

***The Strings of the Lute*. Eileen Colucci. Xlibris, ISBN 978-1-4257-7308-3, 2007. 392 pages.**

The Strings of the Lute, a novel adorned with beautiful observations and mediations, looks at the dynamics of cultural encounters between people who are perceived as essentially different and irreconcilable. The author Eileen Colucci provides a lively testament to a long-held thesis, marshalled by Ibn Khaldun, Giambattista Vico, and Edward Said, that identity is a continuously reconstructed, nuanced matter.

The novel opens with the main protagonist, Lorraine, a Catholic girl from New York, mourning her father's death. As part of her university education, Lorraine travels to France to learn French. Initially, her life in France is intolerable, given that her host is an obsessive and racist French woman, who disapproves of and makes jibes about Lorraine's new-found Arab boyfriend, Larbi, a Moroccan architecture student, also studying abroad in France. Lorraine and Larbi fall in love, and despite protests from their respective families, get married – with ceremonies in both the USA and Morocco. Their religious and cultural differences are presented at various instances by Lorraine's family and her friends in the USA and Larbi's family in Morocco as unbridgeable and insurmountable. Against these 'traditional' unwarranted claims, Lorraine charts a narrative, and a life, which asserts the possibility of cultural coexistence, the need to scrutinize and negotiate cultural differences and eventually coexist with them. Lorraine's experience, married to a Moroccan Muslim and living in Morocco, diverges from the experiences of her American friends, who all, unlike her, suffer marriage breakdowns:

How ironic that of all the girls, it was Brynna, who (along with Suzanne) had married within her faith and culture, whose marriage had fallen apart. It had to go beyond the trite saying about opposites attracting because marriage was about what came after the attraction was established: the acknowledgment that there were fundamental differences and the commitment to work through them; to compromise – to give and take. Maybe those couples who'd never confronted their differences early on had made assumptions that didn't ring true afterwards; had been thrown for a loop when those differences emerged ... Lorraine could not help thinking that perhaps Brynna and Chris had never looked beyond their blond-haired, blue eyed sameness, into the core of each one's distinct individuality, until it was too late (316).

The novel, therefore, is serious in investigating cultural differences, revealing the processes of identity construction as embodied in situations, events, and accidents. It is also serious in establishing possibilities outside one's 'tribe' without disdain or extrapolation from that tribe. Furthermore, the novel

explores the themes of exile and diaspora, making a point of Lorraine's parents' Irish and Italian ancestry, Lorraine and Larbi's diasporic existence while in France, and their decision to live as a mixed couple, and eventually, Lorraine's willing move to Morocco, where she is surrounded by an Islamic culture within which she is at first a stranger.

Colucci presents her case for coexistence between cultures, rather than the menace of clash of civilizations, compellingly. This is not to say that Lorraine has landed an idyllic life in Morocco, unencumbered by impediments and frustrations. She has to go through burdensome ordeals to obtain American citizenship for her and Larbi's Morocco-born son, Ismail; she is far from her childhood friends and finds it difficult to communicate with her mother-in-law and others in anything but gestures; her finances do not give her the option of traveling; her husband is tied to a government contract; save for her sister-in-law, she has no local friends. Lorraine does not underestimate the difficulties she faces, but treats them as challenges that are as much to be understood and overcome in Morocco as in the USA. Lorraine's most testing experience in Morocco is when her son mysteriously goes missing for a few hours. Here, her long-ignored Catholic faith is evoked, but not without Islamic inflections she cultivated from her experiences in Morocco: 'after all these years, she had arrived at a point where the two faiths converged. She'd morphed into some sort of hybrid: a catholic Moslem or a Moslem Catholic ... something. Whatever she was, it defied labeling and would be impossible to explain to her friends' (230). Lorraine's meshing of cultural elements serves to rebuke those who assume the fixity of identity. Identity in Colucci's novel is shaped by the voluntary and purposeful exile of Lorraine in Morocco, but one with no less challenges and hindrances to cripple and stifle contemplation and action than forced exile.

The novel reaches a climax with Lorraine's sudden and tragic death in a car accident while waiting for her son outside of school. Lorraine's mother and childhood friend, Suzanne, travel to Morocco to mourn her death, and the latter, troubled by her infertility, mischievously ponders taking Ismail back home with her to the USA. The two women are welcomed lavishly at Larbi's father's house, where Suzanne suggests that Ismail would be happier with her in the USA, but Larbi, his family, and Lorraine's mother all firmly insist that Ismail stays in Morocco.

The novel ends with Larbi, now a tragic widower, soothing himself by reading from one of Lorraine's letters to Suzanne, which details Lorraine's intercultural negotiations: 'your first language always remains your point of reference, and is what you feel most comfortable in. But, you reach a point where you're so fluent in the second language, you start thinking and

dreaming in it. I've reached fluency in Morocco. It goes beyond the culture and the language (which I've never mastered if we're talking about Arabic). I find myself "thinking in Moroccan"; not just saying "InshAllah" (God willing), but really meaning it' (p. 380).

Lorraine, and by extension Colucci herself, are masterly of details, whether of human affairs, feelings, or landscape. Overall, the readers could have been spared some superfluous particulars, such as elaborate descriptions of meals or side voyages across France and Spain. However, Colucci's gift for writing redeems this superfluity. Lastly, it is partly from conversations and situations occurring in the course of these details that we learn about identity formation in exile and about love, for the novel is essentially about enduring love between strangers in exile.

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