Chapter 4

Writing and Living the Exotic

I loved those walks in the quiet darkness of Africa . . . All these things wove their spell upon me. They were part of the strange soul of Africa—the land that had taken us as her own, to make or to break . . .

Florence Riddell

Oh! Cette patrie d’Afrique! Maintenant qu’on l’arrachait à elle, combien il l’aimait

Elissa Rhaïs

The twenties saw an increase in the literary output of women in both colonies.1 In Kenya it was the early beginning of a literature that would expand in the thirties and forties; in Algeria the period marked the consolidation of colonial women’s voices into a “female” genre that was seen to have a true understanding of interracial relations, and thus to be its most accurate representation. Colonial women’s novels, whether in Kenya or Algeria, reflected metropole anxieties as much as they depicted a particular vision of the colony. In the aftermath of World War I, when the need was to forget the horror and devastation by recreating a semblance of stability, women responded by producing fiction in which the prewar status quo was packaged in an exoticism that belied colonial realities, while formulating a seductive image of the colony. The representational tropes they created and used laid the groundwork for the nostalgia that would become a part of the post-independence collective memory of the colonial past. The exotic in both Algeria and Kenya was perceived in the land and its peoples, and performed by the settlers in their leisure activities. In Algeria it was associated with the Mediterranean beauty of the land and the eroticism of Orientalism; in Kenya it was associated with the wildness of the flora, fauna and landscape and the pleasures their proximity could bring. In Algeria, Elissa Rhaïs (1876–1940) and Magali Boisnard (1882–1945) wrote and performed via the medium of

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the exotic. In Kenya, Nora K. Strange (1884–1974) and Florence Riddell (c.1885–1960) exemplified colonial women, who wrote about and lived an adventure under “the wonderful spell of Kenya,” as the promotional blurb put it.

Nostalgia as Understanding “the Native”

In 1919 Rosine Boumendil, a Jewish woman indigenous to Algeria, made her entry onto the Parisian literary scene as Elissa Rhaïs, author of the novel Saâda, la Marocaine. At the time of her literary debut, Rhaïs was presented as an “Arab Muslim” woman, whose authenticity arose out of her personal experience of “indigenous” society. Boumendil, which is an Arab-Jewish name, suggests that she may have been ethnically Arab, but she was not Muslim. The fact she was categorized as an “Arab Muslim” was no mere publicity ploy; it was also indicative of the colonial discourse that elided the ethnic entity of Arab with the religious entity of Muslim. Rhaïs was born in Blida in 1876, where she attended primary school and then continued her education at the École des Religieuse de la Doctrine until 1894. Her first marriage to Rabbi Moïse Amar produced three children. She divorced Amar in 1914 and re-married another Jew, the wealthy merchant Mardochée (Maurice) Chemouil. The choice of her pen name is noteworthy: Elissa is the less familiar name of Dido of Carthage and Rhaïs is the homophone of Raïs, or leader in Arabic. According to Jean Déjeux, her son Roland claimed it was his classics professor, M. Da Costa, who provided her with the pseudonym. But it has also been imputed to Plon as her contract with that press states that she was “born in Blida of Muslim origin, [and] learned French at the village school.” Whoever it was, it obviously resonated with the colonial author and ideologue, Louis Bertrand, who encouraged her to go to Paris and promoted her work, and with René Doumic, editor of the Revue des Deux Mondes, who first serialized her work. Whether the choice was just a marketing gambit or an attempt to create a more authoritative self with the added aura of enchantment, her acceptance of this new identity helped to land her a five year contract with the French publishing house, Plon. Over a period of 20 years, she published 12 volumes of fiction (10 novels and 5 novellas) and had short stories included in two anthologies, appearing in one of these alongside Luigi Pirandello. Although the authenticity of her identity was sometimes questioned she was deemed to have “a great depth of knowledge of the Arab soul and customs.” Such was her popularity that some of her works were translated into Norwegian, Finnish, Swedish, and Russian. In Paris, she held court in her apartment in the Left Bank, where she reinforced her image of the “authentic and exotic Muslim” by receiving her guests in the “oriental” finery of turbans and caftans. Rhaïs wrote sentimental romances, which today would be classed as romans de bibliothèque de gare or romantic fiction (fig. 4.1). As one rather patronizing reviewer put it: “if ever there were doubts as to whether mediocre adventures could charm and move merely by accentuating the primitive aspects of humanity,