

Boukhobza, Chochana

Chochana Boukhobza is a French novelist born in Tunisia. Much of her work draws on the personal experience of exile and of living in-between cultures, nationalities, and memories. With echoes of the postcolonial Sephardic trajectory, her writing also brings together Ashkenazi and Sephardi characters and histories, as well as Arab and French.

Born in Sfax, Tunisia, in 1959, speaking Arabic and Hebrew as a child, Chochana Boukhobza immigrated to France in 1964 with her family and most of the Tunisian Jewish community. At seventeen she moved to Israel to study mathematics and physics in Jerusalem, a period that substantially influenced her writing, which embodies a passionate vision of Israel's significance for the Jewish people, and simultaneously candidly expresses ambivalence toward its politics and compassion for all its inhabitants. In France, where she returned at age twenty-one, Boukhobza has worked in radio and television as well as for the French-Jewish journal *l'Arche*, and she has written several screenplays. Speaking of how her writing is influenced by memories of her childhood in Tunisia and its abrupt end, Boukhobza has said: "I don't know how to tell you about that. I can't. It's erased. . . . I don't know if I write in order to remember, or if I write to create my own memories" (*Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane*, ed. L. Sebbar, p. 81).

Chochana Boukhobza's many novels have been critically acclaimed, and although none of her books is announced as autobiographic, they have been recognized as including personal confession. Autobiographical elements engender soul-searching and a coming to terms with loss and exile in narratives that question the role of the father, the effect of that role on sibling relations, and the legacy of the parents upon the next generation. The main characters are often strong, independent women who rebel in one way or another against the father's oppressive silence, but who seek his love without giving up their freedom. They endure the multifaceted experience of conflict between homeland and exile, tradition and modernity, freedom and dependence.

Signs of trauma ensuing from the often multiple exiles endured by the families in Boukhobza's novels permeate the narratives. Her narrative style is quick, precise, and often historically anchored, yet seizes the reader with its sensuality, evoking raw emotions, capturing drama and plot with flow and ease. She also frequently portrays characters navigating their lives through the ever-existing human condition of loneliness in togetherness, be they Jews of Sephardi or Ashkenazi origin, Arabs in France and Israel, or *Français de souche* (native French). Several of her novels present a mystery of some sort that brings the characters on both internal and actual journeys, as they search for answers to questions left behind or raised by enigmatic male figures. Boukhobza has alluded to her inclination for invoking searches for sources and answers as perhaps stemming from the fact that her grandfather, a rabbi, *shohet* (ritual slaughterer), and scribe in Tunisia, was the author of several manuscripts stored away somewhere unknown in Israel. In her family's heritage, there is thus a hidden and forgotten voice to which she has no access but which represents a literal witness to the link of her family's Jewish past in the Maghreb.

About her Sephardic heritage and identity frequently reflected in her oeuvre, Boukhobza has said: "Strange people, really, my people, torn between a lost homeland, a country in which to live, get married, and work; and a promised land. Strange people squeezed between the past, the present, and prophecy" (*Une enfance juive*, p. 85). Her work represents

the experience of Jews from the Maghreb who emigrated to the Promised Land and/or France as fraught with the ordeal of uprooting and a sense of renewed exile, and the difficulty of adjustment and acceptance as experienced by many Jews from Islamic lands. However, many different characters are brought to life in the growing corpus of her work, and although the main character is often Sephardi, we find Ashkenazi Jews who have experienced the horrors of the gas chambers, Arab immigrants in France, Palestinian/Arab Israelis, as well as native French, who come to life and interact in ways that discerningly portray the challenges and desires of the human condition.

Living and writing thus from the crossroads of human experiences that have marked the lives of Ashkenazi as well as Sephardi Jews in Europe, North Africa, and Israel, as well as those of Arabs and the French in the twentieth century and on, Boukhobza depicts the meeting of a multitude of contemporary social and personal issues with a perceptive authorial voice. She is empathetic yet never nostalgic, curious yet never naive, progressive and always conscious of her characters' role and place in history.

Boukhobza is the author of many novels. Her first, *Un Été à Jérusalem* (1986), received the prestigious Prix Méditerranée, and the second, *Le Cri* (1987), was a finalist for the Prix Fémina. Her other works are *Les Herbes amères* (1989), *Bel Canto* (1991), *Pour l'Amour du père* (1996), which has been translated into English, *Sous les Etoiles* (2002), *Quand la Bible rêve* (2005), a children's book, and *Le Troisième Jour* (2010), which received the Prix Wizo, and has been translated into English and Italian. *Fureur* (2012) has received the Prix Landerneau Découvertes.

Cairns, Lucille. *Post-War Jewish Women's Writing in French* (Oxford: Legenda, 2011).

Lichtenstein, Nina, "Maghrebian Memories: Exodus and Marginality in Sephardic Women's Writing" (doctoral diss., University of Connecticut, 2007).

Nolden, Thomas, and Frances Milano (eds.). *Voices of the Diaspora: Jewish Women Writing in Contemporary Europe* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

Sartori, Eva Martin, and Madeleine Cottenet-Hage (eds.). *Daughters of Sarah: Anthology of Jewish Women Writing in France* (Teaneck, NJ: Holmes & Meier, 2006).

Sebbar, L. (ed.). *Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane* (Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule Bleu Autour, 2012).

Interviews with Chochana Boukoubza (October–December, 2010).

Nina Lichtenstein