

WRITING A *MARWIYYA* IN CONTEMPORARY TUNISIA: TAOUFIK BEN BRIK'S *KAWASAKI*

CRISTINA LA ROSA

University of Catania (Italy)

Abstract: *Kawasaki* is a novel published in 2014 by Tunisian writer Taoufik Ben Brik, already renowned for his book entitled *Kalb ben Kalb*. Although *Kawasaki* addresses issues relevant to literature of resistance, Ben Brik prefers to define it a *marwiyya*, almost as if to create a new genre. The novel is set in a dry, barren Tunisia, where everything is arid and stony, a metaphor of the state of mind of the men and women who feel trapped in contemporary Tunisian society. The novel bears the name of the protagonist's motorcycle on which he undertakes a physical journey towards Tataouine, but also a complex metaphorical journey characterised by the nonsensical thoughts that assail him on the way. He is a schoolteacher, a father, and a husband. Keen on art and reading, he does not view the world like everyone else. All of this is reflected in the language used by Ben Brik, which produces an illogical and delirious prose, also on account of the blending and alternation of Tunisian and Standard Arabic. In this paper, I will analyse the main formal features of the novel and its principal narrative strategies.

Keywords: *Taoufik Ben Brik, Tunisian novel, stream of consciousness, marwiyya, literature of resistance, mixed varieties.*

Literary production in vernacular Arabic flourished in Tunisia following the Arab Spring¹. These bottom-up works emerged thanks to the commitment of several Tunisian intellectuals who increasingly frequently have chosen to write in their mother tongue or in mixed varieties of Arabic. In recent years, the work of the Association Derja,² which aims to foster the use of Tunisian as a language of culture, has also driven this trend. Naturally, this growing literary production in the vernacular does not mean that novelists did not employ mixed varieties or Tunisian Arabic in their works before the so-called Jasmine Revolution.³ However, as Ferrando (2011) observed in Morocco, there was no strong vernacular literary tradition before 2011, whereas now, in Tunisia, it is really hard to keep up with the intense flowering of novels in dialect. In fact, the 2011 Revolution eliminated any mediation between writers and the public, encouraging self-publishing, opening up new literary genres, and creating a “democratisation of register.”

¹ See La Rosa 2022 and relative bibliography.

² See bettounsi.com and the Facebook page *Derja la langue tunisienne*, available at <https://www.facebook.com/derja.association> (consulted on 26/09/2022).

³ For instance, 'Alī al-Du'āǧī (d. 1949), Bašīr Ḥurayyif (d. 1983) and Maḥmūd al-Mas'adī (d. 2004) included some dialectal elements in their novels and short stories. On Bašīr Ḥurayyif, see Nicosia 2021.

In Tunisia, we are witnessing what Mejdell (2017: 85), referring to Egyptian literature, defined as a “destandardisation process” characterised by a pluralism of expressions and the creation of new, fluid writing norms. Until recently, however, there has not been much interest in Tunisian literary production.

Tawfiq b. Brīk's⁴ *Kawasaki* must be read in the context of this cultural landscape.

1. Bio-bibliographical Notes on Taoufik Ben Brik

Born in a small Tunisian town called Jerissa, near El Kef, Taoufik Ben Brik was one of six children of the founder of the first mining union, a man who had struggled against the French protectorate, and the brother of engaged Tunisian politician Ġalāl b. Brīk al-Zuġlāmī. Known for his satirical writings denouncing Ben 'Alī's dictatorship, Taoufik Ben Brik was censored and arrested several times by the police of the former regime. A brilliant writer and journalist, he has received awards for both literature and journalism. Not surprisingly, he often selects contributions by Z – a controversial and anonymous Tunisian cartoonist known for his stance against the Tunisian government⁵ – who also produced the cover of *Kawasaki*.

Taoufik Ben Brik's novel *Kalb ben Kalb (Dog, Son of Dog, 2013)* was an immediate bestseller, selling 40,000 copies in one year. The book, which is written entirely in Tunisian dialect, narrates the story of the marginalised sections of society in a marginalised idiom. Indeed, this democratisation of register is a visible and audible effect of the Revolution. The book raised a great controversy and Ben Brik was heavily criticized as, for the first time in decades, there no longer was authority responsible for controlling language, thereby also opening the door to the use of explicit sexual language in literature (Omri 2019).

2. Hammām and Kawasaki in a “ṭāṭāized” Society

The novel begins with the introduction of the protagonist, Hammām, a forty-year old primary school teacher from Sīdī Ḥmad Šāliḥ, who is driving towards Tataouine (Ṭāṭāwīn) on a “Japanese-made gazelle made of iron and fire [...] to do something meaningless” (Ben Brik 2014: 21). Tataouine is an oppressive town inhabited and ruled by the 'arš, a word meaning throne, tribe, but also age-old clans. In his introduction to *Kawasaki*, Ḥusayn al-Wād (d. 2018), another Tunisian novelist and scholar, states that «Taoufik Ben Brik got his hands on a secret worth discussing and revealing.» In fact, the “secret” that allows one to understand the book is that the Ṭāṭā clan, responsible for the “ṭāṭaization” [corruption] of society, represents the Trabelsi family. The /t/ which is repeated in proper and geographical names, as in the case of Tataouine (Ṭāṭāwīn), is in fact the initial of the surname Ṭrabelsi, the family of ousted President Ben 'Alī.

Sīdī Ḥmad Šāliḥ is a small and irrelevant town, like many others, 200 km away from Tataouine. It is grey and arid and everything there is stone. Indeed, it is forgotten by God:

⁴ Henceforth, Taoufik Ben Brik.

⁵ See Z's blog *Debatunsie*, available at <http://www.debatunsie.com/> (consulted on 13/10/2022).

“*al-kilāb kilāb w-l-a bād aqall mi-l-kilāb*” meaning “the dogs are dogs, and humans are less than dogs” (Ben Brik 2014: 114). The animals that live there have adapted to the environment so well that they live without drinking (Ben Brik 2014: 114). The protagonist undertakes a physical journey on his Kawasaki motorcycle stopping at various Tunisian villages (such as Manouba, Mejez el-beb, Testour, El Kef and Tajrouine). As Kawasaki advances along the road, Hammām is assailed by illogical thoughts of all kinds and from every direction. The first description of the man portrays him “*muqawwas az-zahr wa-marfū ‘ar-ra’s*” meaning “with a curved back and raised head,” thinking in a delirious language that in Arabic is defined by the words *haḍayān*, *hudā’* and *halwās* (Ben Brik 2014: 13). Hammām is an extremely symbolic name in Arabic as it indicates not only someone who is worried, restless, anxious and troubled, but also a person who is ardent, passionate, resolute, active and tireless. Yet, the latter is the exact opposite of how Hammām feels and describes himself. Moreover, the name is also linked to *hamm*, which means “importance” in Arabic, but also “misery” in Tunisian Arabic. Hammām may also be an implicit allusion to Hammāma, indicating by metonymy all the tribes of Tunisia and thus representing an allegory of the conditions of the country. Even the protagonist wonders why his father called him Hammām and whether it was a mistake or just a joke (Ben Brik 2014: 32). Hammām leads a simple life in the northeast of Tunisia. He is married to his cousin, Mehria, who is older than him and stopped studying after elementary school. Moreover, his two 18-year old twins, Muḥammad ‘Alī and ‘Ammār, consume all of his earnings, leaving him in a precarious economic condition (Ben Brik 2014: 33-38). He lives in a world in which everything is unpleasant and men are like animals – brutish and savage – but Hammām is keen on arts and culture. Suddenly, he decides to yield to temptation and become a criminal. As Kawasaki is his only interlocutor, he turns to it enquiring “Am I normal or am I strange?” (Ben Brik 2014: 35). The motorcycle is a sort of *alter ego* for Hammām, who identifies with it and states “*anā Kawasaki, al-insān an-nārī*”, meaning “I am Kawasaki, the man-motorcycle” (Ben Brik 2014: 74).

3. Formal Features and Narrative Strategies of the Novel

The novel is narrated in the first-person, which is also characteristic of Egyptian novels using mixed varieties or *fushḥā* (Haland 2021, Zack 2001). The narrator is intradiegetic and disappears to the extent that he seems to coincide with the protagonist.

Dialogue, when present, always take place in the mind of the protagonist and is likely imaginary. In fact, dialogue is rarely present and we never know whether it really occurred. In addition, direct or indirect dialogue may be in *fushḥā*, in dialect, or in a mixed variety. The result is a long Joycean stream of consciousness that follows the protagonist’s thoughts. The expression “stream of consciousness” was coined by the psychologist James in 1890. It was then applied to English literature as it allowed writers to narrate their stories from a new point of view, from inside characters’ minds and feelings (Humphrey 1968: 1-3).

Kawasaki may be defined an open text, in which each sentence is independent of all others and has its own meaning. A further important feature of the novel – one which makes it very complex – is its intertextual nature and the continuous use of quotations from

Classical and contemporary Arabic and world literature, poetry, religious literature, cinema, music, theatre, etc.

Reading *Kawasaki* leaves readers confused and disappointed as they fail to grasp the essence of the reasoning and of the narration itself.⁶

4. Linguistic Features

Kawasaki by Ben Brik is the *summa* of a process – underway not only Tunisia, but in other Arab countries, too – seeking to overcome the rigid separation between *fushā* (the language of writing and formality) and dialect, long considered to be the language of informality and orality (see Eid 2002 and Mejdell 2014). Consequently, the first Arab novels were based on *fushā* and Arabic dialects were only used for dialogues.

However, as Brustad (2017) has shown, diglossia is an ideology and the two terms – *fushā* and *‘āmmiyya* – are inadequate to analyse texts such as *Kawasaki*. Indeed, Rosembaum's (2000) notion of *Fushāmmiyya* is far more appropriate. Ben Brik uses both varieties, along with mixed elements, throughout the novel. While his use of various varieties of Arabic does not reflect Tunisian sociolinguistic reality, it does contribute to the criticism of society and the disgregation of Tunisian reality.

Furthermore, the novel follows the thoughts of a schoolteacher who thinks both in his mothertongue (Tunisian Arabic) and in Modern Standard Arabic. He is a person with an above average culture, as proven by the numerous quotations in *fushā* from Arabic and World literature.⁷ Hammām's knowledge, of course, reflects Ben Brik's high and broad culture. In a certain sense Hammām is Taoufik, and viceversa, as their common ascendance from the tribe of Zuġlāmī suggests.

Ben Brik uses the varieties of Arabic with different functions. In brief,⁸ dialect in *Kawasaki* mainly serves an expressive function, whereas *fushā* generally has an informative function in the narration. The author also distinguishes between them by using different fonts. The language used in the novel should be considered Ben Brik's idiolect. It helps the narrator move beyond genres, deconstructing and mixing them to create a very personal one called *marwiyya*. However, as it is well-established that stream of consciousness does not employ “standard” rules of grammar and syntax to convey the idea that people's thoughts are ever-changing and evolving, writers usually insert symbols into their texts, too (Behtash, Ghalkhani 2021: 824). Indeed, Ben Brik plays with mathematical symbols.

⁶ I would like to thank Lucia Avallone for pointing out some formal and narrative similarities between *Kawasaki* and the Egyptian novel *An takūn ‘Abbās al-‘Abd* by Aḥmad al-‘Āydī during the 6th Conference of the Association Internationale du Moyen Arabe (AIMA) held in Bratislava on Sept. 20-23, 2022. See, for instance, Avallone 2012: 167.

⁷ The numerous references to Orwell's *Animal Farm* and, more generally, to a Tunisian society described as inhabited by animals is an example.

⁸ I have offered my first reflections on the features of the Arabic varieties used in the book by Ben Brik at the 6th AIMA Conference which was held in Bratislava on Sept. 20-23, 2022. The detailed results of my linguistic analysis will be published in the Proceedings of the Conference.

5. Main Issues Addressed

The novel addresses issues on two different levels, both of which are related to the notion of crisis. The first level is represented by the collective and social crisis caused in Tunisia by corruption as the result of “*ṭaṭaizzaton*,” an endemic disease provoked by the ‘*arš*.⁹ Ben Brik indentifies them with the *Zuḡlāmī* – the tribe to which Ben Brik belongs, too – and states: “the *Zuḡlāmī* [...] are ‘*arš* (a clan) occupying large areas of land; they enter the *waṭā*’ of *ṭā*’ [the depression of *ṭā*]”. Although “depression” here refers to “low ground,” this metaphor is frequently used by Ben Brik to allude to the vileness of the ‘*arš* *Ṭāṭā*. Through Hammām’s words, the author adds that “*az-Zuḡlāmī man zaḡlama, yuzaḡlimu, zaḡlamatan*”. If we were to search for these words in classical dictionaries, we would only find *az-zuḡlama* in the *Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ* and *Lisān al-‘Arab* indicating a doubt or worry. So, this is another pun, used by the author to indicate peculiar behaviour of the clan. In fact, Hammām states that the clan members provoke hatred and resentment, exhort to revenge, and their leader is the most tyrannical. Their gang rules both on earth and in the grave. They say that they are *amāzīg*, free men, shepherds who speak *šilḥa*, wear a traditional wool coat, eat couscous, and walk on knives. Then, he adds that *az-zuḡlāmiyya* is a catastrophe: it spawned an empress who would not marry anyone from the middle class. She adores banks and travel agencies. This description seems to refer to the *Trabelsi* once again and probably to *Layla Trabelsi*, in particular (Ben Brik 2014: 106-107).

In the novel, *Tataouine* is portrayed as having the shape of an animal: a rabbit, an eagle, or a reptile with a detached tail, depending on the vantage point from which it is viewed. It is small and airless, a place of repentance and dishonesty. Hammām describes his relationship with the town: “I learnt from it the secrets of dishonesty and ignorance” (Ben Brik 2014: 1). Then, he immediately mentions the fall of the ‘*arš* *Tataouine* and defines the city as a little *Tripoli* (*Ṭarābulus ṣaḡīra*). This is another play on words with the surname “*Trabelsi*” (Ben Brik 2014: 1). Ben Brik uses many expressions to allude to the family’s mafia-like attitude and the events that led to the *Jasmine* revolution:

Today is the day of *Al Capone*. [...] the day of judgement has come and the clan of *Ṭāṭā* has fallen, its leaders have been terrorised, its ranks have been dispersed, large prisons opened to them, and their leader has finally stepped aside. [...] We saw them return from whence they came and leave behind excrements. We welcomed the war of wars. After a year, the dead stepped out of their graves and returned. Their legacy is vileness [*al-waṭā*]. We brought down the *Ṭāṭā* and made any return impossible (Ben Brik 2014: 24-26).

Even Hammām, in the end, becomes part of the *ṭaṭaized* society by stating “I want the two *ṭā*’. I want my part of the *ṭā*” (Ben Brik 2014: 126) to the extent that the name of his son ‘*Ammār* becomes ‘*Amrīṭā* (Ben Brik 2014: 136). So, everything is *ṭaṭaized*, including him and his family, too.

⁹ The idea of corruption as a disease is also present in other Arab novels, such as *‘Imārat Ya ‘qūbiyān* by *al-Aswānī*. See *Avallone* 2020: 182.

In the novel, the criticism of the state and society is clear: corruption, social immobility, mafialike attitudes, and the consequent feeling of disillusionment felt by citizens are all caused by the State. This is a country in which nothing seems able to save its citizens, not even the dignity of culture represented by Hammām. Tunisian society is represented as a prison from which no one can break free or prove worthy of respect¹⁰. There seems to be no possible solution. The future is compromised and denied.

The second level addressed by the novel concerns the character's personal crisis. What emerges is the ineptitude of Hammām and Tunisians, in general, who criticise the situation but do not seem to have the strength to change it. Hammām feels that his life has no meaning and that his home is a prison. He feels a sense of oppression and personal dissatisfaction.

Due to the issues it addresses and the way in which they are treated, *Kawasaki* may be classified as literature of resistance. However, as Avallone (2012: 163) has pointed out, existentialist issues have underpinned post-modern – and particularly Egyptian – literature since the late 1950s and the fragility of the human condition and a sense of alienation still characterise the works of many contemporary writers. In the past, writers responded to the failure of government through political and social commitment; at present, the new avant-garde prefers to explore the distortions that society produces in frontline individuals: maladjustment, schizophrenia, and rebellion. It is important to note that while the main character, Hammām, is a frail outcast, the writer, Ben Brik, is a politically committed intellectual who has experienced censorship and has been imprisoned various times.

Moreover, in many Egyptian novels written in *'āmmiyya*, the protagonists were and still are poor and outcast. Ben Brik somehow draws on a literary tradition that was established in the Arab world in the early decades of the 20th century (Zack 2001: 194-95), albeit in this case the context has been profoundly transformed by the Jasmine Revolution: personal and social hardships have been exacerbated.

Unlike *Kalb ben Kalb*, *Kawasaki* was received very positively. In fact, readers have appreciated the novel and critics have lauded Ben Brik's original use of language.¹¹

6. The Metaphor of the Journey

Hammām makes a double journey: a literal one on his *Kawasaki* around Tunisia and a metaphorical one, through his delirious thoughts. The protagonist leaves his hometown to travel to Tataouine to accomplish something of no importance. It is simply a pretext to escape from routine. In fact, the metaphor of the journey used by Ben Brik envisions physical space and travel as the opposite of the immobility that plagues Tunisian society. It is a journey without meaning and without purpose. It does not change things and ends in

¹⁰ The notion of the society as a prison or a cage is also present in other Arab novels: see, for instance, Avallone 2020: 174.

¹¹ See, among others, the review made by the Tunisian artist Slimane El Kamel, available at <http://tnayer.blogspot.com/2015/02/blog-post.html>. Ben Brik has released several interviews on *Kawasaki*, see for instance this one in which he states that the work should not be compared with *Kalb ben kalb* and that he only writes the books and does not wish to judge them: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qg1gbWiS3kY>.

the same way in which it started. The final sentence pronounced by the protagonist: “I went to Tataouine to do something meaningless” becomes a symbol of the impossibility of true social and political change in Tunisia. Rhetorical figures are used to convey the idea of immobility: the metaphor of individual lives and cities as prisons controlled by the Ṭāṭā clan (Ben Brik 2014: 26). Synesthesia helps to convey this notion through colours. Hammām, for instance, describes Tataouine as a black and white chessboard, with only two streets, in which movement is restricted. In fact, the city may be summed up by just one street and it has no suburbs (Ben Brik 2014: 21-22). Tajrouine is described as “*ṣafrā’ ka-siġn al-Alkatrāz*” or “yellow like Alcatraz prison.” In it, everything is yellow, even the seven years that Hammām spent there (Ben Brik 2014: 90-91)¹². More in general, the nouns and adjectives used to refer to the Tunisian towns and cities visited by the protagonist are related to the notions of barrenness, sterility, immobility and corruption. As, for example, in the following excerpt:

the valleys are dry, so is the land, the sun is white as an oven light, there is nothing. The Most High has forgotten it. They [citizens] eat and await death [...] the sons of Sīdī Ḥmad Ṣāliḥ have stopped eating, they have glued themselves to stone, like stones, even the trees have become stones, the water is a stone, the air, the sky is a stone. People have become like animals. Dogs are dogs and people are less than dogs (Ben Brik 2014: 113-114).

The metaphorical and physical journey is a typical element of Arabic literature, as in the *raḥīl*, the *qaṣīda*, and the *riḥla* in travel literature. However, this is neither a *riḥla* for religious reasons, nor a *fī ṭalab al-‘ilm*. It is not even a sentiment of unrequited love that drives the protagonist’s displacement. In this case, the journey is a literary expedient that enables Ben Brik to weave important Tunisian social issues into the narration. Moreover, the metaphorical journey allows Hammām to escape the prison of family life through his fantasy, even though this does not provide him any relief. To borrow Sheetrit’s (2012) expression, in *Kawasaki*, a *riḥla* is narrated in the text, but the text itself is a *riḥla* on the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings, too.

7. Concluding Remarks

Referring to *Kawasaki* as a “*marwiyya*,” Ben Brik denies that it is a common novel¹³ and overtly declares that he aims to create a new literary genre. Such experimentalism is certainly not an absolute novelty in the Arab world. In fact, as Avallone (2012: 165) points out, by the 1960s, Arab novelists had already begun to break out of the mould of the novel and experiment with avant-garde forms to deconstruct narrative structures, characters, and narrative voices through introspective storytelling techniques. Talking about al-‘Āydī’s *An takūn ‘Abbās al-‘Abd*, an Egyptian novel published in 2003, Avallone (2012: 166) remarks:

¹² Another passage in which colours are used is Ben Brik 2014: 46.

¹³ Similarly to what al-‘Āydī does, see Avallone 2012.

Starting with the graphic layout of the text, the author chooses to confront the reader with the unusual and distributes sentences, paragraphs, and blank spaces both to aesthetic ends and to satisfy narrative requirements. Different fonts and font sizes are used to highlight phrases.

Unlike al-‘Āydī, Ben Brik does not employ Latin script or emoticons in his text, which is written entirely in Arabic script¹⁴ but like the Egyptian writer, formal, linguistic, and stylistic experimentalism correspond to a fragmentary and deformed representation of reality (Avallone 2012: 167). It is the result of the projection of Hammām’s delirious thoughts and of Ben Brik’s protest against the unfairness of Tunisian society.

One main feature of *Kawasaki* as a *marwiyya* is the absence of any chronological linearity to the narration, which simply follows the protagonist’s stream of consciousness. Therefore, the narration weaves in and out Hammām’s mind, memories, and sensations. In fact, everything that is linked to the five senses and to what he perceives – his inner state of mind – is narrated, as in the case in which he vents his frustration at not being respected by anyone, not even his children (Ben Brik 2014: 41). He tries to escape reality through his imagination, like when he pretends to flee, to be rich or powerful, or to marry other women (Ben Brik 2014: 36). Yet, the ugly reality in which he is trapped, always draws him back. The protagonist reveals a deep disconnection from reality, a deep cleavage that does not even heal in his dreams.

A further characteristic is the circularity of the novel. The same formula (“I went to Tataouine to do something meaningless”) opens and closes the novel and thereby cancels everything that happens in the book. It is as if the stories, the events, and the journey had never taken place.

In addition to this, while motion through space appears possible and can be followed and understood via Hammām’s narration of his physical journey between Tunisian towns, there is no timeline, either in reality or in Hammām’s delirious mind. In fact,

the story of the stream of consciousness, instead of linear and chronological time emphasizes the mental time, which at every moment slides from one memory to another and from one image to another (Behtash, Ghalkhani 2021: 823).

With regard to the term *marwiyya*, what does it really mean? What does it refer to? Is it something narrated both in written and oral forms? The term used for “novel” is generally *riwāya*, whereas *marwiyyāt*, in the plural, usually refers to “tales, stories, reports.” *Marwī* denotes something reported orally. This “*marwiyya*” certainly breaks the mould. It moves beyond canonical literary genres, starting with the use of a revolutionary language that somehow helps to break free from reality. In fact, both the novel and the language used by Ben Brik are a means of resistance against the unfairness of society.

¹⁴ The Tunisian journalist and writer Nizār Ša‘arī, for instance, also used Latin script in his novel. See La Rosa 2022.

Kawasaki is a story, or a series of stories, narrated as a stream, a continuous watercourse¹⁵. Avallone's (2012: 191) remark on al-ʿĀydī's novel *An takūn ʿAbbās al-ʿAbd* also applies to Ben Brik's *Kawasaki*:

Skilled in the use of the expressive tools he chooses to adopt, al-ʿĀydī makes his narrative a *manifesto* of human malaise in the context of a society that he defines as a 'prison' (Caridi 2006) and employs it as a place for linguistic and stylistic experimentation. It is a profoundly original work that gives the inner world the exclusive dignity of reality, one that functions 'with its own language, its own jargon, its own slogans, its own methods' (Caridi 2006).

In *Kawasaki*, the noun *marwiyya* appears in a few passages. So, we can try to explain it in Hammām's own words as "the language of memory. A language of life and of shocking actions" (Ben Brik 2014: 124). Or when he states:

The *marwiyya* appeared and prevailed (*tasaltana*). The *qiṣṣa* narrates from inspiration (*wahy*), describing what is good and hiding what is not worth being narrated (*sard*), to the extent that *al-ḥikāya* became *ḥurāfa*, which is very close to imagination, far from the truth, beyond the limits of fantasy and logic, and unbelievable (Ben Brik 2014: 133).

This declaration by the author seems to refer to the superiority of the *marwiyya* over other genres that appear obsolete or not authentic enough to still be valid today.

As mentioned above, the novel apparently has no finale due to its circular incipit and finale. The reader is continuously and constantly disorientated, both by the language and the content. And the sentences uttered by Hammām do not help us to decipher the enigma, as when he wonders "Where is the truth? It is in nonsense" or "understanding is not to understand" (Ben Brik 2014: 126 and *passim*).

The final episode of the novel, which is set in Aṭlantā (*sic.*), is an allegory of Tunisia and of the region of Tataouine. The area is off limits. It is inhabited by "the men of the hills" and can not be entered. The 'arṣ sit on their thrones, on the eggs of the *ruḥḥ*. Every now and then, they throw food to the citizens or provide them with entertainment (as in the renowned Latin saying *panem et circenses*) to allow Ṭāṭā *al-waṭwāt*, the vampire, to survive. Ṭāṭā, in fact, is a lie, the lie of the legend of Aṭlantīs, by which Tunisia has been deceived for five hundred thousand years. Comparing Atlantis to Trabelsi's Tunisia is strident as, according to the legend, Atlantis was a fair continent in which the inhabitants were united and behaved very properly (Ben Brik 2014: 154-156).

The novel closes with the protagonist's ambiguous words:

Come on, *Kawasaki*, let's go! Gather some letters, of every letter take a couple, and put them on your boats, let's overcome the limits together, with me on your back! The limits of the opposite of equal (=) and let's go uphill the parallel (II) and you will see that *al-ṭā* is permanent. And what is to be permanent? To be permanent is not to be permanent. The return is now. I went to Ṭāṭāwīn to do something meaningless (Ben Brik 2014: 155-156).

¹⁵ However, it is well known that the root *r.w.y.* in Arabic refers to the action of irrigating, watering, and giving someone/something a drink/water. See, for instance, *معنى كلمة روي - الباحث العربي* (baheth.info).

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