asks us to remember that “Charles Martel a battu les Arabes à Poitiers en 732” (Houellebecq, 148) is he not inviting readers to rethink the false premise that Europe is non-Arab and non-Muslim? Or, instead, is Houellebecq an unabashed French chauvinist in all of its senses? Is he arguing that the most peaceful way to achieve the supremacy of French culture is to ‘use’ Islam to its own
ends, rather than engage in an endless clash with it? Does Houellebecq present misogyny as an inevitable social reality, proposing polygamy as a pragmatic form of civil society, all the while controlling the damages of a more unbridled misogyny, that practiced by those modern *libertins* who are plagued by solitude, such as Des Esseintes or François?

**Misogyny and race, or the crutches of “white innocence”**

*Soumission*’s troubling dexterity relies in large part in its ability to ironically demonstrate its proficiency of the most avant-garde trends in intersectional scholarship. For example, we can read the novel’s staging of a return to non-hypocritical misogyny as a deliberation of Mack’s scholarly theorization of “secular male impotence” (Mack, 249). An important part of Mack’s research is to reveal how the most prosaic stereotypes about Arabness/Islam continue to plague quite serious scholarship, especially in applied psychology. Mack argues that psychoanalysts in France tend to pathologize the “family of immigrant ancestry” (Mack, 129). In Houellebecq’s *Soumission*, François manifests what Mack coins “secular male impotence,” understood to be imbricated in the anxieties around whiteness. Ultimately, he only finds sexual excitement in extreme situations: his women are extremely young, he seeks out prostitutes who represent members of society to which he does not have intimate access, notably women of immigrant backgrounds (185), and he gets excited when women take off their veil. Moreover, his overwhelming sense of solitude is bound up in his desire to realize the Schopenahuerian aesthetic release, which allows a human to enter into “contact avec un autre esprit humain” (Houellebecq, 13).

The order to which he is asked to submit by Mohammed Ben Abbes’s Fraternité musulmane provides François with what he sees as a way-out from his debilitating solitude, which the novel stages as directly related to his general incapacity to maintain the human connection necessary for a less exploitative sexuality. That is, in Houellebecq’s novel the broken and pathologized “family of immigrant ancestry” (Mack, 129) is mended when it merges with the equally pathologized impotent “secular male” (Mack, 249). François writes at the time of his decision to convert from atheism to Islam (Houellebecq, 250):

> L’arrivée massive de populations immigrées empreintes d’une culture traditionnelle encore marquée par les hiérarchies naturelles, la soumission de la femme et le respect dû aux anciens constituait une chance historique pour le réarmement moral et familial de l’Europe, ouvrait la perspective d’un nouvel âge d’or pour le vieux continent. (Houellebecq, 276)

Houellebecq pulls out all the stops to re-operate the stereotypes around: the essential role of the ‘French’ nuclear family; its intendant other, the libertinage of mostly ‘French’ men, understood as white; and the exoticization of the members of the supposedly pathologically but seductively othered members of the broken family that is not-*français-de-souche*. In fact, Houellebecq’s novel mobilizes an ironic solution to Mack’s atomized immigrant family. His novel proposes that the French white male *libertin* will leave his atheistic ways (wherein atheism is understood as hedonistic) to marry one of Mack’s types, the pathologized “veiled woman” (Mack, 106), and as such two societal problems are resolved: that of “mother-enablers of a male Islam” (Mack, 95) understood as fostering a “primitive violence” (Mack, 93), on the one hand; and, that of the impotent white male, whose solitude and disillusion with the ‘modern’ world leads to an over-eroticization of that which is inaccessible to him. In short, *Soumission* deploys basically all of the
elements Mack so incisively deconstructs in his analysis of the dynamics between ‘French’ and ‘Muslim’ identity formations in France. However, Houellebecq’s novel strikes a careful balance in never veering into the “grandiloquence burlesque qui confine à la pure bouffonnerie” (Larue, 50), with which Anne Larue characterizes Huysmans’ À Rebours. In other words, Soumission forces its readers to work out for themselves the intentionality of the novel. That is, are we meant to read it as a parody of the extremely painful pathologizing processes that are plaguing French society today? Or as an affirmation of white French masculinity?

Whether or not Houellebecq consciously presents his readers with the “smug ignorance” that undergirds the more subtle white supremacy of the French left is at the reader’s discretion. What is undeniable is the fact that the narrative architecture of the novel offers many of the elements necessary to understanding just how destructive white French liberal values can be. It is up to readers in the end to decide: is Houellebecq’s novel the work of a delusional, white French liberal, a novel which resembles Richard Millet’s staunchly anti-immigrant rantings (which bring erudite understandings of French literary history together with the most racist expressions of aesthetic theory to date), or is it an offensive, but nonetheless good intentioned attempt to make visible an awareness of Houellebecq’s own “white innocence”?

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2 Houellebecq has been accused on multiple occasions of spurring racial hatred, notably in 2002 being taken to court and finally acquitted.
4 With extreme sardonicism, Houellebecq’s novel advocates for empire as a resolution to the “clash of civilizations” theory. Samuel Huntington’s phrase is reminiscent of the very Franco-Arab space with which Houellebecq plays in Soumission. Huntington’s expression is usually originally attributed to Albert Camus’s 1946 radio comments about Algeria, wherein the phrase used was “ce ne serait plus un choc d’empires, nous assisterez à un choc de civilisations” [it will no longer be a shock among empires, we will find ourselves witnesses to a shock among civilizations] (Camus, my translation). Camus’s phrase clearly suggests a cause-effect relationship between colonialism and postcolonialism, whereby the supposed incompatibility between and among cultures originates in the very teleology of the enterprise of empire-making. That is, Houellebecq’s submits the thesis that the least violent solution is for French republicanism to accept the guise of Islam while all the while promoting the values of French empire.
6 Mayanthi Fernando’s Republic Unsettled (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2014) cogently argues that a Muslim France absolutely respects the tenets of French secular public space, yet shows that such democratic space continues to be dominated by a relentless discourse that refuses to acknowledge the fluidity of Muslim French identity, opting instead for a largely undifferentiated demographic category of Arab/Muslim/Islamic. She proposes that “French national identity is secured through the exclusion of a
homogenous Muslim difference, an analytical framework that underpins wider-ranging studies of Muslim alterity in the West” (19).

7 *Soumission* includes discussions of notably Chinese communities suggesting that they are at once non-threatening, but all the while marginal to French society, whether Islamicized or not.

8 For cogent discussions on how identities such as “beur” and “beurette” are largely products of a culture industry, see Kathryn A. Kleppinger’s *Branding the ‘Beur’ Author: Minority Writing and the Media in France* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015).

9 For a discussion on the notion of “contemporariness” as concept that defines a people and/or a nation’s sense of identity, see Henry Rousso’s article “Coping with Contemporariness” in Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur’s *Being Contemporary: French Literature, Culture, and Politics Today* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2016): 15-28.


12 Houellebeq’s treatment of François’s young girlfriend Myriam, who is forced to return to Israel, in the scenario of a newly Islamicized French government, is yet another ambivalent moment in *Soumission*. That is, *Soumission* corroborates the work of scholars such as Éric Marty, Maurice Samuels, or Gisèle Sapiro, who note that the French left has been and continues to be, if not antisemitic, at least marginally indifferent to the plight of Jews. See Samuels and Sapiro’s articles in Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur’s *Being Contemporary: French Literature, Culture, and Politics Today* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2016) as well as Marty’s Radical French Thought and the Return of the ‘Jewish Question,’ with foreward by Bruno Chaouat, trans. by Alan Astro (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2015).


15 In an interview in 2001, Houellebecq declared his agnosticism and his arrogance as regards Islam: “Je me suis dit que le fait de croire à un seul Dieu était le fait d’un crétin, je ne trouvais pas d’autre mot. Et la religion la plus con, c’est quand même l’islam” (“Houellebecq”).


21 To note is the role played by Ben Abbes. Of all *Soumissions*’ protagonists he is the one who most cogently resembles Durtal’s description of Moses, yet here Ben Abbes is meant to represent a real human being, not a statue of a mythologized Biblical figure. The point is that the ‘other’ becomes aestheticized to serve the Christian West’s quest to ease its bourgeois anxieties, and as such following on Mack’s scholarship, pathologizing the Muslim/Arab other into specifically recognized roles (see Mack’s second chapter).


*Soumission* may of course be read in relationship not only to Camus’s *L’Étranger*, but also to Kamel Daoud’s novel *Meursault, contre-enquête* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2013).

Here other novels that come to mind as deliberating on the plight of the bourgeois male are for example Jean-Paul Sartre’s *La Nausée* (1938) or Michel Leiris’s *L’Âge d’homme*.

For cogent discussions on French intellectuals unapologetic stance as regards the slavery, colonialism, and the Holocaust, see for example Mireille Rosello’s introduction in *The Reparative in Narratives: Works of Mourning in Progress* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010).


