Tunisian Literature and the Language Question: The Long View of a Recurring Debate

MOHAMED-SALAH OMRI

Abstract: This paper traces the life and afterlife of Tunisia's literary avant-garde (*al-tali'a al-adabiyya*), which thrived between 1968 and 1972. *Al-tali'a* sought to 'revolutionise' literary language and to root Tunisian literature in the multilingual environment and social reality of the country, at a crucial period of social and political change and against the backdrop of a Leftist turn in local dissident politics. The literary avant-garde directed its criticism at the hegemony of monolingualism by, in the words of one of its theoreticians, 'wringing the neck of rhetoric and breaking the neck of the rules of standard Arabic'. The movement sought to complete the process of language and literary decolonisation in intersection with key global tendencies, including *Tiermondisme* and decoloniality. The language question was articulated, then as in post-2011 Tunisia, in terms of democracy and justice. While the state promoted fostering Tunisianness as state policy, there were other takes on this concept that were progressive, more deeply decolonial and justice-driven. This paper uncovers the genesis of the movement through the work of Izzeddine al-Madani in drama and Tahar Hammami, among others, in fiction and poetry.

Keywords: Tunisia, multilingual literature, decolonisation, *al-tali'a*,; al-Madani; al-Hammami; *tarafud*

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTS OF DEBATE

The 2014 constitution in Tunisia, for all its departures from the constitution of 1958, has left the language question virtually untouched. Article One summarises the entire narrative of the nation and its pitfalls in about 20 words – 12 only in Arabic. It reads: 'Tunisia is a free, independent, sovereign state; its religion is Islam, its language Arabic, and its system is republican. This article might not be amended'.[1] What caused most stir in the writing of this article was the place of Islam in the sentence and whether the pronoun 'it' refers to the people or to the state, the implication being nothing less than whether the state is 'civil' (*madani*) or not. The language issues remained virtually unchallenged. Article 42 talks about diversity under Title II, 'Rights and Freedoms'. That diversity covers the terms 'culture' and 'heritage', without specific reference to language. At the official levels, the internal regulations of the Tunisian parliament require the use of Arabic as the language of communication. Yet, most discussion takes place in the Tunisian dialect. One head of government insisted on delivering his speeches and interviews in the dialect almost exclusively. The current president, on the other hand, sticks to a classical, rhetorical, even convoluted register in his public address as well as to Maghrebi script in his diplomatic and official communications. No new language policy figures at the official level, if we exclude, on the one hand, references to consolidating Arabic or some attempts at introducing English at earlier stages in primary education in retaliation to French, and on the other, to catch up with an increasingly English-competent youth population.

Yet, the public sphere has been decidedly active and diverse in addressing this issue, both at the levels of discourse and in practice. The cultural sphere is where a lot of this

live debate has been taking place.[2] The significant rise in the prestige of Tunisian Arabic – long-considered by many as a language in itself, as I will explain below – has gone beyond audio-visual media and the political sphere. Novels written partially or wholly in Tunisian are not seen as odd or an affront. The 2013 novel, *Kalb bin kalb* (Son of a dog) by Taoufik Ben Brik, a well-known dissident journalist, essayist and novelist in French and in Arabic, may be considered a landmark in post-revolution Tunisian literature. The revolution unchained Tunisians and removed mediation between the writer and the public. To express excess in the Tunisian dialect is to provide a poetic expression of freedom in a marginalised idiom. To use a regional dialect one can only hear in marginalised Tunisia is to subvert expectations. A democratisation of register was, in fact, one visible and audible effect of the revolution.

Nabiha Jrad speaks of a moment in which 'authority had switched camps, the president spoke the language of the people, and the people spoke the language of power'.[3] This is the moment when Ben Ali, who insisted on speaking in Fusha, gave his last speech in Tunisian. Jrad stresses that 'one of the linguistic outcomes of the revolution was the rehabilitation of Tunisian Arabic or *derja*'.[4] Jrad goes as far as arguing that 'the Tunisian revolution must first be read as a linguistic event' since it is through slogans and chants that people broke the wall of fear and expressed their demands.[5] Those who did not speak Fusha found themselves unable to express themselves in parliamentary debates, as was the case with one elected official representing Tunisians in France.[6]

Yet, the linkages between the democratic question and multilingualism in postcolonial Tunisia is not new, as I go on to explain. By taking a long view, it becomes clearer that Tunisian intellectuals were in sync with contemporaneous decolonial thinking along the lines outlined by Nĝugĩ wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind* (1981). In fact, this article uncovers how Tunisian intellectuals grappled with the intersections between language, class and decolonisation as far back as the early 1960s.[7] To do so, I will begin with that early period through two key theoretical texts written by the Leftist Tunisian Group for Socialist Study and Action (GEAST), better known as Perspectives, in 1964 and 1967, respectively. They will serve as the canvas against which the methodological issues are discussed, and, in some cases, solved. I will then zero in on the contexts and the texts of a concurrent seminal moment in Tunisian literary and cultural history represented by the collective *al-tali'a a-adabiyya* (the literary *avant-garde*) and the multilingual and prolific writer and linguist Salah Garmadi, both active from the mid-1960s onwards.

MULTILINGUALISM AND THE DEMOCRATIC QUESTION IN TUNISIA

Antonio Gramsci saw in the language question deeper social significance. He explains: 'Every time the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore; the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish a more intimate and secure relationship between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to reorganize the cultural hegemony'.[8] The question of language is, therefore, a nodal point. It is part of cultural politics. This is on one side. On the other, it is linked, and linkable, to the question of the organic intellectual, Gramsci argued. This will prove crucial in the historical itinerary of the language question in Tunisia during the colonial period, but most importantly since independence. That is why the first significant protest movement after independence, the movement Perspectives, thought of it as a national question and a democratic question at the same time. The fact that language is often

intertwined with identitarian overtones should not obscure the issues of power, sovereignty and justice involved. All three were crucial to the newly independent Tunisia, engaged in state building, social cohesion and decolonisation. One emblem of this endeavour, which saw a confluence of official as well as opposition voices, was the Tunisification of culture, or more precisely, Tunisianness (*tawnasa*).

The roots of a narrative of *tawnasa* go back to the colonial period, and, like similar national narratives, work with selection and omission, digging deep in history.[9] In the aftermath of independence, *tawnasa* would become a state policy implemented through school curricula and cultural policy, as demonstrated by historian Hedi al-Timoumi.[10] That official version is quite well known.[11] But the other take on it was a progressive, more deeply decolonial and justice-driven perspective. This perspective would see its cultural equivalent in *al-tali'a al-adabiyya*, as I will argue below. But the political and theoretical argument for it is less well known and deserves extensive treatment. At the heart of this search of alternative culture is the political youth movement spearheaded by The Tunisian Group for Socialist Study and Action (GEAST), better known as Perspectives. They were mostly students and activists who gathered around the journal *Perspectives Tunisiennes*, published from 1964 to 1970 before the onset of state repression, which targeted Union Générale des Etudiants Tunisiens and the Left.[12] The essay, '*Reflexions sur la culture nationale*', published in *Perspectives* opens with a diagnosis of the state of culture at that time. Colonialism was no longer to blame: the newstate opted for a culture of the elites.[13] It could not have done otherwise since the 'regime is paternalistic, and denied the people any rightful value in the domains of politics, economics, society, and, *a fortiori*, culture' (p. 44). Intellectuals have shunned the masses: 'having in mind nothing but the desire to keep their roles and preserve their privileges, they incarnate already the indifference towards their people thanks to whom, and for whom, they are the elite' (p. 44). Cultural producers failed to reconnect with 'their' people ('*retrouver leur people*') (p. 44). While assuming the Arabo-Islamic canvas, national culture should reconnect the intellectual with history and with the present, away from 'the mythical or mythologizing the past' (p. 45). For 'it is at the level of the present social condition that the real problems are asked' (p. 45). But the work of culture is dialectical:

Intellectuals and the masses should communicate in an atmosphere of confidence; to discover and confess onto another. Intellectuals – in their capacity as those who have taken upon themselves the task of transcribing in the diverse aesthetic forms the requirements of the masses – are expected to seek [these forms] at the source. The work of the intellectual cannot be crowned with success unless the masses find themselves in it. (p. 46)

The essay goes on to say that bridges need to be built between the two sides, largely through deep alphabetisation since this should allow the masses to become 'less passive, more demanding, and better equipped to ask of their intellectuals more and more questions' (p. 46). Such dialogue would benefit both parties.

The essay is clearly inspired by Frantz Fanon's definition of national culture – published only two years earlier – and Gramsci's conceptions of the intellectual.[14] The hegemony of the state on culture as well as other spheres of social life must be countered by embracing and educating the masses left behind or marginalised. In a country where Arabic and French vied for domination and where most people did not master either of them, the question of language becomes crucial. The issue of language, on which the movement Perspectives expounds in a dedicated text, follows through from this general

outlook on national culture, deemed patriotic and popular at the same time.

With this mind, in October 1967, Perspectives devoted an essay to language, '*Comment, pour qui, contre qui faut-il écrire la langue tunisienne?*'[15] It makes three key points: that Tunisian dialect is a language; that it is the only mother tongue of Tunisians; that sorting this issue is part of the national question as well as the democratic question. By national, they refer to what they theorised in this essay and in the essay discussed above; by democracy they mean giving the majority of people access to writing and reading as well as the right to their own culture and language. This comes after the realisation that the 'Tunisian bourgeoisie', which took control of the country, 'is an ally of imperialism and 'incapable of leading the national and democratic revolution'.[16] They write:

In response to the pseudo-Arabisation by the Tunisian government, we must call for a genuine [T]unisification in practice. Likewise; to the so-called bilingualism, we must substitute French as a code for technocrats and the newly literate with an education and a usage of French as a foreign language, albeit a privileged one. We must double that by substituting Arabic as 'guardian of moral values' with an education and a usage of Arabic as mother tongue.[17]

In this, they cite the example of Haiti where people called for teaching Creole as the national language along with French.

The issues raised in these two essays alert us to the need for revisiting the question of language in a way which mirrors the concrete conditions under which it appears, here, from the perspective of a complex decoloniality and democracy understood within a 'Leftist' local and global politics of culture. In this sense, the concerns of the Perspectives intellectuals find echoes in those of Nĝugĩ wa Thiong'o and others. The forced monolingualism and the struggle for language justice highlighted in these two essays by Perspectives marked the long colonial period and the phase of nation-state building, with violent exclusion and prohibition for the benefit of French in the first period, and a policy of top-down Arabization in the second. Both policies have been vigorously contested. The reality is that this is not exclusive to Tunisia. The whole Maghreb has been the stage of linguistic confluence, a term to which I will return, as well as conflict. Maghrebi people live *in* languages, which include Arabic, local dialects, French and various Berber languages. Their multilingualism, I argue, should not be viewed as the composite of the languages spoken or written in parallel worlds, but the entangled life of these languages. Yet, assuming the multilingualism of the region does not extend to the ways in which Maghrebi literatures have been approached locally and globally. In fact, institutions of literature, including literary criticism at home and abroad, have been largely shaped by monolingualism. The rift between the two realities constitutes a methodological challenge that needs addressing. We will see in the case of *al-tali'a* where Tunisian critics would occasionally devise approaches to bridge the gap. But the issue is not restricted to this country.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Moroccan Abelkebir Khatibi warned of this rift as early as 1980: 'As long as the theory of translation, bilingualism, and the pluri-language has not advanced, certain Maghreb texts will remain beyond a formal and functional approach'.[18] In bilingual literature, Khatibi notes, 'the foreign language, when it is internalized as effective writing, as a word in action, transforms the first language, structures it and deports it toward the

untranslatable' (p. 186). Being neither in one language nor in the other problematizes the position from which the bilingual (and multilingual) subject speaks. Khatibi calls it a position of 'lucid marginality' – *une marge en éveil* (p. 17). This position should allow a decolonisation based on what he, and the Algerian intellectual Mohamed Arkoun, call double critique (p. 12). This is a critique of the other and the self, of the dominating and Orientalist West as well as a recalcitrant and conservative local tradition.[19]

What this means in relation to language is not opposing a thinking in Arabic as the alternative, but thinking *in* languages. In this thinking, the foreign language is a fault line (*faille*) that needs to be named (p. 179). In the case of bilingual writing within the same culture, Karima Laachir, working within the scope of conceptions that are sensitive to multilingualism, has developed a way of looking at Moroccan literature in French and in Arabic not as separate entities but as literatures which 'co-constitute' one another and demand to be read together.[20] Otherwise, we risk tying the value of each practice to the status of the language in which it is done. Eileen Julien raises the question of visibility by asking if the Euro-language writer is the only writer visible to postcolonial theory.[21] She argues: 'it is thus that the extroverted novel has had a disproportionate impact on thinking about Africa both *across* and *outside* the continent'.[22] The Maghreb compels us to take into account the multilingual dimension as a fault line of its own, one that cannot be accounted for as a translation between languages or the substitution of one by another, but as confluency/*tarafud*, a form of confluence and interaction of languages within the same text. By *tarafud*, I mean a blending of confluence and *rafd*: confluence in the sense of flowing with, and *rafd*, which designates flowing as well as support and generosity.[23] *Tarafud* (or perhaps confluency as an English equivalent) is a concept that describes the relationships among world literatures, away from hierarchy, domination and one-dimensional traffic. Within a multilingual text, it designates the ways in which languages flow into one another and the mutual support among these languages.

Critic Tawfic Baccar (1927-2017), a key figure in the Tunisian scene and a practitioner of multilingual criticism, speaks of *al-jiwar al-khasib* or fertile proximity. Introducing a collection of poetry published in 1972 by *al-tali'a* figure, the poet al-Tahar al-Hammami, discussed below, Baccar performs a *tarafud* between Fusha and Tunisian dialects:

Hammami does not fear popular terms or colloquial expressions […] but inserts them [*yunazziluha*) in the Fusha speech in a way which does not make it feel uneasy or odd but exuding the scent of reality and pulsating with liveliness. This 'fertile proximity' […] results in newness and originality which disturb conservatives [*zimmit*], but al-Hammami could care less [couldn't give a damn; *yitmallah*] about the life and the norms of these grandees, and tramples over their dignified propriety.[24]

The two registers are tied as a unit and cannot be separated. They flow into and support one another to create the effect of originality and newness, Baccar highlights. It is in this sense that the critic practices a form of reading together. But in order to perform this task, criticism must, in a sense, emulate the text/writer: it must be multilingual as well. Baccar was promoting this practice in part as a response to a movement in whose make-up he had significant input.[25] But it is Baccar's long-time colleague at the University of Tunis and close collaborator Salah Garmadi (1933-1982) who represents in his life occupations as in his writings, the full extent of multilingualism in the country at that time. Salah Garmadi is considered by some to be the forerunner of *al-tali'a* and offers the most complex case of multilingualism as a method of writing.

Al-tali'a marks a moment the likes of which Tunisia has seen at least twice before, once in the 1930s, through the activities of the group *tahta al-Sur*, while the other moment coalesced around the journal *al-Mabahith* in the late 1940s.[26] Both groups acted as collectives, but in very different ways and in different contexts. *Al-tali'a* also resembles what we might call a collective intellectual in the Gramscian sense of intellectual, given that its members advocated closer linkages with, and action on behalf of, the lower classes, including at the linguistic level. In comparative terms, *al-tali'a* resembles the movement to write in African languages and write for peasants and workers described by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.[27] Historically, the movement emerged when the national question was no longer the rallying cry. Unburdened by the colonial factor *al-tali'a* writers implemented on the ground the type of culture called for by Perspectives in the 1964 and 1967 essays mentioned above.

The literary *avant-garde* aspired to nothing short of a revolution in literary language. They sought to root literature into a multilingual environment. They came to a realisation – very much in line with Perspectives – that the gap between the reader and literature is not, or not only, a content in which readers cannot find themselves, but mostly a linguistic and formal gap. In other words, language and form are fault lines of their own, separating literature from potential readers. The solution is to reverse the equation and take language use as the starting point. This would mean that the presumed distinction between a so-called literary and non-literary language should be abolished, recognising that 'each word should be capable of poeticity if used poetically'.[28] *Al-Tali'a* critic, Mohamed Salah Ben Amor argued that the writer lived in a multilingual reality 'from fusha to darja to French to franco-darja to Arabo-darja to the dialects used in different parts of the country'.[29] He or she should therefore feel free to write in all of these languages and dialects and address readers in the language they understand. This explains the variety in the ways *al-tali'a* poets, fiction writers and even critics dealt with Tunisian darja. Methods used included *tafsih* (subjecting dialect to the rules of Fusha), inserting darja expressions within a Fusha text as they are, rejecting rules of grammar and writing entirely in darja.[30] I illustrate these methods below with brief examples.

While the movement nominally ended within a few years of its birth, most *al-tali'a* figures continued their individual paths, whether in poetry, theatre or fiction, but not so much in criticism and theory. Two critics, Mohamed Salah Ben Amor and Ezzedine al-Madani, are key figures in both the make-up of the movement and the nurturing of it, as well as the subsequent critical disengagement from it. Their roles are worth highlighting. Al-Madani is largely credited with leading the new direction with two date-making contributions, *al-adab al-tajribi* (Experimental literature) and '*al-Insan al-Sifr*' (Zero man), both published first in journals between 1967 and 1970.[31] The first is a critical treaty, close to a lengthy manifesto, while the second is an incomplete narrative. Both texts hold place of pride in Tunisian literary history.

In *al-adab al-tajribi*, al-Madani starts from a basic rejection of imitation, whether of the Arab East or the European West. Another premise is to consider literary form a priority, and this form must be derived from Tunisian reality. The backdrop is social and historical as well, in the sense that the writer must maintain close affinity with their historical moment, especially as lived by the lower classes. The *avant-garde* poses the question of art from the perspective of democracy and justice, not aesthetic innovation for the sake of it. Al-Madani explains:

The Tunisian *avant-garde* has no wish to be connected with Western *avant-garde*. It has an historical, social and cultural consciousness which drives it to open up intellectual paths different from the paths of Europe […] the Tunisian *avant-garde* is more like the *avant-garde* in Brazil, Argentina [etc.] than the *avant-garde* in Germany, the United States or Britain.[32]

For him, literary form was a fault line in its own right.

This South-oriented and internally focussed perspective, with its interest in form and language, is an intersection, a nodal point, which challenges any facile reading. In this sense, *al-tali'a* is better viewed as a *tarafud* of interests, modes of writing, ambitions and personalities, which coalesced within a period of four years or so, from 1967 to 1972, although a close observer, Ahmed Hadhiq al-Urf, speaks of a wider time frame, which stretches from 1965 to 1974. He argues that the movement did not start as a planned programme but 'started spontaneously when audacious experiments began to flow from here and there and gathered into one pond which will later be called the literary *avant-garde*'.[33] He, in fact, notes a splitting of the movement in two main currents or wings, as he calls them: a wing which withdrew in one way or another, and another which saw in the *avant-garde* a movement that went beyond literature and called for a specific culture. Such a culture emerged from the popular classes and returned to them, starting from a 'Tunisia specificity' and connecting with Arab and global perspectives.[34] The movement took place in complex local and global contexts. At the cultural and ideological levels, three main broad trends dominated: Tunisian reactions to the pressures of pan-Arab nationalism, *Tiersmondisme* and formalism.

The sociology of the movement and its political context are important. It included poets Mohamed Lahbib al-Zannad, Salah Garmadi, Fadhila al-Shabbi, Tahar al-Hammami; fiction writers Ezzeddine al-Madani, Samir al-Ayadi, Radhwan al-Kuni, Husayn al-Wad, Mahmud al-Tunisi; playwrights and actors Samir al-Ayyadi, Ezzedine al-Madani, Moncef Souissi; critics and theorists Mohamed Salah Ben Amor, Ezzedine al-Madani, al-Bashir ben Slama, Ahmed Hadhiq al-Urf; and forerunners (Salah al-Garmadi in particular). It also had devoted academic work, most notably the informative and quite comprehensive work by *al-tali'a* leading member al-Tahar al-Hammami. It also had access to journals, *al-Firk* and *Qasas* in particular, and newspaper supplements in *al-'Amal*, *al-Ayyam*, *al-Masira*, *al-Nass* and so on. Al-Hammami argues that *Al-tali'a* 'embodied, to a certain extent, "national unity" under the roof of "Tunisianness" and "form"'.[35]

In my view, to have a movement that combined criticism, theorising and creativity in a deliberate and coordinated manner makes *al-tali'a* a unique intervention. Its collective way of being and its focus on innovation (*tajdid*) in both literature and critical approaches can in itself be a form of literary revolution. Its attempt to break the hegemony of establishment culture and the Western grip on it were radical moves. The political context in which it occurred and its intersections with both the Left and the establishment does not reduce its *avant-gardism*; in fact, it can be seen as a parallel to the political field itself. But its lasting radicalism and decolonial outlook were manifest in its work, to which I now turn.

'WRINGING THE NECK OF LANGUAGE AND RHETORIC'

In poetry, al-Urf identifies key features, all of which stem from the desire to be contemporary in sound, image and themes, as the poem stops being an historical event

and becomes an anthropological one. At the level of form, the main poetic form that emerged from *al-tali'a* was neither vertical, like the traditional *qasida*, nor free verse. Ben Amor identifies three key features of this poetry that he considers unique to Tunisia: keeping rhyme but changing it frequently, commitment to the stop (*sukun*) at the rhyme (*rawiy*), which is a feature of Tunisian Darija, and usage of classical artistic prose devices such as rhyming prose, parallelism, etc. The poem 'Calls in the morning of the city' (*nida'at fi sabah al-madinah*, 1969) by Mohamed al-Habib al-Zannad relies on daily language in order to draw a panorama of the city's sounds and scenes, shouts of plumbers, voices of peddlers selling second-hand clothes:

My city is drawn behind the carts of street cleaners,
Sprayed with pesticides at night.
My city, Oh scary night,
Descends in a 'ditch',
In a 'circled' and tied street,
My city is pounded by hammers,
Tied down to pegs.
Nailed. Nailed and rebuilt anew:
'*Roba vecchia… vecch* … plumber …lummer…
plombier ... bier… bavecch ... ummer…'[36]

Tunisian readers would recognise these sounds, understand them in their diverse linguistic origins – *Roba Vecchia* being Italian, *plombier* being French and other terms such as *mabkhouka* (sprayed) and *hafhouf* (ditch) being dialectal. All of these sounds are made into a sonic whole, reflecting the dissonances of the city's multilingual soundscape. The poem poses the problems of reading multilingual texts and calls for close knowledge of the dialect. It also challenges translation. What should a translator do in order not to lose traces of multilingualism? In my rendering above, I keep French and Italian terms and set them in a sequence to be read aloud, and imitate the Arabic in repeating only parts of the words as a plumber or a peddler would do.

This method of writing was theorised and practiced by al-Tahar al-Hammami who wrote a number of pieces he called manifesto-poems where he expounds on the *tali'a* method and disassociates it from past poetry. In the poem 'The Words of Mr. Dictionary', he gathers clichés about poetry and poets from the poetic and critical heritage in a satirical tone to conclude by describing the dictionary as a keeper of termites, referring to useless and harmful language and concepts. His poem 'Cocktail in the Open Air' resembles a scrapbook of objects, such as a train ticket, popular songs, phrases from local media and even language games and riddles. All of these flow together to make a multilingual and multimodal whole. The poems' main impact is visual and sonic, which makes a translation almost futile. A key feature of his poetry is *tafsih* (standardisation), which is misleading to the monolingual reader since words and phrases look and sound like Modern Standard Arabic but are actually in the dialect and require high cultural competence to decipher.

Al-tali'a critics Mohamed Salah Ben Amor and al-Hadi Bouhouche worked diligently to 'invent' approaches fit for this experimentation.[37] One attempt in particular seems significant for the present discussion. It consists in linking the *al-tali'a* poetry dubbed 'not vertical and not free verse' with jazz music.[38] This is not surprising since the decolonial search for a third way characterised *al-tali'a*'s theory and practice. Such a story, however, remains untold. Authenticity, claim the two critics, is to be rooted in one's time so as to absorb its rhythm. New Tunisian poetry should listen, in a sense, to

its ‘sonic environment’ and in this it constitutes the nucleus of an authentic Tunisian poetry.[39] And part of being Tunisian is being African. They write: ‘[this poetry] is Tunisian because it embraces the rhythms and tunes of popular heritage; Arab because it is born in an Arabic language […] and African because it contains within its folds musical aspects of black [*zunuj*] artists, especially jazz players’.[40] The critics single out the shared practice of handling the sound matter in a personal way, which makes the rhythm of each poem, according to them, suited for its subject matter, achieving an artistic unity of images and sounds. The other shared feature is liveliness and spontaneity, which usually result from a closer relationship to the bustle of daily life and its sounds, as in al-Zannad’s poem above.

But the most celebrated text, and the one which marked a turning point in Tunisian literature at the time, is ‘*al-Insan al-Sifr’* (Zero Man) of which only three chapters were published, but which nonetheless caused a stir among critics and a controversy among the religious establishment. The latter accused the writer of blasphemy and denigration of the sacred text. Like a lot of his work, al-Madani continued on the path he set in his book on experimentation. Here, he subtitles his text ‘experimental story’ and explains in a footnote how it is the expression of a man who is searching for his self through the world of language and objects’.[41] And would elaborate on it later: ‘*Zero Man* is the story of a man in search of himself in his intellectual, linguistic, temporal and worldly prisons, but [who] cannot escape from them’.[42] ‘Zero Man’ is divided into sections called *hizb* (the sixtieth part of the Qur’an), which follow daily prayer times, adding two to the obligatory five to make seven. The basic story is of a man who steals a loaf of bread and is arrested for it. Everything happens at the level of language, including illustrations, a peculiar punctuation and orthography. The register varies from direct Qur’anic quotations and classical diction specific to various genres, to typically Tunisian expressions and direct political statements. One such sentence reads: ‘Guide us to the right path, the path of those who say *amin,* feed us *hergma bil kor’in* [Tunisian popular dish) and don’t let us die of hunger’.[43] Rhyming prose (*saja’*) is used throughout. Some statements are overtly political: ‘My country I will build you I will build you with clear letters with shining words with radiant expression with deep meanings I will build you my country with the revolutionary pen with the militant prose with fighting poetry with rebellious progressive style with popular living raw expression’.[44]. Like the manifesto-poem mentioned above, the story is metafictional, advocating *al-tali’a*’s commitment to innovation in language and form as a liberating aesthetic.

This construction of the nation through language and literature falls very much within *al-tali’a*’s programme of action and needs to be heeded. In the second chapter of ‘Zero Man’, published in November 1969, the classical language of famous astronomers, historians or exegeses are juxtaposed with the dialect of the time in the form of lists of modern amenities and city sounds, recalling the poem by al-Zannad: ‘The city cleaner pushes his wheel barrel dong dong dong robavecchia shouts old clothes for sale old bottles for sale old shoes for sale those who worked hard ended up dead ...’.[45] The poem showcases, on one side, the rhyming prose and rehearsed alliterations of the classical writer, and on the other, the cacophony of the modern city: ‘Everything gets lost in the city of copper with the proletarians whose shoes ring against the asphalt of the street in the morning, singing at the tune of chika chika bom:

Life is *tcharbika* [chaos]. Bika, bika, dom.
And *bulitika* [politics]. Tika, tika, dom’.[46]

But while this form and language satisfy the *avant-gardist* writer, they shock the conservative gatekeepers of culture (*zimmit*, as al-Hammami called them). And this is indeed what happened: '*al-Insan al-Sifr'* was condoned by authorities close to the state, such as Mohamed Mzali, but was condemned by the religious establishment and traditional critics. Atheism and blasphemy were evoked; one critic called the text's language a 'zero language', more like that of magicians and imposters, and its ideas 'adolescent'.[47]

Multilingualism interrupts textually the recitation of the sacred text and disrupts its hegemony at the cultural and ideological levels. By proceeding through erecting monuments to classical styles and languages and then undermining them with their contemporary Tunisian equivalents, one has the feeling the writer is working with an equation – there are in fact several equations and tables in the text – whose sum is nothing, zero. This is a kind of zero degree of literature, where one register and form is unintelligible because it is too far removed from reality, the others are also unintelligible because they are too close to it. Neither is narrativised or subjected to storytelling. The real story is in their juxtaposition. The text becomes a sort of pond where these register and forms flow, or a mill in which they are grounded to dust – in fact, alphabets and single letters dot al-Madani's text – or where meaning comes to a halt. The way the text is constructed ensures that these languages cannot be separated, not even for analytical purposes, and must be considered together. Any attempt at catering to monolingual translatability is kept at bay. How indeed to free oneself from the prison house of a language that has had such a hegemonic grip on literature, if not by attacking its hegemony at every level? And how to counter a crippling history of abstract and transcendental rhetoric if not by opening it up to the chaos (*tcharbika,* to use a word from 'Zero Man') of the here and now?

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of the revolution of 2011 in Tunisia, there was almost perfect alignment between expression and situation, because both were unchained. At the heart of this alignment is a question of proximity between literature and the social and historical situation. With regard to language, a democratisation of language was enabled by this social change, which, in turn, enabled multilingual literature. Yet, linking literature and language to democracy was not new to the country. Tunisia's independence in 1956, opened the way to focus national effort on constructing the institutions and 'modernising' (*tahdith*) the society in a top-down and planned manner, including the areas of education and culture. There was national consensus on this orientation, largely formed by the state's hegemony on all fields of life, including language policy. Bilingual education was preserved, French saw its status reduced but confirmed within the linguistic landscape. This was a deliberate and planned effort, the flagship of which were measures including changing personal status laws away from *shari'a* law and towards more rights for women, bilingual humanistic education and concerted efforts to support the arts across the country. Historian Timoumi speaks of *dawlanah* (statisation) of society and economy in the 1960s. One of its outcomes was a kind of obsession with Tunisianness. Yet, rather similar to what Gramsci describes in the case of Italy, the social experience of Tunisia had changed, including the rise of an educated middle class and rapid urbanisation, while symbolic representation remained tied to clear separation in prestige and in functions between French and Arabic.[48] Therefore, there was a disjunction between the literary and the social, a time lapse and an aesthetic incongruence. Literary renewal, advocated by *al-talia al-adabiyya* was therefore not

'purely literacy', to use Gramsci's argument about the Italian case.[49]

In this sense, *al-tali'a* marks a moment of decolonisation and democratisation of knowledge and culture, one in which the movement practiced, in commentary and in literary creativity, what Khatibi calls a double critique. That work of decolonisation and democratisation was performed in connection with the language question and was enabled by it. More than ten years after political independence, al-Madani asserts, Tunisia did not achieve cultural sovereignty. Post-independence intellectuals, Perspectives tell us, settled in their comfortable privileges and proximity to the state. Globally, the decolonisation and democratisation of culture and literature were on the agenda in a changed world where intellectual leadership was no longer in the traditional West. *Al-tali'a* refused 'intellectual and artistic subordination to the West', al-Madani says.[50] This is what led Mohamed Ali Yousfi to speak about the poetry of *al-tali'a*, borrowing a verse from the Qur'an, as an 'olive tree which is neither Eastern nor Western'.[51] Rejecting East and West, Arabic only and French only, as alien and exclusive, and embracing multilingualism as familiar, real, inclusive and socially and historically authentic, translated in practice into a form of literary justice and a democratic aesthetic.

Approaching such complex and multilingual practice critically can only be experimental or a thought experiment, as in the present essay or as Baccar and Ben Amor have tried to do. For by being fully intelligible only to the multilingual reader, such texts deny intelligibility to monolingual criticism and resist translation. It is in fact on these bases that they have been largely excluded from dominant conceptions and institutions of world literature. But multilingualism does not make these literatures less globally significant if looked at from the right perspective. Nğugĩ, al-Garmadi, *al-tali'a* poets and others like them worldwide resonate with one another. They constitute a world literature in which the social and historical existence of their respective peoples, languages and forms are brought into a whole and synchronised after being dismembered and torn asunder by colonialism and injustice. This is why the language question in these literatures is really about more than language, to recall Gramsci's argument: it is about decolonisation, democracy and justice.

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NOTES

[1] *Constitution of Tunisian Republic* (Tunis: Official Publication, 2014), p. 9.
[2] Nathanael Mannone, 'The Cultural Environment in Post-2011 Tunisia', *The Middle East in London*, 2018, pp. 10-11.
[3] Nabiha Jrad, 'The Tunisian Revolution: From Universal Slogans for Democracy to the Power of Language', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 6 (2013), pp. 232 (p. 252).
[4] Ibid.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 236.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 253.
[7] Michel Foucault, who was in the country at the time, admits in an interview that the Tunisian youth of 1968 were nothing short of heroes, who linked their being to brave and selfless political action. The reaction of Tunisian students was 'a desire, an eagerness and a capacity for absolute

sacrifice without the least indication of suspect ambition or desire for power or personal benefit'. Abdeljalil Temimi, ed., *Le rôle politique et culturel de Perspectives et Perspectivistes dans la Tunisie indépendante* (Tunis: FTERSI, 2008), p. 213.

[8] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, edited by D. Forgas and G. Nowell-Smith, translated by William Boelhower (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 183-184.

[9] Mohamed-Salah Omri, 'History, Literature and Settler Colonialism in North Africa', *Modern Languages Quarterly*, 66 (2005), pp. 273-298; Bechir Ben Slama, *al-Shakhsiyya al-tunisiyya* (Tunisian personality) (Tunis: Dra Ben Abdallah, 1974).

[10] Hedi al-Timoumi, *Tunis: 1957-1987* (Tunisia 1957-1987) (Tunis: Dar Mohamed Ali al-Hammi, 2006).

[11] Ben Slama, who served as bridge figure between *al-Tali'a* and the state versions of Tunisianness, articulated a comprehensive argument for it in his 1974 book, *al-Shakhsiyya al-tunisiyya* (Tunisian personality).

[12] For more on the movement and its effects on Tunisian culture, see Mohamed Salah Omri, 'The movement Perspectives: Legacies and representations', *EuroOrient*, 38 (2012), pp. 149-164.

[13] Perspectives, 'Reflexions sur la culture nationale', *Perspectives*, April (1964), , pp. 40-46. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article. All translations from French and Arabic are mine unless indicated otherwise. Transliteration is simplified. Personal names are spelled as they appear in French sources.

[14] In 'Reflexions sur la culture nationale', there is reference to Sartre's preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* (p. 42). The essay also quotes a text, 'Traditional Cultures in South-East Asia' without further reference. I think the authors are referring to the UNESCO report of 1958 with the same title.

[15] Sami Bargaoui, 'Perspectives et la langue: L'extrême spécificité par l'extrême universalité', in *Apres l'Independence: parcours et discours*, edited by M. B. Ayari and S. Bargaoui (Tunis: Nokoosh arabiyya, 2010), pp. 58-79. The chapter references a text published in 1967 and consisting of five pages including one page of notes, which could be a version of the longer one I use here. The latter is dated October 1967 and has 12 pages. Bargaoui sees a link between the CRS Linguistics research group led by Salah al-Garmadi, to be discussed below, and Perspectives in the sense that they belong to the same intellectual and public sphere.

[16] Perspectives, 'Comment, pour qui, contre qui faut-il écrire la langue tunisienne? October, (1967) (Unpublished), p. 12.

[17] *Ibid.*, p.11.

[18] Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Le roman maghrébin* (Paris: Maspéro, 1983), p. 179. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.

[19] In Khatibi's words, 'L'occident est une partie de moi, que je ne peux nier que dans la mesure où je lutte contre tous les occidents et orients qui m'oppriment ou me désenchantent' (p. 108).

[20] Karima Laachir, 'The Aesthetics and Politics of "Reading Together" Moroccan Novels in Arabic and French', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 21 (2016), pp. 22-36 (p. 25).

[21] Eileen Julien, 'The Extroverted African Novel', in *The Novel*, edited by Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 667-700 p. 677.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 690.

[23] Mohamed-Salah Omri, 'Min ajl nazariyya fi al-tarfud al-adabi: fi shi'riyyat al muqaranah wa akhlaqiyatiha' (Towards a theory of *tarafud*: The poetics and ethics of comparison), in *L'étude comparée et le dialogue des littératures* (The Comparative Lesson and the Dialogue of Literatures), edited by Bayt al-Hikma and the Tunisian Society of Literature (Tunis: Bayt al Hikma, 2016), pp. 13-51.

[24] al-Tahar al-Hammami, *al-Hisar* (The Siege) (Tunis: al-Dar al-Tunisiyya li al-nashr, 1972), p. 11. Baccar is referring to these lines from al-Hammami's poem, 'Defense d'entrer', the title of which is written in French, and which includes a collage of photos by *al-tali'a* writer and painter Mahmoud al-Tunisi:

Values were ailing
And we were reckless youth

Not giving a damn about life
and the norms of its grandees,
Trampling over it and its dignified propriety (*Ibid.*, p. 127).

[25] Taoufik Baccar and S. Garmadi, *Ecrivains de Tunisie* (Tunis: Sud Editions, 2017 [1981]).

[26] Notable is the group *tahta al-Sur*, active in the 1930s and 1940s. The leading figure of *al-tali'a*, Ezzedine al-Madani recognises one of them, Ali al-Du'aji, as 'father of the Tunisian short story' in an introduction to the latter's collection in 1979. Ali al-Du'aji, *Sahirtu minhu al-layali* (Sleepless Nights) (Tunis: al-dar al-tunisiayya li al-nashr, 1979), p. 10.

[27] See in particular the chapter 'The Languages of African Fiction' in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: the politics of language in African literature* (Nairobi: James Curry, 1981), pp. 4-33.

[28] al-Tahar al-Hammami, *harakat al-tali'a al-adabiyya fi tunis, 1968-1972* (The literary avant-garde movement in Tunisia, 1968-1972) (Tunis: Dar Sahar, 1994), (p.264).

[29] The debate on whether Tunisian Darija is a dialect or a language in its own right has a long history. For a brief view and argument for considering it a language, see Imed Ben Ammar, 'The Knowledge of Language: The Case of Arabic', *Les Cahier de Tunisie*, 171 (1995), 71–94.

[30] Al-Du'aji used Darija in the 1930s and, closer to *al-tali'a*'s time, novelist Bachir Khurayyif pioneered the use of local register in dialogue, as did Mohamed Rached Hamzaoui.

[31] Ezzeddine al-Madani, *Al-adab al-tajribi* (Experimental literature) (Tunis: al-dar al-tunisiyya li al-nashr, 1972); Ezzedine al-Madani, 'Al-insan al-Sifr' (Zero Man), *Qasas*, May (1967), 131-133.

[32] Paul Starkey, 'Quest for Freedom: The Case of 'Izz al-Din al-Madani', *The Journal of Arabic Literature*, 26 (1995), pp. 67-79 (p. 69).

[33] Ahmed Hadhik al-Urf, *The Complete Works*, Al-tali'a al-adabiyya: Stages and Achievements (Tunis: Dar Sahar, 2018), II, p. 135.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[35] Ibid., p. 268.

[36] Mohamed al-Habib al-Zannad, 'nida'at fi sabah al-madinah' (Calls in the morning of the city), *al-Fikr*, December (1969), 11-13.

[37] Al-Urf considers Mohamed Salah Ben Amor an '*avant-gardist* critic who called for extracting critical norms from the work of *tali'a* writers itself'. Al-Urf, *The Complete Works*, p. 25.

[38] The authors cite J. Berendt as their source for information on jazz music. Ben Amor and Bouhouche, 'Bayna al-jazz wa ghayr al-'amudi wa al-hur', *al-Firk*, February (1970). It is also likely that they may be aware of a contemporaneous encounter between Tunisian music and jazz, which took place in 1967 and resulted in a famous album 'Noon in Tunisia', spearheaded by the same Joachim Ernest Berendt, recorded in Germany and credited with the start of world music.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 59. *Zinji* is the term used here, which finds its roots in the classical Arabic term for black African, (as we can find in *Zinjabar* (Zanzibar), which means the land of Zinj).

[41] Al-Madani, 'Al-insan al-Sifr', p. 55.

[42] Ezzeddine al-Madani, 'Al-Insan al-sifr, al-khayal, al-Ilhad', *al-Fikr*, February (1969), pp. 70-74 (p. 72).

[43] Ezzedine al-Madani, 'Al-Insan al-sifr, hizb al-fajr' (Zero Man, *hizb* of dawn), *al-Fikr*, December (1968), pp.55-63 (p. 63).

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[45] Ezzedine al-Madani, 'Al-Insan al-sifr, hizb al-subh' (Zero Man, *hizb* of morning), *al-Fikr*, November (1969), pp. 17-33 (p. 22).

[46] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[47] Ezzeddine al-Madani, 'Al-Insan al-sifr, al-khayal, al-Ilhad', *al-Fikr*, February (1969), pp. 70-74 (p. 70).

[48] Neil Lazarus and S. Shapiro, 'Translatability, Combined Unevenness and World Literature in Antonio Gramsci', *Mediations*, 32 (2018), pp. 1-36 (p. 4).

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

[50] Ezzeddine al-Madani, 'Nahnu wa al-thaqafa wa al-siyadah al-adabiyya' (Cultural and literary sovereignty and us), *al-Fikr*, June (1970), pp. 28-39 (p. 4). .
[51] Mohamed Ali al-Yusufi, 'Al-ghayr 'amudi wa al-hur…this olive tree", *Al-Fikr*, November (1971), pp. 92-95.