

ABSTRACT

In the present paper I propose to analyse the novel entitled *Submission* (2015) by Michel Houellebecq. The thesis of the book is that in France the sexual revolution, emancipation, liberalism and individualism have led to a secluded, egotistical and childless society, a situation that needs to change, but the return to the Christian tradition is no longer possible, therefore the solution to the Decline of the West can only come from Islam. Through the character of the protagonist, a middle-aged French professor (François), the author presents a peaceful, democratic and voluntary form of Islamization. However, it is the protagonist's special character and his status that raises numerous questions regarding the depicted form of Islamization. Women and low-status men that form the social majority will never voluntarily convert to Islam, therefore the process of peaceful Islamization, as it is presented by Houellebecq, is highly unlikely. The novel is, obviously, "only" satirical fiction, but one of great importance as it problematizes the modern, Western-type relationship between men and women and it examines the possibilities and consequences of Islam coming into power.

Keywords: Michel Houellebecq, male-female relationship, birth rate

ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ

A tanulmány Michel Houellebecq *Behódolás* (2015) című könyvét elemzi. A könyv alap-tézise, hogy Franciaországban a szexuális forradalom, emancipáció, liberalizmus és individualizmus egy magányos, önző és gyermektelen társadalmat eredményezett, ezért a változás szükségszerű, ugyanakkor a keresztény tradícióhoz már nem lehet visszatérni, tehát a Nyugat alkonyára csak az iszlám adhat megoldást. A szerző Franciaország iszlamizálódásának egy alapvetően békés, demokratikus és önkéntes alapokon álló formáját mutatja be egy középkorú francia professzor (François) személyén keresztül. Ugyanakkor az író érvelése, éppen François speciális személye és helyzete miatt kérdéseket vet fel. A társadalom többségét alkotó nők és alacsonyabb státuszú férfiak sohasem fognak önként behódolni az iszlámnak. Ezért a Houellebecq által vázolt alapvetően békés iszlamizálódás eléggé valószínűtlen scénáriót jelent. A könyv persze „csak” egy satirikus fikció, ennek ellenére alkalmas arra, hogy elgondolkodjunk a modern, nyugatias férfi-nő viszony válságáról, és ezzel összefüggésben az iszlám hatalomra kerülésének a lehetőségéről és következményeiről.

Kulcsszavak: Michel Houellebecq, férfi-nő viszony, születési arányszám



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SUBMISSION AND ISLAMIZATION

Behódolás és iszlamizáció

Potčinjenost i iszlamizacija

Introduction

Michel Houellebecq is a truly scandalous and divisive author, his newest work is probably one of the most read and most popular books in the world right now. *Submission* (Houellebecq, 2015) is a complex book, a very intriguing mix of reality and acerbic utopia, of erotic contemplation and social satire. The main premise of the book is the idea that sexual revolution, emancipation, liberalism and individualism have created an unlivable and dysfunctional society in Europe, therefore transformation is imminent, but the return to Christian traditions is no longer possible, so the solution to the *Decline of the West* can only come from the Islam. The novel employs the character of a middle-aged French literary historian named François to present the external (political and economic) and the internal (existential and spiritual) causes behind the spread of Islam, the emphasis being obviously placed on the latter. The book is, of course, “just” satiric fiction, but it is still adequate to be used as a platform to discuss the possibilities and consequences of Islamic dominance.

Before the Presidential Election

François lives a comfortable, yet terribly monotonous and lonely life. As in previous books by the author, the protagonist’s divorced parents passed away, an event which, just like in the author’s other books, leaves him virtually unaffected. It is only through intel-

lectual and sexual pleasures that he can make his life bearable. He gets the former from Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), a renowned representative of literary Decadence turned devout Catholic, on whom François is an undisputed expert, while the latter comes in the form of sexual encounters with female college students, though the affairs become less and less frequent as time goes by.

The selfish and resigned protagonist is completely wearied of anything except his research and occasional sex, but the unexpected turn of events in the 2022 French presidential elections still captivates his attention. The leader of the far-right National Front (Front National – Marine Le Pen) is the absolute frontrunner, while the candidates of the Socialist Party (Manuel Valls) and of the Muslim Brotherhood (Mohammed Ben Abbes, presumably a fictional character) follow head to head. The radical wing of the National Front or of the Muslim Brotherhood later resort to military action in an attempt to prevent the election from actually taking place for fear that the other side might win. Meanwhile, François leaves Paris, on the one hand to escape civil war, on the other hand to find new sources of inspiration for his work on the life of Huysmans. The events of the civil war are presented as insignificant, an approach that is very difficult to accept, the part dealing with these events being surrealistic and in sharp contrast with the realism that dominates the rest of the novel.

Houellebecq does not depict the Muslim Brotherhood negatively at all. Mohamed Ben Abbes is, in fact, nothing like the leaders of the dreaded Islamic State, he is not intent on implementing dictatorship, he does not force the religion of his people onto France, he disarms the extremists, what is more, he comes up with lucrative ideas to improve the economy. What the author presents here is a fundamentally peaceful, democratic and voluntary Islamization of France. At the same time, however, the Muslim Brotherhood is determined to enforce Islamic culture and traditions. They pursue a strategy that comprises social and cultural elements such as the discouragement of female emancipation, the gradual implementation of polygamy, the weakening of secular education and the strengthening of religious education as well as economic elements, such as the encouragement of small or family-owned businesses.

The term Islam, as Rostoványi emphasizes, refers to both the religion and civilization, as well as culture and politics structured around the religion. “Islam is thus by no means the ‘narrowly interpreted’ religion that can be reduced to theology and religious practices. Islam – or, more precisely, the ideal, or we could even say, the utopic Islam – is a complex system that comprises and regulates all aspects of life, a system in which religious practice constitutes only a relatively minor part, the larger part being concerned with the rules and guidelines referring to secular spheres of life”. (Rostoványi, 2008) Due to secularization and modernity, the victory of a Christian party in the Western world does not entail the abolishment of female emancipation, of abortion and divorce, neither does it mean the reinstatement of a feudal system. However, Islam has never undergone such a process of secularization, therefore all Islamic parties will inevitably seek to implement “ideal” Islamic values and to eliminate the Western way of life. Whether some Muslims will try to

achieve this through violence, while others through more democratic means is an issue of secondary importance from this perspective.

Houellebecq examines society in the dimensions of the traditionalist Christian past, the liberal present and the similarly traditionalist, but Muslim future. Houellebecq continuously stresses that the Christian past and the Islamic future are similar in terms of their primary characteristics, godliness, traditionalism, patriarchal nature and, most importantly, their functionality and they are both in sharp conflict with the present of the Western society that is built on secularism, liberalism and individualism and is therefore disintegrating. “For these Muslims, the real enemy – the thing they fear and hate – isn’t Catholicism. It’s secularism. It’s laicism. It’s atheist materialism. They think of Catholics as fellow believers. Catholicism is a religion of the Book. Catholics are one step away from converting to Islam – that’s the true, original Muslim vision of Christianity.” (Houellebecq, 2015: 125-126)

According to Houellebecq’s thesis, the society that is built on emancipation, individualism and within it the relationship between men and women has failed completely from both a subjective and an objective perspective. One of the causes for the failure is that most love relationships between young people – or between not-so-young people – no longer conclude in marriage and in settling down to form a family, as evidenced by the cases of his peers, Aurélie and Sandra. “As for the present, it was clear that Aurélie had never managed to form a long-term relationship, that casual sex filled her with growing disgust, that her personal life was headed for complete and utter disaster.” (Houellebecq, 2015: 10)

The relationship between François and Myriam also disintegrates, as the man cannot bring himself to stay committed to the woman. On the other hand, it is also because a significant percent of marriages, in France more than half, end in divorce. We see this in the case of François’ parents, but also in the case of his peer, Bruno and his wife (Annelise). As it is imposed by the principles of emancipation, the woman dresses up smartly in the morning and leaves for work. “(O)nce she got home, around nine, exhausted (Bruno was the one who picked the kids up, who made them dinner – he had the hours of a civil servant), she’d collapse, get into a sweatshirt and tracksuit trousers, and that’s how she’d greet her lord and master, and some part of him must have known – had to have known – that he was fucked, and some part of her must have known that she was fucked, and that things wouldn’t get better over the years”. (Houellebecq, 2015: 74) It is liberal individualism that is also to blame for the objective failure of family lives. “(L)iberal individualism triumphed as long as it undermined intermediate structures such as nations, corporations, castes, but when it attacked that ultimate social structure, the family, and thus the birth rate, it signed its own death warrant; Muslims dominance was foregone conclusion.” (Houellebecq, 2015: 221)

It is important to highlight that birth rate demographics show a much more nuanced picture. According to data gathered in 2013, the overall fertility rate in France is within the ideal range of 2.0 children/woman. (Population Reference Bureau, 2014) On a more detailed look, however, we see that the fertility rate of the Muslim population is higher (2.8

children/woman) than the overall rate, while the fertility rate of the non-Muslim population is lower, 1.9 children/woman (*The Future of the Global Muslim Population*, 2014). Even this latter figure can be considered acceptable, as it is still relatively close to the ideal figure of 2.1 that would secure straightforward and continued reproduction, but if the present growth rate structure is maintained, the number of non-Muslim children will continue to slowly decrease, while the number of Muslim children will strongly increase, by 140% per generation. On the other hand, it is also true that there are countries in Europe where birth rate figures are even more alarmingly low, such as Portugal and Poland with 1.2, Hungary with 1.3, despite the fact that Muslim communities in these countries are very small. Germany, however, is faced with low birth rate (1.4 children/woman, entailing a 70% decrease in the number of new-born babies per generation) as well as the rapid increase in the number of Muslim immigrants, therefore the Islamization process can take a much faster course in Germany than in France.

In this politically and culturally tense situation, one of the alternatives is the National Front, one of their cultural groupings being the Identitarist Block, a group that represents the interests of “*indigenous Europeans*”. Their theory is summarized in Lempereur’s brochure entitled “Get ready for civil war” (Houellebecq, 2015:53). “Basically, they argue that belief in a transcendent being conveys a genetic advantage: that couples who follow one of the three religions of the Book and maintain patriarchal values have more children than atheists or agnostics. You see less education among women, less hedonism and individualism. And to a large degree, this belief in transcendence can be passed on genetically. Conversions, or cases where people grow up to reject family values, are statistically insignificant. In the vast majority of cases, people stick with whatever metaphysical system they grow up in. That’s why atheist humanism – the basis of any ‘pluralist society’ – is doomed. Monotheism is on the rise, especially in the Muslim population – and that’s even before you factor in immigration. European Nativists start by admitting that, sooner or later, we’ll see a civil war between the Muslims and everybody else. They conclude that, if they want to have a fighting chance, that war had better come as soon as possible – certainly before 2050, preferably sooner if possible.” (Houellebecq, 2015:53-54)

The approach promoted by Identitarists is debatable, though. Faith and the respect for traditions are not passed down genetically, therefore off-springs always have the option to reject tradition and in a secularized society they usually do, therefore the rapid growth rate of the “*monotheist population*” is no longer imminent and obvious. Theoretically, we cannot exclude the possibility that secularized Muslims appear beside atheist humanists and secularized Christians, which also means that civil war could also be avoided, as the groups involved are no longer in grave conflict. However, reality is much more complex – even though secularized Muslims do exist, the Islam itself is not secularized. As Rostoványi points out: “*As for the current state of secularization, ... ‘explicit secularism’ exists only to a very small extent*” (Rostoványi, 2008). Islam is determined to preserve supervision over state and society – Houellebecq quotes the widely-known sentence by Khomeini: “Islam is politics or it is nothing.” (Houellebecq, 2015:182)

The other viewpoint is formulated by the Islamized rector (Redinger) in his pamphlet, *Ten Questions on Islam* (Houllebecq, 2015:219). “The argument was original, I have to say: to realise His sublime plan in the inanimate world, the Creator of the universe used the laws of geometry (a non-Euclidean geometry, to be sure, a non-commutative geometry, but still a geometry). When it came to living beings, however, the Creator expressed Himself through natural selection, which allowed animate creatures to achieve their maximum beauty, vitality and power. And for all animal species, including man, the law was the same: only certain individuals would be chosen to pass on their seed, to conceive the next generation, on which an infinite number of generations depended. In the case of mammals, if you compared the female, with her long gestation period, to the male, with his essentially limitless capacity to reproduce, it was clear that the pressures of selection would fall principally on the males. If some males enjoyed access to several females, others would necessarily have none. So this inequality between males should be considered not a negative side effect of polygamy but rather its goal. It was how the species achieved its destiny.” (Houllebecq, 2015:219-220)

As for the distribution of wealth, Islam prefers a society that is articulated hierarchically. “In another article, Rediger made a case for highly unequal wealth distribution. Although an authentic Muslim society would have to abolish actual destitution (alms-giving was one of the Five Pillars of Wisdom), it should also maintain a wide gap between the masses, who would live in self-respecting poverty, and a tiny minority of individuals so fantastically rich that they could throw away vast, insane sums, thus assuring the survival of luxury and the arts.” (Houllebecq, 2015:222) In this structure, the woman is only a form of goods owned by either the father or by the husband. Most European men are not aware that polygamy implemented in a society composed of an equal number of men and women would create a situation in which the minority group of dominant males (strong, intelligent, influential and, most importantly, wealthy) get to marry the majority of the women, leaving no women for the majority group of dominated males. François does not perceive this hierarchical structure to be problematic as he is reassured by the rector that in the Islamized society he will be included in the group of the dominant males, the members of which earn high salaries and have many obedient and devoted wives.

The process of Islamization that François goes through thus becomes psychologically understandable. However, what the process implies, even at its worst, would be only the conversion to Islam and the submission of a selfish, individualistic and cynical male elite. It is, of course, undisputable that such a male elite plays a decisive role in social processes, but it must be emphasized that Islamization is detrimental for the interests of the large majority in society. It is obviously detrimental for women, who will consequently lose their autonomy and will become nothing more than a property of men and it is detrimental for the men of lower status and lower income. According to the Pareto-principle, these dominated men make up 80% of the male population, so the voluntary submission to Islam would be an unacceptable alternative for 90% of the non-Muslim society. If a civil war were to break out, it would be much more violent and much more devastating than the

conflict presented in the book. The two parties at war would be the male elite undergoing the process of Islamization backed up by their militias on one side and the majority of the society, that is, the non-Islamic Europeans on the other side.

After the Presidential Election

In the second round of the election the representatives of the National Front (32.4%) and the Muslim Brotherhood (22.3%) make it in (Houellebecq, 2015:80). The centre-right and the Socialists had formed a coalition, a ‘broad republican front’, and were backing the Muslim Brotherhood. (Houellebecq, 2015:121). As a result, Mohammed Ben Abbas is eventually elected president.

Houellebecq does not provide any straightforward explanation as to why the central left parties support the Muslim Brotherhood, neither does he explain why their voters, especially women follow the recommendations of the party elite. In addition to the prospect of obtaining a share of power, another factor could be that humanistic atheists regard religion as a private matter, therefore they wrongly assume that Muslims subscribe to that view as well. Whatever the motivation, the Muslim Brotherhood that initially held only 22% of the votes is able to grab the executive power and can now start the institutionalized Islamization of the society. I would like to note here that Muslims currently make up 5-7% of the population of France (CIA World Factbook, 2015), but this percentage is sure to increase in the future due to immigration and demographic trends, as all forecasts agree.

In the new government, the Muslim Brotherhood gains control over the Ministry of Education, what is more, the protagonist’s workplace, the Sorbonne becomes an Islamic university subsidized from Saudi Arabia (New Sorbonne University – Paris III) and evidently employing only Muslim teachers. The new university leadership makes the protagonist and the other, secular professors resign, but also promises them a hefty sum in pension. On the other hand, the university also tries to persuade all professors, including François to return to the university as Muslim teachers. Working on the critical edition of the oeuvre of Huysmans, the protagonist tightens his relationship with the University’s already Islamized rector (Robert Redinger), he eventually converts to Islamic faith and returns to the university. This decision is motivated not only by the high salary and the possibility of two or three college-age wives, but also by the unbearable emptiness of the Western way of life.

After the elections, the protagonist, forced into early retirement and therefore increasingly isolated, becomes more and more preoccupied with the thought of suicide. “I was incapable of living for myself, and who else did I have to live for? Humanity didn’t interest me – it disgusted me, actually. I didn’t think of human beings as my brothers, especially not when I looked at some particular subset of human beings, such as the French, or my former colleagues. And yet, in an unpleasant way, I couldn’t help seeing that these human beings were just like me, and it was this very resemblance that made me avoid them.

I should have found a woman to marry. That was the classic, time-honoured solution. A woman is human, obviously, but she represents a slightly different kind of humanity. She gives life a certain perfume of exoticism.” (Houellebecq, 2015:168-169)

Houellebecq provides a crushing critique of the Western, emancipated and liberal relationship between men and women and of the society informed by the same principles. In his view, human relationships no longer exist – or if they do, they are completely formal and empty. “The facts were plain: Europe had reached a point of such putrid decomposition that it could no longer save itself,” (Houellebecq, 2015:225). This way, submission becomes almost redemption for François: “(T)hat the summit of human happiness resides in the most absolute submission (...) there’s a connection between woman’s submission to man, as it’s described in *Story of O*, and the Islamic idea of man’s submission to God.” (Houellebecq, 2015:212)

However, the reader may rightfully sense that the pathetic indecisiveness and the affectation that characterize François has nothing to do with emancipation or modernity. No social formation is able to give François what he wants – independence and, simultaneously, a committed relationship –, as these two different desires are a priori mutually exclusive needs.

Conclusions

Houellebecq brings up several important topics, but the author’s arguments become debatable especially because of the personality and status of François. Houellebecq chooses a protagonist that is atypical in many respects, then he presents how the Western way of life is unsustainable and unlivable and how these factors determine the protagonist to convert to Islam. This implicitly means that the Western way of life is unsustainable and unlivable as such, so everyone should convert to Islam. The only exceptions in the book are Jewish people who choose to emigrate, rather than to convert. This train of thought can be challenged from two points of view:

Firstly, François’ unhappiness is not caused by Western society, but by his own personality, by his endless egoism, his individualism and his cynicism, which also means that François cannot be happy, regardless of the structure he lives in, not even within the polygamist framework provided by Islam. Furthermore, the existence of many selfish and cynical men in Europe cannot be necessarily attributed to a social cause. Such people have always existed, regardless of emancipation or individualism.

Secondly, the fact that François is selfish and cynical does not mean that all Western European men are like that and even though like-minded men can cause unhappiness to many around them, they are not able to bring about the disintegration of the concept of family and, subsequently, of society, that is, they will not bring about the “Decline of the West” unless their number reaches critical mass. The voluntary Islamization and submission of François only implies the conversion and submission of the like-minded male elite,

therefore the peaceful Islamization theorized by Houellebecq is a very unlikely scenario. Women and lower-status men who make up the majority of society will never voluntarily submit to Islam. Last, but not least, the problematic nature, if you wish, the crisis of Western society does not imply the supremacy of Islamic society which is also plagued by problems that might be different, but are not less severe.

The French author explores one of the gravest problems that the present form of Western society is faced with: the lack and emptiness of human relationships. However, this crisis is not to be regarded as fate. Europe, if it can gather the will to do so, can face the problem of male-female relationship issues and the dramatic drop in birth rates, especially as the Western male-female relationship is essentially modern and dynamic, which makes it repairable as well. The author presents a form of Islamization of France that is peaceful, democratic and voluntary. This process is facilitated not only by “hard facts” (demographics, immigration), but also by the various wrong interpretations connected to them. The currently dominant, politically correct discourse does not make it possible to confront challenges such as the crisis of the Western family model, the dramatically decreasing birth rates of “European natives” and the fact that Islam is not only a religion, but also an established civilization, a cultural and political attitude that reflects the values of the medieval Arab world. Consequently, the Islam’s rise to power in Europe would inevitably lead to the establishment of a traditionalist civilization and culture that are contradictory to Western values and the Western way of life.

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