

MĀ 'ADŠ SĀKTĪN (WE ARE NO LONGER SILENT).
REVOLUTIONARY DISCOURSES IN TUNISIAN NOVELS:
ḤUSAYN AL-WĀD, ŠUKRĪ AL-MABḤŪT AND AYMAN AL-DABBŪSĪ

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In the surge of Tunisian political literature following the revolution, there emerges a discernible climate of open discussion concerning politics. Political divides are not only dissected and delineated but also rendered into narrative. This transformation in the canon underscores the role of narrative as not merely a mode of artistic or cultural expression, but as a strategic tool capable of shaping public discourse, influencing social norms, and challenging or reinforcing political ideologies. This article focuses on three contemporary Tunisian novels, with the aim to delineate the political discourses entangled with discourses and representations of 2011's revolution. The novels are Ḥusayn al-Wād's Sa'ādātuḥu... sayyid al-wazīr (His Excellency Mr. Minister, 2011), Šukrī al-Mabḥūt's al-Ṭalyānī (The Italian, 2014), and Ayman al-Dabbūsī's Intiṣāb aswad (The Black Uprising, 2016). In the novels under examination, two principal approaches emerge: one that idealizes the revolution as an event potent enough to rectify the country's issues and cleanse the corruption within Ben Ali's political class; the other approach views the revolution with a disenchanting gaze, recognizing its political importance but acknowledging that it is merely the starting point for the reform of the nation.

Mā 'adš saktīn (We are no longer silent), a striking slogan from the 2011 Tunisian revolution¹, arguably captures the core sentiment of the uprising: the long-stifled demand for freedom of speech². The revolution represents the triumph of the public voice over a regime that had lost its capacity to stifle it³. Freedom of speech emerged as a fundamental principle of the

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¹ N. 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. 238.

² R. Maggor, *Introduction*, in M. Albakry; R. Maggor, *Tahrir Tales: Plays from the Egyptian Revolution*, Seagull Books, Calcutta 2016, p. 13.

³ A marked freedom of expression can be read in the 2015 Ṭawfiq b. Barīk's novel *Kalb b. kalb* (Dog Son of a Dog) that employs a provocative language, often obscene to discuss contemporary politics, the rise of Islamist movements, and sensitive themes as political homicide and terrorism.

Tunisian revolution, and its embodiment was seen through the dissolution of oppressive measures, notably print censorship, aimed at silencing it – a strong symbol of the transformative change⁴. Tunisian literature has been perceived as a stage for voicing the nation's political ambitions and goals, thus defining literature as an essential sounding board for voices engaged in Tunisian politics⁵. In the wake of the revolution, Tunisian creative expressions in novels, poetry, and theatre have imbibed the revolutionary spirit by advocating for the open discussion of politically loaded and sensitive aspects of Tunisian history and identity. These creative expressions often exhibit a polyphony encapsulating «contradiction, disruption, and concurrent, contesting discourses»⁶ within Tunisian society. Furthermore, numerous artistic representations have focused on the revolution, investigating the collective determination of the people and the revolutionary masses, and engaging in dialogues on how to meet their expectations⁷.

⁴ C. Pardey, *Processing the Revolution: Exploring the Ways Tunisian Novels Reflect Political Upheavals*, in R. Ouaiassa; 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.

⁵ Political literature, during the era of Ben Ali, maintained its existence but was remarkably encapsulated and, arguably, imbued with an aura of prestige, stemming from its exclusivity from the realm of common artists. A few prominent figures, however, found a way to traverse the tightrope of limited censorship. Notably, esteemed actress Ġālīlah Bakkār and her husband, the reputable theatre director Fāḍīl al-Ġā'āyibī, successfully navigated the restrictive political landscape of their time. Their utilization of political theatre served as a bold platform, enabling them to voice critical perspectives while circumventing the pervasive censorship of Ben Ali, see: M. Carlson, *The Tunisian Revolution and After in the Work of Jalila Baccar and Fadhel Jaibi*, in D. O'Rawe and M. Phelan (eds.), *Post-Conflict Performance, Film and Visual Arts*, Palgrave, London 2016, p. 236. See also: Rafika Zahrouni, *The Tunisian Revolution and the Dialectics of Theatre and Reality*, in "Theatre Research International", 38, 2 (2013), p. 153. This parallel perspective also applies to the significant contributions made by one of the notable figures in contemporary Arabic poetry, the poet Muḥammad al-Šaġīr Awlād Aḥmad (1955-2016). His intense activism, a defining characteristic of his life and work, resulted in multiple periods of incarceration, notably during the latter years of Bourguiba. See: Mohamed-Salah Omri, *A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry*, in "Boundary", 39, 1 (2012), p. 137.

⁶ P. Williams, *Writing the Polyphonic Novel*, in "The Journal of Creative Writing Research", 1 (2015), available at: <https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wip-editions/articles/writing-the-polyphonic-novel.html> (last accessed 31 October 2022).

⁷ See, for example, the emergence of a lively prison literature: B. 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. 247. Douja Mamelouk has instead explored how the post-revolutionary novel saw the re-discussion of gender equality issues, see: Douja Mamelouk,

Within the context of Tunisia's dynamic political milieu, this paper delves into the way three novels have leveraged literature to express their political perspective. It focuses on how narratives have integrated the discourse of revolution, hence acting as a springboard for a more comprehensive dialogue on politics. By reading these literary texts, this article seeks to illuminate the nuanced characteristics of evolving viewpoints related to the revolution and the paradigmatic shifts it encapsulated. In this paper, I explore three novels that have directly engaged with the revolution, specifically Ḥusayn al-Wād's (1948-2018) *Sa'adatuhu... al-sayyid al-wazīr* (His Excellency Mr. Minister)⁸; the esteemed Šukrī al-Mabḥūt's *al-Ṭalyānī* (The Italian)⁹, published in 2014 and recipient of 2015 "al-Ġā'izah al-'Ālamiyyah li 'l-Riwāyah al-'Arabiyyah" – International Prize for Arabic Fiction; and finally, Ayman al-Dabbūsi's *Intiṣāb al-aswad* (Black Uprising)¹⁰, published in 2016. In this exploration, I argue that there is a dynamic tension between an initial intense optimism for change and a subsequent fading hope. This fluctuation between hope and disappointment offers a layered perspective on the intricate emotional terrain that delineates the five years following the revolution.

In Ḥusayn al-Wād's novel *Sa'adatuhu... al-sayyid al-wazīr*, the story follows the life journey of a teacher who becomes a minister. Authored in the pre-revolutionary period and published in 2011¹¹, it brings the reader to the epicentre of political corruption during Ben Ali's (Ibn 'Alī) reign. The main character, who initially appears to have a strong moral compass, is propelled into governmental service by his cousin. However, his encounter with the reality of governmental malfeasance prompts a cascade of psychological crises culminating in a mental collapse. The second work, Šukrī al-Mabḥūt's

New National Discourses: Tunisian Women Write the Revolution, in "Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics", 35 (2015), pp. 100-122.

⁸ Ḥusayn al-Wād, *Sa'adatuhu... al-sayyid al-wazīr*, Dār al-Ġanūb, Tūnis 2011.

⁹ Šukrī al-Mabḥūt, *al-Ṭalyānī*, Dār al-Tanwīr, Tūnis 2014. For a review of the novel see: Nouri Gana, *al-Ṭilyānī (The Italian) by Shukrī al-Mabkhūt*, in "Journal of Arabic Literature", 46, 2-3 (2015), pp. 327-331; Hager Ben Driss, *Chokri Mabkhout*, in "The Literary Encyclopedia", 21/01/2020, available at: <https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=13771> (last accessed 31 October 2022). Two translations have been published so far: Shukri al-Mabkhout, *L'italiano*, traduzione di B. Teresi, Edizioni e/o, Roma 2017; Shukri Mabkhout, *The Italian*, translated by M. Faiza; K. McNeil, Europa Editions, London 2021.

¹⁰ Ayman al-Dabbūsi, *Intiṣāb aswad*, Manšūrāt al-Ġamal, Baġdād 2016.

¹¹ Alia Ben Nhila, *Houcine El Wad's His Excellency Mr. the Minister: A Radical Collusion between the Capital, the Body, and Politics*, translated by Ali Znaidi, available at: <https://tunisianlit.wordpress.com/2012/12/06/houcine-el-wads-his-excellency-mr-the-minister-a-radical-collusion-between-the-capital-the-body-and-politics-an-article-written-by-alia-ben-nhila-and-translated-by-ali-znaidi/> (last accessed 31 October 2022).

al-Ṭalyānī, has been recognized as one of the most emblematic Tunisian novels of the revolution, and has been translated into multiple languages. The plot is set during the twilight of Bourguiba's (Abū Ruqaybah) governance, and the narrative provides insight into the leftist student campaigns and the political activism of the Islamic student collectives within Tunisian universities. The story traces the protagonist's transition from law school to the field of journalism, wherein he clashes with the regime's intelligence and secret services. This clash highlights how the government controls its people and limits free speech. The lead character stands up against a system trying to limit personal freedom and shut down opposition. The narrative also presents a female character that epitomizes the struggles of women oppressed by a male-dominated society, thus delivering a poignant critique on gender disparity. The last novel, Ayman al-Dabbūsī's *Intiṣāb al-aswad* (Black Uprising), released in 2016, is crafted through an autofiction lens. Composed as a series of autonomous chapters, each one of them recounts an incident from the author's life, emphasizing his nocturnal escapades involving alcohol and women. Due to its explicit content, several parts of this novel could be construed as containing pornographic elements. Despite its provocative veneer, the novel acts as a sharp satire of the revolution.

al-Wād's Façade Quest for Revolutionary Truth

Sa 'ādatuhu... al-sayyid al-wazīr by Ḥusayn al-Wād provides a sophisticated exploration of the revolution, examining the conditions that facilitated its onset¹². As Šukrī al-Mabḥūt emphasizes¹³, a fundamental aspect of this literary exploration is the defiant stance against the monopoly of truth, a cornerstone of Ben Ali's regime. The narrative embodies the ideal of a revolutionary individual, resolute in the quest for truth and weary of the palpable deceptions promulgated by the regime's machinery. Opposing the dictatorship's singular authority on truth, the archival work positions itself as a probe into truth's depths. In this context, the methodic evaluation of documents and reports for factual accuracy embodies a subversive stance, as it results in eschewing propaganda and debunking the official truth. The novel begins with the protagonist discovering the manuscript of a ministerial report within the national archive¹⁴. This narrative technique likely aims to reinforce the novel's claim to truthfulness while attenuating its fictional aspect. By being a ministerial

¹² Nūrī Gānah, *al-Adab wa 'l-tawrah: hiwār ma'a Ḥusayn al-Wād bi-munāsabat al-ḍikrā al-ṭālīqah li 'l-tawrah al-tūnisiyyah*, in "al-Ġadaliyyah", 19/01/2014, available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/30109/> (last accessed 31 October 2022).

¹³ Šukrī al-Mabḥūt, *Dégage yā 'iṣābat al-surrāq dīgāğ yā ḥammāğ*, in Ḥusayn al-Wād, *Sa 'ādatuhu... al-sayyid al-wazīr*, cit., p. 9.

¹⁴ Ḥusayn al-Wād, *Sa 'ādatuhu... al-sayyid al-wazīr*, cit., p. 31.

report rather than a mere fictional account, the text assumes an air of authenticity and serves as a primary source. The meticulous detailing of a minister's term during the Ben Ali era unveils a new, substantiated truth, contrasting sharply with the unverified truths fostered by the state. The credibility of the narrative is bolstered further by the context of a courtroom¹⁵, accentuated by the impending death of the protagonist, who turns to God in a manner suggesting that deceit is implausible. His appeal for forgiveness is directed not to any earthly power but to the Divine, in anticipation of a forthcoming judgment. From a standpoint of truth, the paradoxical characteristics of Ben Ali's political class take on parodic dimensions. Symbolizing the revolutionary democratic ethos, the novel advocates the autonomy of individuals in their pursuit of personal truth, while democratically acknowledging the impossibility of a single, universal truth. Through its nuanced engagement with themes of rebellion, authenticity, and political struggle, the novel enriches the literary discourse on revolution and power, thereby affirming its place in the intellectual contemplation of a defining era.

The pursuit of truth in the novel serves as a stark counterpoint to the state's suppression of truth – or even its criminalization – under the Ben Ali regime. This thematic undercurrent is subtly accentuated in the novel's intriguing opening scene, where the narrator is depicted going the maze-like corridors of a crowded national archive at night, on a quest for documents. The oddity of conducting research during a time when the facility would typically be closed is made palpably clear. The nocturnal visit to an archive raises the question: Why does he undertake this search at night? The only plausible answer seems to be that conducting this research during the day would be forbidden, likening the scholars to smugglers who exploit the cover of night when police and patrols are less vigilant. The image of the nightly national archive symbolizes a state where the quest for truth is perilous and obscured, compelling the researcher to cloak his endeavours in darkness, thereby infusing the very act of research with an element of danger. Notably, the clandestine activities of these “nocturnal researchers” do not result in the open revelation of their discoveries. Driven by fear, they leave important documents on the library's tables instead of returning them to the shelves, hoping that someone braver in a repressive regime will take the risk of revealing these texts to the masses. This action provides the narrator's rationale for stumbling upon a manuscript left unattended, which he would subsequently refine and publish as a novel¹⁶.

In the novel, the struggle between truth and deception unfolds as a battle between different social classes, with the novel suggesting that it is often the upper or aspirational classes that engage in deceit, while those from humbler backgrounds remain truthful and sincere. The protagonist,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

hailing from a bourgeois setting, represents virtue and honesty, becoming a symbol for the defence of truth. In stark contrast, the antagonist, embodying sins such as avarice, ambition, and insatiability, stands as a figure for worldly power and the manipulation of falsehoods. Before his ministerial position, the protagonist's life was spent as a schoolteacher, and the novel clearly delineates his connection to his social class and the concerns of his community. Due to his humble income, he is obliged to teach private sessions to well-off students in his home, an arrangement that necessitates overwork but barely suffices to cover fundamental costs. The novel portrays these circumstances as degrading and unhealthy, leading to his dependence on substantial amounts of coffee, tea, and stimulant medications¹⁷. Contrastingly, the antagonist, who is the protagonist's cousin and serves as prime minister, is committed to climbing the social hierarchy to join the elite. He exhibits a total lack of moral compass through his calculated marriages and tactical divorces. Described in the novel as an irresponsible risk-taker akin to a gambler¹⁸, he refers to collateral damage and necessary evils, spending considerable amounts to remarry for financial gain – even to the point of mortgaging his mother's house. Nevertheless, he emerges victorious. When interpreted as a confrontation between truth and deception, the story evolves into a narrative illustrating social inequality. The protagonist, despite working tirelessly for the betterment of his status, reaps no rewards, while the antagonist amasses wealth, successfully sidestepping the consequences of his actions after exploiting institutions, corrupting the state, and wielding his power abusively. In framing the dynamics between these characters, the novel highlights a societal critique that resonates with broader themes of integrity, class struggle, and the corrupting influence of power.

This intense aversion between the two social strata is further underscored in the dynamics of the subjugated and the dominator, with the former aligned with the marginalized popular classes and the latter with the affluent upper classes. The protagonist, due to the chalk dust on his modest clothing, is regarded with disdain within ministerial circles¹⁹. He will exhaust all his savings to purchase a new ensemble, yet this will not significantly alter his association with a lower class. One evident display of scorn from the upper class is the cousin's disposal of his gift – a box of confections, a well-regarded present in Tunisia. This disdain is mutual, as the protagonist harbours no admiration for this privileged class, nor any aspiration to join their ranks. His exchanges with his spouse during the ministry's elegant gatherings highlight his alienation from aristocratic culture²⁰.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Within the elite society, they only perceive a culture of pretence and falsity, illustrated by their indulgence in trivial discussions. Women are depicted as the most overt embodiments of this culture of appearance, symbolized by their heavy reliance on cosmetics and frequent cosmetic surgeries²¹. The ultimate confrontation between the masses and the elite is essentially a battle between two paradigms of existence – one rooted in essence and the other in ostentation.

al-Wād's Representation of Corruption

The novel delves deeply into one of the factors that triggered the rebellion of the Tunisian populace: the widespread corruption of the ruling elite. Prior to the revolution, the public was largely unaware of the egregious state corruption, the opulent villas, and luxury vehicles owned by the family members of the president, particularly his wife Aïcha Trabelsi (‘Ā’īshah Ṭarabulsī), although rumours of such corruption were beginning to circulate²². The first dossier that the protagonist, now a minister, scrutinizes exposes the corrupt behaviours of state officials and their misuse of state assets²³. The ministers argue that the firms inherited from Bourguiba’s socialist policies – Bourguiba being the Tunisian lawyer, nationalist leader, and first president from 1956 to 1987 – are overstuffed and hence unproductive. The corruption of the political elite becomes even more apparent when the minister pushes for the selling of these state-owned firms. However, instead of being awarded to the highest bidders, the tenders are secured by the least competent: firms indebted to the state or lacking sufficient capital. The minister also suggests that some of the firms had backers from countries considered hostile to the state. This embezzlement of state resources eventually leads to companies being unable to guarantee employment for their workforce. The sell-off of firms resembles a fire sale of state assets at discounted prices. As a representative of the common people, the minister shows greater dedication and diligence than his colleagues, thereby uncovering the profound dysfunctions of the Tunisian administration²⁴. From the viewpoint of a common citizen, the reader gets an intimate view of the inner workings of the Tunisian Ministry of Natural Resources after the protagonist is appointed minister by his cousin, the prime minister. The portrayals of corruption and political manipulation are

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²² See J. Clancy-Smith, *From Sidi Bou Zid to Sidi Bou Said: A Longue Durée Approach to the Tunisian Revolutions*, in M.L. Haas; D.W. Lesch (eds.), *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, Westview Press, Boulder 2012, pp. 13-34.

²³ Ḥusayn al-Wād, *Sa ‘ādatuhu... al-sayyid al-wazīr*, cit., p., 249.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

presented as unidimensional and culminate in a manner that is both parodic and arguably populist.

The narrative highlights the manipulation by the elites, who are shown as puppeteers controlling the state apparatus, the parliament, and even the minister himself. It also sheds light on the deficiencies of a president who is evidently unsuitable for his position. The president is portrayed as leading the government through ambiguous directives, assuming that he knows what is best for the nation²⁵. As such, ministers are selected not for their policy expertise but for their ability to adhere to these vague guidelines. The narrative underlines the lack of coherent policymaking, as illustrated by the surprise expressed by a French colleague when they learn that the protagonist has been appointed minister without having formulated a clear agenda. Yet, as the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that the protagonist is not genuinely in control, but instead is being manipulated²⁶. In his meetings with his cousin, the prime minister emphasizes the need to choose judiciously what information to share with the president, revealing a keen interest in every comment the protagonist makes. The prime minister's insistence that preserving the president's peace of mind is of utmost importance serves as a clear indicator of manipulation. As such, the president's incompetence in governance seems to be his major failing, rather than corruption, which is a charge levelled against other ministers and state officials. Moreover, the manipulation is not just limited to the president but is also rampant among the elites themselves. This facade is further echoed in the interactions the protagonist has with others. He is met with profuse expressions of affection, which simply mask underlying disdain²⁷. Even the protagonist's appointment as a minister, as revealed at the end of the novel, turns out to be a manipulative move: a reformer is brought into the government with the intention of capitalizing on the proposed reforms for further personal gains.

The narrative underscores the manipulation directed towards the Tunisian people. In their pursuit of personal interests, the ministers maintain an illusion of stability and dedication to their roles by constantly propagating falsehoods. To sustain this illusion, they rigorously control and manipulate information and media. When the minister of Natural Resources is interviewed, the prime minister intervenes to prevent any potential leaks of sensitive information. His role is to perpetuate a facade of virtuous management of public affairs for the public. This deception is embodied in his first speech in a central Tunisian city where he extols parliamentary action and the president's leadership. Moreover, the minister is encouraged to address the needs of the public by hearing out their grievances.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

While he conscientiously notes down their needs in a notebook, his assistants quickly discard this notebook as soon as he enters his car. This act symbolizes the state's selective hearing – the majority of requests were for employment – and its inability or unwillingness to meet everyone's needs²⁸. The narrative implies that the elites view the public as a group that needs to be kept distant from the political realm, which further intensifies the themes of manipulation and control that pervade the novel. These manipulations and machinations of the elites highlight the systemic issues of the pre-revolutionary era, and their revelation may have contributed to the subsequent Tunisian Revolution.

The novel depicts revolution as the unavoidable outcome when a government, corrupt and inept, is laid bare before the threats to its territory. Tunisia, as it is portrayed, is a little nation with few allies across the world. The schisms amongst the leaders of the Arab domain are especially conspicuous at a water conference. It is all a performance, the protagonist thinks, watching the Arab nations parade unity for the press while disagreements simmer underneath. As environmental concerns escalate and water resources diminish, the inability to reach a consensus appears not merely irresponsible, but exceedingly hazardous. A palpable tension characterized by distrust and covert hostility permeates the interactions among the Arab ministers within the novel. The dinner event is conspicuously vacant, as each minister opts out, citing more pressing responsibilities²⁹. The novel intimates the manipulation of Tunisia's corrupted political elites and the splintered Arab world by foreign powers. Their mingling with the corrupt ruling class carries the shadow of an encroaching neo-colonial menace. The threat is laid bare when an ambassador of a foreign nation wants the minister to rent out Tunisia's maritime wealth – the coastal seas – to his country³⁰. The suggestion of a 99-year lease mirrors the 1898 Hong Kong Handover Treaty and turns out to be a front for a new kind of colonialism. It is not about fishing or farming, but about the potential for dumping nuclear waste or setting up military bases to gain a hold over the region. Despite the project nearing completion, it never does. The protagonist is made the fall guy instead. Through this narrative, the novel underscores how a corrupt leadership invites international meddling, threatening the very sovereignty of a nation.

The novel weaves a connection between the failings of Tunisian leadership and the destitution of its people. It paints a vivid image of the poverty many Tunisians face. Men, pale and unclean, with tired faces and empty eyes that bear the weight of their misery and suffering³¹. Their attire, old second-

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

hand clothing imported from Europe, is a stark symbol of the thriving European used-goods market. The protagonist, a teacher, emphasizes how unemployment and poverty strain families. The absence of a steady income often fuels disputes, leading to broken homes. The harsh economic realities prevalent in the country inadvertently foster a culture of corruption. The author suggests that poverty could be the birthplace of corruption, with individuals resorting to desperate means to escape their wretched conditions. Scarcity of resources forces people to renounce their moral codes, a bitter truth that the teacher grapples with when he is forced to provide private tuition just to get by. In essence, the novel critiques more than just the political realm; it also takes aim at materialism, seeing it as a primary source of state corruption. The story underlines how a hunger for material goods and systematic poverty can spawn a cycle that cultivates corruption and deepens social inequalities.

The book casts a harsh light on how materialism can poison family relationships. The protagonist's social status and the respect from his family are directly tied to his financial standing. When the teacher's income is meagre, he is met with barely a flicker of respect or consideration from his wife. Arriving home, he is greeted with a cold shoulder, left to heat up his own dinner while his wife is engrossed in a television show in another room³². Conversations between them usually end in his disgrace as she continually reproaches him for his failure to meet her financial desires³³. The financial strain escalates to the point where his wife insists on racking up debt to purchase new furniture, completely disregarding the weight it would place on his shoulders. The teacher contemplates divorce but holds back for his children's sake and his inability to pay for it. However, when he acquires wealth as a minister, the dynamics within his family radically transform. Now, he is greeted with newfound respect and admiration from his family. His wife's demeanour shifts dramatically – she prepares his meals each night and sits with him at the table, providing companionship³⁴. Her change in attitude is highlighted by the fact that she now reserves a chair specifically for him, a privilege he was not afforded when he was just a humble teacher. The glaring difference in how his family treats him before and after his ascent to power makes a compelling comment on the damaging impacts of materialism. The narrative suggests that if the impoverished teacher had not risen to become a minister, he would have continued to endure an affectionless family life, oblivious to the disturbing fact that their love hinged solely on his financial status.

In his novel, al-Wād exposes the destructive power of materialism, highlighting the gaping divide that often exists between wealth and moral

³² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

integrity. What was seen as the primary impediment to the family's happiness – financial hardship – ironically becomes the impetus for its ruin. The teacher's wife achieves her dream of a plush home furnished according to her tastes. However, this material comfort comes at a high cost – the disintegration of her marriage. Despite his accumulated wealth, the teacher's love for his wife does not reignite. Though their marital life might seem more harmonious on the surface, he no longer desires his wife, a fact underscored by their absent intimacy. The novel further suggests that wealth can be a breeding ground for corruption and immorality. The minister's house, once a symbol of his well-earned success, turns into a den of moral decay³⁵. His daughter, who now inhabits the house, is portrayed as promiscuous, engaged in relationships with three men who exploit her, thus shaming the family. Similarly, his elder son falls prey to the allure of drugs, becoming another victim of wealth-induced decadence. Disheartened by the moral rot his affluence has bred, the teacher renounces his family, a stark testament to the devastating effects of materialism.

The novel unveils corruption seeping into the family with the teacher's entry into the ministry, likening it to a contagious disease. It suggests a cultural spread from the corrupt elites to the entire family, and by extension, the broader society. The author employs the moral disintegration within the family as a microcosm, illuminating the corruption rife among officials in Ben Ali's regime. The teacher's experiences within the ministry lay bare the culture of hedonism underpinning the elite's operations. The ministry, as depicted in the novel, is riddled with inappropriate behaviour. Secretaries and beautiful women are always flirting, their perfumes leaving lingering traces on the minister's clothing – a detail his wife does not overlook³⁶. Although the teacher resists engaging in explicit sexual relationships, he struggles to contain his desires, often yielding to flirtatious exchanges. In sharp contrast, his colleagues show a flagrant disregard for propriety. A notable instance in the novel is a minister, intoxicated at a water conference, caught in a dispute over payment with a sex worker³⁷. To avert a possible scandal, the teacher ends up compensating the woman with ministry funds. This rampant immorality, vividly portrayed in the novel, indicates that corruption is not confined to financial or political realms, but has infiltrated deep into societal norms.

The protagonist's journey, albeit detached from the Revolution, stands as a powerful metaphor for the Tunisian revolution itself. His declining health, spurred by the unbearable discord between the corrupt reality he's entwined in and his moral ideals, mirrors the societal malaise that forebodes significant political upheavals. The character's ongoing stomach

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

pains, a bodily reflection of his internal strife, along with his escalating reliance on alcohol, echo the pain and struggle the Tunisian people endured under a corrupt regime. At the narrative's peak, mentally and emotionally drained from his ceaseless quest for justice, the protagonist finds himself in utter isolation – betrayed, deserted by his family, and desolate. In his moment of deepest despair, he unleashes a vehement diatribe against the president and the political apparatus, mirroring the sentiments of many revolutionaries. His bravery in the face of potential police retribution reflects the desperation that ignites revolutions: a point where people feel they have nothing left to lose. However, this act of defiance culminates in a solitary outcry, ending with the protagonist's fainting and subsequent hospitalization. His later incarceration and trial, followed by his descent into madness and eventual commitment to a mental hospital, signify the sacrifices individuals make in the pursuit of political change. The protagonist's conclusion, suggesting that only the youth can effect real change, echoes the truth of many revolutions, which are often fuelled by the vigour and dreams of the younger generation.

al-Mabḥūt's Exploring of the Old Revolution

When the revolution erupted, the usually tranquil environment of Manouba University was abruptly shattered, leaving the dean of the Faculty of Letters unprepared for the ensuing riots. Situated in the calmest period of the academic year, the absence of students – who typically return to their families after early January exams – and professors only served to amplify the sounds of anger expressed during the demonstrations within the university. Suddenly, the dean, akin to his counterparts across many Tunisian universities, found himself besieged in his offices. Crowds, congregated at his door, obstructed his ability to execute his responsibilities or even enter his office. This unforeseen turmoil necessitated a thorough examination of solutions and a reconsideration of his role within the altered dynamics of the campus. It was amid this tumultuous backdrop that Šukrī al-Mabḥūt claims to have conceived and written his novel *al-Ṭalyānī*, a vibrant homage to the Tunisian revolution. For al-Mabḥūt, the revolution was far from a peripheral occurrence; he seemed to experience it firsthand, finding himself, in certain respects, at the very core of the revolutionary movement. The once orderly principal now faced the complex task of adapting to a new mode of communication and political engagement, responsive to the demands of students and faculty. The previously serene academic environment, marked by the cyclical rhythm of exams and breaks, was violently disrupted by the echoes of al-Bū'azīzī's protest³⁸. The university's

³⁸ Hager Ben Driss, *Chokri Mabkout (1962-)*, cit.; Günther Orth, *Shukri Al-Mabkhout's Novel "The Italian" Failure in the Police State*, in "Qantara.de", 26/06/2015,

campus, once a place of quiet study and scholarly pursuit, was instantaneously transformed into a crucible of rebellion. This unexpected metamorphosis of the academic landscape reflected not merely a local disturbance but resonated with the broader revolutionary fervour sweeping the nation. It encapsulated a shift in societal dynamics, where once-quiet spaces became arenas for political expression and transformation, contributing to the enduring narrative of change that characterized this pivotal moment in Tunisian history.

In his contemplation of the revolution, al-Mabḥūt's perspective resonates with a personal history marked by youthful aspirations for change, aspirations that were quashed both by the regime of Bourguiba and the burgeoning new regime of Ben Ali. Through his novel, al-Mabḥūt seems to be engaged in a dialogue with the new revolutionaries, evoking not only the contemporary struggle but also the protracted hopes of his own generation. His work stands as a reminder of the long-standing yearnings for revolution that were stifled, and perhaps a tale of unfulfilled promises. By weaving these past experiences into the narrative of the present revolution, al-Mabḥūt bridges the gap between two generational struggles and emphasizes the continuity of a national quest for freedom and reform.

al-Mabḥūt's depiction of his main character, 'Abd al-Nāṣir, and the political scene in *al-Ṭalyānī* is closely woven with his own experiences as a young student activist during the 1980s. The trials and aspirations of his character echo the author's participation in the student movement, his political awakening, and his personal observation of the rise and fall of political leaders, all under the omnipresent eye of police surveillance. This vibrant time in his life, combined with the substantial transformations in Tunisia, left an indelible mark on al-Mabḥūt, which he transcribes into his narrative. He delves into the socio-political environment of the era under president Bourguiba, often hailed as the "golden age" of Tunisian history. It was a time when the fight was not merely about economic subsistence but fundamentally about individual rights and freedoms. Unlike the downtrodden masses portrayed in the narrative, the protagonist 'Abd al-Nāṣir does not suffer from economic hardship. His father is an official at the Ministry of Finance, and his brother is a successful economics scholar based in Switzerland. These circumstances let 'Abd al-Nāṣir chase his education without fiscal hindrance. The narrative thereby highlights that the quest for democracy and individual rights cuts across class divisions and is not solely the concern of the poor. The author also scrutinizes the link between international finance and poverty, frequently laying blame on in-

available at: <https://En.Qantara.de/Node/20348> (last accessed 31 October 2022); Mohammed Chawki Benhassen, *L'engagement impossible: le journaliste au défi du « système » dans trois romans de Šukrī al-Mabḥūt*, in "LiCarC Littérature et Culture Arabes Contemporaines", 10 (2022), p. 47.

stitutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. al-Mabḥūt views these organizations as instruments of neo-colonial economic control, attributing occurrences like the occupational riots in 1978 and the surge in bread prices in 1984 to their sway. The novel's portrayal of economic hardship and its ties to the wider political struggle provides a complex view of the Tunisian revolution. It underlines that the struggle was not merely for bread, but also for securing individual rights and independence from global economic dominion.

The motif of freedom's suppression is a central facet of the novel³⁹. The protagonist, 'Abd al-Nāṣir, epitomizes the unyielding spirit of liberty that staunchly resists subjugation or control. His inherent drive towards autonomy also translates into respecting others' freedoms, as evident in his relationship with his brother. Despite holding conflicting political views, with his brother being a liberal university professor in Switzerland and 'Abd al-Nāṣir championing Nasserist socialist ideologies, they coexist peacefully without trying to enforce their beliefs on each other. This underscores the genuine essence of freedom that cherishes and respects others' rights to harbour diverging opinions. The character of 'Abd al-Nāṣir presents the archetype of a ceaseless rebel, often reflecting the revolutionary fervour of the Egyptian leader Ḡamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir⁴⁰. Regardless of the severe consequences he encounters, he persistently battles against forces that attempt to encroach upon his freedom, whether it be his authoritarian father at home, university administrators quashing student movements, or even the oppressive censorship at his workplace. Conversely, anti-liberal figures, as embodied by Bourguiba and the successive Ben Ali regime, serve as the antagonists in the narrative. They symbolize the powers that oppose pluralism, utilizing oppressive measures like a pervasive political police force and manipulating and undermining student movements to maintain their hold on power. Such a narrative underlines the struggle for freedom within a milieu inherently hostile to the tenets of pluralism and liberty. Therefore, al-Mabḥūt's *al-Ṭalyānī* is a potent examination of the quest for freedom, the associated sacrifices, and the opposition it often faces. It underscores the unbreakable spirit of those who prize freedom and the extents they are willing to go to preserve it, even under the duress of suppression and control.

The narrative presents the state machinery as a master of disinformation, employing it as a strategy to suppress civil liberties. This depiction suggests that the state's political dynamics are largely the outcome of manipulative tactics and the dissemination of propaganda. The author paints a discerning picture of the media landscape during the time. The media is portrayed in

³⁹ For an analysis of the characters and their engagement in society in the novels of Mabḥūt, see: Mohammed Chawki Benhassen, *L'engagement impossible*, cit.

⁴⁰ Šukrī al-Mabḥūt, *al-Ṭalyānī*, cit., p. 160.

two distinct categories: first, propaganda-driven newspapers that laud Bourguiba as an unparalleled leader while conveniently ignoring the state's pressing issues. Second, those outlets that represent economic restructuring policies with a less critical, more accommodating stance. The image of the state, as sketched by the author, relies heavily on its proficient use of propaganda, thereby reducing itself to a hollow representation rather than a substantial entity. The role of journalism, in this context, is portrayed as more about offering consolation than fostering discourse or critical debate. The character 'Abd al-Ḥamīd underlines this by asserting that the only journalism he has ever encountered in Tunisia is propaganda⁴¹. Historically, the state's propagandistic communication model is likened to a form of insanity that engulfs the country. According to the character 'Abd al-Nāṣir, propaganda, intertwined with mass manipulation strategies, serves to manage public fear⁴². This fear, especially of potential anarchy, is exploited to advance the state's agenda and strengthen pro-government sentiment. The novel subtly refers to the role of the police force, which assumes an ambiguous position, swinging between the regime and burgeoning social movements. The narrative proposes that the police, perhaps as the only effective entity capable of action, appear to pursue the state's greater good through opaque and covert means.

As the narrative delves into the consequences of this repression of freedom, the author outlines its traumatic impact. The text underscores the psychological turmoil that plagues the characters, resulting in deep-rooted nihilism. This nihilism leads to a stark denial of their reality and prompts escapist tendencies. Some characters physically flee to places like Switzerland, as in the case of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, or France for Zaynah. For others, the escape is metaphorical, to non-places such as psychosis and madness, as exemplified by 'Abd al-Nāṣir. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn views his brother's dissolute life as a necessity, rather than a simple vice, a path he admits he would have pursued if he had not left his homeland⁴³. This inability to accept their reality morphs into trauma for the protagonists. They attempt to dull this pain through a relentless pursuit of hedonistic pleasures, including sex and alcohol consumption⁴⁴. The narrative underscores the prevalence of psychosis and depicts the Tunisian cultural environment of the time as a broad mental asylum, characterized by widespread illusions, rampant dishonesty, and prevalent self-consolation through alcohol and drugs, as affirmed by 'Abd al-Nāṣir⁴⁵.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

In al-Mabḥūt's novel, the character of Zaynah is emblematic of a broader theme that paints the woman as a victim of state power, subjected to the dual oppressions of corruption and an infringement on her personal freedoms. Zaynah's trajectory, from a heroine striving to be a successful and virtuous embodiment of modernity to a figure crushed by the very officials and forces that should have supported her, illustrates a central motif in the narrative. Zaynah's story is one of a potent struggle against societal barriers. She epitomizes the model of a strong woman intended to symbolize hope for the nation. Yet, she is systematically dismantled, not rising to martyrdom but forced to forsake her ideals by powers that erode her strength and prevent her from sowing seeds for the future of her community. The indignities Zaynah endures are primarily sexual in nature, inflicted by those in positions of power who view her merely as an object for their desires. Even within her own village, she faces abuse and humiliation. Her promising academic path culminates in abandonment, as she gives up her doctoral defence after inappropriate sexual advances from her professor and subsequent reprisals. Ultimately, she finds herself compelled to flee Tunisia, her dreams shattered, seeking refuge with an older man who offers a fleeting escape from her harrowing reality. Zaynah's tragic end serves not only as a commentary on her personal suffering but as an allegorical reflection on al-Mabḥūt's generation. Here, she was a young woman whose intellect and potential should have been the pride of her nation but was instead annihilated⁴⁶. The narrative's voice, 'Abd al-Nāṣir's sister, who is profoundly impacted by Zaynah's fate, grapples with the question of why she ceased fighting. Zaynah's character, in turn, becomes symbolic of a broader cultural malaise. She represents the idea of a nation squandering its most precious resources, compelling them to forsake their homeland. Her story resonates with the experiences of many Tunisians who found themselves caught in similar circumstances, reflecting a societal critique that transcends the personal and gestures toward a collective failure to nurture and protect the promise within its people. Her tale, imbued with the tragedy of lost potential and violated dignity, paints a stark portrait of a society at odds with its ideals, underscoring the urgent need for reform and empathy within the structures of power.

al-Mabḥūt's account of the failed student left revolution is presented as a critical historical reference relevant to the contemporary revolution. He argues that Tunisia must remember and learn from this overlooked chapter in its history if the ongoing revolution is to avoid the same manipulative tactics that trapped the leftist movement. The revolution attempt of the 1980s, as the narrative suggests, did not bring about any significant change. The regime had merely evolved to become more sophisticated, a transition embodied in the polished rhetoric that Ben Ali had skilfully adopted, as noted by 'Abd

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

al-Nāṣir⁴⁷. In this context, the illusions of freedom remained, while substantial discussions about the distribution of the country's resources were conspicuously absent. Ben Ali executed the directives of the international economic apparatus to protect the interests of the ruling classes in the Sahel region. Consequently, the country's problems persisted, remaining unresolved. Future conflicts over power abuse and freedom were inevitable, fuelled by the people's ongoing desire for liberty. The narrative suggests it would not be until 2011 that the unchanged dream of transformation would re-ignite, hinting at a recurring cycle in the Tunisian sociopolitical landscape. Thus, the novel *al-Ṭalyānī* serves not only as a tale of individual struggles but also as a political commentary, informing the readers about the cyclic nature of societal transformations, and the need for understanding past errors to avoid repeating them in the future.

The novel extends far beyond just being a memoir. It can be convincingly argued that it delves into the exploration of self-identity, reconciliation with a troubled past, and the healing of wounds inflicted by repression. The author seems to embark on a journey of self-discovery, unearthing deeply hidden memories and ultimately making peace with his traumatic history. al-Mabḥūt arguably places himself within the narrative as a young student – embodied in the character 'Abd al-Nāṣir – who struggles against a state characterized by censorship, suffocating propaganda, intrusive political police mechanisms, and manipulative union control. However, his most crucial endeavour is to reconcile with his own identity. As he begins the writing process, he seems to aim at memorializing the revolutionary spirit of his generation while simultaneously healing the wounds inflicted by autocracy during his youth, thereby reconciling the past with the present. Interestingly, within the narrative weave of his novel, al-Mabḥūt orchestrates an encounter between his older self and his younger, student self, as if the elder man seeks to provide solace, embracing and interacting with this fragment of his identity. The young 'Abd al-Nāṣir-al-Mabḥūt becomes a physical manifestation of his past, a part of his life that he can look back on with empathy and understanding. In the scene where 'Abd al-Nāṣir withstands beatings to protect Zaynah, who is mistakenly identified as an Islamist movement activist participating in an illegal strike, the dean of the Manouba faculty steps in almost like a *deus ex machina* to halt the police brutality against the protagonist. The dean rescues the young man from the violent attack of Bourguiba's police, who beat him until he bleeds. In this instance, the dean's intervention symbolically underscores al-Mabḥūt's strength and bravery in standing up for his younger self⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

al-Dabbūsi's Parody of the Revolution and Reflection on its Contradictions

Ayman al-Dabbūsi's *Intiṣāb aswad* can be seen as working within the same thematic framework as the previous two novels, which examine and depict the dystopian realities that preceded the revolution. While these works do celebrate the revolutionary accomplishments, they tend to overlook a detailed analysis of the implications of the revolution in the present day. As a result, they articulate the need for a revolution but do not delineate its intended agenda and purpose beyond the overthrowing of repressive government structures. By creating narratives set before 2011, authors can navigate around this issue, offering justifications for current political paradoxes like the escalating political and economic instability. However, Ayman al-Dabbūsi's *Intiṣāb aswad* presents a more nuanced understanding of how a revolutionary agenda could be formulated and implemented to address lingering post-revolution problems. Arguably, al-Dabbūsi's intention is to delve into the impacts and shortcomings of the Tunisian revolution, which, due to the enormity and suddenness of such unpredictable developments, may sometimes appear more harmful than the dictatorship they aimed to overthrow⁴⁹. Fantasies of Ben Ali returning to power to undo the revolution's aftermath have been expressed in various ways, coalescing around nostalgic slogans like *Wīnek Ben 'Alī!* (Where are you, Ben Ali!)⁵⁰. This sentiment seemingly reflects a longing for the perceived stability and prosperity of Tunisia under Ben Ali's rule, a nostalgic yearning for order amidst chaos. Through his novel, al-Dabbūsi aims to unpack the complexities of such a scenario and offer an analysis of Tunisia's current political and economic landscape. al-Dabbūsi strives to uphold the importance of the revolution and its liberating ethos while concurrently grappling with the ensuing complications from 2011 to the novel's publication in 2016. The novel's primary goal is to dispel various myths surrounding the Tunisian revolution, often characterized by orientalist and romanticized narratives. In conclusion, the novel presents a reframed discussion of the revolution, detaching it from regional constraints and positioning it within the broader context of global political dynamics in the age of globalization.

The second chapter centres on the dismantling and de-romanticizing of the revolutionary narrative, which includes rejecting the notion of ethnic

⁴⁹ T. Lageman, *Mohamed Bouazizi: Was the Arab Spring Worth Dying For?*, in "AlJazeera", 3/01/2016, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/1/3/mohamed-bouazizi-was-the-arab-spring-worth-dying-for> (accessed 31 October 2022).

⁵⁰ See for instance the article appeared in the online page of the broadcaster France24: Assiya Hamza, *Surge of Nostalgia for Ben Ali in Tunisia*, in "France24", 1/09/2014, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20140109-tunisiens-nostalgic-ben-ali-ennahda-islamist> (last accessed 31 October 2022).

culture as insular and tradition-bound⁵¹. This section probes the idea that the post-2011 Tunisian discourse on revolution is significantly shaped by European media. It examines how the emerging European image of the revolution inadvertently leads to an orientalizing and essentialization of Tunisian culture and identity. This essentialization cultivates a view of the Tunisian population as somewhat distinct from Europeans in terms of their cultural and political values. Dominant portrayals of the revolution tend to exalt and idealize it as the victory of an antiquated, primitive nation⁵². These depictions rely on deep-rooted discourses that depict the non-European world as stagnant and immutable, while deriding its inhabitants as illogical and backward. The author argues that many Arabists, anthropologists, and journalists who arrived in Tunisia post-revolution adhered to this view. This perspective fuels the novel's satirical depiction of Christoph, a journalist for the left-leaning newspaper "Libération". Christoph was tasked with reporting on the Tunisian Revolution for his newspaper, but he became overly consumed with searching for exotic subjects and colourful anecdotes to embellish his reports. The story revolves around Christoph and his Tunisian acquaintances enjoying themselves in a bar, subsequently spending the night in a downtown Tunis apartment during the revolutionary year, awaiting the lifting of the curfew the next morning while he conducts his orientalist research. The author underscores Christoph's enthusiastic notetaking about his fieldwork with the research group on the revolution, contrasting it with his naive astonishment and fascination. His Tunisian companions incessantly ridicule him for his unquestioning acceptance of Arab stereotypes. He expects his Tunisian comrades to adhere to traditional Arab hospitality and, as such, unceremoniously passes his drink tab onto them⁵³. Christoph also habitually positions himself on a carpet in the middle of the room, mistakenly believing this to be a Tunisian custom, a notion likely inspired by the fantastical imagery of orientalist paintings⁵⁴. Christoph's surprise at commonplace elements such as Ayman's profession as a psychiatrist or his advanced computer further highlights his preconceived notions of the Orient, finding such elements remarkable and unexpected. As the protagonist Ayman laments at the end of the chapter, orientalism makes him feel like an ethnographic puppet⁵⁵, a toy for the entertainment of others.

⁵¹ L. Wang, *Internal Orientalization or Deorientalization? Disciplinary Conflicts and National Imaginations in China, 1912–1949*, in "Modern China", 46, 4 (2020), p. 340.

⁵² Ayman al-Dabbūsi, *Intiṣāb aswad*, cit., p. 87.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

The novel further denounces the implied cultural superiority inherent in the orientalist perspective. Christoph reveals his belief that the revolution was sparked by French culture. When he scans Ayman's library, Christoph only acknowledges Ayman's French books, completely ignoring his Arabic texts. Ayman rebukes him for this dismissive attitude, emphasizing the significant influence of Arabic literature on the revolution, such as works by Kurdish-Syrian author Salīm Barakāt – from whom Ayman appears to derive his autofiction's style. Ayman condemns this ethnocentric viewpoint and asserts that such attitudes should not be present in discussions concerning the Arab Spring. Christoph's cultural arrogance towards Tunisian and Arabic culture irritates everyone at the party, leading them to begin ignoring and mocking him⁵⁶. In a provocative move, Ayman compares the Tunisian revolution to a penis, providing a risqué interpretation for the book's title, *Intiṣāb aswad*, which could translate to "rising", but also to "erection". He humorously encourages Christoph to include this interpretation in his notebook. The novel stands as a powerful critique of orientalist assumptions and a celebration of the Arabic literary and cultural influences that contributed to the revolution.

The author's satirical approach is subtler than it first appears. Christoph, the European journalist, is not only a figure of fun but also of humiliation. He has drawn towards Ayman, and implicitly seduced by him, yet pushed away, a loud rejection that ashamed him in front of the other people of the group. Ayman, in his mysterious way, stays close to Christoph, paying him steady attention, teasing him into shared undress. Amid the haze of drink, Ayman prods Christoph to reveal his uncircumcised self, a topic of conversation around the custom of circumcision that Ayman stands by. They look to Héléne for comparison⁵⁷. Ayman declares, bold in front of Héléne, that his own self is superior. Despite Christoph's entanglements with Héléne, his bond with Ayman persists. Ayman's hold on Christoph is in this constant assertion of being better, putting Christoph on the lower ground. Christoph, then, is emasculated⁵⁸. In the quiet of the bed, when he reaches out to Ayman, he is brushed away. He is seen as unworthy of Ayman, the "superior". This appears to be a calculated strategy on Ayman's part. The efforts to attract Christoph could be argued to serve the purpose of wounding him through rejection in the moment they achieve a certain level of intimacy. This leaves Christoph not only humiliated but also feeling unworthy, as Ayman's withdrawal implicitly denies his value. The author's use of irony acts as a precise instrument to dissect local perceptions of the revolution, effectively juxtaposing the grandiose ideals of the revolutionary movement with the stark realities of daily life. This literary technique

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

emphasizes the chasm between expectation and actual experience, providing a nuanced insight into the disillusionment that started in his view to accompany the lofty aspirations of the revolution. Central to this ironical commentary is the wave of euphoria that swept across Tunisia post-revolution, spurred by the people's victory over oppression. In the author's view, Tunisians, having toppled one of history's most oppressive police dictatorships, now bask in an aura of fearlessness and invincibility⁵⁹. He conveys that Tunisia is envisioned as a bright utopia where the police hold little sway over the populace, resulting in a somewhat anarchic state. Yet, this sense of liberation often expresses itself in petty, surface-level freedoms – the newfound ability to flirt with a policewoman without fear of retribution, or to publicly deride a government official, actions that were unimaginable in the pre-revolution era⁶⁰. With the chains of oppression broken, the people relish their hard-won freedom, indulging in various pleasurable activities as self-granted rewards for their revolutionary victory. Overeating, participating in carnal pursuits, dancing, and skimping on sleep are all seen as jubilant expressions of this newfound liberty. The author implies that Tunisians are thoroughly revealing in the freedoms earned by their successful revolution.

The author suggests that the aftermath of the revolution offers little cause for celebration, a sentiment echoed in a series of telling incidents. One such instance occurs during a gathering when the main character reveals a bottle of Tunisian “Magon” wine. This was a gift from his father on January 14, 2011⁶¹. But it wasn't to toast the revolution; it was a remedy to restore his voice after hours of shouting at a sit-in protest on Bourguiba Street. On that day, his father's priority was regaining his voice. Later, we see the protagonist, drunk, roving the capital's streets, urging people to rise and celebrate with him⁶². But his appeals fall on deaf ears; no one responds to his festive calls. He bellows, assuring people that the revolution has come to pass. He even declares the next day a public holiday and proclaims the malls open for all, allowing citizens to help themselves to whatever they desire. In a somewhat comical end to his speech, he buys a lot of eggs from a forlorn street vendor and devours them rapidly, drawing the attention of the homeless. In the end, he is mugged, beaten, and even loses a tooth. However, he feels no regret, his revolutionary exuberance numbing him to any sorrow. Instead, he chuckles at the incident, recounting it as a noteworthy event, «during the Arab Spring, I met a street vendor, ate some eggs, and got beaten»⁶³. Against this backdrop, smoke rises and rubbish

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

mounts, the aftermath of the workers' strikes that have unfolded since the revolution⁶⁴. Ayman, far from voicing discontent, seems to approve, interpreting the refuse as a sign of communal solidarity. However, despite his celebratory antics, it is hinted that there might be nothing truly worth celebrating – perhaps it is all just an act of parody.

Ayman al-Dabbūsī's *Intiṣāb aswad* presents the Tunisian revolution as something that has lost its mythic glimmer. For al-Dabbūsī, the revolution stands as a signifier of Tunisia's fleeting ethos in its progression towards democracy. The country's current state, however, is clouded by fears of what is yet to come, voiced through the protagonist. These anxieties materialize in the grim landscapes and incidents of societal violence depicted within the narrative. The looming worry is that incoming governments might cut back on freedoms in the name of restoring stability, thus wiping out the blissful revolutionary bubble. Ayman emphasizes the importance of keeping the memory of the revolution alive and remaining vigilant against the possible suppression of their hard-won liberties. The book further draws attention to the significance of the politicians who came back from exile after the revolution, perhaps making indirect references to members of religious movements who had sought shelter in the United Kingdom during the Ben Ali era, only to return to Tunisia post-revolution. A dominant fear is that the twin perils of terrorism and politics might suffocate the nation's freedom, a blow already considered to have severely wounded the revolution⁶⁵, possibly even leading to its downfall⁶⁶. This is embodied in the assassination of Šukrī Bil'īd. As he grapples with the disheartening realization of a change that seems increasingly transient, the protagonist wonders whether the hopes tied to the revolution were just mirages. He questions if the revolution was merely a "temporary dream," a sentiment that underscores the profound uncertainties and concerns overshadowing the nation's future.

The ultimate message the novel carries is that the revolution fell short due to misplaced expectations. Leaders of the revolution were under the erroneous impression that political change would necessarily usher in economic prosperity. This hopeful outlook turned out to be misguided. The author offers a cynical commendation to illegal migrants as the real prophets who rightly predicted the downfall of the Tunisian dream of transformation, seizing the opportunity of slackened coastal police control to flee⁶⁷. The novel places Tunisia within a broader global network of interconnected economics and politics, a theme expanded upon in the latter parts of the work. The story emphasizes that Tunisia isn't merely similar to America but, in a certain

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

sense, a part of it and its cultural fabric. The country's trials are not unique but shared across the globe, stemming from a worldwide economic and political order. This realization comes to light particularly in the extensive chapter titled *Rasā'il ilà Amrīkā* (Letters to America)⁶⁸, where the protagonist communicates via Facebook with a Tunisian expat living in the United States. The woman speaks about social issues such as marginalization, racism, and poverty, issues that permeate both American and Tunisian society. It signifies a global battle between the wealthy and the poor, nations, and individuals. The narrative implies that the American dream, with its symbolism of prosperity, freedom, capitalism, and liberalism, is nothing but a mirage. It is the grasp of global finance and the ideology of capitalism that pose the genuine threat to both Tunisia and America. From this viewpoint, the author posits that true change within this system cannot take root in a peripheral location like Tunisia but must occur in America⁶⁹, the focal point of these global forces. Hence, if Tunisians want to challenge the prevailing order and the economic powers that govern their lives, their gaze must turn towards America. In line with this argument, the author boldly suggests that Tunisians should transform into Americans to truly spark a revolution.

Conclusions

In the three novels, contemplations on the revolution are placed within a context where the aspirations and ideals intrinsic to the revolutionary process gravitate towards a utopian vision. Each narrative engages with the theme of revolution by infusing it with current hopes for transformation and change. al-Wād and al-Mabḥūt appear to channel a sense of optimism and hope into their depiction of the revolution, presenting it as a symbol of potential and promise. In contrast, al-Dabbūsi's novel adopts a more nuanced stance, emphasizing a desire to look beyond the mere act of revolution itself. It acknowledges the revolution as merely the starting point of a broader democratic transition, rather than an end in itself.

In al-Wād there is a pronounced emphasis on the moral decay of society, a direct consequence of the cultural suppression during the Ben Ali regime that the revolution aimed to target. The novel paints a tableau of a populist revolutionary saga, capturing the essence of the "common man" ascending to elite stature. This narrative propagates a dichotomous discourse: on the one hand, "the people", conceived as a vast, yet disenfranchised body, and on the other, "the elite", a minuscule group wielding disproportionate power⁷⁰.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 85-140.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷⁰ B. De Cleen; Y. Stavrakakis, *Distinctions and articulations: A discourse theoretical framework for the study of populism and nationalism*, in "Javnost-the Public", 24, 4 (2017), p. 301.

Politics, as portrayed here, is a battleground where “the people” defend their legitimate aspirations against the “elite” who hinder them⁷¹. The entire Ben Ali era, as the narrative suggests, is a conflict between these two diametrically opposed entities: the marginalized majority and the authoritarian elites. al-Wād posits that the ethically grounded and transparent majority is more adept at managing public affairs than the so-called elite. In this narrative, there is a palpable hope that the nation’s issues can be solely attributed to the corrupt dominance of an elite, as exemplified by Ben Ali’s regime. A pervasive sentiment throughout the text is the belief that ousting this corrupt elite could usher in a new epoch for the country, facilitating the rise of a new political class genuinely committed to the collective good, benefiting the middle and lower classes.

In juxtaposition, al-Mabḥūt’s perspective on the revolution engages with the concept of the *longue durée*, suggesting that understanding the revolution necessitates viewing it through the continuum of history. He interprets the revolution not as an isolated incident but as a culmination of prior episodes of unrest, notably the general strike of January 1978, the Libyan-orchestrated uprising of January 1980⁷², the spirited student movements of the 1980s, and the bread riots that marked January 1984⁷³. al-Mabḥūt’s tale diverges from the binary narrative of elite versus populace. Rather, he delves into a more nuanced exploration of a cross-class quest for liberty, with an accent on police coercion and media censorship. For al-Mabḥūt, the revolution emerges as a poignant manifestation of a deeply ingrained anti-liberal culture that persistently suffocates sequential youth cohorts, driving them towards either escapism or self-infliction. This novel, released four years post-revolution, serves in some ways as a cautionary reminder that the revolutionary impetus did not merely materialize in 2011; instead, it germinated from deeply rooted urges for political and expressive freedom that had been systematically repressed. Yet, the narrative also casts a discerning eye on the state’s architects, or what might be termed the “deep state” – an influential cadre who steers the nation, not always in alignment with the citizenry’s best interests. Through al-Mabḥūt’s lens, there appears to be an inclination to underscore the historical weight of the ongoing movement and the potential for it to be overshadowed by an entrenched system, reminiscent of the management that oversaw the transition from Bourguiba to Ben Ali.

⁷¹ S. Waisbord, *The Elective Affinity between Post-Truth Communication and Populist Politics*, in “Communication Research and Practice”, 4, 1 (2018), p. 17.

⁷² B. Hendrickson, *March 1968: Practicing Transnational Activism from Tunis to Paris*, in “International Journal of Middle East Studies”, 44, 4 (2012), p. 456.

⁷³ C. Alexander, *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, Routledge, New York 2016, p. 71.

Ayman al-Dabbūsī adopts a satirical approach to the revolution, emphasizing its rhetorical dimensions more than the freedoms and progress it conferred upon Tunisia. al-Dabbūsī contends that in an intricately connected global landscape, Tunisia cannot experience substantial transformation unless concurrent revolutions are initiated at the heart of global hubs, especially the United States. The novel dissects the tumultuous nature of the capital, an upheaval that seems unprecedented in a nation that has historically curtailed political freedoms. al-Dabbūsī urges readers to view the Tunisian revolution within the broader context of worldwide revolutionary movements, signifying that influences in a globalized age are seldom purely local. However, interspersed in his portrayal of revolutionary Tunisia is a mocking undertone that appears to demystify and perhaps desanctify the revered concept of revolution. This tone suggests an underlying scepticism, as if al-Dabbūsī wishes to intimate that the actualization of the revolution is either an unattainable dream or a mere utopian vision⁷⁴. Through this satirical lens, al-Dabbūsī highlights the taxing nature of revolutionary fervour and the subsequent upheavals it brings. Yet, he simultaneously affirms such turmoil as an essential step towards forging a better nation.

The novels present insights on the revolutionary period, intertwining elements of hope and disillusionment. At their core, these narratives are drawn from the perspectives of characters who, in different ways, fell short of realizing their aspirations prior to the revolution. They stand as chronicles of battles lost against forces resisting change, imbuing the stories with a sense of injustice and unfulfilled promises. This sense of loss is more than just a narrative device; it functions as an allegory, a call to arms that challenges future generations to confront and redress the grievances and shortcomings of the past. The central figures, emblematic of their respective generations, evolve as the martyrs within these revolutionary tales. An underlying message resonates throughout, urging readers to reflect on historical missteps, to strive for the once envisioned but unrealized ideals. These portrayals of loss are encapsulated in characters who seek refuge in spaces outside Tunisia or non-spaces marked by intoxication and madness, a vivid manifestation of a yearning to flee a distressing reality and the associated disillusionment. For example, in al-Wād's narrative, the minister-turned-teacher's descent into alcoholism and eventual madness represents a tragic retreat from the crushing weight of failure, culminating in his institutionalization. al-Mabḥūt's characters, on the other hand, find solace in hedonistic pursuits and opportunities beyond Tunisia's borders, as depicted in the lives of figures such as Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in Switzerland and Zaynah in France. al-Dabbūsī's central character chooses a path of escapism through intoxicants and an unrestrained sexual life, a journey that leads to his ruin. Through the unfolding of these stories, a

⁷⁴ Ayman al-Dabbūsī, *Intiṣāb aswad*, cit., p. 39.

continuous dialectical exploration emerges, one that pits the lofty discourse of revolution against the sobering realities of disillusionment. These novels serve as both a reflection and a cautionary tale, painting a nuanced picture of a complex historical moment. They invite readers to engage in a deeper understanding of the revolution's multifaceted nature and challenge them to grapple with the contradictions and complexities inherent in societal upheaval. By doing so, they contribute to a richer and more profound comprehension of a pivotal period in Tunisian history.