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Transgender subjects, fairytales, and red light districts: strategies of subversion in Tunisian women's writing under Ben 'Ali

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ABSTRACT
This article analyses three Arabic novels by prominent Tunisian women writers published in the decade preceding the mass protests of 2010: Masʿūdah Abū Bakr's *Ṭurshqānah* (1999), Faḍīlah Al-Shābbī's *al-ʿAdl* (Justice, 2005), and Fatḥīyah al-Hāshimī's *Maryam tasquṭ min yad Allāh* (Maryam Falls from the Hand of God, 2009). These novels are interpreted as alternative political discourses that work to expose the methods of regulation and normalisation in Tunisia under Ben 'Ali. While each has a different focus, they share a number of common themes: the tension between the individual and the collective, the intersection of gender with class as a site of disenfranchisement, the effects of a politically oppressive environment on the autonomy of the physical body, and the way strategies of control effect the lived experience of urban space. Based upon the strongly voiced critique embedded in these texts, the writers' notable positions within their own local literary contexts, and the neglect to which their work has been subject in the West and larger Arab world, I ultimately argue for more inclusive reading practices in modern Arabic literature.

At an international symposium entitled 'The Arab Spring Through the Eyes of Arab Novelists' held at the Ibn Rachiq Culture House in Tunis in January of 2012, Italian scholar and translator Francesco Leggio cited a moment from Mario Vargas Llosa's 2010 Nobel Lecture:

> Let those who doubt that literature not only submerges us in the dream of beauty and happiness but alerts us to every kind of oppression, ask themselves why all regimes determined to control the behavior of citizens from cradle to grave fear it so much they establish systems of censorship to repress it and keep so wary an eye on independent writers. (Znaidi 2012)

Leggio evokes Llosa's observation as a reminder that literature can often function as a form of dissent. Power – authoritarian or otherwise – is known

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to mask itself in normality, a natural order of things that requires no questioning and systems of domination depend on their ability to maintain a grasp on a people's imagination. Literature cannot stand in as a substitute for the highly visible acts of resistance we find in large-scale demonstrations or individual moments of ground level protest, but it can do something. This essay will consider three novels by prominent Tunisian women writers published between 1999 and 2009 – Mas'ūdah Abū Bakr's *Ṭurshqānah*, Faḍīlah al-Shābbī's *al-'Adl*, and Fathīyah al-Hāshimī's *Maryam tasquṭ min yad Allāh* – as part of a genealogy of resistance in which dominant historical narratives are rewritten, the implicit violence of the quotidian is made explicit, and alternative past and future trajectories are given an existence at once tangible and legible. Though the intense campaign of civil resistance waged by the Tunisian people in the middle of December of 2010 was triggered by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, these works show that Ben Ali's repressive 23 year rule had its share of local acts of defiance sublimated into literary texts far earlier than this.

Several aspects of Michel Foucault's thought will unite my reading of these texts, reflective of their common interest in exposing their society's methods of regulation and normalisation in the Foucauldian sense. As Judith Butler notes, the power of regulation 'determines, more or less, what we are, what we can be' (2004, 57). These novels all sought to expand the imaginative limits of the possible in Tunisia before 2011, each relying, in one form or another, on a challenge to the regime's mechanisms of control. Other shared themes emerge as well. Each of these novels is structured around a complicated relationship between the individual and the collective. Gender too is a critical factor for all of these authors, but rather than stand alone as an exclusive site of oppression, it intersects with other forms of marginalisation, such as the disenfranchisement attached to certain class positions or the generalised political suppression felt by all but the most elite. Likewise, all of these novelists figure their challenges to the regime through the physical bodies of their texts' protagonists. In Abū Bakr's novel, the earliest of the three, this takes the shape of the rejection of binary heteronormative categories. The protagonist's fight for bodily autonomy is central but it also nevertheless speaks for more than their individual struggle; it is subtly connected to a collective loss embedded in the memory of the missed revolutionary opportunity of 1864. In al-Shābbī's work, the author relies on an overarching corporal metaphor; her protagonist's contestation of the explicit government strategies of control placed upon Tunis's urban space results in the exposure of her body's absolute physical vulnerability. Here, the individual and the collective merge at several points, even, notably, in the main character's name: *madīnah*, the standard Arabic word for city that positions the protagonist as a gloss for all the inhabitants of the urban centre. In al-Hāshimī's text, the focus remains on the body's lived experience of a repressive urban

environment, but the mechanisms of oppression are comprised primarily of the continuous replication of regressive societal norms. The government's role is not just implied, however, as we witness the state's crackdown on demonstrators who prefigure the real events that ultimately take place just two years later. Taken together, these texts suggest that the disconnect between the government and its people reverberated with ever-increasing volume as the new millennium approached the end of its first decade.

A radical critique of gender and nostalgia for a failed revolution

Mas'ūdah Abū Bakr has been one of Tunisia's most important writers since the mid-1990s and is the author of a number of collections of short stories and poetry in addition to five novels.[1] *Ṭurshqānah*, published in 1999, is the first Arabic novel in any country to feature a transgender protagonist. Borrowing from Butler's work in *Undoing Gender*, I read the protagonist's struggle as disruptive of what she terms the 'regulatory operation of power' that naturalises accepted binary categories of gender; it thereby represents the demand for a profound political transformation that exceeds the character's individual desire for recognition (2004, 43). This is supported by the novel's use of a rhetorical move reminiscent of much recent scholarship on sexual identity in the Arab world – Abū Bakr positions the societal rejection of her protagonist's claim to a non-normative gender identity as something rooted in the violence of the colonial encounter.[2] As a result, while the novel's starting point is a concern for inequalities grounded in questions of gender, it, in fact, works to reveal the restrictive limits placed on everyone within the failed post-independence context of Ben 'Ali's government.

Primarily set in Tunis, the novel chronicles the struggles of its central protagonist Murād, a young artistic man who desperately wants to change his gender through sex reassignment surgery. Murād, whose derisive nickname *Ṭurshqānah* gives the novel its title, is a son of the esteemed and wealthy al-Shawāshī family, several generations of which reside in a large house in Tunis's old city.[3] The novel is structurally divided between chapters recounted through a third person omniscient narrator and letters that are assumed for most of the story to have been written by Murād after his transition.[4] The main plotline follows its protagonist's efforts to convince his adoptive grandmother, al-Ḥājjah Qamar, to give him access to his inheritance, the only means he has to travel to Europe for the surgical procedure that will allow him to become a woman.[5]

One of the more significant aspects of *Ṭurshqānah* is its opposition to the essentialism characteristic of depictions of non-heteronormative characters in Arabic literature.[6] From the novel's earliest pages, Murād exclaims in four languages, 'Nḥib nwillī mrā. Je veux devenir femme. I want to be a woman. Vorrei essere donna' (Abū Bakr 1999, 12).[7] Murād's unambiguous declaration

serves to displace gender as a biological category, redefining it as an identity that is both culturally configured and open to continual remaking (Butler 2004, 9–10). By the time Murād announces his intention with these lines, Abū Bakr has already situated Ṭurshqānah as a critique of the norms regulating sexual identity with the novel's opening scene. The story begins with the staging of a Bedouin wedding in a country estate neighbouring the agricultural land owned by the al-Shawāshī family. The sound of a drum reverberates through the air as the family's matriarch al-Ḥājjah Qamar anxiously sits and watches the guests, uttering to herself, 'I bring him with me only to regret it' (Abū Bakr 1999, 6). The perspective then shifts to an unidentified person whose features are obscured:

> The feminine figure wrapped in a woolen blanket rose up in the heart of the place as if she had appeared from the level ground itself, furnished for the evening with striped wool blankets, linen, and plastic mats. The figure's awe inspiring femininity was prominent in her opulent gilded costume. Every time her chest shuddered her long earrings tangled with her head-covering and necklaces, sparkling under the light of the revealing electric lamps hung on the branches of the gum trees surrounding the place. (Abū Bakr 1999, 7)

As the drum beat accelerates, the figure's movements become frenzied, unreservedly immersed in a dance aligned with the growing pace of the music. Finally, a male guest asks the man sitting next to him, 'who is she (man takūn hadhahi)?', to which his neighbour whispers after smiling, 'Instead, say who is he? … (bal qul man hadhā)' (Abū Bakr 1999, 8–9). It is then clear that this figure notable for its possession of all the attributes of conventional femininity is Murād, and that the source of al-Ḥājjah Qamar's anxiety is this public performance described as a spectacle often repeated.

In her well-known argument about the performative basis of gender that takes drag as its starting point, Butler asks the following rhetorical questions:

> Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established? Does being female constitute a 'natural fact' or a cultural performance, or is 'naturalness' constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within categories of sex? (1990, xxxi)

Following Butler, we should read scenes like the above as examples of the way Murād constitutes a gendered ontological state through performative acts. His enactment of the feminine disrupts the internal stability of the male and female subject, just as it dramatises the signifying gestures that have served to establish these gender categories in the first place (Butler 1990, xxxi). The exaggeration of Murād's impersonation coupled with the reiteration of the adjective 'feminine' (unthawī /unthawīyah) in the lengthy description of his first appearance requires the reader to re-contextualise his gestures after the moment of anagnorisis and the realisation that this embodiment of

femininity is a man in the eyes of society. Consequently, the attributes of femininity are divorced from an identification with a biological or 'natural' basis. His demand for the right to male-to-female transsexuality and his episodic performances of an alternative gender identity here and elsewhere in the text comprise an extreme call for bodily autonomy, and with it, the right to transformation. It is important to note as well that as a character, he bears little resemblance to standard Arabic literary representations of alternative sexualities. Several critics have observed the pathologised figure of the *mukhannath*, or effeminate man, in modern Arabic literature, whose failure to inhabit the acceptable masculinist episteme essentially 'necessitates tragedy' in the literary texts in which he appears (Hadeed 2012, 277).[8] Murād's performance of the feminine, however, is not passive nor is he depicted as deviant regardless of his rebellion against convention. While the figure of the *mukhannath* is generally crafted as a character lacking both self-determination and free will, Murād exhibits an acute self-awareness and his refusal to remain within local frames of reference of gender identification is an act executed with an analytic rationality.

Yet, if we ask, as Michael Allan does in his queer reading of *The Yacoubian Building* (2013), how Murād's non-normative identity becomes intelligible in *Ṭurshqānah*, we find a curious coupling, to borrow Allan's phrasing (257). Several members of his family and the larger community believe that the al-Shawāshīs live under the shadow of a curse five generations old, a reason they regularly evoke to explain Murād's condition. The novel shifts to the mid-nineteenth century where we see Murād's great great grandfather, Aḥmad al-Shawāshī, working as a manual labourer. He finds a store of riches buried in a previously undiscovered ancient Christian tomb. This turn of good fortune is ambiguous; legends surround these objects of wealth, which are thought to bring bad luck to whoever might take them:

> These treasures were consigned to the unknown in circumstances fraught with their owners' tears and feelings of suffering, vanquishment, and oppression. The heartbreak of their owners became a source of bad luck. Misfortune follows them and a curse will attach itself to anyone who takes them, a curse which will extend to their progeny … (Abū Bakr 1999, 47)

Ignoring the superstitions surrounding the tomb, Aḥmad al-Shawāshī removes its contents and uses them as capital to establish himself as a bourgeois merchant, the source of his family's later prosperity and status, but also the rumours of its curse.

I would argue that the function of this trope in the novel is not to justify a sexuality constructed as an inherent aberration from the norm in the vein of al-Aswany in *The Yacoubian Building* (2006).[9] It is, in fact, within the space of this understated connection – between Murād's desire for something beyond the contemporary norm and an affliction brought upon his family by an

ancestor in the middle of the nineteenth century – that the novel performs its most revolutionary work. The causality underscoring this relationship is how the text subtly links the revolution that Murād demands for his body with the need for a political revolution in more general terms. Under Ben 'Ali, Tunisia had an infamously difficult publishing climate, its censors notorious throughout the region for their rigorous suppression of literary texts that questioned the status quo. Direct criticism of the regime was difficult, if not impossible.[10] As Andrei Plesu has pointed out in regard to the communist dictatorships of eastern Europe, 'The existence of censorship led to the elaboration of ingenious subtexts, allusions, and camouflage, techniques practiced with great virtuosity by writers and assimilated promptly by the mass of readers' (1995, 3). In *Ṭurshqānah*, the explicit mention of the year 1864 emerges as a textual anomaly that I read as precisely the type of 'camouflaged allusion' Plesu describes. Indirect enough to escape notice but nevertheless fundamental to the structural logic of the narrative, this is the year Aḥmad al-Shawāshī came to Tunis. We are told simply that his arrival corresponds with 'the 1864 revolution in the countryside' (Abū Bakr 1999, 47).

This momentary intrusion of history situates Ahmad al-Shawāshī as a rural migrant fleeing the effects of the rebellion initiated by 'Ali bin Ghadhaham, a revolutionary from Tunisia's central plateau. This is the same region that witnessed the first events of the revolution of 2010. Mouldi Guessoumi has argued that the revolt of 1864 should be considered a link in a long chain of revolutions rooted in the area, historically a centre of rebellion against unjust regimes (2012, 23). The insurrection of 1864 was no less a call for dignity than its modern day successor. Launched as the result of the Prime Minister's attempts to excessively tax a rural population – people who survived primarily by self-sufficient agriculture effectively outside of the capitalist system – the revolt was a response to a regime whose abusive economic policies had made the lives of the general population impossible (Guessoumi 2012, 23). What the inclusion of the year 1864 as a marker for Aḥmad al-Shawāshī's rural to urban migration tells us is that he does not participate in 'Alī bin Ghadhāham's revolution, choosing instead to take refuge in the capital.

The failure of the 1864 uprising after its brutal repression by the centralised government precipitated a chain of events that led Tunisia into an everdeeper relationship of financial dependency on European powers. Its contribution to an encroaching colonialism was substantial, but it also represents a missed opportunity of another kind. 'Ali bin Ghadhaham, a marabout and son of a respected judge, is often remembered as a hero of nineteenth century popular resistance. Boldly expressing his contempt for a ruler who had little concern for his subjects' welfare, he considered himself the 'bey of the people' (Perkins 2004, 29). The real curse of the al-Shawāshī family in the text is its patriarch's decision to place himself on the wrong side of

history by refusing to participate in a revolution that held the potential for lib-eration in favour of the pursuit of personal financial gain. The remembrance of 1864 in the novel introduces a vision of an alternative historical trajectory, a trajectory free of colonial occupation and the repressive post-colonial regimes that followed. It collapses the inevitability of the status quo and the current regime, creating the ability to imagine a different present in which a greater range of personal freedoms would already be in reach. In this regard, the novel may in fact do more than it intends to. Scholars like Joseph Massad and Khaled El-Rouayheb have proposed that the sexual norms found today in the Arab world have been imported from the West, the result of the violence of the colonial encounter. They are thought to police sexual identity to a far greater degree than the more inclusive struc-tures that previously governed sexual practices.[11] If this is the case, then nos-talgia for what might have been without the trauma wrought by colonial occupation and the repressive post-independence regimes that followed includes within it the possibility of a different way to imagine sexual identity and desire. It raises the possibility that maybe, if history had progressed other-wise, Tunisia would be less divided by the civilisational binaries that pit a rhetoric of gay rights against a rhetoric of tradition. Perhaps in this imagining, someone like Murād would already be possible and legible without requiring the expansion of the very definition of the human within Tunisia's social and political discourses (Butler 2004, 28).

Picking up the mantle of revolutionary literature through innovations in form

If the dissent embedded in Mas'ūdah Abū Bakr's (1999) novel is insinuated through a critique of restrictive local frames of reference and a subtle nostal-gia for lost revolutionary opportunities, Faḍīlah al-Shābbī's 2005 novel al-'Adl (Justice), part of a trilogy of political fiction, employs textual strategies that are more direct. Banned for three years by Ben 'Ali's government before it was available to the public, it is a merciless political invective veiled only by its use of direct allegory taken from traditional modes of storytelling. Al-Shābbī's novel shifts focus to the restrictions placed upon the spaces of Tuni-sia's urban capital, a result of the state's symbolic strategies of surveillance designed to discipline and regulate its citizens. Like Ṭurshqānah, the repres-sive environment of Ben 'Ali's regime is felt directly by the protagonist's body; it is, in fact, through the body's striking vulnerability that al-Shābbī most effectively highlights the absence of the right to physical autonomy.

Al-Shābbī has been a leading literary figure in Tunisia since the 1970s. The author of more than a dozen collections of poetry, two of which are in dialect, multiple volumes of children's literature, a collection of short stories, and four novels, she is also the cousin of poet Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī, whose 'Iradat al-

ḥayat (The Will to Live)' quickly became the revolutionary anthem throughout the Arab world when the protests began in 2010.[12] The consequence of this familial relationship is something she often publicly acknowledges:

> I inherited the poetic spirit from this great poet … I promised myself that I would complete Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī's message … that I would continue it, though in a different way, since I swore that I wouldn't simply repeat what another poet had done, no matter how great … Any poet worthy of the name must leave their own fingerprint on the cultural life of their country. (Interview)

A very different kind of writer than Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī in many ways, she takes up the theme of political injustice in a distinct voice appropriate to the particular kinds of oppression endemic to her contemporary environment. *Al-'Adl* merges the literal and the symbolic, poetry and prose, the personal and the collective, metaphysical discourse and satirical lampoon in an episodic narrative with a recurring protagonist named Raqqiyah in the text's more realistic moments, and Madīnah, a word that simply means 'city' in Arabic, in others.

Within this variegated framework, al-Shābbī accentuates the dark absurdity of living under an authoritarian regime and the necessity of the individual struggle for justice and autonomy regardless. In several vignettes, she accomplishes this by calling attention to the state's efforts to control the symbolic world and the arbitrary violence that follows any act of noncompliance. In one scene, Madīnah crosses a street empty of pedestrians but lined with police officers. When one of them reprimands her for walking while everyone else is standing, she asks why the simple practice of traversing the street should be forbidden. With the officer's response, the narrative enters the realm of the fantastic:

> You're looking for a reason? Take the reason …
>
> She felt his strong hands pull on her shoulders. With a brisk extraordinary speed, they lifted her up high and threw her against the white wall of the towering building that stood in front of them. She felt the pain of collision; something in her broke; something turned to paste; something leaked blue blood onto the building's wall, and her eyes went with it. Strangely, they could still see. Another smear of ruby red blood on the wall, another green, then yellow, orange, brown, gray. People who had been walking thrown against the building's wall as they had done to her. It had become a surreal canvas that the police officers stained with human bodies. (al-Shābbī 2005, 39)

The police are 'the infinitely small of political power', the exhaustive network that transforms the entirety of the city into a field of perception habituating the people to subordination, and here, they employ force as indiscriminately as they choose (Foucault 1977, 214). The inclusion of fantastical elementals in fiction to express phantasmagorical political realities is a common narrative

technique that al-Shābbī broadly draws upon to show the nonsensical and capricious nature of the exercise of power in Ben Ali's regime. As her disembodied eyes continue to see, they scan the city. They note the halted cars, the buses and trains brought to a standstill, and finally see the presidential procession that is its cause. The spectacle of the presidential motorcade, a public representation of Ben Ali's power for which submissive observation is achieved with an excessive violence, is quickly linked to another symbolic disciplinary mechanism ubiquitous throughout the country.

Little more than a bloody stain on the wall, she remembers sitting at the bus station on Tunis's Muḥammad V street earlier that morning: 'she was – before she discovered the president's picture – alone … ' (al-Shābbī 2005, 40). What follows is a meditation on the lived effects of surveillance and observation, the individual's experience of the perpetual visibility that helps the regime to maintain its hold on power. The capital is transformed into an enormous Panopticon, and the omnipotence of Ben Ali's government is displayed through material signs strategically placed throughout the city. Like the inmate of the modern prison who lives in the shadow of the central tower, the president's image reminds the citizen that at any given moment, he or she may be under observation, even if they can never know precisely when; 'power should be visible and unverifiable' (Foucault 1977, 201). But this is not quite the faceless gaze that sustains the disciplinary mechanism of effective modern surveillance through its anonymity:

> No one is at the station. She's opposite the resigned street and the small station's four glass walls. Turning to the right, suddenly there is the president's picture; no one but the two of them, she looks, and he looks. Was she the one looking or was she being looked at? How odd that he was staring at her, as if he were a stranger meeting another stranger. The moment is exceptional. In a station on a nearly desolate street, the estrangement of a city on a rainy day and the ruler estranged inside his dominion. (al-Shābbī 2005, 40)

The president is positioned at the crossroads of the monarchical model of the ritualised show of sovereignty and the faceless, nameless, practice of constant surveillance. His image continues to watch over the complex system of surveyance that he has instituted, a network that extends to the most banal aspects of the social body, to which al-Shābbī points in her poem 'La Genèse': 'Tunis cafes are full of poets/And political police informants' (Rjiba 2012, 24). An untenable balance, in the text she figures it as the cause of his alienation.

The importance of these scenes in *al-'Adl* is rooted in al-Shābbī's refusal to comply with the public dissimulation in which Ben Ali's rule, and the symbols by which it operates, are legitimate. As the following passage demonstrates, she rejects the regime's representation of itself and exposes its inner logic:

> The president's two eyes are different: A seductive eye, a specter of a smile hovering in its lights and darks. A look of seduction; a look revealing intention. A woman and a man, or rather, the image of a man … The seduction of power hisses its storms' jets from him to tighten around the furtherest quarters. The eye glances at the woman though it is she who sees clearly; this is an age in which she will be swept away like a cat on the station's wet sidewalk. The other eye is leaden. The political eye that discharges orders just as it fires bullets. A road of iron, a street of lead, people made of copper and a memory without mercy. The sun is strong and wrathful. There is no river in this city, but its inhabitants are a river of angry blood. (al-Shābbī 2005, 41)

Lisa Wadeen's (1999, 19) analysis of disciplinary-symbolic practices in Hafez al-Asad's Syria is to some degree applicable here as well; Ben Ali also combined the iconography of sovereign rule with the 'panoptic, internalized, disciplinary technologies of the West', generating power through the representation of a leader meant to personify and unify the modern nation. Al-Shābbī reveals the falsehood of the implied panegyric latent in the image and the coercive compliance it is intended to provoke. Behind the portrait lies the threat of punishment. The president's gaze has a double edge: it first elicits submission through persuasion, the citizen's acceptance of his power, yet projects a menacing promise of punishment in the absence of obedience. It seeks to intimidate through the anticipation of retribution. The real politics of the regime is structured around a deferred violence of which its citizens, in al-Shābbī's rendering 'a river of angry blood', are well aware.

If Abū Bakr's method of coding dissent in *Ṭurshqānah* is through the use of the partially hidden subtext of nostalgia for a missed revolution, in *al-'Adl*, al-Shābbī elects a different narrative strategy. She chooses to leave mimetic representation aside for much of the text, shifting instead to a narrative style that cuts to the heart of human existential anxieties. Rejecting the veiled artifice of realism, she uses the older narrative mode of the fairy tale. In an encounter with a group of children, Madīnah tells them the story of a tyrant who feasts on cities. Urban spaces are his favourite meal and he pulls the city out by its roots, placing it in his mouth to savour its people, trees, and stone, demolishing its rivers and mountains in his immense jaws (al-Shābbī 2005, 46). This is not precisely allegory of the kind Fredric Jameson describes in his contention that all 'third-world' texts are 'national allegories' (1986, 69). In Jameson's now infamous proposition, western forms of representation like the novel require the radical split between private and public, the poetic and the political, while in the third-world text, 'the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society' (1986, 69). Al-Shābbī, however, leaves the practice of representation common to modern narrative altogether to draw upon a more traditional type of allegory intended to make the abstract ideas she aims to convey all the more concrete.

The mechanics of narration specific to the fairy tale require an extreme simplification. Characters are types and figures are clearly drawn. There is no space for the ambivalence typical of realist expression (Bettelheim 1975, 9). Along these lines, al-Shābbī begins this section of the narrative not by telling the story of an individual which can then be allegorised by relating it to the larger collectivity but by integrating the two from the onset. Her skin the living membrane of Tunis, after recounting her tale of the beast who devours cities, Madīnah answers the children's disbelief:

A child cuts in, 'Is the city a living being?'

'Indeed, and the proof is that I am that in front of you.'

Another child aggressively interrupts, 'You're a woman and the city is merely a name that you've called yourself.'

She responds calmly, 'Touch the living garment and you'll understand.'

Another child, 'Are you just one woman, or are you all the women, all the men, all the children?'

'I am the city.' (al-Shābbī 2005,46)

Through the fantastic exaggeration of her literal personification of Tunis, the figure of Madīnah reaches an important truth about the collective repression of the city's citizens. Beyond the transparency with which she can depict the image of a tyrannical leader and the cruelty of his rule, the form itself has a notably multi-layered function.

Regardless of the cultural context, the fairy tale has historically been understood to be a female genre. This is as true of seventeenth-century France, where the tales rose to popularity in women's literary salons and reflected an oppositional stance to the patriarchal dictates of church and court, as it is of the stories of the *Thousand and One Nights*, voiced through the heroine Shahrazad and passed down by women for generations. Additionally, the form allows al-Shābbī to create a 'counterworld' of naive morality, the source of the fairy tale's 'moral pulse' (Zipes 2012, 14). The fairy tale confronts the world of reality, corresponding instead to what we instinctually feel to be good and just; 'it tells us what we lack and how the world has to be organized differently so that we receive what we need' (Zipes 2012, 14). It expresses the utopian desire for transformation and closes the gap between empirical reality and imaginative possibility (Zipes 1991, xiii). Evoking the embedded method of narration of the *Nights*, while Madīnah explains her status as the embodiment of the city to the children, one of them responds with a story of his own, 'Books and Birds'. The boy begins his marvellous recitation with a bird that flies through the window of a room filled with books. Complaining of the constant noise filtering through the window, one of the books, who will later have a story of its own, asks the bird to take it to the banks of a stream at

the top of a mountain. The bird agrees; once they reach the mountain top, the book exclaims:

> In a little while, my author will get here. She's climbing the mountain now, carrying freedom, and freedom, my friend, is a heavy thing to carry. She reaches the mountaintop every day at the same time. After a great deal of toil, she leaves at dawn. One day she entrusted me with her secret, saying, 'I made a vow to myself to bring freedom up to the mountaintop to wash it in the stream, cleansing it of all the pollutants that cling to it.' She hasn't betrayed the covenant once. Don't run away terrified, my friend, when you see her pushing freedom in its enormity in front of her, her hands, legs, and knees dripping blood. As soon as she puts it in the stream, it expands and you'll see both of them playing in the water. You'll watch as freedom spreads out euphorically, leaving the soft hands responsible for purifying it of its defilements. (al-Shābbī 2005, 50)

In an essay on his struggle with censorship under Ben Ali, novelist Abdul Jabbar al-Maduri writes that, before the revolution 'tongues were severed, minds were trapped, pens were censored … Only a very few stepped out of the herd and swam against the tide in defiance of the terrible machine of repression' (Rjiba 2012, 33). Al-Shābbī takes the grim reality al-Maduri describes and reconfigures it into a message of revolutionary hope, in which the writer undertakes the Sisyphean task of purifying society of its corruption and oppression, disregarding the personal cost. In contrast to al-Maduri's characterisation and the vibrant depictions of oppression often found in the novel, *al-'Adl* ultimately draws on the liberating potential of an earlier narrative form to project an unapologetically optimistic vision in which social transformation is possible.

Critiquing the state through the appropriation of its red light district

While al-Shābbī focuses on Ben 'Ali's symbolic control of Tunis's public spaces to emphasise the effects of the regime's repressive authoritarianism on its citizens for much of *al-'Adl*, Fatḥīyah al-Hāshimī moves the issue of space to the forefront of her 2009 novel *Maryam tasquṭ min yad Allāh* (Maryam Falls from the Hand of God). The narrative draws upon a division between Tunis's private and public spaces, neither of which offers a respite from the country's oppressive environment. Al-Hāshimī's solution is the creation of a liminal heterotopic space that enables her characters to escape from the repressive norms that hold elsewhere. Like Abū Bakr and al-Shābbī, al-Hāshimī figures her criticism of the regime through recurring images of her protagonist's body's susceptibility to an aggressive and inhospitable outside environment. To a greater extent than we find in the work of her fellow authors, gender aligns with class in the novel to create a portrait of collective repression that effects all but the most elite.

Al-Hāshimī is both a poet and the author of a collection of short stories and three novels; well-regarded in her home country, *Maryam tasquṭ min yad Allāh*

was awarded Tunisia's state-sponsored CREDIF (The Center for Research, Studies, Documentation, and Information on Women) prize for best women's writing of 2009/2010.[13] The novel's non-linear narrative is held together by an extended dialogue between Maryam, the prostitute who is the story's protagonist, and Yūsuf, a demonstrator who has taken refuge inside the brothel from a police crackdown outside. The text's heterotopic spaces – the brothel, a cemetery, a shantytown, and echoes of saints' shrines past and present – are sites that simultaneously represent, invert, and contest the real localities of contemporary Tunis (Foucault 1984).

Most of the novel is set in a part of the capital with a name that retains the traces of an earlier sacred function, though it has since become a counter-site of a very different kind. The brothel where Maryam's works is only accessible through Nahj Zarqūn, the narrow pathway that serves as the animated centre of the medina's black market. The quarter of Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche, located in the southeastern point of the medina on a dead-end alley, has been known for its red-light district since the nineteenth century, the quarter's name synonymous with the meaning of a bordello (Clancy-Smith 2011). In contrast to the city's other spaces reputed for prostitution that are physically peripheral, Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche is centrally positioned. Mohamed Kerrou and M'halla Moncef describe the space as outside the visible/invisible or public/private binary – it is neither/nor – a space of marginality, not a 'social marginalization but a spatial ghettoization' (1993, 217). It has been as paradoxical in actual fact as it is in al-Hāshimī's representation. Prostitution itself has an ambiguous legal status; if not wholly legal, the area nonetheless remains home to government-sanctioned brothels whose women are administered regulatory medical exams (2009 Human Rights).[14]

In the text, Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche is a desanctified space; once what Foucault would term a crisis heterotopia, consecrated, linked to the eternal, it is transformed into a heterotopia of deviation, a transitory space, the function of which is to unmask the nature of the 'real' spaces beyond its borders. After traversing Nahj Zarqūn, a man recalls his first conversation with one of the brothel's madams who addresses the space's shift from the sacred to the profane:

> I overheard the voices of vendors, the melodies of rai, *sha'bi* songs … meanwhile a suffocating odor blocked my pores. It reminded me of the smell of graves. I overheard a voice coming from far far off:
>
> … He was a saint, named Sidi 'Abdullah.
>
> - Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche.
>
> At that moment she [the madam] pressed my lips closed while I swallowed the rest of the letters …
>
> - If the poor thing knew, what's become of it, these houses of beneficence …

I persisted through my teeth:

- But they're much better today, of a more general benefit, that's at least what I mean …

- They were built for orphans, the hard of luck, those passing through.

- But they've become a haven for those passing through.

- Really you mean those passing through the beds. (al-Hāshimī 2009, 46)

Despite the madam's acerbic remark that Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche has been reduced to the role of sanctuary for the clients who spend the occasional fleeting moment behind the bordello's walls, the question remains of how the site works within the novel to show a hierarchy of social oppression determined by gender. Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche's houses of ill-repute are categorically unlike those that fill the pages of chapbooks in Egypt in the 1920s; they are not shining exemplars of female camaraderie that insulate their women from the violence of their families (Booth 2010, 356–357). They are, rather, sites of inversion that reverse the power relations determined by sexual difference endemic to contemporary Tunisian society, exposing them as socially and politically constituted.

Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche's presence in the novel as a mirror and contestation of governing social norms and their relation with the primary axis of power can be parsed through the juxtaposition of both Maryam's and Yūsuf's positions in the brothel with their lives prior. As a child, Maryam is vulnerable to the violence of inappropriate sexual advances perpetrated by the older men of her neighbourhood, including her grandfather. As an adult, she is subjected to the more generalised harassment of the street. At the ceremony held for the signing of her marriage contract, she discovers the scant value of her own propriety. Her inheritance is the status of a fallen woman; the birth certificate that she had never before seen discloses that her mother was a prostitute and the identity of her father is unknown (al-umm qaḥbah wa'l-bū majhūl) (al-Hāshimī 2009, 107). The hypocrisy of a moral system that not only polices the sexuality of its women while ignoring the promiscuity of its men, but moreover condemns its female members as unmarriageable based on 'flawed' genealogy rather than conduct, leads Maryam to the office of a doctor willing to surgically remove her virginity:

The white scalpel gleams in the doctor's hand as he asks me for the last time:

'You won't go back on your decision? You'll lose what you've protected for years and years by a surgeon's scalpel?

… 'Your scalpel will be easier on me than their icy looks, its coldness more comfortable than their frigid taunts. Not one of them will be able to boast that they own me … '. (al-Hāshimī 2009, 97)

The scene is an exaggeration, a subversion of the real practice in which women who are no longer virgins have their hymens restored prior to marriage. It serves as protest against the norms that regulate women's sexuality, a literal and symbolic claim to bodily autonomy, just as her subsequent move to Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche is a rejection of the sets of gender regulations and assumptions that govern the city's less liminal spaces.

The constitution of Yūsuf's masculinity is just as crucial to the text as the processes that create the experience of femininity that Maryam later disavows. Yūsuf's own marginalisation is largely determined by class and is spatially figured. The sound of the wind beating down on the tin roof of his parents' shanty combines with his ill father's cough to create an incessant, anxiety-inducing refrain (al-Hāshimī 2009, 16). His mother gives birth to child after child, who then sleep on shabby mats on the floor: 'Are we preoccupied with anything other than procreation … ? This is another problem, my parents are doing their national duty' (al-Hāshimī 2009, 17). Once the deprivation of his immediate environment is established, we then see the mechanisms and rites that comprise his gender socialisation. This allows the reader to draw a connection to the larger systemic violence that characterises the poverty in which Yūsuf was raised. It is a destitution that denies adolescent boys the tools of education and socialisation, stunting their empathetic impulses. The already troubling understanding of masculinity constructed in the scenes narrated by Maryam takes an even more sinister turn in these sections voiced by Yūsuf:

> The first time I entered the brothel I was sixteen, me and a group of my friends. We were sick of mounting the donkeys, the shepherds running after us, the farmers' batons, the barking of the frenzied dogs. No she-donkey was safe from us. We would take turns mounting her. We got our first taste of masculinity with uncle Ṣālaḥ the coal seller's she-donkey … Even 'Bākah Buhaliyyah' wasn't safe from us. Animals. We were sex-crazed animals happy discovering their masculinity. The poor thing, but we were unfortunate too … the smell of urine and sweat stung my eyes. A bitter smell, yes, her smell was acrid, but that didn't stop us from mounting her. One after the other … the poor thing, a time of dogs and the sons of dogs, we didn't see a trace of her after the pregnancy began to show. She disappeared … . (al-Hāshimī 2009, 113)

The rape of 'Bākah Buhaliyyah', or Bākah the crazy – a local girl they describe as 'half crazy, half sane' – is something Yūsuf comes to regret, recognising the 'atrocity' of their actions (al-Hāshimī 2009, 114). The immediate consequences, however, are suffered exclusively by their victim, and all the speculations as to the truth behind her forced disappearance are equally tragic.

Against this backdrop of a destructive overarching patriarchy by which Maryam and Yūsuf are each negatively effected, albeit in in different ways, is Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche. In life, it is a space that causes the social marginalisation of its women; al-Hāshimī effaces the standard paradigm of exploitation and commodification, depicting the brothel instead as a place in which

reigning gender hierarchies and binaries relating to spatial organisation are either reversed or suspended. The distinctions of public/private, outside/inside, work/home, production/consumption, independence/dependence, power/lack of power that generally correspond to the categories of masculine/feminine do not hold here (McDowell 1999, 12). A male visitor recalls his first encounter with the space:

> Nahj Zarqūn: I still remember … the first time I entered the threshold, this very threshold:

> The feeling still clings to me, the wall scratching my side, the ringing laughter scratching my ears while I stole a glance at the eyes staring at me in curiosity, stripping me naked … How I tried to escape the hands that held me, to stay longer in the narrow alley that leads to the many rooms crowded together along its sides. At first I didn't know where I was: I asked myself, is this a hammam they're bringing me to? … I felt disgusted while the old woman standing in front of me ran her veiny fingers over my body. I withdrew into myself, I tried to dodge her more, cursing the moment that I entered this room. I screamed internally: Mercy, mercy, don't leave me with this old woman … (al-Hāshimī 2009, 45–46)

It is the male consumer who is bereft of power, physically violated by the women within, just as it is the man who is forced to lower his gaze while the women scrutinise him, metaphorically stripping him naked. The power relations that characterise the space stand in stark opposition to those continually reproduced and reaffirmed in the city proper. Yūsuf's first experience in Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche is depicted similarly:

> We had hardly taken two steps when that old hag sitting in front of one of the rooms ran up to us: 'Get away from here you little chickens, what have you come here to do? You don't even know how to do your ablutions yet … ' We ran like we had never run before in our lives. The women's voices followed us, angry voices! Threatening, while small bodies fled from the hell of the brothel … (al-Hāshimī 2009, 115)

Yet the brothel, symbolically outside of all other spaces, a placeless place, takes on a different cast when Yūsuf seeks refuge from the police strike clamouring outside its walls. He is described in language strikingly similar to the characterisations of protestors used by the various Arab dictators who would fall a short time after the novel's publication: 'Yūsuf, fleeing from the demonstration, hiding like a rat in the brothel' (al-Hāshimī 2009, 141). The wide-reaching forms of objective violence executed by Ben Ali's regime are brought to the forefront, and implied to be at the root of the subjective, individual acts of violence committed by Yūsuf earlier in his life. Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche becomes a refuge, not without a sense of claustrophobia paralleled by the agoraphobic terror of the localities beyond. Feeling trapped, Yūsuf proclaims: '"I want to see the world, I'm leaving, yes, I'm leaving … " to which Maryam responds: "Where are you going, you madman? Have you forgotten

you're a fugitive from the police?"' (al-Hāshimī 2009, 142). A dialectic division is established between the restricted outside spaces of the real city, that for all its openness bears the marks of a prison, and the virtual space of the bordello that stands apart. If Sidi 'Abdullah Guèche is suffocating, the world outside its borders is apocalyptic: 'The noise outside intensified: wailing, screaming, running, bottles being thrown … Things crashing into each other: "What's happening outside?" "The police … they're still trying to break up the demonstrations"' (al-Hāshimī 2009, 92).

Throughout al-Hāshimī's fragmented, hallucinatory critique of the levels of oppression pervasive in Tunis, she assimilates the real into the narrative by repeatedly employing the metafictional device of the insertion of her authorial presence into the text. Like al-Shābbī who makes her concern for the collective patently explicit, al-Hāshimī references her analogical relationship to her protagonist – Maryam's status as a stylised double for the author – by confusing, then combining their names: 'Maryam … Fatḥīyah … Maryam … FatMaryam … [Maryam interjects] You have to leave us: who will finish the novel if you stay here? You'll abort us: Yūsuf, talk to her' (al-Hāshimī 2009, 69–70). By calling attention to the novel's artificiality, its material existence as a work of art and its attempt at verisimilitude, al-Hāshimī undermines the aesthetic illusion of the narrative, foregrounding the political immediacy of the text.

Conclusion: reconsidering the periphery

Like many authors working in countries peripheral to the world literary system, the writers considered above are in the paradoxical position of being both consistently recognised as important literary figures in their home context of Tunisia while receiving little attention in the rest of the Arab world and beyond. For the most part, their works remain untranslated, and their choice of Arabic over French restricts their novels' potential for circulation. It may be useful to consider these novels as akin to a minor literature in Deleuze and Gauttari's terms, a position they see as uniquely suited to textual innovation. While not wholly analogous to the Jewish literature of Prague theorised in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), these authors can also be interpreted as a minority constructing a literature in a major language.[15] To write in Arabic as a woman in Tunisia – a literary context in which recognition and status connect to gender and French continues to dominate – is to write from a position of double marginalisation. If language itself is not always deterritorialised as it is Deleuze and Gauttari's characterisation, Tunis's spaces are constructed through a series of tropes that ultimately lead to its defamiliarisation. In the same vein and consistent with other minor literatures, their authors' enunciations are inseparable from collective anxieties.

While we have yet to disentangle the network of relations between the state, the writer, and his or her audience in pre-revolutionary Tunisia, we

can nevertheless see that this is a literature unified through its concern for revolutionary potential, firmly rooted in the political domain. It is also clear that these texts have enjoyed some material success inside the country. Ṭursh-qānah sold well enough to have a second printing in 2006. Though al-ʿAdl was initially self-published, a strategy regularly employed by authors in pre-revolutionary Tunisia, in recognition of al-Shābbī's importance to Tunisian literature, a collection of her complete works, including al-ʿAdl, was published in five volumes by Dār Muḥammad ʿAlī li-l-nashr in November of 2013.[16] That Maryam tasquṭ min yad Allāh won the CREDIF prize attests to the novel's local prestige at the same time as it raises a number of questions. The 'CREDIF prize for the best literary creation in Arabic by a woman' is awarded every year by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Children. How could a novel with notably subversive content have been granted legitimacy by an agency of the state when al-Shābbī's work was banned just four years earlier? What might this say about the evolution of the literary field in the final years of Ben ʿAli's reign? These are lines of inquiry that still need to be addressed. Beyond this, regardless of their status in their home countries, these are novels that have not travelled. They have not been distributed abroad to the other countries of the Maghreb or the larger publishing markets of Cairo and Beirut. Despite their limited readership most likely primarily confined to local intellectual circles, they nevertheless demonstrate the presence of a tradition of political critique disseminated, to some degree, throughout Tunisia's public sphere before Bouazizi's act of protest. We cannot know for certain what effect they may have had, but as Nouri Gana has argued in regard to Tunisia: 'while cultural and artistic acts of dissidence are … characterized by their indirectness … They have protracted and intangible effects that may crystallize only years after their moment of production' (2013, 15). Or, in Deleuze and Gauttari's words, the literary text here 'produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism' (1986, 17). The question these novels ultimately raise is why they have yet to enter our conversations around Arabic literature in either the West or the larger Arab world. If the minor literatures are the greatest spaces of dissent, if they contain within them the greatest revolutionary conditions, then it is precisely in the margins that we should look for political contestations before the spring of 2010.

Notes

1. Laylat al-ghiyāb, 1997; Ṭurshqānah, 1999; Wadāʿan … Ḥamūrābī, 2002; Jumān wa-ʿanbar, 2005; and al-Alif wa'l-nūn, 2009.
2. The most well-known work in this regard is Massad's (2007), where he argues that the homo–heterosexuality binary was exported to the Arab world from the West as part of its larger imperial project. In this view, prior to colonialism, same-sex practices existed without an accompanying category of homosexual identity in the modern sense. Massad reads this local, pre-colonial, understanding of sexuality

as a 'cultural formation whose ontological structure' is inclusive of homosexuality rather than one which figures it as an 'other', something institutionalised and universalised by the violence of Western hegemony to the detriment of the indigenous practices that existed before (2007, 40). Similarly, El-Rouayheb (2005, 6) demonstrates that 'pre-nineteenth-century Arab-Islamic culture lacked the concept of homosexuality' operating 'instead with a set of concepts … each of which pick out some of the acts and actors we might call 'homosexual' but which were simply not seen as instances of one overarching phenomenon'.

3. The word Ṭurshqānah is a slang term used in Tunis. Considered vulgar in register, it refers to the passive participant in homosexual sex. On pages 12–13 in the novel, it is suggested that the boys in the al-Shawāshī house likely picked it up from the boys in the outside alley. They insist on taunting Murād with it despite his grandmother's attempts to stop them. Because there is no easy equivalent to the word in English, I have chosen to use the transliterated form of the word rather than an English translation.

4. For most of the novel, the reader believes these letters chronicle Murād's new life in France, where she now lives as Nadā after transitioning. It is only at the novel's end that they are revealed to be a form of metafictional discourse; it was, in fact, an author and confidant of Murād's who crafted the fictional letters that describe the difficulties Nadā later faces as a transgender woman. This fictional author plans to publish them as her next novel.

5. All of the chapters that take place in Tunis use the conventionally male pronoun 'huwa' to refer to Murād, presumably because he has neither begun his formal transition nor can he be said to present a female gender identity for most of the novel (instead, he expresses the desire to present as female). The chapters that chronicle his later life as Nadā (though they are later revealed as fictions) are consistent in gendering the character as female grammatically. Since my focus here is on the chapters set in Tunis where the character is called Murād, I will follow the Arabic text and use the English pronoun 'he'.

6. As Hadeed has noted in 'Homosexuality and Epistemic Closure in Modern Arabic Literature', while gender oppression has consistently been treated as a critical dimension of the current political and social crises afflicting the Arab world, modern Arabic literature has been 'less open to the spirit of radical critique, remaining in thrall to the weight of heteronormative binaries and their logic of complementary opposites' (2012, 272). Even when homosexuality is figured as a legitimate subjective reality, Hadeed continues, it is nevertheless marginalised and ultimately denied the right to social visibility (2012, 272).

7. All translations from Arabic are my own.

8. On this, see Hadeed (2012). He presents close readings of Sa'd Allah Wannus and Alaa al-Aswany to show the essentialist terms commonly employed in representations of homosexuality, the consequence of which is often death. The characters in these two works both meet tragic ends as a result of their sexuality, one commits suicide while the other is murdered.

9. This widely read novel features the character, Hatim Rashid, who has likely become the most discussed example of a literary depiction of homosexual identity in modern Arabic literature. Successful editor of Egypt's French newspaper Le Caire, Hatim's potential as a groundbreaking example of a (mostly) open homosexual character is undermined by the origin story of his sexual preference. Al-Aswany places the roots of his desire in a childhood rape perpetuated by his favourite household servant Idris. However sympathetic a character Hatim may

be, his homosexuality is nevertheless figured as a psychological condition grounded in an early trauma (al-Aswany 2006, 74–76).

10. On the difficulties of writing under Ben Ali, see the anthology published shortly after the revolution, Rjiba (2012).

11. See note 2.

12. In recognition of her importance to Tunisian literature, a collection of her complete works was published in five volumes by Dār Muḥammad 'Alī li-l-nashr in November of 2013.

13. *Ḥāfiyat al-rūḥ*, 2005; *Minnah mawwāl*, 2007; *Maryam tasquṭ min yad Allāh*, 2009.

14. Since the revolution, the area has been a point of contention. In February of 2011, approximately 500 Islamists marched to 'Abdullah Guèche street demanding that the brothels be shut down (*The Daily Telegraph* 2011).

15. These novels are primarily written in Modern Standard Arabic although the authors do incorporate dialect in some sections, particularly in their use of dialogue.

16. The novelist Abdul-Jabbar al-Maduri relates that this method of publishing to evade the censors became known as the *Fellagah* way. See *Fleeting Words*, 'How Writing has become a Professional Crime', 33–35.

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