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TITOLO/TITLE: New politics and aesthetics of representation in Moroccan literature

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S: FERNANDA FISCHIONE, ANA GONZÁLEZ NAVARRO

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

In *Le roman maghrébin* (1979), Abdelkébir Khatibi claims that writing fiction is deploying “un ensemble d’attitudes” vis-à-vis both the extra-textual reality and the writing itself. Every literary work, in fact, is a description of the world and a piece of meta-literature at once. Moreover, from Khatibi’s postcolonial point of view, Moroccan (and Maghrebi) literature also participates in the nation building process, creating imaginaries and (re)designing national boundaries. But which kind of imaginaries and boundaries does Moroccan literature create today?

In the 1960s, after a couple of decades in which the Maghrebi novel had grown within the French novel, the window of experimental fiction opened up. The formalistic, experimental, and (to some extent) self-referential dimension of the text, which had found in narratology and structuralist literary criticism a faithful ally – or, as critic Yaḥya bin al-Walīd (2012) calls it, “a religion” – in the 1980s, seems to have been almost completely eclipsed today, so much that some Moroccan writers complain about the blowup of bulky historical novels at the expenses of any other novelistic forms. Moroccan critics (and writers), however, have never renounced to considering the novel as a part of the social structure (Fernández Parrilla 2006). As a young Moroccan writer puts it, “the Moroccan novel keeps clinging on realism, yet it does not shy away from inventing marvellous worlds” (Ballūṭ 2023).

Following global aesthetic trends and circulation patterns influenced by the material dynamics of the cultural industry, today’s Moroccan novel in Arabic is experiencing a revival of the great narratives that postmodern literature had somewhat disdained. The Arabic historical novel has made a resounding comeback into the limelight in recent years (Boustani et al. 2022), even hybridized with new forms, such as what scholars have called the “maximalist novel” (Ercolino 2015), the new epic, and so on. The pan-Arab literary prizes of the Gulf, which encourage the “grand narratives” at the expense of the Deleuzian “minor literature”, can be also listed among the causes for the resurgence of such genres.

At the same time as this trend seems to be consolidating, Moroccan literature is also giving place to “other” narratives. After the end of the Years of Lead and the start of the civil reconciliation process at the beginning of the third millennium, the need to record the repression and state violence suffered, as well as to build “other-archives” (El Guabli 2023) that would compensate for the “memory lapses” of official archives, became increasingly pressing. And so became the urge of giving voice to phenomena with high social impact such as migration, racism, and the rediscovery of other indigenous identities after the end of the postcolonial season of Arabisation. In this trend, feminist issues and the role of women have also become increasingly present in Moroccan literature. The first two decades of the 21st century have witnessed a raise both in the publication of

women's writing and in the attention drawn by it. A trend of feminist literary criticism initiated in the 1990s has experienced a considerable push in the past decades, bringing forward debates that explore the implications of the relationship between women and writing and promoting the study of writing by women free from misogynistic perspectives (Binmas'ūd 1994, 2006; Kurrām 2004; al-Madagrī 2009; Labšīr 2013; al-Nāšir 2014, 2016; Kaddū 2014; Brāhima 2019; Būqaftān 2021). As for the new novels published by women, they are both reviving older yet not-surpassed motives, such as the participation of women during the Years of Lead, and reflecting newer issues related to individual freedoms and sexuality, amongst other matters that became more present in the public debate after the Arab Spring. Finally, it is necessary to mention the increasing interest in fiction and poetry written in Tamazight, witnessed – for instance – by the recent establishment of the *Tamazgha Studies Journal* (2023), which also testifies the progressive expansion of Maghrebi studies in English.

Thus, one of the keywords of the new Moroccan novel in Arabic seems to be *representation* in its double meaning of *portraying reality* and *giving someone a voice* – the latter point especially referring to minoritised gendered subjectivities, subaltern social classes, oppressed political entities, racialised individuals or groups, and so on. While the interest in the referential world is revived and realism is resurgent, what this label contains is nonetheless everchanging: narratives with strong national connotations, but in which the structure of the nation is enlarged, expanded, pluralised, under the banner of the recognition of the ever new and different elements that make it up. The conception of what is considered as “Moroccan literature” has been enlarged in the past few decades, to encompass literature not only written in different languages, but also produced from different geographies (Fernández Parrilla and Calderwood 2021). The polyphony becomes extremely rich and varied, as much at the level of individual works as at the level of the literary field. The Moroccan novel, more precisely, can be conceived as an intersection of fields whose primary boundaries run along the lines of the written language – Arabic, French, Spanish and, more recently, Tamazight and English – but are not limited to it. The picture that emerges is that of a plural and extremely diverse ecosystem where different languages, traditions, themes, and audiences coexist, and where one of the challenges for scholars is that of “reading together” (Laachir 2016) these articulated and multilayered writings.

This panel aims to bring out the new trajectories of fiction in contemporary Morocco, exploring how *representation* with its double-edged meaning is at work in different genres, themes, and modes of expression. Proposals may focus on:

- novel and short story
- poetry
- graphic novel
- literary criticism
- women's writing
- Moroccan literature beyond Arabic and French
- literary prizes
- book circulation mechanisms inside and outside Morocco
- book market and the publishing industry

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

Fernanda Fischione is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie post-doc research fellow at Sapienza University of Rome with a project titled *Transnational Maghreb and the International Prize for Arabic Fiction: Pluralism, inclusiveness, and peaceful coexistence in the contemporary Maghrebi novel*. She holds a PhD in Modern and Contemporary Arabic Literature from the same university. Since 2015, she has carried out side-projects on rap and protest music in the SWANA region in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, and nation building and the novel in Jordan. Both projects have resulted in articles and conference presentations. Between 2020 and 2021 she was research assistant at SARAS Department – Sapienza University of Rome. She worked as a guest lecturer at the University of Macerata, where she taught courses in Arabic literature and culture and Arabic-to-Italian interpreting and translation (2019-2021). Besides her academic activities, she is a literary translator from Arabic into Italian and founder and editor of the magazine "Arabpop. Rivista di arti e letterature contemporanee".

Ana González Navarro is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie post-doc research fellow at Sapienza University of Rome with the project *Reconstructing social memory through Moroccan women's writing: female prison literature between the 1970s and the 2010s*. She collaborates with the research groups IEXCUL (Autonomous University of Madrid) and IXBILIA (University of Seville). She is part of the research projects "Heterotopies in the imaginaries of the relations between Spain and Morocco" and "Memory of feminist political activism during the Years of Lead in Morocco (1970-1980)". Her research deals with Moroccan contemporary literature from a gender and postcolonial perspective and with cultural expressions by women and feminist discourses in Arab contexts. Her work has been disseminated in several national and international conferences and has resulted in chapters and articles. She holds a PhD in Human Sciences, in the specialty of Arab and Islamic Studies, from the Autonomous University of Madrid.

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SPEAKERS: Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, Jolanda Guardi, Fernanda Fischione, Ana González Navarro, Faouzia Righi

ABSTRACTS

Mapping Moroccan fiction through the novel and its criticism

Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

In the beginning modern Moroccan literature was Arabic. In the beginning there was no fiction, there was no novel. There was a national struggle for independence. And with the independence the novel came but came in French. And they also discovered that there was a people that were Moroccans but not Arabs. And Moroccans, Arabs and not Arabs, went out to the world.

This paper analyzes, from the first configurations of “Moroccan literature”, the status of languages and fiction through Moroccan literary criticism and literary histories, that reflect the changing politics and aesthetics of literary representation.

Nizār Karbūṭ's *Al-‘araḍ mā qabl al-awwal*: Morocco's Forgotten Voice in the Second World War

Jolanda Guardi, University of Turin

In the landscape of contemporary Moroccan literature in Arabic, an aspect that is still understudied is how the memory archives of the colonial past are incorporated into new novelistic forms, and particularly into revisited forms of the historical novel. As the editors of *Fiction and History: The Rebirth of the Historical Novel* (Boustani et al 2022: 11) state, in recent years this trend has given birth to numerous novels that are more porous to alternative readings of the past than historiography. This feature is particularly evident in Moroccan literature, which, unlike other Arabic-language literatures—e.g., Algerian literature—has not yet completely rewritten colonial history from the point of view of the colonized. A second important feature is that this rewriting is done in Arabic: if it is true, as Fernández Parilla and Calderwood (2021) state, that contemporary Moroccan literature currently manifests itself in multiple languages, it is also true that, in recent years, the literary production in Arabic (Fondation du Roi Abdul-Aziz Al Saoud-Casablanca 2022) is by far preeminent (about 80 percent) and French-language production is experiencing a steady decline. Moroccan literature is therefore, as Parilla and Calderwood state, effectively “in Motion.”

In my talk, I will analyze Nizār Karbūṭ's novel *Al-‘araḍ mā qabl al-awwal*, in which the author gives voice to those forgotten by history—particularly Moroccans who participated in World War II—through a polyphonic structure. *Al-‘araḍ mā qabl al-awwal* is, on the one hand, an attempt to rewrite history and, on the other hand, a possibility to represent and redefine Moroccan identity, at odds with the literary analyses conducted so far.

Writing as a craft: The use of history in Abdelmajid Sebbata's *al-Milaff 42*

Fernanda Fischione, Sapienza Università di Roma

Abdelmajid Sebbata's *al-Milaff 42*, published in 2020, is a thriller fashioned in a typically postmodern style. Interspersed with documents, email screenshots, chess schemes, and excerpts from different kinds of texts, it can be approached through the category of the “maximalist novel” (Ercolino 2014) to some extent. While his *al-Milaff 42* cannot be labelled as a historical novel proper, Abdelmajid Sebbata displays a solid interest in history and digs in a quite unusual historical and geographical reservoir that spans between the 1950s and the 2010s and knits together the US military presence in post-WW2 Morocco, an almost forgotten Moroccan public-health disaster, and an infamous episode of the Russian-Chechen conflict.

The novel tells two (hi)stories that end up intertwining with each other. On the one hand, it talks about Christine McMillan, a US writer who decides to inquiry about her father's involvement in the cooking oil “poisoning epidemics” occurred in 1959, when he was a soldier on a military base in Morocco, with the help of Rachid Bennacer, a brilliant PhD student. On the other hand, the novel follows the steps of Zouhair, a young middle-class Moroccan who leaves the country to escape sexual abuse accusations and finds himself involved in the Dubrovka Theatre hostage crisis in 2002 Moscow.

al-Milaff 42 and the career building of its author are a good example of how a young writer in today's Morocco can use different strategies to circumvent the predicaments affecting the book market at both a national and an international level. The use of history is one of them, since it contributes put the writer in dialogue with the Moroccan and Arabic literary field, setting the space for competition. Also based on my interviews with the writer, my presentation analyses the crosscuts between the style and the content of the novel, and the positioning of its author within the field. How do these two apparently distant poles relate to each other? What is the relationship between the text and the circumstances of its production and circulation? How do

writers use history as a tool to gain legitimacy? Can we trace a line connecting the literary core of the novel and the material context that surrounds it? My presentation explores these and other issues, at the intersection between close and distant reading, and between literary analysis and sociology of literature.

Old myths for new causes: Saida Menebhi revived for the Arab Spring in the novel *An akūn* by Wafa Mlih

Ana González Navarro, Universidad de Zaragoza and Sapienza Università di Roma

In 2014 was published the novel *An akūn*, by Moroccan writer Wafa Mlih, defined as *sīrah gayriyyah*, as alterbiography. The novel fictionalizes the life of Saida Menebhi, a Marxist-Leninist activist that was imprisoned in the 1970s, during the Years of Lead, and died at the age of 25 after a hunger strike.

In Mlih's novel, Menebhi doesn't die, but she falls in a long coma only to wake up during the protests led by the 20th of February movement in Morocco, in the context of the Arab Spring. This paper aims to analyze the mechanisms put in place in *An Akūn* to reconstruct Menebhi's life in the light of Morocco's contemporary context. What does it mean to revive such a character from such a convulsive past in fiction?

In addition, the novel raises questions about the right to tell someone else's story, a rather delicate issue when it comes to painful stories about repression and torture. Therefore, the paper will also look into the implications of writing such a novel from a gender perspective. Can it be read as an act of appropriation or rather as a feminist act, as an act of sorority?

Society Through the Lens of Feminine Writing in Morocco: A Comparative Reading of *Banāt Assabār* by Karīma Aḥdād and *Casablanca Circus* by Yasmine Chami

Faouzia Righi, University of Caen

Women writers are increasingly active in the Maghreb, especially since the decade of the Arab Spring. Novelistic creation provides a penetrating view of societies undergoing significant change and striving for democracy. Yasmine Chami and Karīma Aḥdād are two Moroccan writers, writing in French and in Arabic respectively. Their novels, *Banāt Assabār* and *Casablanca Circus*, paint a portrait of a complex and paradoxical contemporary Moroccan society seen from the perspective of women.

Karīma Aḥdād depicts a poor family where widowhood triggers a descent into despair, featuring intimate and social situations where the power of money and women's dignity are central to the narrative. In Yasmine Chami's novel, the predation and social disdain suffered by the poor are denounced through the story of the relocation of a shantytown's inhabitants in Casablanca. The narrator's encounter with these inhabitants allows her to understand their lives and grasp their humanity.

The two authors' perspectives are uncompromising regarding the sexist and unequal aspects of Moroccan society, revealing its taboos, violence, and chaotic economic evolution. A tension exists between a superficial modernity and a reality still shaped by heavy archaic practices, whose consequences are increasingly crushing for the poor and for women. In my presentation, I will analyze how the female characters confront their destinies in these two narratives, and I will eventually examine the social dynamics that these fictional works reveal. Finally, I will highlight how choral polyphony (*Banāt Assabār*) and introspection (*Casablanca Circus*) construct a critical feminine poetics, challenging taboos and conventions by developing a feminist and modern discourse through fiction, embedded in the demands of the Arab Spring.