
Fuck Autonomy: Neo-Orientalism and Abjection in Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*

PER-ERIK NILSSON

Centre for Multidisciplinary Research on Racism, Uppsala University, Box 511, SE 751 20 Uppsala, Sweden. Email: per-erik.nilsson@cemfor.uu.se

In this paper, the author critically analyses Michel Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* (Flammarion, 2017). The analysis uses post-structural theories of discourse, gender, and post-colonialism. The author argues that the novel employs neo-orientalist modes of identification where abjection is a fundamental theme. A neo-orientalist mode of identification refers to how knowledge about Muslims as an object *other* is produced through various discursive techniques of differentiation, and how this performative practice is articulated through contingent conceptions of race, religion, and gender. Abjection refers to a symbolic castration, namely the central theme of how Western masculinity and European civilization has been de-masculinized by social democracy, liberalism, globalization, and feminism. Finally, the analysis of the novel is contrasted and compared with Houellebecq's earlier writings.

Introduction

On 6 January 2015, the cover page of the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* was a caricature of the praised and controversial author Michel Houellebecq.¹ The cover refers to Houellebecq's sixth novel, *Soumission*. Luz, the pen behind the drawing, depicts Houellebecq as a decadent smoker dressed in a trench coat topped with a magician's hat. The fictional version of the author proclaims: 'In 2015, I'll lose my teeth . . . In 2022 I'll do Ramadan'.² Luz also depicts the author as a seer of the future; a future that in *Soumission* is one where white-French (and Christian) citizens and French Muslim citizens are heading towards outright civil war. In one regard, this allegory appeared uncannily true when self-acclaimed Muslim freedom fighters attacked the editorial office of *Charlie Hebdo*, the very day of the publication of the book, 7 January 2015, leaving behind death and havoc.

Although Houellebecq's depiction of an intra-Hexagonal clash of civilizations is far from sociological reality, he captures and reproduces central tropes in French European

far-right discourses on Islam that it is an ever-violent religious ideology taking hold of France, where French Muslims are depicted as fifth-columnists.³ This type of clash is not new in Houellebecq's writings; be it Muslim murderers in the French countryside, misogynist Muslim youth in the *banlieue*, Muslims depicted as 'barbarian hordes', Muslim terrorists bombing a Western tropical tourist paradise, or Islam depicted as an essentially 'dangerous religion'.⁴ For example, in the novel *Plateforme*, the protagonist, white-French Michel, blames the killing of his girlfriend Valerie by 'Islamist terrorists' on Islam:

Islam had wrecked my life, and Islam was certainly something which I could hate . . . I was quite good at it, and I started to follow the international news again. Every time I heard that a Palestinian terrorist, or a Palestinian child or a pregnant Palestinian woman had been gunned down in the Gaza Strip, I felt a quiver of enthusiasm at the thought that it meant one less Muslim. Yes, it was possible to live like this.⁵

Indeed, Houellebecq has made himself a name as a self-avowed Islamophobe in his staunch anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim statements, both in writing and in person.⁶ In 2001 he was even brought to court for having stated that Islam is 'the stupidest religion in the world'; a case he later won.⁷

However, in *Soumission*, as Luz points out in his drawing, Houellebecq appears to be challenging his earlier writings on Islam and Muslims. In the novel, the key to a peaceful future for the French nation actually lies in the acceptance of Islam and Islamic customs in France. Thus, a question that begs to be posed is whether Houellebecq has gone from being Islamophobic to Islamophile and if there is an a priori contradiction between the two positions. Moreover, how can Houellebecq's obsession with Islam, as either 'phobic' or a 'phile', be understood in relation to the French social and political context in which his writings and statements are circulating?

In this article, I present a reading of *Soumission* viewed through the lens of post-structural theories of discourse, gender and post-colonialism. More specifically, I argue that *Soumission* employs neo-orientalist modes of identification where abjection is a fundamental theme. Both are reoccurring tropes in Houellebecq's writings. Briefly, a neo-orientalist mode of identification refers to how knowledge about Muslims as an abject *other* is produced through various discursive techniques of differentiation, and how this performative practice is articulated through contingent conceptions of race, religion, and gender.⁸ Abjection refers to Houellebecq's professed symbolic castration of Western masculinity and European civilization because of the proclaimed hegemony of social democracy, liberalism, globalization and feminism. Although my focus is on *Soumission*, I contrast this novel with his earlier texts and interviews in news- and cultural media. Before presenting my reading of Houellebecq through the analytical lenses of neo-Orientalism and abjection, I briefly present the overall narrative of the novel and then discuss different ways of approaching Houellebecq's writings.

Michel Houellebecq as Spectacle

The protagonist and narrative voice of *Soumission* is François, a professor of literature at the Sorbonne (Paris III). François is single, in his mid-forties, and lives a

rather secluded life. He questions the meaning of life as an academic: is he really contributing to society or merely an intellectual procrastinator – is his life really worth living? Throughout the book François is searching for meaning. He turns to the Virgin Mary as a path for his soul, without success. He uses prostitutes to rediscover his sexual lust, without success.

A set of events leads to a silent revolution in French society and politics. The Socialists have illegitimately won the 2017 presidential elections. Civil unrest and political instability follow. Most importantly, prior civil tensions now escalate and activists from the ‘extreme-right’ clash with ‘groups of young Africans’ (Ref. 9, p. 54). During the first half of the book, these clashes escalate and France is facing a civil-war. François observes: ‘France, like other countries in Western Europe, has long since been moving towards civil war – it was evident’ (Ref. 9, p. 116). With the approach of the 2022 presidential elections, the situation is out of control and François takes refuge in the French countryside.

During this time, the Muslim politician Mohammed Ben Abbes has launched a new political party, *La Fraternité musulmane* (The Muslim Brotherhood). The Brotherhood has grown rapidly and, in the first round in the presidential election, Ben Abbes receives 22.3% of the votes. His main opponent, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the Front National (*Le Front national*), receives 34.1% (Ref. 9, pp. 75–77). In a coalition with the Socialist Party (*Parti socialiste*), Ben Abbes manages to outmanoeuvre Le Pen and finally gains the presidency. Ben Abbes puts a lid on the civil unrest and François starts to regain his *joie de vivre*. All is finally well in Houellebecq’s Islamic France, but this new France did not come about without certain costs. I will return to these developments in more detail in the following sections.

Soumission offers many potential readings; is it a satire, is it merely a ‘mirror of society’, as Houellebecq has been quoted as saying, or is it Islamophobic?⁶ This kind of ambiguity is not specific to this novel, it is a recurring theme in the author’s publications and public appearances. Jacob Carlson discusses the autobiographical traits in Houellebecq’s writings, not least since several journalists, literary critics and academics have made links between many of the central characters in his novels to Houellebecq himself. This is not far-fetched as in several interviews Houellebecq has repeated what he has his protagonists say. However, in other interviews he describes himself as a mere observer on a quest for the truth about contemporary social life, and claims that his writing is a way to embody fictional personalities that he would never wish to be himself. Carlson concludes that, whatever the case might be, ambiguity is a central aspect in the dissemination of his texts in public debate.¹⁰ Carole Sweeney argues that one narrative technique employed by Houellebecq is ‘ideological ventriloquism’, by which ‘potentially controversial material is situated or thrown somewhere other than in the authorial voice’.¹¹ Examples of this technique are when racialized, Muslim, or female characters are used to make racist, Islamophobic and misogynist statements. Ruth Cruickshank discusses another aspect of Houellebecq’s ambiguity: Houellebecq continuously deplores the fetishism of public intellectuals – ‘clownish quacks’ incapable of any

intellectual novelty, as he has put it – and the marketization of news media.¹² However, he takes on a similar role to the intellectuals he despises in an arena he abhors: he is a product of the very spectacle he critiques as well as being dependent on it for the propagation of his work. Through ambiguity, he even manages to become the central piece of one mediatized affair after another.¹³

Whether or not Houellebecq's blunt racist, Islamophobic, misogynist, sexist and phallogocentric writings should be read as satirical, as objective observations of contemporary society, or as a token of his own intellectual near-sightedness, is not my concern (Ref. 11, pp. 325–326). Houellebecq himself states that his early characters' racist hatred, such as Bruno's of 'blacks' in *Les Particules élémentaires*, is 'really a secondary problem', that it is 'just a little story of sexual competition'. He adds, moreover, that 'he could have hated anybody' (Ref. 12, p. 245). The point I want to make is that *although* Bruno and the other characters could have directed their ire against *anybody*, they nonetheless direct it towards female, racialized and Muslim subjects. My interest in *Soumission* is the fact that it has been possible to circulate it, and with great success; and how it is the product of a neo-orientalist discursive order obsessed by the question of abjection.

My aim is thus to inquire how the categories of Islam and Muslims employed are articulated, investigate their attributed role in the Houellebecqian criticism of post-1968 France, and their role in a romantically reactionary and phallogocentric socio-biological fantasy about the return of an imagined natural patriarchal order (Ref. 11, p. 325). I show, to quote Meyda Yegenoglu, that Houellebecq's novel 'provides a fruitful arena where questions of a more general nature, questions that pertain to the representation of cultural and sexual difference and the nature of the discursive constitution of otherness, could be raised' (Ref. 8, p. 14). This is in a time when French public debate is virtually obsessed by the 'Islamic problem'.¹⁴

Neo-Orientalism

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) has laid the grounds for numerous critical approaches to the study of the intertwined historiographies of Christian-Secular Europe and the Islamic Orient within the human and social sciences. In this seminal volume, Said defines Orientalism as 'a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western Experience'.¹⁵ He continues: 'Orientalism expresses and represents that part [the Orient] culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles' (Ref. 15, p. 2). Drawing on Foucauldian genealogy, Said shows how a complex interplay of power and knowledge has produced the Orient as an object to colonize and govern in such arenas as science, art and literature. The reception and future usage of Said's work has not been unanimously praised by scholars in the human and social sciences. He has, for example, been criticized for oversimplification and biased readings of source material.¹⁶

Notwithstanding, neo-Orientalism can thus be understood as an order of discourse,¹⁷ but also as a mode of identification. As a mode of identification, I take

neo-Orientalism as a producer of alterity in the sense described above, but also as a producer of likeness. Said pointed out this function of Orientalist knowledge production by stating that ‘the orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) and as such it is not merely imaginative, [t]he orient is an integral part of European material civilization’ (Ref. 15, pp. 1–2). Islam and Muslims have thus come to function as a ‘constitutive outside’ for the production of an imagined Christian and European likeness. Thomaž Mastnak, among others, shows how this joint production of alterity/likeness can be traced back at least to the era of the Crusades:

The construction of the Muslim enemy was an essential moment in the articulation of the self-awareness of the *res publica christiana*. The antagonistic difference between themselves and Muslims became at this crucial point a constitutive element of the Latin Christians’ collective identity.¹⁸

However, Orientalism should not be understood as a homogeneous meta-discourse, it has changed, transformed and mutated during the course of history.

Even though Orientalism is far from obsolete as an analytical category for an analysis of contemporary knowledge production about *others*, I find it more apt to talk about *Neo-Orientalism* in relation to Houellebecq’s work. I do this for two main reasons: (a) contemporary changes in the cartography and production sites of Orientalist discourse, and (b) the importance of gendering Orientalism. The Orientalist cartography has changed. As Moustafa Bayoumi argues, there is a ‘twist to an old doctrine’ in that the geographical distances between East and West have somewhat collapsed, or at least been redrawn.¹⁹ The point here is not to measure the historical validity of these claims, e.g. Muslims have been living in today’s Europe since the eighth century. However, in the neo-Orientalist imaginary, the Orient has migrated from over there to here, in the midst of the former colonial centres.²⁰ A number of self-avowed modern Muslims and ex-Muslim commentators have emerged who have taken on the role of *witnesses from within*, who testify to the horrors of Islam. To this I add the popularization of Islamic studies or, more specifically, a learned type of Islamophobia.²¹ This refers to anti-Islamic spokespersons’ and organizations’ selective readings of the Koran to legitimize the imagined universal cleavage between Islam and Christian-Secular Europe.²²

Houellebecq is certainly not an ex-Muslim spokesperson. However, by employing ideological ventriloquism, Houellebecq creates several fictional characters that take on this role. One of the clearest examples comes from *Plateforme*. In the book, the protagonist Michel encounters an Egyptian male character who has paid a visit to his homeland. Echoing the nineteenth-century French orientalist Jean-Baptiste Joseph Fourier (1768–1830), the Egyptian explains that Egyptians are not really Arabs, nor are they really Muslims. In fact, since the emergence of Islam, a wet blanket of ignorance has been placed upon the Egyptian people who once represented the peak of civilization. The Egyptians had invented ‘architecture, astronomy, mathematics, agriculture, medicine’; however:

Since the appearance of Islam, nothing. An intellectual vacuum, an absolute void. We’ve become a country of flea-ridden beggars. Beggars covered in fleas, that’s what we are. Scum, scum! ... You must remember, *cher monsieur* ... that Islam

was born deep in the desert amid scorpions, camels and wild beasts of every order. Do you know what I call Muslims? The losers of the Sahara. That's what they deserve to be called. Do you think Islam could have been born in such a magnificent place? (Ref. 9, p. 328)

The Egyptian goes on to deplore the incongruities in the Koran and states that 'never, for as long as it [Islam] exists, will peace reign in the world' (Ref. 9, p. 328). This correlates with Houellebecq's own statement that Islam would have to disappear from the face of the earth in order to avoid a 'disaster'.²³ Islam is here unquestionably portrayed as backwards, incompatible with modernity, and inherently violent.

At the beginning of *Soumission*, Houellebecq appears to go down this road, or at least the protagonist François shows great reluctance about symbols and customs associated with Islam. When invited to drink mint tea at *la Grande mosquée de Paris*, he proclaims: 'I didn't like mint tea, nor did I like the Great Mosque of Paris' (Ref. 9, p. 28). However, François slowly changes his opinion. It all starts after discussions with a colleague's husband who is working as an agent in the French intelligence agency, *Direction générale de la sécurité intérieure* (DGSI). In the book, the agent functions as an objective voice, providing factual statements about the nature of Islam and its history. He explains to François that, although France had a proud history of stopping 'Muslim expansion from conquering Northern Europe' at the Battle of Poitiers in 732 and that Christians and Muslims had been locked in a millennium-old battle, the time had come for a 'unification, an alliance' (Ref. 9, p. 148). François also learns that the goal of the presidential candidate, Ben Abbes, and his Muslim Brotherhood is not that extreme. Their target is primarily the national education system and a secured demographic growth of the Muslim population. The agent explains that 'the societal group who has the largest rate of reproduction and that successfully transfers its values will triumph; in their eyes it's that simple' (Ref. 9, p. 148).

Here, the agent's statements draw on two recurring themes in the Eurabian and counter-jihadist literature. The first is Renaud Camus' thesis of *le grand remplacement*, which was first cultivated by the French far-right and which today is a common ideological trope with the European far-right. It refers to an imagined natural predisposition of Arabs and Muslims to reproduce at a higher rate than the white French population. In the end, this will lead to a demographic change where the Arab Muslim population is in the majority.³ In *Plateforme*, Houellebecq describes this process as 'migratory flows crisscrossing Europe like blood vessels' and depicts Muslims 'as clots that were only slowly reabsorbed' (Ref. 5, p. 30). In *Soumission*, Ben Abbes' strategy to control the dissemination of values and culture in France quickly bears fruit. In the national education system teachers must convert to Islam; the curriculum needs to be in compliance with Islamic scripture; polygamy is the new normal; women leave the labour force *en masse*; women also start to dress more moderately; and petro-dollars have taken hold of important educational, societal and political institutions, such as the Sorbonne.

The seminal author of the Eurabia thesis, of which *le grand remplacement* is a central topic, is Bat Ye'or.²⁴ She suggests that a widespread Islamization of Europe is in the making. This is achieved through the influx of petro-dollars from the Gulf, mass immigration of Arabs and Muslims, a disentanglement of Europe from the USA and Israel, and the integration of Europe and the Arab-Muslim world into one political and economic bloc.²⁵ In *Soumission*, Houellebecq shows that the references to these tropes are not a matter of haphazard intertextuality. During a lengthy discussion between the DGS agent and François, the agent explains that the 'old Bat Ye'or is not wrong in her fantasy about the Eurabian conspiracy'; he explains, however, that 'she is completely mistaken when she imagines the Euro-Mediterranean area will be inferior to the Gulf monarchies' (Ref. 9, p. 158). What Ben Abbes aims for is not to weaken France but to create a central power in a new Europe inspired by Alexander the Great (Ref. 9, p. 168). In due course, François develops a liking for Ben Abbes. After a televised appearance, François exclaims: 'I found him absolutely excellent' (Ref. 9, p. 108). In the end, François gets a taste for Arabic food and culture, and starts to cherish Islamic customs, and considers converting to Islam. He comes out as a conspicuously Islamophilic character. However, and most importantly, his transition to this newfound love for Islam is negotiated and rationalized through the Muslim woman.

Islamophilia coupled with a deep-rooted desire for the Muslim woman is not unique to Houellebecq.²⁶ It has been a central piece in Orientalist knowledge production throughout history (Ref. 18, p. 42). It is, I argue, key in understanding that although Houellebecq appears to have found in Islam a model for peaceful societal cohabitation, his vision of Islam and Muslims draws heavily on stereotyped fantasies about what this entails. A central issue here is that even though *Soumission* and the majority of Houellebecq's novels are about disassociated men searching to heal their split male subjects, the construction of the male subject is negotiated via women; 'women are always present in the men's own self-image' to quote George Mosse.²⁷ Thus, when analysing fantasies about the Orient in Houellebecq's work, it is necessary, as Yegenoglu argues, to highlight that 'Western acts of understanding the Orient and its women are not two distinct enterprises, but rather are interwoven aspects of the same gesture' (Ref. 8, p. 26).

The production of a Western male subject is better illuminated through Said's notion of a *latent* Orientalism. Latent Orientalism refers to 'an almost unconscious (and certainly untouchable) positivity' that is different from *material* Orientalism, which refers to the 'various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth' (Ref. 15, p. 206). As Said states, 'latent Orientalism also encouraged a peculiarly (not to say invidiously) male conception of the world . . . women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy'; as such, Orientalism is 'an exclusively male enterprise' (Ref. 15, p. 207). It is worth mentioning that scholars of feminism and gender history have criticized Said for this view. For example, Elsbeth Locher-Scholten observes that women 'as authors or subjects' of Orientalism 'are almost completely absent'.²⁸ Daniel Martin Varisco similarly argues that 'Orientalism is a man's book'.²⁹

Notwithstanding, Houellebecq's writings are a clear example of (neo)-Orientalism as a male enterprise. The latent aspect of Orientalism is also helpful in understanding how neo-Orientalism functions in Houellebecq's texts. As Yegenoglu states, latent Orientalism is 'precisely the site where the unconscious desires and fantasies of the "other" and "otherness" appear as powerful constituents of the so-called autonomous and rational Western subject and expose this position as structurally male' (Ref. 8, p. 11).

Before Ben Abbes enters the Elysée Palace, François continually ponders upon his female Muslim student's enigmatic and unattainable bodies that all apparently wear some form of the Islamic veil. In class he sees two students wearing burkas and proclaims that they 'appear to me completely irreproachable' (Ref. 9, p. 33). During a train ride François sees a man dressed in a thobe accompanied by two women. François immediately starts fantasizing about his life:

At least he'll have two gracious and charming wives to distract him from the burdens of being an overworked business man – and maybe he has one or two others in Paris. If I recall correctly, the maximum number of wives is four in Sharia. (Ref. 9, p. 227)

He also reflects on the life of Muslim women in Islamic societies. Their lives appear straightforward: if they are beautiful, they can marry rich men and stay child-like for all their lives (Ref. 9, p. 227). They then enter into a predetermined cycle of wearing sexy underwear fully dedicated to please their husbands: 'Dressed in impenetrable black burkas during the day, rich Saudi Arabian women transform into paradisiac birds in the evening. They put on corsets, see-through bras, and G-strings decorated with coloured laces and gem-stones . . .' (Ref. 9, p. 91). After a period of total devotion to male pleasure, they have kids and then become grandmothers, all the time being freed from the constraints of living a nine-to-five life. François concludes that 'clearly they lost some autonomy' in the process but adds, '*fuck autonomy*' (Ref. 9, p. 227, emphasis in original). In the end, 'Muslim women are devoted and subjugated . . . they were raised in this manner' (Ref. 9, p. 227). It is this devotion and subjugation of the Muslim woman that leads François to fantasizing about the benefits of becoming Muslim. As Michel, the protagonist in *Plateforme*, so bluntly states: 'Intellectually, I could manage to feel a certain attraction to Muslim vaginas' (Ref. 5, p. 30).

Understood in the light of neo-Orientalism, François' emerging Islamophilia and desire for the Muslim woman designate a desire to gain access to the Islamic world, to get behind the Muslim's woman veil, and to find unity in oneself. This brings me to the question of abjection.

Abjection

Abjection is a category taken from psychoanalysis. It designates, as Dino Franco Felluga puts it, 'a reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other'.³⁰ Sandrine Sanos uses abjection as an analytical category to describe

the 1930s intellectual French far-right in ‘its obsession with wholeness, purity, and regeneration and how it was anchored through a grammar of sex, gender, and race’, where fantasies of ‘abjection, dissolution, and dissociation were translated in particular aesthetics where young far-right intellectuals reimagined nation, race, and bodies articulated in a gendered and sexual discourse of male identity, citizenship, and civilization’.³¹

As pointed out by Murielle Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael, abjection is one of the running themes in *Houellebecq’s* novels: ‘The urban landscape disorients and deprives the subject of direction’.³² Liberalism and the market economy have reduced human interaction to a logic of supply and demand; the disappearance of Catholic values has depleted the moral base of society; post-1968 social democracy has numbed human beings; and feminism has turned men into women, and women into men. To François, French society is an agonizing one that, for some reason beyond his comprehension, permits him to continue his academic procrastination – an occupation that does not produce any real things of value (Ref. 9, p. 15). François dreams about a pre-1968 patriarchal order ‘that at least had the merit of existing’; he continues, ‘what I want to say is that as a social system it managed to persevere; there were families with children . . . briefly put, it made things turn. Today, there are not enough children, so it’s all over’ (Ref. 9, p. 41).

To Houellebecq, the male subject appears to have entered a deep crisis and masculinity enters the stage as a lost and stolen ideal. Masculinity can here be understood as, to quote Judith Kegan Gardiner, ‘a nostalgic formation, always missing, lost, or about to be lost, its ideal form located in a past that advances with each generation in order to recede just beyond its grasp. Its myth is that effacing new forms can restore a natural, original male grounding’.³³ Masculinity is thus a response to an imagined castration of a phallogocentric order. Let us return to Houellebecq’s novel and François’ fantasies about the Saudi man and his two women on the train. Here, François juxtaposes the Oriental woman with the Western woman. While the Oriental woman’s sole purpose in life is to furnish male pleasure, the Western woman has become ‘the direct opposite’: ‘classy and sexy during the day because her social status demands it, she caves in when she gets home; tired and dressed in loose and shapeless clothes, she abdicates from all sorts of seduction’ (Ref. 9, p. 91). As François sees women as objects with the sole purpose of pleasing men, it is the Saudi man who gets to enjoy the full benefits of this. The Muslim has been able to conserve masculine *jouissance*, the pleasure of living as a whole male subject in a phallogocentric social order.³⁴

In Houellebecq’s France of today, there is no place for real but degenerate ‘macho’ men such as François. Instead, leftist and politically correct men, backed by feminist and lesbian women, have taken over the scene. At the beginning of the book, François deplors the current order of the Sorbonne University. Steve, a remote colleague and a good-looking Parisian leftist progressive (*homme de gauche*) who, contrary to François, enjoys a mint tea in a multicultural environment,

has managed to climb the ranks without having any solid publications behind him. As it turns out, Steve managed to get the position because he had probably ‘licked the pussy of Mother Deleuze’ (Ref. 9, p. 29). Chantal Deleuze was the president of the university and, according to François, probably ‘100% lesbian’, who had fallen under the charm of Steve’s gender studies course.

Outmanoeuvred and archaic, in *Soumission* the male subject is equated to society, the nation, and Western civilization. During a discussion between François and his professor colleague, Robert Rediger, who, in the course of the book, gets nominated as principal of the new Islamic Sorbonne University, Rediger becomes the spokesperson for a common far-right trope of the decline of European civilization. He explains that ‘during only a couple of decades, Europe, which once represented the height of human civilization, had achieved its own suicide’ (Ref. 9, p. 257). Pondering on this discussion François concludes:

Because of the progressives’ smug seductions and obscene baits, the Catholic Church had lost its capacity to oppose moral decadence, homosexual marriage, abortion rights, and women entering the workforce. It was obvious – Europe had reached a point of such a putrid decomposition that it could no longer save itself. (Ref. 9, p. 276)

This castration of France and Western civilization is also manifest at an individual level in François. François has noticed how his attractiveness has declined over the years. His old habit of picking a new lover for each new semester has changed. Although it still happens, they leave him shortly after the start of the affair. On numerous occasions these women have explained to François that they had ‘met someone’, to which François sadly replies: ‘I’m also someone’ (Ref. 9, p. 20). Even though François bemoans his physical degradation, at least it is not as bad as it is for women: ‘This fundamental inequality between men and women results in a slowly degrading erotic potentiality within men, whereas women face a proper collapse that happens with an astounding brutality, sometimes in a couple years’ time, sometimes in a month’ (Ref. 9, p. 24). With the risk of falling into a state of ‘andropause’, François starts to consume pornography and quickly finds his favourite site, *Youporn* (Ref. 9, p. 25). This site, he explains, was aimed at normal men all around the world: ‘It was confirmed from the first minute, I had become an absolutely normal man’ (Ref. 9, p. 25). The only part of François that manages to retain any sort of vigour is his penis: ‘My cock was basically the only one of my organs that had never manifested any pain to my consciousness, only pleasure. Modest but robust, it had always faithfully served; in the end it was perhaps I who was in its service’ (Ref. 9, p. 98). François soon discovers that a well-functioning penis is not able to provide any proper sense of pleasure. Suicide becomes an option: ‘The simple will to live was evidently not enough to resist the bundle of pains and worries that mark out the life of an ordinary Westerner’ (Ref. 9, p. 207).

Jack Litewka’s theory of the social construction of patriarchal heterosexuality captures what is going on here. One of the foundations of patriarchal heterosexuality is the dehumanization of women, which has three faces: objectification, fixation, and

conquest.³⁵ For François, two stages of this process are so far complete: the objectification and fixation of the Western and Muslim woman. However, the Western woman's inability to become a proper male object of desire and the Muslim woman's irreproachability prohibit François from conquering them, from becoming a whole male subject in a patriarchal and heterosexual social order. Jean Pierre Boulé describes the reason for this type of sexual dysfunction:

Sexual dysfunction occurs because men experience high levels of anxiety when a female sexual partner demands to be treated as a subject rather than as an object. Because of the fixed script of objectification/fixation/conquest with each element parasitic on the other, any different version of this scenario is a source of anxiety which leads to impotence.³⁶

Although François is suffering from a socially-induced castration where the link between physical and symbolic pleasure has been cut, his cock is as healthy as ever. François' penis can thus be understood as sign of the dormant patriarchy waiting to rise. Herein resides François' and the other white French male characters' curiosity about Islam, and their desire to become Muslim. Through individual conversion to Islam and a societal transformation based on Islamic principles, a patriarchal socio-biological natural order is restored. It is through Islam that François' cock once again can be united with the symbolical order it belongs to. It is through Islam that François can finally embark on a conquest of the Muslim woman.

The Return of Pleasure

In earlier writings, Houellebecq has explored various ways of bridging the castration between the physical penis and a phallogocentric social order. For example, in *Plateforme* he finds the answer in Thai prostitutes. In the book, the character Cham Sawanasee in an interview in the *Phuket Daily* explains that Western men

are unappreciated and get no respect in their own countries, and ... Thai women ... would be happy to find someone who simply does his job and hopes to come home to a pleasant family life after work. Most Western women do not want such a boring husband. (Ref. 9, p. 162)

The protagonist Michel is also stupefied and deeply impressed by the Thai woman's muscular and wet genitalia, always ready to serve him (Ref. 5, p. 60). *Plateforme*, to quote Mark Casey and Thomas Turnell-Read, describes a situation where the tourism industry allows men to travel to the Orient where they 'may enact a masculinity no longer available to them at "home"'.³⁷ In *Soumission*, however, the Orient is brought to Metropolitan France, as is the possibility of enacting a masculinity of which the Western man has been deprived.

Towards the end of the book, François sees the 'massive arrival of immigrant populations, still marked by their traditional culture and natural hierarchies', as a positive thing: 'the submission of women and the respect for the elders constituted a historical possibility of the moral and familial rearmament of Europe'. It could

even lead to a ‘new golden age for the old continent [Europe]’ (Ref. 9, p. 276). François finally fantasizes about his life as a Muslim: not only would he be given a generous salary and a new position at the Saudi Arabian Sorbonne University, his relation to the veiled Muslim students would change drastically. These students, ‘pretty, veiled, and shy’, would soon become ‘happy and proud for being chosen by me [François]’, and especially ‘honoured to share my bed’ (Ref. 9, p. 298). In the new Islamic France, François would finally find peace, and he concludes: ‘I would have nothing to regret’ (Ref. 9, p. 300).

François, as stated earlier, is not alone; male colleagues enjoy the same benefits and even the so-politically-correct Steve, with his gender course, has succumbed to the new patriarchal order by embracing Islam, gaining a substantial pay-raise and, most notably, heading fully-fledged into polygamy (Ref. 9, pp. 181–182).⁹ On a societal level, the coming to power of Ben Abbes also puts a lid on the emerging civil war and reduces petty crime. Even the former secularist and far-right nationalist and identitarian groups are content with the new order (Ref. 9, pp. 181–182). Rediger, the new principal of the Sorbonne, explains that they were never real racists and fascists and, with the return of religion, the passage from identitarian nationalism to becoming a Muslim was not that far-fetched since Islam had replaced Christianity’s former role of giving the French nation and European Civilization as a whole a way out of Europe’s degradation (Ref. 9, p. 255). As for the elitist socialist bourgeoisie, they are more content with low unemployment rates as women leave the work force en masse than in showing any real concern for the new status of women. As Landis MacKellar puts it, the ‘post-colonial guilt hangover of the haute bourgeoisie is absolved in a trice’.³⁸ A bright, post-ideological and patriarchal future glimmers on the horizon.

Houellebecq’s *Soumission* is, in one sense, a clear break from his earlier writings on Islam. In *La possibilité d’une île*, Islam is on the verge of taking hold in Europe but succumbs because it is a ‘primitive faith’ maintained only by ‘ignorance and constraint’.³⁹ In *Soumission*, Islam is the cure for the contemporary malaise of French society. The novel discusses more general conceptions of the place of race, religion, gender, nationhood, and civilization in contemporary France. While Houellebecq throughout the book makes explicit intertextual references and more implicit interdiscursive references to tropes common in today’s populist far-right and counter-jihadist discourse, Houellebecq’s own opinions about these topics remain vague. For example, while Houellebecq describes himself in an interview as ‘Islamophobic’, he states that the novel is not Islamophobic: ‘Everything returns to order . . . the moderate faction manages to control its extremists, which is far from a given at the moment’. (Ref. 6)

My main concern in this article has not been to classify whether or not the novel is Islamophobic – and to say whether or not Houellebecq is *x* or *y* is a less interesting and perhaps an even impossible task. The interesting thing about Houellebecq’s novel and his other writings is that they are part of a broader, obsessive discursive order in which nationhood, sex, gender, race, Christianity, secularism, are negotiated

through fantasies about Islam and Muslims. I have tried to show that regardless of the potential cohesive potentials ascribed to Islam in *Soumission*, the image of Islam and Muslims in the novel is ridden with neo-Oriental imagery and with an obsession with abjection and fantasies about patriarchy's second coming.

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About the Author

Per-Erik Nilsson is Associate Professor in the Sociology of Religion, and Director and Researcher at the Centre for Multidisciplinary Studies on Racism, Uppsala University, Sweden. He has written extensively on the intersections of secularism, religion, and politics. His most recent publications are *French Populism and Discourses on Secularism* (2018) and *Unveiling the French Republic: National Identity, Secularism, and Islam in Contemporary France* (2017).