

La rivista di Arablit

semestrale di letteratura e cultura araba moderna e contemporanea

Anno XV, numero 30, dicembre 2025



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ANDREA MARIA NEGRI*

Since the revolution of 2011, Tunisia has witnessed a striking renaissance of politically engaged artistic production. The newly consolidated sphere of civil liberties has provided the conditions for artists – long constrained under the censorship mechanisms of the republican era – to articulate their perspectives openly and to situate their work within broader debates on power, citizenship, and collective memory. At the core of this political discourse – whether articulated through expressions of dissent or through dissonant conceptions of the nation – the figure of the woman constantly emerges as a central and symbolically charged presence. This is anchored in a well-established genealogy of cultural and political discourses attested since the colonial era. The present article analyses the ways in which contemporary Tunisian narrative both inherits and rearticulates this longstanding tradition, weaving together the representation of women with broader political discourses. Within this framework, the article interrogates the construction of female figures across two novels – Šukrī al-Mabḥūt's al-Ṭaliyānī (The Italian, 2015) and Fātimah Bin Maḥmūd's al-Malā'ikah lā tuṭīr (Angels Do Not Fly, 2021) – as well as two widely viewed television series written and directed by Sāmī al-Fahrī: Awlād Mufīdah (The Sons of Mufīdah, 2015-2017) and Barā'ah (Innocence, 2022).

Introduction

The democratic interlude inaugurated in January 2011 – when the revolution brought an end to Ben Ali's rule (1936-2019), and possibly concluded with the 2021 suspension of parliament, described as *taǧmīd* (freezing) in the presidential address – constituted an exceptional moment of expanded freedom of expression and opinion. This newly secured freedom created avenues of articulation that had previously been all but inconceivable, producing a widely felt sense of rupture and possibility. For the first time in the history of republican Tunisia, the literary sphere was effectively released from the constraints of state censorship. Writing animated by political concerns was no longer the preserve of a narrow circle of figures shielded by their international stature – such as Ġalīlah al-Bakkār (Jalila Baccar) and al-Fāḍil al-Ġa'āybī (Fadhel Jaibi) –

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nor of authors writing from abroad within the Tunisian diaspora¹.

This shift was especially striking insofar as it did not remain confined to what McLuhan would term the “cool” cultural media² – novels, poetry, theatre, and cinema, forms that have customarily commanded relatively modest audiences within the Tunisian cultural landscape. It extended as well into the domain of “hot” media, most prominently television drama, which commands an expansive and socially heterogeneous viewership and constitutes a central site of popular engagement and cultural imagination in both Tunisia and the broader Arab world³.

Through literature, artists found a platform to critique state policies and the ideological struggles⁴ that have shaped Tunisia’s complex democratic transition⁵. Writing had become a vehicle for democratic engagement⁶, enabling authors to articulate their own views within ongoing debates on national identity⁷,

¹ M. Carlson, *The Tunisian Revolution and After in the Work of Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaïbi*, in D. O’Rawe; M. Phelan (eds.), *Post-Conflict Performance, Film and Visual Arts*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2016, p. 233; Rafika Zahrouni, “The Tunisian Revolution and the Dialectics of Theatre and Reality”, in *Theatre Research International*, 38, 2 (2013), p. 156.

² M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Routledge, London 2010, p. 9.

³ C. Salamandra, *Creative Compromise: Syrian Television Makers between Secularism and Islamism*, in “Contemporary Islam”, 2, 3 (2008), p. 179.

⁴ C. Pardey, *Processing the Revolution: Exploring the Ways Tunisian Novels Reflect Political Upheavals*, in R. Ouaisa; F. Pannewick; A. Strohmaier (eds.), *Re-Configurations: Contextualising Transformation Processes and Lasting Crises in the Middle East and North Africa*, Springer, Wiesbaden 2021, p. 248; Douja Mamelouk, *New National Discourses: Tunisian Women Write the Revolution*, “Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics”, 35 (2015), p. 101; Mohamed-Salah Omri, *A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry*, in “Boundary”, 39, 1 (2012), p. 145; Muhammad Hasan Askari, *Literature and Revolution*, in “The Annual of Urdu Studies”, 25 (2010), p. 154; A. M. Negri, *Mā ‘adš Sāktīn (We Are No Longer Silent). Revolutionary Discourses in Tunisian Novels: Ḥusayn al-Wād, Šukrī al-Mabḥūt and Ayman al-Dabbūsī*, in “La Rivista Di Arablīt”, 13, 26 (2023), p. 142.

⁵ Bechir Ghachem, *The Resurgence of Prison Memory in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia Testimonies between Truth and Memory*, in “The Journal of North African Studies”, 23, 1-2 (2018), p. 251; D. Barnard, *Old Stories, New Histories: The Past in the Francophone Tunisian Novel*, in “Contemporary French and Francophone Studies”, 20, 1 (2016), p. 95.

⁶ J. Dennison; J. Draege, *The Dynamics of Electoral Politics after the Arab Spring: Evidence from Tunisia*, in “The Journal of North African Studies”, 26, 4 (2021), pp. 763-764. M. Moncef Khaddar, *Tunisian Democratisation: Dashed Hopes between 2010 and 2022*, in “The Journal of North African Studies”, 28, 6 (2023), p. 1327.

⁷ Douja Mamelouk, *New National Discourses: Tunisian Women Write the Revolution*, in “Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics”, 35 (2015), p. 101-2; Nabih Jerad, *The Tunisian Revolution: From Universal Slogans for Democracy to the Power of Language*, in “Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication”, 6, 2 (2013), p.

equality and justice⁸. Within this shifting landscape, artistic and literary production have reflected and echoed the political and social tensions that have shaped Tunisia's post-revolutionary trajectory⁹.

Within the post-revolutionary literary field of political literature, one observes the presence of a deeply rooted motif: the representation of women as symbolic embodiments of the nation. This trope is anything but new. Its most prominent genealogy can be traced to the discursive formations of the colonial period, when women were cast as the social group most urgently in need of liberation from an oppressive cultural and political milieu¹⁰. Within this ideological framework, colonial rule portrayed itself as a civilising mission of modernity – whose ambitions extended far beyond the condition of women, yet in which women's emancipation and their social or professional mobility were strategically framed as the ultimate index and emblem of modern progress¹¹.

This dynamic was followed by the emergence of what may be described as “state feminism”, articulated through policies that foregrounded an explicit commitment to women's rights – most strikingly under the presidency of Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000). Through these measures, official discourse functioned as a performative assertion of national maturity and of the state's inherent capacity for autonomous modernization, countering colonial insinuations that only foreign intervention could liberate women¹². Bourguiba's extensive legal and social reforms in the domain of women's rights consequently became the hallmark of his regime, overshadowing the more contentious dimensions of his presidency.

As Dalya Abudi has argued, the political rhetoric surrounding the “good of women” is grounded in a conception of society and the state as extensions

234; Nūrī Qānah, *al-Adab wa 'l-tawrah: ḥiwār ma 'a Husayn al-Wād bi-munāsabat al-dīkrā al-tālīyah li 'l-tawrah al-tūnisīyyah*, in “Ġadaliyyah”, 19/01/2014, available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30109/> (last accessed December 2014); R. Maggor, “Introduction”, in Mohammed Albakry; R. Maggor (eds.), *Tahrir Tales: Plays from the Egyptian Revolution*, Seagull Books, Calcutta 2016, p. 16.

⁸ Muhammad Hasan Askari, *Literature and Revolution*, in “The Annual of Urdu Studies”, 25 (2001), p. 150.

⁹ Yazan Badran, J. Loisen; K. Smets, *Local Associative Media in Tunisia and the Value of Voice*, in “The Journal of North African Studies”, 27, 5 (2022), p. 931.

¹⁰ Lina Khatib, *The Orient and Its Others: Women as Tools of Nationalism in Egyptian Political Cinema*, in Naomi Sakr (ed.), *Women and Media in the Middle East: Power through Self-Expression*, I.B. Tauris, London 2004, p. 74.

¹¹ R. Pepicelli, *Rethinking Gender in Arab Nationalism: Women and the Politics of Modernity in the Making of Nation-States. Cases from Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria*, in “Oriente Moderno”, 97, 1 (2017), p. 204.

¹² Nabila Hamza, *Engendering Tunisia's Democratic Transition: What Challenges Face Women?*, in Fatima Sadiqi (ed.), *Women's Movements in Post-“Arab Spring” North Africa*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2016, p. 213.

of the familial order, in which political relations are articulated through the idiom of kinship¹³. Within such a framework, women are portrayed as the most exposed and vulnerable members in comparison to men and therefore in need of protection; their security and well-being are taken to reflect a vision of the family as just and guided by equity rather than by coercive force. The state's aspiration to modernity is thus imagined as the projection of an idealized, harmonious family¹⁴. In this political imaginary, men are cast as custodians of a just social order, an order whose legitimacy is ultimately reflected in the condition of women, who bear the representational burden of embodying this ideal¹⁵.

Within this framework, the narrative of women becomes the lens through which the state's aspirations to modernity are articulated: a woman's degree of freedom and independence functions as a direct measure of the nation's level of advancement¹⁶. The terms of this representativeness are cast in notions of honourability within the familial sphere, giving rise to heightened expectations of female morality – expectations that simultaneously serve as indicators of modernity and progress. As Alainna Liloia aptly observes, in this configuration women operate as «symbols of tradition and markers of modernity»¹⁷, a dynamic evident across numerous contemporary Arab states shaped by analogous ideological imaginaries.

Given this entanglement of gender issues with political narrative, especially since the nineteenth century, speaking about women has rarely been a neutral act; rather, it carries a pronounced political charge, as if the poor condition of women directly signified the failure of the state. As Marzia M. Caporale and Gretchen Head have shown¹⁸, veiled critiques of Ben Ali's government emerged within literary and cultural narratives that articulated forms of resistance by unsettling conventional understandings of marriage, sexuality,

¹³ Dalya Abudi, *Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's Literature: The Family Frontier*, Brill, Leiden 2011, p. 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁵ Nagwa Megahed; S. Lack, *Colonial Legacy, Women's Rights and Gender-Educational Inequality in the Arab World with Particular Reference to Egypt and Tunisia*, in "International Review of Education", 57, 3-4 (2011), p. 401.

¹⁶ Nabila Hamza, "Engendering Tunisia's Democratic Transition: What Challenges Face Women?", cit., p. 219.

¹⁷ A. Liloia, *Gender and Nation Building in Qatar*, "Journal of Middle East Women's Studies", 15, 3 (2019), 345.

¹⁸ G. Head, *Transgender Subjects, Fairytales, and Red Light Districts: Strategies of Subversion in Tunisian Women's Writing under Ben 'Ali*, in "The Journal of North African Studies", 21, 5 (2016), p. 811; N. Mannone, *Intertextuality in Tunisian Cinema: State, Allegory, and Sexual Breathing Room*, in "Middle Eastern Literatures", 18, 1 (2015), p. 63; M. Caporale, *The Semiotics of Change: Re-Writing the Female Body in Contemporary Tunisian Cinema*, in "Dalhousie French Studies", 103 (2014), pp. 95-105.

and the gendered expectations embedded within them.

Within this representation of the nation as a family, however, woman's position is conditioned by the expectation that she embodies an idealised figure to be deemed worthy of representing the state – a role that carries with it a series of moral and social responsibilities. Carolina Bracco argues that the elevation of women's virtue to a metric of national integrity imposes a heavy symbolic burden: women are called upon not merely to act virtuously but to embody virtue itself in order to fulfil their expected role as emblems of the nation¹⁹. Within this framework, a woman must exemplify the regime of moral discipline; any deviation from this ideal becomes a point of fracture in which she is perceived to have failed in her representative function, thereby harming the nation as a whole²⁰. In such a regime of signification, virtuous conduct constitutes the only legitimate mode of existence available to women, while any moral lapse is interpreted not as an individual shortcoming but as a symbolic diminishment of the nation's collective standing²¹.

In the interpretation proposed by Meriem Bougherira and Hana Bougherira, this vision has likewise been understood as the explicit target of criticism by authors such as Aḥlām Mustagānamī. The two scholars contend that the portrayal of women who refuse their assigned role as national emblems – women who assert themselves as subjects endowed with agency and desire that exceed or contradict their symbolic function – in the works of the prominent Algerian novelist Aḥlām Mustagānamī constitutes a deliberate effort to dismantle this ideological edifice, forming part of her broader project to reconceptualize women's rights and autonomy²².

In this framework, this article examines female characters as depicted with major literary and television works since 2011 in Tunisia. Firstly, I analyse the representation of women in Šukrī al-Mabḥūt's novel *al-Ṭaliyānī* (The Italian, 2014), which traces the life of a leftist activist deeply entangled in the university movements of Bourguiba's late rule and the early years of Ben Ali's regime.²³

I then turn to the female characters in the widely watched television

¹⁹ Nagwa Megahed; S. Lack, *Colonial Legacy, Women's Rights and Gender-Educational Inequality in the Arab World with Particular Reference to Egypt and Tunisia*, cit., p. 400; A. M. Negri, *Mā 'adš Sāktīn (We Are No Longer Silent)*, cit., p. 149.

²⁰ C. Bracco, *The Changing Portrayal of Dancers in Egyptian Films*, in "Anthropology of the Middle East", 14, 1 (2019), p. 14.

²¹ A. M. Negri, *Lovers as Siblings in Al-Manfalūṭ's Adaptations*, in "Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics", 43 (2023), p. 11.

²² Meriem Bougherira; Hana Bougherira, *The Woman Wasn't Hayat. She Must Be Nedjma: (De)Constructing Kateb Yacine's Nedjma from a (Post)Colonial Stereotype to a Site of Difference in Aḥlām Mosteghanemi's Fiction*, in "Akofena", 4, 12 (2024), pp. 341-351.

²³ Šukrī al-Mabḥūt, *al-Ṭaliyānī*, Dār al-Tanwīr, Tūnis 2014; Shukri al-Mabkhout, *L'italiano*, translated by B. Teresi, e/o, Roma 2017; Shukri Mabkhout, *The Italian*, translated by K. McNeil and Miled Faiza, Europa Editions, London 2021.

series *Awlād Muḥḍah* (The Sons of Muḥḍah), written, directed, and produced by Sāmī al-Fahrī and broadcast during Ramadan from 2015 to 2017 on the channel “al-Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī”. The series portrays the struggles of a widow and her three sons living in a marginalised neighbourhood of Tunis.

I then analyse *al-Malā'ikah lā tuḥīr* (Angels Do Not Fly, 2021) by Fāṭimah Bin Maḥmūd (Fatma ben Mahmoud), a novel that confronts the trauma of female genital mutilation through the perspective of a young woman raised in a Salafī household, offering an intimate and incisive meditation on one of the most contentious practices in the Tunisian cultural sphere.²⁴

Finally, I examine *Barā'ah* (Innocence), a television series also directed by Sāmī al-Fahrī and aired during Ramadan in 2022 also by the channel “al-Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī”, which probes the social, moral, and religious dimensions of polygamy by narrating the story of a family shaped by the patriarch's decision to contract a polygamous marriage – an act sanctioned by religious law yet fraught with ethical and practical dilemmas.

The Novel al-Ṭaliyānī and Women at the Twilight of Bourguiba's Government

In numerous interviews about his novel *al-Ṭaliyānī*, Šukrī al-Mabḥūt repeatedly emphasizes, with a certain sense of pride²⁵, that his work places models of strong Tunisian women at its centre. *al-Ṭaliyānī*'s political exploration is, unarguably, articulated through a polyphony of female voices. The novel features at least six (developed) female characters, including the protagonist's two sisters – one of whom serves as the narrator – the protagonist's ('Abd al-Nāšir) mother, the neighbour Ḡanīnah, his girlfriend and later wife Zaynah, her friend Naḡlah, and the last friend Rīm.

The presence of women in this novel – set in the turbulent 1980s, between the twilight of Bourguiba's rule and the consolidation of Ben Ali's new regime – is constructed through the network of relationships that 'Abd al-Nāšir, the Italian (so nicknamed for his resemblance to some Italian actors seen on the Italian television RAI at the time in Tunisia), forms with them. Each of the women depicted in the narrative embodies, in a distinct register, a model of failed or thwarted modernity, whose limits the novel meticulously exposes. al-Mabḥūt suggests that Tunisian society has, in various ways, pushed these women onto distorted or destructive paths, reflecting the broader social dislocations characteristic of these pivotal political eras – eras for which the author displays little sympathy.

Among the numerous female figures populating the novel, three emerge

²⁴ Fāṭimah Bin Maḥmūd, *al-Malā'ikah lā tuḥīr*, Dār Zaynab li 'l-našr, Tūnis 2021.

²⁵ See, for example, the television programme *Fuṣḥat Fikr*, broadcast on 15 April 2016, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctPXPPC3PD4> (last accessed December 2024). See also the radio programme *Récap*, aired on 16 June 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCIj7BqNKAg> (last accessed December 2024).

as particularly significant for understanding this dynamic: Ġanīnah, Zaynah, and Rīm.

The first female figure, Ġanīnah – a young woman from the protagonist ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s neighbourhood – embodies commitment to personal liberty, which is expressed as well as sexual freedom, that ultimately renders her vulnerable to social stigma. Her downfall is precipitated by Ṣalāḥ, the protagonist’s brother and her lover, who cannot accept the freedom she asserts. His response takes the form of silent condemnation: he abandons her and leaves for France.

This act of repudiation is marked by a revealing ambivalence. Although Ṣalāḥ judges Ġanīnah as corrupted, he refuses to articulate this accusation publicly. To voice it would implicate him as well, exposing both her supposed transgression and his own involvement. Thus, he chooses instead to disappear, withholding from his father the real reason for his departure. His silence functions simultaneously as a means of punishing Ġanīnah and as a strategy to shield himself from the shame he associates with her perceived moral sin. This silence itself appears to function as an index of the representative burden placed upon women: a woman’s shame is construed as the shame of the collective, and thus becomes something to be concealed by the male character who is implicitly positioned as the guardian of familial and communal honour.

Following Ṣalāḥ’s disappearance, Ġanīnah is pressured into a marriage of reparation, engineered to silence the rumours unleashed by his abandonment. Her moral redemption is secured through union with an elderly imam, ‘Abd Allāh, which symbolically reinscribes her within the accepted contours of religious and social propriety. This unwanted marriage operates as the price she must pay for her transgressions – a form of expiation through which she may be reintegrated into society. By placing her within a sphere marked by piety, discipline, and religious observance, the union functions as a ritual of rehabilitation, restoring her to the moral order from which she was thought to have strayed.

Yet the price of this imposed rehabilitation is considerable. The husband selected for her is not only significantly older but also portrayed as a man of limited intellectual acuity for whom she shares no emotional, affective, or romantic involvement.

Yet the logic of this imposed redemption is sharply undermined by the narrative itself, which reveals that the man tasked with saving the supposedly compromised Ġanīnah is in fact deeply sexually deviant. In a paradox central to the story’s critique, the figure who is meant to restore her moral standing proves to be a predator who has abused several children, including the protagonist ‘Abd al-Nāṣir. His immorality is a central thread in the narrative as is the reason for ‘Abd al-Nāṣir attacking ‘Abd Allāh at their father’s funeral which is only explained near the end of the novel.

Within this profoundly dysfunctional environment, Ġanīnah gradually reasserts her agency and mounts a form of rebellion by entering into relationships with several young men from the neighbourhood, including ‘Abd al-Nāṣir himself. Through her figure, the narrative foregrounds the urgent necessity of women’s freedom and exposes the deep hypocrisy that undergirds traditional constructions of honour, which continue to exert considerable force. These honour-based norms – firmly rooted in social expectations and policing women’s bodies and conduct – are shown to be not merely private or familial concerns but integral to the ideological scaffolding of political Islam.

At the same time, however, the novel exposes the structural impossibility of a hopeful outcome for her. Although ‘Abd al-Nāṣir harbours sincere affection for Ġanīnah and she continues to inhabit his thoughts, he is ultimately unable to conceive of a future in which they might share a life. His failure to imagine such a possibility reaffirms its inevitability, highlighting the tragic determinism that circumscribes her fate as failing to be honourable and the limits of the agency she momentarily recovers.

The major female figure, Zaynah – the young student whom ‘Abd al-Nāṣir encounters at university – may be read as the literary embodiment of Bourguibism’s legacy and of the state-sponsored project of women’s emancipation. She represents the idealised modern Tunisian woman: educated, eloquent, and dedicated to contributing to national progress through public engagement and leadership. Yet, despite her unwavering commitment to this Bourguibist horizon, she remains structurally marginalised. As a woman, she confronts a nexus of adversaries whose hostility is overtly and aggressively sexualised. Their attacks target her not merely on ideological grounds but through forms of objectification and degradation that seek to discredit her by assaulting her bodily integrity and moral standing.

This violence originates in the domestic sphere: the novel portrays with stark clarity the profound trauma Zaynah suffers at the hands of her father and brothers, whose sexual abuse is inseparable from the brutalities of rural poverty and entrenched social ignorance. Her wider political struggle against Islamist student unions is similarly grounded in misogynistic rhetoric, as her opponents disseminate rumours that depict her as a woman of loose morals. Through these intersecting forms of violence, the narrative reveals how aggression operates both privately and publicly to undermine women who seek to claim space within the political arena.

Even those who initially appear as allies ultimately reinforce the precariousness of her position. ‘Abd al-Nāṣir – who casts himself as her defender – embodies this tension. In a pivotal scene, during a demonstration orchestrated by Islamist student groups, he places himself between Zaynah and the police, taking upon himself the blows meant for her. While undeniably heroic, this gesture simultaneously exposes the vulnerability of her emancipatory trajectory, which remains contingent upon male protection rather than

grounded in structural guarantees of equality.

As the narrative advances, moreover, the very ideal of female freedom that Zaynah embodies begins to turn against her. The relationships she forges – including her eventual marriage to ‘Abd al-Nāṣir – collapse under the weight of repeated acts of betrayal, pushing her ever further into emotional and social estrangement. Her solitude becomes increasingly acute, repeatedly aggravated by ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s apparent disinterest in her. These multiple betrayals furthermore intensify her disenchantment with a society that proclaims its modernity yet persistently withholds her dignity.

Her final and most devastating disenchantment emerges within the academic environment – once imagined as a sanctuary of progressive ideals. A professor openly demands sexual favours in exchange for authorising her doctoral examination. Confronted with this final act of violence – merely the last in a long succession she has endured as a woman in Tunisia – Zaynah reaches a point of profound spiritual exhaustion and resolves to leave the country altogether. She enters into an empty, affectless marriage with an elderly French sociologist, which seems to represent a form of non-life of quiet and disengagement from society. This withdrawal marks the culmination of her disillusionment, i.e. the symbolic renunciation of a homeland whose proclaimed ideals of modernity and emancipation have repeatedly failed to protect her or to offer her a future commensurate with her worth.

Through the figure of Zaynah, al-Mabḥūṭ lays bare the profound injustices governing women’s lives in a world where they are assailed by forces emanating both from Islamist and non-Islamist spheres. Zaynah’s downfall is symbolically articulated through her rejection of motherhood – a refusal to bring forth new citizens into a polity in which she can no longer believe. This dimension of her character is underscored by ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s troubled reaction when he discovers her decision to terminate her pregnancy. Her inability to imagine a son or daughter capable of flourishing within such a nation exposes the depth of her disaffection and despair.

The abortion thus functions as a prefiguration of Zaynah’s ultimate trajectory, which leads to her marriage to an elderly French professor. This ending, tragic in its broader implications, marks the conclusion of a path shaped by intellectual brightness, personal complexity, and political ambition. Yet the marriage is devoid of romantic fulfilment or shared aspirations; instead, it appears as a strategy of survival, a retreat into the stability and protection that her earlier life had persistently denied her.

The final character, Rīm – a young woman with whom ‘Abd al-Nāṣir develops an emotional relationship – may be read as a degraded variation of the Zaynah model, a figure whose narrative emergence parallels the consolidation of Ben Ali’s regime. The text underscores a telling entanglement between the two: Rīm, like Ben Ali, is closely connected to the rising elite of the new political order. She embodies, in stylized form, the ethos of the re-

gime's cultural landscape grounded in appearances and social performance rather than intellectual engagement or principled conviction. It is revealing that 'Abd al-Nāṣir initially seeks to impress her by promising a role in a film he claims to be writing, appealing directly to her desire for visibility and glamour.

In contrast to Zaynah, who functions as 'Abd al-Nāṣir's intellectual equal and political interlocutor, Rīm offers no such challenge. Her ambitions revolve around fame and appearance, standing in stark opposition to Zaynah's model of critical thought and principled commitment. 'Abd al-Nāṣir, much like the new president, ultimately harbours little genuine affection for Rīm. His relationship with her becomes a space in which the theme of resistance to the new order is played out: he attempts to mould Rīm into a replica of Zaynah, an embodiment of a lost era of political seriousness and moral leadership. His recurrent slips in which he refers to Rīm as Zaynah expose this desire to project Zaynah's qualities onto her, reducing Rīm to a simulacrum rather than acknowledging her individuality.

In this sense, Rīm becomes akin to an actress in the fictitious film 'Abd al-Nāṣir pretends to write – a constructed figure onto whom he imposes his memory of Zaynah. His attempt to transform Rīm into a substitute culminates in a pivotal scene: during a conversation about Zaynah, he kisses Rīm not out of affection for her but because she momentarily serves as an effigy of Zaynah, a doll-like stand-in for what he has lost. Ultimately, he abandons her, unable to summon genuine desire and increasingly repelled by her proximity to the ministries and networks of the new regime, which only heightens his aversion.

'Abd al-Nāṣir's dislike for Rīm – rooted in her proximity to the new circles of power and the culture they embody – combined with his evident longing for the Zaynah he has lost, underscores his sense that the Bourguibist nation he idealizes has been supplanted by a corrupted version under Ben Ali's regime. His solitude at the end of the novel, bereft of a partner, thus arguably symbolically reflects his estrangement from the nation itself.

Awlād Mufīdah: the Mother and the Holder of the Honour of the Family

As Šukrī al-Mabḥūt has observed, television series constitute an important source of inspiration for many contemporary Tunisian novelists²⁶. Although often classified as commercial productions aimed at broad audiences – with limited artistic ambition and frequently relegated to the category of *paraliterature* – these series nonetheless represent discourses which have considerable cultural resonance due to their extensive fruition. Among the post-revolution television works that rose to prominence, *Awlād Mufīdah* – now accessible, like the other series discussed in this article, through unoffi-

²⁶ *Humūm riwā'iyah: ma'a Šukrī al-Mabḥūt*, in "al-'Arabī al-ḡadīd", 29/08/2024, available at: <https://edgs.co/piujis> (last accessed December 2024).

cial YouTube channels – occupies a particularly significant position. The series may be seen as the culmination of Sāmī al-Fahrī's creative trajectory, displaying clear signs of the maturation of the narrative format from which it emerged – namely, the widely popular production *al-Maktūb* (The Destiny, 2008-2014), with which it shares notable structural affinities.

Both *Awlād Muḥīdah* and *al-Maktūb* revolve around the figure of a mother who must confront the challenges posed by children who are either immature and lacking sound judgment or, at times, driven by malevolent intentions. Yet, whereas *al-Maktūb* portrays an upper-middle-class milieu, *Awlād Muḥīdah* – arguably in keeping with the ethos of the revolution – relocates the narrative to the lower social strata, depicting a low-income family living in a disadvantaged environment. Beyond this change in setting, *Awlād Muḥīdah* refines the writing and pacing to sustain a more consistent sense of suspense, which enhances its dramatic effectiveness in comparison with its predecessor.

The sense of continuity between *al-Maktūb* and *Awlād Muḥīdah* is further reinforced by the presence of the same actors such as Yāsīn b. Qamrah (Yassine Ben Gamra) and Niḍāl al-Sa'adī (Nidhal Saadi) who appear in both series with very similar roles – as well as in the series *al-Fūndū* (The Bottom, 2021-2022), directed by Sawsan al-Ġamnī (Sawsan El Gamni) and produced by al-Fahrī, which constitutes the latest iteration of this narrative matrix.

The plot of *Awlād Muḥīdah* centres on three brothers living in a very modest yet respectable neighbourhood of Tunis. The youngest is preparing for his high school examinations (*bakālūriyā*), while the two older brothers – both in their thirties – struggle to secure a stable place within society. Their mother runs a modest street-food restaurant inherited from her father and constitutes the family's only reliable source of income. Within the narrative, she functions as a guiding figure, yet her counsel repeatedly goes unheeded by her children, leaving her to manage the financial, legal, and reputational crises they continually generate.

The brothers, firmly rooted in the culture of their lower-class neighbourhood, become the primary generators of the series' conflicts. Shaped by a worldview structured around reductive notions of honour, machismo, and street loyalty, they repeatedly become entangled in conflicts of their own making, either in attempting to assert their status through violence or in responding violently to violence or perceived affronts or injustices. Their challenges range furthermore from chronic unemployment and the legal consequences of petty and organized crime, warehouse thefts, bodyguarding for powerful criminals, which involve them even in cases of murder.

Against this backdrop of escalating crises, the mother fights to keep the household intact, enduring increasingly desperate circumstances while striving to preserve the family's honour. Her resilience makes evident the fundamental tension of the series: the family's survival depends entirely on the mother's patience, moral fortitude, and continual efforts to repair the damage

caused by her sons' actions.

Politics in *Awlād Mufīdah* emerges as a prominent and defining theme, signalling a decisive break from the pre-revolutionary conventions of Tunisian television drama. Poverty is not treated merely as a narrative backdrop but as a pointed indictment of the state's failure to safeguard the welfare of its citizens. The series articulates a sharp critique of the revolution and its aftermath. In a pivotal scene, the sons reflect on the outcome of the uprising, affirming that the freedoms gained after 2011 were not accompanied by economic improvement. Unemployment, precarity, and hardship persist – if not intensify – capturing the widespread disillusionment that followed the initial optimism of the revolutionary moment.

The critique extends to the police, who are depicted not as protectors but as, at best, minimally competent and, at worst, deeply corrupt and oppressive. They embody a state profoundly disconnected from the lived realities of Tunisia's most disadvantaged classes. The repeated arrests of Mufīdah's sons – often for minor infractions – underscore the absence of any substantive support or structural solutions. This representation resonates strongly with the revolutionary *zeitgeist*, recalling the popular hostility directed toward the police and the Ministry of the Interior, institutions synonymous with Ben Ali's authoritarian apparatus.

Even when the arrests are, in objective terms, the consequence of crimes actually committed by these young men, the series underscores that such acts occur within a social and economic environment that offers no viable pathways of escape. Their wrongdoing is thus framed as symptomatic of structural deprivation rather than purely individual moral failure.

This dynamic arguably recalls, in a different register, the infamous seizure of Muḥammad Bū'azīzī's cart – which ignited the Tunisian Revolution precisely because it revealed the state's profound incapacity to comprehend or mitigate the suffering of its most marginalized citizens. In this sense, *Awlād Mufīdah* becomes a mirror of the wider post-revolutionary disillusionment with state institutions, foregrounding the enduring failures of governance that continue to shape the everyday realities of life in Tunisia.

Mufīdah's role in the series arguably represents an allegory for the political dynamics of Tunisian collective memory. Her narrative unfolds through flashbacks to the mid-1990s, a period marked by acute familial strain. At the centre of this turmoil stands her husband, who – rather than serving as protector and provider – succumbs in his final years to alcoholism and dissipation. In this period of decline, Mufīdah is left to shoulder the full burden of sustaining the household while simultaneously managing the collapse of her husband's moral and physical integrity.

The figure of the ailing, self-destructive father resonates powerfully with Tunisia's political leadership under Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Both leaders entered the national stage with modernising ambitions, only to descend

gradually into corruption, authoritarianism, and systemic abuse. Mufīdah's struggle to preserve the family's dignity parallels a nation's efforts to salvage its integrity under the weight of compromised and morally bankrupt leadership. The damage inflicted by the husband – like that wrought by these political regimes – is irreparable: the children openly ridicule their father's supposed virtues, stripping him of any claim to redemption. This dynamic mirrors the widespread disillusionment with Ben Ali's rule, whose corruption and extravagance came to symbolise the regime's moral implosion.

The husband's physical abuse of Mufīdah further deepens this political metaphor. His violence towards his wife echoes the violence of Ben Ali's regime, notorious for its torture practices and repression of political dissidents. Through this lens, Mufīdah's personal narrative becomes a microcosm of a nation battered by the very authorities tasked with its protection, foregrounding the intimate and political consequences of failed leadership.

Mufīdah's struggle against male authority dominates the first part of the narrative. Central to this section is the modest restaurant she has inherited, which becomes a focal point of conflict when her brother-in-law pressures her sister to demand a share of it. Despite his secure position as a bank clerk, his avarice destabilizes the family's fragile harmony. This figure of a man who fractures familial unity operates as a metaphor for a nation similarly fragmented by selfishness, corruption, and political shortsightedness. His behaviour mirrors a broader political era characterised by personal enrichment pursued at the expense of communal well-being.

The conflict intensifies when 'Aliyā' – his wife and Mufīdah's sister – refuses to submit to her domineering husband's demands. Her refusal to take legal action against Mufīdah provokes his rage, and the violence she endures becomes increasingly brutal, culminating in an assault that nearly kills her. 'Aliyā', representing an older generation bound by traditional and destructive loyalties, is unable to confront or escape this toxic authority. She thus embodies a nation that suffers under unjust leadership yet hesitates to rebel against it.

Resolution arrives through the intervention of 'Aliyā's young daughter, a girl of about twelve, whose action carries a powerful symbolic charge. Exasperated by her father's relentless violence and driven by the imperative to save her mother, she kills him – an act that liberates the household just as the youth of Tunisia liberated the nation. Her gesture stands as an allegory for the revolutionary generation, whose defiance of entrenched authority brought about political rupture in 2011. It symbolises the rejection of a leadership model rooted in greed, exploitation, and the prioritisation of personal gain over collective welfare, offering in its place an image of youthful courage capable of overturning unjust power.

Another crucial dimension of Mufīdah's story lies in the fact that she is a woman compelled to raise her children entirely on her own – first under the crushing weight of an alcoholic husband and, after his death, in the void left

by his absence. In that period, the role of the absent husband was intermittently assumed by another man who occupied an ambiguous position in her life. Although he offered her a measure of care during her most traumatic moments, he ultimately abandoned her as well, leaving for France to build a life of his own.

Thus, even when freed – one might say relieved – of the destructive presence of her husband, Mufidah found herself utterly alone, responsible for raising three sons under extraordinarily harsh circumstances. Her solitude shows the structural vulnerability of a country which is left to grow its own children in the absence of responsible men.

The evocation of France carries colonial undertones, suggesting a leadership that, like a colonial power, seduces and exploits without accountability²⁷. This echoes the final years of Ben Ali's rule, as the former president fled to Saudi Arabia after the revolution, escaping both trial and the consequences of his regime's responsibilities. Mufidah's story thus becomes a broader metaphor for a nation betrayed by its leaders, left to navigate its struggles alone, with little faith in those who claim to lead.

The return of this former lover – now a wealthy man after years spent in France – introduces a new set of complications. Upon learning from Mufidah that one of her sons is in fact his biological child, he becomes consumed by the desire for an heir. Mufidah, however, firmly refuses to disclose which of the three is his fearing for the unity of her family. Her refusal places him in a position of perpetual frustration, prompting him to scheme and manoeuvre in an effort to uncover the truth. This pursuit becomes a recurrent thread across several seasons of the series, infusing the narrative with a persistent tension and an ever-present sense of menace that looms over the family.

The return of the old lover after the revolution is met with deep suspicion by Mufidah, who steadfastly refuses his proposal of marriage despite his apparent repentance and accumulated wealth – resources that could have lifted her family out of poverty and secured a more stable future for her sons (he even pledges to finance any business project they might pursue). Mufidah's rejection reflects not merely mistrust of his intentions, but a principled refusal to compromise her autonomy or her children's future in exchange for material comfort. This act of defiance arguably becomes emblematic of her integrity and of her refusal to reconcile with a past she perceives as irreparably tainted.

His reappearance within the symbolic space of the family-nation is layered with tension. Motivated by his own confrontation with mortality – terminally ill with cancer and childless – he seeks an heir in the only son he fathered with Mufidah. Yet what stands out is Mufidah's unwavering resistance to his overtures. Although she and her children live in economic precarity, she remains impervious to his wealth and promises. In this regard,

²⁷ Shaden M. Tageldin, *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2011, p. 9.

Mufidah comes to embody the ideal of the incorruptible Tunisian commoner, hardened by years of disappointment with flawed leadership. She represents a populace that has endured betrayal and refuses to exchange its dignity for financial gain.

The old lover's obsessive determination to identify his biological son – promising to enrich him alone and not his brothers – reveals a model of leadership defined by division, preferential treatment, and the prioritisation of narrow self-interest. This dynamic arguably mirrors a political logic in which leaders fracture the community rather than foster unity. Recognising the threat this poses to the cohesion of her family, Mufidah withholds the boy's identity for as long as possible, positioning herself as the guardian of collective integrity.

Yet in a symbolic turn, the old leader appears to triumph when he ultimately secures marriage with Mufidah. His victory hints at a political season in which disillusionment yields to seduction, suggesting the cyclical recurrence of compromised leadership – and the enduring vulnerability of those who seek stability amid uncertainty.

Mufidah's role as an allegory of the nation rests on her embodiment of honour – trait that society demands of her as both woman and mother, even as her sons' actions diverge radically from this ideal. While Mufidah represents dignity, sacrifice, and moral steadfastness, her sons move along trajectories marked by profound social transgression: substance abuse, relationships with sex workers, fathering children outside marriage, and engaging in theft and a spectrum of criminal activities. Despite these destabilising forces, Mufidah labours relentlessly to preserve the family's honour, enduring her husband's violence and assuming full responsibility for holding the household together.

She thus symbolises a vision of the nation as a steadfast, honest woman who perseveres through hardship and self-denial. Her exemplary motherhood and unshakeable commitment earn her the respect of the neighbourhood; her sons, in turn, take pride in being known as *Awlād Mufidah* – the sons of Mufidah. This pride encapsulates an idealised vision of national identity: belonging to an honourable, self-sacrificing mother. Yet this ideal of maternal virtue is portrayed as both fundamental and fragile – a *sine qua non* for the family's cohesion.

The eventual revelation that one of her sons was conceived outside her marriage becomes an irreversible stain on her honour. This disclosure precipitates tragedy: the son, upon learning of his illegitimacy, murders the man he had believed to be his father and is subsequently condemned to death. The episode functions as a wider commentary on the symbolic economy of the nation, wherein a woman's honour becomes the fulcrum upon which social values rest – its rupture sending destructive shockwaves through the entire familial structure.

The series concludes with Mufidah confined to a life of desolation: de-

prived of her children, her home transformed into a hollow space devoid of meaning. Her collapse mirrors the fall of the nation she symbolises – once proud and cohesive, now fractured and dishonoured. Muḥḍah's trajectory thus encapsulates the immense weight of societal expectations placed upon women as symbols of the family and the nation and the devastating consequences that ensue when those expectations are violated.

al-Malā'ikah lā tuṭīr and the Suicide of the Nation

al-Malā'ikah lā tuṭīr by Fāṭimah Bin Maḥmūd is a novel that deals with the complex question of political Islam and Salafist currents²⁸. The novel traces the rise of these movements and the proliferation of preachers who disseminate what the author characterises as an alien ideological product – an import facilitated largely by globalisation through the internet and social media.

Fāṭimah Bin Maḥmūd constructs her narrative as a critique of the views and form of life propagated within radical Salafist milieus, presenting them as inadequate as detrimental for women.

By presenting the family as a microcosm of the nation, the narrative grounds its disqualification of Salafism as a viable national model in the portrayal of a Salafi household.

Salafism is embodied in the figure of the family patriarch. Notably, while the woman in the narrative symbolises the nation, the man is portrayed as representing a foreign – if unspecified – nation in nearly every respect. The text emphasizes his foreignness through multiple markers, most prominently his attachment to the black flag of ISIS, which for him signifies the unity of all Muslims. This stands in stark contrast to the Tunisian flag, which he rejects as bearing an identity fundamentally incompatible with his ideal of Islamic unity. In his conception of the nation, only pious Muslims truly belong, whereas unbelieving *kuffār* – a category he applies broadly, extending not only to non-Muslims but also, in his view, to the majority of Tunisian Muslims – are excluded.

Strikingly, when the family patriarch Sayf articulates this vision, it is a woman – his wife's sister – who openly challenges it, defending the Tunisian flag and the unified cultural identity it represents²⁹. The Salafi man's sense of estrangement is further illustrated through his invocation of a *ḥadīth* that he cites to justify his position, interpreting the contemporary religious landscape as evidence that true Islam has become "foreign". This reading draws on the well-known prophetic tradition: *bada'a al-Islām ḡarīb^{an} wa saya' ūdu ḡarīb^{an} kamā bada'a, fa-tūbà li 'l-ḡurabā'* (Islam began as a stranger and

²⁸ For a study of Tunisian Salafism see F. Merone et al., *The Evolution of Tunisian Salafism after the Revolution: From La Maddhabiyya to Salafī-Malikism*, in "International Journal of Middle East Studies", 53, 3 (2021), pp. 455-470.

²⁹ Fāṭimah Bin Maḥmūd, *al-Malā'ikah lā tuṭīr*, cit., pp. 40-41.

will return to being strange; blessed are the strangers).

His sense of foreignness is further reinforced by the figures he cites as the foundations of his worldview: none is a Tunisian citizen. His primary intellectual model is Ṭāriq Saʿīd Ramaḍān, the grandson of Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906-1949), followed by Waḡdī Ġunaym – both of whom are Egyptian³⁰.

The representation of Tunisia through women emerges in the patriotic roles they assume within the narrative. This attachment to the nation is mirrored in the reading habits of Nūr, the daughter of Sayf the Salafi, who immerses herself in novels about partisans and women who fought for Tunisia's liberation from colonial rule. Among these, she holds in particular esteem *Ḥalimah* by Muḥammad al-ʿArūsī al-Maṭwī (1920-2005), a work the text notes she venerates³¹.

The political disqualification of Salafism – and, to some extent, of political Islam more broadly – framed as foreign to the national fabric, is further enacted through a narrative that exposes the failure of these men to fulfil their purported role as guardians of women's and the family's well-being. The novel highlights the patriarch's inability to protect his household, which ultimately collapses under his watch.

The central element of this argument is the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), a procedure for which no historical, ethnographic, or medical evidence attests to its having ever been practised in the Tunisian context. Within the narrative, Sayf is shaped by the influence of Waḡdī Ġunaym, a prominent preacher whose radical positions have led to his prohibition across Europe and the United States, and even to his ban in Tunisia after he publicly denounced President al-Bāḡī Qāʿid al-Sibsī (Beji Caid Essebsi, 1926-2019) as a non-Muslim and branded the country a *dār kufr* (land of unbelief). Under the sway of such rhetoric, Sayf comes to view the mutilation – framed as *ṭāharah* (purification) or circumcision – as a potentially desirable practice. Although initially hesitant, he is gradually persuaded by the cumulative pressures exerted within his Islamist milieu.

The novel's engagement with this issue acquired heightened public resonance when Ḥarakat al-Nahḍah parliamentary Ḥabīb al-Lūz made remarks that appeared to endorse FGM, prompting widespread condemnation and ultimately compelling him to retract his statements³². Faṭimah Bin Maḥmūd's novel thus appears not only to highlight an extreme facet of the ideological ambitions she seeks to contest, but also to articulate a genuine apprehension regarding the po-

³⁰ Waḡdī Ġunaym's visit to Tunisia in 2012 caused a certain media stir, see for example Īmān Muḥaḍḍab, *Ziyārat Ġunaym tuṭīr al-ḡadal fī Tūnis*, in "al-Ġazīrah", 19/02/2012, available at: <https://aja.me/55eeq> (last accessed December 2024).

³¹ Muḥammad al-ʿArūsī al-Maṭwī, *Ḥalimah*, Dār al-ʿarabiyyah li 'l-kitāb, al-Qāhirah 1964.

³² See *Qaḍīyat ḥitān al-ināʾ tašʿal ḡadal^m sāḥin^m fī 'l-maḡlis al-ta'sīsī bi-Tūnis*, in "Deutsche Welle" 11/03/2013, available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/17v7K> (last accessed December 2024).

tential enactment of this reprehensible practice by the most radical fringes of the movement, with serious implications for Tunisian women.

The consequences of this practice manifest in the profound psychological trauma it inflicts, producing the impossibility of living with a forcibly denied sexuality – an irrevocable wound that ultimately drives Nūr to take her own life. Her suicide thus becomes an act of sacrificial revelation, exposing the fundamental hollowness of the chastity, virtue, and religiosity that Sayf purported to defend.

At the heart of the novel's second part lies the dismantling of male authority, shown to have failed in its supposed duty to safeguard women's well-being. The narrative first underscores the agency of women, whose compliance had been essential to the maintenance of Sayf's despotic power. It is made clear that Sayf's authority depended heavily on the complicity of his wife, who constituted a central pillar of his domestic dominance and whom he had successfully moulded to his will. For many years, moreover, she continued to uphold his familial model even during his imprisonment, thereby demonstrating her enduring loyalty to a man who, although deprived of the practical means to impose his authority, remained supported by her unwavering adherence to his patriarchal framework.

The violated daughter responds with a rebellion directed indirectly against her father, enacted through a rejection of the belief system he embodies – namely, through acts that challenge religion itself. The trauma produced by her mutilation initiates a protracted rupture that results not in spiritual refinement but in a profound crisis of faith. Nūr's defiance begins with subtle transgressions – such as performing prayer while in a state of ritual impurity – and gradually culminates in her complete abandonment of prayer, marking her steady withdrawal from her father's ideological universe. Even her suicide can be read as a rebellion against the authority of the father, articulated through a rebellion against God.

This rebellion proves profoundly destabilising to Sayf's entire system of beliefs, which collapses under the shock of Nūr's death. He is unable to comprehend how adherence to what he regarded as the true religion could culminate in such a tragic outcome. Her death also precipitates another reckoning: her mother, confronted with the irreversible consequences of her silence, finally acknowledges her own complicity in sustaining Sayf's authority and recognizes that she could – and should – have intervened much earlier. This realization triggers her own rebellion, expressed in her refusal to remain submissive to her husband's dictates and manifested symbolically through changes in her manner of dress.

The opposition between Sayf as an anti-national figure and Nūr as a patriotic one is further sharpened in the portrayal of Sayf's end. Once his family rebels – once he loses control over the women whose subjugation had formed the cornerstone of his authority – he becomes incapable of sustaining

even the semblance of his former self. His wife's rejection of the dress codes he had imposed, together with his daughter's suicide, compels him to confront the complete collapse of his ideological project. Although he attempts to maintain the outward posture of authority, Nūr's act has already rendered that authority void; he is left powerless, unable to inflict further harm on Tunisian society.

His response is a final gesture of destructive escapism: he decides to leave Tunisia for Syria to carry out a suicide bombing. His departure symbolically expels him from the national body: deemed unworthy of his women, and thus of the nation they represent, he effectively erases himself beyond its boundaries, marking the definitive unsuitability of the ideological project he had sought to impose.

Barā'ah: the neglected and raped nation

The television series *Barā'ah* (Innocence), aired during Ramadan 2022 on the Tunisian channel "al-Ḥiwār al-Tūnisī", stands out as a highly successful production featuring prominent Tunisian actors such as Rīm al-Riyāhī and Fathī al-Hadāwī. Produced, written, and directed by Sāmī al-Fahrī, the series generated widespread debate for its critical portrayal of polygamy – a practice officially outlawed in Tunisia yet still endowed with religious legitimacy and a persistent source of social controversy. Much like the novel *al-Malā'ikah lā tuḥīr*, the series engages with an issue that is relatively marginal in the Tunisian context, but one that functions as a broader critique of political Islam. It does so by focusing on the relationships within a single household, presented as a microcosm of the relationships that structure the nation.

Here, polygamy – presented as the embodiment of a religiously inspired lifestyle – is unequivocally disqualified as harmful to women and, by extension, to the family. In doing so, the series implicitly discredits the political ideology that promotes or tolerates such practices, suggesting its inability to advance genuine progress for Tunisia. The renewed focus on polygamy – abolished by Bourguiba and long regarded as a closed chapter in Tunisian legal and social history – also resonates with a series of demonstrations in the Kasbah, led by women affiliated with Ḥarakat al-Nahḍah, who called for the re-opening of the debate on polygamy³³.

In *Barā'ah*, a brief prologue preceding the opening credits introduces the context of post-revolutionary Tunisia, underscoring the grave threat that Islamic terrorism has posed to the state. The narrative then opens with an idyllic tableau of domestic harmony: a family composed of a father, a mother, and a son presented in terms of absolute ideality. In the vignettes de-

³³ See Munyah Ġanīmī, *Šabah ta'addud al-zawġāt yuṭill min ġadīd fī Tūnis wa yuṭīr maḥāwif al-nisā'*, in "Deutsche Welle", 6/11/ 2012, available at: <https://p.dw.com/p/16d9k> (last accessed December 2024).

picting their daily life, the father appears as a benevolent figure who cares for his family despite their modest social standing. He treats his wife with kindness and guides his son toward moral rectitude, for instance by taking him to the mosque and overseeing his education. Although a practising Muslim, he does not pressure his wife to wear the veil or compel her to pray; rather, he fully respects her freedom – an element depicted as integral to the family's state of idyllic happiness.

This initial harmony constructs a portrait of a balanced and virtuous head of household, a figure who embodies the nation's ideal of upright citizenship and whose moral authority is affirmed by the serenity his way of life generates. His role as a guardian of both family and nation is further emphasised by his profession as a member of the National Guard (*al-Ḥaras al-Waṭani*), charged with safeguarding the security of the state.

The idyllic tone of the prologue – which serves as a gateway to the central narrative, no longer focused on this family – is abruptly shattered during a modest vacation the family undertakes. The euphoria of their holiday is violently interrupted when armed jihadists launch an attack on a shop, resulting in the father's death as he places himself between the assailants – who intend to open fire on his family – and a group of English tourists. This episode positions at the heart of the narrative an ideal of shared humanity, an ideal that the Islamist attack categorically denies through its instinctive and absolute division between believers and unbelievers.

The heartbreaking scene of the virtuous father killed in this attack echoes the many assaults carried out by armed terrorist groups in the turbulent decade following the revolution, marked by repeated clashes – particularly in southern Tunisia – between the National Guard and jihadist cells, most notably in Bin Guerdone and Gafsa. The death of this righteous guardian figure operates as a metaphor for a society that has lost its protectors and now finds itself exposed and vulnerable before its enemies. It is telling that, after the demise of this virtuous father, the narrative shifts its focus to families led by men who do not pursue the well-being of the household but instead seek personal advantage at the expense of women. This shift mirrors a broader sense of disorder and insecurity that permeated post-2011 Tunisia.

The woman, suddenly left alone by this principled and protective man, becomes deeply traumatised and thus profoundly vulnerable, with no effective family structure to safeguard her. Upon returning to her father's household in search of support, she discovers that it is a family incapable of offering genuine care. In this vacuum of protection, she becomes the victim of sexual harassment by a neighbour who exploits her emotional disorientation, as trauma and shock blur her perception to the point that she momentarily conflates him with her dead husband. Deprived of her husband's protection, she is left exposed to violation – an image that symbolically evokes the condition of the national woman in the metaphor of the “raped nation”.

The abandoned woman finds herself in this situation despite having a family whose priorities clearly lie not in her well-being but in safeguarding the interests of its male members – interests deeply rooted in vice and moral corruption. The new head of household to whom Maryam becomes subject is a father who, infatuated with a young woman who had served in his home for years, decides to marry her as soon as she reaches adulthood, despite the significant age difference between them. His attention becomes entirely absorbed by the elaborate schemes required to realize this desire.

This project consumes considerable time and energy, as it requires persuading both his family and his wife to accept his decision – furthermore the fact that such an arrangement is illegal, given that *ʿurfi* marriages and polygamous unions are prohibited in Tunisia, and hence require some sort of “legal stratagems”.

The father is portrayed as a man who cultivates a conspicuously religious appearance. His speech consistently employs classical Arabic, and he demonstrates a ready command of *ḥadīth* and other religious sources. He is also frequently shown handling a rosary. This last detail, however, introduces a subtly parodic dimension: he is depicted running the beads of the rosary through his fingers in contexts wholly incongruous with devotional practice – such as inside a café while smoking a shisha pipe.

The portrayal of the father as a pseudo-religious figure – one whose authority is fuelled by selective religious readings – reflects the kind of religious legitimisation that can operate within a democratic society, where, as several passages assert, the state cannot prohibit what religion allows, nor can it permit what religion forbids. This vision is subjected to critique in the series, particularly through its depiction of women as subordinated to traditionalist interpretations that rest on reductive and superficial readings of religious sources. While the series acknowledges the broader validity of these sources, it discredits the misappropriations upon which such patriarchal authority is built. Within this representational framework, women appear as commodities: individuals whom Wannās the family patriarch, endowed with economic resources, can effectively acquire, bartering land in exchange for marriages to women significantly younger than himself.

His marriage to Bāyah is negotiated as a material transaction: her father consents only after being promised a parcel of land, while Bāyah herself accepts on the condition that the property be registered in her name. The marriage thus emerges not as a union grounded in mutual respect or emotional connection, but as a contract dictated by property and financial interest. The second marriage is negotiated in a similarly transactional manner, devolving into near-parody as the union is ultimately sealed only after a sequence of progressively reduced offers.

Wannās’s ability to shape the trajectory of his family is likewise sustained by his economic leverage. To eliminate a potential suitor for Bāyah, he

bribes one of his taxi-driver employees, using financial power to dictate the course of her personal relationships. He also deploys money to facilitate the marriage of a neighbour's daughter – who had developed feelings for his son – thereby ensuring that she follows her father's plan to continue her studies in France. Through these manoeuvres, Wannās maintains the outward appearance of familial cohesion, even though such cohesion is wholly illusory: every member of the household is, in reality, deeply estranged from the others.

The commodification of women in *Barā'ah* renders them captives of a patriarchal order that traps them within corrosive relational dynamics, where survival depends on navigating – and at times exploiting – the contradictions of the very system that oppresses them. Polygamous marriage, placed at the centre of the narrative, triggers fierce rivalry among the women, with Zuhrah, Wannās's elder wife, initially appearing to emerge as the victor. Yet her triumph proves hollow, as the ensuing conflict irreparably poisons the family environment.

The antagonism between Zuhrah and Bāyah deepens as elements of magic intrude upon an already fragile household. In a world where power becomes the only operative currency, Zuhrah resorts to the esoteric: she administers secret potions to her husband concealed in a plate of couscous, desperate to re-inforce her emotional and social hold over him. When these efforts fail, her despair drives her toward darker, more extreme measures. She seeks the intervention of a *ṣayḥ* to engineer the death of Bāyah and Wannās's child – a figure she regards as a threat to her tenuous influence within the family hierarchy.

Meanwhile, the children find themselves caught within the destructive vortex generated by the father, their existence darkened by the psychological and emotional detritus of an internecine domestic contest. The household is transfigured into a theatre of conflict – a microcosmic arena in which the women, stripped of substantive agency, resort to manoeuvre, subversion, and covert sabotage simply to persist within what Deniz Kandiyoti has termed a form of patriarchal bargaining: a strategy devised to maximise one's room for manoeuvre within a male-dominated order³⁴. Zuhrah epitomises this dynamic when she urges Wannās to marry a third wife, a calculated attempt to secure her own precarious position by pushing the logic of polygyny to its very limit.

This manoeuvre pushes the traditional family model espoused by Wannās to its most grotesque and absurd conclusion, laying bare the internal contradictions of a structure founded on domination, inequality, and hierarchical control rather than on mutual respect or affection. Through these narrative developments, *Barā'ah* exposes the deep dysfunction at the heart of patriarchal systems, revealing how they deform relationships, erode moral agency, and transform the domestic sphere into a theatre of perpetual struggle.

Even when relations between the wives appear to settle into a tenuous truce – marked by a resigned acceptance of their constrained condition – the

³⁴ D. Kandiyoti, *Bargaining with Patriarchy*, in "Gender and Society", 2, 3 (1988), p. 275.

flames of discord erupt among the children. Here, too, the underlying conflict stems from the patriarchal conception of women and marriage, managed according to tradition by the family's male head. The fiancée taken from the eldest son and reassigned first as a prospective third wife for the father and then as a bride for the second son (in order to ensure that the eldest might pursue his studies abroad) ignites a volatile clash within the household.

The tension culminates in an act of revenge by the eldest son, who returns briefly from France. He seduces the young woman promised to his father, compromising her honour through sexual intercourse. His act not only stains the girl's reputation but also brings dishonour upon her brother and her father, thereby shattering the family structure in a manner that appears irreversible. The narrative heightens the absurdity and paradox of the situation in a carnivalesque register: the entire crisis could, in theory, be resolved if the bride simply remained silent about the affair.

Yet the series underscores the inadequacy – and at times the internal contradiction – of religious authority within family life. The young woman, seeking moral clarity, confesses her fault to the family at the urging of a young imam. Meanwhile, the older imam, having learned of the situation, attempts to dissuade her from speaking, advising silence as the more prudent course. This dissonance between competing religious voices highlights the instability of moral guidance and further exposes the incoherence of the patriarchal order that governs the family.

Through this final sequence, *Barā'ah* lays bare the tragicomic logic of a system that collapses under the weight of its own contradictions, revealing once more the profound dysfunction at the heart of patriarchal structures and their claims to moral and religious legitimacy.

Barā'ah concludes with an unflinching and devastating portrayal of a family's disintegration, undone by its regressive, hollow, and performative models of authority. The narrative fuses two central allegories: the woman as emblem of the nation, and religion embodied in the figure of Islām – the son of the policeman killed in the terrorist attack – both of whom emerge as victims of a dysfunctional social order.

The series reaches its tragic apex in the story of Maryam, Wannās's daughter, who is left exposed and unprotected by a family consumed by internal rivalries and ambitions masked as legitimacy and religiosity, yet driven in reality by vice, hypocrisy, and moral decay. As the father pursues superficial religious models and abdicates his role as guardian, Maryam becomes the prey of a predatory neighbour. Exploiting her fragile psychological condition and lingering trauma from her husband's death, he deceives her, sexually abuses her, and manipulates her into believing, in her hallucinatory disorientation, that he is her deceased spouse. She ultimately becomes pregnant as a result of this abuse.

This harrowing narrative summons, with striking clarity, the metaphor of

a violated nation – a collective body abandoned, exploited, and left to unravel. Maryam, stripped of agency and subjected to the desires and failures of those around her, becomes the personification of a nation betrayed by those entrusted with its protection.

In parallel, the narrative exposes the profound negligence shown toward the principles of genuine religion, crystallised in the figure of Wannās. Though he presents himself as a devout Muslim – perpetually clutching a rosary and persistently urging his children to pray – Wannās fails to uphold even the most basic religious expectations within his own family. This failure becomes starkly evident when it is revealed that his son, Islām, has never been circumcised despite having long surpassed the customary age. Such an oversight not only unmasks the superficiality of Wannās’s piety but also highlights the disjunction between his outward religiosity and his inner moral dereliction.

Crushed beneath the cumulative pressures of abuse, abandonment, and an ever-deepening despair, the mother ultimately brings her life to an end. Her suicide – arguably one of the most charged motifs of the revolutionary moment, in which self-annihilation has acquired the status of an extreme yet legible instrument of political expression³⁵ – emerges as a grave emblem of collective ruin. In its wake, Islām – at once a fictional persona and a metonymic figure for the religious sphere – appears profoundly traumatised and wholly exposed, drifting through the nocturnal streets of Tunis in a state of disorientation. This unsettling tableau intimates that the nation’s collapse is mirrored by an analogous devastation within the religious domain itself, which is left fractured, bereft of orientation, and vulnerable to further unravelling.

Conclusions

In the aftermath of the Tunisian Revolution of 2011, the representations of women in the two novels and two television series examined in this article articulate a clear and consistent call for women’s liberation and the expansion of their rights, simultaneously denouncing the violence and abuses committed against them. Female characters are frequently portrayed as victims of men who abuse their positions of power or who embody social models detrimental to women. Yet this narrative pattern cannot be understood simply as a straightforward defence of women’s rights. Rather, appeals to women’s dig-

³⁵ The revolution has precipitated a marked rise in the incidence of suicides, a development that has inflicted a profound wound upon the contemporary Tunisian collective conscience. On this phenomenon, see Mehdi Ben Khelil et al., *Impact of the Tunisian Revolution on Homicide and Suicide Rates in Tunisia*, in “International Journal of Public Health”, 61, 9 (2016), pp. 995-1002. Also see Maher Jedidi et al., *Suicide and Fire: A 20-Year Study of Self-Immolation Death in Sousse, Tunisia*, in “Journal of Burn Care & Research”, 38, 4 (2017), pp. 734-738. See also Imen Ben Cheikh et al., *Suicide as Protest against Social Suffering in the Arab World*, in “British Journal of Psychiatry”, 198, 6 (2011), pp. 494-495.

nity and welfare are grounded in a well-established set of ideas in which women's freedom and well-being serve as key indicators of the moral standing – and thus the political legitimacy – of a state's political movements and their underlying ideologies.

Within this framework, the female condition, is a symbolic device which arguably deprives women-characters of their own voice over real gender-related issues. It is arguably indicative that the narratives under examination never engage with the contentious issues currently raised by multiple Tunisian feminist movements, but instead privilege themes that fall within a broad and largely uncontested realm.³⁶

The primary political target of these representations of women is political Islam, which, in the aftermath of the revolution, rapidly emerged as one of the most powerful actors in the new administration due to its swift expansion and consistently strong electoral performance. Within the broader constellation of political Islamist movements, *Ḥarakat al-Nahḍah* distinguished itself by maintaining an uninterrupted presence in Parliament after 2011, unlike other opposition forces marked by fragmentation and by the cyclical rise and collapse of leading parties at each election.

This critique of political Islam appears to echo very similar older colonial and orientalist narratives centred on the need to “save” and “liberate” women from religious traditions – which served as a key rationale for legitimising colonial intervention and domination.

The idealised female model depicted in these narratives reveals a clear endorsement of Bourguiba's legacy. All positive female characters identify themselves with Bourguiba's paradigm – secular, free, valuing education, and embracing modernist interpretations of religion.³⁷ In a subversive move, this figure is presented as the embodiment of an “authentic” Tunisian tradition, portrayed as threatened by practices and worldviews associated with contemporaneity and foreign influence – political Islam. Contemporary religious parties and movements are emphasised as “imported phenomena” – particularly from Egypt – as in the novels of Šukrī al-Mabḥūt and Fāṭimah Bin Maḥmūd.

When women are not virtues in these stories and are portrayed as vicious

³⁶ Issues related to women tend to reaffirm established views rather than articulate a struggle for new gender relations. This can be seen for example in the condemnation of sexual harassment and sexual predation in *al-Ṭaliyānī*; of female genital mutilation in *al-Malā'ikah lā tuḥīr* by Fāṭimah Bin Maḥmūd (a practice for which there is, moreover, no documented evidence in the Tunisian context); or of polygamy in Sāmī al-Fahrī's *Barā'ah* (although this issue has, to some extent, recently been the subject of debate, albeit driven by minoritarian groups).

³⁷ This “Bourguibist” model of womanhood emerges explicitly in the character of Zaynah in al-Mabḥūt's *al-Ṭaliyānī*, who is depicted as having studied under the auspices of Bourguiba's state; it also constitutes the paradigmatic heroine outlined by Fāṭimah Bin Maḥmūd, and provides a key interpretive lens for understanding the figure of Mariyam in *Barā'ah*.

and evil they represent as expressions of a negative movements or stages of contemporary history reflected in culture. Within this framework, the figure of the “non-virtuous” woman serves as an embodiment of the corruption of the political arena, as if she was the result of this policy and as this model of existence was pushed by these forces, thereby becoming the evidence of moral and social disorder and corruption of her age³⁸.

This perspective is embedded in a broader renegotiation of the very notion of female respectability advanced by these texts, in which virtue is presented as a category to be assessed *cum grano salis*, with good sense. The systematic attribution of moral corruption to women, grounded in categorical criteria, thus becomes an object of sustained critique across the corpus under examination³⁹.

A final aspect that emerges with particular clarity concerns the hollowness of the moral claims advanced by men associated with political actors in their interactions with women. The narratives show that the disqualification of the ideology underpinning these male figures does not stem from the articulation of a coherent ethical alternative, but rather from the exposure of the internal contradictions upon which their moral posturing rests. What is foregrounded is a parodic – at times overtly paradoxical – unmasking of the models these men claim to embody: the male antagonist, who seeks to present himself as a guardian of virtue and moral order, ultimately reveals himself to be an agent of disorder, corruption and harm⁴⁰.

³⁸ Paradigmatic examples can be found in Šukrī al-Mabḥūt’s *al-Ṭaliyānī*, where political change is narrated through a seductive and morally ambiguous female figure who come to symbolise the ethos of the new power. Similarly, in *Barā’ah* and *al-Malā’ikah lā tuḥīr* women fault is not having character and adhering uncritically – often framed as acting out of ignorance – to the models promoted by political Islam are represented as co-responsible for diverting the community away from a secular and national path of modernisation.

³⁹ In al-Mabḥūt’s novel, for example, groups affiliated with political Islam repeatedly and unfoundedly accuse Zaynah of sexual impropriety; similarly, the female characters of Fāṭimah Bin Maḥmūd’s novel, where the father’s stance – according to which the absence of the veil is treated as an unequivocal marker of moral corruption – is explicitly problematised and contested. A comparable narrative treatment is also evident in Sāmī al-Fahrī’s television series *Awlād Muḥḍah*, which stages the moral paradox whereby a woman as virtuous and deserving as Muḥḍah should, in principle, have been granted forgiveness for her transgression.

⁴⁰ This aspect can be seen in Fāṭimah Bin Maḥmūd’s novel, where the protagonist’s father’s attempts to govern the family through what he considers sound religious principles ultimately drive his daughter to openly deviate from religious norms, for instance by praying while in a state of ritual impurity. Similarly, in *Barā’ah*, Sāmī al-Fahrī depicts a family environment that, at least in the father’s intentions, is meant to be permeated by religious fervour; in practice, however, his guidance exacerbates familial conflicts, ultimately resulting in profound division and irreconcilable conflict among family members.