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The Form of Ideology and the Ideology of Form

Cold War, Decolonization and Third
World Print Cultures



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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

1 The novel was translated into Spanish in the early 1980s, and only very recently into French: Bašir Jrayyef, *Barg el-Lil*, trans. by Ana Ramos (Madrid: Instituto Hispano-Arabe de Cultura, 1982); Béchir Khraïef, *Barg Ellil*, trans. by Ahmed Gasmi (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-Bachir Khreyif: 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.

tumbles down from rooftops, crosses the *suq*, hides in a cemetery, and encounters all sorts and classes of people along the way. Uprooted and enslaved as a child, Barg carries the weight of violence and oppression, though he also tricks his way into temporary positions of privilege and becomes a prominent agent in shaping Tunisian history. Through its slave protagonist and an early textual reference to Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the novel hints at the multiple influences that—embedded in the history of trans-Saharan connections and Mediterranean relations—have shaped Tunisian history and culture.

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 multazim*), 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

3 Zineb Ali Benali, 'Les ancêtres fondateurs: Élaborations symboliques du champ intellectuel algérien (1945–1954)', *Insaniyat / إنسانيات*, 25–26 (2004), 201–14.

4 I use 'afrotopia' as used in Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Princeton: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), pp. 19–48; see below.

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

5 Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora, and Francesca Orsini, ‘Significant Geographies in Lieu of World Literature’, *Journal of World Literature*, 3.3 (2018), 290–310.

6 Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, *The Transcontinental Maghreb: Francophone Literature across the Mediterranean* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

7 Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* (Paris: Denol, 1983), p. 26. Many Maghrebis still use ‘Africa’ (*Ifriqīā*) to refer only to sub-Saharan Africa. For a brief history of how Africa got separated into the two scholarly fields of Middle Eastern and North African Studies vs African Studies (i.e. sub-Saharan Africa), see Hisham Aïdi, Marc Lynch, and Zachariah Mampilly, ‘And the Twain Shall Meet: Connecting Africa and the Middle East’ in *Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides*, POMEPS Studies 40 (POMEPS and Columbia SIPA, 2020), pp. 8–18.

8 Sophie Bessis, ‘Bourguiba, Un Destin Tunisien’, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2018, p. 7.

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 Mosbahi⁹

Tunisia had been a French Protectorate since 1881, with significant communities of Italian, Maltese and Greek immigrants since the beginning of the century.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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*.¹²

9 Hassouna Mosbahi, 'James Joyce in Tunisia', trans. by Peter Clarck, *Banipal*, 19 (2004), p. 156.

10 Julia Ann Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800–1900* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2011).

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.

12 Fawzi Al-Zimarli, 'Introduction', *Al-Bachīr Khreyif*, I, p. 10.

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,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.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.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.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

13 Julia Ann Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans*, especially chapter 5.

14 Al-Zimarli, 'Introduction', pp. 12–13. Yoav Di-Capua, 'The Intellectual Revolt of the 1950s and the "Fall of the Udabā"' in *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections On/of the Political in Arabic Literature Since the 1940s*, ed. by Friederike Pannewick, Georges Khalil, and Yvonne Albers (Weisbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2015), pp. 89–104.

15 Augustin, Jomier, 'Le journalisme de langue arabe au Maghreb (1850-1950)' in *Encyclopédie Des Historiographies: Afriques, Amériques, Asies*, vol. 1, ed. by Nathalie Kouamé, Éric P. Meyer, and Anne Viguier (Paris: Presses de l'Inalco, 2020), pp. 942–47.

16 Hassouna Mosbahi, 'Outstanding Figures in 20th Century Tunisian Culture', *Banipal*, 39 (2010), pp. 46–47.

the interwar period.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.¹⁸ It was then that Khreyif began writing *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 *Barg el-Lil's* narrative (Fig. 7.1).¹⁹ Though he did not publish *Balara* until decades later, it prefigures *Barg el-Lil* in having Barg himself as a character.²⁰

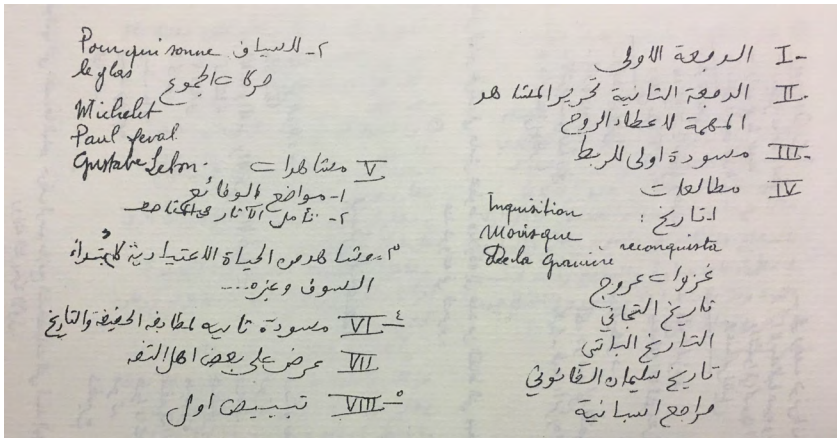


Fig. 7.1 Khreyif's (bilingual) notes on the chapters for *Balara*, which led him to delve into Hafsid Tunisia. The notes include historical episodes such as the Reconquista or the attacks led by Aruj Bey 'Barbarossa'; they mention the Inquisition, Arabic and Spanish chronicles, and French historiography. From Fawzi al-Zimarli, *Al-Bachūr Khreyif: Al-A'māl al-Kāmila* (Tunis: Dar al-Janub, 2007), IV, p. 365.

17 Al-Zimarli, 'Introduction', p. 11.

18 Ibid., p. 25. The so-called 'festival of the martyrs' of 9 April 1938 acquired multiple meanings in independent Tunisia; Mary D. Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881–1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 176–78.

19 Al-Zimarli 'Introduction', p. 13.

20 Khreyif did not publish *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 *Balara* in 1959 and turned it into play (*al-Banāt* [The Girls]); *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.²¹ 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.²²

Like its coeval *al-Nadwa* (Cenacle), *al-Fikr* sought to define the nature of the writer's mission in society.²³ 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'.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.

21 Abir Kréfa, 'La quête de l'autonomie littéraire en contexte autoritaire: le cas des écrivains tunisiens', *Sociologie*, 4.4 (2013), p. 400.

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-Sayab on *engagement* in contemporary Arab literature (*al-Fikr*, December 1961); Emilio García Gómez on Andalusí romances (*al-Fikr*, December 1962).

23 Jean Fontaine and Mounir B. H. Slama, 'Arabic-Language Tunisian Literature (1956–1990)', *Research in African Literatures*, 23.2 (1992), 183–93 (p. 184).

24 Di-Capua, 'The Intellectual Revolt of the 1950s', p. 93.

25 Verena Klemm, 'Different Notions of Commitment (Iltizām) and Committed Literature (al-Adab al-Multazim) in the Literary Circles of the Mashriq', *Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures*, 3.1 (2000), 51–62 (p. 54). See also Yoav Di-Capua, 'Arab Existentialism: An Invisible Chapter in the Intellectual History of Decolonization', *The American Historical Review*, 117.4 (2012), 1061–91 (p. 1061).

While poetry dominated the Tunisian and Arabic literary field and print culture until the 1950s, *al-Fikr* gave room other genres, too.²⁶ 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 (*riwāya*). 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’.²⁷ 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.²⁸) 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’.²⁹

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

26 Josefina Veglión Elías de Molins, ‘La personalidad literaria de Túnez en el siglo XX’, *Hesperia culturas del Mediterráneo*, 10 (2008), 37–47 (p. 42).

27 Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American University Press, 2008), p. 218. Khreyif’s ‘Iflās aw Ḥubbak Ḍarbāny’ (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-Bachīr Khreyif*, II, p. 9.

28 Nadia Mamelouk, ‘The Death of Arabic: Language Wars in Tunis during the Colonial Period’, *Unpublished*, n.d. I would like to thank Nadia Mamelouk for sharing this unpublished work and parts of her private archive during my fieldwork in Tunis in 2018.

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-fuṣṣahā’* (people of eloquence) to stop being pretentious and to consider Darija a respectable language (*lughā 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 khaṇq 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 (*ḥadhḥlaqa*) 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.

31 Al-Zimarli, *Al-Bachīr Khreyif*, IV, pp. 19–24.

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).

33 Khreyif, ‘Al-Iltizām Khaṇq al-Adab’ in Al-Zimarli, *Al-Bachīr Khreyif*, IV, pp. 33–35.

original serialization as stories is unacknowledged.³⁴ 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 1951.³⁵ In fact, publishing literary books in early postcolonial Tunisia was difficult, at least until the 'Maison Tunisienne d'Édition' was established in 1966.³⁶ 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).³⁷ 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).

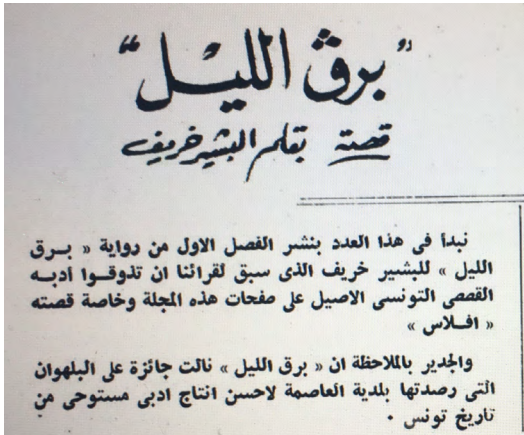


Fig. 7.2 'Barg el-Lil: a story [*qiṣṣa*] by al-Bashir Khreyif, a 'literary treasure' [*athr adabī rā'i*]' which we hope will be published and occupy the place it deserves in Tunisian literature'. From *al-Fikr*, 1 December 1960, p. 9.

- 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.
- 35 Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, *La literatura marroquí contemporánea: la novela y la crítica literaria* (Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2006), pp. 123–24. The same was true of Jurji Zaydan's historical novels, first serialized in his periodical *al-Hilāl*.
- 36 Fontaine and Slama, 'Arabic-Language Tunisian Literature (1956–1990)', p. 186.
- 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.



غلاف الطبعة الأولى لبرق الليل (الشركة القومية للنشر والتوزيع - تونس 1961)
نعتقد أنه من إنجاز حسن تعازيت ومنه استوحينا غلاف طبعة "عمون المعاصرة".

Fig. 7.3 Cover of the 1961 novel by illustrator Hassan Ta'rit. From Bachir Khreyif, *Barg el-Lil* (Tunis: Dar al-Janub, 2000), p. 23.

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

³⁸ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, p. 35.

³⁹ For Third-Worldism as the formation of an international intelligentsia based in Europe, see Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

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

40 Max Silverman, ‘Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Violence’ in *Postcolonial Thought in the French Speaking World*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), p. 86.

41 Yahia H. Zoubir, ‘The United States, the Soviet Union and Decolonization of the Maghreb, 1945–62’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 31.1 (1995), 58–84; Amy Aisen Kallander, ‘“Friends of Tunisia”: French Economic and Diplomatic Support of Tunisian Authoritarianism’ in *Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, ed. by Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 103–24.

42 Rachid Ouaisa, ‘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.

44 Kevin K. Gaines, *American Africans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 13.

45 Afifa Ltifi, 'Black Tunisians and the Pitfalls of Bourguiba's Homogenization Project' in *Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides*, ed. by Hisham Aidi, Marc Lynch, and Zachariah Mampilly (POMEPS and Columbia SIPA, 2020), pp. 69–72.

46 In the late 1960s Bourghiba repressed student mobilizations against global anti-imperialism and autocracy; Burleigh Hendrickson, 'March 1968: Practicing Transnational Activism from Tunis to Paris', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 44.4 (2012), pp. 755–74. Bourguiba's own family belonged to small land-owning bourgeoisie from coastal Monastir, and he studied in the Sadiqi college and Law and Political Science in Paris. On his life and political trajectory, see Sophie Bessis and Souhayr Belhassen, *Bourguiba: À La Conquête d'un Destin (1901–1957)* (Paris: Jeune Afrique Livres, 1988), I.

47 Ltifi, 'Black Tunisians', p. 69.

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

48 Muhammad b. Abi al-Qasim al-Qayrawani, *al-Mūnis fi Akhḫbār Ifrīqīya wa Tūnis (A Companion to the History of Ifrīqīya and Tunis*, Tunisian Press: 1869), composed in 1681 or 1698.

49 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

50 Tahar Bekri, 'On French-Language Tunisian Literature', *Research in African Literatures* 23.2 (1992), p. 178.

51 Roger Allen, 'Literary History and the Arabic Novel', *World Literature Today*, 75.2 (2001), p. 207, and *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 62; Matti Moussa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic*

historical fiction to illuminate the popular classes, those ‘unknown protagonists’ disregarded by mainstream historians.⁵² 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”’.⁵³ In this regard, *Barg al-Lil* can be thought of as working against the ‘noble genres of Arabic literature’.⁵⁴

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’.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ The imprint on Cervantes’ *magnum opus* evokes the notion of the ‘transcontinental Maghreb’ with its millennia-old relations and interconnections.⁵⁷ 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’.⁵⁸

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

Fiction (Colorado: Lynne Reinner, 1997), p. 213. See also Kamran Rastegar, ‘Jurji Zaydan: Avatar of the Modern Revitalization and Worlding of Arabic Literature’ in *A Companion to World Literature*, ed. by Ken Seigneurie (John Wiley and Sons, 2019), pp. 1–11.

52 Al-Zimarli, ‘Introduction’, p. 27.

53 Al-Zimarli, *Al-Bachir Khreyif*, IV, p. 221.

54 As James T. Monroe argued with regard to Badi’ al-Zaman al-Hamadani’s ninth-century *maqāmāt* picaresque in *The art of Badi’ al-Zaman al-Hamadani as Picaresque Narrative* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1983), p. 99.

55 Khreyif, *Barg el-Lil*, p. 27.

56 María Antonia Garcés, *Cervantes in Algiers: A Captive’s Tale* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

57 Talbayev, *Transcontinental Maghreb*.

58 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 7. Lynn A. Hunt, ‘Modernity: Are Modern Times Different?’, *Historia Crítica*, 54 (2014), p. 115.

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 *pícaro* 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 [*baīd mu’ammamīn*]. 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-baīd*), 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,

59 Jareer Abu-Haidar, “‘Maqāmāt’ Literature and the Picaresque Novel’, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 5 (1974), p. 9. Also J.T. Monroe, *The art of Badi’ al-Zaman al-Hamadhani as Picaresque Narrative*.

60 For a history of Tunisian involvement in trans-Saharan slavery, see Ismael Musah Montana, *The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013).

61 Khreyif, *Barg el-Lil*, p. 77.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

where blacks are exploited by Tunisian whites—or rather ‘white, but not quite’.⁶³ 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’.⁶⁴ 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).⁶⁵ 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*).⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷

63 Homi Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’ in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. by Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 153.

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 (*salīqat[u]hu al-'arīḍa*) 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 Khraïef', *Revue de littérature comparée* 327.3 (2008), 368–69.

69 Khreyif, *Barg el-Lil*, p. 77.

70 On the pervasiveness of such negative associations, see Pouessel, Stéphanie, 'Les Tunisiens noirs entre stéréotype, racisme et histoire: regard sur l'actualisation d'une identité «marginale intégrée»'; in *Noirs au Maghreb. Enjeux identitaires* (Tunis; Paris: Karthala), pp. 75–98.

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 Goikolea-Amiano, 'Gender and Sexuality in early 19th-century Tunisia: a Decolonial Reading of Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī al-Timbuktāwī's *naṣīḥa* on the sub-Saharan diaspora', *Genre & Histoire*, 25 (2020), 1–14.

72 Richard C. Jankowsky, *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

73 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, p. 20.



Fig. 7.4 'Barg el-Lil at Sidi Hamid b. al-Nakhli's laboratory', by Omar Ghurairy. Image provided by Salma Khreyif. From Bachir Khreyif, *Barg el-Lil* (Tunis: Dar al-Janub, 2000), p. 35.

sailors.⁷⁴ 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 Andalusí 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 Andalusí"'.⁷⁵

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' (أنا ما أُنزَرُ شيء).⁷⁶ 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-jirān* (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

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 [*baḥr 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 Dakhliā’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

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.

83 Jocelyne Dakhliā, ‘La langue franque méditerranéenne: Asymétrie de la frontière et illusion du creuset’, *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques*, 42 (2008), p. 10. For a more skeptical view, see Nora Lafi, ‘La langue des marchands de Tripoli au XIXe siècle: langue franque et langue arabe dans un port méditerranéen’ in *Trames de langues: Usages et métissages linguistiques dans l’histoire du Maghreb*, ed. by Jocelyne Dakhliā (Tunis: Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain, 2004), pp. 215–22. Interestingly, Dakhliā refers to one of the wives of the king of Bornu in West Africa who learnt the *lingua franca* before visiting Tripoli in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. This linguistic link between sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean is fictionally recreated in *Barg el-Lil*.

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 Lorde⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ 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

84 Audre Lorde, 'Learning from the 60s' in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), p. 144.

85 For the history of the modern debates and movement for women's emancipation in Tunisia, see Tahar al-Haddad, *Imra'tunā fi al-sharī'a wa al-mujtam'a* (Our Women in Shari'a and Society) (Tunis: al-Dar al-Tunisiyya li al-nashr, 1930). For a comparison between al-Haddad and Egyptian Qasim Amin's calls for women's emancipation, see Mohamed al-May, *Mas'ala-t al-mar'a bayn Qāsim Amin and al-Ṭāhir al-Haddād* (The Women's Issue in Qasim Amin and Tahar al-Haddad) (Tunis: Dar Sihri lil nashr, 2006). See also Habiba Menchari's 1929 lecture on 'Muslim Women Tomorrow: for or against the Veil' in Sophie Bessis, *Les Valereuses: Cinq Tunisiennes Dans l'Histoire* (Tunis: Elyzad, 2017), pp. 171–77. The Francophone periodical *Leila* (1936–1941), founded by Mahmoud Zarrouk but edited since 1937 by Tawhida Ben Cheikh (best known as the first Tunisian woman doctor), targeted the elites of the capital city and was particularly critical of colonial patriarchy.

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.⁸⁶ 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'.⁸⁷ As in 1950s Egypt, state feminism in Tunisia replaced intimate familial forms of male control with public patriarchy.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹

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

86 Souad Chater, *Les émancipées du harem: regards sur la femme tunisienne* (Tunis: La presse, 1992); M. Mounira Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

87 Ilhem Marzouki, *Femmes d'ordre ou désordre de femmes?* (Tunis: Noir Sur Blanc, 2000), p. 34.

88 Mervat F. Hatem, 'Economic and Political Liberalization in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism' in *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*, ed. by Suha Sabbagh (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996), pp. 171–93.

89 Nouri Gana, 'Bourguiba's Sons: Melancholy Manhood in Modern Tunisian Cinema', *Journal of North African Studies*, 15, 1 (2010), 105–26 (p. 108).

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.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.⁹¹ Rim and Barg are separated, but destiny brings them back together when Barg is required to perform for her the role of the *tayyās*, i.e. marrying her and repudiating her so that she can remarry her former, now regretful, husband.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.⁹³ Although the subplot 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.⁹⁴

Patriarchal oppression in the novel is reinforced by state institutions. Sha'shu', the *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.⁹⁵ The woman had been imprisoned for *nushūz* or insubordination, what Fatima Mernissi calls 'the rebellion of the wife against her Muslim husband's authority'.⁹⁶ Her *nushūz* and escape signal the woman's dissent with social and

90 Khreyif, *Barg el-Lil*, pp. 32–33.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

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 *tayyās* (in Darija) or *muḥalil* (in Fusha) and then be repudiated by him. Arguably, this is meant to put some constraints to the thrice-repeated repudiation.

93 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

94 Touria Khannous, 'Race in pre-Islamic poetry: the work of Antara Ibn Shaddad', *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 6.1 (2013), p. 76.

95 Khreyif, *Barg el-Lil*, p. 44. On Dar Juwed see Dalenda Languèche, "'Dar Joued" ou l'oubli dans la mémoire' in *Marginales En Terre d'Islam*, ed. by Abdelhamid Languèche and Dalenda Languèche (Tunis: Cérès Productions, 1992), pp. 85–111.

96 Fatima Mernissi, 'Femininity as Subversion: Reflections on the Muslim Concept of *Nushūz*' in *Speaking of Faith: Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. by Diana Eck (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1986), p. 88.

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 trans-historical 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.⁹⁷ 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.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ 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'.¹⁰⁰ Such retort may be said to represent an instance when male patriarchal solidarity breaks. Bonds of camaraderie between men

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 (*saiṭara*) 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

101 See bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: Pluto Press, 1981), pp. 87–117.

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’.¹⁰⁷ 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).

107 Roua Khlifi, ‘Novelists Debate Racism in Arab Literature’, *The Arab Weekly*, 4 July 2019.

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-'Abīd* (*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'.¹⁰⁸

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'.¹⁰⁹ 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

108 Aida Edemariam, 'Jokha Alharthi: "A Lot of Women Are Really Strong, Even Though They Are Slaves"', *The Guardian*, 8 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/08/jokha-alharthi-a-lot-of-women-are-really-strong-even-though-they-are-slaves>.

109 Al-Musawi, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel*, p. 6.

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 forcedly 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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