

## Beyond Language Determinism: Multilingual Literary Traditions in Morocco

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Linguistic and cultural diversity in the Maghreb have not been explored adequately in the field of literary and cultural studies. This paper raises the problematic separation of the Moroccan novel written in Arabic and French in literary and critical studies. It provides a critique of the way Moroccan novels in French have been excluded from the literary field of Arabic literature despite their strong affiliation with the cultural history of Arabic literature. In the field of Francophone studies, the focus on Moroccan novel in French has completely excluded Moroccan novels in Arabic which has resulted in a shallow conception of the transmitted cultural heritage and in obscuring the cultural histories from which these texts emerge. It also obscures the “cohabitation” of French with other languages in the region (Dobie 2003: 33). This paper argues against these dominant reading practices that are based on linguistic determinism as they have contributed to the marginalisation of Moroccan literary traditions within dominant literary systems such as the Francophone/French or Arabic traditions and therefore, have obscured the cultural, linguistic and historical entanglement of these multilingual literary traditions.

Morocco’s complex multilingual scene predated French and Spanish colonialism (1912-1956) as languages such as *Darija* or spoken Moroccan Arabic, Fusha or standard Arabic and various spoken dialects of *Amazigh*, as well as Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish shaped the oral and written cultures of Morocco. The arrival of French and Spanish languages further complicated the picture, particularly as the French pursued a colonial policy of imposing French as the sole language of education and administration. The Moroccan State’s ambiguous politics of Arabisation in the aftermath of independence in 1956 did not succeed in removing French from the public sphere as it remains the language of higher education (although English is increasingly taking over now) and administration and is spoken widely in Morocco’s central cities such as Rabat and Casablanca.

This linguistic diversity is reflected in cultural productions in Morocco which comes in Arabic, French, Spanish, *Darija* and *Amazigh*. However, these multilingual literary and cultural production, particularly in Arabic and French as they are the most prolific ones so far, have been studied in separation from one another. The problematic polarization of the

multilingual literary field and the way it is studied in monolingual literary systems is linked to the larger question of the perception of language in relation to the formation of nation-state in postcolonial societies. With independence and during the process of nation building in postcolonial Morocco, it was Arabic that was perceived as the official language of the nation. This belief was one of the legacies of French colonialism as it was the French colonial powers which strongly created the myth of “common identity between language and nation” (Kaye and Zoubir 1992: 22). Therefore, “Moroccan identity is, according to this belief, tied up with being Arabic and therefore inevitably with speaking and writing in Arabic” (Ibid.). The ambiguous State’s nationalist project pushed for Arabic as the language of national identity while keeping French as the language of science and administration, which has also marginalized Arabic as it has been subordinated to French. This has resulted not only in the marginalisation of Morocco’s *Amazigh* population, their culture and language, but also reinforced the idea that “languages encode national value. To speak or write in French is therefore to perpetuate French values.” (Ibid.)

Decades after national independence in 1956 and Arabisation, French is still widely used. In fact, there is the “quotidian experience” of how Moroccans live in languages<sup>1</sup> in the way they move between speaking *Darija* and *Amazigh* languages and read and write in French, Arabic and Spanish (depending on their geographical location in Morocco). This is not unique to Morocco as a number of African countries as well as countries in the Arab speaking region share this linguistic plurality. What one finds in Morocco is what Abdelfattah Kilito (2013) calls “split tongue” (*lisan maflouq*) and “split literature” (*adab maflouq*). There are two literary systems in Morocco now, one produced in French and one in Arabic and both are directed to two different audiences (Francophone and Arabophone world). Research on Moroccan literature is either focused on the one written in French or the one written in Arabic and this is happening not only in Arabic studies department and Francophone studies department in Europe and North America but also in Morocco itself where researchers do not relate these two fields of production to each other.

For Kilito (2013: 16), it is not the question of the doubleness of language expression that is the problem in Morocco in the field of literature but rather the problem lies in the division between these two literary worlds which does not allow for mutual recognition and analysis. Therefore, the Moroccan literary field is marked not by “linguistic doubleness” as such, but by two types of monolingual literary systems, which live together but separate from each other and which pose huge obstacles for those who attempt to create a literary history of Moroccan literature (Ibid).

Language choice (if it can be called a “choice”) is certainly a complex issue that is still largely linked to colonial legacies and the centrality of the European literary traditions and markets. While some Moroccan writers write solely in French or in Arabic, there are others

like Abdllah Laroui who writes his philosophical and critical texts in French and his fiction in Arabic. This is due to the fact that Laroui recognises that his critical and philosophical texts would be ignored in the Arab speaking *Mashreq* or Middle East but would be appreciated by the Europeans. It is the European interest in Laroui's critical texts which always triggers the *Mashreq*'s interest in his ideas (this was the case of his book *L'Idéologie arabe contemporaine* (Contemporary Arab Ideology) (1967)). (Kilito 2013: 42). Here the question of the power of European academe and literary markets as well as colonial legacies in Arab-speaking Maghreb and Mashreq is crucial. Arabic critical and literary productions are mediated in the last hundred years of so through the West in the sense that their productions becomes only known to them through the way they are received in Europe; for example, if an Arabic critical book is translated in French and English, it becomes then important in the Arab speaking region but not before that European recognition. Laroui claims that: "any contact between us—Maghrebis, Arabs or Muslims—passes through the West.." (cited in Kilito 2013: 42). There is a kind of a tacit request for recognition that passes through the west.

In fact, Moroccan novel in Arabic is assigned a very marginal position in the Arabic literary tradition. Most if not all of the anthologies and literary histories of the Arab novel are *Mashreqi* centred (or rather Egypto-centric) as most of them consider Moroccan (and *Maghrebi*) modern and pre-modern literary traditions as insignificant. Most of the books consulted on Arabic literature in the writing of this paper mention the odd name of the Moroccan novelists Mohamed Choukri or Mohammed Zafzaf (may be because both authors were perceived as rebellious) without really engaging with their works.<sup>2</sup> Roger Allen, one of the pioneer critics of Arabic literature recently recognises the limitations of hegemonic regional literary systems which are exclusive and do not pay attention to the particularities (*khususiya*) of various genres in different contexts (Allen 2007: 249). Gonzalo Fernandez Parrilla (2006) has demonstrated in his excellent book on the literary history of Moroccan novel in Arabic its strong ties with the Morocco pre-modern traditions and genres such as travel writing, manuscripts, and letters. Neither Parrilla nor Allen mention the Moroccan novel in French and its strong affiliation with its sister novel in Arabic or with the Moroccan pre- and modern traditions, which is again is symptomatic of the exclusion of these nationalist and regional language based analysis and reading of the Moroccan literary traditions.

The Moroccan novel in French is in fact read with other Francophone texts within the French literary system to which it remains marginal. This novel was largely directed in its early phases to a French readership which was well versed in colonial French literature like that of Pierre Loti and others whose representation of Moroccans is marked by a set of fixed stereotypes and prejudice (Kilito 2013, 69). This may explain the trap of folklorisation and self-orientalising tendencies of the early Moroccan novel in French that were challenged by later novelists like Abdellatif Laabi who reinvented the Moroccan novel in French.<sup>3</sup> Laabi

defines the Moroccan novel in Arabic and French as a “*roman-itinéraire*” heavily influenced by Morocco’s pre-modern narrative traditions such as written travel literature (*rihla*) and its oral equivalent *al-maqama* (Wolf 1992, 36). In fact Laabi who was the co-founder of the *Souffles/Anfas* bilingual French/Arabic review is one of the Moroccan writers in post-independent Morocco in the 1960s to emphasise the importance of reading together Moroccan literature in Arabic and French. The journal resisted State imposed monoculturalism on the one hand and French colonial and cultural hegemony on the other hand.<sup>4</sup> *Souffles*’s project to heal the divide between intellectuals and writers in French and Arabic and create a debate between them came to an end in 1972 when it was shut down by the regime for political reasons.

It seems that Moroccan critics in the post-independent area were more attuned to the danger of linguistic determinism and segregation in the analysis of Moroccan novel in Arabic and French. Khatibi’s book *Le Roman maghrébin* (1968) is one of the early examples of providing a literary history that goes beyond language determinism as it include Moroccan novels in Arabic and French. Mohammed Berrada’s translation of the book to Arabic in 1971 is a testimony to the belief that Moroccan novel should be read and analysed beyond linguistic divisions. One needs to research further why this consciousness and resistance to monoculturalism and linguistic determinism disappeared from the Moroccan literary scene in the 1980s and up to now.

I suggest an entangled reading of the Moroccan novel in Arabic and French: a reading that will shed light on the aesthetic, social and political affiliation of the Moroccan novel in Arabic and French, a reading that does not concentrate on linguistic categorisation as a mode of reading. It is an entanglement that links culture, histories, and languages in a pluralistic triangle that recognizes the Moroccan novel’s strong links with its pre-modern Arabic traditions, its indebtedness to European, *Mashreqi* and African literatures. It is not a mode of reading that prioritizes geographic borders but as opposed to linguistic ones as the embodiment of a unified field of study but rather it is a reading that is based on the belief in the cultural and historical relations of multilingual Moroccan literature and their importance in revealing new insights on the aesthetics and politics of the country, an aesthetics and politics that is never fixed and is always on the making. It is a reading that is productive of unstable histories, cultures, languages, geographies, and subjectivities.

What would one gain aesthetically and politically if we read together Driss Chraïbi’s *Le passé simple* (1954) with Mohamed Choukri’s *Al Khubz Al-hafi* (1982)? Or Mohammed Berrada’s *Lu’bat anisyane* (1986) with Abdellatif Laabi’s *l’oeil et la nuit* (1969)?

Reading Both Chraïbi’s *Le passé simple* and Choukri’s *Al Khubz Al hafi* provides us with a complex set of aesthetics and politics. Both Novels explore Moroccan society and politics in the eve of Independence and both caused uproar upon their publications: Chraïbi’s novel for its presumed anti-nationalist stance at a critical moment of anti-colonial movement and

Choukri's for its alleged devaluation of Moroccan culture and its vulgarity. Reading the novels together provide us with a complex picture of the national tensions in the 1950s Morocco and shed lights on division within the anti-colonial movements between various fractions; it also provides us with a unique comparative context between two colonial systems of governance, the Spanish in the North where Choukri's novel is based (and which is rarely explored in Moroccan novels up to recent times) and the French in the rest of Morocco. Both novelists explore the role of the intelligentsia in that particular moment of Moroccan history, its relationship to political articulation and the formation of a national consciousness. It seems that both Chraïbi and Choukri critique not only colonial oppression but also the elitism of some members of the anti-colonial nationalist movement. The complexity of Chraïbi's and Choukri's politics and their critique of the violence of hegemony, patriarchy, class and social hierarchy are reflected in their aesthetics: personal histories and narratives are embedded within national history and wider global movements of anti-colonialism at the time (the War in Algeria, the Palestinian struggle). Their styles desacralize French and Arabic and mark them with Moroccan cultural specificity.

What would an entangled reading of Abdellatif Laabi's *l'oeil et la nuit* (1969) and Mohamed Berrada's *Lu'bat Anisyan* (1986) tell us about the intertwined styles of these two giants of Moroccan literature? Both novels reveal moments of aesthetic creativity in the literary history of Moroccan novel in the way for example Laabi's novel firmly establishes a break with the self-orientalising early Moroccan novel in French and Berrada's experimental style of writing that leaves behind the early nationalist Arabophone novel. Both writers are firm believers in the plurilingualism of Moroccan literature and in the way they have been involved in translation from Arabic to French and French to Arabic to set up a meaningful dialogue not only between Moroccan literary producers but also with the *Mashreqi* and European traditions. The novels of both writers question fixed traditions (literary and cultural) and provide an embedded critique of state power using their creative aesthetic narrative style.

Morocco is not a monolingual nation and literature reflects this pluringualism. Therefore, monolingual reading and framing of this literature is problematic in the way it reproduces the marginality of Moroccan literature in relation other hegemonic literary systems and denies its specificity and its links to its pre-modern narrative tradition. "Reading together" Moroccan novel in Arabic and French provides us with the tools to rewrite a non-fixed Moroccan literary history that is not determined by linguistic paradigms but inspired by shared narrative traditions, contexts, histories, intertwined textualities, aesthetics and politics.

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## Notes

- 1 Edward Said's view on the raging debate on language reforms in the Arab world is very critical of those who promote the idea that it is time to get rid of classical Arabic and use only demotic Arabic in education and communication; he accuses them of a genuine lack knowledge and experience of how people in the Arab speaking region "live in" Arabic in their daily smooth movement between the spoken and written forms of Arabic. See E. Said "Living in Arabic" in *Al Ahram Weekly*. 12 - 18 February 2004. Issue No. 677
- 2 See among others for example, Sabry Hafez *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*. London: Saqi Books 1993; Mati Moussa *The origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner 1997.
- 3 Valerie Orlando (2009) argues that Moroccan novelists in French expression are writing for themselves and for their own circles of readership in Morocco rather than targeting French and wider Francophone readership.
- 4 *Souffles/Anfas* is an early example of the breaking of normative understanding of Moroccan multilingual literature as Dobie puts it (2003:37) : "An early model of literary bilingualism in the arena of publishing was furnished by the Moroccan journal *Souffles*, which between 1966 and 1971 under the direction of Abdellatif Laâbi and Abrajham Serfaty, published essays and poetry by

Maghrebian writers, and served as an outlet for avant-garde literature that broke with the themes and forms espoused by the first post-independence generation of writers. Rejecting the monoculturalism of the post-independence regimes, *Souffles* espoused a multiculturalist ideal of the Maghreb and strove to enact this ideal by publishing, from 1968, texts in Arabic alongside texts in French.”