This volume focuses on the period of decolonization and the Cold War as the backdrop to the emergence of new and diverse literary aesthetics that accompanied anti-imperialist commitments and Afro-Asian solidarity. Competing internationalist frameworks produced a flurry of writings that made Asian, African and other world literatures visible to each other for the first time. The book's essays examine a host of print culture formats (magazines, newspapers, manifestos, conference proceedings, ephemera, etc.) and modes of cultural media and transnational exchange that enabled the construction of a variously inflected Third-World culture which played a determining role throughout the Cold War. The essays in this collection focus on locations as diverse as Morocco, Tunisia, South Asia, China, Spain, and Italy, and on texts in Arabic, English, French, Hindi, Italian, and Spanish. In doing so, they highlight the combination of local debates and struggles, and internationalist networks and aspirations that found expression in essays, novels, travelogues, translations, reviews, reportages and other literary forms.

With its comparative study of print cultures with a focus on decolonization and the Cold War, the volume makes a major contribution both to studies of postcolonial literary and print cultures, and to cultural Cold War studies in multilingual and non-Western contexts, and will be of interest to historians and literary scholars alike.

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Cover image: Installation view of Two Meetings and a Funeral (Naeem Mohaiemen, 2017) at NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2020. Cover design by Anna Gaë
7. The Poetics and Politics of Solidarity

Barg el-Lil (1961) and Afrotopia

Itzea Goikolea-Amiano

Introduction

Bachir Khreyif’s Arabic novel Barg el-Lil (1961) traces the adventures of a black slave across the rivalry between the Spanish and Ottoman empires, the two main early-modern Mediterranean empires, as it played out in sixteenth-century Tunisia.1 Barg el-Lil (literally ‘night lightning’, probably a reference to his swiftness) is a black pícaro or trickster character.2 He disguises himself in every possible way, as pícaros do, to escape fights or being captured by those claiming ownership over him. Barg can fade into busy streets and survive impossible crises. He

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1 The novel was translated into Spanish in the early 1980s, and only very recently into French: Baṣīr Jrayyef, Barg el-Līl, trans. by Ana Ramos (Madrid: Instituto Hispano-Arabe de Cultura, 1982); Béchir Khraief, Barg Ellil, trans. by Ahmed Gasmī (Tunis: Éditions Arabesques, 2017). Khreyif is one of the best-known authors in contemporary Tunisia, and his works—which include plays, short stories, essays and two historical novels—are part of the secondary-school curriculum. Fawzi Al-Zimarli, ‘Introduction’, Al-Bachīr Khreyīf: Al-A’māl al-Kāmila (The Complete Works of Bachir Khreyif), 4 vols (Tunis: Dar al-Janub, 2005), I, pp. 21–22. I would like to thank the editors, Orsini, Zecchini and Srivastava, and the anonymous second reader, for their insightful comments to the first draft of this chapter, which significantly improved it.

2 I refer to the novel as Barg el-Lil as per Tunisian pronunciation, instead of the Modern Standard Arabic transliteration, Barq al-Layl. I refer to the protagonist as Barg, since this is how he is referred to in the novel.
The form of ideology discussed in this chapter is that of the historical novel in the context of Tunisian independence and postcolonial state nationalism but also of debates about ‘committed literature’ and the pan-Africanist wave that swept through the Maghreb and the whole continent. *Barg el-Lil* was the first historical novel in Tunisian literary history and the first Arabic novel to have a black slave as protagonist. Unlike the ‘ancient founders of the nation’ like the Numidian king Jugurtha or resistance figures like the Emir Abdelkader who animated historical fiction in neighbouring Algeria, or the iconic peasant of Egyptian literature, *Barg el-Lil* focuses on the adventures of a black slave who manages to escape his tyrant owner and whose actions lead a fast-paced narrative.³

The three layers of this chapter will progressively take us closer to the text and its narrative. The first layer situates *Barg el-Lil* within Khreyif’s literary career in the context of print culture and the decolonial momentum in Tunisia, where literary form, language, content and ideology are entangled. If Khreyif’s choice of a black slave as protagonist needs to be read in relation to Negritude and pan-Africanism, the ‘afrotopian’ momentum, and Bourguiba’s colour-blind policies,⁴ and the fact that its protagonists belong to ‘the masses’ (to use the terminology of the time) and are makers of history, is to be read in relation to ‘committed literature’ (*adab mutazim*), a term hotly debated in Arabic literary circles and periodicals across the Third World in those decades. By situating emancipation in relation to both colonialism and slavery and

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the forced uprooting of Africans into several world diasporas, including the Maghreb, these discussions and movements offer a specific angle on Cold War struggles.

The second layer takes us to the locatedness of the story and the geographical imaginaries it foregrounds through the notion of ‘significant geographies’, an alternative to the generic meta-category ‘world’ employed in world literature that highlights the specific spaces, repertoires, tropes and literary imaginaries that matter to historically located literary actors and texts.5 Barg el-Lil situates Tunisia within what Edwige Tamalet Talbayev calls ‘the transcontinental Maghreb’, which includes the historical rivalry between the Spanish and Ottoman empires and the millennia-old cultural connections, literary cross-pollinations and asymmetries embedded in the Mediterranean.6 At the same time, the novel also places Tunisia within the history of trans-Saharan (slave) trade and the cultural and political relations between northern and southern Sahara. In doing so, it erases the fallacious division between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa that so pervades scholarship and the public imagination and performs the kind of decolonial work that Moroccan critic Abdelkebir Khatibi proposed in the 1980s, which saw the Maghreb as ‘a topographical site between Orient, Occident, and [sub-Saharan] Africa—a site that may become global in its own right’.7

The third layer explores the poetics and politics of solidarity within the novel against the backdrop of Tunisian state feminism and the implementation of the new Personal Status Code (PSC) in 1956, only five months after independence, by Habib Bourguiba—the ‘father of the nation’ whose legacy continues to be disputed among feminists and non-feminists.8 In Barg el-Lil patriarchal oppression is epitomized

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by repudiation, women’s confinement, and the state’s institutional violence, some of the key issues addressed by the PSC. The novel also discusses masculinity, and moments of inter-racial intimacy and solidarity mark the friendship between the two male protagonists—the central African slave Barg and local free man Sha’shu’. All in all, the novel posits pre-modern gender politics as repressive, but suggests that solidarity, friendship and love, and the subaltern heroes’ individual wit and force, can challenge and dismantle it, which is interesting in light of the state- and Bourguiba-centric reformism.

**Barg el-Lil** in Tunisian and Third World Postcolonial Print Culture

Bachir Kh[rey]if is the only Tunisian writer who provoked in me a sweet yet violent shock, such as I experienced when I read Zuqāq al-Midaq (Midaq Alley) by Naguib Mahfouz, and when I finished reading Arkhaṣ Layālī (The Cheapest Nights) by Yusuf Idris.

Hassouna Mosbahi

Tunisia had been a French Protectorate since 1881, with significant communities of Italian, Maltese and Greek immigrants since the beginning of the century. At the time Bachir Khreyif (or Béchir Khraïef, 1917–1983) started writing in the late 1930s, the majority of the Tunisian print culture was Francophone. Khreyif was born in the town of Nefta in the south-western Djreid region, known for its many Sufi lodges, but was raised in Tunis after his family moved there. Like many of his peers, Khreyif first received a traditional education and studied (and memorized) the Qur’an and classical Arabic poetry and language—skills which enabled him to read the sixteenth-century chronicles and exemplary biographies (manaqib) that underwrite Barg el-Lil.\(^9\)


\(^11\) Around 63% of the Tunisian press in the 1930s was in French, 22% in Arabic, and the rest in Italian and Judeo-Arabic; Manoubia Ben Ghedahem, *Haddad et la presse d’expression française: un aspect méconnu de la querelle* (Tunis: Ichraq Editions, 2009), p. 6.

Though he did not attend Sadiqi College, one of the Maghreb’s earliest modern schools established by the Ottoman-Tunisian statesman and reformer Khayr el-Din in 1875, and where many prominent nationalists, including Bourguiba, were educated,\(^\text{13}\) Khreyif received education in Arabic and French at a bilingual primary school and later read Flaubert, Balzac, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Schiller, Chekhov and Hemingway. He also read modern Arabic writers, mainly from Egypt and the Middle East, including Mahmoud ‘Abbas al-‘Aqad, Taha Hussein and Tawfiq al-Hakim, who advocated a new poetic sensibility under the rubric of ‘art for art’s sake’ and would later oppose the explicit politicization of literature advocated by Arab writers in the 1950s.\(^\text{14}\)

Arabic literature and print culture in Tunisia were deeply tied to trends in Egypt and the Levant (or Mashreq). If at the turn of the twentieth century the Arabic press and literary periodicals in the Maghreb published Levantine and Egyptian writers belonging to the movement of cultural revival or Nahda, in the 1920s a new generation of Tunisian writers with modernist ideas emerged, including Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, Ali Douagi, Mohamed Saleh al-Muhawidi and Mustapha Khreyif—Bachir’s brother.\(^\text{15}\) Together they formed the literary group Taht Essour (Under the Wall), named after the café in the old part of Tunis where they gathered to debate and write.\(^\text{16}\) Taht Essour criticized the weight of normative tradition and experimented with style and the use of Tunisian Arabic or Darija, and its members lived a bohemian lifestyle. Al-Shabbi himself was clued into contemporary Arabic literature from the Levant and North America and published in the Egyptian literary magazine *Apollo*. The use of Darija and the iconoclasm of the Taht Essour group arguably influenced Khreyif.

Bachir Khreyif started publishing short stories, critical pieces and translations in Tunisian and other Arabic literary magazines in


the interwar period.\textsuperscript{17} His experiments in historical fiction began in the aftermath of the 1938 events, when civil disobedience protests encouraged by activist Habib Bourguiba’s Neo-Destour nationalist party were violently repressed by the police.\textsuperscript{18} It was then that Khreyif began writing \textit{Balara}, a text in which he delved into the little known Hafsid period (1229–1574), when Ifriqiya (western Libya, Tunisia, and eastern Algeria) was ruled by a Sunni Muslim dynasty of Berber descent, which is also the setting for \textit{Barg el-Lil}’s narrative (Fig. 7.1).\textsuperscript{19} Though he did not publish \textit{Balara} until decades later, it prefigures \textit{Barg el-Lil} in having Barg himself as a character.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Khreyif’s (bilingual) notes on the chapters for \textit{Balara}, which led him to delve into Hafsid Tunisia. The notes include historical episodes such as the Reconquista or the attacks led by Aruj Bey ‘Barbarossa’; they mention the Inquisition, Arabic and Spanish chronicles, and French historiography. From Fawzi al-Zimarli, \textit{Al-Bachîr Khreyif: Al-A’māl al-Kāmila} (Tunis: Dar al-Janub, 2007), IV, p. 365.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{17} Al-Zimarli, ‘Introduction’, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 25. The so-called ‘festival of the martyrs’ of 9 April 1938 acquired multiple meanings in independent Tunisia; Mary D. Lewis, \textit{Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881–1938} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 176–78.
\textsuperscript{19} Al-Zimarli ‘Introduction’, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{20} Khreyif did not publish \textit{Balara} fearing readers’ criticism, possibly because his depiction of Hafsid Tunisia as a melting pot departed from the ethno-nationalist discourse of the time. Khreyif returned to \textit{Balara} in 1959 and turned it into play (\textit{al-Banāt} [The Girls]); \textit{Barg el-Lil} saw the light a year later; Al-Zimarli ‘Introduction’, pp. 14, 36–37.
Khreyif reappeared in 1958 on the pages of the monthly *al-Fikr* (Thought), one of the main literary and intellectual platforms in postcolonial Tunisia founded in 1955 by Muhammad Mzali. Beside launching many new Tunisian writers, *al-Fikr* published major poets and intellectuals from across the Arab world, such as the Egyptian critic and writer ‘Aisha ‘Abd al-Rahman and the Iraqi champion of the Free Verse Movement Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, but also French and Spanish Arabists Jacques Berque and Emilio García Gómez, together with translations from Chekhov, Camus and Kafka.

Like its coeval *al-Nadwa* (Cenacle), *al-Fikr* sought to define the nature of the writer’s mission in society. Although the question of the responsibility of writers toward their people had already emerged in the 1920s, the term *iltizām* (commitment) became current only after Taha Husayn decried Sartre’s notion of *littérature engagée* in 1947. Ironically, as Yoav Di-Capua notes, ‘in warning the young of the dangers of commitment, Taha Husayn gave this burgeoning intellectual movement its Arabic name’. When the Egyptian critic Salama Musa (1887–1958) adopted socialist theories and the Beirut-based periodical *Al-Ādāb* became ‘the mouthpiece of a whole generation of committed writers and poets’, the idea of a committed literature (*al-adab al-multazim*) took a more leftist hue, and as such came to dominate the Tunisian and pan-Arabic field in the 1950s and 1960s.

The first 1959 issue of *al-Fikr*, for example, was devoted to the social role of universities, with essays comparing the state of higher education and the role of intellectuals in Asian, African and European countries and the Arab world.

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22 Aisha ‘Abd al-Rahman a.k.a Bint al-Shati wrote on women’s/feminist writing in Arab literature (*al-Fikr*, December 1961); Badr Shakir al-Sayyab on *engagement* in contemporary Arab literature (*al-Fikr*, December 1961); Emilio García Gómez on Andalusi romances (*al-Fikr*, December 1962).
While poetry dominated the Tunisian and Arabic literary field and print culture until the 1950s, al-Fikr gave room other genres, too. An entire issue in July 1959 was devoted to ‘the story’ (qiṣṣa), a genre the editors felt was missing from the Tunisian postcolonial literary field. In fact, in the late 1950s and early 1960s it was often difficult to draw a clear demarcation between the story or tale and the novel or long narrative (ritwāya). Novels appeared as serialized stories in journals, and some writers produced texts ‘in a sort of intermediary form, somewhere between a short novel and a long short story’. Finally, language debates divided Tunisian print culture like other parts of the Arab world. Many French-educated Tunisians challenged the colonial preference for the vernacular or Darija over literary Arabic on the basis that the latter was incompatible with modernity. (We will hear echoes of these arguments in the criticisms of Khreyif for his use of Tunisian Darija.) At the same time, criticisms of the use of Darija also reflected elitist conceptions of literature. Despite a long tradition of vernacular popular poetry across the whole Arabic-speaking region, modern intellectuals tended to dismiss it as unworthy or illegitimate because it did not fit into the prevailing notion of adab, which entailed ‘conformity to linguistic norms, such as those governing purity and correctness’.

Throughout the 1960s Khreyif published in al-Fikr, where Barg el-Lil appeared in serialized form and where he took part in the debates on language, committed literature, and genre. Literature for Khreyif had to relate to the socio-political reality of the world around it and draw from the lives of the common people, and although he became most famous for

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27 Richard Jacquemond, Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt (Cairo: American University Press, 2008), p. 218. Khreyif’s ‘Ifiās aw Hubbak Darbāny’ (Bankruptcy or Your Love Drove me Crazy, 1958–59) was the first ‘long story’ published by al-Fikr; it discusses the sexual education of an urban young man, denouncing false appearances; it was dedicated to ‘the son of the country’ (ibn al-balad) and serialized in three parts between December 1958 and June 1959; Fawzi al-Zimarli, Al-Baḥīr Khreyīf, II, p. 9.
29 Since the eighteenth century, the vernacular corpus was ‘allowed into canonical culture only if [it] ha[d] been domesticated or reified as “folklore”’; Jacquemond, Conscience of the Nation, pp. 9–10.
his historical novels he considered plays and stories—rather than novels—to be the genres most suited for tackling people’s concerns (see Orsini in this volume).\(^{30}\) In a 1959 article in *al-Fikr* he rejected the apocalyptic future of ‘isolation’ (*in’izāl*) from the pan-Arabic literary field that critics envisaged for literature containing Tunisian Arabic.\(^{31}\) He pointed towards the living nature of language and signalled the ‘co-existence’ (*ta’āyush*) of standard and vernacular forms of Arabic. Khreyif did not advocate the end of Tunisian affiliation with the body of Arabic classical literature; rather, he wanted to continue to belong to such tradition while making it compatible with Tunisian locatedness, expressed particularly through dialogues. Finally, he asked *al-fuṣahā* (people of eloquence) to stop being pretentious and to consider Darija a respectable language (*lugha muḥtarama*). Khreyif’s criticism of the elitism of the intellectuals echoes Egyptian Salama Musa’s call for writing ‘in the language of the simple people’ and his accusation that traditional literature was ‘the literature of the rulers’, whereas committed literature was ‘responsible, devoted to social problems and had a declared position with respect to war, imperialism, exploitation, suppression of women and gender injustice in law and economy’.\(^{32}\) Khreyif later modified his position and argued, in an article published in *al-Fikr* in 1964 with the title ‘*al-Iltizām khanq al-adab*’ (Commitment chokes literature), that *iltizām* could, and at times did, divest literature of its creative soul. Khreyif decried the writers’ constant political positioning and need to justify every choice, which sounded pedantic (*ḥadhlaqa*) to readers. Instead of committed literature he called for ‘liberated literature’ (*adab mutaḥarrir*), and affirmed that ‘the role of the intellectual is to express his opinion freely’.\(^{33}\)

The history of the publication of *Barg el-Lil* sheds light on the importance of periodicals as the first port of publication and the slippage between stories and novels. Many Maghrebi works published in periodicals in the first half of the twentieth century have either been forgotten or, if they were later published in book form as novels, their

\(^{30}\) Al-Zimarli, ‘Introduction’, p. 40. Khreyif was not alone in considering that the novel was unable to express ‘communal concerns and the community’s language’; Mohamed-Salah Omri, ‘Guest Editor’s Introduction’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 4.3 (2007), 317–28.


\(^{32}\) Klemm, ‘Different Notions of Commitment (*Iltizām*)’, p. 56, which refers to Salama Musa’s *al-Adab li-l-sha’b* (Literature to the Masses).

original serialization as stories is unacknowledged. A paradigmatic example is Abdelmajid Benjelloun’s *Fī al-Tufūla* (In Childhood), acclaimed as the first Moroccan novel published in 1957, whereas the stories that constitute it appeared in the periodical *Risāla-t al-Maghrib* between 1949 and 1951. In fact, publishing literary books in early postcolonial Tunisia was difficult, at least until the ‘Maison Tunisienne d’Édition’ was established in 1966. In the case of *Barg el-Lil*, though Khreyif completed it as single piece in March 1960 and sent it to the Tunis city council (Ali al-Balhawan) literary competition on Tunisian history, it was only after it won the prize that *al-Fikr* began to serialize it in December 1960 (Fig. 7.2), before its book publication in 1961 (Fig. 7.3). Note that whereas the instalment in *al-Fikr* spelt the name of the protagonist according to the Darija pronunciation (Barg, with three dots), the note by *al-Fikr*’s editors and the cover of the novel reproduced the standard Arabic pronunciation (Barq, with two or no dots).

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 7.2** ‘Barg el-Lil: a story [qiṣṣa] by al-Bashir Khreyif, a ‘literary treasure’ [athr adabi rā’ī’] which we hope will be published and occupy the place it deserves in Tunisian literature’. From *al-Fikr*, 1 December 1960, p. 9.

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34 This amnesia is partly due to the fact that the novel has been constructed as the modern genre *par excellence* and endowed with a prestige that stories serialized in periodicals lack; Omri, ‘Guest Editor’s Introduction’, pp. 317–28.


37 Part 2 of the novel appeared in January 1961, and part 3 in February; serialization stopped when the novel came out in book form.
Khreyif’s choice of a black slave as protagonist was a powerful expression of his literary commitment. *Barg el-Lil* was written in the time of what Saidiya Hartman calls ‘afrotopia’, a movement aimed at the cultural and political emancipation of Africans as well as those of African descent at a moment in which ‘it seemed that as soon as tomorrow the legacy of slavery and colonialism would be overthrown’.38 This moment included the publication of the journal *Présence africaine* (1947, ed. Alioune Diop) and of Leopold Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (Anthology of new black and Malagasy poetry, 1948), and the re-publication of Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (*Return to the Native Land, 1947 [1939]*) among others.39 If Frantz Fanon, who

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38 Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, p. 35.
moved to Tunis after he was expelled from Algeria by the colonial authorities in 1956, decried the ‘inverted Manicheism of the “Negroism” of the Negritude writers’, these debates moved race and anticolonialism from the margins to the centre of Francophone public discourse—in the Maghreb and Tunisia as well.\(^{40}\)

Although Bourguiba was pro-Western in contrast to Nasser’s Egypt, Muammar al Qaddafi’s Libya, and the Front de Libération Nationale’s (FLN) Algeria, by the late 1950s he sought to reinforce the international position of Tunisia as a non-aligned state.\(^{41}\) In the 1960 Tunisia hosted the All African Peoples Conference (AAPC), which gathered the international movement for freedom and democracy while aiming to build a black nation. First held in Accra (Ghana) in 1958 and then in Tunis in 1960, the AAPC brought many African nationalist leaders into contact with others still actively struggling for independence, like Algeria’s, for the first time. Fanon wrote a large part of *The Wretched of the Earth* while in Tunis and Ghana. Maghrebi delegations from Tunisia, Morocco and Libya attended the AAPC in 1958, as did other radical intellectuals: Malcolm X lectured in Accra, where he met Shirley Du Bois and Maya Angelou. Fanon, who had joined the editorial team of the FLN newspaper *El Moudjahid* while in Tunisia, was appointed by the Provisional Government of Algeria in 1960 as ambassador to Ghana, from where he made trips to other African countries to extend the call for pan-African unity.\(^{42}\) Fanon progressively made the link between the growing movement for national liberation in Algeria and the revolutionary movement in Africa as a whole.\(^{43}\) ‘Watching the world from the vantage point of Ghana’, writes Kevin Gaines, the international expatriates and African intellectuals ‘articulated a neutralism resistant


\(^{42}\) Rachid Ouaiissa, ‘On the Trail of Fanon’ in *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections On/of the Political in Arabic Literature Since the 1940s*, ed. by Friederike Pannewick, Georges Khalil, and Yvonne Albers (Reichert Verlag, 2015), p. 107.

\(^{43}\) Silverman, ‘Frantz Fanon’, p. 78.
to the dictates of both the United States and the Soviet Union’.44 They also situated emancipation in relation to the history of slavery and the forced uprooting of Africans to different world diasporas. *Barg el-Lil* tells the story of one such enslaved sub-Saharan in early-modern Tunisia.

Parallel to the transnational ‘afrotopian’ context, there are national dynamics also to be considered. Led by Bourguiba, the nascent Tunisian postcolonial state aimed to create a politically unified modern and secular nation.45 Bourguiba implemented ‘policies intended to ingest heterogeneous entities and homogenize the nation’, subsuming regional, racial and class differences under full citizenship. Yet Bourguiba’s project for modern Tunisia clearly privileged the secular and urban middle classes and their cultural orientation, and throughout the 1960s the one-party state sidelined the working class, students, and peasants in the already marginalized interior while it consolidated its power in ways that benefited landowners and the urban middle classes.46

Bourguiba’s policies were ‘colour-blind’, Afifa Ltifi argues, and although they aimed at ‘suppress[ing] the memory of slavery’, they reinforced its stigma and the inequality between their descendants and other Tunisians.47 In light of Bourguiba’s ‘colour-blind’ policies, the fact that *Barg el-Lil* connects North and sub-Saharan Africa foregrounds a postcolonial pan-African geographical imagination and sheds light onto the silenced history of the trans-Saharan slave trade, which underpins Khreyif’s exceptional vision and suggests that he was alert to the afrotopian moment.

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Tunisian Borderlands: Between the Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Africa

This is the story [qiṣṣa] of the Tunisian hero ‘Barq el-Lil’ who lived through the hazardous historical events of the hijri tenth century. He witnessed the arrival of Khayr al-Din, Hazardous Wednesday, the Spanish occupation, and local people fleeing to the area of Zaghouan—and his deeds were extraordinary throughout.

Khreyif, Barg el-Lil, p. 27

One of the most interesting aspects of this fascinating novel is its locatedness and the geographical imagination it foregrounds. As the epigraph announces, the story takes place in the tumultuous time—what historian Ibn Abi Dinar called the ‘hazardous Wednesday’ (khaṭra-t al-arb‘īyā‘)—following the deposition of the Hafsid Sultan Mawlay Hassan by the Ottoman army led by Khayr al-Din Barbarossa in 1534, and the latter’s defeat a year later by the army of the Spanish emperor Charles V, whose help the deposed sultan had sought.48 Tunis in Barg el-Lil is a ‘Borderland city’ where different cultures meet and grapple with each other, sometimes in profoundly asymmetrical ways; a mosaic of cultures and languages, of social classes, status and gendered positions, quite an antithetical image to that of a unified national identity and social sameness imposed by Tunisian nationalist discourse.49 Already the early French works by Tunisians Salah Ferhat (Poèmes, 1918) and Salah el-Atri (Les Chants de l’aurore, 1931) had included references to the Berber, Phoenician, Roman and Arabo-Islamic civilizations, inscribing, as Tahar Bekri has noted, a ‘broader conceptualization of Tunisia’s social and cultural past’.50 Yet Khreyif’s historical fiction is more in tune with that of nineteenth-century Arab authors like Sa‘id al-Bustani, Y’aqub Sarruf and, above all, Jurji Zaydan.51 Like Zaydan, Khreyif wants his

historical fiction to illuminate the popular classes, those ‘unknown protagonists’ disregarded by mainstream historians. Modern Tunisian historians, Khreyif sarcastically noted, merely focused on ‘facts’ about kings and rulers: ‘they say “this king died, another king came, then that one died, thus this other one came, until the world ended”’. In this regard, Barg al-Lil can be thought of as working against the ‘noble genres of Arabic literature’.

The novel opens with Barg as a seventeen-year-old black man who ‘began his life [in Tunisia] as a slave of Sidi Hamid b. al-Nakhli, the scholar who devoted his life to searching the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life’. Barg’s owner, in other words, is the man who Miguel de Cervantes claimed to be the author of the Arabic original text of which Don Quixote was a translation. This intertextual gesture in the very first sentence of the novel helps locate the world Barg inhabits, a world shaped, like Cervantes’s, by a constant shift across borders and margins. The imprint on Cervantes’ magnum opus evokes the notion of the ‘transcontinental Maghreb’ with its millennia-old relations and interconnections.

Arguably, inscribing this shared Mediterranean history through Don Quixote, one of the acclaimed masterpieces of Western literature, engenders reciprocity and symbolically challenges colonial hierarchies that are inscribed in linear conceptions of history travelling from tradition and ‘backwardness’ to modern ‘civilization’.

Another trace of this intertextual connection and literary cross-pollination comes through the character of Barg as a pícaro or trickster.

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52 Al-Zimarli, ‘Introduction’, p. 27.
53 Al-Zimarli, Al-Bachīr Khreyīf, IV, p. 221.
55 Khreyif, Barg al-Lil, p. 27.
57 Talbayev, Transcontinental Maghreb.
character. It has long been argued that sixteenth-century Spanish *picaresca* echoes Arabic anecdotal narratives or *maqāmāt* and oral *zajal* poetry. The anticlerical element in the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), the best-known prototype of Spanish *picaresca*, is ‘so manifest’, one critic argues, that it has been suggested that the work ‘might have been written by a *morisco*’.\(^{59}\)

By casting *Barg el-Lil* the *picaro* as an enslaved Central African young man, the novel subverts the pervasive silencing of the Maghrebi involvement in the enslavement of black Africans.\(^{60}\) The violent uprooting and enslavement of Barg, and of virtually any Tunisian descendant of sub-Saharan slaves, is presented explicitly through Barg’s own memories:

> he remembered how he was securely transported—as an innocent prey—to the caravan of turban-wearing whites [*baīḍ mu'ammanīn*]. There he found his mother, tied and weeping, her eyes full of tears. [...] She had resisted, then given up with resignation. [...] [When] she saw her child [...] she tried to reach him with her chest, as her hands were tied at the back. The slave trader whipped her and she screamed like a lioness, exposed her canine teeth [*‘anīyāb*] dried of all saliva, while the boy, like a fawn, tried to rebel against the abductor.\(^{61}\)

Such violence is inflicted on Barg by ‘turban-wearing whites’, a clear reference to Bedouin slave traders. Racism underpins not just the trauma of his, and his mother’s, enslavement, but every aspect of Barg’s life in Tunis: ‘He is black. And this is the whites’ world’ (*dunīyā al-baīḍ*), the narrator notes.\(^{62}\) Whiteness marks not only the slave traders but Tunisians in general—and privileged white people worldwide. We can in fact read the reference as a pun on Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (originally published in 1952) and a transposition of Fanon’s critique of the dehumanization of the black colonized by white (French) colonialism onto early modern Hafsid-Ottoman Tunisia,\

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62 Ibid., p. 76.
where blacks are exploited by Tunisian whites—or rather ‘white, but not quite’.

At the same time, in the passage quoted above the metaphorical animalization of Barg, and especially of his mother, associates them with instinct and aggressiveness and, disturbingly, instead of instilling a critical view towards the perpetrators of violence, it naturalizes the racist (and speciesist) tenet by which they are kidnapped, mistreated, traded, worked, sold, and exploited.

Through Barg’s memories of the caravan route, the narrative evokes some of the most notorious enclaves of the trans-Saharan trade routes: ‘From Central Africa the caravan headed to Timbuktu and Bornu. There they sold, bought and interchanged ostrich feathers, coral, shells, textiles, pottery and arms. They then continued their way to the Fezzan.’ By placing Tunisia within the ‘significant geographies’ of the trans-Saharan (slave) trade and relations, Barg el-Lil connects both sides of the Saharan desert and problematizes the long-standing cleavage between the so-called Bilād al-Baīḍān (the Lands of the Whites) and Bilād al-Sūdān (the Lands of the Blacks). The action-driven narrative shifts into a reflexive mode through the memories of violence and Barg’s longing to ‘go back to the world of blacks’ (dunīyā al-sūd).

But if the novel illuminates the traumatic experiences of forced uprooting and enslavement, Barg is no passive victim. On the contrary, the text challenges understandings of slavery as utter victimhood, and Barg shows agency not only in managing his own life but also in shaping Tunisian history. While historical accounts attribute the withdrawal of the Christian forces to their being decimated by leprosy, in the novel it is the arsenic that Barg throws into the pond of the Citadel that kills the soldiers and forces the Christians out of the country.

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64 Khreyif, *Barg el-Lil*, p. 78.

65 See Leo Africanus, *Della Descrittione dell’Africa et delle cose notabili che ivi sono* (1550), which includes a translation of his Arabic travelogue (written when he was still al-Hassan al-Wazzan) in which he uses the term the Lands of the Blacks; A.R. Allen, *Leo’s Travels in the Sudan: Being the Seventh Book of Leo Africanus Simplified, Abridged and Done into Modern English from the Translation of John Pory* (London; Ibadan; Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1962).

66 Khreyif, *Barg el-Lil*, p. 76.

67 Ibid., p. 137.
Barg’s cultural attachment to central Africa is embedded in music and dance. Music is in fact a fundamental element of the novel and triggers narrative action. It is through music and dance that the protagonist attracts the attention of his beloved neighbour Rim while he dances to the sound of glass jars and bottles at Sidi b. al-Nakhli’s (Fig. 7.4), which ‘enables his ancestral musical intuitiveness’.68 The sweet memories of Barg’s childhood back home include dancing around the embers of the open fire before going to sleep.69 This association of Barg with an intuitiveness that comes all the way from a remote past (saliqat[u]hu al-‘arida) again problematically connects him with the realm of nature and a past antithetical to modernity.70 At the same time, the history and memory of black people in Tunisia are linked to rituals of trance and possession by divine spirits that are associated with a particular set of rhythms and movements and that Tunisian readers would probably connect with Stambeli musicians, the descendants of sub-Saharan slaves.71 Their performances—like the Gnawa in Morocco—illustrate the current folklorization of minority cultures.72

In Borderlands, ‘at the juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalised; they die and are born’, Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us.73 The sixteenth-century Tunisian Borderland in Barg el-Lil is truly multilingual. Different registers of Arabic, Turkish and Italian are heard on the streets of Tunis, and the music and chants of the Andalusis mingle with those of Beduins, Genoese, and Majorcan

68 Ibid., p. 28. See also Samir Marzouki, ‘Fiction historique et subversion: Barg ellil de Béchir Khräif’, Revue de littérature comparée 327.3 (2008), 368–69.
69 Khreyif, Barg el-Lil, p. 77.
71 In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these rituals were carried out in communal households (dīyār), which also functioned as support systems for the enslaved communities; Ismael Montana, ‘Bori practice among enslaved West Africans of Ottoman Tunis: Unbelief (Kufr) or another dimension of the African diaspora?’, The History of the Family, 16, 2 (2011), pp. 152–59; also Itzea Goikoetxea-Amiano, ‘Gender and Sexuality in early 19th-century Tunisia: a Decolonial Reading of Ahmad b. al-Qādī al-Timbuktawi’s nasīḥa on the sub-Saharan diaspora’, Genre & Histoire, 25 (2020), 1–14.
73 Anzaldúa, Borderlands, p. 20.
The port is frequented by privateers who come and go, carrying booty and captives from across the Mediterranean; captives are imprisoned in the Citadel or sold in the city markets along with Circassian and sub-Saharan slaves. A sizeable number of *moriscos* rescued from Christian harassment at the fall of the Muslim kingdoms of al-Andalus also dwell in the capital, along with Andalusi migrants, whose musical chants bring much delight; some of them join the force fighting the Spaniard invasion, eager for revenge. As the narrator notes, among the ‘linguistic expressions inherited from that time and still in employ is the following: “No one knows the Rumi expulsion better than the Andalusi’”.

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74 Ibid., p. 114.
75 Khreyif, *Barg el-Lil*, p. 120. Rumi refers to the Christians (*al-rūm*).
If language plays a fundamental role in signalling the force of structural violence, it also highlights the agency of the slave protagonist. Barg performs a pidginized and incorrect Darija in order to avoid the legal responsibility he had previously committed to, and declares: ‘let the free comply, let the free comply, I am a slave, I can’t comply with anything’ (أَنْزَزَهُرٌ، أَنْزَزَهُرٌ أنا وصيف، أنا ما أَنْزَزْ شيء). Barg mispronounces the verb anjaza, meaning ‘to do’, ‘comply’, or ‘carry out’, as anzaza, the way children do; and pronounces the adjective hur, ‘free’, as hur. Khreyif helps the reader by placing vowel diacritics, not normally used, on the mispronounced words. This is the only instance in the whole novel in which vowel diacritics are used, showing that Barg’s one-time incorrect use of language, which he otherwise masters, is intentional. His linguistic performance marks his wit and agency, and at the same time it is a reminder of the infantilizing and othering of the blacks in Tunisia.

Like Gha‘ib Tu‘mah Farman’s al-Nakhla wa al-jīrān (The Date Palm and the Neighbours, 1965), which mixes classical Arabic and Baghdadi dialect ‘to recover scenes and anecdotes typical of periods of transition, change and challenge’, especially from the point of view of the lower classes and women,77 Khreyif uses the vernacular in Barg el-Lil to evoke the social world of his characters. Vernacular expressions like ‘Yā afandī’, an Ottoman title of nobility, or ‘Dāda’ for governess, or old toponyms like ‘Mazghana’ for Algiers (which Khreyif clarifies in a footnote), derived from the name of one of the Berber tribes dwelling there, pepper the novel.78 When introducing Sha‘shu’, one of the main characters and soon to become Barg’s best friend, the narrator tells us that he is ‘a karrākayī, that is, his job consists in rowing when the wind blows, as they say’, before situating this Tunisian term for a Mediterranean oarsman within the system of forced labour.79

If popular language provides aesthetic value, the historical explanations betray a pedagogical impulse that resonates with Salama Musa’s conception of the writer as an educator.80 Khreyif refers to

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76 Ibid., p. 76.
77 Al-Musawi, The Postcolonial Arabic Novel, p. 11.
78 ‘Yā afandī’ appears on p. 84, ‘Dāda’ on p. 91, and ‘Mazghana’ on p. 87.
79 Khreyif, Barg el-Lil, p. 43. The term derives from carraca (in Spanish) or caracca (in Italian), a specifically Mediterranean vessel, to which the Turkish suffix -yī is added.
80 Klemm, ‘Different Notions of Commitment’, 56.
institutions, city houses and gates by their sixteenth-century names, at times quoting the Tunisian historian Ibn Abi Dinar (d. c. 1699), and includes contemporary names in footnotes to allow readers to locate them: Barg ‘was outside the Qasba, where the ruins lay of the corridor built by al-Mustansir about three centuries ago so that his female slaves could traverse it without wearing the veil on their way to leisure activities in the royal hall at Ras al-Tabia. Only a few faded traces remain that tell the story—for those willing to listen to it—of the beautiful, coloured feet that lightly and merrily stepped on them’.81 Here the narrator captures the reader’s attention through a story-telling formula, marked by dashes in the text, that creates suspense about the owners of the ‘coloured feet’.

At one point, Sha‘shu’, the karrakayī in the Ottoman army who Khayr al-Din Barbarossa appoints as governor of the citadel, entrusts Barg with surveying the prisoners. Barg takes the opportunity to learn their language, ‘a mixture of the languages of the nations surrounding the Christians’ sea [bahr al-rūm]’.82 Normally used between Muslims and Christians and between Christians of different origins, this lingua franca was an early-modern pan-Mediterranean koiné consisting of a mixture of mainly Romance languages. Khreyif’s reference to it as the language of ‘the Christians’ sea’ evokes Jocelyne Dakhlia’s notion of the lingua franca as ‘the locus of the overcoming of an alterity, but also a reminder of it’ due to the underrepresentation of Arabic, Turkish, Tamazight or Greek, which replicates the ‘asymmetry of the border’.83 If the link between Barg el-Lil and Don Quixote establishes literary co-constitution, the lingua franca makes the asymmetry of the Mediterranean Borderlands explicit. And if the picaresca narrative of al-Hamadani worked against the prestigious Arabic genres of ḥādīth, sīra, the sermon, the theological debate, and

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81 Ibid., p. 71. Note that Rās (cape) is spelt as is pronounced in Tunisian Darija, rather than Rā’s as in standard Arabic.
82 Khreyif, Barg el-Lil, p. 98.
lyrical poetry, *Barg el-Lil* challenges elite-centred historiography by making common and subaltern people the protagonists of a fairly disregarded historical event, and by using a popular language peppered with sixteenth-century terms and Tunisian Arabic.

**Solidarity and Gender Politics: Imagining the Past to Build a Better Future**

*We have the power those who came before us have given to us, to move beyond the place where they were standing... We are making the future as well as bonding to survive the enormous pressures of the present, and that is what it means to be part of history.*

Audre Lorde

If *Barg el-Lil* expands the representation of pre-colonial Tunisia and complicates understandings of slavery as utter victimhood, it is in the novel’s gender politics that the debates of late 1950s postcolonial Tunisia are most evidently tackled through the form of historical fiction. How policies of state feminism were contested emerges powerfully in the novel. As with the black protagonist, the narrative shows the power of structures, but also the power of female subaltern characters to navigate and challenge them. *Barg el-Lil* emphasizes love, particularly interracial romantic love and friendship between men, and envisions solidarity as the foundation of that ‘bonding to survive the enormous pressures of the present’ through which the future is made.

In the novel, women’s oppression is embodied by repudiation (i.e., the thrice repeated divorce initiated by the husband in the privacy of the

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home), physical violence, and confinement within the home, as well as the state’s patriarchal and repressive institutions like women’s houses of correction. Some of these issues were reformed by the Tunisian Personal Status Code (PSC) approved in August 1956, less than five months after the country had attained independence. The PSC abolished polygyny, created a judicial procedure for divorce (thereby abolishing repudiation), and established the mutual consent of both parties as a requirement for marriage. The PSC encoded modern understandings of sexual difference, family and kinship arrangements embedded in urban middle-class respectability, with the nuclear household becoming the new ideal union. It became a symbol of the postcolonial state-led reformist feminism encapsulated by Bourghiba and his project of modernity, which promoted gender equality while reinforcing an androcentric narrative of nationhood. Women’s rights and the National Union of Tunisian Women (Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne; UNFT)—the primary means through which official policy related to women was translated into local practices—were instrumentalized and trapped ‘between public declarations and favourable legislative measures and the effective absence from decision-making’. As in 1950s Egypt, state feminism in Tunisia replaced intimate familial forms of male control with public patriarchy. At the same time, the PSC aroused strong opposition among some social sectors of postcolonial Tunisia. Both the traditionalist scholars (‘ulamā’) of the Zaytouna Mosque and the remnants of the Old Destour Party—which Bourguiba had left to establish the Néo Destour Party in 1934—rejected the provision that abolished repudiation.

In Barg el-Lil Barg falls in love with Rim, a woman who lives in the building facing Sidi b. al-Nakhli’s and secretly watches Barg dance to the rhythm of the instruments in the laboratory. Barg does not look at Rim

87 Ilhem Marzouki, Femmes d’ordre ou désordre de femmes? (Tunis: Noir Sur Blanc, 2000), p. 34.
directly but sees her reflected in a small mirror. The ritual is repeated every night for three months while Rim’s husband is away on the Hajj; before leaving, he had sealed the house door to prevent her from going out—a sign of women’s cloistering which the novel persistently denounces.\(^\text{90}\) When Rim’s husband comes back from pilgrimage and finds out, he slaps her, beats her and repudiates her by pronouncing the divorce sentence three times.\(^\text{91}\) Rim and Barg are separated, but destiny brings them back together when Barg is required to perform for her the role of the \textit{tayyās}, i.e. marrying her and repudiating her so that she can remarry her former, now regretful, husband.\(^\text{92}\) Barg accepts the role, but after spending the night with Rim he refuses to repudiate her and escapes from the legal scholars who threaten him with dire consequences by remarking, as in the passage quoted in the previous section, that as a slave he cannot comply with legal conventions.\(^\text{93}\) Although the sub-plot between Barg and Rim focuses mostly on her mistreatment by her husband, it points to the social taboo of inter-racial love and turns both characters into new ‘Antar and ‘Abla, the protagonists of the pre-Islamic epic in which the romance between black and chivalrous ‘Antar with ‘Abla cannot be consummated due to his origin and skin colour.\(^\text{94}\)

Patriarchal oppression in the novel is reinforced by state institutions. Sha’shu’, the \textit{karrakayī} in the Ottoman army, was sentenced to the oars after being jailed for assisting an unnamed woman escape from Dar Juwed, a women’s house of correction.\(^\text{95}\) The woman had been imprisoned for \textit{nushūz} or insubordination, what Fatima Mernissi calls ‘the rebellion of the wife against her Muslim husband’s authority’.\(^\text{96}\) Her \textit{nushūz} and escape signal the woman’s dissent with social and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \(^\text{90}\) Khreyif, \textit{Barg el-Lil}, pp. 32–33.
  \item \(^\text{91}\) Ibid., p. 37.
  \item \(^\text{92}\) Ibid., p. 72. After repudiation, if the spouses want to marry again the woman needs to get married to another man, the so-called \textit{tayyās} (in Darija) or \textit{muhalil} (in Fusha) and then be repudiated by him. Arguably, this is meant to put some constraints to the thrice-repeated repudiation.
  \item \(^\text{93}\) Ibid., p. 76.
\end{itemize}
institutional sanction, while Sha’shu’s act is one of solidarity: he helps her because he considers her unjustly ‘oppressed’ (madhlūma) by her husband, who is a shaykh and thus a religious authority.

By going back to the Hafsid period, Khreyif signals the transhistorical nature of patriarchal notions and practices and points towards the continuity between Hafsid, Ottoman, and French patriarchal systems. If by advocating women’s emancipation and the need to do away with patriarchal structures and practices may seem to reinforce state-led feminist policies, the novel goes further and suggests that the so-called ‘woman question’ is as much about men and masculinity. Through Sha’shu’ and Barg’s friendship and discussions on women and gender relations, the novel presents a more complex and layered picture of how men’s worlds and interactions are gendered, arguably reflecting the range of male attitudes in post-independence Tunisia.

The friendship between Sha’shu’ and Barg begins after the latter escapes from Sidi b. al-Nakhli, who beat him for crashing the laboratory, distracted by music and by Rim’s gaze. When Sha’shu’ bravely defends Barg from a general, who asks why he’s defending a black slave, Barg claims to be Sha’shu’s slave. Their friendship thus begins with an act of reciprocity between a local free man and a black slave, which signals how solidarity need not be unidirectional. From then on, the two men share hazardous adventures and intimate conversations. Despite the differences in race and status, they have many things in common, and both intervene on behalf of women suffering gendered forms of oppression. At the same time, Sha’shu’ also comes across as a womanizer who boasts of having a woman in every port and holds misogynistic ideas about women. When Barg confesses his love for Rim to him and cries because a reunion seems impossible, Sha’shu’ laughs and tells him that ‘[women’s] weakness is a false appearance that they use over men. Their tricks are sublime’. Sha’shu’ then apologizes for laughing at his friend in a moment of vulnerability. Barg accepts his apology but counters his words saying that ‘women deserve all attentions’. Such retort may be said to represent an instance when male patriarchal solidarity breaks. Bonds of camaraderie between men

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97 Khreyif, Barg el-Lil, p. 18.
98 Ibid., pp. 42–43.
99 Ibid., p. 93.
100 Ibid., pp. 92–93.
are key to perpetuate the patriarchal system that awards men privileges for the simple fact of being men. The lack of solidarity between Barg and Sha’shu’ is thus politically meaningful.¹⁰¹

Moreover, despite being depicted as disenfranchised by patriarchal society, throughout the novel women display strategies to overcome gendered forms of oppression. They communicate with each other through the rooftops or employ coded taps on the walls separating them.¹⁰² One becomes a spy for Spain and exploits her position as a concubine, thereby shaping history and politics.¹⁰³ Enslaved women—Circassians, Christians from Calabria and Valencia, and sub-Saharan women from Abyssinia and Sudan—build mutual bonds in the lodging houses before they are sold, and by sharing stories their ‘sadness turn[s] into joy and happiness’.¹⁰⁴ One explains how she managed to seed discord among her abductors; another confesses that she fell in love with her master and had to use tricks to avoid being sold; yet another explains that she associated with a robber to whom she handed over her masters’ valuable objects; together they sing, laugh and dance.¹⁰⁵ Women also display solidarity with men and, by doing so, their position shifts from objects to subjects of solidarity. At one point an unnamed woman saves Barg from being tortured to death after he refuses to repudiate Rim. She shelters him in the basement of her house, treats his injuries, and hides him from her own husband, to whom she gives a potion so that she can spend the night with the black hero. Barg abruptly ends this relationship and leaves when he notices some possessiveness (saitara) in her. While denouncing the oppressive patriarchal structure within which womanhood is constructed as subaltern and as a uniform social category, Barg el-Lil constantly de-essentializes the category of ‘woman’ (al-mar’a, in singular, as it was used then) by highlighting women’s heterogeneity. ‘Are all women the same?’ Barg asks himself. ‘No way!’ is his answer.¹⁰⁶

If patriarchal institutions and ideas are to be abolished, Barg el-Lil suggests that human bonding will occur through solidarity with those

¹⁰² Khreyif, Barg el-Lil, p. 100.
¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 121–22.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 54.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 55.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 104.
most vulnerable in the structures of power. The novel shows the power of love—especially Rim and Barg’s inter-racial and taboo love—but it does not valorize romantic love alone. On the contrary, Barg el-Lil is an homage to friendship, particularly that between men of different social status and race like Sha’shu’ and Barg. As such, this fictional past provides a blueprint for gender and race relations in postcolonial Tunisia.

Conclusion

The second Arabic Novel Forum hosted in Tunisia in March 2019 was dedicated to racism and slavery in Arabic novels. The guest of honour, Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury, affirmed that these issues are ‘often silenced’ and emphasized the role of culture ‘in breaking taboos and tackling the real issues of Arab societies’. The poster of the Forum featured Barg, the first enslaved black protagonist in a modern Arabic novel, as illustrated by Hassan Ta’rit for the 1961 cover of the novel (Fig. 7.5).

Fig. 7.5 Barg on the poster of the second Arabic Novel Forum. From Bilal Ramadan, ‘Launch of the Arabic Novel Forum in Tunisia with Elias Khoury as the guest honor’, al-Youm al-Sabi’ (The Seventh Day).

Just how exceptional *Barg el-Lil* was in its time is even more apparent considering the new generation of Maghrebi and Arab writers who have started to break the silence around the history and legacies of trans-Saharan slavery, also in the context of the movements and discussions opened up by the Arab Springs and strengthened by the 2020 global anti-racism protests. Among recent works are Libyan Najwa Binshatwan’s *Zarā’ib al-‘Abid* (Slave Pens, 2017), Moroccan Rachid El Hachimi’s *Dhākira-t al-Narjis* (*The Daffodil’s Memory*, 2018), Mauritanian Samira Hammadi’s *Asmāl al-‘abīd* (*The Slave’s Rags*, 2019), and Omani Jokha Alharthi’s *Saīyydāt al-Qamar* (*Celestial Bodies*, 2010). According to Alharthi, whose novel won the 2019 International Man Booker prize, ‘[s]ome people feel that touching upon a sensitive topic like slavery is stirring up the past in a way that isn’t appropriate now’. And yet, according to her ‘that’s what literature does’: it enables us ‘to think about the past, to think about history’.  

*Barg el-Lil* is indeed an invitation to think about the past, to wonder about how peoples lived, struggled, loved, or strolled in the streets of sixteenth-century Tunis. Set in the context of a violent imperial clash between the Ottomans and the Spaniards, Khreyif’s novel is endowed with what Muhsin al-Musawi calls ‘a postcolonial consciousness’, in that it tackles the thorny postcolonial issue of contacts between Europeans and Muslims, but resists ‘contaminated discourses like the strictly nationalist and even the reformist that succumb to colonialist compartmentalization of the colonial subject’. There is little doubt that *Barg el-Lil* discusses issues that were pressing in late 1950s and early 1960s’ Tunisia, especially gendered and racialized subjecthood and the patriarchal nature of state institutions, society and culture, as I have argued. But Khreyif also aimed at complicating mainstream historical narratives in which the past is limited to the rulers’ deeds. His historical novel pivots around a key event of early modern Tunisia from the point of view of subaltern characters, especially the Central African *pícaro* Barg. The multilingual and multicultural character of

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Hafsid Tunisia in Barg el-Lil prevents colonialist compartmentalization and resists the homogenization of the postcolonial state. At the same time, cultural heterogeneity does not mean that the sixteenth-century Tunisian Borderlands contains no asymmetries—indeed, the fact that the protagonist is an enslaved young man who was forcefully uprooted from his homeland and family is perhaps the clearest antidote to any idyllic depiction.

Barg el-Lil thus connects North and sub-Saharan Africa through the atrocious practice of slavery, but also makes the defeat of one of the strongest imperial powers of the time the slave’s deed when Barg poisons the pond of the citadel and forces the Christian forces out of the country. If central Africa constitutes an important ‘significant geography’ in Khreyif’s novel, Barg’s pícaro character and the intertextual link to Don Quixote through Sidi Hamid b. al-Nakhli situate the Mediterranean as another polyvalent ‘significant geography’, a ‘world’ in which inter-connection, literary cross-pollination and the asymmetry of the linguistic border coexist.

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