

Submission

Soumission

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Set in 2022 (the year of the next presidential election in France when the book was written), this political-fiction novel envisages an unprecedented and improbable scenario: what if the candidate of a Muslim political party were elected President of the French Republic? The book immediately sparked major controversy in France, not least because of the coincidence of its release with the attacks that struck the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015.

The novel features a typically Houellebecquian character: François, a Parisian professor of literature specializing in the French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans, lives alone, away from both professional and sentimental intrigues; he is completely disinterested in politics and other people in general. Apathetic and misanthropic, he observes the world around him with only the vaguest claim to detachment and experiences a growing sense of emptiness and decline. At the same time, the country seems to be on the brink of civil war, with clashes between young identitarians and Salafists multiplying. It is in this atmosphere that the presidential election is taking place. To prevent the victory of far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, the traditional parties ally themselves with Mohammed Ben Abbas, the charismatic candidate of a new political party, "La Fraternité musulmane". He is elected. This political change, which sees the proclamation of Sharia law in all areas of public and private life, including in universities, offers the narrator a second life. At the cost of his conversion to Islam, he enjoys a successful academic career and the advent of polygamy. No need to be convinced, just submit. The novel concludes with the words: "I'll have nothing to regret" (p. 296 in the French edition).

Several real-life political figures appear in the novel, and some even commented on the book upon its release. François Hollande, then President of the French Republic, said he would read it "because it is a subject of debate", while Marine Le Pen praised it as a "fiction that could one day become reality" (*Libération*, January 6, 2015, http://next.liberation.fr/livres/2015/01/06/michel-houellebecq-et-le-cas-soumission_1174350). So this novel immediately made its mark on French political life. Hailed for its ability to anticipate, or denounced for inciting hatred against Muslims, the book has sparked much discussion and divided French opinion. The debate focused in particular on the representation of political Islam. Once elected, the candidate, who presented himself as a moderate Muslim, nevertheless imposes a radical transformation of French society, particularly with regard to women. Houellebecq was accused of stirring up the fears of part of the French (and European) population towards immigration in general and Muslims in particular. Is it a "gripping political and moral fable" (as the publisher puts it on the book cover) or a slam-dunk for the far right and its thesis of the Great Replacement? Thesis novel or farce? Michel Houellebecq has countered his detractors by claiming the irresponsibility of the writer as a guiding principle.

A reading of this novel outside the immediate context of its release reveals a more classic political

dimension, insofar as it is, in the strictest sense, a reactionary novel: Houellebecq again and again denounces post-May 68 liberal society, where man, freed from the shackles of family and religion, finds himself free, but also alone, condemned to an empty existence. The world and society are seen only from a male perspective, with women reduced to their sexual attractiveness (for the younger ones) or to their role as “pot-au-feu women”. Provocative by design, Houellebecq paints a picture of a disembodied, decadent democracy, where nothing connects the “elementary particles” (the title of his second novel) to make up society. Submission replaces all ideals and all forms of action (not to mention resistance). A first-person narrative, this novel adopts the perspective of an eminently unsympathetic narrator, who resembles the persona Houellebecq has forged for himself on the media scene. He exaggerates and magnifies the line of what he perceives as representative of contemporary society, taking his faithless but provocative prose to the extreme. In this way, his open denial (and denigration) of politics enables him to assert himself in political debates. An effective strategy since *Soumission* topped the bestseller list in three European countries on its release: France, Italy and Germany. The reception in other European countries, particularly in Great Britain, has shifted the debate, highlighting Houellebecq’s nihilism and exonerating him from the allegation of anti-Islamism, which marked the reception of the novel, especially in France.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

CENSORSHIP STATUS: