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REDIRECTING AL-NAZAR: CONTEMPORARY TUNISIAN WOMEN NOVELISTS
RETURN THE GAZE

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ABSTRACT

The notion of an objectifying gaze, as described and elaborated in feminist and psychoanalytic theory, may have its correspondent in Arab culture in the concept of al-nazar (vision, gaze or “beholding”) or perhaps also in the evil eye. In many contemporary Tunisian novels written by women, female protagonists question masculinity and the gendering of Tunisian/Arab society. Three Tunisian women novelists in particular, Amel Mokhtar, Massouda Boubakr and Fethia Hechmi give special attention to visual aspects, such as the gaze, the nazar and the evil eye, when describing male characters. Making use of concepts of the gaze, al-‘ayn and al-nazar, I argue that it is no accident that Tunisian women novelists would re-appropriate al-nazar in order to question concepts of masculinity in Tunisian/Arab culture. Instead of lowering the gaze, they create fictional female characters who dare to look back at men and define them through the potency of their female eyes. While looking upon men and masculine behavior, the novelists redefine their perception of male characters as contextually formulated within Tunisian/Arab society. As the female characters take on the gaze and refuse to lower it, they redefine and effectively repossess the nazar.

This study challenges the notion proposed by Hanita Brand that mutuality of the gaze does not exist in contemporary Arab literature. Amel Mokhtar’s Nakhab al-hayat (1993), al-Kursi al-hazzaz (2005) and Maestro (2006) serve to demonstrate the female narrators’ attempt to establish mutual gaze with male characters, which often leads to pleasure, while exploring conflicting
gender relationships. However, current theories of the gaze prove inadequate in the examination of Massouda Boubakr’s *Laylat al-ghiyab* (1995), *Trushqana* (1999), and *Wada’an Hammurabi* (2003) while Arabo-Islamic concepts of *al-‘ayn* allow for a greater nuance of analysis. Boubakr ascends from the personal realm to regional and national levels, asserting that all Arab men are marginal. Finally, Fethia Hechmi captures the masculine through the evil eye in *Hafiyaat al-ruh* (2005), *Minna Mawwal* (2007) and *Maryam tasqut min yad Allah* (2009) and condemns men to impotence through female characters.
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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATIONS

In this work, I spelled the names of authors the way they spell their names and not according to transliteration rules. For example: Amal Mukhtar is written Amel Mokhtar. For the writers and scholars from the Maghrib cited in this work, I have kept their names in accordance with the way they spell them in French. As for the names of places in Tunisia, I have either transliterated them in Tunisian dialect or have kept their French inscriptions. I use the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) for personal names, places and titles of books. I have attempted to keep Tunisian proverbs, names and expressions as close as possible to their pronunciation in Tunisian dialect.
INTRODUCTION

When I arrived in Tunisia in August 2007 and became acquainted with the intellectual circles of downtown Tunis, I announced to my Tunisian interlocutors—mostly men—the purpose of my visit: to research Tunisian women’s novels. Reactions were mixed and contradictory. While one group told me that “women’s literature” does not exist in Tunisia and attempted to dissuade me from pursuing my interest, another group found it appealing, as the topic is surrounded by animated debates worldwide, although not enough has been written on it. After consulting a variety of women’s novels, I selected the three most published novelists\(^1\) in order to assemble a corpus worthy of study: Amel Mokhtar’s *Nakhab al-hayat* (*A Toast to Life* 1993), *al-Kursiy al-hazzaz* (*The Rocking Chair* 2005) and *Maestro* (*Maestro* 2007). Massouda Boubakr’s *Laylat al-ghiyab* (*The Night of Absence* 1997), *Trushqana* (1999) and *Wada’an Hammurabi* (*A Farewell to Hammurabi* 2003). Fethia Hechmi’s *Hafiyat al-ruh* (*At the Edge Of the Soul* 2005), *Minna Mawwal* (2007) and *Maryam tasqut min yad Allah* (*Maryam Falls from the Hand of God* 2009). To my knowledge, no one has written an in-depth study of these novels. Furthermore, there is no study that looks at this body of texts through the lens of *al-nazar* (vision, gaze or “beholding”).\(^2\)

The novels of Mokhtar, Boubakr and Hechmi, though different in form have a common thread: they put male characters under a microscope. While examining masculine behavior, the novelists redefine their own perception of male characters as contextually formulated within

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1 Hafidha Guesmi has the most publications (seven). However, her novels (two of which she names *riwa-qissa*) are short (30-50 pp.), resembling long short stories rather than novels, which is why I disregarded her texts for this study.

2 The Arabo-Islamic concept of *al-nazar* as defined by Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi mutes the power relation between the *nazir* (the one who looks) and the *manzur ilayh* (the one who is looked at). However, Timothy Mitchell in *Colonising Egypt* (1991) emphasizes “the risks of exposure” to the gaze, and proposes that Europeans confused ‘*ayn* with the evil eye, while in Arabic, ‘*ayn* is eye, not the evil eye (86).
Tunisian/Arab society, which may (or may not) cause readers to question their perceptions. Equally important, these writers give prominence to visual apprehension, such as an objectifying gaze rooted in some psychoanalytic and feminist theory, the Arab concepts of al-nazar and al-‘ayn (eye) or the evil eye when describing male characters. The objective of this study is to explore the possibility of the use of al-nazar as a theoretical tool. Consequently, I analyze these texts in order to examine the depiction of the masculine through the lens of the nazar, which is, in fact, active, transformative and redefining. I propose that female characters re-appropriate al-nazar—both maintaining it and redirecting it—for the potency of al-nazar resides in its duration as it is capable of undermining identity or causing physical harm when focused on its object. It may cause lust according to Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi (al-Nazar fi ahkam al-nazar bi-hassat al-basar 1996) or, project the evil eye. I argue that some Tunisian women novelists re-appropriate the nazar as a means of questioning concepts of masculinity in Tunisian/Arab culture. Instead of lowering the gaze, they create fictional female characters that look back at men and dare to redefine them through the potency of their female eyes.

How female characters represent men through the lens of redirected gaze is the subject of this study, which is based on the textual analysis of nine novels by these three authors. In addition, I embarked upon a series of interviews with eight short story writers and novelists in order to collect background information and understand the position of women writers vis-à-vis several issues including écriture-femme. These interviews aided in contextualizing women novelists into the debates surrounding writing practice. I noticed that they vehemently resisted the term “women’s literature” and viewed it as a condescending term that meant their literary

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3 Béatrice Didier develops the concept of écriture-femme (women’s writing) in Écriture-femme (1981). The hyphenated word suggests the importance of each word (both are nouns). Thus, Écriture is just as important as femme. In fact, Didier suggests that women have historically appropriated writing the same way they have appropriated motherhood (19). See Chapter 1 for a discussion of this concept.
production was not good enough to qualify as “literature.” After all, no one has heard of a sub-genre called “men’s literature,” or “men’s novels.” After consulting the limited critical literature concerning women’s writings in Tunisia (Tarchouna, Ben Jemaa, ElKouni), I came to better understand why so many women writers reject the term. Critics often insist on searching for the personal details of the writer’s life in her writings (Taroucha 21). Tunisia is a small country with approximately ten million people and the intellectual class based largely in Tunis forms a community. In such a small literary field, where the details of writers’ lives are well known to all, texts are rarely read as texts in themselves. All too often they are read as the extension of the biographies of those who write.

During my research, I located studies such as *Etudes Littéraires Maghrébines: Dossier: Littérature tunisienne* (Studies on Maghribi Literature: Tunisian Literature 1999) and a recent conference, *Surat al-mar’a fi kitabatiha* (“Arab Women’s Image in their Writings” Tunis, 6-8 March 2010) that examine the way women portray themselves in their writings. Fewer studies discuss the representations of men in women’s writings. Sawsan Naji, in *Surat al-rajul fi-l-qasas al-nisa’i* (Men’s Image in Women’s Narratives 2006) brings forward the various types of men that she uncovers in Egyptian women’s narratives, such as images of the father, husband or brother. Her interest relates to the technical details of women’s narration and the way it depicts male characters while charting male narrative depictions in Egyptian women’s texts. Similar to Naji, Tunisian scholar and short story writer Zohra Jlassi studies the narratological processes in which women construct male characters in their writings in “*al-Shakhsiyya al-rijaliyya wa-lu’bat al-adwar*” (“The male character and role games” 282), presented at an international conference in Sousse, Tunisia (2001). In her study, Jlassi looks at novels such as *Tamass* (1995) by Aroussia Nalouti and ‘*Ajin al-fallaha* (1992) by Salwa Bakr and highlights the semantic meaning
behind the characters that women novelists and short story writers across the Arab world choose for their narratives. Both Naji and Jlassi chart male characters that Arab women writers create—in Egypt for Naji, in a variety of countries for Jlassi—without highlighting the socio-cultural environment of these characters. My research, on the other hand, investigates al-nazar, a concept present in Tunisian/Arab culture, and focuses on specific male characters as seen through the lens of women’s nazar. This concept provides the framework to approach male characters. Further, none of the studies mentioned above emphasizes the importance of the nazar in women’s texts, which is central to the structure of the narrative for the selected novelists of this study. Indeed, very few studies mention al-nazar, much less use it as a theoretical approach, hence one of the contributions of this study.

In order to set the stage for an exploration of the selected texts, the first chapter, “Women Writers: From Silence to Talking Back,” focuses on the debates surrounding écriture-femme, which Tunisian novelists adamantly condemn. I argue that although male critics negate the terminology “women’s literature,” they nonetheless group texts in the category of “women’s writing” thus reinforcing the classification. Meanwhile, Tunisian women writers may appear to reject the terminology along with the condescension of male critics (Amel Mokhtar, Interview May 2008). It is through the discussion of this debate that I establish my reasons for grouping women’s texts in order to analyze them and offer the reader a review of the critical literature relevant to this study.

Moreover, because the entrelangues debate surrounds Maghribi texts, this study will explore the polyglossic aspects of selected novels. Tunisian women novelists do not write in isolation but are in conversation with other Arab women writers, particularly those from other Maghribi countries, the Levant, Egypt and the Gulf. In some ways, Tunisian women’s novels
resonate with writings in other parts of the Arab world because of the central question of marginality. For example *Hajar al-dahik (The Stone of Laughter)* 1994 by Hoda Barakat, problematizes the male character’s ambiguous masculinity in ways that are strikingly similar to Massouda Boubakr’s *Trushqana* (1999). A discussion of contemporary Tunisian women writers within the context of Arab women’s literature further demonstrates how they are connected through shared topics and issues such as changing gender roles and the repercussions of war. However, I propose that local politics concerning women’s issues and status contribute to the environment in which Tunisian women write, as there appears to be a gap between women’s legal status and their social reality. Finally, I argue that the Arabo-Islamic concept of *al-nazar* is more appropriate to use when approaching Tunisian women’s texts as some theories of psychoanalytic and feminist gaze theories have limitations due to different attitudes about body and privacy for both men and women.

Chapter Two, “Pleasure and Mutuality of Gaze in Amel Mokhtar’s Novels,” tests some psychoanalytic and feminist theories of the gaze applied to Arabic texts. Amel Mokhtar not only reverses the gaze by allowing her female characters to gaze back at men, she establishes *nazra*, the same *nazra* that Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi recommends his reader to keep under control. In fact, she redirects her *nazar* toward men, however, it does not necessarily lead to temptation as Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi describes (15). While Hanita Brand argues that there is no mutuality of the gaze either in Arab society or in Arabic literature (Brand 158), I argue that Amel Mokhtar creates the possibility of a mutual gaze between her female and male characters. In *Nakhab al-hayat (A Toast to Life)* 1993, through the female narrator, Sawsan bin ‘Abdallah, Mokhtar describes a mutuality of gaze between the female protagonist and her male subjects. In *al-Kursi al-hazzaz*

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4 I do not use IJMES transliteration system for the names of characters in the novels, but instead I transliterate them according to their pronunciation in Tunisian dialect as that is the way they appear in the texts.
(The Rocking Chair 2002), the female narrator, Muna ‘Abd al-Salam, searches to establish mutuality of the gaze with her silent and disabled father, yet, he never returns the gaze. However, Muna succeeds in establishing a mutual gaze with her father after his death when he appears in a dream. Finally, in Maestro (2006), Mokhtar gives voice to three male narrators who fail to establish a mutuality of the gaze due to the female characters’ refusal. An analysis of the text using the lens of some psychoanalytical and feminist theories shows that women deprive men of mutuality of the gaze and power. Because these gaze theories revolve around power structures and subject/object relationships, it is more appropriate to look at local Arabo-Islamic nazar theory as discussed by Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi when analyzing Boubakr’s and Hechmi’s texts instead of imposing psychoanalytic or feminist theories on them. Although some gaze theories can be applied to Mokhtar’s texts, it becomes restrictive in the case of Boubakr and Hechmi, as pleasure linked to the gaze is not a central theme in their works.

Chapter Three, “al-nazir and al-manzur ilayh in Massouda Boubakr’s Novels: Marginal Men in the Spotlight,” investigates the various marginal male characters that Boubakr highlights in three of her novels. I argue that Boubakr makes use of al-nazir to bring out marginality in her male characters. By placing marginal male characters in the position of al-manzur ilayh (the one who is looked at), she calls upon her reader to look closely at the male individual shunned by Tunisian/Arab society. In Laylat al-ghiyab (The Night of Absence 1997), the female narrator assumes the position of the nazir (the one who looks) while highlighting the marginality of her father al-manzur ilayh (the one who is looked at). Marginality in this first novel remains at the individual level of a father-daughter relationship, while it transcends to the social and public realm in Trushqana (1999). The main character of Boubakr’s second novel is a transexual man who lives an in-between status sexually, socially and visually, for he vacillates between his
position as *nazir* and *manzur ilayh*. Finally, the marginal space expands further in *Wada'an Hammurabi* (*Farewell to Hammurabi* 2003) where the character of Zaqquma represents Arab men, while the general state of marginality in which they currently live is highlighted.

While Boubakr makes use of *al-nazar* to emphasize the marginal masculine, Fethia Hechmi wields the ‘*ayn* (eye) as a punishment for men. In Chapter Four, “When the Female Evil Eye Strikes: Destruction of the Masculine in Fethia Hechmi’s Novels,” *al-nazar* develops into an evil eye to which women characters have the power to subject men. I argue that Hechmi deprives her male characters of their power through the ‘*ayn* and places them in the position of a *maf ‘ul bih* (direct/indirect object of a verb, thus, an object). In *Hafiyat al-ruh* (*At the Edge Of the Soul* 2005) the female narrator makes use of male characters (husband and lover) to help her heal from war wounds. In fact, war transforms the way Rayhan looks at the men in her life. In *Minna Mawwal* (2007) Minna, the female jinn/ghoul submits Mawwal and the entire town to her ‘*ayn* as a punishment for ignorance and men’s insolent behavior with women. Finally, *Maryam tasqut min yad Allah* (*Maryam Falls from the Hand of God* 2009) takes the reader into the space of the brothel in Tunis and illustrates the disappointment of Maryam who punishes men by transforming one of them into an image on the wall through her potent female eye.

Overall, the three contemporary Tunisian women writers selected for this study go against the masculine dominant discourse that governs their environment. Not only do they innovate in their narration but they make use of their perceptive vision to employ the *nazar* and ‘*ayn* in various ways to suggest a new discursive narrative where the potent feminine ‘*ayn* takes an active role. I propose that contemporary Tunisian novelists utilize the ‘*ayn* to re-appropriate the *nazar* and assert the feminine powers linked to the eye. In a way, Mokhtar, Boubakr and
Hechmi become the novelist equivalents of Zarqa’ al-Yamama,\(^5\) as they highlight a potent vision and a strong perception in their writings. Despite the tragic ending of Zarqa’ al-Yamama because men refused to believe her, she has become a symbol of perception linked to the power of the eye. Similar to Zarqa’ al-Yamama’s troubled relationship with men, the authors whose texts I examine experience difficulties with male literary critics, which Chapter One brings forward.

\(^5\) According to Jeries Khoury: “The story of Zarqa’ al-Yamama is an ancient tale, whose roots go back to the period of the Jahiliyya, but it is still very much alive in popular memory today, fifteen-hundred and more years later. In the version related to al-Tabarī (d. 923 CE) it is the story of a woman… who was famous for her intuition, keen sight, and her ability to predict and see events before they happened.” (312)
CHAPTER ONE

Women Writers: From Silence to Talking Back

I do not believe in women’s writing, as their experiences and texts are universal. They transcend gender boundaries. Yet, there are secrets within every woman that only she can describe and unravel. This does not put women outside the realm of universal literature. (Massouda Boubakr, interview, May 2008)

Massouda Boubakr responded firmly to my question, “Do you believe in a women’s literature?” which had provoked an animated debate. Yet, although she claimed not to believe in a women’s literature, she admitted that women possess a specificity that is reflected in their texts. Indeed, the topic of women’s writing incites discussions until present day. The debate intensifies when the topic relates to Arab women’s writing. While some believe in the existence of a women’s literature or écriture-femme and the validity of such terminology, others reject such terms, which they feel diminishes the value of women’s contribution to the body of world literature. This chapter first examines these opposing conversations to shed light upon the environment in which the selected authors write and publish. I propose that, while male critics often negate the classification of “women’s writing” they nonetheless are unable to maintain a neutral stance and tend to connect women’s texts to women’s bodies. My selected novels, though written in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), are rich with Tunisian colloquial words, sentences, and dialogues. Hence, I bring forward the linguistic dimension that is pertinent to women writers from the Maghrib.

Tunisian writers, in general, face serious publishing difficulties, and women writers even more so. Readers in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria or Sudan may not be versed in contemporary Tunisian literature—although they may know Mahmoud al-Messadi or have heard of him—however, it is rare to come across a novel written by a Tunisian woman writer in any of these
countries. On the other hand, one cannot say that readers in Tunisia have not come across Naguib Mahfuz, Tawfiq al-Hakim, al-Tayyib Salih, Jibran Khalil Jibran or Mikha‘il Nu‘ayma, for they figure on mandatory reading lists in Tunisian high schools. Hence, my connection of Tunisian women novelists and other Arab novelists in a single conversation, as I consider the former to be part of the latter’s wider literary puzzle. For indeed, Tunisian women novelists do not write in isolation and appear more attracted to the literary Middle East than to Europe. In fact, despite the geographic and cultural differences between the various women writers throughout the Arab world, they converge on topics such as gender, war, sexuality, identity and social class. As I have chosen the gaze/nazar and ‘ayn (eye) as my lens to study the way three Tunisian women novelists represent specific male characters in their novels, a discussion on the gaze/nazar is in order, to bring to light an Islamic discourse on the nazar that does not reflect the subject/object relationship with which the ‘gaze’ is charged.

When Arab Women Write, Arab Men Have Something to Write About

When Tunisian literary critic Mahmoud Tarchouna published his book Naqd al-riwaya al-nisa‘iyya fi-Tunis (A Critique of Women’s Novels in Tunis) in 2004, many scholars rejoiced, for not many literary critics in Tunisia write on women’s literature, other than Bouchoucha Ben Jemaa, Radouane ElKouni and Kamel Riahi. The topic of women’s literature is controversial. On the one hand, there are those who believe in the existence of such a literature labeled

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6 Anthologies of Arabic literature seldom include Tunisian writers, particularly women writers. For example, Mohamed Barrada, in Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide 1873-1999 (2008), briefly mentions two novelists and two short story writers from Tunisia.

7 In his book Min a‘lam al-riwaya fi Tunis (A Selection Prominent Novelists in Tunisia, 2002), Tarchouna discusses eight Tunisian novelists’ works, none of whom are women. He groups Tunisian novelists in the aforementioned work, yet claims that he does not believe in the subdivision of women’s writing.
women’s writing or women’s literature. On the other hand, many believe that writing is universal and is not subject to gender-line divisions. In his introduction to Ecrivaines Tunisiennes (Tunisian Women Writers 1994) Jean Fontaine notes: “… I must clarify that I do not believe in a separate women’s literature different from men’s literature. Although I isolate women’s writings in this book, it is only for educational and feminist purposes” (3).

Conversely, Mohamed Siala, in “Paroles et textes de femmes: Caractéristiques, enjeux et différences sexuelles” (“Women’s Words and Texts: Characteristics, Issues and Sexual Differences” 2008), states:

“Women do not possess the same linguistic and rhetorical tools as men because of social taboos,… resulting in a psychological morphology that differs from that of the opposite sex, in that it often turns into discursive subterfuge… language in this case becomes a masking game, an arm of persuasion aimed at the exact level of the readership…"

The above quotes demonstrate the variety of opinions pertaining to this debate on the existence or non-existence of women’s literature.

Tarchouna divides women’s literature in three subgenres: the feminist novel (al-Riwaya al-nasawiyya), the feminine novel (al-Riwaya al-nisa’iyya) and literature containing a feminine sensibility (hasasiyya unthawiyya) which he describes as a “flavor” that we find in all women’s novels (6). Despite the subgenres of women’s novels that he explains, he claims that the classification of women’s writing into a sub-genre limits innovation and creativity (40). One may wonder why he wrote a book critiquing women’s novels if he does not believe in women’s writing. In his article entitled “al-mashhid al-riwa’i al-tunisi al-‘an” (“The Status of the Tunisian Novel” 2008), Tarchouna maintains that: “In 2004, I wrote a study concerning women’s writing, in which I made clear that these texts have no particularities” (11). Nevertheless, Tarchouna’s critique of Tunisian women’s works revolves around their overall inability to distinguish the personal from the narrative text. In fact, he claims that writers such as
Fadhila Chebbi, Zakia Abdel Qader and Hayat Ben Cheikh incorporate details of their personal lives in a narrative work that they call ‘a novel.’ Similarly to Mahmud Fawzi in his book *Adab al-azafir al-tawila* (*The Literature of Long Nails* 1987), Tarchouna describes a woman’s text the same way he would describe a woman’s body. He portrays Amel Mokhtar’s first novel *Nakhab al-hayat* (*A Toast to Life* 1993) as:

...perfumed with a feminine scent and the simple elegance of a woman who stays far from the superficiality of makeup, shining diamonds and tons of gold and silver. This is a short novel in which the spontaneity of the narration goes hand in hand with the spontaneity of the topic... The uniqueness of this text stems from its writer distancing herself from the tragic nature and whining about life and people unlike other women writers. She also does not pretend to reform society and save humanity from its misery or promote political ideas.... Instead, she is concerned with portraying herself through the first person singular with truth and honesty. (113)

In the above passage, Tarchouna describes Mokhtar’s first novel as if he were describing a woman. He compares the superficial ornaments of certain women who perfume themselves and wear jewelry to her narrative, arguing that it is superior to such superficiality. More importantly, he classifies women’s writings as being a lament about life and sad. By praising Mokhtar’s narrative simplicity in her first novel, he condemns women writers who critique society, suggest social reform or propose a political stance. However, he does not put forward a criterion for what constitutes a successful woman’s novel. Yet, Tarchouna praises Mokhtar for restricting herself to a storyline that focuses on the narrator’s journey from Tunis to Germany and unravels the intricacies of her multiple sexual adventures.

Tarchouna sees in Massouda Boubakr’s novels an improvement in women’s narrative style since the appearance of the Tunisian women’s first novel in Arabic, *Emna*, by Zakia Abdel Qader in 1983.⁸ He praises Boubakr for her ability to move forward with the narrative text and

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⁸ Fontaine establishes *Emna* as the first Tunisian women’s novel in Arabic in 1983. See *Ecrivaines Tunisiennes* (124).
away from traditional narratological structures (123). However, he criticizes her for “assassinating the dream” (131) in *Trashqana* (1999) by condemning Murad al-Shawashi to death at the end of the novel. Furthermore, Tarchouna, though he does not state his expectations of what constitutes a ‘good’ novel, states his view of the possibilities and limitations of the contemporary novel when he notes:

The contemporary novel should not contain secondary issues that clutter the central theme...These are techniques that pad the narrative to avoid silence or to elaborate on short events...The contemporary novel is based upon its events, structure and characters and can no longer uphold lengthy debates on general social issues, as these debates intrude upon the narratological text itself. (139-140)

Although Tarchouna views Boubakr’s text as one that contains unnecessary details (139), these are not inconsequential since they flesh out the world of the novel and make it full—such as in the description of Murad’s art or the launching of the art gallery business. Nonetheless, Tarchouna considers such descriptions ‘padding’ and unessential to the structure of the novel.

A recurring criticism (Tarchouna, Ben Jemaa, ElKouni) of Tunisian women novelists states that most of them produce one novel (Alia Tabai, Zakia Abdel Qader, Habiba Meherzi) and end their writing ‘career’ after it. Although the reasons for the interruption vary from one author to another, one writer interviewed in May 2008 maintained that she has continued to write and has two manuscripts ready for publication. However, fear of censorship and interest in the maintaining the security of her family dictates that her works remain a private matter. She said: “When I die, my family can publish them.” This indicates that the constraints upon women’s writing may be hidden, multiple and have lasting effects that cripple production.

Tarchouna notes an evolution in the world of women’s novel production in Tunisia, especially in the case of Massouda Boubakr:

We often accuse our writers and poets for not publishing enough due to their busy daily routines and the necessity of taking up a lucrative occupation. However, some of our
women writers are changing this by freeing themselves from their daily occupations and reserving time to write. In fact, we thought that Massouda Boubakr was one of the writers who had stopped midway, but she has proven to be madly obsessed with writing. Not only did she produce two novellas but she also published her first novel, and followed it with a second soon after. (131-132)

According to Tarchouna, Tunisian women novelists are either consumed by their daily routines or consumed by their writing, like Massouda Boubakr, who is “madly obsessed.” His double-edged compliment to Boubakr hits at a personal level and insinuates that because her production outstrips others,9 she might not be quite a “normal” woman for how could one balance daily life with a dedication to writing? This is a question that would not be asked of male writers.

Tarchouna’s work is important in the field of Tunisian Arabic literature because he groups women novelists and presents a critique of their writing styles and their texts. However, he appears unable to disassociate the written text from the personal lives of the writers. He suggests that many women novelists (especially in their first novels) present a text that is closer to autobiography than to an actual novel. Consequently, their fault is that they fail to write fiction that is adequately fictional. This standard is rarely raised in discussions of writings by men. In addition, Nawal el-Saadawi argues that “…the literary critic has no right to confuse a novel with an autobiography. So long as the writer does not state that the book is autobiographical, then no one has the right to say otherwise” (190). Although Amel Mokhtar mentions that there are autobiographical fragments in her first novel, she says that the critics assume systematically that the novel is an autobiography (interview May 2008). Indeed, the separation between self and text appears difficult in the case of Tunisian novelists because of the geographical and social constraints of a small country where everyone knows or knows of everyone else.

9 Boubakr has published five novels between 1997 and 2009 in addition to her short stories and poetry collections. See Bibliography for titles.
In 2007, the Novella Club (*Club de la Nouvelle*, Tunis) organized a conference on women’s narration. Radouane ElKouni, a writer and critic, published “*Fawda al-mustalah wa-itmi’nan al-mar’a lil-ma’luf*” (“The Ambiguity of the Term and Women’s Traditional Narration”) in *Qisas* (Oct. 2007). He proposes that “Tunisian women are committed to defending a feminist cause in their writings. Hence, they depict men as the cause of their miseries, women dreaming of the perfect man that cannot measure up to their own fathers or brothers, or a liberal husband that will not be controlling” (71). He further notes that in their texts, women portray female characters that flee their controlling husbands or rebel against social constraints and go against tradition. Occasionally, a woman writer describes a defeated man and the female protagonists defend his cause (71). Hence, ElKouni argues that Tunisian women have put men at the center of their narratives, and focus on raising their feminist issues through their texts. He states: “Women have yet to engage in narratological matters, as they are still consumed by the idea of liberating themselves and obtaining their full rights. I have yet to find a woman writer who has broken away from traditional narration and gone against the grain. Even at the linguistic level, I have not noticed any addition to the structure of the sentence in Arabic” (71).

ElKouni observes that women writers have followed men’s footsteps in narration and copied rather than innovated in the literary field. In fact, he considers their engagement in their feminist cause to weigh down women and prevent them from innovating narratologically. Furthermore, ElKouni argues: “Women writers are consumed by ideology instead of literary innovation” (72). Overall, the critic views women’s writing as an ideological stance that women take against men, a contribution on their behalf in “the war of the sexes” (71) without contributing to the actual literary field. However, ElKouni makes generalizations about women writers, clumping them into one group and thus making his analysis neither subtle nor nuanced. In addition, one may
easily contest his point that women automatically express feminist ideology in their writings. Tunisian writers after the 1980s maintain they are not feminist, especially the selected writers of this study.

Another Tunisian scholar and critic who writes about Tunisian women novelists within the wider Maghrib is Bouchoucha Ben Jemaa. In *al-Riwaya al-nisa‘iyya al-magharibiyya* (*Maghribi Women’s Novels* circa 1994), Ben Jemaa acknowledges the existence of a female sensitivity (*hasasiyya‘unthawiyya*) in women’s literature that has attracted critics in recent years to grow interested in “women’s literature” (9). For Ben Jemaa, studying *Maghribi* women’s novels in Arabic is important because it was “a masculine literary genre in the mid-fifties in Tunisia and Morocco, at the beginning of the sixties in Libya, at the beginning of the seventies in Algeria and in the eve of the eighties in Mauritania” (11). Hence, the appearance of the Arabic novel as a genre in the Maghrib was delayed in comparison to Egypt or the Levant. The Tunisian critic highlights another linguistic factor that relates to *Maghribi* women’s writing practices, which concerns the choice of language. He mentions that *Maghribi* women’s novels in French have received more attention worldwide compared to their Arabic language production (13). Due to the strong linguistic imprints of French colonization on the region and the novelty of the novel as a genre, many Algerian and to a lesser extent Moroccan and Tunisian novelists write in French. Therefore, their works receive attention in France and the rest of the francophone world, while the concept of *Maghribi* writers expressing themselves in Arabic presents a new post-colonial phenomenon. Regarding the terms “women’s literature” and “women’s writing,” Ben Jemaa alludes to the legitimacy of such terms because “women write

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differently than men do and women’s psyche is different than men’s, hence their use of a
different language” (26). Although this critic believes in the categorization of women’s
literature, he presents the various views that surround the genre explaining why some (such as
Yumna Eid and Khalida Said 47) propose that women’s socio-historical environment legitimizes
the term women’s literature. As Tarchouna, Ben Jemaa describes a connection between the
narrative text and the autobiographical, whereby many Maghribi women writers interlock the
authorial voice with the narrative voice. He states:

... One may wonder if Maghribi women writers possess a critical skill toward the act of
writing and from there, becoming conscious of the nature of the text they create... Maghribi
women writers cause critics confusion concerning their literary production. While the text may
contain standard narrative techniques, it also reveals autobiographical aspects within the
narrative. (77-78)

Ben Jemaa is not the first Tunisian literary critic to charge women novelists with adding
elements of their own lives into their works of fiction, suggesting that the women novelists are
unable to distance themselves from their texts. Although it is common for first novels to contain
autobiographical elements—for both men and women—Ben Jemaa generalizes this phenomenon
for all Maghribi women’s texts. Furthermore, his questioning of women’s critical skills
concerning the texts they create suggests that a writer is called upon to be a critic of his or her
own texts and that women just pick up their pens and write spontaneously without editing their
drafts.

Ben Jemaa notes that the gender of the writer attracts both readers and literary critics
when he writes: “Women’s innovation and creativity, especially in literature, is seductive to
readers and critics alike, as if it were an aesthetic current or a phenomenon” (9). Although Ben
Jemaa discusses the different stances regarding women’s writings, he validates his own
motivation to study Maghribi women’s novels in his book on the basis that it is a recent body of
texts that has emerged many years after the appearance of men’s Arabic novels. Furthermore, Ben Jemaa acknowledges that there are differences in the spatial constraints between women and men that challenge women’s writings (250). He gives the example of Amel Mokhtar’s choice of a bar as the female narrator’s space in Nakhab al-hayat (1993) because it is socially unacceptable in the Maghrib for a woman to discuss or be physically present in a bar because it remains a masculine space. Further, Ben Jemaa attributes Mokhtar’s choice of Bonn, Germany to a greater freedom available to women compared to the spatial constraints Tunis or any other Maghribi city presents to a woman. The critic attributes such narrative choices of space to gender inequality in the Maghrib (250). While Tarchouna’s critique of women’s writing limits itself to Tunisia, Ben Jemaa’s work examines women’s writing across the Maghrib and makes an argument for socio-cultural similarities in the region. Hence, he moves from the particular (Amel Mokhtar) to the general (Maghribi women writers) proposing that women suffer from gender inequality, which affects their choices of space within the novel.

Ben Jemaa finds feminist traces in women’s texts, and considers them a reaction to patriarchal and sexist societies. He notes:

The reading of Maghribi women’s fiction unveils many feminist traces that relate to their feminine world, which overflows with emotions and the body’s desire for pleasure. Writing allows women to contest subjugation and compensate for the suffering of not achieving a satisfaction that would allow for a balanced existence. (286)

Although Maghribi women experience subjugation, Ben Jemaa relates the socio-cultural constraints to the female body, and therefore diminishes the act of writing. By establishing a correlation between women’s frustrated sexuality and the act of writing, he reduces the act of writing to a method of compensation rather than a form of creation. On the other hand, relating the expression of feminism in women’s texts to emotions and sexual needs minimizes the value
of their writings to a private journal, as if they are at home venting rather than producing a creative work of art for public consumption.

Once again, we are confronted with the interlocking of fiction with the autobiographical to which Nawal al-Saadawi responds in Georges Tarabishi’s *Woman Against Her Sex: A Critique of Nawal el-Saadawi* (1988): “... a novel is only a novel; it is fiction, not an autobiography” (213). Several years before writing his rebuttal to el-Saadawi, Tarabishi wrote *al-Adab min al-dakhil (Literature from Within)* (1978) in which he maintains Ben Jemaa’s opinion regarding women writing their emotions. He states:

... Until now, the novel appears to be a men’s art in the Arab world, like many other universally sexist art forms. Not only did men produce more novels than women did but the latter tackled fiction with different techniques than men. While a man reconstructs the world through his novel, a woman’s novel is a pile of emotions... For a man writes with his mind while women write with their hearts. (10)

Although Tarabishi wrote the above passage in 1978, his views are not different from Ben Jemaa who wrote his critique of women’s novel in 1994. Both critics express a shared notion—that women represent the emotional. Tarabishi, however, takes this thought further by highlighting the role of rationality in a man’s writing of which a woman’s text appears deprived, for she writes to express feelings and emotions, not ideas. While Tarabishi acknowledges the existence of a “women’s novel,” he assumes that this division creates a counter-division named “men’s novel” that dominates the world of literature. Hence, he proposes that women focus on the “self” in their novels, and therefore, the esthetic standards for women’s novels should be different from men’s (10). Tarabishi believes that men’s novels must contain strong narratological techniques.

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11 This sentence is from a “Clarification by the Author” included in G. Tarabishi’s critique of Nawal el-Saadawi’s novels. This was his response to her correspondence in which she attacks his work and says: “...It is even more demoralizing, however, when criticism generates into a kind of subjective personal attack.” (189) She further refers to Tarabishi saying: “He has adopted a Freudian analysis of sick, neurotic women in order to prove that my heroines are all, without exception, suffering from the castration complex, phallic envy, the Oedipus complex, or any of the other psychological complexes likely to be suffered by a woman who rejects her femininity.” (190)
while women’s novels must rely on the abundance of feelings and emotions (11). Logically, if there is a split according to gender in fiction, there must be different standards for both groups according to Tarabishi. In her reply to Tarabishi, el-Saadawi snaps: “... Had the novels been written by a man, Tarabishi would not have found this same need to identify the author with his heroes. This is one of the problems facing women writers” (190).

However, Tarabishi makes a relevant observation pertaining to this research regarding the relationship between women’s novels and the nazra (look, gaze) when he proposes: “Women’s novels do not only play the role of a reflecting mirror but are, in essence, presenting a reflecting look (nazra). In the novels, the world becomes looked at (manzur) after it has been essentially a looking (nazir) men’s world.” (11) Hence, Tarabishi sees in women’s fiction a shift in position from being looked at to becoming the one who looks at the world and writes about it, allowing others (men and women) to read women’s perceptions of the world. Despite the double standards that Tarabishi presents to his readers concerning women’s literature, he alludes to an important discovery in the world of literature: the existence of a woman’s novel enables us to discover her vision and view of the world, self or any other topic about which she writes. Tarabishi recognizes the power of the nazar and women’s use of it.

Mahmud Fawzi, in his work Adab al-azafir al-tawila (Literature of the Long Nails 1987), raises the question of the existence of women’s literature, but considers this query to reflect a misunderstanding of the nature of literature and the influence of the historical status of women in Arab society (10). Unlike Tarabishi, he maintains that no gender difference exists in the use of narratological techniques in literature, but that a distinction is in the disparity of interests between men and women (10). Fawzi does not see “narration” as a new phenomenon in women’s lives, but on the contrary, he cites Scheherazade as the oldest female narrator that we
know of in Arabic literature and acknowledges women’s history with narration (oral narratives) (7). Although he highlights the correlation between women and the art of narrating, he discerns four critical schools of thought surrounding women’s writings: a biological approach (with a focus on the influence of women’s sexual organs on her literary production), a linguistic approach, a psychoanalytical approach and a cultural approach (15). Fawzi does not see that the “biological approach” to women’s literature is one that diminishes the creative value of the text. Quite the contrary, the biological element can in fact serve as an inspiration to the most literary elements of a text (15). While Fawzi attempts to consider “women’s literature” from various points of view and questions the notion of a “woman’s literature;” his approach remains problematic insofar as it situates men as a model and presents women as a deviance from this model. The attempt to classify women’s literature and present various approaches to critiquing it takes into account women, not an archetype for themselves but instead, as a marginal being in relationship to men while placing the latter as the standard.

**But Women Have Something to Say, Too**

Although views by critics on the emergence of women’s novels in Arabic and their integration as a body of literature into the Arabic canon are noteworthy, nevertheless, women offer arguments in support of the terms “women’s literature” and “écriture-femme” as well, although motivations differ. The example of Hélène Cixous as mentioned by Priscilla Ringrose in *Assia Djebar: In Dialogue with Feminism* (2006) stands out as she “turns to fiction and envisages *une écriture féminine* as a bisexual political act which privileges the expression of voice” (17). Hence, the body of literature produced by women is in conversation with an

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12 However, Fawzi’s use of Scheherazade as an example of a female narrator is problematic since she is the narrator of a fictional text while he links her to an authentic women’s history where women create oral narratives.
important aspect of life: politics. While Cixous believes in a women’s writing discourse, Julia Kristeva opposes such a categorization of a body of literature, according to Ringrose. Kristeva explains that the practice of *une écriture féminine* “brings about alternative modes of expression, perception and relation to those dictated by the oppositional, hierarchical and *self*-referential masculine or paternal order” (29). Cixous suggests that women’s writing is a response to the dominant linguistic discourse governed by men and upheld by patriarchy. The existence of such a body of writing implies the construction of a new feminine language that is not phallocentric and that inscribes a positive feminine sexuality and history, thus responding to the dominant masculine discourse (29).

Furthermore, Ringrose points to Luce Irigaray who also supports the idea of a women’s writing, although “like Cixous, [Iragaray] questions the phallocentrism of masculine models of language and sexuality” (30). Similar to Tarchouna, Ben Jemaa, Tarabishi and Fawzi, Cixous and Irigaray agree in grouping women’s texts within the greater context of an *écriture féminine* and though both groups relate the necessity of such a grouping to the body and sexuality, the logic is different. While Cixous and Irigaray consider a corpus of writing labeled as women’s writing, they do so in response to the dominant phallocentric patriarchal masculine discourses that form the norm, which they seek to disrupt.

In her book *L’Ecriture-Femme* (1981), Béatrice Didier explains the legitimacy of grouping a corpus of texts under the category of women’s writing, though she admits the difficulty of such a categorization, which stems from the divergences of the histories and *vécu* of each woman-writer: “… the experiences, traumas and memories of each woman writer differ from one another. As legitimate as it is to analyze the work of an individual writer so it is arbitrary to consider the work of women as a continuous fabric that allows for the establishment
of a common thematic” (6). Didier’s main concern in supporting the Ecriture-Femme (1981) is her fear of limiting a woman to her body and further perpetuating her imprisonment (6). Didier maintains that women’s writing is not a new trend and has always existed, since Sapho and Héloïse (10). Yet, she notes that, as a fact, the socialization of women toward accepting the institution of marriage and family cannot be refuted. Furthermore, it is indeed this institution, which orients women toward a feminine form of creativity other than writing, that is, toward procreation (12). Once this goal is achieved, it is almost impossible for women to find space to write, as they are called to other family-oriented tasks. In addition, according to Didier, the adverse social circumstances and confining cultural parameters stand as a barrier to women’s creativity, yet despite the obstacles, women have written in the past and continue to write today (17).

Tunisian writer Hayet Errais’ short story “Tuqus sirriyya wa-jahim” (“Secret Rites and Hell”) published in the literary journal Qisas (2009) serves as an example of Didier’s notion of the social constraints affecting creative women, as the female narrator is a poet who runs into her former professor one day. He asks about her poetry and she responds that the project is delayed because of the arrival of children. This statement causes him to wonder: “What do children have to do with writing poetry? This is how you women are. You search for a husband and when you find one, you drop the world around you and bury your talents” (18). In reaction to her professor’s words, the narrator goes home and attempts to return to her creative world only to be interrupted by her husband’s demands to satisfy his physical needs. Consequently, in this short story, the poet is reminded of her family’s constraints on her creative world. Meeting her professor and his query about her poetry inspires her to return to her creative world, however, that world proves difficult to access and may be lost.
Carmen Boustani, in *Effets du féminin: Variations narrative francophones* (*Effects of the Feminine: Francophone Narrative Variations*) 2003) does not deem that women narrators deviate from the past, but rather follow a continuation of oral traditions. Boustani considers women to be historically “natural narrators” because mothers and grandmothers have recounted stories to their children and grandchildren for centuries, although today’s technologies and the invasion of multimedia and television have distanced women from oral narration (12). To support her argument, she gives the example of the *Tale of the Genji* (1004) by Lady Murasaki as the first novel in the world written by a woman (13). Hence, unlike many critics previously mentioned, Boustani views women’s writing as part of a natural progression from their history of oral narration. She further does not see women’s novels as replicas of men’s novels, nor does she admit that men have set the precedent for the art of the novel. In her opinion, the novel is a feminine genre par excellence. Although one cannot argue against the influence of oral narration in contemporary novels, it is not necessarily present in all women’s writing. For example, while Hechmi and Boubakr incorporate oral narratives in their writings, Mokhtar does not. The fact that men dominate the genre indicates that novel writing is not a feminine genre as Boustani argues.

Interestingly, both male Arab critics and Western feminists offer an array of opinions on a corpus of literature called “women’s literature.” Indeed, both conversations highlight women’s body, language and socio-familial circumstances in relation to men, masculinity, and patriarchy. However, male critics’ opinions are less defensible because they treat women’s texts differently than men’s writing while they argue that women’s literature does not exist. In addition, male literary critics study women’s literature while making use of men’s literature as their archetype. On the other hand, feminist theorists contest the dominant model of men’s writing and demand
that women’s writing not be held up to a masculine and patriarchal norm. I have included these debates in order to support my grouping of women’s texts.

Throughout 2008, I conducted interviews with ten Tunisian women novelists and short story writers, including those selected for this study. Among the questions I formulated were two relating to the topic of “women’s writing”: “Do you consider your texts to be part of a women’s literature? Is there such a thing as a women’s literature in your opinion?” All the writers I interviewed responded negatively. In fact, several appeared irritated by the question itself. Hafidha Guesmi, in a phone interview (July 2008) answered my question with a question of her own: “Is this a question to be asked? Aren’t we beyond this whole ‘women’s writing’ debate?” Unanimously, these writers agreed that there is no such thing as a women’s literature. Amel Mokhtar exclaimed in an interview: “I hate the terms women’s writing or feminine writing! There are elements of femininity in men’s writing just like there are elements of masculinity in women’s writing.” This was her first reaction to my questions on women’s writing. Further in the meeting, she added: “Of course there are feminine elements in my writing. It is like when you walk into a woman’s house, it doesn’t look like a man’s house. My writing resembles me, and I happen to be a woman. I cannot write something that doesn’t resemble me” (May 2008). In June 2008, when I asked Massouda Boubakr the same questions; she answered: “Today, it’s wrong to talk about a feminine or feminist writing, although it existed in the 1960s. If we speak of a feminine writing, does this mean we can safely talk about a masculine writing? What about writing that is in-between? Is there a cross-gender writing? Many claim that the first one to have written a novel is a man, but who claims this? A historian who happens to be a man? We also know of men being great poets. What happened to women? We all know that narration is instinctively feminine. Women have always narrated, but history
has largely wronged women” (June 2008). When I asked Fethia Hechmi about her thoughts concerning ‘women’s literature’, she exclaimed: “Writing is universal and goes beyond gender lines. If we admit to the existence of a feminine writing then that means there must be a men’s writing, a masculine writing. Yet, we don’t hear of such a classification. I see a text for what it is, simply a text, with no gender attached to it” (April 2008).

Taken together, the interviews I conducted suggest that these authors reject such a classification, even if they acknowledged that women writers face different challenges than their male counterparts. To these authors, separating their texts from ‘mainstream’ literature by hyphenating them under écriture-femme would be tantamount to giving them a second degree aesthetic status in relation to men’s text.

Although literature may well be a practice that transcends gender boundaries, by interviewing Tunisian women writers and reviewing the literature on écriture-femme I have come to the conclusion that women have common social constraints affecting their creative processes. Not all women writers have the same social obligations and limitations, yet, in the case of Tunisian writers, they all write within the framework of a patriarchal society. Further, despite the equality that Tunisian law guarantees women, all of the writers interviewed agreed about the discrepancy between text and practice. However, they are not the only group to resist such a categorization of their literature. The Tunisian scholar Raja Benslema, in Buniyan al-

fuhula: abhath fi-l-mudhakkir wa-l-mu’annith (The Construction of Virility: Studies of the Masculine and Feminine 2008) states that we should not speak of a “feminine writing,” but instead of an androgynous writing, that is an asexual and genderless writing. For the act of writing is accomplished through the yearning for satisfaction linked to sexual pleasure. Benslema explains men’s and women’s sexuality within the framework of Islamic tradition and
concludes that the concept of pleasure is alike for both men and women. Therefore, the act of writing, an innovative and creative act of pleasure, is not gender bound. Although Benslema’s stance on écriture-femme has validity, it does not take into account the societal status of women. Didier explains this as the additional social constraints placed upon women that justify the choice of a corpus of literature as “women’s writing.” Ritu Menon, in “The Structured Silences of Women” (2004), describes women writers in India saying:

...writing remains an isolated, solitary activity, often surreptitious, generally unacknowledged and undervalued. Although the number of women writers may well run into some thousands, they are still invisible, encounter all manner of obstacles in expressing themselves freely, and experience many forms of direct censorship, simply because they are women. (6)

The harsh circumstances Menon describes are not geographically bound. Tunisian women writers encounter similar difficulties, which validates the use of the term “women’s writing.” “Men’s writing” does not face the same obstacles according to Menon. Consequently, the term écriture-femme becomes valid because experience influences writing and may shape form and content. While literature is universal and transcends socio-political and gender related limitations, there is no doubt that patriarchal society makes an imprint on women and their writing. The “aesthetics of silence” that Menon refers to reflects the oppression that women writers face (6). As a result of social constraints and oppression, I conclude that women’s writing represents diverse experiences and forms influenced by the fact that the one writing the word (the woman) encounters different obstacles on her literary path than her male counterparts. Consequently, this study groups writers first by a social construct—gender.

However, other factors influence the environment in which women write. In the specific case of Tunisian women writers, a language debate that opposes French and Arabic requires consideration.
Why Not Arabic?

Tunisian women novelists re-appropriate their history and identity as “narrators by nature” as Boubakr mentions, through their writings. Yet, when I posed the question “Why do you write in Arabic?” to the writers interviewed in 2008, their response was unanimously “Why not Arabic?” When they elaborated further on their answers, they clarified that Arabic was their mother tongue, the language of their education, and the language in which they feel the most comfortable when expressing themselves. However, Hechmi, Mokhtar and especially Boubakr are bilingual and acknowledge that French contributes to their cultural background, though Arabic remains their preferred language of expression. The fact that these three writers insert Tunisian colloquial and occasionally French into dialogues reflects the diglossic nature of Arabic in Tunisia and allows for a more authentic and local expression of events and speeches.

Choice of language as it relates to Tunisian writers’ identities and self-perceptions becomes even more relevant when one considers Keith Walters’ sociolinguistic description of Tunisia in “Opening the Door of Paradise a Cubit: Educated Tunisian Women, Embodied Linguistic Practice, and Theories of Language and Gender” (1999):

Although over 98 percent of Tunisians are Arab Muslims of the Malaki rite, making Tunisians the most ethnically and religiously homogeneous of the countries in the Arab world, the linguistic situation is quite complex. Characterized by postdiglossic Arabic language continuum and postcolonial bilingualism involving Arabic and French, it offers speakers many resources creating identities while using language for referential and nonreferential purposes. Except for a declining number of native speakers of Berber (less than 1 percent of the population) and any foreigners who might live there, children growing up in Tunisia learn as their first language a variety of Tunisian Arabic (TA) linked to their regional, social, and confessional background. (204)

Walters refers to the homogeneity of Tunisian society, but insists upon a complex linguistic dynamic that places Tunisian Arabic (TA) as the dominant language for most people. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is associated with the media at an early age, and then learned in schools.
As for French, though taught in schools in parallel with MSA, its usage depends upon socio-economic factors. Thus, Tunisia represents a multi-glossic linguistic status according to Walters. As a result, Tunisian women novelists reflect this linguistic richness in their texts. In *Experimental Nations or the Reinvention of the Maghrib* (2003), Reda Bensmaïa reveals a more complex linguistic makeup present throughout the Maghrib. He notes:

> Several Maghribi writers did understand—although they were not always able to turn this understanding into *practice*—that within the given cultural arena which they had to produce their works, they were not dealing with a single language, or even with two; nor was it a matter of high and low languages. Rather, *whatever language they used*, they were always in fact dealing with (at least) four very distinct types of language. (16)

Despite the focus of Tunisian women novelists on Arabic, Bensmaïa suggests that the *Maghribi* writer is not only bilingual (French and Arabic) but within this bilingualism there exists other linguistic registers such as Berber colloquial as well as a *‘mythic language,’* that is, the language of the Qu’ran and other sacred texts (18). Yet, Tunisian women novelists prefer to ignore the linguistic mosaic, although the use of vocabulary from the *‘mythic language,’* as Bensmaïa refers to it, and the *sha‘bi* (popular) vernacular (especially in Fethia Hechmi’s novels) reflects this linguistic richness. The desire for many Tunisian novelists to reach the rest of the Arab world and a wider audience pressures them to use Modern Standard Arabic and hold back from employing the local vernacular too frequently, although Hechmi resolves this problem by offering a glossary of Tunisian terms placed at the end of *Minna Mawwal* (2007).

In *Le Roman Tunisien de Langue Arabe 1956-2001 (The Tunisian Arabic Novel 1956-2001)* 2002), Jean Fontaine documents the publication of ten novels in Arabic between 1956 and 1965, and ninety-nine novels between 1996 and 2001 (6). Despite the fact that many Tunisian women novelists today prefer to write in Arabic, this was not always a matter of choice. In his survey of Tunisian novels written in French, Fontaine notes that, if we consider pre-
independence novels in Tunisia, more than half of the production is in French. This changes after independence: For every five Arabic novels published, three are published in French. In addition, writers publish over forty percent of French texts in France, however, Fontaine notes that Tunisian novels in French tend to be neglected by researchers in comparison with Moroccan and Algerian novels, thus indicating a problem at the level of literary criticism (7-8). The issue of language, then, is relevant to this study, not only because Arabic is the language in which the selected texts are written, but because it relates to problems in publication, to critical recognition and to the identity of writers as well.

When examining Maghrabi women’s French texts in *La littérature feminine de langue française au Maghrib* (*French Feminine Literature in the Maghrib* 1994), Jean Déjeux agrees with Jean Fontaine that Arabic literary production in Tunisia exceeds production French (51). The women’s French novel emerges in Tunisia as early as 1975 with Souad Guellouz’s *La vie simple* (*A Simple Life*) (52) compared to the Arabic novel that appears only in 1983 with Zakia Abdel Qader’s *Emna*. Déjeux describes the language of the first novels in French as simple (52) and considers Hélé Béji the first novelist “worthy of such a title” with the publication of her 1986 novel, *L’Oeil du jour* (*At the Heart of Day*). The first novels in French focus on topics such as the end of colonization, identity, and the regard of the Other on the Self. In the 1990s, Emna Bel Haj Yahia\(^\text{13}\) evokes the French language as an opening onto modernity according to Déjeux (53). Like Assia Djebar, Bel Haj Yahia expresses herself in French and is in constant debate with the language of the Other in her novels (53). She indeed sees modernity through the lens of the French language, and although she speaks Tunisian colloquial, she can only write in French.

\(^{13}\) Emna Bel Haj Yahia published *Chronique Frontalière* in 1991 and *Tasharej* in 2000.
The *entre-deux-langues* (in-between two languages) dialectic, although rejected by some Tunisian novelists, concerns the texts of Hechmi, Boubakr and Mokhtar, in that they make use of French words in their Arabic texts. The choice of “Amour” (love) as the title of the first chapter in Hechmi’s *Maryam tasqut min yad Allah* (2009) or exclamations in French by Boubakr’s main character in *Trashqana* (2006) who screams “Je veux être femme” (“I want to be a woman” 13) stand out as linguistic examples of the presence of the French language as part of the identity and cultural context in which these women write.

The Algerian writer Assia Djebar (b. 1936) highlights the relationship between language and identity, as she speaks Algerian Colloquial Arabic but writes in French. In *Word: On Being a [Woman] Writer* (2004), editor Jocelyn Burrell compiles several women writers’ testimonies, including that of Assia Djebar who presents herself as follows:

“No, I am an Arabo-Berber woman” and add “writing in French.” …Nevertheless, forty-five years later, I acknowledge this: I present myself first as a writer, a novelist, as if the act of writing, when it is daily, solitary to the point of asceticism, might come to modify the weight of belonging. Because identity is not made up only of paper or blood but also of *language*. And if it seems that language, as is frequently said, is a “means of communications,” it is above all for me as a writer, a “means of transformation,” insofar as I practice writing as an *adventure*. (113-114) ¹⁴

Interestingly, writing becomes the most important aspect of Djebar’s identity. Further, the author finds herself in an *entrelangues* (in between languages) situation, whereby, she speaks colloquial Arabic but can only write in French because she was educated in French. The fact that she views writing as a “means of transformation” indicates the extent to which writing influences Djebar as a woman but also as a human being. Not only is the act of writing an expression of identity for her but the issue of language remains present for Djebar. According to Clarisse Zemra, who interviewed Djebar on several occasions and wrote the “Afterword” of *Women of

¹⁴Quoted from Djebar’s speech at the 1996 ceremony for the Neustadt Prize for Contributions to World Literature.
Algiers in Their Apartment (1992): “Djebbar is unusual in her defiant embrace of the French language as an instrument of self-liberation... For Djebbar, French gradually became the instrument of liberation brokered by the bilingual father as an escape from the increasingly restrictive brothers, guardians of the physical and intellectual harem” (196). Thus, French serves to liberate Djebbar from social and intellectual constraints.

Contrary to Djebbar, Tunisian novelists do not seem caught up in the *entrelangues* category to the extent of other Maghribi women writers, for they are educated in Arabic and although they consider themselves bilingual, they prefer to write in Arabic (Fontaine, *Le Tunisien de Langue Arabe Roman* 6). Indeed, the Tunisian novelists writing in Arabic whom I interviewed do not see French as a “liberating” language. Instead, Arabic—both MSA and colloquial—offers them the freedom to express themselves. For Boubakr, Arabic is a rich language that allows her to express her thoughts and emotions. She sees no restriction in the Arabic language, and to enrich her text, she may add dialogues in Tunisian colloquial.

**The Forgotten: Tunisian Women Writers**

Shedding the light on Tunisian women writers is not only important because they participate in the literary life of the Arab world, but also because they appear to have been forgotten by editors in the compilation of anthologies and by literary critics. Although the novel is a fairly new genre for Tunisian women writers,¹⁵ production has increased recently. According to the Tunisian minister of culture in his opening speech at the “Arab Women’s Image of Themselves in their Writing” Conference (6-8 March 2010), Tunisian women’s productions (poetry, short stories, novels) have exceeded two hundred works for 2009. This

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shows progress in the field of women’s writing and production for a country of ten million inhabitants.

In *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women’s Novels* (2002), editors Lisa Suhayl Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman and Therese Saliba include chapters discussing the works of Arab women novelists such as Sahar Khalifa, Salwa Bakr and Etel Adnan. A chapter on Assia Djebar’s *Fantasia* represents the *Maghrib*, yet neither Moroccan nor Tunisian women novelists figure in this work. Another important work on Arab women writers, Margot Badran’s and Miriam Cooke’s *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing* (1990), includes women authors from Morocco, Algeria and even Mauritania yet no Tunisian author finds a place within its pages. The book discusses feminist writings in the Arab world over a one hundred year period, but fails to mention any significant writings by Tunisian women, despite the fact that women wrote and published as early as the 1930s in Tunisian periodicals such as *al-Masrah* (*Theater*, 1937), *Leïla* (1936-1941) and *Faïza* (1959-1967). In fact many Tunisian women wrote in an attempt to change women’s condition such as Bchira Ben M’rad (1913-1993), seeking a space for women to write and participate in the building of the newly independent state (Fontaine, *Ecrivaines Tunisiennes* 7).

Not every anthologist has forgotten Tunisian women writers. Dalya Cohen-More includes a short story by Hayet Ben Sheikh and another by Nefla Dhaabab in *Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* (2005). However, she considers a third, Najia Thameur, to be a Syrian, while Tunisians claim her as their first woman writer (*Aradna al-hayat, We Chose Life* 1956). Najia Thameur was indeed born in Damascus, however, she migrated to Tunisia at the age of twenty-one after she married an Algerian residing in Tunis. Soon after her arrival, she

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16 Writers from other countries such as Libya, Sudan, Mauritania, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar experience the same neglect suggesting that scholars and editors focus primarily on Algeria, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria.
integrated into cultural and intellectual circles, was one of the first women to present radio programs and published several short stories. In fact, Fontaine refers to her as the first woman short story writer in Tunisia and emphasizes that she is a Tunisian of Syrian origin (*Ecrivaines Tunisiennes* 7). Although Hayet Ben Sheikh wrote two novels, Nefla Dhahab until today, has remained faithful to short stories.

Tunisian women writers are seldom represented in Tunisian anthologies as well. For example, in the Tunisian novels’ anthology compiled by the Tunisian Writers’ Union (*Union des Ecrivains Tunisiens*) in 2004, less than fourteen percent of those mentioned are women. While thirty-one male writers participate in the anthology, it only includes five women. The absence of Tunisian women novelists in anthologies indicates that their production does not reach other Arab countries, much less the West. Tarchouna insists upon the difficulties of publication for Tunisian writers (*al-Mashhad al-riwa’iy al-tunisi* 5). Yet, he indicates that between 2001 and 2007 the Tunisian novel has increased to over 220 novels, for both men and women (5).

Although he lists 150 novels, women’s novels between 2001 and 2007 are less than thirteen percent of the total production of novels (13-16). Another difficulty that Tunisian women novelists writing in Arabic encounter is the absence of an active translation movement into French or English. In addition, their readership in the Arab world is limited, as Tunisian books rarely reach Baghdad, Beirut or Cairo. At the same time, Fontaine suggests that certain novels by women lack in aesthetic appeal (Interview June 2008). Consequently, aesthetic value may play a role in the limited circulation of Tunisian women’s texts, as well as gender.

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17 The Tunisian Writers’ Union (*Union des Ecrivains Tunisiens*) excludes all Tunisian writers who are not members. Many writers do not adhere to this organization for ideological reasons, therefore the exclusion of women may be due to multiple factors. Nonetheless, the anthology does not do justice to women writers. The under-representation of women in anthologies is not limited to Tunisia.
In order to contextualize the works of the authors upon which this study focuses and to illustrate the development of women’s literature in Tunisia, a glimpse at the history of the production of Tunisian women novelists gives the reader an idea of the context in which these women write.

Tunisian Women Novelists: A Piece of the Arab Women’s Literary Puzzle

Like Tarchouna, who insists that categorizing women’s publications within the sub-genre of women’s writing limits creativity and innovation, Jean Fontaine also criticizes the category of women’s writing although he publishes *Ecrivaines tunisiennes* (*Tunisian Women Writers* 1994) for research purposes (3). In this work, he analyzes women’s literature and proposes that there are four literary currents in women’s writings: the conformist, the realist, the feminist and the experimental (7). According to Fontaine, Najia Thameur (1926-1988) and Hind Azzouz (b. 1926) represent the conformist current and are concerned with social change, gender relations within marriage and preach a socialist perspective on life (10). Fontaine includes Khadija Chitoui (b. 1944), Fatima Slim (b. 1942) and Jalila Hafsia (b. 1929) in the realist literary current, because they describe strong women and turn against Tunisian traditions that hold people to the past and do not allow them to move forward (14). Zoubeida Bechir (b. 1938) and Layla Mami (b. 1944) form the feminist current with the former’s poetry and the latter’s short stories and Fontaine indicates that women’s issues are at the center of these women’s texts (19). Finally, Fadhila Chabbi (b. 1946) and Zohra Jlassi (b. 1950) form the experimental current with poetry and short stories that go beyond traditional topics and that question global issues (22). Hence, women’s writings eventually move away from feminist questions and become engaged with international and existentialist topics such as love, violence, war, silence, solitude and space.
Can women’s narratives close an eye to gender relations in the Arab world? Sabry Hafez thinks not. In “Women’s Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology” (1995), he notes that “Classical Arabic literature, whether in its pure literary form—poetry—or in its other scholarly, linguistic and theological guises, has been predominantly male-controlled and male-oriented,” (155) suggesting patriarchal dominance in Arab society that gives reason for women to renegotiate their imposed gender roles in hopes of re-establishing new ones, though fictively. Although I generally agree with Hafez, it should be noted that not all women writers re-negotiate gender roles or attempt to establish new ones in their fictive worlds such as Radwa Ashour or Salwa Bakr.

The production of Tunisian women’s novels takes off at the end of the 1990s and especially after the year 2000. Several women poets and short story writers become novelists such as Boubakr, who begins her writing career with a short story Ta’m al-anañas (The Taste of Pineapple 1994) and Hechmi, who publishes her poetry collection al-Uqhuwan al-maslub ‘ala-l-shifah (Crucified Daisies on the Lips 2002). Yet, according to Bouchoucha Ben Jemaa’s bibliography of Maghribi women’s writings, Bibliyughrafiya al-adab nisa’i al-Magharibi (Bibliography of Maghribi Women’s Writings 2008), which includes literary production in Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Libya, Tunisian women have produced one hundred fifty-seven poetry collections between 1968 and 2007 in comparison with thirty-one in Algeria, one hundred twenty-five in Morocco and thirty-six in Libya. In addition, Tunisian women published ninety short story collections between 1956 and 2007 and forty-two novels from 1983 to 2007 (116-117). According to Ben Jemaa’s statistics, Tunisian women have published the most literature compared to the rest of the Maghrib. Many Tunisian women writers turn to the novel because it is a literary genre that allows them a margin of freedom not found in poetry or novellas. Yet,
writers may include poetry or fragments of oral narratives and folk songs, suggesting the perceived flexibility of the genre. For example, Fethia Hechmi includes long passages of popular (sha‘bi) Tunisian poetry throughout her novel _Hafiyat al-ruh_ (2003) and references to folkloric songs and narratives in the following two novels _Minna Mawwal_ (2005) and _Maryam tasqut min yad Allah_ (2009).

Writing for Tunisian women novelists does not occur in a vacuum. During the First Arab Novelists’ conference in 1992, Tunisian novelist Aroussia Nalouti (b. 1950) discussed the meaning of writing to her. She described it as a meaningful moment of truthfulness where the writer finds himself or herself alone before the act. Hence, the need for honesty and sincerity while writing (245). She notes:

> When I write, I recreate myself and the entire world around me. I construct and deconstruct. I deny and agree… Within me I carry other’s excitement and cruelty… I love and loathe them in the same way that I love and hate myself at the same time. .. My story with writing is a Sufi love story… All the effort occurs within the complex body of language, as it constructs the novel through its characters, events and temporal space. (248)

Nalouti discusses the act of writing as an emotional moment at times, but at other times, as a religious one. She describes the difficulty she senses as a writer to explain the significance of the act of writing for her, as a novelist. Once again, the relationship between the writer and language is stressed in her speech, as she highlights the significance of selecting the exact word from the dictionary that corresponds to the idea she wishes to convey to her reader. Yet, her statement reveals the power of a woman writer, as she is at liberty to ‘construct’ herself and others as well

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18 _Multaqa al-riwa‘iyyin al-‘arab: shahadat wa dirasat_ was the first Arab Novelists’ Conference which took place in Gabes, Tunisia between 31 July and 4 August 1992.

19 Aroussia Nalouti is a Tunisian short story writer, novelist and scenarist. She has published _al-Bu‘d al-khamis_ (1975), _Tamas(1995),_ and _Maratij_ (2005), and in 2008 she assisted Fadhel Jaziri in the production of his play _Thalathun._
as ‘deconstruct’ them because the narration allows for such freedom. On the other hand, her text reveals the difficulty of a writer’s mission, as she must pay close attention to word choice, sentence structure and thoughts. In the above passage, we notice the binary oppositions of love and hate and constructing and deconstructing, connected to the act of writing. Thus, writing allows for the expression of contradictory emotions for Aroussia Nalouti while she enjoys the freedom and pleasure of creating. Writing a text empowers its author according to Nalouti, as the tools she possesses allow her to create a world of her own, while others do not have this ability. The reader may enter the world of Nalouti’s novel, but she controls the modalities.

Tunisian women writers are a fragment of a literary genre in the Arab world that is on the rise. In Introduction to Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women’s Novels (2002), Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba note:

A proliferation of Arab women’s texts in the last century has changed the face of Arabic literature. Arab women writers have emerged as important players in the modern and postmodern literary renaissance of the Arab world, their rich diversity of style and subject matter opening critical avenues of discussion in social, political, and cultural arenas. (xvii)

The editors of this work notice that Arab women’s texts from across the Arab world intersect to challenge the traditional gender, notions of the nations and structures of communities in the Arab world, suggesting a re-reading of the established, and proposing to renegotiate current boundaries. Despite the local flavors and reflection of Tunisian culture in Tunisian women’s novels, their writings interconnect with the spaces and topics that surface in other Arab women’s writings from Lebanon, Egypt or Syria. For example, Egyptian novelist Salwa Bakr in al-‘Araba al-dhahabiyya la tas‘ad ila-l-sama’ (The Golden Chariot 1995) brings forward women’s lives in prison and highlights their marginality within society while Tunisian novelist Massouda Boubakr evokes the topic of marginality by creating a transsexual character within the social context of
the city of Tunis (Trushqana 1999). Fethia Hechmi in Maryam tasqut min yad Allah (2009) explores the life of a woman within the context of a brothel. Both novels draw attention to the marginal and marginalized in an Arab society, and although the spaces may differ, the topic of marginality dominates the narratives.

Marginality may bring violence into a narrative work, however, wars and national struggles escalate the violence depending upon the country. For example, Lebanese novelist Andrée Chedid and Palestinian novelists Sahar Khalifa and Liana Badr renegotiate gender boundaries within the context of war, as women’s issues tend to be set aside for the sake of nationalist struggles. The characters in these novels reflect the high levels of violence in the authors’ societies, which results in hostility and aggressive behavior against women. In the case of Tunisia—a country which has not confronted war or external threats since independence—some novels reflect the echoes of war and conflict in other areas of the Arab world (such as in Palestine and Iraq) through the depiction of the troubled psychological state of fictional characters. For example, certain characters in Hechmi’s Hafiyat al-ruh, Boubakr’s Wada’an Hammurabi and Hayet Ben Sheikh’s Wa kana ‘urs al-hazima (The Celebration of Defeat 1991) reveal a state of mind frought with unease and the need to recover from conflicts continually brought forward by multimedia coverage of wars in the Middle East.

Besides images of war and violence, certain topics recur across borders, suggesting shared issues and problems. In Hajar al-dahik (The Stone of Laughter 1995), Hoda Barakat creates an androgynous character who she positions between femininity and masculinity. Likewise, Hechmi in Minna Mawwal gives the character of the Sheikh a son/daughter whose gender is ambiguous although the official announcement states that the child’s sex is male. An androgynous/asexual creation comes through the literary texts of these two women novelists. On
another level, Hanan al-Sheikh’s *Hikayat Zahra (The Story of Zahra* 1995) tackles the controversial topic of body for the female narrator Zahra as does Amel Mokhtar in all of her novels, but particularly in *Nakhab al-hayat* and *Al-Kursi al-hazzaz* where women’s bodies are redefined through the eyes of the woman narrator. Despite the geographical, linguistic and cultural differences that exist between women writers in the Maghrib and their colleagues in the *Mashreq*, the writings of women in the latter resonate and echo in the works of Tunisian women novelists, as they are in dialogue with the literary and cultural production of Beirut, Cairo, Baghdad or Damascus. We find evidence of this dialogue in the international conferences that writers attend. For example, Mokhtar presented at an international Arab women writers’s conference entitled “*Surat al-mar’a fi kitabatiha*” (“Women’s Image of Self in their Writings,” March 2010, Tunis) attended by writers and scholars from Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait, Libya, Mauratania, Morocco, Qatar, and Syria. Making use of technology, Hechmi actively contributes to online literary forums (www.inanasite.com, www.doroob.com) where other writers from Jordan, Algeria, Morocco and Iraq participate, and keeps in touch with writers from other Arab countries through the internet (interview May 2008).

Despite similarities between Tunisian women novelists and women novelists in other Arab countries, there remains a Tunisian influence and a local distinctiveness prevalent in the former’s works. Although women in Tunisia also live within the framework of a patriarchal society, they have a unique post-colonial history in the Arab world. When Tunisia became an independent nation in 1956, Habib Bourguiba, the first president of independent Tunisia, announced the Personal Status Code (*Code du Statut Personel*) 13 August 1956, which went into effect 1 January 1957 (*Code du Statut Personnel 6*). According to this judicial family code, women had the same legal rights as men, with exceptions in inheritance laws. Further, the code
banned polygamy and made abortion legal, and women were granted the right to divorce, which must take place before a court of law (the end of repudiation). These laws were considered revolutionary because women were granted iner civil law unlike other Arab nations. Nevertheless, the patriarchal structure of Tunisian society remains in effect until today due to persistent social traditions. Labidi argues that despite the modernity of Tunisian women, tradition remains prevalent (425). Unlike other Arab nations, the post-colonial Tunisian government endorsed a feminist agenda under the umbrella of nationalism from its early days by making education obligatory for girls as well as boys, and by encouraging family planning and abortion. The picture from the women’s periodical Faïza (October 1959) demonstrates the Tunisian leader’s interest in making use of women for propaganda value in his nation-building policies.

The caption under the photograph of an enthusiastic Bourguiba surrounded by women proclaims him the “women’s liberator” (Faïza Oct. 1959). The state intelligently rallied women in the building of the new nation by creating a union for women, the UNFT (Union National des Femmes Tunisiennes) and encouraging their participation in a labor force that would build the nation (Chater 86, 179-194).

See for example, the independent women’s magazine Faïza (Tunis, 1959-1967) that carried numerous articles promoting the government policies mentioned and that promoted the UNFT.
However, the gap between state laws and women’s social reality has grown, according to women’s novels that reflect a gender-divided society with elements of patriarchy infiltrating into all segments of women’s lives. For example, Aroussia Nalouti in *Maratij* (1985) creates a world in which the nationalist post-colonial struggle is the ultimate goal of a group of students in Paris. While the different characters live in a European city, they are unable to distance themselves from their traditional Tunisian heritage. Mukhtar, though in love with Juda, must face his fears and anxieties about her. Juda, on the other hand, chooses silence over proclaiming her love for Mokhtar. Both individuals are haunted by traditions and Mukhtar recalls his grandmother’s belief in ghoul and *jinn* which he cannot break away from (61). Mukhtar’s patriarchal attitude surfaces as he declares: “Our women [Arab women] are backward and complicated!” (95)

Women’s novels deviate from official feminist discourses\(^{21}\) to uncover the nationalist discourses of modernity that feminism serves. The space of the novel allows women writers the liberty to bring forward social taboos such as sexuality, and give voice to marginal individuals such as a transexual in Boubakr’s *Trashqana*. Furthermore, the space of the novel allows writers to express reactions to conflict in the Arab world (such as the Iraqi war) since public dissent is prohibited. Overall, Tunisian women novelists deviate from the local official political discourse, while remaining in dialogue with the literary production of women in other parts of the Arab world.

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\(^{21}\) In *Femme* magazine (May 1969), A. Rizgallah writes that Bourguiba said: “Without women’s evolution, there can be no progress.” (3) Rizgallah states: “The feminist path that we have followed since the beginning, demonstrates the maturity of Tunisian women to play an important role in the Nation.” (3) Hence, Tunisian authorities have always considered the feminist cause to be relevant because it contributes to nation building or to “the modern nation.” Thus, the feminist movement remains controlled by the one-party system.
On Gaze Versus nazar

In the novels selected for this study, the expression of emotions and sexuality occurs through acts of visual apprehension. Hence, the various psychoanalytical and film theories on the gaze and nazra (to look) along with definitions of ‘ayn (eye) and nazar require consideration to further highlight the uniqueness of female characters’ nazra (or gaze) to male characters within the novels.

In some psychoanalytic and feminist gaze literature, the gaze translates into a power relationship between men and women, consequently mutuality is not an aspect of the gaze relationship. For the gaze, often connected to imagery and film, expresses the man’s gaze over a woman within the context of pleasure. Indeed, a man gazes at a woman and within this gaze there exists the expression of pleasure. While some theorists (Evans & Gramman 1995, 16) draw a distinction between the look (a perceptual mode that concerns everyone and is not based upon gender divide) and the gaze (a reflection of gendered concepts of pleasure and desire), Laura Mulvey, making use of a Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, presents the gaze as a scopophilic expression of the male self. Her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (Screen 13:1975) constitutes an important addition in the discipline of film and feminist theories.

Mulvey notes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze project its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coated for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (39)

Mulvey explains that the male gaze in cinema renders the feminine subject an object and denies women human agency, submitting them to a passive role while placing men in an active role.
Yet, for the purpose of this study, the reversal of the feminine and masculine gaze would be more appropriate in order to explore women’s representation of male characters through a feminine gaze. Several feminist theorists (Kaplan, Silverman, de Lauretis) go against the grain arguing that in parallel with a male gaze there is indeed a feminine gaze that is just as potent as the male gaze if not more so. According to de Lauretis (1984) the gaze has a double identification by assuming a dual position as passive and active subject. She notes:

… both theories [semiology and psychoanalysis] deny women the status of subjects and producers of culture. Like cinema, they posit women as at once the object and the foundation of representation, at once telos and origin of male’s desire and drive to represent it, at once object and sign of (his) culture and creativity. In this context subjectivity, or subjective processes, are inevitably defined in relation to a male subject, that is to say, with man as the sole term of reference. Hence the position of woman in language and in cinema is one of non-coherence. (8)

De Lauretis examines semiotic and psychoanalytical theories to question the use and effect of the male subject in determining the boundaries of culture and creativity. Although she does not use the term “phallocentric” which Mulvey insists upon, she nonetheless explains the central position of the male character in language and cinema. De Lauretis’ position is of interest, because there exists a correlation between the narrative structure of the texts analyzed in this study and socio-cultural constructs of gender within film and narrative theories. Not only are Tunisian women novelists in accordance with this counter argument to Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’, as their texts place the male as the subject of their gazes, but they become “producers of culture” through the creation of their novels.

This approach is valuable in the examination of Mokhtar’s novels in Chapter Two of this work. However, after using the lens of gaze for Mokhtar’s work, the gaze theory I use proves inadequate because it does not take the socio-cultural context of the Tunisian authors into consideration. Hence it must be replaced by the nazar when examining the narratives of
Boubakr or Hechmi. For the various theories of the gaze, though relevant to gender, do not take into account the nature of the Arabo-Islamic cultural context in which the development of their narratives takes place. Hence, it is necessary to examine definitions of ‘ayn and nazar.

According to the Encyclopedia of Islam (2010), al-‘ayn:

…in its basic sense signifies the eye, the organ of sight, acquires then the meaning of the function of sight, the seeing, and as is frequent in semantics—compare e.g. khalq, creation, and fi’l action, which can mean in Arabic as in English the acting and the effect of the acting—can also denote the effect of the function of sight, the aspect, the thing viewed, and especially in the plural, a’yān, the particular things that are perceived in the exterior world. (784)

However, there exists another definition of the ‘ayn which pertains to Chapter Four of this work and relates to superstition within Islamic popular culture, the evil eye is defined in the Encyclopedia of Islam as:

“Evil eye”. Belief in the evil eye is well established in Islam. According to Abu Hurayra, the Prophet said al’ayn ḥakī “The evil eye is a reality” (Bukhārī, commentary of al-Ḳasṭallānī on the Ṣaḥīḥ, viii, 390, 463); it is the evil action of an envious glance which is envisaged by the recommendation given in the Kurʾān, cxiii, 5. Orthodoxy, however, makes the Prophet condemn this belief. (786)

Despite the condemnation by the Prophet Muhammad of the evil eye because it presents a superstitious belief with no logical ground, it remains prevalent in Arab society and infiltrates into contemporary literature. In the case of the corpus chosen for this research, the evil eye appears throughout the three novels of Hechmi, but changes from a disapproving look to a potent evil action. The Encyclopedia of Islam offers multiple definitions of ‘ayn and nazar from which I have selected the most pertinent ones to apply to the texts discussed in Chapters Two, Three and Four.

Interestingly, the concept of nazar relates not only to the physical aspect of seeing, but to the intellectual nuances of scientific and logical Islamic (and other) thought as well. While the act of nazar (seeing) can only occur through the function the ‘ayn (the eye), the definitions
overlap. For the ‘ayn relates to the belief in supernatural and superstitious powers while the nazar carries an intellectual discourse that stands upon al-‘aql (rational thinking). Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi suggests that the ‘ayn represents the emotional while the nazar the rational. Despite the seeming opposition of definitions, they have power in common, although in nazar, the nazir (the one who looks) does not necessarily render the manzur ilayh (the one who is looked at) an object. That is, the gaze in traditional Arabic culture does not necessarily objectify. Furthermore, according to Lisan al-‘arab, al-nazar derives from both al-‘ayn (eye) and al-qalb (heart), that is, al-nazar includes both the physical act of seeing and is the emotions and psyche of a person. In fact, in comparison with al-nazar, the gaze—a complex concept in gender and film studies, literature and psychoanalysis (Mulvey18, de Lauretis 7)—implies a gender-based division, which may appear in definitions of al-nazar. Yet, semantically, the power of al-nazar stems from its ability as a term to convey the physical act as well as the emotional and intellectual act of the concept of the visual. While the gaze implies pleasure or lack of pleasure at a sexual level, the idea of al-nazar in Islamo-Arabic tradition does not bear such a burden by definition, according to Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi.22

The Tunisian women writers I examine may not be aware of Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi and his study of the nazar within the Islamic tradition,23 yet most Tunisian women writers in Arabic know Arabic classics and all of them have studied it in the public school system. For example, Boubakr quotes Ibn al-Arabi in the epigraph for Juman wa ‘Anbar (Juman and Anbar 2005)

22 For an example of the power of the manzur ilayh (the one who is looked at) in poetry, see Mu‘allaga of Imru’ al-Qays (7-12) in Robert Irwin’s Knights and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature (1999).
23 In addition to the nazar, other elements of Islamic tradition include the Hubus, madrasa, and sabil to a name a few. For a Tunisian intellectual’s views on the Arabo-Islamic tradition and its future, see Hichem Djait’s La personnalité et le devenir Arabo-Islamiques (1974). He rejects both traditionalism and modernism as ideologies and argues that an Arabo-Islamic renaissance will take place in the Maghrib rather than the Mashreq.
while Hechmi alludes to *Alf layla wa layla* in her first poem in *Minna Mawwal* (7). Consequently, the presence of classic texts may reinforce the remembrance of the Arabo-Islamic heritage.

From an Islamic perspective then, *al-nazar* suggests a dialectic that we should take into consideration, not because the authors I have selected emphasize it but because the remnants of this dialectic are present in Arabo-Islamic culture until today. In fact, *ghad al-basar* (the lowering of the gaze) translates into *habbit ‘inik* (lower your eyes) in Tunisian dialect. In Çabra Hachma: *Sexualité et Traditions* (*Patient and Shy: Sexuality and Tradition* 1989), Lilia Labidi maintains: “Everyone’s gaze keeps watch over the virtue of women. Patient, prudish and virtuous, women avoid making men disgusted with themselves and disgusted with female sexuality. Women allow men to remain men” (73). According to Labidi, women have come under closer examination indicating that the patriarchal nature of Tunisian society has altered the Islamic discourse on *al-nazar* and *al-basar* (vision) from a cross-gender one to an exclusive imposition upon women.

In his book *al-Nazar fi ahkam al-nazar bi-hassat al-basar*, Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi (1167-1231), explains *mas’alat al-nazar* (the issue of the gaze) from an intellectual Islamic perspective (this includes the *Qur’an*, *hadith*, the *madhahib*, and ‘urf) based upon the verse of the *Qu’ran* that states:

> Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do (30) and say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (ordinarily) appear thereof… (31)

These verses command both men and women to “lower their gaze and guard their modesty” (30) although Abu al-Hassan Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi specifies that the above *Quranic* verse is
applicable to the nazar (the gaze) as well as to voice, whereby one must lower both when communicating with others. In his view, the Islamic restrictions on the gaze must be respected not only across gender but also on the inter-gender level. The idea of ‘lowering the gaze’ does not apply to men or women only, but is more of a general conduct that all must abide by. (15)

Further, Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi mentions the prophet Muhammad’s hadith: “kull ’ayn zaniya” (“Every eye fornicates” 16) which gives reason to the obligation of every Muslim to lower his gaze. This is not the only hadith that the scholar mentions where the prophet insists on the importance of lowering the gaze as a shield between a Muslim and temptation. However, the deontological limitations of the nazar (that is, the action of seeing is not entirely responsible for the consequences of looking, which are infatuation, sexual excitement, etc.) appear to be fluid, insofar as there existed many distinctions among classes of people in the 12th century (slave, dhimmis, hermaphrodite). The issue of al-nazar according to Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi is linked to the definition of ‘awra (the part of the body that must be covered) which he delineates at the beginning of each chapter and which changes according to social status and gender. Moreover, the Islamic scholar shows that the Qur’an, and especially the hadith, is concerned with the issue of al-nazar for the sake of avoiding ifitan (temptation, infatuation), which can lead to sin.

In his article, “La notion de ‘awra selon Abu al-Hasan Ali b. Muhammad b. al-Qattan al-Fasi (m. 628/1231),” Eric Chaumont draws a comparison between the religious climate of the Almoravid dynasty and today’s religious revivalism in the Arab world. Chaumont indeed sees similarities between the two eras and explains the publication of Ibn al-Qattan’s manuscript in 1996 as a proof of people’s interests in examining the definitions of ‘awra and the limitations of the nazar, and to relate them to their daily lives and especially to dress codes (veiling, etc).
While Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi reserves thirty-three pages for “Men’s Look onto Women,” he devotes only ten pages to the issue of “Women’s Look onto Men,” indicating that men’s nazār is more complex than that of women.\textsuperscript{24} Although the Muslim scholar does not mention the issue of ‘power’ which is the basis for some psychoanalytical and feminist concepts of the gaze, it appears that the manzūr ilayh (the one who is looked at) wields control as he or she is responsible for covering or revealing his or her ‘awrā. Yet, Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi enumerates the responsibilities of both the nazīr (the one who looks) and the manzūr ilayh, regardless of gender, to maintain modesty under Islamic law. However, the concept of al-nazār remains fluid. For example, Chaumont mentions that “Gaze is illicit but to ‘let show’ certain parts of the body is allowed” (119). This allows the manzūr ilayh some flexibility, as they are not viewed as a passive object or a victim of al-nazār.

According to Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi, a man may not look at the face of a woman who is outside of his immediate family (mahram) if he feels he may be tempted, yet a woman may show her face. Therefore, the responsibility to ‘fight temptation’ is upon the man (120). This Islamic scholar emphasizes the importance of using one’s judgment, whether man or woman, al-nazār or manzūr ilayh, to prevent infatuation and illicit passion from turning into an illegal sexual act (outside of marriage). Chaumont notes that Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi’s \textit{al-Nazar fi ahkam al-nazar bi-hassat al-basar} aims to maintain and uphold the patriarchal order of his society (122).

However, the Islamic scholar mentions that men are tempted more easily than women and

\textsuperscript{24} In his work \textit{Love Theory in later Hanbalite Islam} (1979), Joseph Norment Bell sheds light on the relationship between nazār and ‘ishq (excessive love), according to Ibn al-Qayyim. He notes: “The correct view, according to Ibn al-Qayyim, is that the first stages of love—glances, exposing oneself to temptation, and contemplating the beloved—are voluntary actions, whereas the involvement which follows is involuntary and inescapable” (126). According to this view, the relationship of the nazār to the beloved acts as a precursor to a physical action that Bell describes as “involuntary.” This explains Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi’s insistence on the importance of ‘regulating’ the nazār and setting its religious boundaries.
therefore, he places more restrictions on men as a nazir in his fifth chapter, which is devoted to
men’s look upon women. Interestingly, the cultural context in Tunisian society implies that
women are responsible for concealing/covering themselves so that they are not a subject of
men’s nazar. Thus, in Tunisia, the manzur ilayh—women become responsible for the good
conduct of the nazir—men.

Have contemporary Tunisian women novelists read Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi’s work?
Possibly not, yet, they have witnessed a polarizing of Tunisian society since the 1990s and they
regularly attend religious discussions and notice the reexamining of the concept of ‘awra by
many Tunisian women. Therefore, while writing within the cultural framework of a small society
that demands that women lower their gaze (habbit ‘inik), the writers in this study challenge the
nazar. In fact, the nazar still determines the ‘morality’ of the person for many. While it is a sign
of power and prowess for a man to maintain his gaze, it is rather a sign of rudeness, looseness
and possibly a sexual invitation if a woman directs her gaze at a man, according to Labidi in
Çabra Hachma (8) and Dalenda and Abdel Hamid Largueche in Marginales en Terre d’Islam
(Marginal Women in Muslim Lands 94).

Habbit ‘inik and Freedom

When women write within the socio-cultural patriarchal structure of habbit ‘inik and are
surrounded by the haunting effect of the word ‘ayb (shameful), they invite the readers and
scholar to consider the way they look at men in their narratives worlds. Despite the socio-
political limitations, the novel emerges as a literary genre that allows for a degree of freedom not
easily found in other spaces. For example, Mokhtar explores sexual violence against girls and
incest in al-Kursi al-hazzaz, which was censored for three years and finally released in 2008.
Mokhtar dared to exploit the novel to reveal taboos in Tunisian society, and then waited for the censors to approve it. This shows that like other writers in the Arab world, Tunisian writers must outsmart the censor while resisting the pernicious effects of self-censoring. Despite pro-feminist state policies, and the semblance of equality between men and women, there seems to be confusion for Tunisian literary critics between a woman’s text and her body and a misunderstanding about the usage of the first person singular I in a novel and an autobiographical essay. Further, the scarcity of critical studies pertaining to women’s novels in Tunisia, while they are on the rise, suggests that more consideration needs to be given to such a body of texts, for they may reveal the untold. For women no longer write about their ‘silences’ but instead, talk back. The next chapter focuses on Amel Mokhtar’s books viewed through the lens of gaze theory.
CHAPTER 2

Pleasure and Mutuality of the Gaze in Amel Mokhtar’s Novels

When he said my name, I did not recognize it. I imagined that he was talking to someone else. At that moment, I saw a sparkle in his eyes that gently relaxed me. I awoke from it once the words “I love you” came out of my mouth. (Amel Mokhtar,25 Nakhab al-hayat 21)

Sawsan bin ‘Abdallah, the narrator and protagonist in Nakhab al-hayat (1993), dreamily professes feelings of love and pleasure connected to gaze and voice when she recalls her lover, Ibrahim. Amel Mokhtar makes use of the first person throughout the novel, thus setting the tone for Sawsan’s journey of self-discovery to Germany. The theme of sexual pleasure and the narrator’s search for it dominates the novel. When Sawsan bin ‘Abdallah gazes seductively upon a man, she finds pleasure in the mutuality of the gazing game. Though her gaze may not lead to sexual pleasure, it still provides her with the visual pleasure of seeing her reflection in other men’s eyes. I propose that Mokhtar’s female narrators and characters attempt to establish a mutual gaze, however, they are still free to interrupt or refuse it, putting them in a controlling position that allows them to appropriate power. Because female characters direct the mutuality of gaze, women’s pleasure—that is the pleasure of looking and being looked at or the sadistic pleasure of teasing men—can take center stage in the narrative. Hence, the novelist goes against established tradition by condemning men’s pleasure to oblivion while front-staging women’s gaze and pleasure. According to Mildred Mortimer in “Reappropriating the Gaze in Assia Djebar’s Fiction and Film” (2001): “…Maghribian patriarchy still attempts to restrict movement and vision, denying Algerian woman her right to circulate freely in public space where she may

\[25\text{Amel Mokhtar was born in El Kef, Tunisia in 1964. She completed her Bachelor’s in Natural Science at the university in Tunis and launched her career in journalism in 1985. She has published many of her short stories in Tunisian newspapers and Arab literary magazines. Her first novel Nakhab al-hayat was published in Beirut in 1993. She then published a short stories collection entitled La ta’shiq hadha al-rajul and her novel al-Kursi al-hazzaz in 2003. She won several prizes such as the Tunisian ministry of culture’s prize for literary innovation in 1994 and the COMAR book prize for her novel Maestro in 2007.}\]
see and be seen‖ (213). As Tunisian women are part of the *Maghribi* mosaic, Mortimer’s comments might be said to apply to them as well. Hence, *Maghribi* women encounter visual limitations within their societal spaces in both positions as *nazir* and as *manzur ilayh*.

In her article “Gazing Games: Yusuf Idris’s Contemplating Protagonist and the Elusive Object of his Gaze” (2009), Hanita Brand juxtaposes theories on the gaze from the West with those from the East. The uniqueness of her article stems from the fact that she takes into consideration fields such as art, culture, gender studies and psychoanalysis in order to theorize the gaze and *al-nazar*. Brand notes:

*Western theories centred on gazing-at-the-double emphasize a tight relationship between the subject and object of the gaze, a nexus of life and death and a strong emotional attachment through infatuation and falling in love. A similar significance is attached to perceptions of the gaze in the literature of Islamic jurisprudence and theology.* (160)

Despite Brand’s proposed project that reinforces a binary opposition between East and West, the above statement shows that she actually finds similarities between a Lacanian concept of the gaze (gazing at one’s self in the mirror) and the idea of the gaze provoking infatuation and falling in love found in Islamic jurisprudence. Brand makes use of theory on *al-nazar* developed by the twelfth century Imam, Abu al-Hassan Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi (1156-1231). *Al-nazar* has two aspects: one pertains to the gaze toward God and the other to the gaze directed toward body parts (160). The inhibitions of the gaze are related to infatuation (*iftitan*), which according to Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi must be avoided. Brand proposes, however, that her analysis of Yusuf Idris’s short stories shows that Arab culture negates mutuality of the gaze (161). Brand refers to Michael Argyle’s and Mark Cook’s definitions of gaze and mutual gaze laid out in their book *Gaze and Mutual Gaze* (1976) when analyzing Yusuf Idris’s ‘gazing games’. They note: “Whenever organisms use vision, the eyes become signals as well as channels; the most important place to look is another’s eyes. Mutual gaze is arousing, and depending on the
situation may lead to attack or withdrawal” (I). Their definition of gaze emphasizes the importance of its mutuality, which Mokhtar attempts to achieve through her narrators and other characters in her novels. Indeed, Mokhtar develops scenarios in which the gaze acts as a ‘signal’ or a ‘channel’ that leads to ‘attack’ or ‘withdrawal’ responses in her characters.

Brand bases her study partially on the work of Andalusian hadith scholar Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi who introduces his book, al-Nazar fi ahkam al-nazar bi-hassat al-basar, by stating that vision, as a sense is one of the fastest ways to reach someone’s heart. He adds that vision is second in importance only to breathing. Hence, the relevance of the act of gazing in Islamic jurisprudence, which Ibn al-Qattan analyzes, in the process taking into consideration the four madhahib (Schools of Islamic Thought) along with cross-gender and inter-gender gazes. Relevant to the present study, his sixth chapter, entitled “fi nazar al-nisa’ ila al-rijal,” (“Women Gazing at Men”) theorizes the ways in which women gaze at men in accordance with Islamic jurisprudence, thus reflecting the cultural influences at work in twelfth century Islamic society.

According to Eric Chaumont in his article “La notion de ‘awra selon Abu al-Hasan Ali b. Muhammad b. al-Qattan al-Fasi (m. 628/1231)” (2006), although Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi’s observations date from the Almohavid dynasty (1130-1269), they reflect attitudes that have lingered in contemporary Islamic societies. The resurfacing of Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi’s manuscript in 1996 is due to the resurgence of an interest in Islam within the Arab world. In fact, Chaumont draws similarities between Arab societies today and the Almohavid society in which Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi lived and wrote. To resume his view on al-nazar, men are more susceptible to the sexual seductions caused by ‘the eye’ than women are, though both men and

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26 According to Abu Mahmud, Abu al-Hassan Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi was born in 1167 and died in Fes in 1230. He resided in Marrakesh and specialized in the hadith. He wrote Al-nazar fi ahkam al- nazar bi-hassat al-basar, maqala fi al-Awzan, and barnamaj. (Introduction to al-Nazar fi ahkam al-nadhar bi-hassat al-basar 7)
women must avoid the nazar that might lead to infatuation (hawa). In his lengthy explanations, there is no mention of power or subject/object relationships between the nazir and manzur ilayh. However, the cultural context of al-nazar deviates from the Islamic theory, whereby, according to Labidi:

… women’s bodies, condemned to secrecy must be concealed. A Tunisian woman must walk with her head bowed, lowering her gaze and never making eye contact with others. She is not to talk or laugh too loud. Overall, a Tunisian woman must be [sabra hashma] patient and shy. (8)

From Labidi’s observations on women’s vision in Tunisian society, it appears that the Islamic concept of al-nazar that Ibn al-Qattan outlines is altered within the framework of patriarchal Tunisian society. Consequently, the equally gendered Islamic restrictions on al-nazar transform into visual limitations for women in Tunisian society.

Debates on the gaze, which were popular in the 1970s, still linger. In 1975, Laura Mulvey examined the gaze within the framework of cinema. In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” she emphasizes the scopophilic nature of men’s gaze. Her notions are useful for this study because she links the gaze to sexual pleasure, even though she proposes a narrow definition that only pertains to male viewers. She assigns different roles to men and women: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (19). According to Mulvey, the gaze exists within a power structure that the masculine ‘spectator’ controls and subjects women to, thus, women assume a passive role with no power to gaze. This constitutes a weak point in Mulvey’s argument: my study of Tunisian women writers’ novels shows that women take an active position and gaze back. Unlike the

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**nazar** theory, gaze theory assumes powerful/powerless relations between the object and subject of the gaze. Although Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi does not frame the *nazar* within a power structure, according to him, when the woman is in the position of a *manzur ilayh*, she becomes responsible for covering\(^{28}\) (or revealing herself) to others and her clothing reflects social status. Yet, Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi’s goal is that both men and women dress and look in order to achieve modesty, regardless of whether they are in the position of *nazir* or *manzur ilayh*.

An important aspect of *al-nazar* is *al-‘ayn* (the eye) because it serves as the means of expression and is the origin of the gaze or *nazra*. As noted in Chapter One, S. Van Den Burg defines *‘ayn* as not only being sight, but the effect of seeing. The act of seeing, carried out by *al-‘ayn* correlates with *al-fi’l* (the action). However, while *al-‘ayn* carries out a variety of actions summarized in the gaze or the *nazra*, *al-‘ayn* has diverse meanings as well, that is, not all gazes are the same. The meaning of the gaze may vary for the act of gazing does not guarantee that mutuality will be established, that is, the Other may or may not look back. In the *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an* (2009), Andrew Rippin defines *al-nazar* as:

The action of the eyes (q.v.), and of the ears (q.v.), respectively. Seeing and hearing are understood to be attributes of God and the terms are used literally as human bodily senses as well as metaphorically in the senses of “to know,” “to understand,” and “to learn”... More common words for dealing with human perception are related to *al-nazar*, which is used over one hundred times in the Qur’an. This root incorporates a broad range of usages, including the imperative, where it is usually translated as “Behold!” Here, the sense is turning one’s attention to something, making it the focus of one’s gaze.

I consider these definitions of *al-‘ayn* and *al-nazar* useful to my study, because they draw attention to the connection between the eye and other senses, such as speaking, voice, and

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\(^{28}\) According to Ibn al-Qattan, the type of covering for women differentiates social rank and hence gives women a certain power. For example, the clothing restrictions on a ‘free’ woman are not the same for a slave. The former must conceal her body while the latter is not required to. (Refer to Eric Chaumont’s article in bibliography)
hearing, found in the selected novels of this work. The definition of \textit{al-‘ayn} relates to \textit{al-fi’l}, suggesting that the gaze is active and may cause such emotions as pleasure or displeasure.

The topic of the gaze and women gazing appears as a relatively new phenomenon in the Arab world, especially in Tunisia where the first Arabic novel by a Tunisian woman appeared in 1983 (Fontaine, \textit{Ecrivaines Tunisiennes} 124). As the novel became a space where Arab women writers could express themselves, it also served to expose the realities of their societies, such as war, (Hanan al-Shaykh, Sahar Khalifa), love (Ahlam Mostaghanemi, Amel Mokhtar) and gender relations, which are omnipresent in novels by both men and women. In \textit{Gaze and Voice as Love Objects} (1996), Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek state: “... the continuation of the old \textit{bataille des lumières}, is nowhere fought so ferociously as in the terrain of the relationship between the sexes” (2). This remark presupposes a psychoanalytical perspective, connecting the gaze to a relationship of love and pleasure. Mokhtar brings to the fore this relationship in her three novels: Her characters are either living and experiencing love and pleasure or else striving to provoke such feelings through the gaze.

Whereas Mulvey defines visual pleasure as a male domain, Mokhtar shows that it is instead, a mutual cross-gendered one. Mokhtar not only enables her female characters to gaze freely at men, but she also eventually negates the mutuality of the gaze for male characters, thus suggesting that gaze and pleasure may in fact be a specifically female function. By allowing her female characters to appropriate the dominant male gaze, Mokhtar sets the stage for her female characters to choose whether their gaze on men be pleasurable or not. She further takes away the ‘right’ to gaze from her male characters, as several of them wish to establish a mutual gaze with women, but are not able to. Making use of Brand’s article “Gazing Games: Yusuf Idris’s Contemplating Protagonist and the Elusive Object of his Gaze” and Susan Lanser’s \textit{Fictions of}
Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice (1992), I investigate the narrators’ gaze in Mokhtar’s three novels. Brand argues that most of the literary texts in Arabic do not assume mutuality of the gaze. She notes: “… in the literary renditions the gaze is usually and to a large part deprived of mutuality” (158). Yet, I argue that Amel Mokhtar creates female narrators that either establish or attempt to establish a mutuality of the gaze with the male characters in the novel. Furthermore, the female narrators and characters in Mokhtar’s novel negate the male characters’ gaze by not allowing their eyes to meet. In fact, throughout the novels, mutuality of gaze occurs only if the female characters either provoke it in the male characters or accept the reciprocity of their gazes. Overall, the female characters withhold their gaze and decide whether it will be mutual or not in the presence of male characters. However, before readers plunge into the novel, the author provides indications for understanding her text.

Dedications: The Dichotomy of Masculine vs. Feminine

Mokhtar’s first dedication in Nakhab al-hayat, “To the other woman within me, the one whom I love and fear when she glows sometimes,” suggests that the author’s idea of her female gender is a multi-faceted construct. Mokhtar is aware of another woman within her, perhaps she alludes to the woman writer within her. Although I do not confuse the author with the female narrator she creates, there remains a certain closeness that she maintains to her novels, through her dedications and by interrupting the narrative itself and allowing herself to penetrate the text through the authorial voice. In her first dedication, Mokhtar reveals the duality of womanhood that exists within her. One may wonder why this ‘other woman’ within her frightens her. Indeed, how can the author love the ‘other woman’ within her while fearing her at times? In an interview in March 2008, she disclosed that despite the novel’s autobiographical elements, the
narrator embarks on a journey that the author has only dreamed of accomplishing. Mokhtar remarks: “Despite what many critics have said about this novel being autobiographical, I never actually traveled to Germany nor did I live the adventures that Sawsan bin ‘Abdallah did. However, there is no doubt that I am present in the novel in one way or another. A writer cannot distance himself from the text he creates. Although I did not embark on Sawsan’s journey to Europe, it had always been a dream in my mind.” Sawsan’s defiant nature, her ruthless search for pleasure and the lack of a goal during her journey may be the traits of the “other woman” that cause trepidation in the author, who establishes duality as a key to the events of the novel. From the outset, the reader knows that within the female author or narrator there is a shadow of another woman who genders the narrative as soon as the author announces the presence of an “other” woman within herself.

The acknowledgement and search of the ‘other’ continues in Mokhtar’s dedications when in her second novel, al-Kursi al-hazzaz, she announces:

Dedication: to Hamid Abd al-Salam.
In the end, I find myself alone! I’m alone to the point of seclusion as I attempt to sort out my issues, my sadness, my happiness and my craziness. Why is it then that I sometimes feel the urge for that someone, my ‘other’, even though I’m sure that he will never be me, and that I will still be alone even when he is near me. (5)

Here, Mokhtar dedicates her novel to the father of Muna, the narrator. The first lines of al-Kursi al-hazzaz describe his disability, whereas the last paragraph of the novel discusses the continuation of Muna’s relationship with her father Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam even after his death. Mokhtar admits her yearning for a male ‘other’. However, as soon as she states this in her dedication, she negates the ‘other’ by declaring that loneliness and the feelings of solitude persist even in his presence. Through this dedication, Mokhtar aspires to live love in a state of fusion

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29 Interview with Amel Mokhtar in Tunis, May 2008.
with the male ‘other.’ The gender of the ‘other’ changes from a woman in the first novel to a man in the second. The results of the search are different: While the author acknowledges the ‘other woman within’ in her first dedication, she condemns her to solitude in the second as she looks for the ‘other.’ The gender of the ‘other’ determines the goal of the author. In her first dedication, she associates fear with love, while in the second novel’s dedication, she feels solitude; though she attempts to break it, she returns to it.

In her most recent novel, Mokhtar dedicates *Maestro* to “the masculine sleeping within my femininity” thereby acknowledging the feminine/masculine dichotomy that exists simultaneously. Mokhtar strongly believes that both men and women carry elements of each other’s gender within them. This final dedication suggests a peaceful attitude toward the gender dichotomy that is troubled in the preceding novel. While *al-Kursi al-hazzaz’s* dedication implies a sense of disappointment and disapproval of the ‘male,’ *Maestro’s* dedication indicates a sense of acceptance and relief. The author is at peace with the male/female dichotomy within her. Not only does Mokhtar carry a feminine ‘other’ within her, but she has a masculine ‘other’ as well. By suggesting that ‘he’ is ‘sleeping’ within her, one wonders if the novel presents moments when the masculine awakens. Indeed, the masculine appears in the form of three male narrators throughout the novel. Hence, the dedication sets the tone of the narrative by acknowledging the inter-gender status of the author.

In fact, unlike the other women novelists examined in this study, Amel Mokhtar is the only writer who does not use an epigraph from another writer or poet in her dedication, but instead writes her own. Thus, she gazes at her own work and reflects her ‘self’ as the author standing outside the narrative. This sets the tone, allowing the novelist to have an intimate

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30 Interview with Amel Mokhtar, May 2008
moment with her reader and guide him or her. It is a simple and short way of announcing her narrative project. Interestingly, Mokhtar intrudes in the narrative of *Maestro* when the narrator ‘Afif insults Amel Mokhtar, his creator. She says: “If you dare to insult me again, rest assured that I’ll kill you. You know that you’re a fictive character made up of words. All I need to do is assign you a synonym to the verb ‘to kill’ and you’ll be dead” (70). The author thus gazes upon her creations. Furthermore, by introducing herself into her narrative, Mokhtar assigns herself an active role within the text. When she threatens to kill her character, she takes pleasure in playing with their lives of her and shows that her scrutiny of them is not remote but intimate. Scrutiny of Mokhtar’s works reveals the construction of a mutual gaze between characters and the establishment of pleasure, whether it be mutual or otherwise.

By showing the narrator’s authority (or lack thereof), a summary of Mokhtar’s three narratives assists in understanding the role of the gaze in the quest for pleasure and its connection to power.

**Narrators and Power**

In *Nakhab al-hayat* (1993), the narrator, Sawsan bin ‘Abdallah, begins with a recollection of her student life. She alludes to a male character without mention of his name. Instead, she describes him by the color of his skin, his smell and the size of his lips (7). The narrator only reveals his name, Ibrahim, in the second chapter. The novel is a monologue in which Sawsan engages during her travels in Germany and her return to Tunisia. When Sawsan gets bored of her ‘here’—Tunis—and decides she wants to go ‘there’—Bonn, Germany—she ends her relationship with Ibrahim and travels to Bonn with very little money and nowhere to go. Sawsan’s memories of life in Tunisia haunt her even when she travels to free herself from her
past. In this short novel, Mokhtar juxtaposes the narrator’s present in Germany to her past in Tunis. The world of pleasure absorbs Sawsan as she lives romantic adventures. Her physical beauty and Tunisian charm mesmerizes men and yet she does not always accept their propositions. In the end, Sawsan returns to Tunis, goes straight home to her parents’ house and resumes her relationship with Ibrahim. An examination of this novel reveals the possibility of communication, sexual pleasure and inner-satisfaction with the opposite sex through the gazing game controlled by the woman narrator. For although the narrator does not always engage in sexual activities with her male acquaintances, feelings of victory emerge when she seduces a man with her looks, yet does not allow him to touch her.

When compared to later texts in which Mokhtar negates the mutuality of the gaze, this work serves as a positive example involving a degree of hope. Sawsan bin ‘Abdallah’s multiple sexual adventures take place away from her homeland, which represents her past, Ibrahim, her parents and her home. As she is a tourist in another country, the taboos imposed in Tunisian society limiting free sexual relations and restricting the gaze of women cease to exist. While away from her habitual environment, she is at liberty to indulge in sexual adventures, yet she discovers that there are limits within her and that not all limits are merely socially and culturally imposed. In this study, I investigate how the narrating protagonist in Nakhab al-hayat reaffirms her power as a narrator through a mutual gaze that she controls.

In al-Kursi al-hazzaz (2002), Mokhtar unravels a psychological narrative in which Muna ‘Abd al-Salam, a university professor, serves as both protagonist and narrator. In her search for true love, Muna disentangles her difficult relationship with her silent and disabled father, Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam, as she cares for him and goes about her life. While she attempts to balance her intellectual life with her intimate one, she seeks her elderly father’s approval, thus revealing an
Electra complex. The complicated social conventions in Tunisian society against which Muna rebels make the balance between the father’s approval and her personal needs impossible to meet. After living through several failed relationships, Muna decides to marry Munji, an act that she believes will please her father and bring her stability. When she has an affair with his friend Lutfi on her honeymoon, she comes to realize that marriage is not for her. Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam is not the only disabled man in the book, although he is the one with actual physical limitations. Her husband Munji and her two lovers have other psychological limitations, which distances them from Muna as she searches for peace with her inner self and with her father, even after his death.

Mokhtar’s second novel further explores the possibility of a mutual gaze, however, the male characters meet Muna ‘Abd al-Salam in complex situations that render them impotent while she seeks power. Her father, impotent due to old age and illness, represents an ultimate authority. At the same time as she attempts to establish a mutual gaze with her father, she conspires to take over his authority represented by his rocking chair, which is his throne. Consequently, her sexual experience on the rocking chair with one of her lovers may be an intentional act aimed at reaffirming her power rather than the accident that she claims it to be. The issue of power infiltrates the novel in many ways as the narrator shifts between past and present in her narration of events. Yet, the narrator chooses to focus on her own power struggle with her father over his rocking chair, a piece of furniture that takes on a metaphoric and figurative presence throughout the novel. Before becoming a disabled and silenced old man, Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam had been a strong father to Muna; it is from his rocking chair that he governed family affairs. He has attempted to guide his daughter into adulthood separating mind
from body and avoiding emotional and physical issues. That is, Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam has always taken Muna’s mind into consideration and never acknowledges her body and femininity.

Central to the novel, Muna shows her own empowerment by attempting to control male characters. For example, she never gives her father a chance to speak. In addition, Muna maintains control over the implied reader as the only narrating voice throughout the novel. She has the ability to manipulate the inferred reader when she recounts different versions of her childhood rape to male characters. These variations in the narration create confusion for the reader; one may not comprehend which version of her story is accurate, and eventually the reader may wonder if the rape ever happened or if it is the product of Muna’s imagination. As an omniscient narrator, Muna knows the truth but decides to present various versions of it.

Another aspect of the narrator’s power resides in the nature of the relationships that she maintains with men, whereby she gazes at them and decides on the beginning and end of their encounters. When she chooses to marry Munji in order to obtain her father’s approval, she has an affair with his friend Lutfi on her honeymoon. The multiple men in Muna’s life are a sign of her rebellion against paternal power and the rules of a patriarchal society. Because she understands that her father does not care to see his daughter with men and only consents to a lawful relationship, her struggle for power remains focused on her father throughout the narrative. An analysis of the narrator’s efforts to assume her father’s power shows her attempt to establish mutuality of gaze with a central male character in her life: her father.

In her experimental novel Maestro, Mokhtar shifts her focus from female to male narrators:

I looked at my face in the mirror and noticed my black-haired chest. As my hand touched my cheek, I felt the stubble and thought to myself, it must have scratched her beautiful skin... I stared at my features attempting to repair their anomalies. If I were to get plastic surgery, would I have the crow’s feet removed from my tiny eyes and brows? (10)
The physicality of the male body intrudes into the narrative underlining the fact that the narrator is no longer a single woman but three different men representing three different generations of the same family. Each one suffers from the loss of a beloved woman, causing them feelings of abandonment or a fractured sense of identity. The grandfather, the imam Hajj Tahir Bilgayid, narrates the story of his life from his tomb where he longs to be united with his wife Fatima. When she eventually dies, Satan plots for the multiple women whom the sheikh has secretly married to rebel against him, thus revealing his lifelong secret to his wife who denies him her gaze for the rest of eternity. ‘Afif, the very homely son of Tahir and Fatima, defies his ugly face by conquering many women; however, the one who has the greatest impact on him—Valeria—walks out of his life without a trace, throwing him into emotional trauma. Finally, Alfredo, an Italian from Genoa, searches for his father, the unknowing ‘Afif, because his mother Valeria has kept his identity secret.

The story takes place in Tunis, in Genoa and on the ‘floating island,’ a ferry between Tunis and Italy on which ‘Afif works. Many secrets are revealed toward the end of the novel, thereby disclosing the complexity of each male narrator within the family structure. ‘Afif learns that his mother Fatima, the apparently faithful wife, betrayed his father, Hajj Tahir. Hajj Tahir loses his beloved wife Fatima in the hereafter once she discovers his infidelities. After one night of passion, ‘Afif never meets Valeria again and never knows of his son Alfredo, however Alfredo discovers that he is ‘Afif’s son. Finally, Alfredo never meets his father alive, but realizes that identity is a construct in the mind. The aspiration for the three male narrators to establish a mutual gaze with the ones they love is never achieved. Furthermore, two women characters are the main cause for mutuality of the gaze not taking place. In the case of ‘Afif, Valeria leaves him forever and chooses not to see him again; she conceals ‘Afif’s identity from
Alfredo by not revealing the identity of his father. Finally, Fatima decides to evict Sheikh Tahir from her grave and forbids him from seeing her again.

**Nakhab al-hayat: Pleasure through Mutuality of the Gaze**

In *Nakhab al-hayat*, Mokhtar makes use of the mutual gaze between the female narrator and the male characters who are subjected to her gaze as a means of attaining pleasure. This idea is not new in literature. In her article entitled “Gazing Games: Yusuf Idris’s Contemplating Protagonist and the Elusive Object of his Gaze” Brand states:

> In most disciplines, both in the Middle East and the West, the gaze is connected to the very core of matters human, to questions of life and death, usually through sexuality, which may be seen as both life-giving and life-threatening, even causing death. In this respect, the cultural significance of the gaze is more or less an extension of its natural function. (157)

The function of the gaze is a physical one that the eye performs. Brand shows that the phenomenon of the “gaze” has many meanings, and colors how we see things and interpret the world, hence, it is not independent from cultural context. On the contrary, our cultural context shapes the way we gaze at others.

Brand ties the different aspects of the gaze to culture, as the dynamics of the gaze depend not only upon the culture in which the gaze takes place, but also the gender of the gazed at and gazed upon. In her opinion, a simple gaze can be ‘life-giving’ or ‘life-threatening’ in the sense that the gaze conveys the meaning it upholds to the receiving party. Brand argues for a connection between culture and gaze suggesting that the nature of the gaze depends upon the cultural context in which it takes place. Although the intent may appear to be sexual arousal of the opposite sex in the case of the narrator Sawsan bin ‘Abdallah, it is not always the goal of the gazer. Brand notes:
I have traced one such interesting use of the gaze in modern Arabic literature, particularly in women’s writings, but not only there: while mostly retaining its erotic character, the gaze there serves—among other things—as a tool of defiance or challenge to unjust sexual and/or social powers; as a learning and self-discovery tool, and as a means to reform existing social ills. (158)

Brand sees the use of gaze in modern Arabic literature as a multi-faceted prism serving either personal gender-related objectives, challenging the dominant male patriarch or questioning socially established norms. The Tunisian proverb *kull shay hbas illa inzar ya nas* (“Everything is forbidden except looking, for it has no limits”) suggests that socially imposed boundaries upon gazing do not exist in Tunisian society, however, this proverb is misleading because it does not necessarily apply to women, as social norms dictate that women should not gaze into men’s eyes. Brand sees a predominant gazing theme in Arab women’s literature (158), which is my reason for bringing in her arguments about the gaze and mutuality of the gaze in this chapter. In Mokhtar’s novels, there exists a mutual gaze, which Brand does not account for. In *Nakhab al-hayat*, the narrator is preoccupied with her own gaze at men, but, she also describes the way that men gaze at her, thus introducing the possibility of mutuality of the gaze. Shifting between the positions of the one who looks and the one who is looked at, the narrator creates confusion for male characters because female characters’ gaze is not stable. This shifting of positions contributes to a wandering gaze in women, a gaze that travels.

**Sawsan’s Peregrinations: the Traveling Gaze**

Sawsan travels to Germany without knowing a word of German. Therefore, she depends upon eyes and gestures to communicate with people in Bonn. One of Mokhtar’s narrative tools when focusing on Sawsan bin ‘Abdallah’s journey is the usage of gaze vocabulary. Not only does Mokhtar employ a rich vocabulary to express the functions of the gaze, but her use of
language explains the different positions within the nazar as well. Examples include: yuthabbit basarah ‘ala jasadi (“he focuses his vision on my body,” 10), waqift amam ahadihim wa nazart fi ‘umq ‘aynayh fa-ra’aytani (“I stood before one of the men, looked deep into his eyes and saw myself,” 15), and lam afham al-lughah, bal ahsast al-ma’na wa fahimtu min ‘umq ‘aynayha al-zarqawayn (“I didn’t understand her language, but I felt the meaning in the depth of her blue eyes,” 15). The first quote establishes Ibrahim as the one who gazes and Sawsan as the one who is gazed at, rendering her body the object of the gaze even as Ibrahim avoids her eyes, thus precluding a mutual gaze. The second quote demonstrates that Sawsan establishes a mutual gaze with a stranger to look at her own reflection. This quote refers to depth of vision and reveals multiple layers in the gaze, that is, one must look deep into the eyes of the Other to see the Self. In contrast, a glance off the surface of the eyes would only give her a superficial reflection of herself similar to the reflection of a mirror. In the third example, Sawsan depends upon the deep gaze into a woman’s blue eyes to make sense out of what she says, since Sawsan lacks the ability to understand German. Depth of gaze does not only reveal the Self, but aids in comprehending the other. The gaze becomes an international means of communication that transcends geographical boundaries. While Sawsan assumes the position of the one who looks, she also inherits the position of the one who is looked at because of the established mutual gaze. Consequently, when a rupture occurs between speech and vision, the gaze takes over meaning and comprehension. The above examples demonstrate that mutual gaze can be established between members of the opposite sex or the same sex, that positions of the gaze shift and overlap, and that there exist multiple layers of the gaze.

In addition, Mokhtar employs words such as daw’ (light), ‘alaq (shadow), and bariq (brightness) frequently to show that the narrator prefers light to darkness. The idea of the gaze
reflecting the light of the soul is synonymous with pleasure throughout the novel, even where the
self is concerned. When Sawsan looks at her reflection in the mirror, she seeks to read deep into
her soul and to see a reflection of her true self (39). This search alone provides her with
pleasure, as she attempts to unravel the secrets hidden behind her physical appearance.

Although the gaze is not always synonymous with mutual pleasure in Mokhtar’s first
novel, it sometimes provides a one-sided pleasure for the narrator. When Ibrahim approaches
Sawsan asking her: “Are you Sawsan bin ‘Abdallah?” she notes:

He broke my heart and I immediately fell madly in love with him. It was the second time
that I had seen him so close. Before that moment, I’d been avoiding him. When he
uttered my name, I almost didn’t recognize it thinking it was someone else he was
calling. I saw a light brightening his eyes. It moved across his glasses and caused me
to hallucinate. (21)

It is through Ibrahim’s eyes that Sawsan experiences her own pleasure and falls in love with him,
suggesting that the eyes may communicate better than words while providing pleasure at
different levels. Indeed, Sawsan mentions the light and brightness that radiates from Ibrahim’s
eyes several times. The memory of his eyes triggers other memories; as Sawsan recounts the
story of her Bonn adventures, her memory plays tricks on her and takes her back to Ibrahim, the
lover with the radiant eyes, left behind in Tunis because he refused to travel with her to
Germany.

After Sawsan notices Ibrahim’s eyes, mutual gazing serves as the foundation for their
relationship. She recalls him removed his glasses and whispered: “I want to see you with my
fingers” (39). By assigning the attributes of eyesight to the sense of touch, Mokhtar’s narrator
insists that the world of the two lovers revolves around the gaze and its power, while
strengthening the power of the gaze with the sense of touch. Despite Sawsan’s quest for the
unknown through her travels, the memory of Ibrahim’s gaze remains and a parallel between the
end of her relationship with Ibrahim and the image of herself in the mirror takes form. She notes:

As I stand before the mirror covered by the running hot water’s vapor, I wipe it off with my arm and wonder where this face was hidden. I wonder if this face looked like me a little earlier, was I myself? I don’t know. I just remember that when my pain became unbearable and the longing haunted me I asked my face: Whose face are you? I had the shape of a woman with no femininity. How long am I going to resist and not step back? (39)

Sawsan’s monologue in front of the mirror shows that with the loss of the mutual gaze with Ibrahim and her decision to leave for Germany, she has lost her femininity and sense of identity as a woman.

When Sawsan first arrives in Bonn, she heads to a bar where she orders a drink. As she drinks, she remembers a conversation she had with Ibrahim when she tried to convince him to travel with her. The author links the memory of Ibrahim’s eyes to the black eyes that Sawsan notices in the corner of the bar, only to discover that they belong to a stranger and not to Ibrahim (30). However, it is not only through his gaze that Ibrahim provides Sawsan pleasure. When he kisses her forehead and looks deep into her eyes, he offers her a pen as a gift and says: “I chose to give you a pen as a gift, do you know why? It will be an important tool in your life. I want you to remember me when you are successful” (31). Here, the combination of a deep look with another form of gaze—seeing into the future—allows Ibrahim to participate in Sawsan’s life, thus indirectly laying a claim to her future, a claim that comes to pass when Sawsan returns to Tunisia and to Ibrahim.

The mirror is omnipresent in Nakhab al-hayat and Sawsan returns to it often as a means of looking into her soul. At first she gazes into Ibrahim’s eyes as a means of seeing self while establishing a mutual gaze, but once she has lost Ibrahim, she replaces him with a mirror, an object that allows her to look into herself and see an image of herself that she decides to
construct in the absence of the one she loves. She says: “Days go by quickly, and my desire for him grows. Yet, I will not go back. I will draw a mask of light and put it on my face” (39).

Despite her desire to be with Ibrahim she resists and attempts to satisfy her physical desires with other lovers. Her mutual gaze with Ibrahim confirms Brand’s suggestion that in women’s Arabic literature the gaze serves “as an act of protest; as a means of transgressing the boundaries of gender separation; as a learning and self-discovery tool” (158). The act of protest for Sawsan becomes more apparent when she is in Germany and her sexual adventures multiply.

As for defying gender boundaries, Mokhtar’s plot suggests that none exist between genders in Tunisian society. The fact that the author establishes a mutual gaze between male and female characters indicates that gender separation is not a considered an issue in Tunisian society. Yet, in Çabra Hachma (1989), Lilia Labidi states that the ethics of a group depends upon a girls’ education, which is based in turn upon two fundamental concepts: sabr (patience) and hishma (shame), which constitute the virtue of girls (51). Contrary to Tunisian tradition, Sawsan has neither sabr nor hishma: She gives Ibrahim a chance to go with her to Germany, and when he refuses, she leaves on her own and does not wait for him. As for her sense of hishma which requires her to lower her gaze before the opposite sex, Sawsan appears not to have such a “virtue.” According to Labidi these two elements constitute decency for Tunisian women, and yet, Mokhtar defies these concepts and allows her narrator to rise above such social norms in her search for self and discovery of the other.

Ibrahim’s uniqueness stems from the fact that the mutual gaze established with Sawsan leads to sexual pleasure every time their eyes meet. Sawsan notes: “I ran to his lips and the struggle began as the waves left us two exhausted bodies” (36). The struggle Sawsan refers to is the sexual act in which Ibrahim and she struggle to reach sexual satisfaction. The word mut’a
(pleasure) occurs often throughout the novel and Sawsan reiterates the importance of reaching this stage with her lovers. She remarks:

I couldn’t believe that I’d once thought him a worthy lover and desired him intimately. Although I knew very well we weren’t compatible lovers, I was comfortable with him. Then, to each his own! Let’s enjoy our pleasures while we can! This is an illusion and nonsense! (19)

The lover she refers to in this passage is Ibrahim, to whom she grants the privilege of discovering the intricacies of her body. Whether Sawsan truly believes that her relationship with Ibrahim is an illusion or has convinced herself of such a fact to facilitate her departure, is not clear, since the narrator cultivates ambiguity. However, the narrative makes it clear that Sawsen intentionally breaks the mutual gaze established with Ibrahim. This gaze allowed for the overlapping positions when Sawsen both looked at and was looked at by her lover. Although Sawsan returns to her home in Tunis after her adventurous life in Germany, the narrator does not make it immediately apparent that she resumes her relationship with Ibrahim.

Sawsan’s and Ibrahim’s mutual gazes conclude with a sexual encounter, however, the situation changes when Sawsan establishes a mutual gaze with other men in Germany. In fact, Sawsan uses her gaze to seduce men and provoke desire in them but does not necessarily offer her body. A blond Frenchman invites Sawsan for a drink that she accepts without hesitation, and then she follows him to his hotel room. As they drink a bottle of wine, he tells Sawsan about the history of wine making in France. Perhaps the Frenchman thinks that he has reached a certain level of intimacy with this Tunisian stranger when he offers to play a song and she chooses “Ne me quitte pas” by Jacques Brel. In the song, a desperate lover asks his beloved not to leave him as he will suffer horribly and might even die if she leaves (43).

The Frenchman, whose name is never mentioned, thinks that Sawsan is Italian and wonders how to approach her, as he does not speak Italian. Then, he admits that he has asked
about her at the hotel’s reception desk where they told him her nationality. He says: “I found out you were Tunisian and I immediately sensed the closeness” (44). The term ‘closeness’ implies several possible meanings; the Frenchman could be referring to the geographical proximity between Tunisia and France, the colonial history between the two countries or simply the physical nearness in which Sawsan and the Frenchman find themselves. Nonetheless, silence reigns despite their physical proximity. Then, the Frenchman decides to kiss Sawsan’s hand and she expresses her pleasure, but misleads her readers by saying:

I relished his kiss upon my hand and allowed our fingers to play. He left his chair and fell to his knees in front of me. He kissed my hands and put his blond head in my lap smelling my clothes and my scent. His voice changed as he repeated whisperingly: “Oh! You smell so good!” (44)

Thus far, Sawsan does not express displeasure or repulsion. Yet, the Frenchman proceeds to take off his clothes and pulls her onto his bed where she notices that “his nose is bigger and his lips thinner” (44). She attempts “to suck on one of his lips” but fails as his lips are too thin to kiss. Sawsan exclaims: “I looked at him; he was so white I felt that he was a woman lying beside me. He was as tender, fair and soft as I was. I saw no difference between us” (44). Suddenly, Sawsan becomes aware that there is no sexual pleasure in looking at this nameless Frenchman. Consequently, she chooses to control the gazing game, thus showing that the gaze does not necessarily lead to intimacy and pleasure.

In order for a man to please Sawsan, he must be different from her, dark and rough, like Ibrahim. When the Frenchman asks Sawsan why she does not undress, she simply answers that she has no desire to do so. Sawsan refuses him because in her opinion he is not man enough to arouse her (44). Sawsan disappoints him as he surely hoped to succeed in seducing her for why would Sawsan follow a stranger into his hotel room, drink wine with him and, then, refuse to undress? Perhaps she thinks of the possibility of enjoying the Frenchman, however, as they get
physically closer and she fails to recognize any masculine traits that interest her, she ends the mutual gaze and rejects his advances.

The relevance of this male character derives from the fact that he attempts to become Sawsan’s lover but fails. She reduces him to impotence, blocks pleasure and condemns him to a defeat of his masculine prowess. Perhaps Sawsan would have allowed this man to become her lover if it were not for their physical similarities. Sawsan stands firmly in the position of the gazer, judging a man’s physical appearance. Indeed, the Frenchman’s fairness of skin proves distasteful to Sawsen because it is a female beauty attribute in Tunisian culture, praised in women, but not in men.³¹ By insisting on the difference between male and female standards of beauty, the narrator willingly accepts the binary opposition of male/female existing in Tunisian society.³² Yet, despite the clear gender divide that the narrator implies, she dares to question the male virility of the Frenchman and deconstructs the masculine.

Sawsan finds a position as a waitress in a bar through ‘Abd al-Latif, a new friend and colleague (61). After consuming a few alcoholic drinks, she finds herself walking down the street toward a nightclub arm in arm with two women, Suzie and Nicole, while ‘Abd al-Latif walks beside Nicole. Once they arrive at the nightclub, Suzie asks Sawsan to dance and she accepts. Although Sawsan allows Suzie to kiss her neck, she does not accept Suzie’s kisses on her lips. ‘Abd al-Latif informs Sawsan that the lesbian couple, Suzie and Nicole, nearly fought over her, and they insist on inviting Sawsan for the night have sex with them. While Suzie and Nicole discuss their plans with Sawsan, ‘Abd al-Latif has different ideas, which he expresses by telling Sawsan: “Tonight, you are mine” (67).

³¹ An aphorism in Tunisian dialect says “rajal abyad ki limra” (“a man as fair as a woman”), which is pejorative for men. Yet, the expression “bida kil sham’a” (“fair as a candlestick”) articulates physical beauty for a woman.
³² In Buniyan al-fihula (The Construction of Masculinity 2008), Raja Benslema illustrates the masculine/feminine binary opposition that predominates in the region and argues that it holds a central position in Arab culture (21).
‘Abd al-Latif engages in sexual games with Suzie and Nicole as they consume heroin and caress one another. It is only when he strokes Sawsan’s knee that she realizes that he is naked and ugly. The inferred meaning behind his distasteful nakedness is that his unsightly body hides an unattractive inner self. Despite his ugliness, Sawsan presses his hand and kisses his neck with repulsion as she proposes to return to her hotel room “where they will have more freedom” (70). As he tries to kiss her, she pulls away telling him to get dressed quickly (70). Sawsan interrupts her gaze and refuses pleasure in order to protect him from himself and preserve his dignity as a man. Their friendship is of more interest to Sawsan than his body.

Certainly, once again, the narrator chooses a lover who repulses her for he serves as a means to forget Ibrahim. Yet, when Sawsan interrupts the mutual gaze, their relationship shifts, and for Sawsan, listening takes over gazing as a means of understanding. For despite their mutual gazing games and ‘Abd al-Latif’s intent to make Sawsan his lover, they establish a sense of mutual friendship. As with the Frenchman, ‘Abd al-Latif lays his head on Sawsan’s lap and recounts his escape from Morocco, his harsh life as an illegal immigrant in France, and his marriage to a German woman who left him once he obtained legal papers. While he cries, he says: “Your scent’s that of an Arab woman. Your fragrance reminds me that I can’t forget. I won’t forget who I am. You’ve made me yearn for Tangiers, my mother and Fawziyya” (71). While he pretends to have forgotten his childhood and life in Morocco, at a vulnerable moment his past returns to him. One may attempt to bury memory, yet it will always come back to haunt the individual.

‘Abd al-Latif’s poignant memories cause him suffering and an emotional breakdown in Sawsan’s arms, who now listens. This listening aids her to understand her own decision to travel and reminds her of the treacheries of memory that may return to haunt her. As Sawsan watches
‘Abd al-Latif walk away in defeat, she observes a beaten man dragging his feet forward as though she is watching herself, gazing into her own future. Indeed, ‘Abd al-Latif serves as a precursor to Sawsan’s decision to return to Ibrahim (72).

Despite the narrator’s interest in establishing mutual gazes with men, she misleads them, since she does not always seek physical pleasure. Rather, as a narrator and as a female character in the plot, Sawsan affirms her power when she takes control and decides whether her gaze will be limited to the visual or develop into a quest for physical pleasure. Interestingly, the effeminate Frenchman and the emotionally troubled ‘Abd al-Latif serve to empower Sawsan. That is, the effect of the gaze upon her as the one who looks is more important than the one who is looked at, which has little effect upon her. Despite her weakness with regard to her memory of Ibrahim, she affirms her power as a gazer once away from her homeland, even while she searches for physical pleasure. Because Sawsan has broken the depth of her mutual gaze with Ibrahim, the one who is the object of the gaze fades in her eyes.

When the mutual gaze becomes superficial, the one who is gazed at is reduced to a weaker position. Brand comments upon the effect of the gaze:

... the reality of the story is made up of whatever the gazer deems to be happening, this is usually what we need in order to understand it. Nor does it matter that much of what the gazer comprehends about the object of his or her gaze is true or accurate or not, until such time that the protagonist himself or herself realizes this, since the story’s main-and at times sole-interest is in the effect the gazing has on the protagonist, who in many cases is also the narrator or partial narrator of the story. (159)

What counts according to Brand, is the effect of the gaze on the protagonist and not on other characters. That is, the interpretation of what the gazer sees is not relevant, but the effect of the gaze upon the gazer is important. Thus, as the memories of Ibrahim and their mutual gaze fade, Sawsan affirms her power as the gazer. Mokhtar combines the roles of narrator and protagonist in Sawsan who does not always gaze upon her male objects with a purpose in mind, although she
is conscious of the effects that her gazes have on men. In fact, the narrator enjoys the effects of her gazing games on her male characters, thus the gaze procures pleasure for her. Just as she enjoys and indulges in the physical act of pleasure, she takes equal pleasure in her rejection of certain men such as the Frenchman and ‘Abd al-Latif. Furthermore, Sawsan refuses to take part in a lesbian experience with Suzy and Nicole despite their insistence. Although she longs to experience all forms of pleasure, certain boundaries remain in place.

Whereas, Brand notices a lack of mutuality of the gaze in Yusuf Idris’s stories, Mokhtar establishes a mutual gaze between her female narrator and all of her male characters with the exception of one, a primary school teacher. As Sawsan leaves her Bonn hotel to travel to another town, she suddenly interrupts her narrative to recount her experience with her third grade teacher:

My tall teacher spoiled me. He offered me chocolate every time I answered his questions correctly. Since I was a good student, I used to take a lot of chocolate home with me daily. My mother wasn’t pleased about this and asked me if my teacher offered my classmates chocolate as well... Despite his special treatment, I didn’t like him, nor did I fear him like the rest of my classmates. (78)

Sawsan’s third grade teacher did not offer her chocolate as compensation for her correct answers. He offered her chocolate to justify his punishment of Sawsan and her friend Muna, the only two students in the class whom the teacher punished. The third grade teacher called the corner between the classroom closet and the door “the prison” where he often confined Sawsan. There was no real reason to punish Sawsan other than the fact that her teacher molested her, despite her silent tears. Although Sawsan wished she could pull out his moustache hairs, which caused her so much pain in her childhood, she never dared to react to his sexual advances (78).

After recounting her early forced sexual experience with her schoolteacher, Sawsan returns to the present and notes: “I have this urge to pull out his moustache and throw each hair
in the river. I’d like him to take those torn off hairs with him wherever he goes, and tell everyone the story” (78). Although in Sawsan’s childhood she could not establish a mutual gaze with her third grade teacher due to the powerful position he held, as an adult she strips away his masculinity by pulling off his mustache—in her imagination. The fact that she recounts her intentions in her narrative permits her to establish a mutual gaze with her teacher. Furthermore, she turns the tables and acquires power over a man who wronged her when she was weak and who committed the crime of stripping away her childhood innocence by molesting her. By stripping away his mustache, Sawsan strips away his manhood and takes away his virility, thus castrating him (78). The Tunisian proverb “erra jal b’shleghmu” (“a man’s mustache is a sign of his manhood”) suggests the importance of a man’s mustache as a symbol of virility and manliness. Yet, Sawsan looks down on her teacher and desires revenge by taking away his manliness just as he took away her innocence. Going beyond mutual gaze, Sawsan uses her imagination to degrade and humiliate the abusive teacher. She appropriates the power she lacked as a child and makes use of the tools she now possesses by recounting her narrative.

In Nakhab al-hayat the sharing of her gaze with the male characters serves to reaffirm Sawsan’s power as a woman and especially as a narrating voice. The novel ends with her return to her parents’ house in Tunis, where an unnamed man (possibly Ibrahim) knocks at the door. Sawsan’s note to him, “I do not want to tell you I love you” (111), suggests that her journey in Germany and her multiple gazing experiences have allowed her to reach a decision concerning her relationships with men. She is no longer interested in merely re-living what she had with Ibrahim, yet she realizes that his memory continues to haunt her.

Sawsan’s resolution suggests that her gazing stories enhance the female narrator’s power, however, as Brand notes: “... in the majority of gazing-stories in modern Arabic literature, the
protagonist-gazers are actually looking at their doubles, even if they themselves do not always
realize it, or if the objects of their gaze may not always seem as their exact mirror-images.” (160)

Indeed, Sawsan often looks at her double. She notes:

I can’t recall the last time I wore make-up. I used to put it on every day. I haven’t seen
kohl in my eyes in weeks. I used to choose my perfume and my clothes without
hesitating. It’s been awhile since I’ve done that. I’ve forgotten lots of things. All I
remember is that I haven’t seen my face in the mirror for a long time. (27)

The mirror holds an important place in Sawsan’s life. It offers her assurance and certainty
concerning her physical appearance. When Sawsan is at a loss, she looks at her reflection in the
mirror. By not looking at herself in the mirror or doing her beauty practices, Sawsan expresses
an interruption in her daily routine, which leads to an interruption in the way in which she looks
at herself. Her new life in Germany disrupts her self-image, something that she had maintained
through her daily make-up application while looking at her face in her mirror. Her journey has
led her to change the way she gazes not only upon others, but upon herself as well. In fact,
Sawsan makes use of her life in Germany to turn her gaze away from herself and toward others.
Although she deprives herself of the pleasure of her own mirror, she finds pleasure in gazing at
other people.

The Search for a Mutual Gaze in al-Kursi al-hazzaz

In her controversial novel al-Kursi al-hazzaz, Mokhtar again gives voice to a female
narrator. The work was released by the Tunisian censor in March 2008, although she had
attempted to publish it in 2002. The issue of incest (sex between cousins, 114) and the
descriptive sexual scenes were at the center of the controversy and the reason for the censor’s
decision to block publication for six years. Unlike her first novel, Mokhtar’s narrator and
protagonist Muna ‘Abd al-Salam does not establish a mutual gaze with her father Hamid ‘Abd
al-Salam. Although Muna is defiant and strong in her dealings with male lovers and friends, she does not succeed in establishing eye contact with the man who matters the most to her and from whom she seeks approval, namely her own father. The idea that mutual gaze is connected to power and pleasure dominates in Nakhab al-hayat. In al-Kursi al-hazzaz, attempts to establish mutuality to achieve power and pleasure do not necessarily succeed. Although Muna experiences mutual gaze and pleasure with her male counterparts, she struggles throughout the narrative to establish a mutual gaze with her disabled father. She compensates for failure with her father by empowering herself when she takes over his rocking chair.

In their book Gaze and Voice as Love Objects, Renata Salecl (1996) and Slavoj Zizek note:

...Love is never “just love” but always the screen, the field, on which the battles for power and domination are fought. Is voice, as a catalyst of love, not the medium of hypnotic power par excellent, the medium of disarming the other’s protective shield, of gaining direct control over him or her and submitting him or her to our will? Is gaze not the medium of control (in the guise of the inspecting gaze) as well as of the fascination that entices the other into submission (in the guise of the subject’s gaze bewitched by the spectacle of power). (3)

Salecl (1996) and Zizek link voice to gaze as they explain that there is more depth to the act of loving than is initially apparent. That is, love is a screen which conceals other elements. They argue that a closer look at voice and gaze allows for a better understanding of the fundamentals of love. In al-Kursi al-hazzaz, Mokhtar reinforces this idea by giving voice to Muna ‘Abd al-Salam as the only narrator in the novel, while making her father, Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam, the object of Muna’s gaze, love, and struggle for power.

Despite Muna’s love for her father, she finds pleasure in his disability. It allows her to take over his rocking chair, which serves as a symbol of patriarchal power in Muna’s household. The narrator reveals his identity immediately on the first page:
My father’s condition didn’t improve, and it doesn’t look like it will. Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam remains a corpse lying on the bed or sitting in his wheelchair after he used to sit on his throne in his small kingdom. (7)

As Muna describes her father’s current health situation, she juxtaposes the two chairs: on the one hand, there is the wheelchair where Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam sits paralyzed; on the other, there is an abandoned rocking chair (10). The title of the novel, al-Kursi al-hazzaz (The Rocking Chair) refers to the chair on which Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam used to sit and rock as he watched over and directed his family’s matters. The rocking motion further suggests that Hamid’s throne is shaky and on the verge of collapse. According to Muna’s narrative, it rocked back and forth like Muna’s life. For Muna, her father’s rocking chair inspires anxiety and she prefers not to see it.

The narrative evolves in a circular motion, starting with Muna describing her father and ending with her vision of a sheikh speaking to her with her father’s voice: “This place is ours, yours and mine together. We will have our annual meeting here. At dawn on the first day of every year, we shall meet. Whoever gets here first will wait for the other until sunrise” (130). Although Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam does not speak directly to his daughter in this passage, he breaks his usual silence and communicates with her. To Muna, her father has not died, in that she still feels his presence and communicates with him. He finally reciprocates, after long years of silence.

Muna cares for her sick father while desiring his forgiveness. She mentions the word ‘ghufra’ (forgiveness, 14) a term that is usually used in the context of the divine. Muna seeks forgiveness from her weakened father, who refuses to look into her eyes and exchange a gaze with her. Muna narrates:

When my father woke up at the hospital, he stared defiantly into my eyes ‘Why did you do this?’ he asked. Then he suddenly decided to stop looking to me. Every time I talked to him, he would close his eyes or simply look away. As I chattered away hoping for his mercy, he did not move or respond with either his hand or eyes. (7)
This passage illustrates the dichotomy between silence and communication that puts Muna and her father on opposite ends of the spectrum. While Muna tries to communicate with her silent father, he abstains from any form of communication with her. The power of communicating through touch and gaze becomes important in view of Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam’s paralysis and his inability to utter words. Though he has lost his physical and linguistic powers, he is still able to use silence in order to exercise authority over Muna (8). When Muna narrates her life, one understands that her father allowed an emotional vacuum to exist between them. Even though she now looks back at her past as an adult, she yearns nevertheless for a true interaction with her beloved father (16). The constant feeling of wanting to satisfy her father haunts her. Although it does not stop her from living her adventurous life and having numerous lovers, Muna suffers from guilt and yearns for his forgiveness.

Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam is portrayed as a powerful father who dominates his daughter. She reports that, even though he is disabled, he manages to kill her with his silence. Before his accident, he had already decided to be silent with her and only discuss family issues and household matters. During her childhood, he had demanded obedience, but then she became an adult and rebelled, leaving him wondering where the true Muna was. Furthermore, Muna describes her father as having been a man of words. In fact, she had wished that he would punish her physically instead of giving her long lectures that caused her to urinate in terror, a sign of the psychological impact of the father’s words. In fact, when Muna remembers his harsh words as an adult, she feels the urge to urinate.

Not only was Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam severe while his daughter was growing up, but his severity has continued for he decides to cut her off as an adult, condemning her to solitude and isolation. When Muhammad, Muna’s friend and lover reveals to the reader an incident that
causes Muna to beg for her father’s forgiveness, one can understand her feelings of shame vis-à-vis her father. Muhammad reveals the issue of contention between Muna and her father when he says:

This incident isn’t worth your dark thoughts. It could’ve happened to anyone. It’s not the end of the world. It was only by chance that the wall of silence between you and your father came down. He walked in and saw you naked with one of your students on his rocking chair. Your father isn’t God to punish you for your sins. You’re just as human as he is. This isn’t as catastrophic as you’ve made it out to be. (14)

The incident creates long-lasting reverberations in Muna’s life. While she longs to have her father discover her inner-self and see the nakedness of her soul (‘Ury al-ruh), he actually sees her physical nakedness (14). Muna’s daring decision to rock with her lover on her father’s ‘throne’ is a way for her to trespass on paternal power in order to appropriate the rocking chair, symbol of Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam’s power. However, Muna’s decision to challenge paternal authority does not last. Feelings of shame and suicidal thoughts take a hold of her. A friend advises her to allow time to heal the wounds between herself and her father, yet she is convinced that their relationship will never be the same again. Hence, her constant desire for her father to gaze into her eyes. She states that this incident has split the house in two and after losing the battle, she plans to demolish the rest (15). According to her, the quest that she undertakes to improve her relationship with her father and make him see her as she really is fails. She announces her defeat and appears to have lost all her power until she decides to demolish ‘the house,’ allows the reader to witness her power (15). Her father may have split the house in two, but instead of repairing the damage, she decides to tear down what is left.

Silence is not the only attribute of Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam: according to Muna he is stubborn as well. When she suggests sitting on the veranda on a cool summer evening, he refuses and continues to sit in bed watching television (16). Yet, when Muna sits in his rocking
chair, his facial muscles cringe and he closes his eyes. She has the impression that he will never open them again to return her gaze. Then, even though Muna does not believe in marriage and finds Munji repulsive, she announces his visit to ask her father for her hand (17). She realizes that her father believes only in marriage, hence her eagerness to detect signs of approval and forgiveness on his face and in his eyes. Marriage becomes important to the father after Muna turns thirty and lives a lifestyle of which he does not approve. When she was a high school student and then at the university, Muna’s father had not wished to see her marry. When he discovers his daughter naked with a lover in his rocking chair, he realizes that she has a body and physical needs that must be contained within the institution of marriage. Nonetheless, Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam remains silent when Munji brings his mother to ask for Muna’s hand in marriage, a reaction that makes Muna wonder if he approves or not (19), despite an Arab proverb that dictates that silence is a sign of approval. As narrator, Muna deprives the father figure of two essentials: voice and gaze. Yet, she continues to search for both, especially through the medium of her father’s eyes.

Despite her father’s silence and indifference, Muna reveals a different aspect of his personality as she prepares his breakfast. Her childhood memories allow the reader to see her father from various angles. While he was a harsh father, he used to prepare Muna’s breakfast and serve it to her every morning. He continued to do so even after she graduated from college and started working (112). Muna mentions that he insisted that he be the one to prepare her breakfast, revealing the strong connection he felt toward his daughter. Yet in the present moment, whereas Muna attempts to provoke him to force him to break his silence, he stubbornly refuses to make eye contact with her or to speak. Muna realizes that the relationship has turned into a monologue and that communication with her father is no longer a possible (19). Even
though she knows that he will never leave his bed and house, she still tells him of her new plans to move him to her new home. The father reacts with more silence and ‘removes Muna from his heart,’ causing her further pain. She retaliates and decides to punish her father and take over his throne (52). She confronts him while sitting in his rocking chair: “Dad, I’m going to take this rocking chair, which you surely hate by now, to my new house. It’ll be my trousseau” (52). The father’s sickness has forced him to replace his rocking chair with a wheelchair, so she defies him and takes over his symbol of power, putting her childhood fear behind her.

Nonetheless, Muna still wants to please her disabled father and take good care of him. The narrator emphasizes this love-hate relationship between daughter and father. Immediately after taking away his rocking chair and moving it to her new house, she takes the time to gaze at him, as if he were one of her lovers. She says:

... It’s the first time I find myself staring at Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam’s face. He appeared so handsome with his shiny olive skin, his sharp nose, and his fine purple-colored lips, his pointed face with thick eyebrows, his long black eyelashes, and his grey hair, which he trims regularly. If it weren’t for the wrinkles around his eyes and neck, he would appear younger than his age. It’s the first time I realize how handsome and masculine my father is. (53)

Muna puts her emotions aside and gazes at her father with the eye of a stranger, before she starts a new life with another man and moves into a new house. Not only does Muna deprive Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam of her presence as his daughter but she also takes away his rocking chair as well, leaving him with a wheelchair. The importance of the father-daughter relationship centers on eye contact or the nazra, which Muna yearns for and Hamid refuses to grant. Yet, after Muna signs her marriage contract with Munji, she turns and looks at her father: “... and for the first

33Traditionally, Tunisian women prepare their trousseaus at an early age by purchasing linens, kitchenware, and rugs for their new house. The trousseau is the bride’s responsibility and Tunisian traditions dictate what the husband and wife must each provide in the making of their new home. The trousseau is called zha.”
time in months our eyes met. A tear fell on my cheek and on Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam’s as well” (55).

Does this final eye contact between Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam and Muna mean that he has forgiven her? Alternatively, the moment of her marriage and leaving his house may prevent him from punishing Muna anymore, especially since he now has to deal with her absence. Although Muna tries to overthrow her father’s throne and take over power, when their eyes meet at this particular moment, they are both at the same level. The pain of loss overcomes both father and daughter. Muna still hopes to treat her father kindly when she legitimates her union with a man. However, when Muna returns from her honeymoon, her father returns to his silence. In fact, he pulls away his hand in dismay as she kisses it. After Muna has questioned her cousin, she understands that she has angered her father by running off with Munji’s friend on their honeymoon (81). Not only does Muna bring down shame and dishonor onto Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam, but she also brings back his rocking chair and places it in her own room at her parents’ house.

For Muna, Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam is the parental authority who enforced the rules the family had to respect. When Muna and her family spend the summer in the countryside at her grandparents’ house where Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam grew up, he yells at her mother; “You let Muna eat spicy food? If she gets diarrhea you’re the one to blame! Do I make myself clear?” (100). Hamid’s love for his daughter includes elements of fear, which suppresses his ability to communicate feelings of love to her. Furthermore, his angry outbursts impose silence in the home, curtailing both laughter and gaze. Overall, Muna’s father is responsible for obstructing her access to pleasure.
Despite being a fearful father, Hamid nevertheless believes in modernity. Hence, he is the one to take Muna to daycare everyday when she is little.\footnote{Amel Mokhtar mentions that daycare centers were new in Tunisia after independence and quickly replaced the kuttab (100).} He brushes her hair, puts on her uniform and prepares her lunchbox (112). Nevertheless, the relationship changes when Muna starts primary school. She holds Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam accountable:

... You were a fan of ‘modernity’, so you made me your guinea pig, someone on whom you did all your experiments. You filled my mind with thoughts that seemed to you to be my only weapon to face the future and my destiny. Yet, unlike real life experiments I was neither dissected nor was I dead. Your spoiled guinea pig grew up and formed her own ideas that went beyond your own. This is why the split between you and I was larger than usual. You crowded my mind with beautiful thoughts and noble principles that you considered my treasure yet you ignored my heart and soul. I do not recall you hugging or kissing me beyond the age of six. You stopped giving me any kind of tenderness. You never told me that you loved me. (111-112)

Finally, Muna’s voice reveals her father’s inadequacies to the reader, which date from early childhood. With the onset of puberty, more father-daughter issues emerge, as Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam allows the mother to resume her authority, using her as an intermediary between himself and his daughter. The vacuum that Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam creates in his daughter’s heart, of which he is not aware, causes her to search for love in the arms of many men. Muna admits that she has spent her life rejecting men who resemble her father, while resisting those who were different from him (115). If a man reminded her of Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam, she feared his harshness and inability to express his feelings. Yet, if a man was not like her father, she also left him because he was not intellectually stimulating and could never be as grand as Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam.

When Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam dies, Muna abstains from crying over “the man who loved her to death, yet also hated the female in her to death” (128). It is not clear whether he has died of sickness and old age or if his daughter’s final confession has made the continuation of life
meaningless to him. Suddenly, Muna is alone with the rocking chair, the only meaningful possession of Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam. The symbolic meaning of the rocking chair goes beyond that of a throne. After his death, the rocking chair comes to represent Muna’s father. Although death interrupts her ability to gaze at him in person, she can still gaze at his rocking chair.

Despite the chaos that Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam causes Muna and his inability to make peace with her before his death, he rises from the dead in a dream in which he is an older man on a white horse (129). Here, Amel Mokhtar makes use of ambiguity in order to suggest the possibility of the father becoming a sheikh in the Hereafter, or the sheikh being the carrier of a message of peace from Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam to his daughter.

The tormented father dies without establishing a mutuality of the gaze with his daughter that might permit the healing of wounds. Yet, through the dream he conveys his desire to set a yearly meeting with Muna (130). For Muna, her father never dies; he is still alive within her and establishes a mutual gaze with her in her dreams, thus alleviating her pain. Hamid has raised her in an atmosphere of fear. When he could not find words, he used the mother as a scapegoat. Although confined to a wheelchair in his old age, his disability actually begins when Muna turns six; communication ceases when Muna turns her gaze to the exterior world of public school. The silence imposed by the stroke he suffers has already taken root when Muna goes to school (113). When his child’s gaze transcends the father and his authority, Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam has no idea how to react toward his growing daughter or seek a mutual gaze. Overall, Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam is disabled long before the accident that confines him to a wheelchair. He is just as impotent sitting in his rocking chair, though it provides him with an illusion of power. Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam’s choice of silence and blindness is easier than finding words to communicate with his daughter or daring to look into her eyes.
Although Mokhtar deprives her narrator Muna ‘Abd al-Salam of the possibility of gazing at her father and does not allow her to take pleasure in the mutuality of the gaze with him, she lets her enjoy the rocking chair that represents the father image. At the end of the novel, the narrator finds peace in the annual rendezvous that she will have with Hamid ‘Abd al-Salam, in which they will gaze pleasurably at one another (130). As for the rest of the year, Muna may have lost her beloved father, but she has gained control over his symbol of power: the rocking chair.

**Maestro: When the Gaze is Lost, So is Pleasure**

From a woman narrating her struggle with her father, Amel Mokhtar proceeds to a novel with three male narrators, two of whom are fathers, in *Maestro* (2006). The unity of voice found in *Nakhab al-hayat* and *al-Kursi al-hazzaz* is divided in *Maestro*, fragmenting the narrative into three parallel stories. Although the three male narrators experience pleasure through gazing at women at various moments of their lives, they exhaust their time in the hope of re-establishing a mutual gaze with a loved one. Indeed, the novel ends with all three male narrators experiencing the loss of gaze altogether. When Brand suggests in her article that the gaze in Arabic literature is deprived of its essential element of mutuality, she lists the tools that convey this idea:

The literary devices to create such situations are almost as many as there are such stories, and entail, among others, rendering the targets of the gaze unaware of their being gazed at, or removed from the scene, or asleep, or wrapped up in their own thoughts or dreams or their own gazing-targets, or busy, or physically unable to return the gaze, or blind, or in the dark, or even dead. Although this may seem at first glance as associating the literary gaze with loneliness and lack of sociability, it is generally understood in psychoanalytic and cultural theories as a mostly life-seeking activity. (159)

There are multiple literary techniques that enable the literary gaze to take shape while those who are looked at are unaware that they are being looked at. Brand argues that this is not a lonely
endeavor that the author engages in, but an endeavor that connects to humanity. Mokhtar centers her narrative on the male narrators who are yearning to establish or re-establish a mutual gaze with a loved one in order to experience pleasure. Furthermore, Mokhtar stages the gazed-at characters to appear busy, asleep or physically unable to return the gaze.

‘Afif, whose name means “chaste,” opens the narrative with an imaginary voice asking him: “Don’t you know that the Lord forbade the killing of souls?”(7) thus insinuating that the narrator has killed someone, contemplated suicide or has been involved in a process in which a woman has aborted a child, maybe his own. The reader does not understand the meaning of this introduction until the end when ‘Afif dies. The reader then realizes that ‘Afif may have been narrating his life before joining his mother and father in the Hereafter.

‘Afif is the sole son of sheikh Tahir Bilgayid and Fatima. His father’s name also means pure and chaste which indicates that Mokhtar ironically names her characters the opposite of their nature, for neither Tahir or ‘Afif may claim to be chaste. Although the first chapter reveals his upbringing and describes his perception of himself through others, it also shows his weaknesses, one of them being the narcissistic gaze. ‘Afif’s mother has taken pleasure in gazing at him for long periods as she finds him handsome—something of which she reminds him frequently—and gives him a necklace with a khumsa (a hand-shaped amulet) to ward off the evil eye. Refering to his mother, ‘Afif exclaims: “My mother instilled in me the conviction that I am handsome. She made me believe that I was the most handsome man on earth.” (11) Consequently, ‘Afif as the one who is looked at when his mother gazes at him, maintains that position by gazing at himself in the mirror for long periods of time, admiring his figure. The absurdity of the image depicted stems from the fact that ‘Afif describes himself as being extremely unattractive, even hideous, and as a result, no one would even bother to cast an evil
eye upon him. The disappearance of his protective necklace after his brown-haired lover’s sudden departure suggests a rupture in the gaze at several levels (12). After ‘Afif takes a shower, looks at himself in the mirror and notices that his khumsa is gone, the narcissistic gaze is disrupted: “Fatima’s hand is gone. I felt bitter pain in my stomach” (12). It is no coincidence that the khumsa,\textsuperscript{35} also known in French as la main de Fatima or “Fatima’s hand” is representative of his mother (Fatima) keeping close to him. From the mother’s perspective, the presence of such a symbol close to her son’s heart allows her to keep a close eye on him and provides him with maternal supervision and protection. On the other hand, the loss of Fatima’s hand represents a loss of security and an act of alienation. Indeed, Valeria (his dark-haired partner) cuts the mother-son umbilical cord by taking the necklace. In addition to the loss of security provided by the watchful, maternal eye, the mother loses her reassurance that while her khumsa remains on her son’s chest, he is kept safe from harm. Thus, the mother loses part of her power to gaze, becoming partially blind.

‘Afif appears ridiculous in such a comical situation. He is reduced to a ‘mama’s boy’ because he still wears the necklace that his mother put around his neck, symbolizing maternal chains and the constant presence of her gaze upon him, watching over him. Consequently, not only does the unnamed lover (identified later as Valeria) leave ‘Afif permanently (7), thus rupturing their mutual gaze, but she also removes the maternal chains from ‘Afif when she takes the necklace. In addition, Valeria stops ‘Afif from maintaining a mutual gaze with her, and thus, she takes away his source of pleasure, for which he has spent many years searching.

Throughout the novel, ‘Afif recalls his childhood with Sheikh Tahir and Hajja Fatima, and at the same time, he expresses his yearning for the attractive foreigner (Valeria) who walked

\textsuperscript{35} Although called yad Fatima in Egypt, in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, the ‘Fatima’s Hand’ amulet is referred to as khumsa, or main de Fatima in French. (Migliore 49)
away from him. Toward the end of the novel, the reader discovers that the ‘secret’ woman that ‘Afif yearns for is Valeria, the rich Italian woman and mother of Alfredo, the child ‘Afif never knows (63). The importance of ‘Afif as a father figure in Maestro originates in his clandestine paternity that is kept safely secret in Valeria’s hands. She in fact strips away his masculinity twice: once symbolically by taking ‘Afif’s khumsa, which represents his mother’s power to protect and gaze over him, and another time by using him to father her child yet keeping it a secret from both father and son. The opportunity to gaze at his own son, as ‘Afif’s mother has gazed at him, is another visual pleasure that Valeria controls and prevents ‘Afif from enjoying. Unaware of his son’s existence, ‘Afif cultivates a Don Juan image, defying his physical appearance (10). He does not realize that, deprived of mutuality of the gaze, he is essentially an impotent man whose true masculinity resides in the hands of Valeria on the other side of the Mediterranean. Although Valeria does not transfer the maternal gaze by putting an amulet around Alfredo’s neck, she still controls him indirectly by keeping his identity secret and by preventing him from establishing a mutual gaze with his father. No matter how hard Alfredo tries to convince his mother to tell him who his father is (105), Valeria gives him multiple versions of an imaginary narrative regarding the identity of his father, but only reveals her secret at the end of the novel.

Although Tahir Bilgeyid is ‘Afif’s father, in his own narrative he does not delve into their relationship or his role as a father. Rather, he focuses on his role as husband to Fatima—and to the many other women he secretly marries. However, he views the miraculous arrival of ‘Afif into the world as “a preservation of my name and a continuation of my path” (53). This certitude proves to be false when ‘Afif is condemned to unknowing fatherhood and cannot continue Tahir Bilgayid’s legacy. In a monologue spoken from his tomb, Tahir Bilgayid complains:
I left him a young teenager when I died. God didn’t give me a chance to continue life’s journey with him. I wasn’t able to help him unravel the world’s secrets and pass on my experience and knowledge. God intended for ‘Afif to grow up alone with his mother who loves him with such passion that it made me jealous at times. Every time I saw her hugging him, kissing him and playing with him I would shout at him: “Get up! Move away from your mother’s arms! You’re now a man! A true man does not cuddle with his mother. Grow up!” (53-54)

His own early death upsets Tahir because he will not see ‘Afif grow into a man, a replica of himself. A narcissistic father, Tahir enjoys making his son feel guilty. For example, his son, ‘Afif, angers him by not visiting his tomb and speaking to him, thus depriving Tahir of a pleasurable gaze at his son’s face. Unable to conceive for many years with Fatima, Tahir lived with no proof of his virility and masculinity, which are important to him (hence his love for women). When he finally becomes a father, his own son renders him jealous because he watches Fatima touching another man and establishing a mutual gaze with her son. He regards ‘Afif as a rival who shares pleasure with his wife. Although ‘Afif is too busy to visit his father’s tomb, he pays him a visit to announce Fatima’s death and her ‘arrival’ the following day in the father’s world (in the afterlife, 48). Overcome by feelings of solitude, he tells his father that he has become a true orphan. After all, death deprives ‘Afif of the pleasure of gazing at his parents’ faces. Once they are dead, he finds no pleasure in visiting their tombs. There is no mutual gaze involved, so he never returns.

While Tahir wishes that ‘Afif would turn out like him, Fatima informs her husband that ‘Afif looks more and more like his father and has inherited his features, especially the ugly nose. Tahir Bilgayid has a particular nose, the physical feature that links Tahir to ‘Afif and Alfredo. All three men possess a similar large nose that is a distinguishing feature (11). Yet, they are strangers to one another. While ‘Afif’s necklace represents the maternal gaze, the ugliness of the nose in the paternal lineage is a physical feature that may cause people to gaze at all three men.
(Tahir, ‘Afif and Alfredo) in horror. By killing the father, the novelist’s narrator allows for an open relationship between ‘Afif and his mother to develop. While Tahir succumbs to death, his worst punishment is to be restricted within the confines of a monologue, he speaks but no one can hear him (13). Not only does death imprison Tahir Bilgayid within the four walls of his tomb, but it also confines him to eternal silence or an endless monologue. Like ‘Afif, death prevents Tahir from enjoying a mutual gaze with Fatima, his beloved wife; whence his desire to meet her in the Hereafter.

Overall, fatherhood does not absorb Tahir Bilgayid. Although he has desired a child with Fatima for many years, he becomes jealous when Fatima’s roles multiply and she no longer tends solely to Tahir’s needs, but also to ‘Afif’s (53). The ‘self’ consumes Tahir throughout his life. His biggest achievement is maintaining his marriage with Fatima while keeping his other marriages secret. Despite his piety, he admits to being a man who loves a variety of women. Although he describes Fatima as being a perfect wife in all respects, including her ability to satisfy his physical needs and fantasies, he still desires other women (15). Tahir waits for Fatima to join him in his tomb for an extended period. Yet, just as he anticipates his union with Fatima, Satan sets him up for disaster and the secret he kept from his wife in life is brought to light in death (133). After death, as Tahir and Fatima unite in intimacy in the tomb and establish a mutual gaze, they hear women’s shouts and insults. At first, Tahir does not comprehend what he hears, but then confusion turns into understanding: “I suddenly saw the souls of most of the women that I knew and married during my lifetime. It was truly a female revolution. All my dead wives met up in Fatima’s tomb and insulted Fatima and me” (135). This event sends Tahir into deep confusion as he realizes that Satan has deceived him and ruined his relationship with Fatima. She angrily demands that he leave her tomb, while Satan and Tahir’s other wives laugh
hysterically as they observe the scene (135). While Tahir strives to establish a long awaited mutual gaze with his wife Fatima, Satan takes it away from him by turning his other women against him. As Satan thus deprives Tahir of a gaze, Satan is able to indulge in his own pleasure as he watches Fatima expel her husband from her grave, leaving Tahir him powerless and alone.

Although Tahir focuses on his role as lover and husband to Fatima, he still attempts to influence ‘Afif, but this son rejects paternal authority by going against his father’s wish for him to procreate and continue the Bilgayid legacy. Having a final chance to express himself in the twenty-third chapter, ‘Afif exclaims:

O Sheikh Tahir, I’ll never propagate. You’ve disabled me with your consciousness and subconscious and I find myself neither chaste (Tahir) nor pure (‘Afif). I’m neither a Sheikh nor am I a drunken vagrant. I’m nothing, I’m barren, and I’m the desert. I’m a man with no emotions and I’m worthless. (137)

Finally, ‘Afif expresses his true feelings toward his father. He announces that he refuses to father children, seeing himself as a failure because of his father’s behavior and upbringing (137). Instead, he replaces his biological father with the captain of the ‘floating island’36 where he works. ‘Afif constructs an imaginary father figure in his mind inspired by the captain of his ship, whom he enjoys gazing at and conversing with, as opposed to his father whom he considers a failure and with whom he is unable to connect (138). Furthermore, the death of his mother causes him to lose hope; he wants to put an end to his life since he now realizes that the closest woman to his mother is the Italian woman whom he will never see again. If Valeria had become his wife, thus replacing his mother, ‘Afif would not have such a dark outlook on life. Nevertheless, the loss of his father, mother and Valeria all serve to provide him with a gruesome image of his own existence and a negative gaze upon himself.

36 The ferry that travels between Tunis and Genoa.
Alfredo is a victim of the matriarchs in his family: not only does his own mother conceal his identity, but also his own grandmother (Valeria’s mother) constantly harasses him by telling him to go and search for his father and origins (124). Alfredo expresses his desire to kill his grandmother and throw her into the sea as food for the fish. However, he also feels a visual attraction toward a man on the ferry between Genoa and Tunis (144). He is sure that his attraction is not an expression of homosexual tendencies, yet, he can find no plausible explanation. Gazing at ‘Afif on the ferry, Alfredo feels pleasure, and converses with him but he is not aware that the man towards whom he feels so drawn is actually his own father.

Mokhtar’s narrator grants ‘Afif his wish to reject paternity by making him unaware of his role as a father, even as he gazes at Alfredo, he is unaware that it is his own son. In fact, he boastfully tells Alfredo that he is always cautious in his relations with women to avoid the possibility of conceiving. The fear of fatherhood is deeply rooted in ‘Afif’s childhood as he recalls how Tahir raised him. ‘Afif believes that his father wanted to take his mother away from him when he was a child (54). Now that Tahir has managed to do so when she dies and joins him in the hereafter, ‘Afif is left to face solitude. Hence, death deprives ‘Afif of the maternal mutual gaze, which he enjoys during her life. Furthermore, Mokhtar’s narrator ridicules ‘Afif by making the reader aware of his paternity on the one hand, but on the other keeping it a secret from him, thus highlighting Valeria’s power and ‘Afif’s lack of it. Sheikh Tahir thus emerges as a failed father in the eyes of his only son, although he himself is an anonymous father who cannot change his family legacy by improving the fathering practices of the previous generation. The author renders Tahir impotent once by killing him while keeping Fatima alive, and a second time, after Fatima’s death, when she finds out about his other wives and dismisses him from her tomb, thus spurned by all women. Fatima secretly undermines Tahir’s masculinity by taking a
lover, which ‘Afif discovers but keeps secret from both his mother and father. Furthermore, Mokhtar’s narrator deprives Tahir of the pleasure of gazing at Fatima, through death at first and after Fatima’s death, through Satan’s plot to reveal the truth about Tahir’s love for women. As for ‘Afif, Valeria castrates him once when she takes away his mother’s khumsa and again as he dies unaware of his paternity, proving that it is a woman’s decision when a man is to father, not his own. Valeria deprives ‘Afif of gazing at her after their first and only meeting and then sabotages his right to gaze at his son Alfredo. Through the characters of Valeria and Fatima, Amel Mokhtar demonstrates how women can appropriate power, even though she does not place them in the position of a narrator. Despite their non-narrator status, they manage to transcend their secondary roles and prove that they are the true ventriloquists in Maestro by depriving men of the pleasure of gazing at them and affecting expression.

Mokhtar’s three novels Nakhab al-hayat, Al-Kursi al-hazzaz and Maestro focus on the creation of a mutual gaze between men and women. She establishes multiple types of gaze, such as the father/daughter gaze, the lovers’ mutual gaze, the mother/son gaze and the mirror/self gaze. Despite the variety of gazes, the human pursuit in each novel is to construct mutuality of gaze, which, according to Brand, leads to pleasure. Yet, the progression of the gaze changes after the first novel where mutuality occurs through the narrator. Although it does not necessarily lead to physical pleasure, it may lead to other pleasures revealed by the narrator. In her second novel, Mokhtar moves away from the central theme of pleasure and gaze, weakening the female narrator by depriving her of a mutual gaze with her father, who is unreasonably determined not to allow his daughter a nazra. It is only in the narrator’s dream in al-Kursi al-hazzaz that mutuality of the gaze with the beloved male character of the father occurs. This novel reveals the difficulty and importance of the mutual gaze, and empowers the role of the
‘ayn which is not only vision but a greater tool of communication between father and daughter. For the narrator Muna Abd al-Salam, a mutual gaze with her father would have been able to satisfy her desire for forgiveness and hence provided her with peace and pleasure. Finally, in Maestro, with a shift from the single female narrator to three male narrators, Mokhtar allows the reader to see her narrative games revolving around the gaze. Although she allows her characters to establish a mutual gaze with their loved ones, it only lasts for a short period and is then lost.

At the end of the novel, one realizes that women are responsible for depriving the male characters of their pleasurable gazes directed at their loved ones. Not only does Fatima deprive her husband Sheikh Tahir of ever gazing at her again in the Hereafter, Valeria deprives her own son Alfredo and his father of finding pleasure and satisfaction in gazing at and knowing one another. Hence, a father/son gaze is negated in parallel with Valeria/’Afif’s possible mutual gaze. When Valeria finally gives clues to her son to find ‘Afif in Tunis, they arrive too late. They find ‘Afif dead, and walk away, uncertain as to whether the dead man they have found is in fact ‘Afif. In the third novel Mokhtar uses her female characters to deprive male characters of their pleasures, condemning them to eternal unhappiness and dissatisfaction. The power of the gaze in Amel Mokhtar’s novels plays a double role of providing pleasure when it is present and causing displeasure when absent.
CHAPTER 3

*al-nazir and al-manzur ‘ilayh* in Massouda Boubakr’s Novels:

**Marginal Men in the Spotlight**

*Marginal*, adj. and n. *Sociol.* Of an individual or social group: isolated from or not conforming to the dominant society or culture; (perceived as being) on the edge of a society or social unit; belonging to a minority group (freq. with implications of consequent disadvantage). Also: partly belonging to two differing social groups or cultures but not fully integrated into either (Online Oxford English Dictionary).

In her novels and short stories, Tunisian novelist Massouda Boubakr creates narrators who focus on marginal male characters. Reflecting on the theme and perceptions behind these characters, I noted that in spoken colloquial Arabic such marginal and marginalized men are not discussed without attributing to them the term *miskin* (poor dear). Further, the word for marginal/marginalized exists in Modern Standard Arabic (*muhammash*) yet does not exist in Tunisian colloquial. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) explains the adjective “marginal” and the act of marginality to be something that occurs within the person (the marginal) but is also the action or reaction from society to assure that continuity of the marginal status in any given group or society. Similar to the idea of *al-nazar* (gaze, look) which assumes that there is a *nazir* (the one who looks) and a *manzur ‘ilayh* (the one who is looked at), the idea of marginality requires two elements: in the active position there is a ‘marginalizer’ (*al-muhammish*) while the one who is marginalized (*al-muhammash*) occupies a passive position. Thus, this chapter

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37 Massouda Boubakr (b. 1954), a poet, novelist and short story writer, was born in Sfax in 1954 where she completed her elementary education. She attended Montfleury high school in Tunis and received her higher education diploma in secretarial and administrative affairs in 1978. She is a member of the *Union Tunisienne des Ecrivains* (Tunisian Writers’ Union) and a member of the *Club de la Nouvelle* (The Short Story Club). She publishes articles in Tunisian newspapers, has written two short stories *Ta’m al-ananas* (1994) and *Walima khassa jiddan* (2004) and several novels: *Laylat al-ghiyyab* (1997), *Trushqana* (1999), *Wada’an Hammurabi* (2003), *Juman wa ‘Anbar* (2005), and *al-Alif wa al-nun* (2009). Boubakr has received several Tunisian national awards from the ministry of culture and local municipalities.
highlights the way the marginal or marginalized men in the novels of Massouda Boubakr are gazed at or looked upon. In these novels female narrators (and occasionally narrator with ambiguous gender) take on the role of the nazir and focus on marginal men (al-manzur ʿilayh) as they shed light upon their lives, behavior and thoughts. This chapter examines Massouda Boubakr’s novels Laylat al-ghiyab (1997), Trushqana (1999), and Wadaʾan Hammurabi (2003) in which she brings forward marginal men in Tunisian/Arab society and therefore creates representations of marginal Arab men. While the previous chapter demonstrates that Amel Mokhtar links the gaze to pleasure, I propose that in Boubakr’s novels, the gaze becomes nazra and disassociates from sexual pleasure attached to some psychoanalytic and feminist theories. I argue that on the contrary, Boubakr associates nazra with marginality by creating female narrators that describe how society treats marginal men and how they react.

According to Faruq Abu Mahmud in his introduction to al-Nazar fi ahkam al-nazar bi-hassat al-basar (1996), the nazra is a double-edged sword whereby the nazir (the looker) can either look at a subject positively and be awarded the status of al-siddiqin (the honest) and al-shuhadaʾ (the martyrs) or look viciously and render “the one who is looked at” with hawa (lustful or lust-driven)(6). The nazra is of such importance that Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi writes about the various facets of sharʿia (Islamic jurisprudence) affecting it, with the goal of the nazra being a positive human occurrence and the nazir contributing positively to the general good of self and society. That is his or her look is within the parameters of what is Islamically acceptable

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38 According to the English Oxford Dictionary, one of the meanings of the word “margin” is: “1.a. An edge, a border; that part of a surface which lies immediately within its boundary, esp. when in some way marked off or distinguished from the rest of the surface… 3.a. A region or point of transition between states, epochs, etc.; a moment in time when some change or occurrence is imminent. Now freq.: a limit below or beyond which something ceases to be feasible.” (OED) The marginalized men in the three novels of Boubakr are not confined to a physical space away from society, that is not a physical marginalized space, but instead, occupy a place within society although society ostracizes them. Consequently, the margins they occupy are social margins, not physical/geographical ones.
within society. For example, a friendly look of greeting would be considered good as opposed to a look that carried desire and causes infatuation. According to Abu Mahmud, the most dangerous nazra is the lustful one established by a man toward a woman and vice-versa.\textsuperscript{39} The Islamic framework of the nazar as explained by Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi is relevant to this study because the Islamic laws discussed are still applicable in today’s life according to Faruq Abu Mahmud who says: “…all Muslims will benefit from this book, especially those searching for truth... Particularly during these times in which we see perplexing thoughts displayed” (11).

Before exploring Boubakr’s novels, the debates surrounding the topic of marginality merit discussion, for marginality varies according to cultural and historical contexts. By placing making marginal men in the position of al-manzur ilayh (the one who is looked at), the novelist allows female narrators to occupy the position of nazir (the one who looks). Furthermore, the narrator reaches a better understanding of the self by delving into the character of the Other (the marginal man) in the novel. First, definitions of marginality must be taken into consideration. According to Fedwa Malti-Douglas in \textit{Power, Marginality, and the Body in Medieval Islam} (2001), marginality is a multi-dimensional fluid concept. She states that:

\begin{quote}
One can speak, for example, of statistical marginality; or one can speak of structural marginality, in which the marginal is someone outside the norm, someone who is not well integrated, or who is excluded from society. Thus, the study of a society’s discourse on marginality can help us to understand the way this society conceives of the normal and of its relationship to the marginal, or to a plurality of marginalities. (215)
\end{quote}

Although Malti-Douglas emphasizes the importance of studying marginality and its various facets within the historical framework of the Mamluke period in Egypt and the status of the blind as the marginal, her comments on marginality are useful for this study. By bringing in

\textsuperscript{39} For further information about the nazra, refer to Faruq Abu Mahmud’s introduction to \textit{al-Nazar fi ahkam al-nazar bi-hassat al-basar}. 
Mentalités history\textsuperscript{40} to understand the status of the marginal in Mamluke society, she bridges the gap between history, historiography, and socio-anthropology to shed light on the blind. Her study is relevant to this research as it shows that what constitutes the marginal and marginalized in society differs in accordance with historical periods. Furthermore, Malti-Douglas’ article “Mentalités and Marginality: Blindness and Mamlūk Civilization” emphasizes the blind as the marginal, while this research depends upon vision (nazra) to marginalize the subject. Malti-Douglas defines the subject as a group of marginalized individuals deprived of vision within Mamluke society. However, the subjects of Massouda Boubakr’s characters are not deprived of their vision. Though able to gaze and look at others, the nazir possesses the power to marginalize al-manzur ilayh.

Malti-Douglas offers many categories of \textit{ashab al-‘ahat} (the physically disabled) in her article proving that the group of people with specificities constituting the marginal changes:

This category [\textit{ashab al-‘ahat}] includes those whom we could consider handicapped, like the blind and the lame, but also many who are physically abnormal. Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), for example, included the blue-eyed, and those with bad breath, among others, while the Damascene scholar Yusuf ibn ‘Abd al-Hadi (d. 909/1517) combined the blind with the hemiplegic, the wall-eyed, the flat-nosed, and the large-mouthed. Al-Nuwayri (d. 732/1332), in his \textit{Nihayat al-arab}, places the blind between women and beggars, and shortly after idiots. (218)

While Boubakr’s contemporary novels take place in the Arab world today, the above display of examples of marginal individuals in Medieval Islamic society is significant. Mentioning individuals considered as marginal from various times, Malti-Douglas bases their marginality upon a physical defect, whether it be blindness, eye color or mouth size. What comprises \textit{ashab al-‘ahat} (the disabled) and specifies them as a group of marginal people, is the vision of

\textsuperscript{40} Malti-Douglas defines mentalités: “The term has been rendered into English as mentalities, mind sets, or less frequently, mental structures. Mentalités history can be understood as a school whose goal is the explanation of popular social attitudes and forms, and whose chief method is the exploration of the networks of structures through which social conceptions are conveyed.” (211-212)
‘normal’ individuals and the fact that they see them as different from most members of society, and hence, put them in a separate category. The projection of the nazir upon the manzur ilayh allows for the superiority of the majority and the seclusion of the minority group ashab al-‘ahat.

This leads to the center/periphery debate, which Suzan P. Castillo brings up in Notes from the Periphery: Marginality in North American Literature and Culture (1995). Although the discussion about center/periphery often pertains to the colonizer/colonized relationship in that the colonizer is the center while the colonized is peripheral, I can relate this to my discussion of marginality to indicate that there are problems in discussions on center/periphery. By establishing a dichotomy (those who marginalize/those who are marginalized), the middle terrain where there is overlap is forgotten. However, individuals and positions within each category can shift from one to the other or may be both as Boubakr shows in Trushqana, where Murad al-Shawashi despite his sexual marginality is still considered a member of his family. While social conventions define marginal groups and individuals, the individuals who carry out the act of marginalization (al-nazir) are at the center of society and assure that the marginalized remain on the periphery. In fact, Malti-Douglas’ work reminds us that society does not contain integration and oneness, but rather a center and a periphery. Castillo offers current examples of center/periphery whereas Malti-Douglas brings forward examples of the marginal in Medieval Islamic history. Both studies complement one another from various historical and literary perspectives. Castillo mentions:

Obviously, in the area of literary culture, existing elites see themselves as custodians of sacred values... Consequently, in order to validate the allocation of hierarchical status, prestige, and financial rewards..., the cultural elites-the compliers of literary anthologies, the professors who establish the curricula and grant tenure, the reviewers of books and plays establish the criteria for centrality, and relegate the texts which do not conform to these criteria to the peripheral status. (28)
Despite the difference in Castillo and Malti-Douglas’ historical frameworks, the above excerpt from Castillo’s “Ex-Centric Visions” chapter in *Notes from the Periphery* indicates an association between center/periphery ideas and marginality and the influence of vision as a source of power. Furthermore, Malti-Douglas notes that when society discusses the physically unusual, it is consequently expressing values about the physically normal forming a discourse of the body, prominent in Islamic Medieval discourse (223). Similarly, when Massouda Boubakr highlights the marginalized men in society, she reflects the attitudes and thoughts of the non-marginalized as well. Comparable to blindness as a sign of imperfection in Mamluke society, Boubakr’s novel Trushqana suggests that homosexuality and trans-sexuality pushes certain Tunisian men to reevaluate definitions of masculinity and the concepts surrounding manhood. For example, Trushqana meets violence and harassment on the streets of the old city of Tunis because some men are disturbed when seeing him. They accuse him of not being “man enough”. His sight causes them anxiety and they prefer to use violence against him to prove their manliness, over accepting him as a man.

Malti-Douglas notes that in Western mental structures, blindness is “linked to sexual transgression” (such as in the case of Oedipus blinding himself as a punishment for his relation with his own mother) and therefore linked to castration (227). On the other hand, in Islamic tradition, blindness (in the case of men) correlates with sexual prowess and hence the sexuality of blind men compensates for their physical deficiency. In fact, Malti-Douglas contrasts Western and Eastern attitudes linking blindness to sexuality by saying: “The medieval Islamic position on the sexuality of the blind is thus the opposite of the Western one. Where the West uses equivalence, the East uses compensation” (227). In the East, it was believed that sexual prowess increased to compensate for physical defects. This reflection calls upon one to question
the marginality of the blind in Medieval Islam and furthermore suggests that the marginalized in a society are able to possess what the non-marginalized may lack. Linking this idea to the marginal men in Boubakr’s novels, one must question whether they compensate for their deficiencies through other means (be it sexual or other) or if there exists a sense of equivalence between the physical, mental, or behavioral deficiency and another element.

At another level, both Western and Islamic traditions have considered blindness as a form of punishment to the individual it is inflicted upon. Hence, from a religious perspective, the prophet Muhammad and Jesus were both able to cure the blind—a miraculous act considered a form of approval for the person who finds sight again. While looking at the blind in Mamluke society, Malti-Douglas’ research leads to a pertinent conclusion regarding a marginal group in a Medieval Islamic environment. She states:

... the sighted person is trying to call attention to, and hence to strengthen, the marginality of the blind individual. Associated with this on the part of the sighted person is a feeling of superiority. The blind man reverses this relationship of normality/marginality and superiority/inferiority by casting the sighted person into the marginal, inferior category. He is disagreeable or blind at heart. This role reversal is, of course, a familiar literary humoristic technique... it is no accident that this integrating, or in this case we had better say desegregating, message is placed not in the mouth of some benevolent sighted authority but in that of the blind individual. (232-233)

The conclusion that Malti-Douglas reaches in her study of the blind as a marginal group within Mamluke society opens many doors upon the marginal men that Boubakr exposes in her novels. From a historiography perspective, the fact that the blind reversed their deficiencies and projected them upon the sighted is a unique phenomenon. Medieval Islamic accounts allow Malti-Douglas to bring us a closer reading of the mental structures of a group of marginal individuals condemned to the periphery to demonstrate that they possessed the power to question the center and ridicule the sighted majority. Furthermore, the historical accounts suggest that regardless of superiority/inferiority, center/periphery and normalcy/marginality relationships,
there existed a space in Mamluke society that allowed for a debate between the marginalizing and the marginalized. Likewise, Boubakr creates the possibilities for such debates and establishes communication between the two groups throughout her novels through the nazra.

Similarly to Castillo, Taoufik Baccar explains the term *al-hamishi* (the marginal) as the opposite of the *markaz* (center) in *al-Qīta‘ al-hamishi fi al-sard al-‘arabi* (*Marginality in Arabic Narration* 1995). However, Baccar acknowledges that the *al-haraka* (change, transformation, variation) element in the marginality debate must be taken into consideration as the variants of the word *hamishi* change according to time and within different social contexts (8).

Mahmoud Tarchouna contributes to the discussion with his article *al-Hamishiyun fi ‘alf layla wa layla* (“The Marginal in *One Thousand and One Nights*”) where he describes the marginal in society as:

...the one who lives on the margins of his productive society. He is a burden and does not contribute to the production process yet he benefits from it illegitimately through fraud, thievery and robbery. The marginal sees nothing wrong in his ways as he considers them legitimate since society is wicked and evil... This group of people includes the savvy, the wanderers, the shrewd, the intruders, the vagrants and the day thieves, night robbers and even some notables that take over others’ properties through abuse of power. (81)

Tarchouna’s definition of the marginal in society is behavior-based and takes place within a socio-economic context. All the attributes indicate that the process of marginalization of an individual is his own making because he justifies his malevolence by blaming society’s oppression. Tarchouna notes that marginal individuals in *The Nights* are especially present in the anecdotes taking place in Cairo and Baghdad. He notices that *al-hamishiyyin*’s (the marginal people) attitude varies between a desire for social acceptance and assimilation and an urge for rebellion and resistance to social norms (83). Therefore, marginality may incorporate resistance.

When the marginal tell their stories in *Alf layla wa layla*, Tarchouna highlights the blending of the extraordinary with daily routine making this a particularity in the literary genre (85). From
Tarchouna’s analysis of the marginal in tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*, it appears that *al-hamishiyyin* allowed for the intricate fantastic details to appear in their own *adab* (literature) genre in *Hallaq baghdad* (*The Barber of Baghdad* 87).

Tarchouna’s approach to the marginal in his article suggests that this group adheres to their special status while alternating between narrative techniques of *adab* and their exceptionally varied daily activities, for literature offered them a space where their marginality was freely expressed. Similar to Malti-Douglas, Tarchouna demonstrates that the marginal have a voice in their societies in *One Thousand and One Nights* and indeed a forum exists, allowing a narrative genre to emerge. Despite the negative connotations associated to the marginal in his definition, Tarchouna reveals that *al-hamishiyyun* are not confined to negative characterizations but go beyond it in their *adab*. This compels the reader to wonder whether the marginal (*hamishi*) or marginalized (*muhammash*) have a similar status in Boubakr’s novels, and if they are able to go beyond ostracism.

Mahmud al-Misfar’s article, “*al-Hamishiyyun al-muhammashun fi-l-riwaya al-magharibiyya*” (*The Marginal Marginalized in Maghribi Novels* 1995) provides a closer look at the *hamishi* and *muhammash* where he connects the root of “margin” in Arabic to movement and combat, then revolution and resistance, and finally assimilation and pride (184). Al-Misfar extrapolates three marginality levels in *Maghribi* fiction. He notes:

The first level relates to the family environment of an individual: the nature of inner-family relations, mother/father dynamics, the father’s social behavior and reputation, violence, and divorce play an important role in the process of marginalization of a son or daughter… the second level of marginalization is economic causing women to work in brothels, condemning men to prisons, hospitals, and the streets and the third level of marginalization is political, and includes segregation, strikes, demonstrations, and revolution within the framework of colonization in the *Maghrib*. (185-208)
Through his approach to the marginal and marginalized, al-Misfar nuances their representation in *Maghribi* fiction. Unlike the negative image Tarchouna offers, the politically marginalized have an honorable and positive image in El Misfar’s narrative analysis. In comparison to the socially and economically *hamishiyyun muhammashun* (the marginal marginazed), where their image reflects the disapproval of society, the politically marginalized represent a symbol of honor and resistance in *Maghribi* novels. According to al-Misfar, in ‘*Urs bagl* (*The Mule’s Wedding* 1988) Tahar Wattar’s description of an imprisoned prostitute who kills her baby and throws it in a trashcan differs from Mohamed Saleh El Jebri’s description of al-Rib‘iy who kills the French man who had chops off his hand for expressing disapproval of workers’ conditions in *Yawm min ayyam Zamra* (*A Day in the Life of Zamra* 195, 207). This example demonstrates the various levels of marginality present in *Maghribi* fiction.

Through the analysis of marginal and marginalized characters in six *Maghribi* novels (two from Tunis, two from Algeria and two from Morocco), al-Misfar shows the fluidity of the definition of marginality not only from one historical period to another, but also within the same epoch. Fiction is a means to emphasize this phenomenon because the novelist nuances the term within a variety of socio-economic and political realms. If al-Misfar is able to draw these general conclusions about *Maghribi* fiction and reports certain patterns pertaining to the status and role of the marginal and marginalized in *Maghribi* societies, one may wonder whether Boubakr highlights the positive as well as the negative aspects while bringing forward the male marginal characters in her books. Indeed, positive aspects appear, yet, negative aspects tend to dominate her writing of the marginal man.

Marginality may be expressed through language and writing, as well as being a way of life. Nureddine al-Fallah gives the example of the Tunisian writer Mohammad Laribi, as a
marginal novelist and memoir writer who writes about the *muhammashin* in Tunisian society. His article “*al-Kitab w-al-hamishiyya: Mohammad Laribi 'unudhajan* (“Writing and *Marginality: Mohammad Laribi as a Model*” 1995) demonstrates that between 1935 and 1945 Laribi describes the marginal in Tunisian society by the use of Tunisian colloquial in his writings published between 1935 and 1945 (142). According to al-Fallah, Tunisian colloquial serves as the basis of Laribi’s literature because he considered Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) to be the language of an intellectual and educated elite and hence, the language of the *markaz* (center).

On the other hand, ‘arniyya (colloquial) represented the language of the periphery and therefore a source of resistance for Laribi. As Laribi considered himself marginal in Tunisian society, he brought forward marginal characters (such as prostitutes and alienated young men) and used colloquial as his linguistic tool to highlight the degrees of marginality in his writings (142). This discussion shows that the theme of marginality may be expressed through different venues and is not limited to the content of a text but also its language. Boubakr also uses Tunisian colloquial Arabic to highlight the marginality of her characters with the use of adjectives such as *miskin* and *maghbun* (the unfortunate) especially in *Trushqana*.

In her article “*Voices of the Marginalized in Tunisian narrative,*” (1997) Sonia S’hiri reflects upon the marginalized characters in Hassuna Musbah’s novels. She notes:

> The determination of this writer to continue addressing the taboo, “unimportant,” and “offensive” subjects that populate his work reveals his truthful preoccupation with negotiating a say in the sociopolitical environment of his country, through his writing. The comments and statements he offers in his literary writing strive to undermine and question an infinite number of received ideas pertaining to religion, literary genre, the Arabic language, sexuality, gender relations, children, and regionalism. (56)

Hence, writing and the narrative offers Musbah a space in which he is able to address a variety of taboos and bring forward various marginalized groups in Tunisian society. According to S’hiri’s article, the creation of fictive characters that represent individuals and groups within a
social order where they are usually shunned, gives voice to the voiceless and encourages the readers to be aware of such marginal characters within Tunisian society.

Overall, marginality appears on many levels in literature, and can occur at the character level, as well as at the linguistic level. I hypothesize that Massouda Boubakr relies on the *nazra* (gaze) to direct attention to the marginal man. Though her techniques vary in her novels, *Laylat al-ghiyab*, *Trashqana*, and *Wada‘an Hammurabi*, the relevance of the *nazra* remains constant throughout. A closer look at her texts reveals the different types of marginality that Boubakr stresses in her novels.

**Father or Sperm Donor: Marginalization through a Daughter’s Eyes Sahib al-nutfa**

In her first novel, *Laylat al-ghiyab* (1997) Boubakr gives voice to Fa‘iqa Mahfuz who attends her biological father’s funeral and then attempts to unravel the mystery of his life. After fathering her, Mahmud al-‘Arabi walks out of her mother’s life before Fa‘iqa’s birth. Although her mother immediately remarries al-Hadi Mahfuz who raises her as his own daughter, once she finds out that he is not her biological father from a malicious, teenage cousin, she becomes obsessed by the search for her biological father. Fa‘iqa’s journey into the secret lives of Mahmud al-‘Arabi begins with his funeral. She meets al-‘Arabi’s best friend who leads her to al-‘Arabi’s second wife, Irissa the Greek, and his third wife and her half-brothers. Fa‘iqa’s curiosity regarding her biological father’s life results from her need to understand herself better. The novel contains passages in bold in which Fa‘iqa (in a monologue) talks to her dead father questioning and accusing him of shortcomings toward herself as his daughter and toward her mother. At the end of the novel, Fa‘iqa finds peace with her father when he is resurrected in her hotel room and explains himself to her. It is only after that moment that Fa‘iqa may carry on
peacefully with her own life. In this novel, Fa’iqa’s attempt to understand her father, allows her to better understand herself. Once she meets with her father who, in her mind resurrects from the dead, she becomes able to proceed with life, remarry and have children. The novel’s protagonist no longer feels marginalized vis-à-vis society once she connects to her father and he is no longer a marginal man in her life.

Boubakr emphasizes two components that structure her novel: The father figure and his absence. The title, Laylat al-ghiyab suggests darkness and absence but then, Boubakr’s dedication states: “To my father’s soul, for he was the first to offer me a book and say: ‘Read!’” (5). This dedication reminds us of Amel Mokhtar’s emphasis on the father figure in al-Kursi al-hazzaz’s dedication to Hamed ‘Abd al-Salam, the father of the female narrator. However, Boubakr differs from Mokhtar as she dedicates her first novel to her own father and not the father of the narrator.

The father figure appears in the author’s dedication and is omnipresent throughout the novel. Boubakr emphasizes the narrator Fa’iqa’s imagined dialogue (often a monologue) with the deceased father by emphasizing it in bold script while the rest of the novel is in normal script. The idea of the nazra is relevant in the monologue (or imagined dialogue) that the daughter engages in (bold writing) as she acts as al-nazir and situates her deceased father, Si Mahmud al-‘Arbi, at the level of the manzur ilayh. Interestingly, the narrator elevates the status of her father, as she renders him the manzur ilayh, the center of her interest and subject of her research. Fa’iqa does not consider herself the main character of the narrative, although by searching for her father’s secret life and attempting to understand it she hopes to reach a better understanding of herself. Although the narrator has never met her biological father, she acts as a detective attempting to unravel his enigmatic life after she unexpectedly finds herself attending his funeral.
To emphasize the role of the father figure, the author employs the *nazar* (look, gaze) to bring out the marginal in Mahmud al-‘Arabi through the narrator’s depictions of him.

The novel commences in an ambience of old women’s stares and sadness. It soon becomes clear that the setting is a funeral. The narrator says: “The old ladies’ eyes grew bigger in between the folds of their wrinkles as they stared at me strangely. I stared back at them to discover that they were a group of mourners that came to support the family” (7). While the old women’s eyes draw attention as their only notable human characteristic, their gaze sets Fa’iqqa apart and she expresses discomfort while in her biological father’s house. The *nazra* in this instance expresses the old women’s curiosity about the strange and mysterious Fa’iqqa. This is her first encounter with her biological father and his private space. The discomfort caused by the old women’s stares stems from the fact that narrator, though Mahmud al-‘Arabi’s first child, has remained unknown to the rest of his family. Yet, Fa’iqqa’s estrangement does not begin at the funeral, but dates from before her birth.

A glance at Fa’iqqa’s life reveals the factors leading to her own marginality and aids in comprehending al-‘Arabi’s marginality. Fa’iqqa Mahfuz should have been Fa’iqqa al-‘Arabi, however, since her biological father abandoned her mother while she was pregnant, Fa’iqqa was born to Hadi Mahfuz, her mother’s second husband. The narrator might have been spared her quest for her father and therefore for her self, if one of her maternal cousins had not divulged the family secret about her mother’s first husband. This moment shatters the illusion of normalcy Fa’iqqa believes she lives and forces her to question her identity, pushing her into a marginal position. She is unable to put together her life’s puzzle because an important piece is missing: her biological father Mahmud al-‘Arabi. However, his funeral presents an opportunity for the narrator to discover her father and resolve the mystery of his life.
Further aggravating her marginality, Fa’iqa marries ‘Adel in her twenties only to have him divorce her because, unlike her father, she is sterile. She says, referring to a cyst that is mistaken for a pregnancy: “My body betrays me and my uterus abandons me. A cyst at the age of twenty? It was a false pregnancy” (33). Fa’iqa’s body conspires against her causing pregnancy symptoms to appear. She is disappointed that a uterine cyst puts an end to her dreams of giving life and endangers her marriage. At her father’s funeral, Fa’iqa thinks of herself as a barren woman and as a recent divorcée, making her twice marginal woman in Tunisian society. 

*Khanha hzemha* (literally: her uterus betrayed her) is the colloquial Tunisian expression used when a woman is unable to conceive. It expresses the lack of femininity and the inability to achieve the highest social level of the feminine: Motherhood, according to the women in *Laylat al-ghiyab*. Such an expression renders a woman’s body monstrous as it turns against her by preventing conception. However, at the funeral, she is not only a barren divorcée but also an *itima* (Tunisian colloquial for orphan). She observes her father’s body as it lays covered in a white sheet. She says to herself: “jasad walid... sahib al-notcha” “My father’s body... the sperm donor.” Throughout the novel, Fa’iqa refers to her father as *sahib al-notcha*, relegating him to a purely biological role.

Nevertheless, al-‘Arabi, in spite of his three marriages, has succeeded at social and economic levels. His third marriage lasted the longest and produced several sons, which is viewed as socially desirable, while he never met his only daughter. Consequently, because of feelings of abandonment and her own marginality, Fa’iqa marginalizes her father throughout her narrative by bringing out his shortcomings as a husband and father. She explores her father’s attributes while in the position of *al-manzur ilayh* and she proceeds to marginalize him at the individual level. The state of marginalization of the father figure is not a general one but a
strictly individual one in relationship to Fa’iq. As a narrator, she makes use of bold font writing in
the novel to highlight her father’s marginality. Boubakr limits the space of the marginal in this novel to the personal and individual level and marginality does not leave the confines of the self.

Fa’iq expresses her first impression of her father’s physical appearance in bold print:
“You are quite tall father! You are far from being thin. You appear overweight and of broad
chest’” (10). She gazes at her father for the first time, yet in Fa’iq’a’s mind he only represents the
man who carried out the procreative function that brought her into the world. Fa’iq wonders
about her father’s eye color: “What color were your eyes? Everyone who knew you, said that I
resemble you. I am now certain that I have your eye color. What if you were to open them
now?” (11). Not only do the eyes draw the narrator’s attention, but she reflects on the possibility
of their gaze meeting. Fa’iq attempts to engage her father in a posthumous conversation,
although her words remain in a state of monologue thus far. While trying to give meaning and
sense to herself in relation to her biological father, Fa’iq discovers that her father’s physical
features are important to her, as they are the reflection of her own.

The death of her father is not Fa’iq’a’s first experience with funerals and obituaries. A
few years earlier, she faced the death of whom she refers to as her adoptive father. He died at the
age of ninety of old age and although his death saddened her, the fact that he lived his life
wishing her mother would offer him tender words but died without ever hearing them caused her
further dismay. Quickly, Fa’iq’a’s thoughts go back to the dead man, who lies before her eyes,
sahib al-nutfa. She wonders how the end of his life had been and if he had remembered her.
Fa’iq holds her father responsible for her marginality and accuses him of being marginal as well
because as he abandoned his wife and unborn daughter.
Fa’iq is thirty when she arrives at her father’s funeral. Pointing out his inadequacies, she says:

Why did you deprive my mother of your presence? What happened? Why did you flee from her and me? Didn’t you feel the need to hold your newborn child? And, here you go running away again! You run away from this world now that I’ve finally come into your home. You’ve played hide and seek with me for thirty years... Come alive! Talk to me! I need to relive images from my past with clarity! Get up and allow me hold you! Awaken and let us settle this before God does! (19)

Fa’iq holds her father responsible for her own marginality and hence points out to him his shortcomings, rendering him marginal, as the man who abandoned his wife and unborn daughter. She reverses roles and challenges the cultural norms that allow parents to judge their children but not vice versa. Indeed, Fa’iq asserts her superiority in her posthumous tête-à-tête with her father, as he lacks the ability to respond. She forges a unique image of the father he was (or was not), which differs from the ones her siblings have. By exposing the reader to her inner thoughts and condemnation of father, she removes herself from her marginality and loss, and places her father within the marginal space. Mahmud al-‘Arabi is guilty twice—not only for abandonment but also for never inquiring about his daughter—causing Fa’iq grief.

Fa’iq refers to her father as “the Berber Don Juan” for she discovers that he was a handsome man with a taste for beautiful women: after her mother, he had moved on to other feminine conquests, including Irissa the Greek woman, his second wife (27). Fa’iq travels to Athens to meet her father’s second wife to track down his secret life. Irissa explains to her that her father was a charming man but unable to content himself with one woman. Sarcastically, Fa’iq imagines her father’s happiness when his third wife gives birth to his first son. While he is proud of giving birth to a son and not a daughter, she pities him for failing to benefit from the joys of having a daughter as his first child (29).
The biological father’s absence affects Fa’iqa’s marriage with ‘Adel and makes her wonder if her father would have defended her when her husband wrongs her. She questions him:

O sperm donor, if you only knew how many times you came to mind at my most difficult and embarrassing moments with ‘Adel. What might have been different had you been around? Would destiny have been different or would life have continued in the same way? I wish you’d asked me how I met ‘Adel Shawashi and I would’ve answered you... (33-34)

Mahmud Al-‘Arabi did not fulfill the traditional role of father that requires his presence at her wedding and defending her if difficulties arise in her marriage. Fa’iqa wonders how her father would have responded the day ‘Adel divorced her because she was sterile (35). While enumerating the factors leading to her marginal social and personal status, the narrator reminds the reader that her father is to blame for all her woes. By his constant absence and failure to fulfill his fatherly duties, he makes himself marginal in his daughter’s eyes. Her long contemplating look at him while he lies dead awaiting burial suggests that even though he is not considered marginal in society by others, in Fa’iqa’s mind he is, and while being on the periphery, he cannot occupy the center position in his daughter’s life.

The narrator suspects Mahmud al-‘Arabi to be concerned only with women’s physical beauty. However, her mother emphasizes appearance as well when she advises Fa’iqa to forget her blue jeans and take out her silah al-‘untha (the female weapon). This causes Fa’iqa to suspect that her mother did not use her ‘female weapon’ on her father, or else he would have not left (35). All three wives are attractive women. This element of “The Berber Don Juan” syndrome in her father’s character appears shallow and negative in Fa’iqa’s mind, as she considers it the cause of abandonment of a wife and daughter. Nevertheless, the physical dimension takes over Fa’iqa’s thoughts when she remembers gazing at her mother’s body, admiring its beauty and voluptuousness, at the hammam (Turkish bath 38) and how she had
enjoyed the scent of her mother and clung to her as a child and teenager. Yet her mother, unable
to reciprocate love, pushed her away (39), consequently, Fa’iqa yearns for both her mother’s and
father’s love but she only obtains that of her stepfather. Yet, she does not hold her mother
accountable nor does she blame her. Instead, she accuses her father of breaking her mother’s
heart and implicitly faults him for the harshness and rigidity of her mother’s character.

Despite his physical absence, Fa’iqa questions her father: “How were you able to live
without me for all these years? I haven’t lived a moment without you!” (39). The binary
opposition of absence/presence perturbs Fa’iqa, for although her father was absent from her daily
life, she never stopped thinking about him. On the contrary, his absence caused her to constantly
wonder about the causes of him abandoning her. When she was young, she was not able to
search for him physically, while her mother evaded Fa’iqa’s questions about her biological
father. However, she still searched for him in her mind. She notes:

As soon as I became aware of my true father, I started searching for the pieces of me in
those around me. My mother concealed the chaos with a wall of harshness she built
between us... I searched for you in our mu’addib... On the mail carrier’s face, the mayor
and Uncle Hamida the nurse... I continued to look for you in the faces of taxi drivers,
bank customers, at the train station and markets... Then I sought you within me, in my
personality, behavior, and my sudden hate for you and your memory. I loathed you for a
long time... Indeed, I hated you, O Father! (40)

Fa’iqa lists the facts of her life leading to her marginality. After searching for her father in other
men around her, she dares to look into herself, allowing a mirror effect that combines the nazir
and manzur ilayh, and thus she becomes the object and subject of her nazra. Within her
peripheral space, she dares to examine herself while searching for her father, the successful
businessman and failed father according to Fa’iqa. While she attempts to understand the source
of her marginality, she perceives her father as a marginal character in her life and hence refers to
him as sahib al-nutfa throughout the novel.
Another source of marginality for Fa’iqqa is the lack of memory concerning her father.

She notes:

O sperm donor, my memory’s a strange world in which you don’t figure. Is it my misfortune or yours? I don’t know... I’ve no memory of you. I only have emptiness, gaps of nothingness concerning your memory. I associate you with no color, scent, image or gesture. I’ve no trace of anything vivid connected to you in my memory. Other than a first and last name, there’s oblivion. Big letters that light up and darken like the lights of a train station in a remote area. M-A-H-M-U-D A-L ‘A-R-A-B-I. (49)

For Boubakr, memory is a recurring theme in her novels. She however employs memory in this context to highlight the scars sahib al-nutfa imprints on the abandoned child. In the above passage, the narrator negates her biological father’s existence in her life through the lack of memory. As memory is a tool that an individual depends upon in his or her interactions with the Other, Fa’iqqa demonstrates to her father that she has no reference to him in her mind. Furthermore, the lack of a sensual, visual or olfactory memory of Mahmud puts him into a place of oblivion in his daughter’s mind, imposing invisibility upon him. The concept of al-nazar plays a role in demonstrating to the reader the importance of the visual in its relation to memory. Other than the word ‘scent,’ the terms ‘color, image and gesture’ are semantically connected to al-nazar. Their absence from Fa’iqqa’s memory equates to a blank slate of any visual memory of a father’s remembrance in her mind, and therefore to blindness. In fact, when Fa’iqqa dreams of her father one night, she is only able to distinguish the shape of his body but his physical features are blurry, confirming her blindness toward him (61).

Fa’iqqa digs deeply into her father’s life. She travels to Athens to meet his second wife Irissa and questions her relationship with sahib al-nutfa. Her desire to know all that she can about this absent, dead man represents is her attempt to understand herself while emphasizing the marginality of her father in her eyes, and relegating him to forgetfulness. Yet, Fa’iqqa attends his funeral where, in accordance with Tunisian traditions, a crying woman asks her to forgive her
father so that he may appear before Allah with a pure spirit before the men carry the body to the
cemetery (104). In Fa’iq’a’s mind, this demand is absurd because she believes her father
wronged her throughout her life, therefore, she does not know where to begin the forgiving
process. Fa’iq’a refers to herself as *al-maw’uda* (the one who is buried alive) (105) who is asked
to forgive her father on the day of judgement. Yet, she finds herself unable to forgive as
forgiveness is a divine action that she, as a human, does not possess. She finally forgives him
saying: “May the Lord have mercy upon your soul, O you sahib al-nutfa. You troubled me in
your life and after your death! May God forgive you!” (108). Whether the narrator truly
forgives her father or says so out of social obligation is not clear until the end of the novel, when
her father resurrects to absolve himself.

Fa’iq’a searches for peace and serenity, yet she does not find them after forgiving her
father. She retreats to her hotel room after the funeral procession, and at this moment, the
imagined monologue transcends to an imagined dialogue, as Mahmud appears in her hotel room.
In dismay, Fa’iq’a exclaims:

> Is this truly you, Father? Is it sahib al-nutfa? You really stand now before me. Are you
> truly addressing me and touching me? This is you sahib al-nutfa somewhere between
> reality and imagination. (109)

Finally, the *nazir* and *manzur ilayh* stand face to face, on equal footing. Although Fa’iq’a
continues to enumerate her father’s shortcomings, she allows him to defend himself. However,
he instead offers his daughter eye contact that turns into a mutual *nazra*, a touch and comforting
words. Moreover, Mahmud envisions his daughter’s future. He asks her if she is interested in
‗Umar al-Dhawi—Hadi al-Dhawi’son—and blesses their future union, predicting a happy
marriage and the arrival of twin sons (115). Nonetheless, Fa’iq’a sees his vision as sexist, which,
in her mind, explains his inability to acknowledge her, based on the fact that she is female (116).
Mahmud admits to his marginality during his conversation with Fa’iqqa in her hotel room. When questioned about why he abandoned her mother, he explains:

When I met your mother, I was poor. She had long periods of silence, which I wasn’t able to comprehend. I loved her but couldn’t contain her. I feared humiliation that I wouldn’t be able to accept. There’s nothing to gain now if I admitted to her my regret for running away from her love. Her love was more encompassing than I was, and too difficult to deal with. (118)

Finally, the narrator discovers the causes of her father’s desertion. His poverty and inability to reciprocate her mother’s overflowing love made him feel inadequate. Unable to face a loving woman and economic marginality, Mahmud favors escaping, rendering himself doubly marginal. Although he succeeds in shifting himself economically from the periphery to the center, he does not accomplish the same success on the personal level and remains a marginal father. Fa’iqqa’s fantasy ends when she dials ‘Umar’s number anticipating her father’s blessing upon their union as Tunisian traditions dictate. However, it suddenly becomes apparent to her that her father’s presence was an illusion and daydream. While the imagined conversation between Fa’iqqa and Mahmud al-‘Arabi allows her to find peace and serenity within herself and forgive sahib al-nuffa, it also allows her to move forward in life. Suddenly, Fa’iqqa’s father has a vision of her becoming fertile and able to give life, removing her from the marginal position in the feminine world and placing her in the privileged position of the both the feminine and masculine worlds. However, her father disappears, thus negating his position of manzur ilayh while Fa’iqqa, the nazir, is condemned to blindness once again.

In his interview with novelist Massouda Boubakr, for the magazine Amman (nd 90) Kamel Riahi asks: “Laylat al-ghiyab is a text that questions what we thought was unquestionable in our society, such as a father’s image. Yet, your first novel removes the sacredness from the father figure and presents him as sahib al-nuffa. How do you explain this?” (95). Boubakr notes
that Mahmud is treated justly in Laylat al-ghiyab because he is indeed just a sperm donor. He was constantly absent and assumed an estranged fatherhood, losing his right to sacredness as a father figure. The novelist sees Mahmud’s desertion of his daughter as an atrocity especially vis-à-vis its effects on Fa’iqa (Amman magazine 1995).

The narrator dares to rebel against the sanctified father figure in Arab society. She transforms the father Mahmud al-‘Arabi from the traditional position of nazir to a manzur ilayh, thus making him an object. Boubakr further removes power the father figure may have in Tunisian society by depicting him as a dead man awaiting his burial and taking away his ability to act and react. Although Fa’iqa is a marginal woman within her society in dialogue with her marginal father, her despair comes to an end when she reaches an entente with him. Boubakr confirms the power of kin relations between a father and his daughter, who although the narrator depicts her father as marginal, removes him from his marginality once he does the same for her. The novel confirms that marginality is a fluid construct that confines the individual in relation to another individual and not necessarily to his or her society.

Boubakr’s second novel widens the space of marginality shifting it from the individual level to the familial and social levels. A close look at the male character’s life as a transsexual in Tunisia and then as a woman (after surgery) in France will be discussed.

Looking at You Disturbs Me: Murad al-Shawashi in Trushqana (1999)

Trushqana is the name that the children of the neighborhood call Murad al-Shawashi, as they run behind him mocking his feminine ways. The novel is about a Tunisian transsexual man who feels trapped in a man’s body and dreams of going abroad for a sex change operation to become a woman. Boubakr writes about him in the third person and highlights his daily life, his
activities, his dreams, his aspirations, and his relationships with family members and friends through the female narrator, Nura al-Shawashi (wife of his cousin Karim al-Shawashi.) Not only does Trushqana dream of becoming a woman, but he dreams of giving birth to a child. His dream revolves around motherhood as the essence of femininity. Yet, science fails when it fails in making Murad’s dream a reality while family and social traditions stand as a barrier between Murad and his dreams. Yet the rest of his family members are able to marry, have children, build houses, and make ‘ordinary’ dreams into reality.

A financial aspect hovers in the background when the family matriarch, Nana Qamar (Murad’s grandmother), turns against Murad and aligns with the rest of the family to withhold his inheritance from him. The novel begins with an apparent family entente only to unravel the truth behind the calm of the characters. The novel takes another turn when children, adults, and sheikhs turn against Murad in the name of social tradition, family status, and religion. The elders of the Shawashi family reunite to remind Murad that his dreams of becoming a woman are not legitimate and hence, he should not attempt to fulfill them. Unfortunately for Murad, the only person who understood him was his French mother, Simone, who noticed his gender differences in childhood and predicted a difficult future for him. Hence, her request that her father gives her inheritance in Normandy to her only son, Murad, as she expected that he will want to have a sex change.

With the means provided by his mother, Murad moves to France, undergoes the sex change, and becomes Nada. However, she is not happier than Trushqana, since she is unable to conceive and feels that her body is betraying her. When Nada discovers Nura al-Shawashi’s manuscript about Nada’s life, she is devastated because she realizes that her only ally in the family deceived and betrayed her. The novel ends with three ambiguous pieces of news that all
agree on the disappearance or death of Murad al-Shawashi. The first piece of news announced that “an exhausted man was seen carrying a treasure chest asking about an old mine where he said he wanted to bury his grandfather’s treasure chest.” (152) While the second piece of news noted that “Several fishermen found the corpse of a drowned person on the Southern shore. For the first time in the history of the morgue, doctors were unable to determine whether the deceased was male or female.” (152) Finally, the newspaper proclaimed that “Sheikh Filali had passed away… A man, just returned from Morocco, claims to have seen a young man with soft skin accompanying the Sheikh wherever he went.” (152) The end of the novel suggests that, not only was Murad’s life ambiguous and full of confusion, but so was his death/disappearance.

When Kamal Riahi asked Massouda Boubakr about the origins of the name *Trushqana* in an interview for *Amman magazine* (95 nd), she replied:

Many names are given to effeminate (or bisexual) men whom we find in rich and poor neighborhoods, such as Badi’ah or Mannubiyya. However, an effeminate man living in a popular neighborhood is quite unfortunate because of the way people treat him... I heard a group of men mocking an effeminate man’s walk. While they clapped, they emitted the sounds: ‘trash-qan, trash-qan’ referring to his feminine mannerisms while walking. I also remembered the effeminate man that I knew and who inspired me to write *Trushqana*. He was very elegant and loved to wear *qubqa* which make a lot of noise when walking in them. I found the word *Trushqana* to be appropriate for Murad Shawashi’s character. (13-14)

Marginality in *Trushqana* begins with the title, as the etymology of the word connects to a certain sound emitted by women when walking in their *qubqab*. It further reminds us of the word *tarshaq* (chewing noise) linked to the act of chewing acacia gum loudly. Both actions are strictly feminine in Tunisian culture and are acceptable in the private space but rejected in the public space. In fact, women who *taqtaq* (make noise with their shoes while walking) or who *tarshaq* (make a snapping sound when chewing gum) are considered to exhibit loose behavior
Hence, readers discover the femininity of the protagonist of Boubakr’s novel *Trashqana* as soon as they read the first two pages. In her dedication, Boubakr states: “To Murad, who left without ever showing me his face” (5) suggesting that Murad al-Shawashi (Trashqana) is faceless or that the narrator knows him only wearing a mask.

While marginality is limited to the father figure within a personal space in Boubakr’s first novel, the space widens in her second novel. The sexuality of the main character determines his marginality, which disturbs his family and the public. Trashqana’s marginality troubles those around him because he undermines the masculine ideology of society by cross-dressing and wanting to be a woman. I argue that Boubakr offers Murad Shawashi a double role: he is a *nazir* at times and at others a *manzur ilayh*. A look at the constituents of Trashqana’s marginality reveals that despite its connection to *al-nazar*, a financial component concerning inheritance motivates those in the center to marginalize Murad al-Shawashi continuously and make sure he is not removed from the periphery, thus introducing the possibility of economic marginality as well as sexual marginality.

*Nhibb nwalli mra, I Want to Be ‘Woman’*

Murad al-Shawashi is Nana Qamar’s grandson and Ahmad al-Shawashi’s son. His mother, a French aristocrat, makes sure that her only son inherits her father’s sizeable property in France after her death, thus making him affluent. As an adult, Murad lives in his studio in a southern suburb of Tunis but is often at Nana Qamar’s in the old city of Tunis, *al-madina*. His

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41 For more on the correlation between chewing gum and sexual excitement, see Mai Ghoussoub’s “Chewing Gum, Insatiable women and Foreign Enemies: Male Fears and the Arab Media” (227-235) in *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East* (2000).

42 *Nana* is how the aristocracy of Tunis refer to their mothers and sometimes grandmothers.
friends refer to his apartment as *beit larti* (the artist’s house) (32). The sexual and social constituents of Trushqana’s marginal status in Tunisian society are many and worth examining. Boubakr depicts her protagonist as shifting positions between a *nazir* and a *manzur ilayh* in parallel with Trushqana’s sexuality shifting between male and female.

When Nana Qamar takes Murad with her to a wedding, he freely dances with the other women, allowing his body to move in its natural feminine ways (9), much to his grandmother’s embarrassment: “*njibu m’aya u nindim*” (“I bring him with me and regret it” 8). The omniscient narrator of Trushqana’s life emphasizes the flexibility with which he moves his body at the wedding. While Murad al-Shawashi has a pleasant time at the wedding and dances freely, he draws people’s stares with body movements that resemble a woman’s (8). Although sexuality is part of the private space, it transcends the realm of privacy in Trushqana’s world because he does not attempt to conceal his desire to be a woman and views his masculinity as a curse or a mistake of nature. Throughout the wedding, Trushqana draws attention to himself through the intensity and passion of his dance. Many of those present think of him as a woman and question his in-between identity. The wedding guests exclaim their shock when they find out that the apparently female dancer is in actuality a man (10). Their stares accentuate Murad’s position as a *manzur ilayh*.

The narrator highlights the ambiguity of Trushqana’s sexuality in a dialogue between Nana Qamar and her daughter Hayfa that invalidates his masculinity. Qamar says: “Take off those shorts, the pest [Murad] is in the apartment upstairs!” Hayfa answers: “Oh Nana! Since when are we ashamed of that guy?” (12). While the grandmother asks her daughter to cover her body out of respect for the man present in their house, Hayfa sees no need for modesty in the presence of Trushqana since she does not consider him a man. Despite her saying: “May the
Lord rest your soul in peace Ahmad my son. You died and left me this disoriented child and all the shame he brings” (12), Nana Qamar is the only family member that appears to accept Trashqana, venture out of her house in his company and take him to social events.

Beside Trashqana’s ambiguous appearance whereby he looks like a woman from the exterior but remains a man physiologically, he is dissatisfied with his sexuality and wishes to become a woman. Not only do his looks marginalize him but so does his speech. From the upper quarter of Nana Qamar’s house, Trashqana screams: “nhibb nwalli mra! Je veux devenir femme! I want to be woman! Vorrei essere donna!” (13). Despite the mocking claps and screams of the neighborhood’s children, Murad proceeds with his maniac behavior, expressing his aspirations to, first of all, become a woman and second, to conceive. Femininity and motherhood are Trashqana’s vision for the future, and while science concretizes the former, it fails to do so for the latter. In a letter to his friend Anushka, Murad explains that the derogatory name Trashqana invented by the neighborhood’s children does not disturb him or affect him in any way. His sexuality however, is a source of anxiety. He writes: “Dearest Anu, you asked me once why I embraced the name Trashqana and didn’t rebel against it. Yet, that which is worthy of my revolt is difficult. Can I defy nature?” (35). After all, nature has caused his marginalization, according to him. By reversing the effects of nature, Murad will overcome the cause of his marginality and will move from the periphery to the center.

Subject to violence from the street dwellers, at times Trashqana comes home to Nana Qamar with a bloody face. He is attacked and beaten while sitting peacefully drawing one of the doors of the old city. As she cleans his face, Murad exclaims: “Nana, I want to find peace! I don’t feel comfortable under this skin. Tell my uncle to give me my inheritance... I want to leave... I want to change my skin... That way you will no longer see this face!” (36). Nana
replies: “But I love this face... I want you to be a man, like your father and grandfather were... I want you to marry and see you fill this house with your children” (36). In this dialogue, Nana expresses her expectations of her sons/men: To marry and procreate. However, the matriarch of the family does not respond to Murad’s claims to his inheritance and ignores his financial rights. In fact, Nana Qamar does not consider Murad an adult and treats him like a child. She does not ask her son for Murad’s inheritance money and prefers to keep it under her other son’s control.

Not only is Trushqana marginalized through violence in the public sphere, but he is also marginalized within his beldi family. While Murad appears to be Nana Qamar’s protégé, she contributes to marginalizing him by denying him his financial rights. The family matriarch knows that her grandson wishes to make use of his inheritance money to travel to Europe for a sex change operation, and despite her desire for grandchildren, it is essential that she see them descend from the male Murad al-Shawashi, and not from the woman he aspires to become.

Hence, the matriarch of al-Shawashi family preserves the patriarchal elements of her family and thereby contributes and perpetuates the principle elements upholding patriarchy in Tunisian society. In Beyond Power: On Women, Men, and Morals (1985) Marilyn French points out that women contribute to the preservation of patriarchy. She notes:

It is unrealistic to expect women to live totally apart from their cultures, to have a perspective and a doctrine with which to oppose those cultures. Men have also been oppressed by patriarchal institutions, but we do not expect them to be able to see, through the veils of patriarchal ideas, precisely what it is that oppresses them. It is also true, however, that women as a group have fought, at least privately, in every regime in which they have lived, for a place of their own, a realm in which they could use some of their talents and in which they could exercise some control. (121)

43 In defining the Beldi, Hejaiej notes: “The achievement of considerable learning, the holding of prominent religious offices and the monopoly of certain skilled crafts were the means by which families acquired noble status... The Beldi maintained a reputation for being cultured and refined, but as the population increased through rural migration, their self-esteem grew together with a sense of prejudice. Scholars, merchants and craftsmen held on to their urban identity and looked down upon all outsiders.” Hejaiej, Monia. Behind Closed Doors: Women’s Oral Narratives in Tunis, 24-25.
Indeed, Nana Qamar, the Shawashi family’s matriarch, has a central and essential role in her family. However, she does not oppose the oppression of patriarchal institutions for the benefit of her transsexual grandson Murad. Though she finds her niche as a caregiver for the marginal member of her family, she does not support him nor does she contribute to removing him from the marginal position into ‘normalcy.’ Nana Qamar only opposes the family and society in that she defends the physical well-being of Trushqana and cleans off his wounds after he is physically assaulted. However, she does not stand for his financial rights despite her matriarchal authority over her family. In fact, Nana Qamar hopes that Trushqana will cease to exist and become Murad once again. She is only disposed to remove her grandson from his marginality if he relinquishes his desire to become a woman. On the other hand, Murad anticipates shifting into the realm of ‘normalcy’ through a sex change that will put an end to his marginal position in his family and society. For Nana Qamar, Murad’s famous identification “Trushqana” does not exist. In fact, she forbids anyone to call Murad by Trushqana in her house (39), as she considers the title derogatory and negative.

Despite his love for them, the children around Nana Qamar’s house run after him calling him names, singing a repeated melody: “Trushqana craves sleep, he stayed up counting stars” (40). When Murad attempts to hold one of the little girls in his arms, she orders him: “Get away from me! My mother told me to stay away from you and especially not to enter your apartment when you are alone!” (39). The meanness of the children following him, while calling him names and gesturing mockingly at him, are but a few elements that contribute to Murad’s marginality through the eyes of the children surrounding him. He expresses this to Nana telling her: “Nana, I don’t want the little ones to run away from me, especially not the ones in our family. They are so dear to me!” (40). While Trushqana offers his affection to the children
around him, they are not able to reciprocate because adults warn them to stay away from the deviant man they perceive Trushqana to be.

Assuming a marginal position begins early in Murad’s life. As a young student, children mocked him and beat him up often because they found him too effeminate (41). Unlike his classmates, he went home to share a room with his French mother in Nana Qamar’s house. Nana Qamar accuses politics for the death of her son Ahmad, Murad’s father (41), leaving her responsible for Simone and her son. When Simone dies, Murad moves from the position of itim (orphan) to the position of elli metit ‘ummu (the one whose mother died) (43), accentuating his difference among children his age.

While spending a summer in Normandy at his maternal grandfather’s chateau, Murad meets Anushka who becomes his best friend. He admires her musical talent as she plays the violin while she marvels at his artistic talent as a painter. Regarding his sexuality, the narrator says:

[Anushka] wasn’t surprised when he expressed his desire to become a woman. In fact, she promised to accompany him to a specialist when he was ready to see a doctor... He informed her of his attraction to the world of men and how no woman had ever moved him sexually... Despite his closeness to the world of women, the idea of intercourse with one of them, even out of curiosity, repulsed him. (57)

While Nana Qamar refuses to accept Murad as he is (the transsexual man aspiring to become a woman), Anushka accepts him and enjoys conversing with him. She makes no judgment regarding his sexual orientation and offers her support in making his dream come true. Anushka treats Murad as a human being, not as a transsexual effeminate man who bothers her. Moreover, with Anushka, he changes from the constant position of a manzur ilayh to an equitable position where he assumes the role of a nazir at times and at others becomes manzur ilayh. She supports Murad’s dream of being accepted as a human being, and does not remind him of his marginal
position in Tunisian society. The above quote alludes to Murad’s sexual orientation without a value judgment, even though the same sexual orientation is the cause of the value judgment he encounters in Tunis. In addition, Murad shares his secrets with Anushka, such as when he shows her his armoire full of women’s lingerie. When she sees the size of the bras Murad has selected for when he becomes Serena (female name he gives himself), she remembers the urgency of meeting doctors in France and inquiring about the possibility of performing Murad’s sex change surgery. It becomes obvious to her that her friend intends to develop breasts (58), a symbol of femininity.

Anushka treats Murad as her equal, shows him true love, kindness, and friendship, and proves that his dreams and interests are of relevance to her. The rest of Murad’s world places him in the position of manzur ilayh where he is no longer Murad but becomes Trushqana. His position as a manzur ilayh causes him to be subjected to actions leading to his marginalization, such as the physical violence in the streets, children’s stalking, and his family’s refusal to give him his inheritance. As a nazir, Murad searches for inspiration in the beauty of his surroundings for his paintings. He pays attention to detail and loves colors. Though he analyzes the people around him, he prefers not to share his negative opinions of them out of fear of causing pain. His dream to become a woman reveals his dream of removing himself from the periphery and moving into the center. For Murad, a sex change will offer him the prospect of removing him from the in-between-genders status, and place him comfortably within the female gender. However, marginality transcends gender differences and remains in his life, even after he becomes a woman.
Redefining Marginality: The In-Between Status

Convinced that his birth as a son was a mistake that occurred in Simone’s womb, Murad wishes to correct nature’s confusion and change the Shawashi’s all male lineage (his father had two brothers) by bringing a daughter into the world. He writes to Anushka:

... Then my dearest friend, I wish to become a female! Perhaps I’ll give birth to the beast that the female members of the Shawashi family failed to conceive. I’ll load my womb with my strongest desires and the violence that accompanies morning sickness. (69)

In this letter, Murad expresses his dreams of rectifying history and curing the Shawashi family from their overwhelming masculinity and absence of female descendents. He wishes to succeed where his grandfather and father failed, as they were not able to beget a female. While he expresses his desire to conceive after he becomes a woman, he also brings out the violence his immediate family circle and the streets of Tunis subject him to when imagining his morning sickness withholding violence. Murad uses the word “beast” to refer to the child he aspires to conceive, a reflection upon himself which places him in the position of nazir, because he is looking at himself. On the other hand, the “beast” may be a replica of the image that his family and society have created for him, which places him in a position of manzur ilayh. This demonstrates Murad’s in-between status shifting from the position of nazir to manzur ilayh and back again.

Despite his cousins’ (Ghazi and Karim) mockery at every opportunity, Murad does not change. For example, when the Shawashi cousins go to the coastal city of Sousse, they comment on Murad’s exaggerated dancing in a nightclub (80). Murad explains to them that his love for the body and freedom translates into rhythm, and whether it be at a Bedouin wedding or a chic nightclub, he believes in his right to allow his body freedom of expression. Murad adds: “I just want to be a normal and clear-minded person able to love, like everyone else. Dancing allows
me to forget that I am not that person. It allows my body to shout all that I have to say to you but you are deaf” (80). Murad continues his speech on the meaning and value of dance as a response to his cousin’s criticism for dancing excessively. While he divulges his desire for ‘normalcy,’ he accepts a definition of marginality that the people around him, including his own cousins, impose upon him. Murad is marginal because the world around him resists him and denies him to be himself. Nana Qamar turns her medina house into a site of Sufi ceremonies, anticipating the flight of the female jinn that has taken over her grandson’s body and the restoration of his manhood (76). Karim ridicules Murad for going to see a sheikh with Nana Qamar who wants to heal him of the Jinn that lives within him. It is only when Murad says to him: “Why do you not understand that I hurt? My life is like walking with wounded feet on coil!” (81) that Karim realizes that Murad’s sexuality is not a choice but a natural urge causing him pain and grief.

Murad’s world is ambiguous and governed by his in-between status. Starting with his name, Murad is himself to his family, but to the people in his neighborhood, he takes on the identity of Trushqana. While Trushqana is governed by a gender construction that allows him to behave like a woman, Murad is defined by his biology. His parents are mixed: his mother is French and his father Tunisian, and while he has family in Tunis, he has grandparents in France. Indeed, Murad’s identity fluctuates between his roots in a well-established aristocratic yet impoverished beldi family in Tunis and his roots in the old aristocratic and rich Dubois family in Normandy. Yet Murad yearns to leave his in-between status and aspires to move toward his constructed idea of ‘normalcy’. He believes that once he becomes a woman physically, he will leave his marginal space, as there will be unity between the physical appearance and the inside soul: one female entity. Murad believes that once he becomes a woman, his identity will become stable and fixed, as opposed to the unstable identity that makes his self-boundaries
difficult to define. The ambiguity surrounding his identity stems from his position of a manzur ilayh within his family and society. Despite his unclear sexuality, his dream of becoming a woman and his artwork consume him and make him a nazir focusing his vision on himself while the others around him make him a manzur ilayh, which disturbs them. All his paintings depict the same image, that of a pregnant woman in various surroundings. The narrator writes: “There are nine portraits, yet the topic is one: A beautiful young pregnant woman is present in all of them… The woman maintains the same position throughout the nine portraits, though the colors surrounding her are different.” (65) Murad’s art depicts an ideal image of himself—the pregnant woman/Trushqana—and allows him to look upon himself, thus putting him in the position of the nazir. On the other hand, those viewing his artwork have the opportunity to see the ideal image of Trushqana as well as to look at the painter (Murad). Therefore, Murad shifts within a double position of manzur ilayh and to the position of nazir.

In fact, seeing or looking at Murad appears to be particularly troublesome for men more than for women. For example, his cousins Ghazi, Karim, and Nur al-Din offer their misplaced comments more than their wives Layla and Nora, who on the contrary, defend Murad and acknowledge his boldness (85). When Ghazi says: “He’s going to travel this summer in a men’s shirt and trousers but will return to us at the beginning of winter wearing a woman’s fur coat and high heels” (85). Layla responds: “He is the most courageous one in your family” (85), suggesting that the other men are cowards and untrue to themselves, despite their apparent secure masculinities.

Murad demands his inheritance money and openly tells his cousins that Anushka has arranged for him to meet with his surgeon performing the sex change. Yet, his cousins question
the level of acceptance of his family and society to the future female Murad, to which he responds:

I could care less about their [family and society] acceptance. Even if I had one chance in a thousand to be accepted, I won’t change my mind. Do you all make peace with your bodies and minds and forbid me? You all make love, feel affection for others and procreate... I want to live peacefully within the confines of my body as it announces its real identity. The disapproval that I see in your eyes and especially in Hajja Qamar’s eyes will become curiosity and finally habit. (87)

Murad speaks out asserting that once he becomes a woman, he will move away from his marginal situation into the realm of normalcy. However, he does not appear consumed by the projection of others upon him, or by his situation as manzur ilayh. Instead, he aspires to satisfy himself and move away from his in-between genders world. Murad’s goal is not to conform to society, but to establish conformity between his inner-self and his external body. Could this search for conformity on the individual level imply a desire to move away from the marginal space? From Murad’s discussions with his cousins, finding inner-peace consumes him more than others’ nazra upon him. In addition, in moving away from what Murad and Trushqana represent in Tunisian society, Nada (Murad’s name after he becomes a woman) aspires to live her situation of nazir focusing on herself and integrating into mainstream society. The fourteenth chapter demonstrates the notion of normalcy by creating a new and apparently stable identity that Murad aspires to achieve. Suddenly, a new narrator emerges interrupting the authorial voice that puts Murad in the third person throughout the novel. This new narrator is Nada who identifies herself:

I’m Nada the granddaughter of Mister Alain Dubois who passed away before last year’s Christmas, joining Simone and Suzy. I’m the descendental of the Norman farmer Baron Dubois, Nada Shawashi. Simone Dubois’ blood flows in my veins. I welcome you all in his house where his soul exists in all the corners of this art gallery that he encouraged me to found. This space will always be open to encourage art and to commemorate the ancestry of Simone Dubois. Her name will be posted on the entry of this hall. (74)
The direct narration that Nada engages in proves that once Murad becomes Nada, she takes over his life and destiny, but more importantly, she has a voice. Instead of her story being told by another outside narrator, Nada defines her own identity and brings forth the importance of her mother Simone and her noble Norman ancestry. Nada’s speech takes place in her grandfather’s Normandy castle that she transforms into an art gallery. This suggests that Trushqana becomes who he wishes (Nada) outside of his immediate family circle, outside of Tunis, and outside of Tunisia. Finally, Murad is able to define the parameters of his identity as Nada, without taking into account the way others define him. However, the original narrator interrupts this state of normalcy following the above paragraph, as he or she (the narrator’s gender remains ambiguous) narrates the events and dialogues Murad engages in and places him in the third person status.

Back in Tunisia, Karim brings up the differences between Ahmad Shawashi and his son Murad, as he tackles the issue of nationalism: Ahmad al-Shawashi\(^{44}\) was in the opposition (first against the French then against Bourguiba) and was murdered in France. Murad however wants to strip his father’s legacy from its masculine elements by becoming a woman.\(^ {45}\) He says: “He [my father] had his cause, and I have my own,” (87) insinuating that a sex change is as important as his father’s nationalist cause because transforming into the body of one’s choice allows to define one’s identity similarly to nationalism. When his cousin tells him that these two causes are different because Ahmad al-Shawashi affected a group of people while Murad aspires to produce change at the individual level (87), Murad responds: “The common point between them

\(^{44}\) Murad mentions that his father was a Yussefi, referring to the Tunisian nationalists who followed Saleh Ben Youssef and were opposed to Bourguiba.\(^ {87}\)

\(^{45}\) Although Karim attempts to prove that Ahmad al-Shawashi led a normal and honorable life, he dismisses the fact that, similar to his son, Ahmad was marginalized for political reasons. The letters he wrote to Simone reveals that he was banned from returning to Tunisia, was a leftist, in the opposition, a supporter of Ben Youssef, and finally he was murdered as he walked out of his Paris apartment in 1959. \(^{90-92}\)
[the two causes] is that they both reestablish an identity” (87). Hence, rectifying his current false manhood and transforming it into womanhood is not only a matter of space, nazra and a personal malaise for Murad, but a matter of re-creating an identity that the transsexual character aspires to choose, making his position as a nazir and looking at himself in the mirror possible. He seeks conformity, but not within a group; rather, he wishes to feel conformity between the woman inside him and his façade.

When Murad urges the Shawashi family to gather at Nana Qamar’s house in the Old City of Tunis, he suddenly becomes a nazir projecting his vision upon all his family members, unveiling their lust for money, grand weddings, businesses in new malls, and modern houses in the suburbs. Murad divulges that the ulterior motive of his family members behind keeping his inheritance money away from him is mainly economic (101-102.) His uncle, Si al-Munji says:

What need are you talking about, Murad? Do not force me to say and do wrong against you. Had you asked for the money to complete a normal task, such as build a house, start a business, travel to study or do research or to get married, your demand would be logical. You however, are asking for something insane. How can you ask for your father’s share in the family money when you intend to hurt his name and harm his image? How can I give you his money to change your own skin? What about your father’s rights over you in passing on his name? Does it make sense for me to support you on such a matter? Is this not extreme madness? (102)

Si al-Munji highlights Murad’s marginality while revealing what he considers normal: the construction of a house, the launching of a business, and paying for a wedding. When Murad expresses his desire to spend his inheritance money on a sex change, his demands are considered outside the realm of normalcy and simply insane. The uncle brings in two important components to strengthen his argument. The first one relates to the family image that Murad will tarnish if he becomes a woman according to Si al-Munji. The second component is the importance of preserving and safeguarding masculinity through the passing on of the family name, which only
happens in Arab culture through patriarchal lineage. Both elements of Si al-Munji’s argument concern the family image in relation to the rest of society. Hence, the importance of Murad as a *manzur ilayh* dominates over his significance as a *nazir*. Moreover, the battle Murad leads with his family over money transcends the financial aspect and translates into a battle between Murad demanding his individual right as a *nazir* to himself and his family insisting on their right to preserve their image in society through Murad as a *manzur ilayh*.

Despite their bitter confrontation, the family including Nana Qamar, goes to his studio apartment in Ezzahra to make peace with Murad. They realize that family ties are stronger than Murad’s marginality (112-113). However, Murad’s concerns lay elsewhere for is he able to leave the periphery and move into the center once he leaves his masculinity behind?

**Nada: the Ex-Man, the Guinea Pig**

A semblance of normalcy hovers over Nada’s life when the narrator describes her as a female artist who gives the opening speech at the art gallery housed in her grandfather’s chateau in Normandy. Nada confides in her best friend Anushka that, George Hazim, a Lebanese man in his forties residing in London, has caught her attention (74). Despite Nada’s reconciliation with her body, her marginality transforms from an imposition upon her from the outside world to originating from within. While at dinner with Hazim, Nada reveals her estrangement and her yearning for her family in Tunis (107). She proposes to her guest to listen to some Tunisian *maluf* (chants of *Andalusian* origin) and describes her family as being in her heart and memory (107). They engage in a nostalgic conversation about their respective families and countries until Hazim asks: “You seem athletic. Were you ever a weight lifter?” (110). Despite the simplicity of the question, it causes Nada discomfort as she wonders if Hazim has noticed
anomalies in her figure. Once again, her status of a manzur ilayh causes her anxiety because she fears that her body will betray her when others examine her, as her body has retained masculine features. Nada tells Anushka:

... It’s my body Anushka! I feel like my body is betraying me... Is it another body enveloping my soul or another being within this body? I don’t understand... Did this really happen to me? I had a goal that I moved forward toward and I made it happen to honor my humanness...” (111)

The reason for becoming Nada was to find peace within herself. Yet, her expression of anxiety and the questioning of her success suggests that true peace from within is elusive. Even though Nada dreamed in her previous life of becoming the woman she is today, she cannot find satisfaction in her body. In front of her mirror, she places herself in the position of a nazir, examining her own body as if she were another person and adopting a critical view of herself instead of the positive view she once aspired to have. Consequently, Nada makes herself unhappy in the same way that others made her unhappy when she was Murad. Whereas Murad was consumed by the thought of changing his nazra upon himself and dismissed his image of manzur ilayh from the perspective of others, today as Nada, her position of manzur ilayh becomes significant to her. In fact, she goes as far as ending her relationship with George Hazim using the image of ships going through the Rouen port only once in history, as a metaphor for how some relationships do not survive their first meeting. Nada ends a letter to Hazim indicating that: “I am a woman, not a guinea pig (fa’rat makhabin)” (129). This is how she puts an end to the possibility of a relationship with a man she loves. The marginality of Murad emerges in different forms in Nada, as she condemns herself to solitude, loneliness and seclusion, and shies away from relationships with men even when they fancy her.

In his response to Nada’s request to end their relationship, Hazim responds:
I salute you, for I’m impressed by what you’ve done for yourself. I know everything. You’re so brave that I can’t face you again. As you requested, my ship won’t sail in your port again. Farewell. (129)

In his letter, Hazim expresses admiration for Nada as a person who was true to herself, but he also admits to his weakness of not being able to confront her again, now that he knows that the woman who attracted him was once a man. Hence, the status and identity of Nada does not resume itself in Nada, but instead, she becomes Nada who-was-once-a-man. This identity alone marginalizes her and estranges her from those born as women. On the one hand, surrounded by people in Tunis, followed by the neighborhood children, and attended to by the women in Nana Qamar’s house, Murad exists as a marginalized individual in a group. On the other hand, Nada condemns herself to solitary confinement in her grandfather’s chateau in the company of an old servant. Anushka describes her environment as a mixture of cigarettes and paint odors (130) and alludes to her solitude. She advises Nada to go out to meet men and recommends her to animate her social life instead of confining herself to the walls of her chateau in Normandy and imposing upon herself a marginal status from within. In this instance, Adam Weisberger’s views on marginality theory are applicable, for in his article “Marginality and its Directions” (2005) he argues that a marginal individual is unable to return and reintegrate in his original group after being part of another group. Yet, Weisberger advances that the marginal person is “caught in a structure of double ambivalence: unable either to leave or return to the original group” (425). Murad becomes the victim of this double ambivalence discussed by Weisberger, for he is unable to return to his status as ‘man’ physically. Yet, integration in the world of women seems impossible to achieve.

The pattern of rejecting love, men, and relationships continues even when Nada shows interest in a man. While exhibiting her art in the city of Marrakesh, Nada meets a Moroccan
executive who strikes his fancy. When he proposes marriage to Nada she reacts by checking out of her hotel and leaving the country without “having the power to leave him [the businessman] a note at the hotel’s reception” (131). The rejection and denial of family and society condemn Murad to transform into a woman, who reflects others’ rejection and denial of her identity as Trushqana. The marginal status imposed upon her in her previous life in Tunis transforms into a self-imposition, perhaps more difficult to assume than her previous status. Despite Nada’s implementation of radical change on her body and identity, she cannot act upon her environment and insists on keeping the decor of her grandfather’s chateau unchanged. When Anushka suggests that she should renovate her antique-looking chateau, Nada exclaims:

   No way! Anything but that! This home must remain the same, with is particularities, its colors and its environment. There are narratives and history that time made happen in this ancient house. It’d be inappropriate to demolish them, the same way we destroy cobwebs in corners. (132)

Although Nada dares to change her body image, she holds on to the memory and history of her ancestor’s chateau, giving importance to space as a familiar sight. Ironically, as much as Murad craved change, Nada fears it and does not attempt to alter her surroundings or her relationships. She clings to Anushka, her only friend who knows her as Murad and as Nada, but fails at building new friendships. Suddenly, Nada fears love, although she yearned for it when she was Murad. Furthermore, she runs away from men that show interest in her, escaping from her own dreams and desires.

   Nura, Murad’s cousin and a novelist, predicts Nada’s estrangement. The narrator describes her ambiguous and worrisome feeling saying:

   Nura predicted that the coming stage of Murad’s life would not be easier than his current situation. His integration, socially, legally and psychologically would not be as easy as he imagined it to be. On the contrary, his estrangement would deepen in his new environment. (142)
Despite Nura’s certitude that Murad will assume with difficulty his sex change, she and Layla are the only women in the family who collect money for Murad to support his operation (142). In fact, they advocate Murad’s cause because they believe in his freedom to choose his identity, unlike the men of the family who make use of an amalgam of arguments to dissuade Murad from the operation. They perceive the act as a betrayal of masculinity and patriarchy, and do not hide their feelings of anxiety regarding it. Yet, Nura’s concerns, unlike the men of the family, relate to the well-being of Murad alone. Indeed, the outside world imposes a marginal position upon Murad, which Nada converts to self-imposed marginality. Hence, Murad’s marginality through his position of a *manzur ilayh* persists even when he becomes Nada the *nazir*.

Murad’s desire to become Nada was the first part of his dream, and was possible. Unfortunately for the ex-man, going from womanhood to motherhood proves to be obstructed, thus putting an end to the dream. In a conversation with Anushka regarding Nada’s new legal status in Tunisia, Nada says:

... I want to find a way back to my tribe... I want my space where I choose it to be: underneath the sun of my country... My sweat is there... My memories... My father’s inheritance... The history of my ancestors. I want to have a home... I want to be a mother... (148)

The success of becoming a woman is not enough for Murad, as womanhood in its best form translates into motherhood in his mind. Nada sees no end to her dreams, and hopes to carry a child within her, despite the doctors’ confirmation that it is an impossible dream to realize. When Anushka asks her about her doctor’s opinion on her case, she answers: “The doctor informed me that nothing can be done. I simply cannot carry a child in my womb” (148). Being a woman is not enough for her; she must give birth to feel complete.

Back in Tunisia, when Murad discovers a purple folder that he curiously looks through, he reveals a secret that Nura has been withholding from him. Feelings of betrayal and deception
overcome Murad as he reads the pages of Nura’s manuscript and finds out that he serves as the protagonist of her novel (148). His greatest disappointment occurs when he reads about becoming Nada and Nura’s portrayal places Nada in a continuous state of marginality. He says:

Why did you do this, Nura? Is this how you foresee my future? I’m not Nada and will never be Nada with her inability to love and to integrate. And why do you say it’s impossible for me to become a mother? What about my dream of giving birth to a child for whom I will be a different parent than Simone and Ahmad Shawashi were to me? Curse you all! Curse you, O Nura! (148-149)

Murad responds violently to Nura’s manuscript. Not only does he feel that Nura betrays him by keeping her new novel a secret from him, but he believes that it would have been easier on him if she had killed him (149). The reduction of his life as Murad and Trushqana to disintegrated and infertile Nada alarms Murad and distresses him. Murad thinks that Nura is one of the few family members showing support for his cause. When he reads that she transforms him into Nada the barren and places him as a deviant character in her work of fiction, he becomes extremely angry and disappointed in her. Murad uncovers a disconnection between Nura’s spoken and written transcripts. Feeling used, Murad serves as Nura’s literary guinea pig in parallel to Nada being George Hazim’s guinea pig. Murad’s life and its entanglements offer Nura intriguing material for her latest novel. Murad disappears after this incident, leaving no trace of himself.

Regarding the conclusion to this novel, Mahmoud Tarchouna, in al-Hayat al-thaqafiyya (1999), argues:

It appears that the writer built a fortress throughout the novel and took it down violently at the end. Not only does she [Boubakr] assassinate Murad Shawashi’s dream but she furthers his misery and then pushes him into suicide (Ightiyal al-hulm fi riwayat Trushqana 112).

Tarchouna assumes that the novelist ‘killed’ Murad at the end of her novel, although she offers three possible endings but indicates that one is true without saying which one. The first ending alludes to Murad taking the manuscript away from the city into a rock quarry and searching to
bury his grandfather’s *fniq* (jewelry box in Tunisian dialect), the source of the family’s misery resumed in the person of Murad. The second piece of information confirms that several fishermen find an unidentifiable person whose autopsy is unable to determine whether he was male or female, laying on the shore. Finally, the third piece of news confirms that a beardless man, seen in Marrakech with a Sufi Sheikh, has disappeared (152). Thus, the end is ambiguous and unclear. The reader may be certain that Murad changes life and moves away from his family and neighborhood without telling anyone. The death or suicide of Murad is not confirmed, although his disappearance is. Similar to his life, Murad al-Shawashi’s death or disappearance is vague and indefinite, positioning him somewhere—somewhere between life and death.

Murad al-Shawashi leads a life that his family, neighborhood, and society conspire against and thus place him on the margins of society through his position of *manzur ilayh*. Yet, when his cousin’s wife Nura allows him to become the woman Murad dreams of becoming, she condemns him to marginality that originates from within in her position as a *nazir*. Fulfilling his dream, Murad fictionally finds himself on the outskirts of society. Although he reaches for the center, the world around him plots against him to keep him on the periphery of society, until he effaces himself through death or by fading away. As his life is outside the realm of social normalcy, so is his demise. Yet, Kaja Silverman in her book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992) suggests that all forms of sexuality marginalize the object. She proposes that: “There is no form of human sexuality which does not marginalize need or substitute a fantasmatic object for the original and nutritive object” (186). Thus, one understands the continuous marginal position of Murad al-Shawashi in being a man or a woman.

But in her novel *Wada’an Hammurabi* (*Farewell Hammurabi* 2003), does Boubakr condemn the protagonist Zaqquma to marginality in the same way she did with Trushqana?
**Zaqquma: I’m Repulsive and Filthy, but I Exist and You Must Look at Me**

When the Gulf War erupts, it has a major effect on the inhabitants of the village of al-Rajin (hopeful people). Not only does the distant war change the mood of the villagers but it also changes their actions, discussions, and their general day-to-day life. The title of the book, *Wada‘an Hammurabi*, and the name of the characters reflect historical events. Boubakr mixes historical facts with the reality of the villagers showing the importance of memory and its protection, although it may remind a people of their failures and defeats. The character, Zaqquma, brings evil to the village, however, he was not always a thief. The novel is the journey of Zaqquma and his move from being transient to becoming sedentary when given the appropriate chance.

According to Tunisian literary critic Kameel Riahi in his article “*Wada‘an Hammurabi: intisar al-fanni ‘ala al-idayluji: bahth fi riwa‘iyyat al-riwaya*” (“Farewell to Hammurabi: When Art Overcomes Ideology: the Narratology of the Novel”), the title of Massouda Boubakr’s third novel was originally *La‘nat al-kam*’ (*The Curse of the Poisonous Truffle*) which symbolizes petroleum due to its black color (*Amman* 56). With the Second Gulf War, Boubakr changed her title to *Wada‘an Hammurabi* suggesting the end of Iraq’s Assyrian civilization and the demise of the Arab people.

“They saw me covered in black, they thought I had no ammunition, but I am like a written book, with much to gain from” (26). This statement is the reader’s first encounter with Zaqquma as a *nazir* onto himself. He expresses himself in a colloquial poetic form exposing himself as blackened from the outside yet carrying a treasure within. Zaqquma’s image of himself is the opposite of what the rest of the inhabitants of al-Rajin see. In fact, through their
eyes, Zaqquma appears as an obnoxious and ill-mannered man who does not hesitate to interrupt others’ conversations. Physically, he is scrawny, lame and malodorous according to the narrator (26). Furthermore, he wears clothes so old and used that one cannot distinguish the original colors (26). Yet, Zaqquma claims that he is the descendant of al-Jaziya al-hilaliyya though his father died when he was a child and his mother weaned him when he was only six months old because she had to work the land to assure their survival (28).

Zaqquma’s name comes from the zaqqum tree defined in *The Arabic English Dictionary* as “an infernal tree with exceedingly bitter fruit, mentioned in the Koran” (Wehr 440), but also defined as “frech butter with dates in the dialect of Ifriqiyya” according to Edward Lane (1239). According to the people of the village, Zaqquma lives up to his name, that is, he is the character ‘from hell’ whom the villagers avoid and shun. However, Zaqquma becomes “like butter and dates” by the end of the novel. While Munawwar reads a letter he has received from Hamid al-Hilali, Zaqquma storms in and asks him: “What has happened to Hamid? Is he dead?” (61) Munawwar points out the ridicule in Zaqquma’s question, as he interjects that if Hamid were dead, he would have not written a letter (61). The marginal and dark character engages in pessimistic language that is not appropriate in Arab culture; asking such a question and evoking death when speaking of a living person is not permitted culturally and is considered a bad omen. Yet, Zaqquma consistently insults the villagers and offends them. He knows that when seen,

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46 *al-Jaziya al-hilaliyya* was a strong woman who led the Banu hilal tribe on their journey to Tunis. As a historical figure, she influenced oral culture in Tunisia, especially in the Southern regions. She is also notorious for her beauty and her loyalty to her tribe. The Hilali saga is known as *al-Taghriba*.

47 Hamid al-Hilali narrates to his childhood friend that his Irish wife Dina has turned into the devil and conspires against him. She argues that by invading Iraq, the West is cleaning the East of its lack of freedom and a culture where men indulge in virgins and eunuchs (61). In parallel with the war in Iraq, Hamid leads a war within his marriage as he faces his daily life in a Western country.
people turn their faces however, he chooses to confront them and does not hesitate to express his opinions openly.

The Gulf War affects the inhabitants of al-Rajin. They are unable to think, react, or take action because of the shock from the images of bombs falling on innocent children in al-‘Amiriyya and Baghdad. While the women wail over their lost Hilali history and the vanished prowess of their men, Zaqquma nonchalantly stands up and screams: “I, Zaqquma al-Hilali, stand to urinate on all these faces!” (89). When Munawwar commands Zaqquma to pull up his trousers and cover himself, the latter explains to him that he actually is urinating on all the faces of “the satanic bastards who hurl fire from the sky on people and children” (89). Despite Munawwar’s supplication, Zaqquma continues removing his pants, pleading with Munawwar to allow him to urinate on the faces of the wild beasts that devour children (90). He walks in the wilderness half-nude, exposing his skeletal legs carelessly. Once in the car, Munawwar asks Zaqquma: “Are you done being a Sultan?” (90). To which Zaqquma answers, exposing his marginality: “Si Munawwar, tell me if I harm anyone by pretending to be a Sultan? I am like a man standing in a line of people but never getting anywhere. I am simply peddling against the wind” (90). The narrator infuses Zaqquma’s character with a sense of defiance and rebellion although he carries within him the knowledge of his inability to cause change in his community. Not only is he marginal but he also sees the possibility of losing sanity at any moment due to war.

Zaqquma expresses feelings of insanity and carelessness because he does not comprehend war since it does not resolve issues (91). Although he claims he has a good understanding of the world, Munawwar admits to Zaqquma that he, the intellectuals and the other educated of the village, wronged Zaqquma by not educating him or informing him. He
distinguishes between education (ta’lim) and culture (thaqafa) although he feels it is his duty to extend both to all the people of al-Rajin. Moreover, the marginal character of Zaqquma extends beyond the person and becomes a symbol for the Arab people. His ailments are synonymous with the metaphors of ailments in the Arab world. Hence, Boubakr makes use of inductive reasoning moving from the particular to the general. The topic of war weighs upon all the villagers who, though aware of their hopelessness, insist on following the daily news and visually stimulating their eyes with sights of destruction, death, and havoc.

Although Zaqquma is not a central character in Wada’an Hammurabi, he is nonetheless a relevant character in the lives of the people of al-Rajin. Boubakr portrays him as the provocateur in disputes. In one example, he incites Fu’ad to curse the useless generation that the villagers belong to and not to fear al-Hadi Rishaq, the village’s police officer (109). Defiantly Zaqquma steals the sheep of ‘Amm al-Fihri. When questioned, he answers: “The entire world steals, burglarizes, and raids. Why is Zaqquma always the one to be tried?” (125). He justifies his own wrongdoing and gives his actions legitimacy because he knows there are many other thieves that remain unpunished. When Zaqquma says “everyone,” he alludes to everyone else in the Arab society, insinuating particularly governments because they steal and remain unpunished, while Zaqquma, the individual, is punished.

While the inhabitants of al-Rajin perceive Zaqquma as a dirty, vagrant thief among many other negative characteristics, Fu’ad suddenly sees another side of him when the latter says:

Your grandfather Si Fu’ad wasn’t a man who enjoyed big feasts as many think. He was a scholar who knew the Qu’ran and the sayings of the Prophet. He had a following of youngsters like yourself and many of them traveled to Mecca and stayed there. (148)

Suddenly, Zaqquma displays historical knowledge of an important family in the village, revealing an intellectual side of him that he keeps to himself and chooses not to share with
others. He rarely shares his insights and instead lives his life as an annoyance to the rest of the villagers. Shocked, Fu’ad replies:

I know this Zaqquma. However, I didn’t know that you were capable of uttering such words. I see that you’ve started acquiring a semblance of intellectualism. You may even be a participant in Si Munawwar’s newspaper project. (148)

As a manzur ‘ilayh, Zaqquma represents ignorance, unawareness, and the lack of sensibility toward others. He is vagrant, has neither roots nor allegiances, and possesses the power to live his life freely and to manipulate those around him. In fact, toward the end of the novel, Rim, the village’s French teacher and only educated woman in the novel, mentions that, thanks to the efforts of Munawwar, Zaqquma repents from his malevolence and becomes a good citizen (162). He, among many other characters, confronts the wars, mediocrity, and passive attitudes that prevail in the Arab world according to the novel. By turning Zaqquma, the darkest character in Wada’an Hammurabi acceptable to others, the author suggests that there is hope for the Arab world to see positive change in society and its leadership, since the most marginal of men in the village of al-Rajin is capable of change when given the opportunity.

The novel ends with Rim leaving Tunis on a peace boat to take aid to Iraq. Interestingly, the ship’s members are all women, suggesting that women carry the power to make change happen. Furthermore, a woman from the village makes the decision to put an end to watching children being killed without the ability to react. On the other hand, Munawwar starts publishing his newspaper from his headquarters in his village, offering an intellectual dimension to life in his secluded area and Hamid al-Hilali opens a milk factory in al-Rajin and appoints ‘Ali al-Rayis as its manager. The authorial voice in this novel suggests that the solution to issues occurs with the use of the human mind. Instead of living a passive life in an Arab village, verbally protesting and questioning the injustice of wars, there is a need for action. While the novel brings forward
the matters of war, migration and rural exodus, and displays the negative effects they have on the villagers, such as insanity, it alternately offers solutions such as education and courage to amend the mundane.

As a marginal man in the novel, Zaqquma lives his life pretending that his position as a *manzur ilayh* does not affect him. However, when Munawwar offers him a lending hand and proposes change, Zaqquma accepts and welcomes this new dimension. This being said, and despite the villagers’ disgust with the vagrant thief, it is remarkable that they accept him as part of the mosaic of the village and do not force him to leave. Furthermore, by accepting change, Zaqquma reveals that he only assumed his marginality because he did not see the possibility of being anything else other than a marginal character in his village. Yet, Zaqquma possesses a mind and when given the opportunity, he appears pleased to put it to good use.

Zaqquma’s role reversal in his village is pivotal in the novel, as he proves that good can come out of evil. His change of position from the marginal space to the central space satisfies him, as he becomes an element in the making of the history of al-Rajin. The author disrupts the narrative by radically changing the course of events in the last four pages of the novel. While the reader may have thought that there was no hope for the village, and consequently for the Arab world, suddenly change emerges as educated individuals take charge of their destinies and propose a radical transformation through multiple plans of action.

Throughout the narrative, the marginality of Zaqquma transcends his individual space and acts as a representation of Arab citizens from the *Maghrib* to the *Mashreq*, where they have no voice and are unable to comprehend the events surrounding them. Munawwar says:

I’m suffocating in al-Rajin. In fact, I’m suffocating in this narrow yet vast nation. Nothing excites me or impresses me. The mountains I see from afar look the same; nothing’s changed them despite the violent currents. The faces around me are still the same. The same feet drag these bodies in slow and boring motion. I’m so bored, my
friend, and have no energy. I feel myself throttled by others’ pessimism and lack of initiative. We need a collective quake to change the universe around us. (45)

Despite the difficulties, Munawwar experiences in his village and the moments of hopelessness he survives, he launches his newspaper initiative creating an intellectual forum in the boring village of al-Rajin. In fact, through his newspaper and by presenting the villagers with a vibrant intellectual life, he pulls Zaqquma out of his marginal space and guarantees his positive integration into the community. Suddenly, Zaqquma is no longer a parasite in his society but instead an active member. Not only did the marginal character change, but so did the nazra of villagers toward him. Although they attribute Zaqquma’s radical transformation to Si Munawwar, the looks of disgust transform into looks of admiration. After all, Zaqquma proves that nothing is impossible and that spatial confinement is a choice that individuals favor or reject.

**Marginality Revisited: Ambiguous Masculinity through Women’s Eyes**

The three novels examined in this chapter suggest that Massouda Boubakr, a rising novelist in Tunisia, makes use of inductive reasoning in her narrative development. She starts in 1997 with her first novel *Laylat al-ghiyab*, focusing on the marginality of a father in relationship to his abandoned daughter, highlighting marginality within the individual space. Boubakr then shifts to a wider space in *Trushqana* in 1999, by bringing out Murad al-Shawashi as her focal point. His non-normative gender is the cause of his marginality but he transcends the individual and projects of his friends, family, and society. Finally, the marginal transcends the private and particular spaces in *Wada’an Hammurabi* which come to represent the wider Arab world and transnational conflict. For example, the author focuses on a small isolated village called al-Rajin, which is not necessarily situated in Tunisia but could be anywhere in the Arab world.
The importance of Boubakr’s works stems from her focus on giving a narrative voice to the marginal men in Tunisian/Arab society. Although her readers know or have heard of a Mahmud al-‘Arabi (Fa’iqa’s father), a Trushqana, or a Zaqquma in real life she transfers them from the shadows of society to the focal point of her novels. Instead of concealing them, she brings them forward and places them in the position of a manzur ilayh, suggesting to her reader a new nazra to the marginal and marginalized in Arab society. Furthermore, by shifting from the individual and private spaces of marginality to the collective and public spaces in Wada’an Hammurabi, Boubakr emphasizes the fluidity of the definition of marginality as a concept. After all, just as Mahmud al-‘Arabi and Trushqana are marginal characters in their societies, so is everyone else in the Arab world according to Wada’an Hammurabi. Not only the city of Tunis marginalizes people (in the case of Trushqana), but so does every other Arab country and city.

It is not a coincidence that Boubakr created three marginal male characters in her three novels. After all, one may wonder why she did not construct a marginal female character.

Sabr, a female character in Wada’an Hammurabi, has the following dialogue with her husband:

“Your eyes are full of hatred toward me! Perhaps you think that I declared war and massacred children?”
Sabr: “Men are no longer men!”
Husband: “Don’t ever repeat those words. I’m a farmer’s son, and such words are unbearable to me, they crush my soul!”
Sabr: “… How can politicians, the wealthy and the powerful remain silent? Curse this era! For men hurry to the pleasure of their flesh and keep silent over the death of children!”

(79)

This dialogue between Sabr — whose name means patience — and her husband, suggests that it is unacceptable behavior for women that Arab men sheepishly grow accustomed to the images of dying children in Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon. Hence, the masculine experiences crisis and women must take action. For example, Rim’s father purchases a deserted piece of land and tells
her that he is confident that she will sow it with her good seeds (56). The old father reverses traditional gender roles by showing more faith in his daughter than in other men.

A relevant aspect in bringing out marginal men in the aforementioned novels, is that despite the burden these men cause their family members and communities because of their non-conformist behavior, there remains a certain amount of acceptance. The reader may notice that other characters may stare, mock, and express dissatisfaction with the marginal man but in none of the three novels does his entourage drive him away or banish him from his community.

Finally, in Boubakr’s three narratives, the marginal man does not destabilize society or present a threat to it; one must only avoid looking at him. Yet, when the marginal man surpasses the individual and becomes every Arab man, women must intervene for the salvation of society. Men may be non-conformist but are not subversive, while it is up to women to save society but can also be subversive, such as in the example of Rim in *Wada’an Hammurabi* who leaves the village and boards an aid ship to Iraq, while leaving the men of the village behind.

The novelist distinguishes between the individual marginal man in Arab society who remains harmless, and the catastrophic nature of all Arab men becoming marginal through imposed wars, lack of control over their own lives and the inability to retaliate. The political and social alienation of Arab men leads them to marginality in *Wada’an Hammurabi*. In this novel, while the women question the insanity of war and the illogical nature of what they see, men passively watch the bloodshed and accept that they cannot implement change. In fact, they follow the news very carefully suggesting a masochist dimension to their characters. After all, why watch massacres on television if one is not even able to express his opinion on such matters.

While Boubakr suggests the acceptance of the marginal in the individual space and promotes change in the collective space, nevertheless she alludes to diverse masculinities in
Arab society. The following chapter focuses on Fethia Hechmi’s novels that explore the demise of men through the evil eye of women characters, condemning men to impotency.
CHAPTER 4

When the Female Evil Eye Strikes:

Destruction of the Masculine in Fethia Hechmi’s Novels

I have never seen a creature that develops legs before the rest of its body. Shape his head first! You are so stubborn! I ignore my sister’s comment. I continue creating the legs. His right one is a little longer than the left. I attempt to fix it. I should shape the head first! No, the legs first! Why? So that he may run away! Without a head? The head is not so important. He should be equipped to run, first. (Maryam tasqut min yad Allah 161)

The idea of Maryam, the narrator in Fethia Hechmi’s most recent novel Maryam tasqut min yad Allah (Maryam Falls from the Hand of God 2009), describing her creation of a male body suggests that she, as a woman, has the power to create and control the male body. Yet, she creates a man with two legs and dismisses his head, proposing that a man does not need to think. However, a man needs his legs to run away from the female threat. Fethia Hechmi’s novels draw attention to traditional gender roles and present a unique way of looking at male characters.

By bringing out the masculine subject as a manzur ilayh (the one who is looked at), this chapter examines the various ways in which Hechmi sets out to show that he is a maf’ul bih (passive acted upon, the object of a verb).

Through a close reading of her first novel Hafiyat al-ruh (At the Edge of the Soul 2005), I examine the ways in which the female narrator makes use of male characters to heal the wounds caused by war in the Arab world, especially the Second Gulf War. Furthermore, I investigate the

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48 Fethia Hechmi is a Tunisian poet and novelist. She published her first collection of poems al-Uquwan al-amsalub ’ala al-shifah (Crucified Daisies on the Lips) in 2002, Hafiyat al-Ruh (At the Edge Of the Soul) in 2005, Minna Mawwal (Minna Mawwal) in 2007 and finally Maryam tasqut min yad Allah (Maryam Falls from the Hand of God) in 2009.

49 For an Arab man’s view of gender differences, see for example Muhammad Hishem Abih who presents gender differences in his satirical novel Ward wa basal (Roses and Onions 2010). He attempts to explain the differences between men and women on linguistic, emotional and practical levels adding a sense of humor to his account.
ways in which Minna looks at Mawwal. She makes use of her potent evil eye to destroy the small town in Hechmi’s second book *Minna Mawwal* (2007). Finally, I turn to *Maryam tasqut min yad Allah* (*Maryam Falls from the Hand of God* 2009) to demonstrate the objectification of men through Maryam’s eye but also through the use of her body.

By exploring relations of love and gender in her three novels, Hechmi objectifies and furthermore reduces men to impotence and castration through female characters’ eyes. Indeed, Hechmi brings her male characters to destruction through the language and gazing eyes of the woman. In this chapter, I explore the visual and linguistic characteristics that make the *manzur ilayh* male character a subject of the woman’s *nazra*. I hypothesize that the female characters objectify the male characters through their potent *nazra*, which is no longer a mere look at men but intensifies to become an active agent causing physical events to occur, resulting in impotence, castration or destruction. I make use of scholarship on war and sexuality, the evil eye and the objectification of masculinity as the theoretical framework for this literary analysis.

In *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (1990), Evelyn Accad links war to gender by correlating women and their bodies to politics through the analysis of six novels concerned with the Lebanese civil war (1975-1991). Accad’s study contains aspects relevant to the writings of Hechmi, who eludes to war in her novels, however, unlike Accad, Hechmi does not elaborate on political topics. As war creates a harsh climate for people to live in, its violence affects gender, which Accad defines as:

...not only the physical and psychological relations between men and women, or the sexual act itself, but also the customs – Mediterranean, Lebanese and religious – involved in relations between men and women and the feelings of love, power, violence and tenderness as well as the notions of territory attached to possession and jealousy. (2)

This definition of gender is relevant to the study of sexuality in Hechmi’s novels because the cultural element that Accad mentions exists in Hechmi’s works, in parallel with issues of power
and violence. Hence the importance of correlating war with sexuality in the case of Tunisian contemporary novels, though the history of Tunisia is different than that of Lebanon. However, the effect of war in the Arab world goes beyond national boundaries as will be further developed in the analysis of the novels.

While Accad situates sexuality within the context of male domination and relates sexuality and male domination to the political and national struggles in the Arab world (11), I propose that Hechmi strays away from this dominant discourse by suggesting that sexuality becomes a female weapon allowing women domination within the context of gender conflict, especially in Maryam tasqut min yad Allah. “Throughout the ages, men have been fascinated with war. At some very deep level, it has been for them a way to prove their existence,” (95) Accad believes. Yet, Hechmi shows that war, in one way or another, leads to the impotence of men and/or their annihilation. Nevertheless, Accad nuances her arguments by demonstrating that “the differences in outlook are not so much a result of differences in sex as in culture, in training, in vision and values” (96). This suggests that differences in narrative and the writing of war cannot be attributed to biology and sexual differences but instead to the social construct of gender.

The elements of vision and culture are particularly relevant to this study as they are the tools I make use of to examine Hechmi’s novels, as she places her male figures in the position of a manzur ilayh. This position of ‘being looked at’ determines the extent to which the male character is given or stripped of power. For example, in Maryam tasqut min yad Allah, the nazra of the female protagonist, Maryam, transforms the male character into a poster hanging on the wall. I propose that Hechmi stages her characters in a way that allows a shift in patriarchal

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50 Tunisia has not known war since its independence in 1956, while Lebanon has known on-going conflict throughout the past fifty years.
positions whereby male characters become the *manzur ilayh* instead of the *nazir*. In his article “Women’s Narrative in Modern Arabic Literature: A Typology,” Sabry Hafez writes:

> Arabic narrative discourse has long been recognized as a reflection of the many political, national and social issues of the Arab world, but it has rarely been studied as a battleground for the war of the sexes that has been waged through narrative since the rise of its various genres at the turn of the century... Modern Arabic narrative discourse has therefore played a significant role in shaping, influencing and modifying the existing power relations between men and women in society. In a patriarchal society the literary discourse reflects a social structure whose dynamics are based on a power relationship in which women’s interests are subordinated to those of men. (154-155)

Hafez suggests that patriarchy in Arab society has indeed influenced narrative discourses, and furthermore, the produced literature reflects a patriarchal supremacy that governs gender relations. This phenomenon, which is not unique to the Arab world, reflects in the narrative and it is not studied enough according to Hafez. While there is no doubt that Hechmi’s novels take place of a patriarchal environment, a reversal of traditional gender roles, or perhaps a restoration of matriarchy, appears in her work. Hafez defines patriarchy as “a social order which structures norms of behavior, patterns of expectations and modes of expression, but in Arabic culture it has acquired a divine dimension through the religious ratification of the supremacy of men enshrined in the Qur’an” (155).

In the case of Tunisia, I would argue that the ‘divine dimension’ mentionned by Hafez is overpowered by a social dimension where the idea of *‘ayb* (shameful) subdues that of *haram* (illicit). In fact, Hechmi’s novels highlight the *‘ayb* over the *haram*, and serve as a battleground for the war of the sexes. However, the results prove to be the opposite, going against the rules of patriarchy as defined by Hafez.

A patriarchal system upholds itself through the social construction of the body, which is an essential constituent of Hechmi’s three novels. As‘ad E. Khairallah’s comments on images of
the body in modern Arabic poetry (‘Love and the Body in Modern Arabic Poetry’ 1995) may be applied to Hechmi’s novels, particularly Minna Mawwal for he notes:

The interesting phenomenon in modern Arabic poetry is the extent to which the poet is able to ‘enjoy’ his beloved, and yet cultivate not only a relatively passionate love for her, but often a mystical relationship with her body, or even with the totality of Being as condensed in her body... some modern poets yearn passionately for the body, without this being a sheer physical or particular end in itself. It is, rather, a window to the Infinite, the focus of a total experience, and a means of spiritual ecstasy as well physical ecstasy. (210)

This passage proposes the idea that the body serves as the vehicle through which the poet expresses love toward his beloved. It furthermore reinforces the notion of the oneness of the body and the soul and does not consider them as separate entities. Thus, the body is not the poet’s object of desire, but a reflection of the beloved, and it represents the wholeness of the beloved. The poetic nature of Hechmi’s writing appears in her three novels, however, in Minna Mawwal the male lover expresses strong desire and passion for his beloved, similar to the emotion expressed by modern Arabic poetry. Although this study focuses on the way the female nazra objectifies the male lover and the mechanisms the female character makes use of to render him an object, a look at the debates concerning the body is useful. As the body plays an essential role in the extension of the nazra, one must consider it from multiple views. Khairallah concludes with the observation that ‘in modern Arab poetry there is a new mysticism of the Earth, centered in the body, itself tense as an electric wire at the moment of love. At that moment, the body is no longer the matter of transitory, earthly pleasure. It is a medium for unity with all existence in its burning pleasure’ (223). Hechmi shares with Khairallah his view of the body in its relation to mysticism and as part of a greater existence that transcends the physical. However, in parallel to the body being a space for pleasure and power, Hechmi evokes the body
as a curse for women (when unwanted and unplanned pregnancies outside of marriage occur) and for men as well (when they find themselves faced with their inability to perform sexually).

Notions of the body and Islamic mysticism prevalent in Hechmi’s writing appear elsewhere in Tunisian writing. For example, Jacques Berque remarks that Traki Zannad Bouchrara may be the first writer to consider Islam as “the religion of the body” in Les Lieux du Corps en Islam (The Status of the Body in Islam 1994) (7). Indeed, Bouchrara searches for a better understanding of the body in the Qu’ran where she claims that the nafs may signify a united body and soul. She notes: “The body signifies nafs. This word designates the human being as well because the Nafs designates the whole being. Depending upon context, it is the soul, the body or both at the same time” (16). She explains that Muslims manifest their rites through the body to allow for intimacy with Allah (16). Consequently, the expression of collective memory through the body continues today in oral tales, in the belief in Jinn, in rites practised in marabouts (Muslim saints’ shrines, also known as zawiya) and in Sufi gatherings and trance dances (19). While Bouchrara draws upon the notion that the body is the Muslim’s tool to approach God, the body in Hechmi’s writing prevents her characters from moving closer to God or establishing logical thinking. For example, the narrator in Hechmi’s Maryam tasqut min yad Allah becomes a blasphemous prostitute the same day she is supposed to be a virtuous Muslim bride.

This discussion on the body, mysticism and religion leads us to the definition of the evil eye present in Hechmi’s writings, as the eye has an important role in the function of the body. In the preface to his collection of essays The Evil Eye (1976), Clarence Maloney writes:

... primarily the belief that someone can project harm by looking at another’s property or person – is found in many parts of the world, though not in all of it. Some people might think of this belief as simply a superstition, or classify it among the occult; but what is one person’s superstition or occult idea is another person’s belief or religion. (v)
While the evil eye may be associated with superstition, Maloney points to its correlation with religion as well. Nevertheless, whether it is superstition or religious belief, the evil eye has infiltrated social and cultural systems in Tunisia for centuries. Not only does it appear in daily life in mundane ways such as a hirz (protective amulet) hanging above front doors and dangling from rearview mirrors in cars and jewelry, but, notions of the evil eye pass from one generation to another through oral narratives according to the Tunisian storyteller Radhia Belkhodja (interview July 2008).

Teitelbaum argues that the Tunisian concept of the evil eye (‘ayn harsha) can be traced back to the Berbers. About Tunisians, he notes:

They have selected elements of this long heritage of mixed traditions to fit their present situation. Fear of the leer is built into their culture. Tunisian villagers believe that the “eye” can hurt only living things, usually animals or plants owned by humans. It cannot directly affect inanimate objects... Things and animals that are highly prized and may engender envy in others are thought particularly susceptible to the power of the eye; hence conspicuous consumption is thought to increase risks. Women and children especially must be shielded from the view of others to avoid being taken by the eye, which is thought to cause illness or accident, even lead to death. (63-64)

Since the evil eye affects women and children the most, Teitelbaum lists charms, amulets and pious verbal expressions as means of protection for Tunisian villagers who fear the evil eye (64). In fact, the organization of their daily lives revolves around escaping the evil eye, or protecting one’s women and children from its effects.

One may draw parallels between the concept of the evil eye and the Western notion of gaze as they are both connected to power. In fact, the evil eye’s power goes as far as death according to belief, which gives it potency. In short, the evil eye is given agency by the Tunisian villagers Teitelbaum describes, as it shapes their daily behavior and the inter-personal relations with others. He states:
belief in the evil eye functions in public life as a controlling element in group
dynamics, structuring ambiguous fields of association that are not subject to clear-cut
rules or lines of authority but involve completing norms and activities. (65)

These sociological and anthropological interpretations of the evil eye focus on a small Tunisian
village, however, the belief transcends the rural space into the urban space although it may take
(1997), Sam Migliore considers the evil eye in Sicilian-Canadian communities, showing how this
notion travels easily across oceans and continents. He stresses that the nuances between usage
and the meaning of the concept “does not exhaust or restrict what people can do with the
concept” (53). Migliore confirms not only the flexibility and adaptability of such a notion as the
evil eye, but also the fact that it infiltrates communities in a pernicious way. Hence, it is no
surprise that a Tunisian writer includes the evil eye in comments:

Though anyone can do this to a certain degree, some people are said to possess the “evil
eye,” that is, to have especially strong powers in this regard. In many cultures, people
with certain physical characteristics, such as blue eyes or eyebrows that run together, are
believed to have the evil eye. Older women are often suspected of having this power.
The usual targets of the evil eye include babies, children, pregnant women, brides,
bridegrooms, and all others whose attractiveness, wealth, or distinctions might inspire
envy. According to one Hadith, Muhammad accepted the existence of the evil eye as a
fact. (203)

Not surprisingly, Gulevich points out the fact that older women possess the evil eye but younger
women are targets at different stages of their lives, such as when a bride, pregnant, or with young
children. Physical traits such as eyebrows that run together may be associated with the evil eye.
For example, in Malek Alloula’s The Colonial Harem (1986), prostitutes appear in many
colonial postcards possessing eyebrows that run together, which is synonymous with ‘ayn harsha
(evil eye).51 Another concept connected to the evil eye, is fa’l (omen) which Edward

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51 Alloula notes: “What I read on these cards does not leave me indifferent. It demonstrates to me, were that still
necessary, the desolate poverty of a gaze that I myself, as an Algerian, must have been the object of at some moment
in my personal history. Among us, we believe in the nefarious effects of the evil eye (the evil gaze). We conjure
Westermarck discusses at length in *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (1926) in which he explains that good *fa’l* and bad *fa’l* are concepts tied to every domain of life for people in Morocco. Thus, superstition and magic play a role comparable to that of Islam in Moroccan society. In fact, many rituals that precede Islam may be condemned by the *Qur’anic* text or the *hadith* (Prophet Muhammad’s sayings), yet they still play a critical role in both the public and private space in Moroccan society.

A close reading of Hechmi’s three novels, *Hafiyat al-ruh, Minna Mawwal* and *Maryam tasqut min yad Allah*, with a focus on the depiction of the male lover reveals how female characters condemn men to impotence and eventually destroy masculinity through the evil eye. Although Massouda Boubakr portrays war as the culprit for Arab men’s impotence, Fethia Hechmi goes further by placing women in the position of bringing down masculinity. The eye remains an essential tool for the author. Although used to seduce and please at times, it is capable of causing destruction. Alongside the evil eye are women’s specific linguistic choices when addressing men directly or indirectly. I analyze many of these expressions across the three novels as they reveal an intercultural and cross-gender struggle between Tunisian men and women. I argue that Hechmi undercuts masculinity and shakes the patriarchal establishment by reversing a dominant sexual discourse and a traditional subjugation of body and pleasure with the evil eye, which takes many shapes and forms.

Alloula suggests that the colonial pictures of Algerian women on postcards demonstrate a traveling evil eye that is bound to cultures. Mohamed Bennani at the Beit Bennani Foundation in Tunis also possess postcards and photographs of Tunisian prostitutes with the eyebrows running together.
*Hafiyaat al-ruh (At the Edge of the Soul 2005)*

The events of Hechmi’s first novel begin the night of the Fall of Baghdad on 9 April 2003, which corresponds to ‘*id al-shuhada*‘ (Veterans’ Day) in Tunis. The novel’s protagonist, Rayhan, is a Tunisian painter and intellectual who marries a man she respects, however, she falls in love with another man who becomes her lover. She attempts to adopt a child from a young unmarried girl whose aunt wants Rayhan to take the baby out of fear of the villagers’ reaction to her niece’s illicit pregnancy. However, the biological mother insists on keeping the child despite her poverty. Hechmi gives her novel local flavor by employing Tunisian dialect in her dialogues and footnotes. She makes use of intertextuality, stream of consciousness and symbolism to highlight the parallels between Rayhan and the main characters with the condition of intellectuals in the Arab world. Rayhan’s psychological state depends upon the wars and political events in the Arab world, therefore, Iraq and Palestine, which represent the Arab world’s wounds, remain omnipresent throughout the novel, as well as death and sterility.

**The Lover/Husband as Healer from War Wounds: An Unsuccessful Journey**

While the Second Gulf War leads to men’s passivity and lack of initiative in Boubakr’s novel *Wada’an Hammurabi*, the same war causes Rayhan, in Hechmi’s novel *Hafiyaat al-ruh*, to make use of a lover to help her heal from the damage this war causes her. Rayhan, the artist and intellectual, explains herself:

I was never like other women. Perhaps I’m the descendent of a cloud or rain, which explains the flood of my emotions...I’m such a dreamer. After my return from Iraq, I dreamed and dreamed and dreamed. Maybe this is why I imposed myself upon you and submerged you with my illusions. I must admit that I was fearful and found myself inflicting a burden on you that you may not have been able to handle. I found you (actually I found myself through you) as I was in the midst of my search for the only point of light in this dark universe. Then I discovered your ridiculous smile, which alleviates my afflictions and adds to your own. I’m truly fond of you. (21)
The narrator, just returning from Iraq and full of memories of war and destruction, finds refuge in a man other than her husband. Although her husband loves her—and food—more than anything else in the world (22), he is unable to provide her with the comfort her lover offers. Rayhan connects with her lover on several levels. He brings out in her a sense of belonging to the Arab nation, even though she knows that such an ideal does not exist and that it is a lost concept in time (22). Further, the narrator declares her objectification project as she knows that when she talks to him about the painful topic of Iraq, her lover reduces her anxieties while he increases his own. This suggests that she does not care about his well-being but is preoccupied only with herself. Yet, he provides her with a sense of identity that the Iraq war has caused her to lose. The interest of the narrator centers on herself, as she admits that her lover has assisted her in her soul-searching. Although not depleted of emotions, Rayhan favors searching and finding hope through her lover over fidelity to her husband, as fidelity is a meaningless concept in her mind.

Resisting the whimsical desires of her lover, Rayhan pushes him away after he kisses her nose: “She [Rayhan] pulled herself from his arms and stood far away from him so their encounter would not end in bed like every other one” (27). While the lover physically desires Rayhan whenever he sees her, she appears to be in control when she decides that their meeting will not end with an indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh.

In a dialogue between Rayhan and her neighbor, the latter exclaims: “He finally slept with me! I was just with him!” (31) suggesting that it is a victory that the neighbor’s partner was able to perform and causing the reader to wonder if such an occurrence is unique and worth mentioning. Yet, the author deploys this dialogue between Rayhan and her neighbor to reveal their opposite views on the body and the act of love. While the neighbor considers the sexual act
as a “body game” (31), Rayhan perceives it as a liberating act that allows the body to express the ultimate act of love (31). The opposing views on such an important topic to the two women textualize the concept of body and its relation to pleasure. Rayhan perceives the body in dialogue with the soul, while her neighbor believes that “sex is just sex regardless of the different names and ways you give it!” (31). Hence, the sexual act becomes a physical and instinctive affair for the neighbor, bereft of emotions and feelings.

The effects of war go beyond what Rayhan witnessed in Iraq. She draws a parallel between love and war as she says: “When my exhausted body lies above yours, it resembles a dead horse... We made love the same way others make war” (36). Rayhan gives agency to her body to assert her sexual power in her relationship with men. She perceives her bed as a battlefield and appears unable to see the world outside the context of war. Despite her rejection and hatred of war, her inability to comprehend it causes her to make overwhelming war parallels with her immediate environment. Indeed, Rayhan takes the global issue of war to a local dimension. War shapes her vision as a woman, artist, and intellectual, and configures her perceptions of pleasure and body. Moreover, in Rayhan’s mind, the evil of war shifts from the war zone to her outlook on life. The war scenes in Iraq distort her vision as she internalizes the evils of war, but at the same time, her nazra upon a man she randomly meets in a Tunisian suburb provides her with hope:

It was the first time she had looked at him since he sat by her... She stared deeply in his eyes and found herself lost in infinity. She got away from him and ran to the beach where she threw her belongings up in the air as the cold sand tickled her feet and the water got her clothes wet. She gazed at him as he watched her secretly. Then he carried her up the stairs on his back. She did not mind the stares of those walking by when they gazed at her in astonishment. (37)

The stranger provides Rayhan with some bonding moments of pleasure that she needs. Yet she tells him that her husband is looking for her, which causes the stranger to run from her with the
thought that the woman he just spent several hours with is insane. Despite her liberty with her body and her social nonchalance, physical pleasure for Rayhan carries a binary meaning. On the one hand, she experiences the pleasures of the flesh with her lover who helps her forget the atrocious war she has witnessed, yet on the other hand, when she remembers the night of her wedding and her husband’s impatience to discover her body she associates it with pain (41). In parallel to the duality of her concept of pleasure in its relation with her body, Rayhan sees that the color white is the color of wedding dresses, but also the color of death in that it is the color of shrouds.

Her personal history with men shapes her perception of them as she sees them crushed and defeated. The narrator recounts Rayhan’s story with a man she once loved:

The day of her engagement, he left the capital and settled in the far South. He escaped as all defeated men do. How she wished he would come back to her now... He immediately searched for a bride to prove to her that he was wanted and that he was not sorry about losing her, as all selfish men would have done (42).

The image of masculine defeat takes over Rayhan’s thoughts, as she attempts to reorder and rearticulate the events of her wedding night. Instead of running away to the southernmost point of Tunisia, she would have liked to see this man fight for her love. Instead, his selfishness and feelings of rejection cause him to search for another woman, suggesting that Rayhan can easily be replaced and that women, all members of the same sex, are not individuals. Recounting the night of her wedding stirs unpleasant memories in her mind. It is the story of putting masculinity to the ultimate test. Rayhan’s elderly aunt, who has the task of explaining the wedding night procedure, mentions that men have changed and are no longer the way her own husband was the night of their wedding, when they immediately took the bloodstained suriya (wedding nightgown) outside for men to shoot guns in the air, as a sign of the bride’s chastity and the groom’s sexual prowess (43). Rayhan questions the connection between emotions, the color red
and firing arms in Arab culture (43). Exposing the suriyya on the wedding night is a sign of victory and triumph for the Arab man’s masculinity: Not only does he assure the community that his bride came to him as a virgin, but he proves his virility as well. For he must prove himself in the performance of the nuptial ceremony, an act celebrated by others with the firing of guns.

Yet, men and their masculinity come under attack, as the Arab man no longer has the right to celebrate his manhood after being defeated in wars. By questioning nuptial rites of passage, Rayhan questions Arab masculinity in general. There is no logic in celebrating victory at the end of a wedding ceremony by firing guns because the Arab man is unable to stand in the face of foreign invasions and to react to wars imposed upon him. In addition, today’s stringent laws prevent Tunisian men from owning firearms. In other words, the Arab man’s only victory limits itself to the confines of a woman’s body as he penetrates it the night of his wedding.

The political events in Iraq and the capture of Saddam Hussein by the American army on 13 December 2003 influence Rayhan’s outlook and perception of color:

The poetic image of the nation suddenly correlated with the fall of Baghdad in her mind. She wondered if the fall had a color or a smell. Was it red? Like the color of blood. Maybe it was grey, the color of bullets and sadness. She daydreamed briefly then thought; the fall must be transparent, like tears. Yet, the fall could only be green, because it could produce other falls and hence its color would be the color of fertility. (59)

Rayhan’s war wounds only deepen as the narrative develops. As a painter it is crucial for her to visualize faces and events, especially the political ones that shape her world. By associating green, the color of fertility, with the fall of Baghdad and the capture of the Iraqi president, Rayhan expresses that this is the beginning of the demise of the Arab nation and that many other ‘falls’ will occur in history. Furthermore, Rayhan holds the West, and specifically the United States, responsible for the war in Iraq and the demise of the Arab people (59). The Other shifts from being a man, a husband, an ex-boyfriend and a more recent lover, to the West and America.
No longer absorbed at the individual level, Rayhan instead moves on to national and international concerns. Whether the narrative debates the personal or the general in Rayhan’s life, the story line culminates with war. This explains why she yells at her friend’s daughters while they listen to American songs: “Stop this music! How I hate the English language! For it’s the language of the Fall of Baghdad and of malice!” (60) Hence, war touches many aspects of Rayhan’s personality and life. The war context forms illogical alliances within her. She hates a language because she considers it the language of her enemy and is unable to remove the language from the political context that concerns her.

Not only is Rayhan’s eye concerned with color, it is further troubled by light and darkness. In a rare moment, she connects with her husband. The Fall of Baghdad brings them both to tears and into each other’s arms:

Her house was entirely dark as she sat there. Suddenly, the lights in all the rooms were on as she sat without moving while she covered her eyes with her hands. Her husband stood before her. His face was the color of death. She threw herself into his arms and they both cried (61).

The war in Iraq brings Rayhan to rebellion and a sense of disgust for all those who stare at the “war box”—the television—and passively digest the images. At the same time, it creates a space of interaction and dialogue with her husband with whom she rarely speaks. Rayhan’s connection to Baghdad goes beyond her belief in belonging to the same Arab nation. In fact, the narrator mentions several awliya’ salihin (the Servant Sufis) such as Zaynab, Sidi ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaylani, and al-Hussayn (80). She evokes the Tunisian hadhra (Sufi chant) song “ya faris Baghdad ah ya jaylani” (O Jaylani! O Knight of Baghdad!) giving reason to Rayhan to identify her own connection to Iraq in parallel with Tunis’ history with Baghdad (80). The collective memory that Rayhan cannot remove from her mind causes her intense pain, which reveals her strong connection to Iraqi events.
The conflict in Iraq is not Rayhan’s only sorrow: she follows the problem of Palestine through her “war box” as well. Her body launches a different war against her through infertility, for Rayhan is unable to conceive a child. Her inability to find an ideal man may be the cause of her infertility. Similar to her visual dissatisfaction with war, men, the news, and teenagers’ choice of music, she places her idea of a male hero at the level of al-Daghbaji and Ben Ghdahem:

She would have liked to rest her head on his large chest and sing to him... She would have admitted to her weaknesses before true heroes and been a true woman who bows and prays before al-Daghbaji and Ben Ghdahem. If he stared in her eyes, he would see the dark skin of her father’s face. His features would tell him how he [her father] left his sixteen-year-old bride to tell her story and bow in submission to the hazel eyes while defying guns. Her father fought the French... How she wished to hold his hand and run in the streets of Baghdad visiting all the shrines. (80)

Rayhan defines manliness within the context of war. She wishes to be a woman and feel her femininity in the arms of a man who fights for his freedom and does not shy away from battle. Her father, who fought colonization in Tunisia, serves as her male role model. Rayhan sees that there are many other wars worth fighting today, such as in Iraq and Palestine. Yet, like others around her who are unable to react, her only outlet is her painting. Rayhan reacts to the visual pain of war by uniting the colors of war (red, grey, black) on her canvas. In a mirroring effect, the colors on her painting start to bleed “exactly like her soul” (82). While her body fails her and condemns her to barrenness, Rayhan makes use of her artistic talents and transforms her canvas into a healing space from her war wounds. This space however is unique to Rayhan as she shares it with neither her husband nor her lover.

52 Ali Ben Ghdahem headed a revolt in 1912 against the Bey and the French. Mohamed Daghbaji led revolts against the Italians in Libya and the French in Tunisia until he was executed by the French in 1924.
Rayhan’s relationship with her husband is puzzling. Although he loves her, she can only offer him her respect. The type of looks they exchange reflect the type of relationship they share:

She attempted to liven up for her husband. Instead, she felt like a corpse, looking away from him as she quickly put on her clothes. Every time her husband took her in his arms, she felt the other man’s arms. She was like a blooming rose in his arms until she realized that it was his voice whispering in her ear, which caused her color to fade. That look full of disappointment in his eyes hurts her so much but she is unable to change. She would attempt to please him with a few kisses but he would turn his face from her, his pain. Rayhan would spend her night staring at the ceiling and damning the moment she had laid eyes on him (84).

The relationship between Rayhan and her husband lacks the element of pleasure yet she refuses to change it by leaving him. Instead, she focuses on adopting the baby of a poor, unmarried teenage girl, 53 hoping that bringing a child into her home will transform her marriage.54 The narrator in the above passage focuses on the visual effects of the relationship, on the sad husband who lives his unrequited love silently without protest and on Rayhan who contemplates the ceiling with regretful eyes. Moreover, she avoids eye contact with her husband, a victim who she keeps beside her for convenience. The soon-to-be-adoptive-mother counts on her husband’s love for her to be free to make decisions without consulting him. His opinion in matters regarding their household is irrelevant to Rayhan, as she removes herself from him both physically and emotionally.

Despite Rayhan’s subjugation of her husband, she suddenly becomes sensitive to his gaze when the young mother refuses to give her the baby she promised after its birth. When her

53 The girl comes from a poor family and works as a cleaning woman in the city. When she falls in love with the gardener, he impregnates her, disappears then reappears to inform her that if a DNA test proves that he is the father, he will acknowledge his paternity for the child. Meanwhile, the pregnant girl must survive the shame she inflicts upon her family in her small village and keeps her child even though she is unable to provide for it.

54 The narrator describes Rayhan’s hope as ‘inqilab (a coup d’état, 86). The author often uses a political and revolutionary linguistic register throughout the novel.
husband attempts to communicate with her, Rayhan exclaims: “Eyes make me sick! I hate malicious looks!” This reference has a dual meaning: On the one hand, her husband’s gaze disturbs Rayhan as she feels weak and vulnerable. On the other hand, she senses that her physical pain along with the possibility of losing her dream of motherhood results from the evil eye. When Rayhan sees the young mother’s aunt in the hospital, the presence of the evil eye in her mind accompanies the idea of the bad fa’l (bad omen) the aunt brings with her. When the aunt confirms that the biological mother has run away from the hospital, Rayhan’s superstitious sentiments are confirmed (94). Furthermore, “she hates eyes, especially the shiny ones” (97). This attitude toward eyes implies that Rayhan attributes her unhappiness to the evil eye. In fact, it has come between her and the realization of her dream of motherhood, preventing her from exploring a space most women around her enjoy.

Rayhan returns to the dominant hegemonic discourse of war in Hafiyat al-ruh when loud sounds from outside awaken her. In her mind, she thinks war has finally reached her area and the fight is to start. Confused for a moment, she thinks she must be in Iraq or Palestine (104) but she then discovers a funeral procession for a shahid (martyr) who died on the borders of one of the Arab nations (105). She asks her husband if the shahid has returned from Iraq, Palestine or Afghanistan, the three war zones mentioned throughout the novel. Despite their geographical distance from Tunis, they affect the local nazra, even the eyes of children.

The narrator describes the scene in the old quarters of the city called al-mdina al-‘arbi (The Arab city) saying:

Some bodies are slim while others are fat, flabby and old. They walk in the market, holding children with cold and glass-colored eyes. I spot a local perfume, Fatima’s hand (khumsa), a fish, and a hot pepper.55 Khamsa we-khmis56 (ward off the evil eye) off these

55 According to a 65-year-old Tunisian woman (interview, 15 March 2008), Tunisians believe that hanging amulets with a khumsa (hand of Fatima), a fish, and a red pepper will ward off the evil eye. On babies, mothers add verses from the Qu’ran (sura yasin).
beautiful flowers. O Miss! Madame! Come here! There go the vendors after the tourists. (111)

The narrator brings up the evil eye in parallel with war as they both generate evil. While Rayhan strives to make sense of her existence in the midst of her own insanity, she openly expresses her visual world as she sees it before her eyes. The look in others’ eyes, even children walking by, reveals the state of mind and emotions of the people around her. While the wars in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan are recent historical events, the belief in the evil eye is an old traditions that infiltrates from one generation to another. Hechmi reminds her reader that the evil eye is not a forgotten folkloric and archaic belief, but a vivid element in Tunisian culture that she puts forth in her narrative.

The lover disappears in the second half of the novel. Eventually, Rayhan’s husband does the same, especially after the adoption fails. The topics of war, dreams, and death take over the irrelevant male role. Suddenly, the main female character has no use for the males in her life. Although she uses her lover to recover from the Iraq war wounds she feels within her, the images on television and the reality of the Arab world continually irritate the wounds. Yet, suddenly, an image of her lover uttering the words “I love you” hits her (139), however, it is simply part of her daydream. In his following reappearance, the narrator wonders: “Is it true that his phallus abandoned him and fled to the desert?” (141). The phallic symbol, a sign of masculinity and manhood, is linked to images of war for it detaches itself from the man, suggesting that the lover’s manhood has disappeared, and runs into the desert, which has transformed into a war zone. The narrator gives human attributes to the phallus by allowing it to disentangle from the lover’s body. The lover, a symbol of the cowardly man who searches for pleasures with many women, finds himself deprived of the member that governs his sense of masculinity.

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50 This is an expression in Tunisian dialect said to ward off the evil eye. It literally means “five plus Thursday.”
With her authorial voice, Hechmi condemns the lover—and through him all men—to subjectivity. In fact, she takes away his physical sign of masculinity because she views him unworthy of it. While Rayhan preoccupies herself with wars, attempting to reduce the images of destruction to colors on her canvas and wishing to draw the face of death, she observes men around her fixated on the Lebanese television show “Star Academy” and soccer games. Consequently, Rayhan wishes to disrupt patriarchal order because she sees men deviating from their duties, passively sitting in front of the television. While she is unable to sleep without sleeping pills due to the war, the men around her remain capable of experiencing pleasure, for they are able to sleep, laugh, smoke, eat, and make love.

Not only does Rayhan have daydreams in which she rips the manhood from her lover, she also decides to “slap him across the face and throw the portrait she had drawn at him... She will then take back what she had given him” (149). The need and desire for a lover ceases when Rayhan decides that he is not worthy of her love. To continue with her action of stripping away his manliness, she reverts to physical punishment. Rayhan’s certitude that her lover knows other women encourages her to see revenge in a different way than the quick, physical pain of a slap. Hence, she insists that he leave his apartment and follow her to a hotel bar in Tunis where she watches him drink while she erotically kisses him, offering voyeuristic pleasure to the people surrounding them (155). Once her lover is drunk, she drives her car to the beach where she seduces him, removes his clothes and throws them out of the car. When he is the most aroused, Rayhan leaves him: “She held all his clothes in one hand, and his phone in the other, while the wind blew her portrait onto him” (159). Then Rayhan tells her lover: “Cover yourself with it [her portrait]! I no longer have any use for it!” (159).
The heroine chooses an elaborate theatrical punishment to rid herself of her lover for whom she no longer has use. Instead of confronting him in his apartment and ending their relationship, she uses ruse to subjugate him physically and emotionally. Rayhan first weakens her victim with alcohol, then brings out her feminine charms to seduce him while removing his clothes and finally she leaves him alone, stranded and without clothes. She forgets her plan to slap him across the face in favor of her final discursive plan, although the result remains the same: Rayhan rid herself of her unfaithful lover. As she abandons her troubled and lost lover, she gains her self-esteem and confidence. In fact, the author chooses to end her novel with this scene, suggesting that war may crush people, but they are responsible and capable of resisting and surviving.

Finally, Hechmi’s first experimental novel debates many local, national and international episodes in recent Arab history. While the presence of the evil eye brings a local flavor to her narrative, the wider issue of war in Iraq is omnipresent throughout the novel. The source of Rayhan’s unique ‘eye’ or nazra upon her multi-faceted world is the artist making sense of her surroundings through image. At the beginning of the novel, she asserts herself by keeping her husband while taking a lover. The non-gendered narrator keeps both male characters nameless affirming their subordination throughout the narrative. Their existence is only of importance in relationship to Rayhan the protagonist. In fact, when she decides to annihilate them, she does so on several occasions. Rayhan condemns both men to impotence, yet decides to keep her husband in what appears to be a masochistic relationship, as she admits to not loving him. The effects of war on gender relations surface in this novel. At the same time, the passivity with which men surrounding Rayhan respond causes her to castrate them. After all, the components of masculinity as defined in Hafiyat al-ruh no longer exist. Similarly to Boubakr, Hechmi
tackles the issue of war and its effect on gender relations and the construct of masculinity in Tunisia, however, the latter adds the image of the evil eye throughout her work. There are similarities between war and the eye, as they both generate evil in people and cause destruction, whether realistically or hypothetically.

The convenience and comfort in having a lover while keeping a husband shifts for Rayhan into a desire to subdue the male character and reduce him to oblivion. After all, in literature and film the spectator is acquainted with the nudity of a woman but rarely is a man left naked by a woman. This reversal of roles depicted in the novel with vengeance and precise planning, reflects the female desire to expose man. On one hand, he has a chance to look at himself without clothes and contemplate himself (a mirror effect). On the other hand, exposing his body before others transforms him into a voyeuristic object of pleasure or possibly disgust—although in the case of Rayhan’s lover, his main fear stems from the police arresting him for indecent exposure. However, Rayhan succeeds in converting a manzur ilayh into a maf’ul bih which permits her to take power and leaves the lover powerless.

Hechmi’s second novel, Minna Mawwal, allows for a wider space for the evil eye. A close look at Minna’s nazra onto Mawwal will show that a new dimension of Hechmi’s narrative style develops.

**Minna’s Eye: The Power of the Evil Eye, Superstition, and Body**

The events of *Minna Mawwal* (2007) take place in a coastal village on a mountain somewhere in Tunisia. While the men of the village sit around in cafés, talking to each other, playing cards and recounting their lives, the women believe in the power of the Qadiri Sheikh and visit him in his zawiya (where the Sheikh resides). Superstition and fallacy guide the
villagers in their daily lives, until the most virile and handsome man of the village, Mawwal, falls in love with the village’s beautiful female jinn Minna. He describes her beauty to the men in the café and cannot return home to his wife and children. The pleasures of sex are the villagers’ goal in life while their minds are preoccupied by superstitious rites and beliefs. Ultimately, Minna saves her beloved Mawwal while she drowns the rest of the villagers condemning them to death for their sins and ignorance.

Hechmi organizes her second novel into ‘revelations’ (bawh) rather than chapters, suggesting the coming of seismic events. The narrative’s language is poetic and takes the form of long dialogues and third person narration. While the narrator introduces Minna as her mother in her first revelation (5), she deduces that Mawwal must therefore be her father (6). From the first dialogue in this novel, Minna shakes the patriarchal modes of dominance in the small town that sits atop a mountain and looks over the ocean. She addresses the people gathered around her who demand that she return what has been forcefully taken from them: the men’s sexual organs. She says: “My grandmother [Eve] didn’t force your grandfather out of Heaven. It’s his running after sexual pleasure that took you out of Heaven! But then, you’re all just like mules, guided by your penises!” (11). As she places herself high in a tree and addresses the men and women of the town from above, she gives herself the superiority that she claims as they beg her to return their masculinity, their sexual prowess, and their sense of being to them. According to Minna, she magically rids the men of an unnecessary part of the male anatomy. Yet, for the inhabitants of the cursed town, Minna has stolen the essence of life from them, and has condemned the population to impotence, oblivion and eternal frustration. One man shouts: “Return our masculinity to us! We’re not worth an onion in the eyes of our families!” (12), revealing loss of the heteronormative balance within the small superstitious community. Minna defends herself
by saying that she did not coerce the men, but they proceeded blindly toward their own death and destruction (12). The normative discourse of sexuality is violently interrupted when Minna unties a bag containing what the villagers want—the men’s sexual organs—from around her neck and throws it onto the people before her, only for the crows, symbols of bad luck, to get a hold of it before it reaches human hands (12). Minna enjoys the spectacle of men and women running in all directions to save the phalluses from the evil birds. She appears to have no remorse for her actions, as she victoriously takes over the village, condemning the men to impotence and the women to sexual dissatisfaction.

In her first novel, Hechmi does not castrate male characters despite the disappointment of her female character. She only annihilates the male characters at the end of the narrative. However, in her second novel, she creates a narrative space in which Minna, the female character who appears human but really belongs to the world of jinn, castrates not one man, but all the men of the small town. By hanging the phallises around her neck, she claims her matriarchal power back as it appears that patriarchal rule has been a historical mistake that Minna must rectify. When Hechmi ends her introductory poem with “We [women] are the beginning/the end/everything/the source of words” (8), she proposes the re-establishment of the feminine voice because words, language, and narratives belong to her. Indeed, Hechmi sets out to depict a castrating woman who takes over the city as she calls its inhabitants to re-evaluate the purpose of their lives and their belief system that revolves around superstitious practices, such as visits to the wali (Muslim Sufi Saint) at the top of the mountain. For example, the narrator gives the example of the masculine rite of passage of circumcision, in which mothers and family members of newly circumcised boys are taken up to the wali, their hands covered with henna, seeking his blessings.
As harsh as Minna’s punishment may seem to the reader, when the narrator reveals the details of the small town’s daily life, the reader may understand the logic of Minna’s castrating act. For the men spend their Sunday afternoons at M’allim Hnash’s café while they stare in a daze at a soccer game on the television (16). While the television set pulls them in through the vivid images of a soccer game, their wives know that the mood of their evenings depends upon the soccer game. Hence, the connection between sexuality and the images men see on a television set. Furthermore, the relation between the concept of masculinity and the ways in which these male television viewers act it out depends upon the visual stimulation of the eye. The results of the soccer games impact the sexuality of the male supporters. While one wife complains that her husband’s losing team causes him to lose interest in her, another wife complains that her husband’s winning team over-stimulates his sexual interests (17).

When the small town’s blacksmith hears someone playing the flute beautifully, he knows it is Minna. Her music is seductive and causes chills up the men’s spines. The blacksmith is convinced that this seductive woman with superpowers will bring the demise of their small town. While he asks the town’s sheikh to destroy her with the Qur’an, the latter confesses that he had seen her the previous day and describes her as “raising her arms up to the sky while totally naked. Her hair is so long it covers her back and she appears to be over thirty, maybe even forty years old... She must be a witch! She has seven eyes!” (19) The blacksmith draws a parallel between the sheikh’s mention of Minna’s seven eyes, and the Tunisian saying “a cat possesses seven spirits,” meaning that a cat is capable of avoiding death seven times before he finally dies. By mentioning her “seven eyes,” the sheikh insinuates that the dangers of the female jinn multiply seven times due to her numerous eyes. Thus, Minna’s feminine evil grows and develops according to the Sheikh.
M’allim Hnash enjoys narrating his adventuresome nights with the ghula (the equivalent of an ogre in children’s tales) as much as his followers do. Although Minna (the ghula) seduces him physically according to M’allim Hnash, the power of her eyes is even stronger than her physical appearance. He narrates: “She walked toward me and gestured to get closer to her. I suddenly found myself walking toward her as if I were flying. My eyes were glued to hers until she took me in her arms and bam!” (41). Throughout the novel, the patriarchal structure in place dictates that men initiate sexual acts with their wives and lovers. Yet, when the coffee shop owner describes his encounters with Minna, he portrays himself as her victim, as he is unable to resist her physically and emotionally. Even though he is a husband and a father, the power of the ghula named Minna exceeds the norms of feminine beauty in the small town. The strong, macho and authoritative coffee shop owner openly admits to transforming into the subject of Minna and her desires at the fall of dark, causing one to wonder about the reason for relating his nightly adventures with the city’s ghula. M’allim Hnash enjoys the excitement he sees in the eyes and on the faces of his listeners. Admitting his male weakness before the powerful and constantly changing Minna proves his uniqueness to his listeners. After all, he claims that she chose him and no one else in their city. Indeed, he feels that he is an exceptional man for he has no fear of Minna who makes use of his sexual prowess every night. Although not all his storytelling fans believe him, they nonetheless enjoy the descriptions of sexual encounters. Despite the affection men in the city have for the television and the visual stimulation it offers (soccer games, Lebanese music videos) it is interesting that they preserve their oral tradition of storytelling and find pleasure in it. Consequently, a community forms around M’allim Hnash that focuses on Minna’s sexual life, making the men guilty of voyeurism.
Hechmi announces her narrative project in the first pages of her book. She imposes her authorial voice through the narrator and embarks on her project, which is the restoration of matriarchal rule. This becomes apparent to the reader through the example of al-Lubba, a strong, man-ish woman who diminishes her husband’s masculinity by “throwing him over her shoulder as he begs her to let him go, out of fear for the café customers’ mockery” (44). Yet, al-Lubba would answer her husband nonchalantly:

Why don’t you become a man, and leave this town and me for the last time? What am I supposed to do with this matchstick? Even his son – whom he’s not sure is his own or another man’s – makes fun of him and mocks the way his mother treats his poor father until his father starts crying hysterically while getting drunk and hopping from one bar to another (44).

Al-Lubba defies the patriarchal structure in place. Her community knows that she is a strong woman whose husband and son fear her. Unlike the other women around her, she makes her voice heard and reappropriates power in her gender relations with her husband and her son. In fact, al-Lubba goes as far as effacing the men in her life. They only exist in relationship to her being. Her husband, known as “al-Lubba’s husband,” attempts to introduce himself by his name. However, the people around him do not listen because they have accepted his identity as al-Lubba’s husband. By giving the example of this strong woman in her narrative, the narrator undercuts masculinity and challenges patriarchy through the example of a harsh female character, who, paradoxically, cries “like no wife ever cried over her husband” (45) the day that her husband dies. Thus, al-Lubba’s harsh and sometimes brutal treatment toward her husband was not out of hatred for him. For indeed, the townsmen only discover her profound feelings the day her husband dies.

While the women gather at the zawiya (Sufi shrine) to celebrate a boy’s circumcision and engage in superstitious trances to rid the city of the ghula (Minna), the cause of all the city’s
evils according to their sheikh, Minna attacks Mawwal in the forest. At first, he does not realize the nature of the body that descends upon him (54). He defends himself and turns the body over to discover a beautiful feminine face, long hair and full lips. Minna asks him to kiss her, which he does. The narrator focuses on her eyes: at first, Mawwal sees fear in Minna’s eyes, but soon, he “gets lost in the blackness of her eyes” (55). Mawwal’s eyes discover a woman that does not conform to M‘allim Hnash’s description of the ghula with whom M‘allim Hnash claims to have nocturnal adventures. Minna does not possess donkey’s hooves instead of feet, nor does she change into a bigger sized woman and then shrink, as the café owner claims. It becomes obvious to Mawwal that the café owner’s narratives are fictional and have nothing to do with the likeness of Minna. M‘allim Hnash constructs a fictional world to boost his manliness in front of his customers. Not only are they able to gather and socialize in his shop, but M‘allim Hnash nourishes their imagination with sexual fantasy through his adventuresome tales with the ghula. When Minna attacks Mawwal, she takes over the role of the male predator while keeping her seductive aspects (her lips, her eyes, and her music). Yet, Minna possesses a power that other women in the city do not: Her eyes change color in accordance with the environment she stands in, affecting Mawwal’s resistance to her visual powers (70). Indeed, her eyes and sensuality create a mixture that Mawwal finds impossible to resist.

The presence of the evil eye becomes obvious to Mawwal in his encounter with Minna whom he considers a sorceress. Nevertheless, she charms him and seduces him with the whiteness of her skin, the finesse of her arms, and the rhythms of her flute (81). The narrator recounts:

She [Minna] dragged him behind her as she jumped above the weeds, avoiding tree branches. When Mawwal moved his fingers, he tickled her hand and it escaped hers. These fingers can only be those of a sorceress, he mumbled as he ran after her. He took her glowing hand, stared at it and pulled it up to his lips kissing it feverishly. She
stopped running and extended a white pinkish hand with an eye gazing in the middle of her palm. It appeared to blink at him if he stared too long. A chill went through his body. He was not only fearful but horrified (82).

This passage highlights Mawwal’s mixed emotions toward Minna. On one hand, her irresistible beauty seduces and intrigues him. On the other, her super-human powers frighten him and cause him anxiety, for Minna is a mystery woman not only to him but to the rest of the inhabitants of the town. The eye in the palm, a source of power for the sorceress, allows her to perceive her surroundings in a way that other humans cannot. Yet, the eye symbolizes the protection she offers her beloved Mawwal. While others hang a khumsa (hand of Fatima) with an eye in the center as amulets around their necks, in their babies’ clothes, on their doors and in various rooms of their houses, Minna carries within her the object that protects from the evil eye, transforming her body into an anti-evil eye space. She controls this protection from the ‘ayn al-hasud (evil or malicious eye) and may choose to convey it to Mawwal. Her visual power connected to the evil eye proves to have further forces as it deprives Mawwal of his masculine power of resistance. In Minna’s presence, he becomes powerless, defenseless, and disinterested in defying her feminine charms. Instead, he accepts her ‘ayn (eye) and embraces it. In this text, the forces of feminine seduction and the protection from the evil eye unite. Minna’s eye in the palm of her hand serves as protection against the evil eye or as an eye causing others evil: The sorceress controls the eye in her palm, extending it to either offer protection or curse those on whom it projects a nazra.

Convinced that Minna, the ghula, has caused the violent storms that hit the town, the people take action and attempt to catch her to neutralize the evil eye. To accomplish their mission, they proceed to the zawiya at the top of the mountain, organize one hadra (Sufi chant that may be accompanied by dance) after another, and watch women go into trances to the rhythms of a stambali (African Sufi dance). Similar to the pre-historic man who believed that
superstition offered him protection from natural disasters, the people in Mawwal’s town carry out superstitious rites seeking the protection of the wali (Saint) from the violent storms that Minna causes. The authorial voice of Hechmi in this narrative presents a critique of Tunisian society’s powerful superstitious beliefs, not only belief in the evil eye, but especially in the wali, and the different zawiyas that stand in every village and every town in the country. Furthermore, Hechmi draws attention to the absence of logical thinking (ghiyab al-‘aql) in the conversations, attitudes, and actions of the townspeople. For example, the false sheikh acts as a divine authority, while in the name of his healing powers, he touches the fainting bodies of girls in trances (108).

In the meantime, Minna takes Mawwal on a journey into the wilderness. She allows him to discover her deep relationship with the sea that she adores. Mawwal finds himself lying on a soft animal skin watching the strange happenings around him. As the animals gather alongside the seashore, he notices that his vision exceeds its normal abilities. Suddenly, he sees Sa‘ida, his maid and son’s caregiver, offering her breast to his son. When he looks at Minna, he feels the need to touch her, however, when he attempts to make a move toward her, his body disobeys him, for Minna has not given him permission to touch her yet (128).

Minna had not always been a jinn. She tells Mawwal how, in a previous life, she escaped from an abusive husband, who bound her and forced himself upon her. He let her run away after she kicked him in the kidneys with her knees, while he attempted to penetrate her (165). When Mawwal tells her that he does not believe such a tale, Minna answers:

You ought to believe it. He set me free that night to conceal his scandalous impotence. He crawled like a wounded animal toward me and untied my chains. He told people that the jinn to whom I was married kidnapped me, after he had damaged his [the husband’s] masculine symbol. (165)
When Minna tells Mawwal about her abusive husband in the previous life and how she rendered him impotent, she reveals her power over men. In order not to shame himself and admit that his own wife has caused him harm, Minna’s husband blames a jinn for his impotence and the disappearance of his wife. Such wild imagination encourages the villagers around him to believe his explanations rather than to question them, and indicates the existence of a relationship between superstition and masculinity: when a man is impotent, the evil eye or the underworld of the jinn becomes the culprit. However, the evil eye and superstition go beyond the context of masculinity and intertwine with femininity in an interesting way. Revealing women’s secret world overshadowed by the evil eye and superstition, Minna declares:

... where I lived, women were superstitious toward me and wished to see me gone. In fact, they even facilitated my departure. For only a woman comprehends and knows another woman and her secrets. All the women fear my charm wherever they see me. As for men, they desire me and when I do not succumb to their advances, they slander me. (165)

Minna’s human beauty turns into a curse against her and prevents her from living in a community. She becomes the object of the evil eye of women and the evil tongue of men if she disobeys them. As women gazed at Minna, she was able to see the malicious look in their eyes. Their desire to see her leave the village originates in their fear for their men whose eyes might wander. The evil eye of the jealous women correlates with their knowledge of their men’s weaknesses and their desire to preserve their masculinity, as they consider Minna a threat. This explains the fear of the eye staring too long so as to cause fitna (dissent). Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi explains that Muslims have an obligation to lower their gaze to avoid fitna and iftitan (infatuation) which can easily lead to sin. He notes: “...lowering the gaze is an obligation in order to avoid any sin... (20).
Nonetheless, Minna’s supernatural powers are not the source of the village women’s problems with their men. Instead, it is the curse of their ignorance and belief in the Sheikh and his zawiya that cause their demise. Minna’s presence as a jinn in the village only aggravates what already existed. When the women shout: “Return our men to us! Where are our men?” (139), they announce the demise of masculinity because, according to the narrator, they have lost their men to the town’s brothel. As the men grow lose interest in their wives, the women become bitter and vengeful. When the men leave their wives for prostitutes, the women shout at their husbands to return. The depiction of the town’s fool, al-Buhali (Tunisian colloquial term meaning “the foolish one”), as the only remaining man in town, implies that the men are shirking their responsibilities of upholding their community and their families. Al-Buhali stares at the brothel’s matron while “he puts his hands in his pants to touch his penis as if he were worried about losing it” (139), a gesture that reveals male anxiety and the fear of castration. Although he remains the only man, the women walk by al-Buhali and ignore him because he does not represent masculinity but impotence for these women (despite the pride he takes in his male member) (141). Nevertheless, he makes observations and posits questions that reveal his wisdom, such as when he asks one of the women going to the zawiya: “Do you think men deserve all that you’re doing? Do you think you go home victorious?” (141). Al-Buhali’s question suggests the uselessness of the women’s efforts, as the men have grown apathetic toward them. The women’s solution to their problems, whether it be their husbands’ desertion or the violent storms that hit the coastal town, is to ascend toward the zawiya, their spiritual space, where they hope to rid themselves of the evil eye by performing endless trance dances.

While the townsmen point their accusing fingers toward Minna, she informs Mawwal that excess, fear, and cowardice are the origin of the town’s corruption and immorality. The
narrator recounts the thoughts going through Mawwal’s mind as he attempts to return to his home but finds himself unable to:

He [Mawwal] murmured... fear... cowardice... Yet what keeps him close to this ghoul is something different... The female within her must be the origin of the problem. He made up excuses not to leave because she had her grips on him. Indeed, she’s a seductive female, strange and insanely giving... Who gave her such a glow? Who bestowed upon her such authority and power? Is it his cowardice or his fear? Maybe it is his hesitation or attraction to her. The faces became blurry before his eyes as he stared at her extremely beautiful body. (148)

The entranced Mawwal reflects on his situation: On the one hand, he contemplates Minna’s accusation of men suffering from fear and cowardice and hence leading their town into ignorance and darkness. On the other hand, he recognizes Minna’s irresistible sexual power. However, when Mawwal attempts to resist Minna verbally, she utters the most blasphemous of words that take him by surprise, for it is not a feminine attribute to use such bad language. As much as Minna is sensual, feminine, and irresistible, she possesses all the attributes that are connected to masculinity as well, and thus causes Mawwal a moment of gender confusion (148). The narrator expresses this by admitting, “how he [Mawwal] detests women who break the simplest femininity rules” (149). Despite Minna not conforming to the feminine mold that Mawwal has in mind, he cannot defy this linguistically vulgar yet physically sensual woman. Furthermore, Minna is not the only female who dares to break the “femininity rules” in Mawwal’s life. For his wife, Raghd, spends her days before a television set searching for pornographic channels for her visual entertainment without Mawwal questioning her behavior (148).

Minna’s language, physicality, actions, and movements disrupt the heterosexual rules set forth in Mawwal’s microcosmic world. In her fantasy world, surrounded by snakes, lions, and other voracious wild animals, she claims back Eve’s power, which is made possible by her heightened senses as a jinn, and imposes herself as the woman she feels she is. Exercising her
power, she appropriates reversed gender roles while openly deconstructing masculinity, even obliterating it. Her evil eye wreaks havoc upon the town until even the matron of the brothel and her prostitutes ascend to the zawiya and shout at the sheikh: “Oh, our sheikh! Oh, master! What is the solution to this problem? Where have the men gone? Our city has become a desert and its women barren!” (161). The masculine crisis overwhelms the city and touches all women including the al-sabirat\(^\text{57}\) who dare to leave their brothel and run to the sheikh, who promises them an answer on the following day.

With the occurrence of such incidents and the verbal expression of desperate women, it becomes obvious to the reader that the sexual identity of both genders in the city is under attack. While the men retreat and surrender their patriarchal power, women find themselves at a loss as they become sexually deprived. However, their major concern is the survival of the human race through procreation. It is ironic that the only man left is the town’s fool al-Buhali whom women hate and enjoy insulting or physically assaulting when he dares to join their gatherings (162).

The evil eye sentences the city’s men to impotence according to ‘Amm Mukhtar (the oldest man in town), who secretly informs his wife of the other men’s impotence. At first, he touches his male member and refers to it as huwa—he—an attempt not to utter words about the subject. When his wife appears unable to comprehend his insinuations, he confesses: “The men of our town hide the symbol of their masculinity. In fact, they wear tight pants just like women to conceal their impotent phalluses” (171). This passage shows the intensity of the calamity that Minna has caused. In fact, through her evil eye, she has threatened the human species and created a rupture between procreation and function, causing ‘Amm Mukhtar’s survival instincts

\(^{57}\) *Al-sabirat*: term used in the novel to refer to the prostitutes, literally the feminine plural of “patient.”
to resurrect from his old age, and sexually perform like a young man, even though his wife cannot conceive.

No longer merely a gaze, the evil eye now takes action, pushing the young men aside by making them impotent. The vacuum created by the evil eye forces the inactive segment of the population (such as old men like ‘Amm Mokhtar) to step forward and become active. When ‘Amm Mokhtar refers to his member in the third person, he gives it life and attributes humanness to a bodily organ. The evil eye causes the elderly man to become representative of all men in his town. Moreover, the only men with functioning male members left in the city are the old ‘Amm Mukhtar and the foolish al-Buhali, yet the women reject both men, the former for his old age and the latter for his insanity. However, ‘Amm Mukhtar feels threatened and rebellious: he suddenly finds himself able to defy his old age and perform with his wife while warning her not to share their sexual adventure with the rest of the women out of fear for their evil eyes (177). And so, human relations degenerate to a point where the survival of the town depends upon Minna as it succumbs to the damnation of her evil eye. Nevertheless, she remains indifferent to the townsmen because she lives in a state of rapture with Mawwal.

After Minna reveals the town’s evil to Mawwal, which includes the Sheikh’s plot to collect money and jewels at the expense of the villagers’ ignorance, she disappears and Mawwal finds himself alone with the women attacking him. When he realizes Judgment Day has come, a voice informs him that all the women he wronged in his past life must forgive him before he may enter paradise (204). As reality and fantasy become one in Mawwal, he realizes that Minna is

58 In parallel with the loss of masculinity, ‘Amm Mukhtar’s grandson (who lives with him) asks his grandmother about the loss of Palestine. As the grandmother narrates to her grandson a tale about a sultan, her little listener draws the conclusion that Palestine must not have any sultans left in it and hence it has been lost (178). This is the authorial voice including a political component in her narrative that parallels the loss of masculinity. The story implies that no Arab men remain, and hence no one can defend Palestine.
the only woman for him, although she represents all the women he ill-treated in his life. As she continues narrating multiple stories to him, Mawwal guesses that she must be the *Jaziya Hilaliyya* (the Hilali saga’s female narrator). The narrative evolves and changes, as Mawwal confesses that Minna is similar to Niran (a name meaning “fires”)—a woman once madly in love with him—because Minna ignites in him the strongest of passions and his deepest desire (209).

Mawwal, the lady’s man who used to easily appease his physical needs until the day he fell in love with his wife, thought he was in control of his emotions and relationships with women. Minna, convinced that he has become powerless before his wife (and women in general), confesses to him:

> You did not know that she was the one who set the rules of the game and not you. In fact, she possibly pushed you to make the decisions you made and allowed you to think that you were the one in control. A woman is as deep as a well while a man can drown in a cup of water. She offered herself to you for the last time and allowed you to do as you pleased with her body. She allowed you to puncture her soft flesh with your fangs so that you might enjoy the warmth of her blood on your lips. She pushed you to harm her so that she could rid herself of you with the least damage. (211)

Minna takes Niran’s defense with such passion that Mawwal believes she is resurrected and wants revenge. While Mawwal believes in his prowess and powerful masculinity as he seduces women, Minna reveals women’s deep secrets, for she portrays them as powerful and in control of their destiny contrary to their image of weakness that Mawwal believes.

The end of the plot experiences narrative manipulation whereby the reader wonders what constitutes reality and what forms fantasy. However, the explanation of the town’s retribution for their superstitious beliefs and actions—even when laughing, villagers say “*inshallah khayr*” (Tunisian expression meaning “may no evil happen”)—becomes clearer (213). As Minna escapes on her lion’s back with Mawwal leaving the town behind them to burn and drown in water, a face with no eyes appears and attaches itself to Mawwal’s face. He twists his neck
around, attempting to remove it, but is unable to untwist his neck and Minna must intervene (214). His punishment for maltreating women is to have his eyes taken away for they are the origin of the pain he has caused women, as they are his seduction tools. Minna warns him not to look back as “the curse will affect everyone. You must reach out for the truth!” (215). Yet, while Mawwal cannot understand why such punishments have descended upon him and his town, Minna sees that fire purifies and cleanses, for as long as “the men of the town circumcise themselves at night” (216) and are uninterested in satisfying their wives, there must be discontinuity of life in such a space.

The curse descends upon the town as a punishment for men’s desertion of women who have shed bitter tears. The authorial voice presents a critique of the world described in Minna Mawwal where mediocrity rules because the prostitute and the savant have become equal in society (218). However, the critique is not limited to the small town or even to Tunisia, but is aimed at the Arab world as well. When Mawwal exclaims “I’m the only one hitting myself with his cane. Watch my cane split me in two and all my defeats fall out. I’m the only one defeated” (220), he alludes to the multiple Arab wars and defeats. In addition, the tents set up at the top of the mountain symbolize the tents of the refugees in different Arab countries.

The look in Minna’s eyes gives Mawwal anxiety because she seems like a female spider about to devour her male. Indeed, Minna causes a state of confusion in him where reality intertwines with fantasy. He wonders “how this body beneath him takes him into ecstasy; as she kissed his skin he felt stiffness in his spinal cord. Perhaps she is about to devour him he thinks. Maybe she started with his lips” (233). Minna’s evil eye moves from the occult to the physical: The combination of her powerful looks and her powers of physical seduction cause Mawwal to lose his balance and he is unable to disentangle himself from her arms. Eventually, the storm
blows over and Mawwal returns to the city. While he attends the circumcision ceremony of the town’s boys at the zawiya, he observes the absurdities of the rites and finds no trace of Minna’s presence. In his mind reality confuses itself with dream while he observes the eyes of those around him (248).

At the circumcision ceremony, the false sheikh sits motionless in a corner while the boys’ mothers grow impatient because they wish to see the procedure completed in order to celebrate. When the tahhar (man who performs circumcision) finally arrives, he prepares the circumcision table for the one-week old son of the sheikh before the eyes of the saddened mother. As soon as he removes the clothes from the newborn’s genitals, the tahhar becomes perplex and unable to move. The novel ends with his observation about the baby and the interjection of the women present:

- He is neither male nor female. He’s a half-breed, a metamorphic creature. He must have changed out of fear of the female genitals.
- They all changed because of the female genitals. (252)

The novel ends with the discovery of an androgynous human being and the destruction of the masculine subject. Minna’s evil eye condemns the men to the loss of their masculinity and brings sexless children into the world, suggesting the presence of the monstrous feminine.59

In the case of Minna Mawwal, the definition of the monstrous feminine goes beyond a woman’s sexuality and expands to include the ‘ayn and the occult. Thus, Hechmi expands on the topic of the ‘ayn and the evil eye and then further develops the topic of the visual in her most recent book. She becomes a writer who paints, creating a canvas of words full of colors.

59 According to Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous-Feminine: film, feminism, psychoanalysis* (1993): “All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject... As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality” (1, 2).
Saints, Brothels and Prisons: Colors of the Body, the Evil Eye and the Masculine

In *Maryam tasqut min yad Allah*, the female protagonist appears to be part of the educated elites: a lawyer by profession, she is beautiful, intelligent, virtuous and middle class. Certainly, Maryam would have conformed to social norms, however, the day of her wedding she looks at her birth certificate and discovers her adoption papers. And so, the day of new beginnings signifies a day of many endings in Maryam’s life as bad surprises accumulate. On her wedding night, she learns that her biological mother is a prostitute and her father is unknown. Her husband-to-be and his family desert the contract ceremony and abandon her the moment they discover that she is fatherless. Consequently, she seeks a doctor to break her hymen, as she sees no point in preserving her virginity for a man. Bitter and drunk, she wanders the streets of Tunis in her pink wedding dress and goes to the cemetery where she symbolically buries her respectable life to follow in the footsteps of her biological mother, the prostitute. By exploring the extreme reaction of a female victim of patriarchal society, this novel displays the physical indulgences Tunisian men allow themselves at the expense of women and the ways in which Tunisian women defend themselves.

To symbolize physical and emotional states and elements of the earth such as water and fire, the author makes use of colors—red, black, white, green, pink, and grey—to set the tone for her narrative. Similarly to her two first novels, Hechmi continues her fragmented narrative in an experimental style. Extending the experimental, she transforms her narrative into a painting by entitling the first chapter “The First Drawing,” thus providing her reader with a visual effect. As the narrative includes poetic passages using color, it reminds us of the connection Jean H.

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60 Although the word “saint” does not correspond exactly to the word *waliyy*, I use it in this work as the closest term in English. Hans Wehr translates *wali* as “a man close to God, holy man, saint.” (*Arabic English Dictionary* 1994) However, I maintain that “saint” and “sainthood” have Christian connotations that are not the same as the Muslim ones, although in popular Islam both saints play very similar roles (intercession with God, prayers).
Hagstrum makes in *Sisters Arts: Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (1958) where he sees poetry and painting as sisters in the art world since antiquity. He further acknowledges that there is “an intimate relationship between pictorial visualization and total poetic structure” (xviii). In the case of Hechmi’s latest novel, the relationship between the pictorial and the visual transcends the poetic structure to cover the overall narrative (poetry and narration). To use Murray Krieger’s words in his work *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (1992) (in reference to Homer and Keats’ works), Hechmi’s narrative is “a word-ridden and time-ridden attempt not to portray visual representations but to create verbal ‘pictures’ whose complexity utterly resists their being translated into visual form” (xiv). Indeed, the novelist brings out the pictorial elements of words by giving expressions and actions colors, assigning the reader the role of the spectator in a myriad of colorful scenes, in the brothel, in the zawiya or in prison.

The book cover reinforces the concept of writing as painting, for the artist Asma Massoudi designed it specifically for Hechmi’s text according to Hechmi. Thus, the first image apprehended by the reader shows a bride holding a red bouquet of red roses, with a large red rose replacing her face. The design is in black and white, with the exception of the red bouquet and the red rose-face. This image is relevant to the novel because it summarizes it: The stairs in the background represent Maryam’s journey through life as she walks from darkness toward light and the red rose-face symbolizes a woman’s vagina. The narrator develops this image when he/she (the gender of the narrator is unspecified) depicts a woman’s vagina absorbing the main male character’s genitals:

She is a black smiling well. Indeed, she is the well and he is the hairless Yusuf struggling as his penis sinks in an abyss wide open beneath him. It swells, grows, elongates, and fits the circumference around it. Yet, the empty redness grows deeper and the depth pulls his
penis. While the old man attempts to hold on to his penis, it wants to sink into the red well. Suddenly, the well takes in his entire body. (9)

Hechmi begins this novel with the image of the monstrous feminine introduced at the end of *Minna Mawwal*. Indeed, the monstrous feminine becomes more explicit in the above passage, in which the female genitals absorb the male’s entire body. While the narrator mentions the man’s name (Yusuf), the ‘well’, a metaphor for a vagina, defines the identity of the woman involved. However, the narrator does not wish to reduce the identity of a female character to a vagina, but instead, to portray the reality of the image men hold of women by reducing her to the round red circle on the cover of the novel. The above quote suggests that a woman’s genitals, regardless of her identity, are capable of absorbing the body of a man. While Yusuf’s body attempts to escape from the female ‘well,’ his phallus disapproves and shows an interest in becoming the subject of the woman’s body. The male character’s resistance is doomed to failure because of the division between his body and his phallus. Indeed, they constitute two independent identities according to Hechmi’s text.

Constantly changing images disrupt the narrative. A story exists, which the reader only comprehends at the end of the novel, however the plot remains blurred. Similarly to the book’s cover, the novelist succeeds in creating a narrative that resembles a collage of images through words. I consider her work a cinematographic narrative where words are put together to create an image. The importance of color and the role of the eye become relevant to the story line, as the reader turns into a spectator gazing at the painting Hechmi creates with her words. To add to the chaos of the narrative, Hechmi entangles political events in Tunis with life in the main brothel. The space of the brothel conspires along with the evil eye, superstition and the saints to destroy masculinity. Hence, masculinity is under attack on multiple fronts, adding further chaos. The correlation between the various events appears impossible. Hechmi illustrates that men,
despite their distorted look at women, retreat from their masculine roles and women must step forth because they have no choice. In other words, this novel is a woman’s cry against the wrongdoings of men and shows that women find the courage to protect men, such as when Maryam hides Yusuf in her brothel room while the police search for him.

A “communiqué zero” announces that the blue pills (viagra) have disappeared from the central pharmacy (10). While it warns people to use them sparingly, it also informs the reader that the police are searching for the thief. The narrator connects the disappearance of the blue pills to bad luck for the year, because in Tunisian Colloquial Arabic (TCA), ‘am azraq (a blue year) implies a bad year. Thus, there exists a correlation between the disappearance of the blue fertility pills and the possibility of the new year becoming a sterile year.

Notably, a rapport appears between the main brothel in Tunis and sainthood. The narrator explains the uniqueness of ‘Abdallah Gish (the name of the brothel), for it is the name of a Tunisian saint, Sidi ‘Abdallah Gish. As the street with its small apartments becomes a brothel, the “sidi” part of the full name of the street sign has been erased and left with “’Abdallah Gish.” Although this is a brief explanation of the relationship between the brothel located in a dark alley and a waliyy salih (holy man), the narrator highlights it as one of the absurdities of the city of Tunis. When Maryam, the prostitute, asks Yusuf to leave her brothel chamber, he begs for her protection. As she stares at his body with admiration, she wonders about his manhood—after all, he is in the company of a prostitute so why does he refuse her services? She murmurs: “It’s impossible that he’s not a man!” (13). He answers laughingly: “That’s the calamity! They [the police] want to catch me because I’m too much of a man!” (13). This brief dialogue between the prostitute and the fugitive suggests two definitions of manhood. Since the prostitute is not accustomed to the presence of a man who refuses her sexual advances,
she immediately assumes that his refusal is linked to impotence. In her mind, there is no other reason holding back a man. On the other hand, the escapee insinuates that his masculinity (literally, his ‘flood of masculinity’) is the cause of his presence in the brothel, as he attempts to run from the police chasing him. The meaning of masculinity in this context is synonymous with courage to stand up for his political ideals. His choice of escaping to a brothel, where he believes his safety is guaranteed, renders the space of sin and promiscuity a sanctuary, similar to a mosque. The police would not suspect a politicized man to take refuge in a brothel.

Maryam explains to Yusuf how she arrived at the brothel. On her wedding night, she had imagined Sidi al-Khidr (a wali) standing before her and watching over her as she crazily walked toward cars driving by. While she said “the light fills me up” (33), car drivers yelled at her “You are insane! Open your eyes!” while another exclaimed: “She’s crazy. Actually, she is blind, the poor dear. A car will eventually hit her on this rainy night” (33). Yet Maryam continued her journey until she met a man “whose circles below his eyes shock her” (35). Maryam’s physical appearance and loss suggest to him her sexual availability. Once again, the interlocutor refers to Sidi Mihriz sultan li-mdina (the Sultan of the old city), as Maryam informs the stranger that she is a hundred years old. Once they reach the cemetery, he suggests they make love on his wife’s tomb: “She has been laying here for twenty years, listening to people cry and smelling mildew. I want her to come alive tonight, breathe in love’s scent and hear our bodies quiver. I beg you…” (37). Yet, the older man stares at Maryam unable to perform sexually. She narrates: “He was unable to penetrate me or even to touch me. Instead, he stood before me staring at my legs spread apart” (38). While the old man gazes at Maryam’s legs indicating his sexual interest, impotence lies behind his gaze making it void of power.
When the male narrator finds himself on the doorstep of the ‘Abdallah Gish brothel, he becomes the subject of the onlookers as they pass by. He remembers:

I still recall the first day when I fled to that doorstep on Zarqun Street. This doorstep evokes the feelings I experienced as the wall scratched my body and the loud laughter hurt my ears. I shyly looked back at the bystanders whose curious eyes undressed my body. At first I tried to get away from the grabbing hands and stand outside in the narrow ally with small bedrooms on each side of it. I did not know where I was and wondered if I was being whisked off to the Turkish bath. I quickly changed my mind, as I have never heard of the presence of men and women at the same time at a bathhouse (45).

The narrator confuses the brothel, a space for illicit sexual indulgences, with the Turkish bath, a space for body cleansing. Further, the male character describes himself as the object of attention of an old female prostitute who gets a hold of him and forces herself upon him. The confusion of space in the above passage indicates the absurdity of the situation. Notably, the contradiction of the ‘Abdallah Gish brothel draws the narrator toward it because he wishes to understand the transformation of a holy space into a brothel. Once he dares to step into the narrow ally of ‘Abdallah Gish, he becomes the subject of the prostitute’s gazing eyes as she stares at the masculine body before her (47). While women are the subject of men’s devouring gazes in the rest of Tunis, ‘Abdallah Gish remains a space where women convert men into their objects as the fulfillment of men’s pleasure is in the hands and eyes of the prostitutes.

Not only does the prostitute look at the narrator, rendering him the object of her desirous eyes, but she initiates a debate with him in which she accuses all men (he becomes representative of the male gender) of getting rid of their offspring. She says: “You men dispose of your children in trashcans, sewers, toilets of hotels, and brothels” (49). The prostitute directs this accusation to all men while conversing with the narrator and bestowing him with condescending looks. She portrays men as irresponsible and careless beings who ignore the consequences of their sexual indulgences.
When Yusuf remembers his mother, he recalls her three fears: his father, saints, and God. She had told him that “saints punish immediately; as for God, he waits until the following day” (54), thus making saints valuable intermediaries as followers perceive saints’ actions as being immediate. Consequently, there exists a relationship between sainthood and the evil eye throughout the novel, but especially when invoking certain wali who are known to prevent the evil eye or cure its effects. The space in which the narrative takes place unites opposite concepts. The narrator explains that ‘Abdallah Gish was a holy man who built small rooms in an ally off Zarqun Street for travelers (‘abiri sabil) seeking refuge and rest overnight. Ironically, the virtuous space is transformed into a brothel thus creating a space for sin and a refuge for ‘abiri sari (prostitutes’ customers 46). Furthermore, when Maryam narrates her thoughts, life, and feelings to Yusuf, she mixes registers of the vernacular, introducing vulgar expressions into her speech and converting social taboos into ordinary chatter. Thus, Sidi ‘Abdallah Gish, the saint, becomes ontologically connected to a brothel. To reduce the contradiction, the “sidi” is removed and the brothel is referred to as ‘Abdallah Gish. Thus, a saint is rendered a pimp through the transformation of the space. On the other hand, when Maryam wonders if she can destroy “this brothel-shrine or shine-brothel” (140) she intends to return the sinful space to its original sanctity. The fact that she is an aspiring prostitute yet still a virgin allows her to consider the destruction of the brothel because it is the cause of her mishaps. She would return it to the saint because she remains innocent.

Yet the innocence of childhood haunts her. The evil eye does not only indicate envy: Its notion includes looks of disgust, disapproval, and condemnation. Maryam’s childhood memories consist of her playing hide and seek alone (69) because mothers yelled at neighborhood children: “Do not play with her anymore! She’s a bastard child! She’s a love
child! Do not play with her!” (69). The looks of others descend upon the child and condemn Maryam to solitude. The evil eye transcends the notion of envy to incorporate exile and the seclusion of a child and her mother, for the child, though crimeless, must carry her mother’s burden and bear her reputation. This is why as an adult, she decides to appropriate her mother’s life and destiny and return to a safe space: the brothel.

It is not surprising that the brothel appropriates the attributes of the zawiya it is built upon, for the saint’s blessings guard the prostitutes from the evil eye, or so they believe. The prostitutes must contain and limit worldly evils. Maryam wonders:

Sidi Bin Na‘im Street. It appears that saints have embraced all the brothels. I wonder why houses of prostitution are located on saints’ streets? Maybe it is because they are the sabirat (long-suffering women) who keep the world’s evils within bounds (73).

While the brothel represents an alternative space for the prostitutes, the saintly space upholds its holy mission through them, as they themselves are transformed into blessed and sanctified women by limiting the evil beyond the brothel. This connection does not appear obvious to the reader at the beginning of the narrative. On the contrary, the narrator depicts the irony and oddity of a brothel subsuming a holy and protective space. Furthermore, the brothel/saint space, located in a deadend, is relatively concealed from prying eyes, which inspires Yusuf to seek refuge in it as he runs away from the police.

At the same time, overtones of prison insinuate into the text. Yusuf, wanted by the police, risks going to prison if he ventures outside, yet his self-confinement makes the brothel into a prison for him. Maryam by virtue of her new profession faces the possibility of prison as well, however, prison images preoccupy her in a different way. Maryam draws a parallel between her nudity in the brothel and that of the actor Nur al-Sharif in his movie Laylat al-baby
The title of the movie is not referred to in the text, which assumes that the reader should have knowledge of it. However, the title itself “The Baby Doll Night” suggests an erotic movie, which Yusuf assumes it to be.
- Ok, enough talk about nudity! I’ve been naked all my life and nobody’s cared about it!
- You’re a prostitute. A prostitute strips and doesn’t care about it.
- Right! But the actor is a man! How can we accept a man exposing himself!

Maryam’s final sentence in Tunisian dialect suggests her sarcasm toward her interlocutor, for he invokes the normalcy of her nudity. As he appears to accept her nudity because her livelihood depends on it, he implies the anomaly of male nudity before an audience. When Maryam sarcastically points out that a man ought to conceal his body and not appear entirely naked, she indicates that society protects men. Thus, the social order upholds masculinity within hetero-patriarchal standards by protecting the male body from the male or female gazing eye.

Seeking protection from the evil eye along with curiosity to know what the future holds for her, Maryam consults a daggaza (a fortune teller/healer). As she is unable to protect herself from the evil eye and misfortunes, she seeks refuge in the supernatural despite her level of education that includes a degree in law. According to Abdel Hamid and Dalenda Larguèche in *Musulmanes en Terre d’Islam* (1992), oral narratives present the daggaza as a sexually liberated woman who does not hesitate to charm and seduce men that appeal to her (36). Belief in the evil eye transcends education and knowledge and reflects the fear of being unprotected and defenseless (101). However, the belief in the daggaza is not potent enough: Maryam expresses to Yusuf her desire to retaliate and avenge herself and her biological mother (a prostitute) by transforming herself into an evil eye that attacks men in the most vicious way. She exclaims:

> As I glance at them and listen to them, how I wish I could bury my shame in the bed curtains. I yearn to kill them all, or to cut off their “war machines” (*alatahum al-haribiyya*) and throw them to the neighborhood’s cats and dogs (102).

The image of ‘war machines’ as a metaphor for the male sexual organ reinforces the perceived connection between violence and sexuality in Maryam’s life. As a result of her bitterness toward men, she decides to punish Yusuf for the crimes of other men by narrating to him her life and her
mother’s life stories which are entangled throughout the narrative, while he fearfully attempts to hide in her bedroom.

The police finally penetrate the brothel and interrogate Maryam thus violating the couple’s sanctuary. As she evades the officer’s question of the whereabouts of Yusuf, he exclaims: “Just wait. I’ll sober her up. You’ll see. I’ll make the whore speak” (212). The policeman slaps her face again and again. It becomes apparent to the reader that Yusuf is the creation of the author/painter as he screams: “Oh you, painter! Return my legs to me! Wait, quickly, draw my arms, and erase my eyes. I do not want to see the policeman hit her! What is this salty liquid descending from my eyes?” (212). The ambiguity of the novel opens the possibility of a double construction of Yusuf as a man and an image. If he is the poster on her wall, then Maryam establishes an imaginary dialogue with the image of Yusuf making her the nazir and him the manzur ilayh who is void of power. Hence, his wish to lose his eyes, as he is unable to bear the sight of the policeman’s physical abuse of Maryam. He rejects his position as the nazir because it entails pain and the inability to react to authority. As a poster on the wall, Yusuf is reduced to a synecdoche, representing all Arab men who are impotent and passive spectators in the view of the novel.

The bizarre occurrences in this novel, beginning with its title, suggest a form of magical realism that allows a poster on the wall to speak. Referring to conflict within the Arab world, Yusuf (the poster version) is curious about the appearance of tears. He asks:

- Don’t tell me those tears are what gushes from their eyes every time a blood bath happens in what they call their great nation? Is that all they have? That liquid?
- Apparently, they don’t possess anything else, or perhaps they don’t wish to have anything but tears. (212-213)

The narrator offers a critique of the state of the greater Arab nation by setting up a poster-man to wonder about the reaction of Arabs to massacres and wars. The image is almost comic as it
depicts the astonishment of an icon (poster) at the replacement of ‘masculine’ action with ‘feminine’ tears.

The shifting spaces in *Maryam tasqut min yad Allah* from saintly sanctuary to the brothel to the prison as well as the shifting position of the *nazir* and *manzur ilayh* reflects the shifting of masculine images and gender delineation throughout the narrative. Furthermore, the narrator converts into a painter making use of colors that reveal moods and feelings. Although the saints are able to protect the prostitutes from the evil eye, making the brothel a safe haven, they are unable to protect the masculine from the evil eye of the castrating, bitter woman.\(^6^2\) The narrator portrays the only male protagonist, Yusuf, as unnecessary, for the illusion of him being a real man evaporates when he becomes a painted poster on a brothel’s wall. Hechmi resumes the masculine in an icon, void of the powers of masculinility.

**Rayhan, Minna, and Maryam: From Evil Eye to the Obliteration of the Masculine**

Hechmi’s three novels work hand in hand to illustrate the absence of the Tunisian/Arab man. While the war theme is central to Hechmi’s first novel *Hafiyat al-ruh*, it is only alluded to in her following works. Since the main female character, Rayhan, appears frustrated with the ongoing wars in the Arab world and her inability to conceive, she makes use of a man and attempts to adopt a child to console her and cure her war wounds. Her husband seems insufficient and hence she takes a lover and ends the relationship at her discretion. The presence of color is prominent in Hechmi’s first and third novels providing her often ambiguous texts with a visual

\(^{62}\) Tunisian women perform the rite of *tasfih* on pre-pubescent girls. An incision is made on the knee from which blood is drawn to cover a raisin that the girl eats while saying “*ana hit, wa-wild al-nas khit*” (“May I be a wall, and the man a thread,” Labidi 63). Maryam’s mother, a prostitute, has this rite carried out on her daughter to protect her (*Maryam tasqut min yad Allah* 96).
dimension unique to her narratives. The first novel concludes with the idea of the male
characters proving to be inadequate and lacking in masculinity, hence rendering them subjects.

Hechmi’s second novel Minna Mawwal transcends the narrative space to juxtapose a real
town and an imaginary world that almost resemble a fairytale land. Minna seeks revenge from
men, condemning them to impotence as punishment for their ill-treatment of her because her
physical beauty seduces them and ignites the jealousy of women. Minna decides to disrupt the
normative space of the zawiya where the Sheikh establishes superstitious rites, influences
opinion, and paralyzes judgment. As she represents a creature from the jinn world, she carries
physical amulets to ward off or bestow the evil eye upon those she chooses.

In Maryam tasqut min yad Allah, the title suggests not only the abandonment of men,
including the father of Maryam, but also of God. Confronted with her unique destiny of a
prostitute’s fatherless child, Maryam discovers the day of her wedding that her virginal world is
an illusion. Instead, reality throws her in the brothel where her mother worked her entire life.
The narrator/painter depicts the world and thoughts of Maryam as a series of colorful mishaps in
which the sanctity of space plays an important role. Throughout the novel, the narrator focuses
on the progression from a holy space to brothel and the role of the body and nudity in producing
pleasure and pain. Further, the evil eye changes to an eye that watches evil as well as inflicting
it. Maryam’s eye provides her with the illusion of Yusuf being a real man while she only draws
him on paper. The ambiguity of the text confuses the construction of the male character, for
although he is described as a real man at the beginning of the novel, the reader discovers toward
the end that Yusuf could have been a poster-man on Maryam’s bedroom wall throughout the
narrative. On the other hand, Maryam’s evil eye could have angrily punished the real man,
Yusuf, and stripped him of his power by rendering him a simple image. In either case, Maryam’s ‘ayn maintains an active role throughout the novel.

The nazra in Fethia Hechmi’s novels plays a multitude of roles but serves primarily to destroy the masculine while rendering him the subject of the ‘ayn in general and of the ‘ayn al-hasud (evil eye) in particular. Hechmi emphasizes the relationship between evil eye, male sexuality, and masculinity in her last two novels more than in her first. It appears that men’s sexual performance or lack thereof may relate to the evil eye, as women can subject a particular man to their evil eye. Thus a woman may want to boast of her husband’s sexual prowess, yet will reign herself in for fear of other women’s envy and their evil eye upon her husband, as in Minna Mawwal.

Hechmi’s depiction of the eye evolves throughout her three narratives. While she establishes the possibility of Rayhan’s husband being sterile in her first novel, she moves on to portraying the men in Minna’s town as resembling women and losing their manhood in her second novel. In her third novel, she destines the only man in the novel to become a painting or a poster-man on Maryam’s wall. The ambiguity and multi-layered aspect of Hechmi’s texts allow for many interpretations. As she writes a fragmented narrative, the authorial voice intervenes at times and allows for a different narrative to take shape, confusing the reader about the previously read text. The author’s textual disruption affects the construction of the masculine, which constantly shifts within the narrative yet concludes with its demise.

The eye acts as a source and transmitter of thoughts, emotions and projects, for Hechmi uses it copiously in her text. While the evil eye is not always synonymous with envy, it always relates to evil. Thus Rayhan objectifies her husband and lover as a response to wars created by men, while Minna reacts to the sheikh who encourages ignorance through his superstitious rites
in order to swindle the inhabitants of the small town. Finally, Maryam condemns men’s use of prostitutes. Although Hechmi highlights female protagonists who wreck havoc and thus appear evil, when delving into the text the reader discovers that women react to men’s malevolence by attempting to correct it even if this requires violence manifested through the evil eye.

her novels bringing destruction to individuals and groups.

The association of evil eye with power appears in *Understanding Islam and Muslim Traditions* (2004), where Tanya Gulevich ties the power of the evil eye to certain physical characteristics. She
CONCLUSION

From ‘ayb to ‘ayn: Women Write, Women Look

The texts of Amel Mokhtar, Massouda Boubakr and Fethia Hechmi suggest that women can make use of the novel as a space in which they freely redirect the nazar and create characters within new parameters, not the socially imposed molds of Tunisian society. That is, the characters act and express themselves in ways not possible for their authors in everyday life. This implies that these novelists do not create autobiographical texts as Mahmoud Tarchouna and other literary critics argue, but instead experimental texts in which they enable their characters to go against the grain and defy the established socio-cultural boundaries. Hence the space of the novel offers these writers the freedom to transcend the limitations of ‘ayb (the shameful) which constrains women’s behavior in Tunisia.

These writers tackle complex matters connected to social roles and gender constructions when creating male characters. When I first approached the topic of women writers’ construction of male characters, I attempted to analyze the texts of the selected novelists through some psychoanalytic and feminist gaze theories. Although I did not wish to impose ‘foreign’ theories on this body of literature, the possibility of finding an Arabo-Islamic theoretical framework proved difficult until Hanita Brand’s article, “Gazing Games: Yusif Idris’s Contemplating Protagonist and the Elusive Object of his Gaze,” introduced me to Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi. When I discovered the shortcomings of the gaze theories, such as the fact that they are
defined by power and assume that there exist positions of the powerful and the powerless in a relationship, I examined definitions of *nazar*, which offer a more compliant theoretical framework to apply to the text of the novels. Indeed, although the *nazar*, as a theoretical concept, does not revolve around power in the same way as the gaze, it nevertheless offers the possibility of giving power to the *manzur ilayh* (the one who is looked at), making him or her the opposite of the gazed at (the powerless and objectified). In addition, local concepts in Tunisia that control the gazelal-*nazar*, which Lilia Labidi highlights in *Çabra Hachma*, as well as proverbs within the Islamic framework of *al-nazar*, are key to a deeper understanding of the texts, which take place in Tunisia and whose characters are predominantly Tunisian.

The texts analyzed in this study display an array of *al-nazar‘ayn* dynamics. Mokhtar links her narrator’s female gaze to sexual pleasure and attempts to establish a mutual gaze between male and female characters. In contrast, Boubakr makes use of *al-nazar* to focus on marginal male characters. For her part, Hechmi suggests that *al-‘ayn* carries within it the forces of evil and revives an ancient popular Islamic belief of *‘ayn al-hasud* (the evil eye). All three novelists redirect the *nazar* by allowing it to exert power in new ways. Moreover, the amalgamation of Tunisian tradition and Islamic faith reinforces a patriarchal double standard that has taken away the right of women to look back or, simply, to look. Yet, Mokhtar permits her female narrators to pleasurably gaze at men and defies the masculanist structure of her own society by revoking men’s unquestionable right to gaze. Furthermore, Boubakr creates a male character who dreams of becoming a woman in *Trushqana*, leading her reader to wonder whether womanhood offers more to an individual than the constraints of masculinity. Finally, the feminine eye reveals itself in its darkest shades in Hechmi’s novels where the body becomes an objectifying tool and the eye leads to destruction.
In his book *Une Fiction Troublante* (*A Disturbing Fiction* 1994), Fethi Benslama notes: “…literature could be the text’s last resistance” (18), suggesting that literature or writing, is the result of the mind’s forced impotence and the need to react. The constraints of Tunisian socio-cultural spaces act as incitement for the novelists of this study to write. It is indeed within the space of their novels that three women redirect the female *nazar* and instead of lowering their gaze, raise it.

Influenced by the general literary atmosphere that reigned over Arabic women novelists’ works in the 1990s, Mokhtar’s first novel *Nakhab al-hayat* was sexually charged, similarly to Ahlem Mostaghanemi’s *Dhakirat al-jasad* (*Memory of the Flesh* 1993). Suddenly, Arab women writers appropriated a social taboo and normalized it in their texts thus going against the patriarchal masculanist discourse in which they had lived. Indeed, the concept of sexual pleasure for women is not foreign to Arab culture as Sheikh Nefzawi’s *The Perfumed Garden* (1434) or al-Tifashi’s *The Delight of Hearts: Or What You Will Not Find in Any Book* (first half of 13th century) demonstrate. However, the concepts of *haram* (illicit) and ‘*ayb* (shameful) became socio-cultural regulators applicable to both men and women, but especially to the latter. In fact, women’s writing in Tunisia progressed from defiance of the established social norms of ‘*ayb* from the 1930s through the 1960s when a few ‘modern’ women from the city of Tunis dared to publish (in women’s periodicals such as *Laïla* and *Faïza*), to a state-sponsored feminist discourse in the 1960s through the 1980s. In the 1990s, women writers in Tunisia asserted their voices, not as feminists but as individuals, as they attempted to integrate into the wider literary world.

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63 With *Dhakirat al-jasad* (*Memory of the Flesh* 1993), Ahlem Mostaghanemi is Algeria’s first woman novelist to publish in Arabic along with Zouhour Wannisi, who published *Lunja wa-l-ghul* (*Lunja and the Ghoul* 1993) the same year. However, Mostaghanemi is more well-known because of her numerous novels (Ben Jemaa 122).
In parallel with the emphasis on sexual taboos of Tunisian society, such as in Mokhtar’s *Nakhab al-hayat* (1993) and *al-Kursi al-hazzaz* (2002), Mokhtar reveals secrets of an exclusively feminine world in which men are not granted access in real life, yet fictively may enter it. The examples of ‘Afif discovering that his virtuous and pious mother, Hajja Fatima, has a lover (*Maestro*, 2007) or of Muna ‘Abd al-Salam, who narrates the memory of her cousin sexually abusing her during a vacation in the countryside (*al-Kursi al-hazzaz*) come to mind as instances in which both characters choose silence; for ‘Afif never confronts his mother with the reality he discovers, and Muna keeps her secret to herself. To unravel these taboos, the writer employs a potent gaze, or a potent reversed gaze that may or may not lead to physical pleasure.

Boubakr takes us into the private space of a Tunisian home in her first novel *Laylat al-ghiyab* while creating a female character that dares to look back at her father and holds him accountable for marginalizing her. Despite his success in life, in her eyes, he represents nothing but a marginal man and an absent father. His status diminishes to fit her views of him as *sahib al-nufa* (the sperm donor). In a culture where children are not allowed to hold their parents accountable, Fa’iqa challenges social rules by looking back at her father, in the same way that Muna does in Mokhtar’s *al-Kursi al-hazzaz*. In these two novels, both female characters choose to challenge the father figure and attempt to look into his eyes, going against social convention and tradition. However, their gaze may not always be a sign of defiance, as it is also an attempt to make peace with the self and the authoritative father figure. Indeed, these female narrators wish to see the father shift from his authoritative position and connect with them on an emotional level. The female characters desire that their fathers have the courage to step away from traditional molds instead of representing power. For example, Muna would have her father look at his daughter as she is, creating a mutual gaze.
Boubakr chooses to place marginal male characters in a typical Tunisian/Arab setting. *Trushqana* (1999) takes place in the old city of Tunis and a southern middle-class suburb (Ezzahra). Despite a shifting background created by travel and changes of scenery, Boubakr’s narrator scrutinizes the character of Trushqana (Murad Shawashi) and draws the reader to him. For not only does the narrator focus on him, but she highlights aspects of his life that are puzzling and intriguing at the same time. While Boubakr brings out Trushqana’s sexual marginality, it becomes clear to the reader that it is not a choice but an imposition that Murad alShawashi senses from within himself. Furthermore, the author questions the linear parameters framing the definition of masculinity and femininity in Tunisian society. Yet, the weight of the past and its role in the making of a person becomes obvious when Murad becomes Nada. Suddenly, the new woman is not simply a woman, but the woman-who-was-once-a-man. This novel invites the reader to reflect upon gender roles and to look beyond physical appearance. In fact, the behavior and treatment of people other than than Murad’s immediate family suggest the narrow gender spaces, which divide their world.

Marginality becomes a general phenomenon in *Wada’an Hammurabi* as it moves beyond the individual space into the public space of an entire nation. The narrator in this novel qualifies the Arab world as one nation that suffers multiple levels of fragmentation. Not only does Boubakr invite her reader to contemplate the character of Zaqquma, but she also places this marginal character in a juxtaposing position between *nazir* and *manzur ilayh*. While Zaqquma alludes to his Hilali origins and his poetic capabilities, he appears to have much esteem for himself and his personal history. Similar to a *su’luk* (vagabond), he does not concern himself with the *nazra* that others shed upon him. On the other hand, when in the position of a *manzur ilayh*, Zaqquma incites pain and disgust when one looks at him. Not only is his physical
appearance despicable, but so are his words. Nevertheless, the author resolves this opposite 
*nazra* by removing Zaqquma from the marginal space and integrating him into the realm of 
‘normalcy’ when the village intellectual gives him the opportunity to write in their newly 
founded newspaper.

Boubakr’s writing suggests that Zaqquma represents today’s Arab man who suffers from 
a discrepancy between his position of *nazir* onto himself, and a *manzur ilayh*. This novel 
questions Arab masculinity when women characters comment on their men’s lack of reaction to 
televised images of women and children dying in Iraq and other places of the Arab world. 
Consequently, women become distrustful of masculinity when their men do not take action to 
save children. War shakes the image of the Arab man in this novel, yet the author chooses to 
restore it within the local framework of al-Rajin by establishing an intellectual/cultural forum. 
The educated woman of the village (Rim) sails away on a peace ship to take aid to Iraq, while the 
men of the village lag behind. Nonetheless, they take the initiative to create a newspaper, 
offering a cultural and intellectual space to their community. A restoration of community occurs 
and a gender-role reversal is affected in the process. Fethi Benslama’s article “Identity as a 
Cause” emphasizes the idea of belonging to a particular nation and the effects of war on the Arab 
nation (composed of multiple states), which is present in *Wada’an Hammurabi*. Benslama refers 
to the effects of the Algerian civil war on himself:

For a non-Algerian such as myself, if I search for the motive that led me to surpass so 
many obstacles, I believe I can find it in this very clear perception that I belong to this 
catastrophe, that this catastrophe belongs to me, and that I am genealogically linked to it 
through a mythical and historical filiation. This catastrophe, drama, or whatever the 
approximate label upholding it today, which is the Algerian name and space, is imbedded in 
a series of world events, the common denominator of which was the collapse of communism: the Gulf war, the end of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin wall, Bosnia. (36)
Benslama connects himself as a Tunisian living in France to the political events in Algeria. He justifies his concern through the globalization of the issue, for he senses a historical element connecting him to a neighboring nation (Algeria). Even if he acknowledges that his attachment is a ‘mythical and historical filiation,’ he nonetheless admits to its importance for him.

Similarly, Boubakr establishes a fictional connection between the Arab imaginary village of al-Rajin and Palestine’s Intifada and the bombs in Baghdad. As Benslama points out, even if it is a fictive, imaginary and mythical unity, it exists because a group of individuals believe in its existence, hence giving it legitimacy.

The war issue comes up in Hechmi’s first novel *Hafiyyat al-ruh* where she sets the stage for her main female character Rayhan, a Tunisian artist and intellectual, back in Tunis after a long visit to Baghdad. The war in Baghdad resonates in Tunis and transforms her perception and vision of people, objects, places, and especially men. The devastation of the war lingers in her personal life and she is unable to conceive. Perhaps her body senses her devastation from the bombs descending upon Baghdad and refuses to bring a child into such a world, or that her husband like all the other men around her, are unable to assume responsibility for such catastrophes and, consequently, are infertile. After all, bestowing infertility upon a character may be easier than castrating him.

Although Hechmi hesitates to condemn male characters to impotence in her first novel, she renders them powerless in her second. In *Minna Mawwal* Hechmi assigns a female Jinn to instigate the destruction of a small town through the evil eye of a woman who has turned into a *ghula* (female ghoul/monster) after succumbing to men’s ill-treatment of her. Minna would not destroy the small town if she did not see that ignorance has fogged their common sense and rendered their vision impure. Her evil eye is the solution, as nothing else may be done to change
their minds. The people of the small town make a pact with ignorance and find refuge in their belief in false sainthood. Minna’s ‘ayn affects the men’s manhood and prowess, rendering them impotent and unable to satisfy their partners. The nazar in this novel proves unable to maintain neutrality (unlike Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi’s idea of al-nazar) and transforms into a projection of evil. Even physical attraction shifts from being a finality—in Mokhtar’s novel—to becoming part of a process leading to the real effect of the evil eye: destruction.

In her last novel Maryam tasqut min yad Allah Hechmi continues with the idea of the evil eye to some degree, yet adds visual effects to a novel that resembles a montage of colors and words. Despite the absence of pictures other than the book cover, the reader senses that Hechmi founds her novel upon pictorial concepts. Furthermore, she grows more daring in her choice of space that represents a contradiction: The main brothel in the old city of Tunis happens to be situated in a zawiya, on a street that holds the name of a saint. The narrator shows that spaces change over time, and a sacred religious space may become a blasphemous, sinful space, paralleling the way a virgin becomes a prostitute on her wedding day. The narrative transcends traditional forms and becomes experimental and fragmented, a reflection of the lives of its characters. Although Yusuf seeks refuge in Maryam’s brothel room when he escapes from the police, the end of the novel portrays him as a poster on the chamber’s wall. In fact, not only does he represent a man who suffers from ‘too much masculinity,’ but a prostitute proves that he, the ‘real’ man, is only an image. Yusuf, condemned to an image on a wall becomes disabled as well, either missing his head, or his legs and therefore, unable to defend Maryam from the police who torture her to find out where she has hidden Yusuf. Perhaps Yusuf is in reality the last real man that Maryam deems important enough to rescue hence she saves him from the police by
transforming him into a painting on a wall. While men destroy Maryam’s life and future, she dares to look back at Yusuf and save him from the political oppressor.

While the text serves as a space in which Tunisian women novelists defy their restrictive and restricted public as well as private spaces within Tunisian society, the nazar and ‘ayn act as tools with which writers create their fictional worlds. Furthermore, by directing their vision and focusing on male characters, not only do they depict masculinity as they perceive it, but they also reappropriate the ‘ayn and assert the Tunisian proverb kull shay hbas illa inzar ya nas (“Everything has limits, except looking at people”) while resisting habbit ‘inik (“lower your gaze”). Although Ibn al-Qattan al-Fasi recommends lowering the gaze to every Muslim man and woman, the gender divisions of Tunisian society have proven to be more resilient than religious impositions. Yet, the question pertaining to the significance of these Tunisian women’s novels remains of order. In fact, Benslama’s definition of humanity is in conjunction with people’s ability to read a novel. He says: “Humanity is defined by one’s ability to read a novel (the fictional contract is indicated on the book cover) quietly in his house or on the metro” (30). Benslama contextualizes this within the framework of Salman Rushdie’s novel The Satanic Verses (1988) and the violent reaction of Muslims to a piece of fiction. Yet, Benslama considers that the language of fiction touches many intensely and proves to have the power to penetrate and contaminate people’s minds and bodies (32). Although Tunisian women’s novels do not exceed 15,000 copies for a single book (Mokhtar’s Nakhab al-hayat was printed twice in Beirut, 5,000 copy each time and once in Tunisia) because they operate in a limited market, their fiction deserves consideration. However, these women novelists have the merit of defying silence in its many forms (tradition, social norms, and censorship), for they dare to take risks and expose themselves in a small country where critics confuse fiction for autobiography.
While Tunisian women’s first wave of writing is characterized by a feminist (imbedded with nationalist intents) ideology centered within the text, novelists in the mid-1990s removed themselves from feminism and today focus on improving writing, narratological techniques, plot and character roles. These changes and increased publication point to the development of a literary production in Tunisia that is worthy of study. Although I approach my selected texts through the lens of al-nazar, there remain possibilities for further exploration. Elements of memory, effects of space such as the old city of Tunis and its architecture, gender roles that include the role of father and mother figures, the experimental use of language such as the insertion of French words and Tunisian colloquial dialogues alongside Modern Standard Arabic, and intertextuality are but a few topics that beckon to adventuresome researchers.
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