

XVI Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Cagliari
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali

3-5 ottobre 2024



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Crossing boundaries in Tunisian cultural productions: genres, languages and audiences

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENTS and CHAIRS: ANNAMARIA BIANCO, CRISTINA DOZIO

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

Tunisia has played a pivotal role in starting the popular uprisings in the Arab region in 2010-2011, in which the citizens demanded social justice, the end of corruption, and freedom of expression. Nevertheless, mainstream narratives have often presented this complex process in terms of exceptionalism: Tunisia was the only case of successful transition resulting from the Arab Spring. Overcoming this simplification, scholarship has explored political dynamics and social change over the last decades, while the contemporary scenario confirms the country's interconnectedness with regional and global issues, such as migration, economic crisis, and religious extremism (El Houssi 2019; Sadiki 2015).

In parallel, modern Tunisian cultural productions have been partly overlooked due to the country's supposed insularity. Its small size, the peripheral geographic position in the Arab world, the prestige of French as a literary language, and the divide between the intellectual elite and the public all contributed to marginalizing its literature, drama, and cinema within the broader field of Arab studies and World Literature (Mamelouk 2017). Nevertheless, the 2010-2011 revolution brought about some relevant aesthetic changes that challenged these notions of fixity and exceptionalism. As in other Arab cultural scenes over the same years, artists have experimented with creative ways of expression, enhancing the contamination of styles, languages, and genres (Carlson 2016; Lang 2014). Moreover, the impact of art on the social life has become more visible, as exemplified by the street art (Lacquaniti 2013) and multidisciplinary festivals. For instance, *Chouftouhonna Festival* and *al-Nawaat Festival*, launched in 2015 and 2021 respectively, bring together artists of different backgrounds and give new life to the cultural scene thanks to innovative communication and participation strategies that have been defined as 'artivism' (Borrillo 2020). Meanwhile, some contemporary Tunisian novels are accessing the global market through translation, which has been encouraged by international literary prizes. Tackling socio-political concerns in artistic productions is part of the agency of speaking out (Negri 2023; Pardey 2021), while the re-examination of the past has brought about some critical debates about multiculturalism and gender issues (Nicosia 2023). However, these themes are equally central to literary writings focused on the present time, investigating in particular the racial discrimination that runs through today's Tunisian society while problematizing the meanings of identity and belonging (Elsakaan 2023; Sciortino 2023).

To further explore the Tunisian modern and contemporary cultural production in all its richness, this panel aims at studying various artistic and cultural fields (fiction, poetry, drama, cinema, visual arts, music) that develop the notions of contamination and/or transit. Which borders are crossed in the production and circulation of Tunisian art? Which regional and global issues are central in the cultural debates? Which role does hybridity play in shaping modernity and national vs post-national identities? Do the notions of 'crisis' (Gana 2023), 'renewal', 'dissent', and 'justice' acquire new meanings when examined through the lens of contaminations?

References:

- Borrillo, S. 2020. "Chouftouhonna Festival: Feminist and Queer Artivism as Transformative Agency for a New Politics of Recognition in Post-revolutionary Tunisia". *Studi Magrebini* 18(2): 203-230.
- Carlson, M. 2016. "The Tunisian Revolution and After in the Work of Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaïbi". In *Post-Conflict Performance, Film and Visual Arts*, ed. by D. O'Rawe & M. Phelan, 233-249. Palgrave.
- Elsakaan, N. 2023. "«Non voglio che tu scriva di me»: le donne nere si raccontano". In *Scritti in onore di Antonino Pellitteri*, ed. by M.G. Sciortino & D. Sicari. Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino: 98-127.
- El Houssi, L. 2019. *Il risveglio della democrazia. La Tunisia dall'indipendenza alla transizione*. Carocci.

- Gana, N. 2023. *Melancholy Acts. Defeat and Cultural Critique in the Arab World*. Fordham UP.
- Lacquaniti, L. 2013. *I muri di Tunisi. Segni di rivolta*. Exorma.
- Lang, R. 2014. *New Tunisian Cinema: Allegories of Resistance*. Columbia UP.
- Mamelouk, D. 2017. "Tunisia". In *The Oxford Handbook of the Novelistic Tradition*, ed. by W.S. Hassan, 455-472. Oxford UP.
- Negri, A.M. 2023. "Mā'adš sāktīn (we are no longer silent). Revolutionary discourses in Tunisian novels: Ḥusayn al-Wād, Šukrī al-Mabḥūṭ and Ayman al-Dabbūsi". *La Rivista di Arablit* XIII(26): 141-166.
- Nicosia, A. 2023. "Nāzilāt dār al-akābir e il tentativo di riconciliazione sociale in Tunisia". *Studi Magrebini* 21(2): 233-253.
- Pardey, C. 2021. "Processing the Revolution: Exploring the Ways Tunisian Novels Reflect Political Upheavals". In *ReConfigurations. Contextualising Transformation Processes and Lasting Crises in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. by R. Ouaisa, F. Pannewick & A. Strohmaier, 247-259. Springer.
- Sadiki, L. (ed.) 2015. *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring. Rethinking Democratization*. Routledge.
- Sciortino, M.G. 2023. "Raccontare e raccontarsi al di là dei «limiti»: Šamt al-nawāqīs di Faṭḥiyya Dabiš". *In Verbis*, October: 27-49.

ABSTRACTS

Andrea Maria Negri (University of Bologna)

"Fare contenta la mamma": the representation of illegal migrants across media, rap, novel and tv series in Tunisia after 2011 revolution

The haunting images of the *ḥarga* since the revolution resonate deeply within the collective imagination finding expression in the arts that depict and investigate a discourse on migration, spanning songs, poetry, novels, and television. I delve into the discourse surrounding migration focusing on the figure of the illegal migrant and space in contemporary Tunisian fiction. I begin with the 2016 hit "Clandestino" by Master Sina and Balti, I further examine the social critique in Āmna Ramīlī's novel "Šaṭṭ al-Arwāḥ" (2020) and the acclaimed Ramadan TV series "Harga" (2021) by Lassaad Oueslati. These forms of media collectively paint a vivid picture of the migration ordeal from Tunisia to Italy. The journey, rather than offering a beacon of hope, becomes a harrowing passage through landscapes marked by injustice and dehumanization, underscoring the profound crises facing individuals in pursuit of refuge and a dignified existence.

Rania Said (University of Massachusetts, Boston)

Four Daughters Performing Women's Life Narratives in Documentary Cinema

Kaouthar Ben Hania's documentary *Four Daughters* (2023) tells the story of Olfa Hamrouni, a Tunisian matriarch whose two daughters disappeared in Libya after having joined ISIS. Described by journalists as an "ovni méthodique" (a methodological UFO) and by the movie director herself as a "a health laboratory", this film is an experimental narrative that blurs generic boundaries as it explores the complexities of the theme of militarization (tajnid). Critics such as Said El-Mezrawi, have praised *Four Daughters* for its play on the parameters of metafiction. More particularly, El-Mezrawi argues that "the film's originality lies not only in its blurring of generic boundaries" but in its experimentation "with the dual concepts of representation and acting". Other critics such as Khalil Khalsi, however, have questioned the aesthetic quality of the film's play on generic boundaries, claiming that it is misleading for the audience and predatory vis à vis the Hamrouni women (2024). I consider that while it is impossible to think of *Four Daughters* outside of its global context of circulation, it would be both unfair to the film and detrimental to the development of Tunisian cultural productions and cultural criticism to reduce it to what Khalsi calls "un documentaire [...] tiers-mondesque, orientaliste" (a third-worldly orientalist documentary) (2024). First, I will demonstrate that the film is fully engaged in laying bare the ethical issues at stake in documentary film making. Second, I will argue that it is necessary to read the rise of "tajnid" narratives to which the film belongs not only as a product of Western interest in the topic, but also as a local/national need to reckon with the traumatic (epistemic) violence of the postcolonial state in Tunisia.

Maura Tarquini (University of Cagliari)

Traditional forms of performance in Tunisia: exploring the linguistic, artistic and cultural heritage

In Tunisia, migratory phenomena coming from Europe, as well as forms of cultural mixing, influenced the artistic scene, just think of the traditional forms of popular entertainment. They not only livened up the festive evenings but also entertained the public on weekdays in the streets and cafes. For example, for many years Tunisian squares have experienced both the Karagoz show and the Sicilian puppet theater. It is worth mentioning the performances of Bū-Sa'adiyya, and all the comedic sketches of two main personalities: on the one hand, Ya'qūb al-Quwayiṭa', a French Jewish origin who performed in the early 20th century mixing Arabic and French; on the

other hand, Qaddūr Bin Nitrām, a storyteller and comedian who spent much of his life collecting and staging the street sabirs of Tunis. These are just a few examples of entertainment forms linked to popular tradition that used the linguistic varieties present in the territory.

Charlotte Pardey (Independent Researcher)

Crossing boundaries of gender. Transgender identities in pre- and postrevolutionary Tunisian Literature

Tunisian novelist Mas'ūda Bū Bakr published *Ṭurshqāna* in 1999. It is most likely the first novel written in Arabic that centrally focuses on a transgender character: At a time when open critique was difficult this seemingly personal story conveyed political nuances by moving political criticism into the private realm. The transgender themes formed a counter thesis against the very stability Ben Ali's regime attempted to safeguard (Head, 2016). Recently, Tunisia has experienced a return of authoritarian leadership after the initial hope of a democratic rebirth following the 2011 uprising had petered out. Interestingly then, in 2023 novelist Sufyan Rajab published *Qāri'a nahj al-dabbāghīn* (Reader of the Tanners' Alley) and in this work again plays with transgender themes. The parallelism of the novels both in content and in construction allows for a fertile 'reading together' (Laachir, 2016) that stretches across time from pre- to post-revolutionary Tunisia, thereby crossing the border that the revolution suggested to form dividing cultural production in what came before and what came after. The notions of tarāfud ('confluency', Omri, 2015) and oscillation (Pardey, 2022) will be used to describe how the works speak to one another. The novels furthermore lend themselves to a discussion of the international visibility of Tunisian literature and of whether and how it crosses actual borders.

Maria Grazia Sciortino and Nesma Elsakaan (University of Palermo)

Exploring Literary Activism:

Boundary-breaking Narratives and the Agency of Black Women in Tunisia Post-2011

This study explores the intersection of literature and activism through an analysis of Fathia Dabish's collection *Ṣamt al-nawāqīs* (The Silence of the Bells, 2021) and her novel *Mīlānīn* (Melanin, 2020), examining the concept of boundaries in both content and form. Firstly, Maria Grazia Sciortino will analyse *Ṣamt al-nawāqīs*, focusing on its hybrid nature blending narrative and introspective elements, challenging traditional literary genres, and exploring themes of political oppression, violence, and discrimination. Transitioning to the activism of Black women in Tunisia, particularly their use of "woke" literary expressions to assert visibility and dismantle racial taboos, Nesma Elsakaan will highlight their agency and determination in navigating social, literary, and political spheres thorough the analysis of *Mīlānīn*.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Annamaria Bianco is a temporary teaching and research associate (A.T.E.R.) in Arabic language and literature at the University of Aix-Marseille and at IREMAM. Her research interests include cultural productions on and by Arab migrants, refugees and exiles as well as the representation of human rights in fiction. She is also a translator for film, theatre, publishing and the press.

Cristina Dozio is Assistant Professor (rtd-B) in Arabic language and literature at Università degli Studi di Milano, Italy. Her research interests are contemporary Arabic literature, humor and satire, urban literary representation, and translation studies. Her first book is *Laugh like an Egyptian: Literary Humor in the Contemporary Egyptian Novel* (DeGruyter 2021). She translates Arabic fiction into Italian.

INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES: annamariabianco91@gmail.com, cristina.dozio@unimi.it